

Signature for Sunshine

5 FREE CHAPTERS, ENJOY.

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Signature for Sunshine
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Dedicated to Dr Mellmac
Without your love and support throughout
the years,
I would be mental.

CHAPTER 1

Her grandfather's old, flannelette shirt hung to her knees, hiding her slender figure. Seen rarely out of jeans and baggy shirts, Chris hunched over the kitchen sink whilst washing up the afternoon tea dishes. Chris kept a close eye on the digital clock sitting on a shelf above the crowded notice board of children's drawings, bills and school notices. Hearing the front door shut, Chris sighed with relief, thinking it was about time the old coot got back.

Bill O'Keith entered the large, timeworn kitchen. He placed his walking stick in the corner near the refrigerator where it usually sat when he wasn't out on his daily walk or running errands. The lanky, gentle giant was a religious man whose humble, ageless wisdom had gained the respect of just about everyone that knew him. He reached into the pocket of his corduroy jacket.

"What took you so long?" Chris frowned impatiently. "You did get them, didn't you pop?" She was ready to reprimand him if he hadn't.

"Have some patience girl." Bill tossed the small bag of thick, elastic bands down on the table. He had grown accustomed to his granddaughter's bad moods over the last four years. "I don't know why you get so flustered girl. If you find that mop such a nuisance, get it cut." Bill would rather see Chris keep her hair long.

"You know damn well I only kept it short for shit head! I'm not looking like that mobile fanny he

ran off with. When it dangles in the dunny and I can wipe my bum with it, then I might get it trimmed.” Chris tore the bag open and as part of her daily routine, pulled her long, dull, brown hair into a ponytail. “Besides, isn’t it a woman’s glory?”

“Don’t quote the Lord’s words at me when you’re angry girl. You know who’ll come off second best.” Bill saw Chris glance at the clock. Three twenty five, this was her cue to make tracks.

“Back soon Pop.” Chris scurried away with a look in her eyes that left Bill shaking his head in disappointment. He knew where she was off to in such a hurry and looked up at the ceiling before muttering to himself.

“Thank you Lord for creating only one of her.”

The woman ran along the sidewalk, passing old, federation style homes with well-maintained gardens and ornamentation. The odd, little, brick veneer boxes stood out, young trees and neat lawns gave a sense of suburbia catching up with the old neighbourhood. Weekends and after school saw the street like a playground. Excited kids hung from trees on the nature strip, cars dodged bikes and children skateboarding on the road. Balls frequented neighbouring gardens and the residents often watched the kids kicking the football in the middle of the street.

Her thirty-four year old lungs felt like lead weights as Chris plonked herself down on the bus stop bench and stretched out her legs in an unladylike manner. Taking a deep breath, Chris stood to watch the rickety old school bus draw near, packed with boisterous kids screaming obscenities from the windows. Her posture reflected her intensions, as did the angry glint in her eyes. The bus off-loaded a dozen or more students, who moved back in an un-

orderly fashion on the footpath awaiting the entertainment that Christine O’Keith so frequently provided.

The woman’s teenage daughter was like her mother in appearance, but did not share the same ideals in regards to femininity. Stepping off the bus, without so much as a hello, Kelly continued down the footpath rolling her eyes with embarrassment. Not even Elka’s high-pitched voice, calling out to her older sister and caught everyone else’s attention, could entice Kelly to look back.

“Hey Kell! Aren’t ya going to stay and watch mum kill him?” Elka was tall for her eight years with blond hair and doll-like features. Standing on the pavement with others, Elka watched her mother grasp Mitchell by the arm and haul him back onto the bus, which by this time had many vacant seats.

Mr. Jago, the bus driver, turned in his seat. The plumpish man in his fifties watched Chris drag her eleven-year-old son down the aisle to the back row, where four rowdy youths had not yet noticed Chris’s approach.

A solid, well-groomed boy occupied the centre seat, his laughter displaying the contents of his mouth, meat pie with evidence of sauce on his chin. Chris stood over the youth, who looked up due to the sudden silence. His smug expression sent Chris into a rage and she unleashed everything she could lay her tongue to. She didn’t care who was listening and had no thought for the youngsters out on the footpath. Chris’s use of profanities saw even Mr. Jago raise a brow, but he wasn’t about to interfere.

“And I mean it! You ever touch my son again and you’ll be brushing your teeth via your arse!” Chris continued to threaten the teenager and described what else she would do to him, which saw his friends cowering.

The woman could be heard out on the pavement. Many of the youngster's faces beamed with smiles, including Elka's, who in thought, encouraged her mother to thump the bully. One boy climbed onto another's shoulders and peering through the back window of the bus, looked straight into Christine O'Keith's wrath. The woman thumped at the glass pane, which sent the two youths tumbling to the ground. Squealing with excitement, Elka pestered the two boys to inform her and others of Jackson's response.

Jackson was known as a spoilt brat. Not only did he buy friends with his excessive allowance, but also bullied those he didn't like. The teenager rolled his eyes, trying to convince the onlookers that Christine O'Keith was not intimidating him in the slightest. Chris's anger soared with his attitude and without warning; retaliated. What the lad held in his hand was now a mess in his lap. Jackson reacted just as Chris expected him to. He sprung from his seat, pie went everywhere and he too began using a few choice words to express his thoughts on the matter. Chris screamed the boy back into his seat, before again Jackson threatened.

"I'm serious! I'm going to have you up for assault!"

"What assault?" Chris scoffed. "I didn't assault you, I assaulted your pie. Let it take me to court you pile of crap!"

"You wait until my dad hears about this!"

"I can't wait to tell him!" Chris was almost nose-to-nose with the youth. Jackson's face dropped. This was not the first time Chris had warned the boy for teasing her son, but he knew it was going to be the last. Jackson's father was a very strict man and a respected member of the community. Not only was he a deacon in the local church, but also owned the

largest hardware store in town. Chris continued. "We'll see what he has to say when I tell him he's lost thousands of dollars worth of my business because of you! Enjoy your pie, you'll be on bread and water after this, you stinking little coward." She left the youth wide-eyed and defeated. Chris had successfully done what she had set out to do, which in turn gave her much pleasure.

Mr. Jago winked at Mitchell as he swiftly passed. The lad leapt steps to join his awaiting mates, who slapped him on the back and made him the centre of attention.

"Good on you Miss O'Keith." Mr. Jago smiled encouragingly. "It's just what he needed." Chris's expression wiped the smile clear from his face and had him wishing he'd remained silent.

"You make me sick Edward Jago!" Chris swore and continued. "You men claim to be the superior sex and you can't even handle one of your own. If you can't do the job properly, give it to someone who can!" Having said her piece, she left the bald man to ponder her words. Edward Jago glanced through his rear vision mirror at Jackson and his mates, whom now sat silent. The bus driver shook his head whilst mumbling something under his breath pertaining to the woman's arrogance before driving off.

After grasping Mitchell's hand, Chris strode off towards home. Elka ran behind, contemplating how to get her mother to school the next day for show and tell. It was the third week of the first term and she wanted the entire class to know of her mother's heroism and to let it be a warning not to mess with the O'Keith kids.

His granddaughter didn't mince words when talking to Mr. Jackson on the telephone. Bill became so irate with Chris's use of profanities, he snatched

the receiver out of her hand and ordered her outside to cool off. As usual, Bill managed to defuse the situation where both parties felt victorious. Mr. Jackson assured Bill, his boy would not bother Mitchell again and Bill assured Mr. Jackson, he had not lost them as customers.

The family sat around the crowded, laminated table with the evening meal steaming in front of them. Bill said Grace.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for blessing this household, for meeting our needs and blessing us with your gracious presence. Lord continue to watch over us as we...”

“Mitchell,” Elka squealed, fighting to retain her cutlery. Chris gave Mitchell the evil eye and belted out her words.

“Knock it off you two!” Chris’s sharp tone scared her four-year-old son. Tears flowed from Julian’s big puppy-like eyes, down plump cheeks onto the tray of the high chair. “Oh for god’s sake!” She was further aggravated with Julian adding to the commotion.

“Christine,” Bill abruptly interrupted. “Do not use the Lord’s name in vain. You know better than that girl, especially when the little ones are around.”

“Sorry Pop.” Chris rolled her eyes, still mad with him that there was no blood shed over the Jackson incident.

“It’s not me you have to say sorry to.” Bill glanced at the ceiling.

“Sorry God, I’ve had a bad day, okay!”

Ignoring his granddaughter’s sarcasm, Bill opened his mouth to continue but was again interrupted.

“Mum,” Mitchell whispered, his eyes partially covered by light mousy brown hair. He drew his

mother's attention to a puddle of soup beside Julian's high chair.

"Julian!" Chris thumped her fist on the table.

"He's only little mum." Mitchell defended his brother.

"Little my foot! You bloody kids can't even sit down for one meal without fighting or playing with your food! Grab a cloth." Her son rose from his seat to comply.

"I'm sick of this!" Kelly brushed back her brown fringe, revealing the first signs of every teenager's worst fears, pimples. "I'm going to eat in my room!"

"You can bloody sit here with the rest of us!" Chris lowered her tone. "If I have to put up with all this shit, so can you."

Kneeling on her chair, as she always did, Elka suddenly jabbed Mitchell in the leg with her fork and he in turn hit her with his spoon. They began a battle under the table. Elka tried to avoid another attack and losing her balance, pulled on the tablecloth. Kelly's bowl of soup was in her lap, Julian screamed, Chris yelled and Bill finished saying grace before eating his meal. It was the nightly ritual and some time over the next hour, they would eat their meals or wear them, whichever came first.

Pounding on the bathroom door, Kelly yelled. She could give as good as her mother when she wished.

"Open this bloody door you little shits!" Kelly thumped harder. "If you're touching my stuff Elka, I swear you'll be wearing my shoes up your arse!" She glared after Mitchell opened the door with his face baring the markings of mischief. Elka stood on the stool, gazing into the mirror adding the finishing touches to her cheeks.

“Mum!” Kelly screamed out a few times. When she received no response, she screamed louder. When this failed, Kelly grabbed the two little artists, who kicked and screamed whilst being dragged down the hallway to the kitchen.

Looking over Elka and Mitchell’s face painting, Chris chuckled and Bill smiled amused. This didn’t go down well with Kelly, who grit her teeth, ready for a good argument.

“It’s not funny mum! They’ve ruined my make-up!” Kelly folded her arms across her chest defensively.

“Whose make-up?” Chris raised an un-shapely brow. “It was mine to begin with.”

“You gave it to me! It was you who said you’d never wear that...” Before Kelly could finish the quote, Bill interrupted, disapproving of children swearing. Chris grinned and continued.

“I know what I said, but it didn’t mean everything I own. Whose clothes do you play dress ups with? I can’t even remember the last time I saw my thongs. I’ve had to borrow yours and don’t think you’re getting them back either.”

“That’s okay,” Kelly said, having changed her tone. “I’ll just swap them for your sandals and your green jumper.”

“Alright then.” Chris was ready to haggle. “I’ll take your blue cardigan and the red tee-shirt.”

“It’s a deal.” Contented, Kelly moved quietly down the hall to her mother’s room, followed by the two mischief-makers.

Chuckling, Bill scratched his abundance of white hair, finding amusement in the outcome.

“She’s done it to you again.” Bill eyed his granddaughter across the table. “You’ve only got back what was yours to begin with.”

“There’s method in my madness Pop,” Chris replied. “Tell you what; I’ll swap you my insanity for your patience, sound fair?”

“What do you take me for, stupid?” Bill smiled.

The warm, summer night sky was a blaze of stars and the moon shone in its fullness. Bill liked this time of year; he could relax in a rickety cane chair that sat precariously on the veranda. On hearing the creaking of the wire door, Bill’s sights shifted from the old bible resting on his lap.

“Here Pop.” Chris held out a mug of hot chocolate to him. Taking off his glasses, Bill placed them on the open pages and expressed his gratitude. He watched his granddaughter seat herself down on the old veranda timbers beside him. Although a gentleman, Bill knew better than to offer Chris his seat. With her back resting against the wall and legs sprawled out, Chris sipped her hot drink.

“Finally got the little ones off to sleep then?” Bill said.

“It’s quiet isn’t it?” Chris’s tone whispered relief. “By the way, the bloody sink’s clogged up again. I’m not waiting any longer Pop, tomorrow I dig up the pipes...”

“Don’t worry about it girl. I’m just waiting on the builder to...”

“Measure up, scratch his head, rearrange his testies, um and ah, spit and fart then give a price that’s usually bigger than the national debt.” Chris signed with the thought, yet was determined to follow through tomorrow.

Chris was grateful and appreciative of her grandfather’s commitment to provide her and the children with a comfortable home; nonetheless, she’d grown impatient with the renovations being held up by red tape, as she saw it. They had already planned to

add on a couple of bedrooms and upgrade all wet areas of the old weatherboard house with its decorative ceilings and open fireplaces. As Chris was no stranger to a paintbrush or hard work, she was just itching to get started; presuming all that stood in her way was male incompetence.

The woman's attitude towards men, since her husband left, was one of absolute contempt. Chris thought them wimps, home-wreckers and money grabbing mongrels whose minds never came above their navels. Naturally, she didn't tar her grandfather with the same brush as the rest of the male population. However, she was concerned with his judgement when dealing with tradesmen, as in her opinion, they were nothing more than criminals in overalls. She loved her grandfather dearly, but thought him too religious and soft for his own good.

Bill looked down at Chris sipping her drink and gazing out into the darkness. There was that bitterness in her expression, as though it had been there all her life, yet he knew different. It upset Bill whenever he thought about it. His compassion for his granddaughter stirred up angry feelings towards the man, who'd done her such an injustice. Chris was constantly part of his prayer routine and to date, he felt his pleas for change had not been fulfilled. He would remind himself it was in God's time, not his, yet wished there was an express lane for miracles.

With much on his mind, Bill sighed. Having not informed his granddaughter of what he'd been up to, behind her back, decided there was no time like the present to tell her.

"I've hired a builder," Bill said uneasily. "He should be over some time tomorrow."

"What!" Chris glared at him. "Don't tell me; bloody Carl Stubbs." Her expression now reflected her intolerance of the man. "I could chew straighter

and faster through wood than he can with his ancient bow saw. He avoids power tools like the plague and still thinks in cubits!”

“I’m not getting Carl Stubbs, and for your information girlie, he’s retired.”

“Thank God! Home wrecking will be a thing of the past.” Chris relaxed a little.

“It’s all been taken care of. There is nothing for you to do but sit back and be a lady of leisure.”

Not taking any chances with his granddaughter’s temperament, Bill had already taken precautions, which he voiced to Chris. He had not only pre-warned the builder of her vicious tongue, but also instructed him to ignore her altogether. In addition, the builder was totally in charge of the site and in the event she gave lip, the builder had his blessing to give as much as he received.

Fuming, Chris already assumed her grandfather had been taken advantage of, especially as she hadn’t been present at the time of negotiations. The truth of the matter, her nose was out of joint, as she liked to run things her way. Though feeling left out of the decision-making, it bugged the hell out of her that Bill wouldn’t divulge the identity of the builder. She wondered whether this tradesman was one to be easily intimidated or an unknown enemy she would have to work on.

“I just wish you had of talked to me first.” Chris kept a low tone, in hope of gaining information.

“We have discussed renovating this house since we moved in three years ago. You haven’t stopped telling me what you want and I can assure you, it will be done just the way you envisioned it. Plans have been passed...”

“What!” Chris’s eyes widened and fixed on him.

“You heard correctly. I’m no fool young lady, I might be getting on in years but I can still do what a man’s got to do. Besides, there was a lot of paperwork involved, do I need to say more?”

“No you don’t, but...”

“No buts. I’m still the man of this house and my ink stain on paper talks louder than yours. Do I make myself clear?”

“I don’t want another lecture Pop.” Chris knew exactly what he referred to. Having lost this round, she changed the subject back to the tradesman. “So, who is this so-called builder you’ve hired? What monumental feats does he have to his name?”

“You’ll find out when he gets here. Isn’t it past your bed time?” Bill grinned mischievously. Rising to her feet, Chris came to stand in front of him like a stubborn child. All sorts of things went through her mind, but most of all, she wanted a name presuming she knew the man in question.

“I just want to know who he is!”

“Goodnight Christine, pleasant dreams and don’t forget your prayers.” Bill silently patted himself on the back for standing his ground. Chris stormed inside, slamming the fly screen door behind her.

Having thumped through the house to her bedroom, Chris cursed men in general whilst getting undressed. In pyjamas, a quick trip to the bathroom saw her glance into the mirror; her expression reflected her thoughts. In anger, she kicked the old vanity door, thinking she should have stood her ground until Pop told her what she wanted to know.

Lying in bed, Chris heard her grandfather lock up the house and check on the children; a job she usually did. His footsteps came to her door and she closed her eyes pretending to have dozed. Bill peered in before entering. The light from the hall shone into

the bedroom, as he made his way over to Julian's cot where he pulled the blankets up over his little body. He remembered doing this to Chris when she was his age, which brought a smile to his lined features. Bill looked over to where she lay.

"Goodnight, grumpy," Bill said, knowing all too well she wasn't asleep.

"Just tell me one thing Pop. Who is he?" Chris rose up on an elbow.

"That's for me to know and you to find out when he arrives."

"Bloody hell! What's he on, the endangered species list or something?"

"With you around girl, he might as well be." Bill smiled, leaving the door ajar as he left.

Entering his bedroom, just a little down the hallway, Bill gloated over his victory. Opening his bedside draw, he took out the builder's card. What he already knew of this man had him chuckling, perceiving this was one fellow, who would not put up with his granddaughter's nonsense.

CHAPTER 2

Chris had spent the morning ignoring Bill, having only spoken to him when necessary. Unconcerned, Bill sat in his worn armchair; one he'd had for many years and was an addition to the floral lounge suite. He watched Julian play on the threadbare carpet on the spacious floor of the grand room with high ceilings and fancy cornices. Antique furnishings were placed in a manner that his deceased wife would have appreciated and her ornaments graced the room. Bill was accustomed to being a babysitter, something he enjoyed and didn't begrudge as Chris was a good housekeeper and gardener. Knowing his granddaughter was outside, unearthing old pipes, he could only hope her mood would change with such exertion.

Chris cursed under her breath whilst the sludge and water from the broken pipe spewed out, creating a muddy mess under the kitchen windows. The more she dug, the sloppier the area around her became, but being a determined person, she would see the job through to the end. Believing she could do anything she put her mind to, Chris had been quite willing to put the extensions on herself. It could not be any harder, she'd thought, than the small shed she'd built when they lived on the farm. The woman also believed in saving money wherever she could. Living on a sole parent's pension was not easy and she was too proud to accept handouts, even from her grandfather.

Having not heard the Ute pull into the drive, Chris didn't notice the owner of the vehicle standing behind her. The tall, muscular figure in overalls was greeted by Chris's rear end, considering she was hunched with a shovel in hand.

"Bill?" Rick hadn't meant to startle the person, who lost their balance in their zeal to see who'd spoken. It happened so fast, Rick could do nothing but watch the woman land on her backside with a thud and swear loudly. Like a true gentleman, Rick extended his hand to offer assistance.

"Here, let me help you."

"Who in the bloody hell are you?" Chris snapped and glared angrily over the state she was now in.

"Rick Eastly." By the look on her face, it was obvious his name was unknown to her. "The builder. Mr. O'Keith has hired me to put on some extensions." Unbeknown to Rick, his strikingly handsome features and charming smile only antagonised the woman further. Rising to her feet, Chris flicked mud from her hands.

"So you're the Mr. Macho Pop hired!"

"Excuse me?" Rick expressed confusion.

"Listen you, I don't take orders, I give them. You're here to do a job and that's exactly what you're going to do. I want no stuffing around and remember, if you slip up, I'll be on your back like God Almighty." Chris presumed her tone of authority would have him quivering in his boots. Rick could only conclude this to be the woman he'd been warned about and found her arrogance somewhat amusing.

"I can't say I've had the pleasure of God on my back, I think it would be quite an experience."

"There's always a first time buddy!"

"Listen Sunshine, I'd love to stand here and chat, but I've been given strict instructions to ignore

you, so if you don't mind, I'll start ignoring." Rick casually walked several steps away from her without so much as a second glance.

Taken back a little, Chris now thought her beloved grandfather had not only hired a viper, but had also given him ammunition to use against her.

"Wait a minute!" Chris called to Rick, who continued to look over the back of the house. "What did Pop tell you?" She folded her arms across her chest defensively. Rick didn't look at Chris on answering.

"Only that you're not user friendly." Rick heard the woman huff, yet paid no attention. Finding no words to retaliate, Chris retreated to the house.

Bill chuckled whilst Julian played the clown and pulled funny faces. He loved the boy dearly, as he did all the children. Both looked up on hearing the back door slam shut. Within moments, Chris stood in the doorway of the lounge covered in mud. Julian was quick to seek refuge on Bill's lap.

"Good gracious girl, what happened to you?"

"Your builder, that's what! Sneaking around scaring the shit out of people, but you listen here..." Chris pointed a stern finger at him. "I want to know what you said to that lower life form."

"Go and get cleaned up girl, then we'll talk." Bill didn't think the war of the sexes would start so soon.

"I'm not budging until you tell me! I'll stand here until I bloody rot if I have to." In protest, Chris placed her hands on her hips.

"You really want to know what I said?" Bill smirked. Chris gave him a look he was accustomed to, he continued before she could say, 'don't piss with me', which he was also used to. "I told him you were a foul mouthed, arrogant pig. I also said he was not to put up with any of your nonsense. For his own

protection, I blessed him with holy water and he's on several prayer chains." Bill felt rather smug with his granddaughter's mouth gaping open. Chris stormed from the room, her head a muddle of self-defence.

Bent over, Rick was measuring out, when a shadow cast over him. Looking up, he encountered Chris's snarly expression before straightening.

"It's all lies what he told you. He's a senile old fart with false teeth and bad manners." Chris knew she wasn't at her verbal best, but it was all she could manage, considering she was still somewhat shocked. Rick appeared unperturbed by her remarks.

"Listen Sunshine, if you want me to be involved in domestic disputes as well as build, it's going to cost you double. I will even throw in psychiatric evaluations free of charge." With the woman speechless, Rick continued. "I'll let you think about it." He went back to work. Again, Chris felt she had no alternative but to quickly withdraw to the house with her ego in tatters.

When Mr. O'Keith warned him about his granddaughter, Rick thought the man had exaggerated. Rick assured that his easygoing and friendly nature would see himself and Christine getting along. The words that had come out of her mouth, the moment they met, had changed his perspective. Christine indeed came across as bossy and candid. With her having implied she'd be looking over his shoulder whilst on the job, he would do as Bill had suggested; give out as much as she gave. Shaking his head, Rick thought her somewhat amusing and remained confident he would finish the job with his masculinity intact.

In no hurry to do homework or chores, the three children dawdled up the drive. Kelly was the first to notice the white Ute parked at the side of the

house. At first, she presumed it to be a visitor until eyeing the faded lettering on the tailgate.

“The builder’s here!” Kelly’s excitement was catchy.

“Ripper,” Mitchell squealed. “I’m getting my own room.”

“You dork!” Kelly nudged him, distracting his eyes away from the Ute. “It means I get a bedroom away from you two.” Her little sister drew her sights.

“Does that mean I get the top bunk?” Elka appeared hopeful.

“It means you get the whole room.” Kelly became irritated by the entire conversation.

“And everything in it.” Elka grinned mischievously.

“Only what’s yours pipsqueak,” Kelly replied.

“You said the whole room, pimple face!” Elka poked her tongue out, stirring up trouble for herself.

“That’s it Elka! You’ve had it!” Kelly chased her little sister into the house whilst her brother ran past the Ute and around to the backyard with enthusiasm in his stride.

Mitchell felt the strong hand grasp his arm and pull him back a step or two.

“Whoa boy,” Rick said. “You better watch where you’re going.” Rick smiled, so as not to frighten the boy, who glanced down at the string line he had almost tripped over. Remaining over excited, Mitchell dropped his school bag at his feet and looked up. The man towered him, yet Mitchell couldn’t restrain himself.

“Are you the builder?” Mitchell wanted to be certain before asking the many questions already in his mind.

“What do I look like, the babysitter?” Rick grinned.

“You could be, you dress like mum and she says she’s a babysitter.” Mitchell’s honesty sounded more like a wise crack.

“I’m the builder, Rick Eastly and let me guess; you’re Mitchell.” The boy’s eyes lit up.

“How did you know?” Mitchell’s mouth remained open. Rick decided not to tell fairy tales, dreading reprisals from the boy’s mother.

“Your Pop told me. He said you were a keen tradesman.” Rick informed him.

“I built a billycart. The wheel fell off when I hit a signpost, but you just push it back on. Do you want to see it?” Mitchell was eager to show his talents, hoping to impress the man.

“Some other time mate. I’ve got to finish setting up this string line or your mother will string me up.”

“You’ve heard mum yell, haven’t you?” Mitchell sighed, feeling a little embarrassed with the thought. “Sproggy reckons he can hear her down at the shop. He reckons he knows when I’m getting a hiding.” He glanced away, before again looking at the man. For a moment, Rick presumed the boy might be a victim of his mother’s temper.

“So you get a few hidings, do you?”

“Na, mum can never catch me. She’s getting too old, she just yells a lot. Pop calls her the old dragon behind her back, all hot air.” The boy thought his Pop’s remarks pertaining to his mother amusing. Though relieved, Rick’s curiosity found him asking questions, presuming the more he knew about Chris the better.

“Doesn’t your mum and Pop get along?”

“Of course they do. Pop’s looked after mum since she was little and now she looks after him. He might be old, but he used to hunt dinosaurs.” Mitchell’s expression implied he totally believed this.

“He helped me make my billycart and mum...” The lad was interrupted by his eldest sister, who yelled from the back door for him to get inside. Ignoring Kelly, Mitchell hoped she would go away, but she called out a message from his mother.

“Mum said not to pester the hired help!”

Not impressed, Rick’s pet hate was to have someone belittle him or anyone else for that matter. Realising these weren’t the thoughts of the child, but of a difficult, self-centred woman, he ignored it, but Mitchell wasn’t going to.

“I’m not talking to the hired help,” Mitchell yelled back. “I’m talking to the builder!”

“Mum will kill you Mitchell,” Kelly replied. “Now get inside!” She slammed the wire screen door behind her.

Although impressed by the boy’s response, Rick didn’t wish to see Mitchell get into trouble and placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“You better do as you’re told mate or dragon woman will have your guts for dinner and mine too.” Their eyes met. Mitchell thought for a moment and already assuming to know the answer, questioned the man anyway.

“You’re not scared of my mum are you? Everyone else is.”

“No, dragons don’t frighten me, I’m a dragon slayer.” Rick smiled and winked.

“Ripper! That means I’ll get my own room and you get more money than the Prime-Minister.” Mitchell scooted off towards the back door.

Considering the boy’s words, Chris became the centre of Rick’s thoughts. What an odd thing to say... What does this woman put in these kid’s heads? What’s her problem? Rick could usually determine a person’s character very quickly, but Chris was a different kettle of fish altogether. He had never come

across such a loud-mouthed woman in his life and yet to look at her, she was a kitten, a pretty one at that.

Whilst Rick worked, he pondered on the conversation he'd had with Mr. O'Keith. The man warned him of Chris' intimidating nature and vicious tongue. However, Bill had also added, she was a sensitive woman with a big heart. It crossed Rick's mind that perhaps Chris had some mental disorder that no one liked to talk about. If this was the case, she could misconstrue his witty and humorous traits as sarcasm and arrogance. His thoughts were interrupted on hearing the sound of the wire screen door, which noisily creaked on opening. Chris was the last person he wanted to see, not to mention talk to.

"Here comes dragon woman." Rick aired under his breath.

"So what's all this?" Chris asked, plucking the string line as though expecting it to vibrate a tune.

"String line. If all goes well, the holes for the foundations will go in tomorrow." Rick's height cast a shadow over the woman.

"So, you're going to dig holes, that will probably take you a week, knowing your kind." Chris folded her arms across her chest, unimpressed. Rick smiled, determined not to let her get the better of him.

"Do you see a ball and chain Sunshine? It's done with a back hoe."

"What's wrong with digging them out by hand? Scared of blisters, earning your money?" Chris unfolded her arms, awaiting an answer.

"I'll lend you a shovel." Rick shook his head in amusement.

"Don't bother; I've got one of my own." Chris stormed off towards the back door. With the woman inside, Rick again shook his head whilst

chuckling to himself. They were mere words, he thought, perceiving she would not follow through.

The light streaming from the kitchen window and the back porch lit up an area Chris found comfortable to work in. The warm night air contributed to the beads of sweat trickling from her forehead whilst digging and cursing aloud. Her words became a chant, not only repetitive, but also an insult to the male population. With only one more hole to dig, her thoughts singled out Rick and as she spoke aloud, found additional strength and haste to her digging.

“Ball and chain, slave labour my foot! What’s he talking about, he’s being paid more than if we had a hundred convicts on the job!” Chris’s concentration was interrupted by footsteps. She glanced up and continued to dig when she realised it was only Kelly, holding her dressing gown closed, covering a feminine nightie.

“Do you know what time it is mum?” Kelly yawned.

“Don’t know, don’t care. What are you doing up?” Chris was not about to stop for anyone.

“I was getting a drink of water.”

“Tap’s in the kitchen.” Chris wiped the sweat off her forehead with her arm.

Moving a few steps closer, Kelly knew what her mother was up to, but decided to ask anyway.

“What are you doing?” Kelly glanced over the holes. Aggravated by the interruption, Chris straightened and leant on the shovel.

“I’m looking for buried treasure. What else would I be doing at this time of night?”

“Mum, you’re only going to make Pop angry. Why don’t you just leave it up to the builder?” Kelly could foresee arguments over breakfast. Heaving a

sigh, Chris thought it was time to give her daughter a quick lecture on ethics.

“Builders are a pain in the...” Chris thought before she swore, it was as though any moment Pop would hear her and it would be on for young and old. “Look Kell, Pop might think he’s loaded since selling the farm, but he’ll have nothing left after that mongrel finishes here. Take it from me, if you can do something yourself and save money, do it. Don’t rely on men, you’ll end up penniless and heart broken.”

“Mum...” Kelly shook her head in disagreement. “Pop said Rick is a really nice man...”

“Pop thinks everyone’s nice Kell. You watch...” Chris pointed a finger. “You’ll see I’m right. Rick the dick will end up costing us money. I’ve seen his type on TV. Hand in front of the camera, squawking no comment, rip off’s the lot of them.”

“Pop said Rick has already saved us money.” Kelly didn’t realise she was letting Bill’s secrets out of the bag.

“What a crock of shit!” Chris stuck the shovel into the hole with anger.

“He did, honestly mum! Rick drew up all the plans and organised everything with the council. He was even picking up Pop and...” Her mother interrupted.

“So that’s how he did it the cunning old fart.”

Realising she’d said too much, Kelly thought it a good time to go back to bed. Her mother was too deep in thought to notice her creeping off. Returning to her digging, Chris pondered over what had been revealed. So that’s how he did it, she thought, recalling the times her grandfather had gone for his so-called walks, sometimes twice a day.

“I bet the arse wipe picked him up down the road.” Chris’s thoughts escaped her, before continuing silently. Lily has to be in on this too, that’s

why she's asked me over so much lately, get me out of the way so they could come in behind my back. What is this, a conspiracy against me? That's it! I'll show them. Mr. Arse Wipe is going to regret ever saying yes to this job!

CHAPTER 3

Having arrived a little earlier than his contracted eight thirty start, Rick stood gazing over the holes where yesterday the markers had been. Swearing and blaspheming loudly, Rick realised what was coming out of his mouth and went silent. Considering Bill's beliefs, the last thing he wanted to do was offend his boss, a good man, in his opinion. Running rough skinned fingers through his shoulder-length, dark hair, Rick again looked over the holes, whilst cursing under his breath.

Chris wandered out the back door with a mug of coffee in hand. She found amusement in Rick's expression, presuming she had won the first round of the day.

"Morning," Chris smiled politely, noting the man's raised brow as she continued. "Run out of elastic bands?" She referred to his thick hair hanging loosely, as the day before he'd had it tied back.

"Can't handle the competition, hey Sunshine?" Rick wasn't really in the mood for her sarcasm, yet reminded himself not to let her get to him. Clearly, she wanted to throw this up in his face.

"My oh my, look here. Someone did some hard work and I'm not wearing a ball and chain." Chris grinned, ready for the verbal reward. Rick sighed, placed his hands on his hips and looked her straight in the eyes.

"You're a better man than me Sunshine, and I bet you haven't even got blisters." Rick watched Chris

slip her hands behind her back, spilling the remainder of her coffee. Drawing forth his mobile phone, Rick continued to look upon Chris's sarcasm whilst awaiting the number to answer. "Hi Alan," he spoke into the phone. "It's Rick Eastly. I've got a bit of a problem here mate. Could you give me about an hour? Thanks, I'll explain when you get here." Rick slipped the mobile back into his overall pocket.

"So what was that all about?" Chris asked.

"The back hoe will be here in an hour." Rick pulled the shovel out of a hole that Chris had left behind in her efforts to upstage him.

"Why do we need the back hoe? Aren't they deep enough for you or are you going to tell me they're supposed to be round not square?"

"No, they're deep enough and square is fine."

"So what's the problem?" Chris stood defensively, knocking an empty mug against her leg.

"You've dug them on the wrong side of the string line Sunshine." Rick winked at her and gloated at his victory. Not about to be defeated, although Chris attempted to hide her embarrassment, grasped the shovel from his hand.

"No sweat, I'll just fill them in and start again."

Shaking his head, Rick could not believe the defiance of the woman or that she wouldn't even acknowledge her mistake.

"Just go inside Sunshine. I'd suggest eating humble pie, but I don't think you have the taste for it." Rick gestured with his hand for the shovel.

"They're my holes and I'll do what I want with them." Chris gave him a hostile glare and began shovelling.

"Is this what you call having God on your back Sunshine?" Rick laughed as he walked around the corner of the house and out of her sight.

Shovelling the dirt, Chris cursed, not caring who heard her.

“That’s what I get for trying to help; bloody moron! Men, they’re such wimpy, brainless, lazy, no good, conniving bastards! He should be buried under a rock the prick!”

Able to hear the woman out at his Ute, Rick muffled his laughter, thinking her defeat most sweet. When he thought his amusement would not get the better of him, straight faced, Rick returned to where Chris was.

“If you hurry...” Rick startled her. “You may get it done before the back-hoe gets here.”

“Oh get stuffed,” Chris snapped without looking at him.

“And make sure the earth is...”

“I know, I know!” Chris jumped up and down in the hole. Rick looked on as she trampled the earth firmly under foot.

“Why me God?” Rick glanced up at the Heavens, not realising Chris had heard him.

“Because you’re a blood sucking leach, that’s why! And don’t expect Him to answer you.”

“And why not, oh great spirited one?” Rick rolled his hand in the air, as though giving greeting to a sheik.

“Because men are the root of all evil, especially you.”

“Okay, so you’ve had some bad sexual partners, I can relate to that.” By the look on her face, Rick perceived he’d struck a nerve. After the loathing glare, without responding, Chris went back to the job at hand.

Rick found pleasure in teasing her as she scooped earth. He thought she looked rather cute when at her most hostile. She stopped for a moment to take off the old flannelette shirt, revealing a singlet

top that was now saturated with sweat. Rick diverted his eyes with it clear Chris wasn't wearing a bra. Though eye candy, he knew if he teased her with the thoughts running through his mind, she would slap him across the face or knowing her, belt him with the shovel, so he remained silent.

On the edge of a packed garden bed, Rick utilised the nearby log as a seat. He'd been entertained by Chris's expressions of vicious thoughts and had been wondering when she would give in and have a go at him for not helping. Finally, Rick offered Chris a hand, which saw her glare at him for a few seconds. Without a word, she continued shovelling. Why wasn't she biting, Rick thought to himself.

Again offering his services, Rick got the same response as before, an aggravated glance and back to the job. Although having been enjoying himself, the mood had dampened with Chris so quiet. He decided to push the issue by grabbing a shovel.

"Stay back or I'll take your head off!" Chris raised the shovel above her shoulder ready to swing at him. "These are my holes, go get your own!" She went back to shovelling.

"Have it your way Sunshine, but it's just going to cost you more money. There's no way known you're going to fill them in and dig new ones today, unless I help." Rick thought the mention of money might entice her to let him near the area, but again she gave him the death glare, before continuing. Rick was now suspicious. Chris was not enjoying herself, which was blatantly obvious, nor did she bite back when he stirred her. Time was running out, the backhoe would be here any moment.

The man only received a glance with him moving away. Chris presumed Rick was going to his Ute for something. When out of sight, she heaved a sigh and continued to shovel dirt. Returning a few

minutes later, Rick parked himself down on the lawn. His sights shifted with the back door opening. Bill called to his granddaughter.

“Christine, phone for you!”

“I’m busy! Ask them what they want!” Chris glanced at Rick, who looked totally uninterested.

“It’s Lily, she said she needs to talk to you. Come on.” Bill went back inside.

“Oh shit!” Chris dug the shovel into the ground. “Stay away from my holes,” She demanded. Rick raised his hands, gesturing he wouldn’t move.

Storming into the kitchen, Chris picked up the receiver. On hearing an engaged signal, she sighed annoyed.

“She must have hung up.” Chris put the receiver down.

“Well you did take your time,” Bill said, knowing the truth of the matter. Both he and Chris heard Rick yell out.

“Oh shit!”

“What have you done?” Bill looked annoyed and followed Chris out the back door.

Rick stood to the side of the hole, nearest to the house; from a kneecap down, was nothing but mud.

“Hey Bill, you didn’t tell me you wanted a fountain in the middle of the room.” Rick’s smile hid his frustration, hating the fact that his boot was full of muddy water.

“Christine!”

Having enjoyed her shower, the water had cleansed the dirt and soothed Chris’s aching muscles. She stood in the doorway of the spacious lounge brushing her damp hair whilst reflecting upon the day’s events. Bill looked up at her from his armchair.

“Rick said you did a good job helping him today.”

“Did he just. What else did he say or shouldn’t I ask?”

“He said you worked hard. All the footings were dug and you put all the dirt around the garden, leaving a clean area for him to work with... And you were so quiet.” Bill contained his amusement. “Oh, and don’t forget to wash his overalls and sock. Lucky he had a spare with him.”

“I’ll wash them in acid.” Chris mumbled to herself, before again speaking aloud. “So, what else did Mister Macho have to say? Sounds like he’s crawling for a promotion or extra money; probably both.”

“Be nice, it’s been a long time since a man paid you a compliment. Give him a chance.”

“I already have. He gives me the...”

“There’s no need to swear young lady.” Bill was silently enjoying this.

“I didn’t say a word,” Chris snapped back.

“You were going to.” Bill leant forward in his chair. “Isn’t it about time you acted a little more lady-like? You’re starting to sound like a beer guzzling truck driver!”

“That’s below the belt Pop.” Chris felt the sting of the remark and looked away.

“The truth hurts girl.”

Not about to hang around to be further insulted, Chris wandered into the kitchen. She felt a little ganged up on, thinking Rick one of those charismatic personalities that sucked the life out of people to do his bidding. It was obvious he was trying to turn her grandfather against her.

Filling the jug, Chris shoved it down on the worn, laminated bench with resentment in her gaze.

“Bloody crawling men.” Chris thought aloud, before sitting herself at the table, wondering what else she could do to put Rick back in his place. She would

be happy to see the man buried in the backyard, but doubted he'd make good fertilizer. The thought of him contaminating her lawn or killing surrounding plant life had her again assuming submission to her authority the best way to go, and easier on Pop's wallet. She would slash his tyres, but knowing Pop, he would offer the viper a bed until the damaged was fixed. Sugar in his fuel tank could also result in him invading their space. An overdose of a liquid laxative would keep him away for a few days, but she could not bring herself to offer him a coffee.

Before Bill retired for the night, he apologised for hurting her feelings. Chris accepted, but ended the conversation by calling Rick satanic and after the renovations were completed, a priest to come in and bless the rooms.

CHAPTER 4

Sandy was not just the next-door neighbour; she was a close friend of the O'Keith family. Having no children of her own, Sandy doted over her friend's kids and enjoyed babysitting if Chris or Bill needed to go anywhere. Often, Sandy assisted in Sunday school, playing mum to the O'Keith kids, as Chris no longer went to church. Seven years younger than Chris, Sandy always took pride in her appearance, especially as her husband, Paul, appreciated the finer things in life.

Standing tall and slender against the coolness of the refrigerator, Sandy gazed out the open kitchen window at Rick. The fullness of her lips left a deep pastel print on the coffee mug as she sipped slowly while admiring the muscular physique and the beads of sweat on the man's brow.

"So you're trying to tell me," Sandy said, "that you're not the slightest bit interested? Come on Chris, look at him, he's gorgeous! What did you say his name was?"

Chris leant up against the sink, knowing Sandy was about to go into one of her many lectures on the importance of male companionship, which she was not in any mood to hear.

"Rick with a silent P. Okay, so he's good looking. I'd rather shave my head and carry incense before I'd go out with his type." Chris placed an empty cup in the sink "I've been through all this before, remember?" She sat down at the table,

disliking that her dearest friend was attempting to play matchmaker. Sandy had given up trying to introduce men to Chris, as she would be totally obnoxious to them, even in her own home. Joining her friend at the table, their conversation continued.

Rick had settled himself down under the kitchen window to enjoy a well-earned break. Having just poured himself a coffee from his thermos, he heard an unfamiliar female voice. Glancing about, he realised the woman was above him and in the kitchen, which had him intensely listening to the conversation.

“Chris, not every man is like Ian.” Sandy stipulated. “It’s been four years for goodness sake. Jeoper’s girl, no wonder you’re grumpy. I don’t believe the good Lord wants to starve you to death, and I’m not talking food and dying of malnutrition.”

“You sound just like Pop.” Chris’s voice was heard. “Good Lord this and the good Lord that. The good Lord created a female terrorist and gave her my husband’s address!”

Rolling her eyes in frustration, Sandy had heard the same line from her friend a hundred times. Chris heaved a sigh.

“You and Pop make me feel like I’m the sinner who needs to repent. I don’t feel I have anything to repent! I’m the victim here remember; I didn’t leave him, he left me.”

“All I’m saying is get on with your life. Find a new man.”

“I’d rather be carried off in a body bag. Maybe men need their daily dose of vitamin S, but I don’t.”

“That’s true.” Sandy smiled. “If Paul doesn’t get it at least four times a week, he thinks I’m having an affair.”

“Exactly! Their whole intelligence is centred around their dicks.” Chris slouched back in the chair, placing her feet up on the corner of the bench.

“For your own sake Chris, get yourself a man.” Sandy shook her head at Chris’s lack of femininity.

“I’d rather shoot myself in the foot at a nuclear testing site.”

Concealing his amusement in a swig of coffee, Rick decided that Chris’s attitude problem could be solved with a good romp in the hay. He had been a bachelor for some time and the worldly ways of courtship were no stranger to him. Chris was not at all undesirable and Rick felt he was more than capable of delivering her from chastity. However, with that thought, he began to recall some information regarding a spider; she lured the male into her web and devoured him after mating.

“Let someone else commit suicide,” Rick mumbled to himself. Glancing at his watch, he picked up his belongings and moved himself over to the long, thick log in the garden.

Rick knew he had time for a quick smoke before returning to his labour. The cigarette paper stuffed with tobacco rolled easily between his fingertips. Laying the full pouch on the log beside him, he searched his overall pockets for his lighter. Startled, he suddenly found himself gazing at an axe that had severed his tobacco pouch in half.

“Don’t you know smoking is bad for your health?” Chris whined. “It pollutes the air my kids and I breathe. This is a no smoking area, Mister!” She removed the axe, placed it over her shoulder and walked away, passing Sandy with a grin of excellence.

“Hi, I’m Sandy, Chris’s friend. I live next door.” Sandy pointed to the far end of the O’Keith’s house. Her home could be seen nestled amongst trees

and shrubs. A little gateway, between the two properties gave quicker access than using front entrances.

“Was she born mad or did it mature over a period of time?” Rick was overwhelmed by Chris’s actions. Sandy noticed this in Rick’s expression.

“Don’t take it personally, it’s her way of saying she likes you.” Sandy smiled awkwardly.

“Likes me! I can’t wait to see what’s she’s like when she’s frisky.” Rick now deemed the woman a psychotic menace.

“Didn’t Bill warn you?”

“Yes, but he didn’t tell me she was asylum material.”

“Chris’s ex-husband ran off with a cigarette distributor.”

“Oh! Well, that somewhat explains it.” Rick felt a little uncomfortable, yet couldn’t help but wonder if the ex was a smoker before taking up with the woman. Sandy glanced over the area, making sure Chris was out of ear reach. She placed her hand on Rick’s shoulder.

“Let me give you a little advice. Think of a woman who’s been through hell and act accordingly.”

“Sounds like she took up residency.” Rick teased and Sandy defended.

“She really is a nice person when you get to know her.”

“Glad I’m multi-talented.” Rick rose to his feet.

“Don’t ignore her, you’ll only make it worse for yourself.”

“I have no intentions of ignoring her; I’ll leave that up to the rest of the world.” Rick shifted his sights. Chris appeared irritable, as she stood looking out from the back door, her tone confirmed this.

“Sandy, will you keep an eye on Julian while I slip down the shop?”

“All right,” Sandy replied. Rick decided to put Sandy’s strategy to the test and edged forward, grinning with expectation.

“Would you like a lift Sunshine? I promise to drive carefully.”

“The only time I’d drive with you is in the back of a hearse.” Chris slammed the door.

“I’d like to post her to Heaven,” Rick grunted, “but they’d only return her to sender.” He sat back down on the log.

Burying her face in her hands, Sandy contemplated what she would like to do to her dearest friend, but it was against the law and she knew talking was a waste of time. With Rick’s eligibility, Sandy was eager to play matchmaker and so began her plotting.

Chris returned home with more groceries than she had set out to buy. As usual, Sandy queried some of the items whilst helping her friend to put them away. There was always some excuse for buying them, like cat tuna, when the O’Keith’s didn’t have a pet. It did sound plausible; she could very well see Chris feeding some stray mongrel that she didn’t want to bring to the kid’s attention. The truth of the matter, Chris did not want to admit she’d made a mistake due to her being illiterate and dyslexic, a condition that only a few knew about.

With the chore completed, Chris sat at the table, tired and hot, whilst Sandy made cold drinks.

“Julian should be awake soon,” Sandy said. “He’s so cute; I want one. Paul just keeps telling me to be patient. Sometimes I think he’s more interested in his business than a family.”

“You’ve been saying that for years. He’s not stupid; he knows kids are hard work. I’d stick to the business, prolong your sanity.”

“If you had a partner, hint, hint, it wouldn’t be so hard for you.” Sandy watched Chris straighten in her seat, evidently displeased with her comment.

“If you’re trying to match me with that oversized drill bit who thinks he can screw anything, forget it!” Chris hoped she’d put an end to that idea.

Holding the glasses, Sandy remained at the sink. A glance out the kitchen window, turned into observation. A tall, middle-aged man in a dark suit, holding a black leather satchel, stood in conversation with Rick. Sandy turned and looked at Chris, who still appeared agitated. For a moment, she contemplated whether to draw her friend’s attention to the matter, considering Chris’ frame of mind, but her own curiosity got the better of her.

“Who is Rick talking to?” Sandy felt a little uneasy with Chris shooting from the chair. With a glimpse out the window, Chris’s expression turned to contempt.

“Bloody religious salesman! I’ll fix him.”

Like a cat in the night, Chris sleeked out the back door to the hose at hand’s reach. Rick only caught a light spray with him jerking back, yet the stranger caught the full brunt of Chris’s assault. Sandy stood agape, Rick yelled for her to turn off the tap. With the water now only a dribble, Chris assumed a twisted hose and turned to eye the line back to see Sandy’s hand on the tap.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Chris glared angrily. “I hate these morons. I want him to think twice before stepping foot in my yard again.” She turned spontaneously with the sound of Rick’s voice.

“Christine...”

“Ms O’Keith to you!”

“Okay... Ms O’Keith, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Sutherland, the new building inspector.”

The expression on her friend’s face was enough to send Sandy running into the house in a fit of laughter. Rick fought to keep a straight face and shrugged with Chris eyeing him. Gob smacked, she had no choice but to find her own words.

“Oh, I thought... Ah... Yes well, ah, let me get you a towel.”

Chuckling, Rick thought how silly Chris looked, bolting into the house like a naughty girl.

“I’m sorry Barry.” Rick expressed an amused apology. “I should have warned you.” He watched the man take a hanky from his shirt pocket to wipe his face. Chris had made Barry’s day, usually he wouldn’t have seen the humorous side to the misunderstanding, but her humiliation was compensation enough.

“There’s no need to,” Barry replied. “I’ve already heard about Christine O’Keith. Evidently, the woman is well known around the town for her intolerable behaviour.”

“You’re telling me. I meet some butch women in my trade, but they haven’t invented a name for her sex.”

“Mind you, this is the first time I’ve met the woman and I hope it will be the last. Next time I’ll give you a call and make sure there are no hoses in hand’s reach.” The two chuckled and resumed their original conversation.

Standing out of sight behind the door, Chris could not possibly go out there to be further humiliated. She was good at dishing it out, yet when it came to getting it back, she was an absolute coward. There must be a way out of this, she thought, perhaps she could throw the towel and run or better still,

ignore him altogether and hope he'll leave. Sandy nudged her in the back.

"Give me the towel," Sandy said. "I couldn't stand to watch you annihilated in a second round."

Heaving a sigh of relief, Chris didn't hang around to watch her friend do the deed. Sheepishly, she wandered back to the kitchen, perceiving that once Pop heard about this, he would either die laughing or put her over his knee.

CHAPTER 5

Widow Lily Taylor lived across the road in the old weatherboard commission home. She often potted around in her garden, talking to her many gnomes and encouraged bird life by placing seed around the concrete birdbath situated in the centre of the front lawn. Lily was always the perfect host, especially when it came to Bill O'Keith, who visited her regularly. She was only a little younger than Bill and since the death of his wife; the two had become extremely close.

Bill sat at her kitchen table, set lovingly for afternoon tea. With Lily having baked a storm of treats, Bill's bread plate was already full of delights. He watched Lily pour his tea before continuing their usual line of conversation, centred on their favourite subject, Chris.

"The girl just won't listen Lily, in one ear out the other. She just doesn't want to know."

"She's bitter and hurting Bill." Lily's sympathetic eyes peered over the china cup. "She's constantly in my prayers."

"It's been over four years." Bill sighed, continuing. "How long is she going to be like this? Her attitude is appalling, and even you were disappointed when she didn't come with us to the Christmas service."

"She never missed church when Kate was alive." Lily glanced away in disappointment.

"But you know as well as I do it was Kate who protected Chris. Always making up excuses just

so no one would know she had a problem.” Bill was agitated.

“Kate taught her well, didn’t she?” Lily felt uneasy speaking of the dead in such a manner.

“When Kate died, she took Chris’s faith with her.”

“It had nothing to do with Kate’s death.” Lily’s chin lowered and her flabby neck thickened as she peered over the top of her glasses. “Ian was the problem. For goodness sakes Bill, he was an atheist. He condemned the church and always got very angry if Chris asked for a few dollars to put in the collection plate.”

Bill was accustomed to her answers of sympathy and patience, but this time, Lily preferred to take a different approach. She was tired of sounding like a broken record.

“You have to stop protecting her.” Lily pointed a finger; her hand revealing she suffered from arthritis. “It’s time she faced the real world.”

“I couldn’t do that to her Lily!” Bill had surprised the woman. Lily thought that perhaps her friend liked the idea of having someone depend on him. “It breaks my heart to see her struggling. Kelly tries so hard to teach her, but Chris has no patience, which only frustrates the poor child. Bless her little heart, she does persevere.”

“She’s kept it a secret for too long.” Lily felt sorry for Kelly. “It’s not right to put all this on a fourteen year old. There are people who can help Chris. You have to make her see someone. Ian put her through hell over it and she’s just too frightened it will happen again. Even John said you just have to give the word and he would talk to her.”

“Could you imagine the ramifications if Chris knew the church were involved?”

“I know, but John has been a minister for many years and if anyone could help the poor girl, he could.” Lily took a sip of her tea.

“You know as well as I do what Chris thinks of John, and besides, he said you can’t push her, it has to be her choice.”

“But she’s not choosing to do anything about it!”

“I know, stubborn as a mule. I have to admit, it’s really getting me down.” Bill sighed discouraged. “I actually thought of telling Sandy, but...” He began to expose his desperation.

“No, that’s not a good idea. Don’t get me wrong, I think Sandy is a lovely person, but I just dread to think of what she would say to Chris if she found out.” Lily stood and hobbled to the bench to add more hot water to the teapot. It was obvious Bill felt anxious to do something, yet apprehensive to take her advice.

“Bill...” Lily sighed, feeling for the man’s dilemma. “What about if I make some inquiries? I don’t have to give any names.” She returned to the table and sat down. “What harm could it do just to get some information?”

“Chris lights fires with the literature she’s been given on the subject. But you never know, one of us might make her come to her senses.” Bill smiled and nodded.

“Another cup of tea?” Lily expressed delight.

The chilly night air hadn’t deterred Kelly from sitting on the front step beside her mother, who complained endlessly that trying to educate her was like trying to kiss a crocodile. Over the last year, Kelly had persisted, her mother’s attitude held the woman back from learning even the simple alphabet.

“Ship!” Kelly interrupted, pointing to the word and the appropriate picture. “Concentrate mum. Sound the word, we’ve done this before.”

“I just can’t do it! Let’s face it Kelly, I’m...” Chris tried to think of the name of her problem.

“Dumb.” Kelly raised a brow.

“Don’t rub it in!” Chris was in no mood for sarcasm. “You know I hate that.”

Kelly was sick of playing the teacher, especially as her mother fought her every inch of the way. It wasn’t easy for Kelly. From an early age, she had learnt to forge her mother’s signature. Occasionally, she used that ability to her own advantage. She could scribble a note to get out of sport or homework, but this was not a regular practice and she would find herself confessing, after the event, to Bill or Lily.

“Have you still got that pamphlet Elka gave you?” Kelly was hopeful.

“Don’t start this again!” Chris frowned.

“Then learn it yourself.” Kelly stood; she’d had enough for the night.

The pamphlet Kelly referred to was one Elka had brought home from school a month or so ago on adult illiteracy. The school set up a program and both Bill and Kelly nagged Chris to participate. As usual, the pamphlet was ignored, thrown in the fire and soon the matter was dropped. Kelly grasped the books borrowed from the library. She suddenly remembered the school notices. Finding them at the bottom of her large colourful bag, she shoved them under her mother’s nose.

“When you’ve worked these out,” Kelly said, “you’re supposed to sign them and a cross won’t do.” With books under her arm, she heaved a sigh of frustration leaving her mother to sit alone, wallowing in self-pity.

Bill strolled onto the veranda. For a moment, Chris presumed Kelly had a change of heart and come back to apologise for her behaviour.

“It’s time you did something about it girl. We can’t keep this up for ever.” Bill stood behind his granddaughter, leaning on his walking stick. He decided earlier that he would sit Chris down this very night and bluff her into doing something about her illiteracy.

Holding out the notices, Chris waited for her grandfather to take them. When he didn’t, she turned and looked at him, reading something in his expression.

“If I go and see someone, then everyone will know.”

“Don’t be so silly,” Bill replied. “These things are done in private.” His granddaughter turned away, looking out over the street.

“I can’t even wipe my arse around here without everyone knowing what brand of toilet tissue I’m using.”

“I’ve made a decision!” Bill’s tone gained his granddaughter’s immediate attention. “This is the last time I do this for you.” He took the notices from her. “You either get help or you’re on your own.”

“Don’t do this to me Pop. I’m stressed out enough with the kids and...”

“It won’t work this time girl,” Bill interrupted. “I’ve heard your excuses too often. I should have put a stop to it years ago, but Kate always told me to leave you alone.”

“Good old nana, she knew how to keep you men in line.” Chris rolled her eyes; she had heard it all before and was not about to take him seriously.

“You had Kate wrapped around your little finger!” Bill prodded her in the back with his stick. “What are you going to do when I’m gone? Ruin your

daughter's life? She can't run after you just so you know what's on the label of a TV dinner!"

"I don't need that sort of help; besides, I look at the pictures."

"Is that why you don't buy plain label? It's cheaper and just as good."

"I'll kill Kelly," Chris snapped. "She always tells me it's overseas muck and is really expensive!" She was now fuming, feeling her trust had been abused. Bill presumed he was finally getting through to her.

"Doesn't this tell you something?" Bill waited in anticipation.

"Yes it does! I'll take Mitchell shopping from now on."

Bill turned his back on his granddaughter, deciding against further conversation as it only upset him. Chris heard the door close whilst pondering over Kelly's deception, trying to conjure up some sort of punishment for betraying her trust. It was her own fault, not that she would admit it and Kelly was in such a tempting position.

"I'll show her," Chris thought aloud, "take advantage of me will she? Let's see how she feels when I cut off her supply of pimple cream." She grinned mischievously, forgetting all that Bill had said. Looking up behind her, she saw the light on in her grandfather's room; he must be going to bed she thought.

Rising to her feet, Chris walked into the house and through to the kitchen. Spotting the notices on the table, she peeked to see if they were signed. Pop had done it again; she knew he would. Chris could now sleep easier after plotting the builder's demise.