



# VERONICA

BAMBERG, FRANCONIA, 1628

It was a warm day in August when they burned my father at the stake. Our house sat a little way back from the cathedral square, perched near the river, right in the busiest part of Bamberg. From my bedroom window I could see the four towers of the imperial church dedicated to St Peter and St George, a magnificent bundle of stone and glass. The sun was high in the sky and I could hear some noise filtering across to where I sat by the window. The carts were bringing condemned witches and other criminals to the square outside the church for the burnings and beheadings. This always made my face prickle with cold as I remembered Mutti who had taken her final breath in the square and my father who awaited the same fate. I shut my eyes and recalled the booming voice of the Bishop shouting from the pulpit that he 'would not suffer a witch to live' and he followed through on that threat every single day.

The windows and doors of our narrow house were all gaping wide, letting in the whisper of breeze to cool us. Hans was in the kitchen with Kristina, his nurse, eating a lunch of sausage and sauerkraut. I had no appetite and was at the window box in the sitting room, feeling the sweat trickle beneath my arms, when the sound of the bells came drifting through the heat to my ears and the noise of people, the mob, a cruel rabble, cheering for the latest dispatch of a witch or murderer.

I could see through the doorway to where Hans was pushing the slop of spiced and salted cabbage around on his platter, doing all he could to prolong the agony before ploughing it into his mouth. Hans enjoyed sausage and it was with love that Kristina and I had made them in the pantry not long after they took Papa away for questioning. After the crops failed last harvesting season and the animals suffered from lack of grain, we were lucky to get the meats at the price we did, and with Papa gone and no wage coming in, the pantry would be bare enough soon.

'For all the time we put into them,' Kristina smiled. 'The boy makes short work of it.'

'I'd rather more sausage and less of this,' Hans Georg groaned.

Kristina ruffled the boy's hair and smiled at him as a mother might. Hans was the only living boy in our family. Three buried before and after him. A small, slight brother with butter-blond hair falling over his face, cornflower-blue eyes and knobbly knees that bunioned so prominently on his scrawny eight-year-old legs; a boy who had, up until that day, a blazing future as the son of the

Burgermeister, Johannes Junius, with a handsome house and good strong blood.

‘That cabbage is spiced with laurel leaves, juniper berries and apple,’ I frowned. ‘Best in Bamberg. Good for your innards. Now eat it up.’

Kristina was small with dark hair and a kindly face. Older than Mutti but younger than Papa, her husband had left her penniless when he’d been killed in a tavern brawl and she had come here to Bamberg looking for work. She had been with us, cooking, cleaning and watching over us, for seven years and some months.

I felt a shadow fall across the threshold and the Jesuit priest appeared at our kitchen door, which opened out onto the narrow cobbled street, a dip between his dark brows, his hands falling limply by his sides, a book in one. I recognised him. Father Friedrich Spee.

‘They’ve done it,’ he said sombrely. ‘They’ve carried out the sentence. His soul has been set free, Veronica.’

It was a hammer coming down hard upon me. There had been no warning. I knew it was coming but not so sudden, so brutal with its abrupt trickery. Kristina’s face drew pale and I swayed on my feet, my fists curling into white and I felt as if I had drifted outside of everything with only my dull throbbing heart to keep me tethered to the room. They had burned my father like a suckling pig. I turned back to the window box and could still hear the roar from people in the square, the lingering peal of the bells, hollow in my ears. I moved towards the priest, crossing the kitchen floor. The windows looked out to the street where I could see people moving quickly towards the

square. There were always three or four burnings; sometimes three at a time and people were scrambling to find out who was for cooking that day, a neighbour, friend or foe. A sharper gust of air whisked through the narrow lane and caught my pale hair, and I wondered if it wasn't my father's ghost, passing by on his way to the Kingdom of God or to Hades below.

'I smuggled a letter out,' the priest said softly, gently. 'I hope it brings you some comfort, Veronica.'

He moved through the doorway to the sitting room and pulled out a folded parchment from inside his Bible. It looked like two sheets pressed against one another. My face was clammy and I felt the bitter taste of bile beneath my tongue. Footsteps thudded past as young lads ran toward the execution pen. I could smell smoke, a sickly sweet odour that prickled in my nostrils. It was a common stench these days with the Hexenbischof, Fox Von Dornheim, Prince of Terror, on a crusade to weed out the three thousand people who allegedly met at Haups-Moor to dance with the devil. My stomach cramped and my cheeks tingled. My father was dead. Burned, like my mutti before him. Hans Georg and I were orphans. I was just seventeen. We were the children of two convicted witches, Rosa and Johannes Junius. Our lives were in danger.

'Veronica. The letter. I gave the guard a thaler for it as requested by your father.'

I walked towards him and stared at the papers, folded once, tucked inside one another. The priest's fingers were long and white with sparse dark hairs sprouting from his knuckles.

'Your father's hands were damaged by the thumb-screws and he took more than a week to write it,' the man in the long black robe explained while I tried to fathom his words. 'He gave it to a guard who handed it to me when I went to pray with your father this morning.'

'You prayed with him?' I asked, feeling the sting of tears in the corners of my eyes, knowing that Papa's requests for a priest had been denied him before.

'They had broken him and he was no longer the robust Burgermeister we all knew so well,' he said sadly. 'But he was resigned to his fate and he will be with your dear mother, Rosa, now. I heard his confession.'

I turned my lips in on themselves.

'He was no witch,' I said defiantly, though my voice wobbled. 'I saw what they did to him. Did he cry out ... was it quick?'

Kristina had gone to Hans Georg who was finally beginning to understand what the priest was saying. She kneeled beside him and held his hands.

'It was quick enough and he did not cry out but he renounced the devil and that is well. Quick enough.'

I shut my eyes, trying to blot the image that sprang to my head but it was too late. The flash of my father burning, melting, wedged in and stuck like a deep splinter. I had seen a woman burned in the square. Kristina and I had been coming home from market and she had tried to shelter me, pushing me along but it was right there in front of us. The woman had fallen from the stake and lay on the ground writhing, her bare, blistering arm outstretched and trembling. A guard had pushed the arm back into the flames,

using a pitchfork that he quickly threw into the flickering fire as he realised that a self-confessed witch had touched the implement. The smell was unforgettable: acrid smoke and rancid burning fat and the suffocating odour of burned hair, straw and wood and blood and bone.

'You must have someone come to the Hexenhaus gate to collect his certificate of death. Hide that letter well now, child,' he said gently. 'And do not go about proclaiming his innocence or you, too, may be looked at by the inquisitors. He confessed his allegiance with Satan. They have his confession in writing.'

The last time I had seen my father had been some weeks prior. He had been tortured the first time by then. Thumb-screws followed by leg-screws and he told me his fingers had burst around the nails like squashed sausages. I looked at the sausage on the table and bit down hard on my bottom lip. He had asked then that Kristina bring his food and clean laundry as he did not want me to see him in pain, his body marked by scabs and bruises. He had asked me to tell Kristina to bring parchment, ink and some tallow to have light by. I should have predicted the impending death when the guards began turning her away sometime the previous week, saying that the rules had changed and that the prisoners were no longer allowed family visits.

I put the letter in my pocket to read later when I was alone and the sting of the news of my father's execution had softened to a painful ache.

'The Prince-Bishop has taken possession of your father's estates and his men will be here within days to

evict you,' the tall man said sadly. I heard Kristina gasp.  
'Do you have kin close by?'

I nodded, although it was not the truth. My aunt and uncle did live nearby on the other side of the River Regnitz. We could not go there as Dr and Mrs Braun were my father's mortal enemies since the doctor had been instrumental in the first round of my father's tortures.

I would collect all we had of value, take our last horse and the cart and take Hans to Würzburg where my mother's widowed sister lived with her children. My heart was thumping with sadness but I had already given thought to this day, knowing it would come upon us, but still, until the priest's visit, we had all hoped for some reprieve. Some small mercy. My father had served Bamberg for twenty good years as a councillor and five times as Burgermeister.

After the priest left, we all wept together. Kristina went to collect my father's ragged clothes and his certificate of death. Burned at the stake until life departed him. A condemned witch. A *maleficus diabolos*. Later on that long, hot night, by candlelight, I read my father's letter. Each word felt like a hot poker. I cried softly, not wanting to let my brother hear me as I read about the unbearable tortures my father had endured to extract the confession of witchcraft from him. As the son and daughter of two burned witches, Hans and I would need to be careful because the accusation that we may be the children of Lucifer might be the tiny ember that the Hexenbischof needed to fan.

I made a silent promise to my dead parents, as I folded the letter away, that I would protect little Hans and get him safely away from Bamberg. Hans was all I had left and

his life became my new reason for being. They may have burned Mutti and Papa and half the city's men, women and children but they would never, ever touch my brother.



# KATHERINE

RENFREWSHIRE, SCOTLAND, 1696

This is my story. I am Katherine Campbell and although I lived my life in such a manner that I should have slipped away forgotten, just another country Scotswoman born to simple highland folk with no greater skill at my fingertips than churning butter, fate decreed that I might be remembered, if only in hushed whispers, for something much more sinister. I was no queen or astrologer or writer, nay, not anything so grand. I would be remembered forever, as a witch.

In the gentle hills of the highlands, its beauty marred from time to time by the bloodshed of warring men, I lived a simple life. I was nineteen years of age when I came to dwell, through grieving circumstance, in the central midlands outside of Glasgow down past the township of Paisley to Bargarran. The small time I spent in these parts was a strange and bewildering time. Dominating the villages and small farming tenancies, was a terror barely

conceivable to me. The people in the narrow laneways lived in constant fear of a neighbour's curse; the beggars sold magic charms to protect households from evil in exchange for salted meats; the women whispered that soured sheep's milk sprinkled by a warlock had saved the laird's crops; a field of corn gone to rot was the work of the devil; and the bedrooms were hung with crucifixes and garlic to keep away the grim man in black. The peasant feared witches, the priest feared witches, the whole clergy and aristocracy feared them and even the king and queen were terrified of the dreaded witch. Up until this time I had never heard of this thing, the witch. Of water kelpies and mermaids and water sprites I knew much, but nought of the witch.

In 1696, when my tale begins, the spell of a particularly fiendish terror had settled in the small estate of Bargarran. And it was here that I was to make my home. Unwittingly I walked into a briar's nest, aye, right into the very thick of it.

I had known terror. It had been hammered into my bones. The fiendish Robert Campbell of Glenlyon had slaughtered our da as he slept under the stars and then, less than three years later, he had cut my mother down in a paddock as we all fled from our burning house. Granaidh and I had lived quietly in the lower rooms of an abandoned castle for almost a year until she too passed. Isabel had long gone into service and was saved from the sting of witnessing the ordeal of my mother's death. I had hidden with Granaidh behind a grumble of rocks and seen the brutal butchering of my mammie, her body dismembered and then set alight. When Granaidh's spirit went

a'wandering, there was nothing left for me but to pack up and head south into service with my sister. I prayed that the close company of my sister would take away the nightmares and offer me the promise of a new life. It was with this hope in my breast that I arrived at the front gate that was decorated with creeping roses, with an archway of apple blossoms above.

Bargarran House was the seat of the Shaw family. The mansion stood three storeys high, nested with attic rooms and annexed by some inferior cottages and working buildings. The whole compound was enclosed by a wall of some fortitude that may have offered it some defence during the many years of religious warring that had only recently brought about the Reformation and shifting power at state level. It sat atop a hill and looked out over the tenanted paddocks of the local farmers, green hills and purple-heathered moorlands, peppered with peat bogs and scented with the briny swell of the wide brown river. Wisps of smoke from the wood fires spiralled into the pale mauve skies. The earth was hard and the shire, along with most of the country, was facing a famine.

I arrived at the house, little more than a bright-eyed girl, looking for domestic work. It was May and one of the warmest days of the year to date. The vixens were just nudging their cubs from the dens and purple buds had opened to cool themselves. I looked forward to seeing my sister again and was filled with the hope that my new home would bring with it some fresh happiness.

To look at me, there was nothing that suggested I was the devil's servant. I was not especially beautiful, nor

wide of hip or too scrawny. I stood at the front door of the manor house and tried to tidy my unruly hair beneath my bonnet and wiped my boots on the back of my stockings, one at a time to polish off the flecks of dirt.

From my first glance at Laird John Shaw – indeed, from the first breath that smelled of whisky or ale or a combination of both, I could tell he was a stern man and someone I would do well to obey at all times. John Shaw was about fifty years of age. He had a nobleman's body, stocky, soft and running to fat. His dark hair was greying and his eyes were small in a ruddy pudding of a face. His lips were wet and there was no warmth in his welcome. 'You've come at your sister's recommendation, Katherine,' he said gruffly. 'See I don't regret this kindness.'

And so the wild, feisty spirit that I'd inherited from my good mammie was brought to heel. Not once did I slip up and answer back sharply when chastised or overburdened by work. With every new day, I would swallow my contempt and lay aside, as coins saved or acorns stored, my defiant airs. I remained tough, stoic and uncomplaining, tending to the gathering of kindling, the sorting of the larder and weevil sifting, the scrubbing and laundering and tending to the house sheep that were bursting with milk in the lead-up to the next wave of lambs. Many times I felt the fire in my belly wanting to cuss and shout down the laird or his lady but I knew my surly temper might see me and my sister booted back out onto the street. Isabel and I were all the kin we had left in the world and it was good to be working shoulder to shoulder again after years apart. She was three years my senior. Isabel had always been a fine

example of domesticity, diligence and obedience; quite the opposite of me but you'd not have known it to see me work with such restraint at Bargarran. Not once did I complain about the frugality or blandness of the staff meals. In the evenings, I went to my quarters, meekly, wedged into a space no bigger than my cot, where I kept the silhouette of my beloved granaidh on my wall and a worn black leather Bible under my hard pillow and the family book in my small chest. There I slept on a mattress filled with straw, packed down tight from the countless other bodies that had pressed into it before me. The floorboards were rough and cold. During the day I worked as long as there was light. I salted meats and milked the ewes, pickled and bottled onions and kneaded dough to make the bread.

Laird John Shaw lived at Bargarran with his wife and six young children, the youngest having only just mewled her first cries on this earth. His eldest daughter, Christian, had not yet attracted much attention from me, although I had loosely observed her to be a precocious child with a wilful temper, not unlike myself at the same age of ten or eleven years. Her life was much softer than mine had been but I could see in her eyes, the same wildness, the same desire for something bigger than she had around her. We both had fire in our blood.

At eleven I had lived in a small farming lot of a decent rod-size, many miles north in the Highlands. There among the hills and dells I enjoyed a simple life, playing with livestock and taking to the raw, bleak hills, and then playing in the shadows of Kinlochaline Castle, known in the old tongue as Caistean Ime or the Castle

of Butter on account of the legend that the lady of the house had paid the builder with butter equal to the volume of the castle. The old castle had been abandoned some years earlier and was a right fancy place to explore with all its rooms and staircases, although my mammie warned us that parts of the place had been burned out and were not safe.

That same year, the Jacobite rising had left me and my kin nervous, despite our relative isolation. Open to marauding clansmen weeding out Jacobite dissenters, my mammie and granaidh had hauled Isabel and me indoors. Isabel and I had learned to read, against our da's express wishes, but with the menfolk off warring, we women had to amuse ourselves somehow. It was in those days, with the stench of peat bog in my hair and by the dim light of my candle that I fell in love with words. We read mostly Bible stories and the characters and wars and heartbreaks of the Old Testament salted my imagination. I quite foolishly thought I might like to write down all the stories from my own head.

My granaidh kept a secret book that had the names of all the womenfolk of our bloodline etched into the calf-skin parchment with iron gall ink. Names and the places of birth. My name was the last in there and some nights by candlelight my sister Isabel, my mammie and her old ma would sit by the fire and recite the names weaving backward through the years.

'You were born in Franconia?' I would marvel at the old woman with milky eyes and spider-web hair. 'What was it like? Did you go to fine banquets with princes?'

'Your seanair was my only prince and a right red fiery one he was,' she would smile, her tongue still thick and harsh. 'We lived a simple life until we came to Eire.'

I often pressed the old woman for more stories of the faraway land from whence she came, but her eyes would grow sad and tears would track the grooves of her face. She would shake her head and tell me that some things were best left unspoken.

Together we womenfolk would read back the strange sounding names and look at the ancient markings called runes in the book which looked like the footprints of birds and then it would be carefully wrapped in a hide of goatskin, tied with a leather strap and placed back in the underground chamber by the back door.

Some nights in my cramped cell at Bargarran I would pull out the book and read the names of my mothers and their mothers that wound by blood back to the earliest years in the frozen north, in a faraway world I could only wonder about. There were fragments of many different languages all woven together and it made me feel less lonely to look at the fading names and markings. On the worn leather-bound cover the old Norse words *Systir Saga, Sister Story*, were branded deeply and I was glad to be the last name between its pages. I often wondered where it would travel beyond me and where my blood might flow.

Young Christian Shaw of Bargarran was equally well-read and could patter out a Latin passage from the Bible to resounding applause from her proud parents. I always made sure I smiled at the girl, noting how pretty and arrogant she was as she tossed her fair curls about. Life

was restrained at Bargarran and I felt it like a suffocating corset around me. Isabel had cautioned me never to smile or laugh and to always keep my head down and my wild red hair tucked out of sight but on my one day off a week, I found my greatest satisfaction in the city of Glasgow. Here I felt alive.

It was like being in a circus. The wide and busy road through the markets was a festival of colour and as I walked the streets, I marvelled at how people could live in such dense proximity to one another, each house pushed tightly against the next and some buildings many storeys high. The air in the city was a blend of congealed aromas from the perfumes of fine ladies to the damp stench wafting up from the Clyde River. I drank it all in, the whiff of heady incense spilling from the churches to the earthy scents of sage and ale from the breweries. After a full week of farm odours this shamble of city fragrances pleased and excited me. For a highland girl the colour, noise and perfume of a big city was new to me and I found that I liked it.

I would often stand by the well and watch the people with their different clothes: the pressed silks and brocades embroidered with colourful thread, the rich variety of Clan plaids in the kilts and cloaks. Drunken louts tumbled out of alehouses chasing one another with hoops and shouts into the narrower alleyways.

I would wander slowly through the fish markets where the heat lay leaden upon the stones and the sound of fish scaling scratched the still air. After passing other stalls where vendors fussed over baskets stuffed full of vegetables and eggs or caskets of wine and vinegar, the noise

of haggling voices filling the air, I would climb to Fir Park Hill, the highest part of the city. It soon became my favourite place.

Here I would take in the view of this fine city. On a clear day, looking west, I could see the valley of Clyde bounded by the hills beyond and I felt the pangs of homesickness while knowing with a sodden grief that there was nothing to return to but charred memories. It stung my eyes and my heart to think of it.

One day, just as I was about to leave this peaceful palette to head homewards along the river path, I saw a man walking towards me, heading over the hill and down to the town square. He smiled at me and nodded as he passed. His gaze fluttered on me like a tiny insect, fleeting, almost imperceptible. In that moment, something shifted within me.

Aye, I had known boys, larrikins in the hills, even one or two who had turned my head but none enough to pursue with vigour. The truth was I had a fire in my belly and I wanted more than a small white cottage, thatched and cold, on a barren hill with naught but small town gossip to entertain me and a never-ending crib of bairns. My mammie had always frowned at my hopes for a grander life above my station and my dreams of travel. But the highland life of a country wife was not the life I wanted for myself. I wanted to see the world and learn about its wonders. I'd listened to traveller's tales and, thrilled by their adventures, wanted some of my own. I yearned to visit the land of the northern lights where my earliest mothers had sprung.

But that day I had the breath knocked out of me as I backed up against a tree after the man had crested the hill and disappeared and I had to remind myself to breathe again before I died.

From that brief moment, my head was turned and I became giddy. It was one of those ‘knowings’ that my granaidh had spoken of. Despite my feeling for common-sense, every market day I would go to the same place on the hill and wait. And every day at the same appointed time, he would walk by and smile at me – just a small upturn of his full lips and a mischievous glint in his eye. It went on for some weeks until one day I decided to follow him at a distance, allowing myself to get a better look at him. The man walked back into the throng of the city with a jaunty gait and I once came so close, with only a few walkers between us, that I imagined I could hear him whistling and the sound made my belly leap. He had sand-coloured hair and wore a white shirt with wide sleeves. The mysterious man disappeared into the Tollbooth but not before throwing me a glance, a wink and a salute. He had known all along that I had followed him. After waiting for a lengthening time without another sighting of him, I turned and made for home, the image of that wink never leaving my head.

That night, my tiny space seemed to me a palace and my straw cot a carved four-poster bed. Never before in my life had I known such happiness and I could not sleep for it. And during that same night, at first awake and then in my dreams, I inspected my vast rubble of memories. Good and bad, sad with joy, the Highlands to the Lowlands. A

young man without a name had been the start of this new bud of happiness, bursting through a bloodstained snow. Already his features were fading, but it had not been his stride or face or shirtsleeves that I was preserving. It was the knowledge that something had changed and become new in my life. It was the 'knowing' that this man would be a catalyst for my own personal revolution. The Highlands and the bloodshed were my yesterday but the handsome man with the captivating smile would be my tomorrow and ever after.



## PAISLEY

BUNDANOON, AUSTRALIA, PRESENT DAY

The autumn trees look amazing, all cornflake and raspberry coloured, as they flutter in the afternoon breeze. There is the beginning of an evening chill creeping up from the deep gorge behind Bundanoon and I walk home fast. I've forgotten my jumper and there are goosebumps on my arms.

Locals congregate in clusters, gossiping and laughing and all wave and ask me how my day was.

'How was school, Paisley?'

'Great, thanks, May,' I smile back.

I like it. The main street of this tiny town is lost in time with its quaint old shops and Pete's Primula Diner which still feels like it needs horses tied up outside, drinking from water troughs. It's shy and unpretentious and daggy; a little bit like me.

I turn at the laneway and push open the rusted gate. Mum's herb pots are huddled by the back stairs and I can see that she hasn't watered them for a while. The coriander

looks shrivelled and even the usually hardy parsley looks dehydrated and unconscious. I fill the can from the leaky garden tap and give them a good drenching before pushing through the back screen door.

The house is quiet; the breakfast dishes are still in the sink and the place smells like burned toast. I walk straight through the kitchen to the back room of the shop, which is attached to the house, and find Mum there. I can tell immediately that she has not had a good day.

She looks up as I enter with my schoolbag slung over my shoulder. Her hair was pale blue when I left for school this morning. Now it is hot pink. I know what she's going to say before she says it. The hair says it all.

'Oh, Paise,' she sighs. 'Calvin dumped me! I should have seen it coming, darling. It's right bang in the middle of Mercury Retrograde. And I never learn.'

Only my mother could blame the break up of her latest flash-in-the-pan romance on a chunk of rock floating across the earth's orbit, millions of miles away in space. Calvin had been 'the one'. She was sure this time. But once again, she'd been wrong.

'It's not because of some planet, Mum,' I sigh. 'It's because you told him you loved him and wanted to spend your life with him about five minutes after you'd met. You scared him off.'

'It had been nearly two months and when you know, you know,' she sulks. 'He has thrown away an opportunity for the real thing. I was the best thing that ever happened to him and both our moons were in Leo.'

My mother shakes her head and blinks at me through her blue-tinted glasses, in genuine disbelief at this turn of events. She is wearing a wafting silken technicoloured caftan over her long lean body. Mum is a very regal, beautiful woman. Her hands are shuffling a pack of tarot cards and I feel as if I'm the parent giving her daughter counselling about her messed up and chaotic love life.

'You'll be fine, Mum. When the time is right, the right one will turn up. Just wait for him to come to you.'

Calvin. He hadn't seemed overly special. Just another handsome face. She collects them like butterflies and they have about the same lifespan. Ever the optimist, Kirsty McLeod is always on the lookout for her knight in shining armour.

I take a sip of water from the plastic bottle and move a pen aimlessly around the desk. I have other things on my mind because I think *I* might be in love. I have no model or framework on which to hang that possibility. My mother has been in love one hundred times and never really at all. She has been in love with the idea of love her whole life, and she lives by the philosophy that what goes around comes around and one good deed gives birth to another. She is the Fairy Godmother of good deeds but, as yet, she is still waiting for her Prince Charming to come riding into her life on the back of a white steed.

But, yes. I think I might be in love. If it is a *thing* where you feel a little bit sick in the guts every time you clap eyes on a particular boy and you have trouble remembering how to form sentences when you talk to him and it comes out sounding like a kindergarten kid's ramble and

you dream of holding his hand, resting your head on his shoulder as he tells you about his day and nothing much at all, then I have that *thing*. His name is Ben Digby. A senior like me. He's in three of my classes and we've become bus buddies. There are quite a lot of us in Bundanoon who catch the bus to Moss Vale every weekday and back again in the afternoon. It's a tight crowd of kids and we all look out for one another.

He sits next to me on the bus while I fixate on his thigh, which presses up against my own, searing the flesh where his grey school trousers touch my skin. I remember that he did notice my new haircut but that is only because it was such a drastic change. I'd let the hairdresser take off my long blonde locks and swapped them for a short pixie cut, which I then dyed black. A blind man would have noticed such a drastic change. Perhaps he'd only commented because he didn't like it. My mother had moaned and told me it made me look like a middle-aged woman. To be honest, living with my mother, who is a female version of Peter Pan, has turned me into what my friend Em calls, *a grandmother trapped inside a teenage girl's body*. I think that's a bit harsh. I have a thing for retro music and I knit. So what? I don't think my new haircut looks 'old'. I think it looks kind of elfin.

'Are you even listening to me?' my mother whines and I flicker back into the moment, trying to remember what she has said to me.

'Sorry?' I ask and look at her sitting at the other end of the table where she has laid out a spread of cards.

She is pointing animatedly at one. 'It's the Tower,' she says shrilly, her eyes wildly blue behind the tinted lenses.

'Total destruction. End of days sort of stuff. That's the break-up with Calvin.'

'In the grand scheme of things, Mother,' I smile indulgently, patronisingly, speaking like I might to a child, 'I don't think Calvin what's-his-name counts as a really big deal. You went out what, ten times?'

'But here's the Fool and that denotes new beginnings,' she muses, ignoring my remark.

I don't know why she keeps telling me about her various interpretations of the cards which seem to always, quite implausibly, reflect exactly what is going on in her life at that particular moment. I don't believe that a pack of cards has the ability to give any kind of advice or insight into a person's life. She knows how I feel about them and yet she talks to me as if I'm somehow endorsing her fantasies just by being present. I'm not. Her cards hadn't predicted the demise of her relationship with Calvin, but I had. I just used logic instead of a pack of cards. My mother had gone after that poor man like a lioness after a gazelle. In the end he just ran faster than her.

'New beginnings,' she mutters to herself, deep in thought.

Mum lives for new beginnings. She sees every day as an opportunity for some new surprise. I long for security and stability. Seven schools in twelve years will do that to a person. I love my mother very much. She is frustrating, annoying, childish and irrational but she is also passionate and caring and funny and ... well ... I mean funny in every sense of the word. As it's just Mum and me, we have a deep bond, but to be honest as I get older I find myself

becoming more and more the sensible voice of reason in the house as she becomes more and more obsessed with her potions and crystals. I am dreading the day she decides that she is over Bundanoon and packs us up like gypsies once again, but I'm eighteen next year and I like it here so I'm just going to have to be firm with her and say 'no'.

Ben Digby. Ben Digby. I drift back. How does one move a casual sort of friendship to the next level? He hasn't given any direct sign that he feels the same way as me. To him I'm just good old Paisley Muller-McLeod, one of the gang, one of the usual suspects roaming the streets or hanging out at the skate park. But he does sit with me on the bus and that is kind of a new thing. I'm deciding to read that as a sign that he's interested. Am I just being as foolish as my mother? I can't talk to her about it or she'll demand to know when his birthday is and possibly accost him in the street to find out and that would ruin everything. My mother, with all the best intentions in the world, is a colossal success at messing up all things to do with romance.

'I'm going out the back to do some study,' I tell her as a tinkle of bells comes from the other room, as the door at the front of the shop opens.

'Someone's here.' She smiles and sweeps the cards back into a pack, putting them in the middle of the table, before going next door. 'Might be someone needing a chakra alignment.'

I pick up my bag from the floor and sling it over my shoulder, peering out to see who her next victim might be. I am curiously surprised to see Amy, the local

policewoman. She's never been into the shop and she's in uniform so she's on duty. I rest my shoulder against the doorframe and watch through the beaded curtain hanging between the two rooms.

'Sorry, but I need you to come down the road to the station, Kirsty,' she tells my mother. 'To make a statement. Someone's made a complaint about you.'

'What?' my mother stammers, confused. 'Who? I don't understand. What sort of complaint?'

Amy casts a look my way, seeing me through the strings of beads. She looks uncomfortable.

'It might be best to talk about that as we drive down to the station.'

My mother looks back at me over her round glasses. She blows a strand of pink hair from her face and smiles, but she looks slightly spooked.

'Lock up the shop, hey, Paisley?' She nods. 'I'll be straight back after I sort out this nonsense.'

I'm not one for believing in hunches but I am feeling more than uneasy, sick in my belly with it. I turn over the top card of Mum's tarot cards, just to see, just to be foolish. It is the Hanged Man. I feel a chill blow through me as my mother and the policewoman leave, punctuated by the tinkle of doorbells. I wonder for whom those little bells toll.