

The Butterfly Tower ©

By Sophie Tatlow

Genre: Popular fiction with a blend of literary fiction and a dash of crime.

Influences: *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean; *Perfume* by Patrick Suskind; *Eucalyptus* by Murray Bail; the film *Adaptation*; directed by Spike Jonz (film adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*); *Nabokov's Butterflies* by Vladimir Nabokov.

Following a chance encounter on a plane with a butterfly man, property developer and obsessive lepidopterist Grace Fox enters into an unusual relationship with environmentalist, Henry Stern. He is unlike anyone Grace has ever met and for the first time in her life she is able to share her butterfly obsession with a fellow collector. But like many first impressions, Henry may not be what he seems to be. For the following two weeks, Grace lives under Henry's charismatic spell, eventually succumbing to his charms and inviting him to her sub-tropical Queensland oasis. What transpires between the two is the combination of a rare hallucinogenic moth and the subsequent discovery of the world's most unusual insect, the Opportunity Butterfly, a sighting that threatens to destroy Grace's building ambitions and turn her life upside-down.

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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Chapter 1

C is for Courtship

A female butterfly will mate if the situation is right. There has to be enough sun and warmth for optimal conditions, and it can take as little as twenty minutes, or as long as two hours.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

It's a long climb
Up the rock face
At the wrong time
To the right place.
Vladimir Nabokov 1969

How to begin? When is a story a story? Where does it start and where does it stop? Is it like a Hollywood film? A grab-you-by-the-throat beginning? A narrative arc with rising action, leading you to a climax? Death at the end or a marriage? Is the beginning of one part of your life, and the end of another, really a decision anyone makes? Do accidents happen? Or is it all sketched out by some higher power.

There were no questions, no answers. There was no beginning, no middle and no definite end. In my case, it was a chance encounter. I believe it was destined to happen.

~

The night was rank and oppressive. It was hot and getting hotter. It was mid-July, Sunday, and I was working, returning from a business trip. It was a dreary series of meetings; days filled with unfulfilled expectations. A total waste of time.

All around me the air was clogged with people smells and carbon monoxide fumes. Something irritated my nose. I coughed and cleared my throat, covering my mouth with a handkerchief. It smelled gentle and of soap.

Somewhere, into the air above my head, a foreign voice announced the departure of a flight. Another accent translated: *This is the last call for flight QF456 to Sydney.* At last I was going home. I fanned my airline ticket in front of my face, glancing at my watch. It was late. My body parts were stuck together. I had to get out of there.

The queue in front of me stretched to the counter, the line behind streamed out of the automatic doors. The announcement was repeated: *This is the last call for flight QF456 to Sydney.* No one moved. My face fell. What was going on? If I were still a smoker, I would've been smoking. Instead, I chewed my finger.

As though I was driving a car, I rolled my case backwards an inch, turning it left, and swinging it out into a vacant space. I rolled it all the way to the front of the queue, not looking back. I didn't hear the protests of my fellow passengers. I kept pushing till I reached the front of a counter. Nothing was going to stop me. I slid my ticket across the reservation counter. 'My flight's been called.'

A young woman with a passive face stared at me. She opened my ticket and frowned. 'I'm sorry, Madame, this ticket is for next week.'

'WHAT?'

'Yes, Madame. It says it here.' She pointed to the date with her manicured fingernail. 'Sunday 20 July'

'Impossible.' I snatched the ticket out of her hand, staring at the date: *Sunday 20 July, Business Class.* A week from today.

Patiently, she repeated her statement: *this ticket is for next week.*

I looked down the length of the counter, searching for anyone official. Someone had to help. She smiled, shaking her head again, pointing to the back of the queue. I shook my head. No way. I wasn't going back.

I stretched over the counter, spinning the computer monitor around. I had no idea what I was looking at, columns of numbers flicked and flashed. I felt like punching the screen.

I spoke to her like she was deaf. 'I don't think you understand. I *have* to leave for Sydney tonight.' I tapped the counter again. 'I have a very important meeting to attend to in the morning.'

The woman with black glossy hair smiled. She turned around, scanning the airline staff behind her. She was looking for some assistance. No one paid us any attention.

I took my wallet out of my bag, sliding a thousand rupees across the counter. Raising my eyebrows, I stared at the top of my hand. A corner of the note peeked out. 'It's urgent.' My voice trembled, 'I-must-go-tonight.'

I saw the money register in her eyes. 'I'll see what I can do, Madame.'

I put my wallet on the counter, watching as she scrutinised her screen. She spoke into her phone and in a moment she was smiling. She stamped my ticket and handed it back.

'Madame. One seat. Economy. Row 98F.'

Cattle class. Second-back row. Beside the engines. Two metres from the toilets.

'I'll take it.'

I pushed my bags through the chute, watching them crash over the rubber conveyor belt and fall into a vortex. I grabbed my handbag and ran for gate seventeen. I had three minutes to get there.

~

Once in the plane I found myself in a narrow, congested passageway. Above, hand-luggage compartments clunked open and shut, spewing open with personal belongings and exploding duty-free bags. I struggled through, looking at the backlit numbers and their corresponding passengers. Row ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, finally ninety-eight. I stood there, staring at the person in 98G. My heart sank. A man too big for the space filled the area. He looked to be about 6 feet 4 inches. His elbows hung over the armrests and his knees touched the back of a seat. Legs and arms

invaded my space. I looked behind at row ninety-nine. A baby's chubby legs wobbled like jelly on its mother's knee.

Turning back, I glanced down at my travelling companion. His eyes were closed and he was tapping to the beat of the music on his iPod. I took a magazine out of the side-pocket in my bag and shoved the bag into the overhead compartment. Teddy bears and blankets fought back. Sitting down, I pulled some headphones out of the pocket in the seat in front of me, slipping them over my ears. I wanted to hang a *do not disturb* sign from my forehead, pulling it down like a blind over a window.

I ripped the plastic off my new magazine, turning to the contents page. I opened to the middle of the journal and spread out the centrefold. September's pin-up revealed a Western Blue Charaxes (*Charaxes smaragdalis*), a feisty subject with extraordinary flight muscles, not adverse to pugnacious behaviour. My type of flyer.

Next to me, I felt some fidgeting. My elbow shot off the armrest, my magazine collapsed into my lap. I threw him a filthy look and he returned my icy gaze with a big smile.

'Excuse me, butterflies?' he said, pointing to the magazine resting in my lap.

Without moving my head, I looked into my lap, nodding.

'*Cydia Saltitans*,' he added, tapping the butterfly on the head.

'Sorry?'

'The cover of the magazine, it's a *Saltians*, common name, Westwood Bean Moth. Amazing story.'

I frowned, 'Anything else I should know?'

He ignored my remark, leaning over my armrest. His thick hair tickled my face. It smelt strange.

'In my opinion, that butterfly is one of Lepidoptera's biggest enigmas. Might not be a dazzler, but it's definitely got character.'

'And why do you say that?'

‘Well, if you’re a real collector, and not a hobbyist, I think you would understand.’

‘Try me.’

He reached out to shake hands as if I’d joined some conspiratorial club, ‘First, the name’s Henry Stern.’

I hesitated. I wanted to lie. ‘Grace Fox.’

He leaned back in his chair, attempting to rearrange his legs. He was tall. Masculine. A fine white scar ran from the bottom of his left nostril to the top of his lip. For a second I wanted to touch it. But more than anything he had a certain look in his eyes, a look that was difficult to define. I wasn’t sure what I was looking at.

Without asking, he smiled, filling the air between us with the story of the unique Westwood Bean Moth (otherwise known as the The Mexican Jumping Bean). The plain-Jane moth on the cover of my magazine laid its eggs on a particular fruit; when the eggs hatched, the young caterpillar burrowed into the seeds of the fruit and consumed its contents. After it had eaten its fill, the squashed caterpillar wriggled around for space, causing its body to catapult against the inside of the bean and making the bean ‘hop’. However, and this is the best part, emphasised Henry, it only does this jumping when it’s over-heating, it’s the little grub’s endeavours to move blindly out of the sun’s rays.

‘Claustrophobic,’ I said.

‘Depends how you look at it. I think it’s very smart. You and me, we’re just the same.’

‘Think so?’

‘Sure. I’m believe that we all have the spirit of the Lepidoptera, the brains of the primates, the calculative expertise of the feline and the memory of an elephant.’

I extended my fingers out in a spider-like stretch. The action was oddly relaxing. ‘You think we are all *spirited* butterflies?’ I said smoothing my hands down over my trousers.

A long moment passed, and then he leaned forward. 'Something like that. There are scores of butterflies, all of them special. Sexy species, such as the Blue Nymphidium, big travellers like the Monarch, and then there's the Tropical Leafwing, a crafty little hideaway who can virtually disappear from view, it looks so much like a dead leaf. I can honestly say I know someone who shares all, or one, of the above qualities.'

'An interesting theory.'

'I'm sure you're aware, Grace. People own animals that bear a resemblance to them physically. And if they don't look like their owners, it's only a matter of time before they start behaving like them.'

'So I've heard, but I've never owned a pet.'

'What do you own?'

'A modest butterfly collection.' Every trophy species from Papua New Guinea to Tibet hung in my office.

'What a coincidence, what's the chance of two butterfly collectors sitting side by side on a flight?'

'Maybe we've got trendy.'

'You remind me of someone you know. An old friend.'

'Well, should I move now, or later?'

'She was very nice.' He laughed.

I flushed. He was making me nervous. I wanted to talk to him, which surprised me. A conversation with a butterfly man could be dangerous. Especially a handsome one.

'So. Butterflies?'

'I'm president of SBA.'

'Excuse me?'

'The Sustainable Butterfly Association.'

I abhorred the word *sustainable*. It was *suspicious*.

'I had no idea such an organisation existed.'

'Butterflies are big business. I'm in the industry of setting up sustainable farms and ranches. Tourists visit Costa Rica to see the rainforest, the cloud forest, the volcanoes, the wildlife and, of course, the butterflies. But

Costa Rica also has a deforestation problem. It's a major world-wide conservation issue.'

I nodded. *You will detest me. I am your enemy. I cut down trees everyday. Thousands of them.*

'Rather than the villagers plundering their forests for logging, agriculture, and capturing wild butterflies. I help them set up farms. They breed captive-reared species. Sometimes they earn up to a dollar a pupa. They are then on-sold to collectors, major zoos and natural history museums.'

'My God –' I felt sick to my bones.

He grinned. 'I knew you'd be impressed.'

I didn't answer.

'It's all about community and enterprise.'

I still didn't answer.

'It's very successful. Where the villagers use to survive on fishing and logging, they are now surrounded by national parks and reserves. The butterfly farming is part of a major world trend in ecotourism.'

'So, the commercialisation of butterflies is really about their conservation.'

'Something like that.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. 'Smart.'

'We pull people out of a rut. Create opportunities for indigenous communities everywhere. I'm passionate about making the world –'

'Obsessed.'

'Funny word *obsessed*. I would say I'm passionate about making the planet a better place for the animal kingdom, specifically Lepidoptera.'

I shook my head in disbelief. *Incredible*, I whispered.

'Enough of me. So, why have you been in Jakarta?' He was so close, I could feel his breath on my face.

'Real Estate.'

'You're an agent?'

I swallowed. 'Property. I've got a business called *House Scout*.' The lie slid out of my mouth like an egg rolling off a table. I had worked for *House Scout* ten years ago and knew 'property scout' could mean anything. I also knew that property development and butterfly collecting didn't exactly sound like an ethical mix.

'And you?'

'There's a conservation conference. We're developing training for the protection of butterfly habitats. I'm setting up programs internationally.'

I coughed to clear my throat. As if sensing my discomfort, the flight attendant appeared and asked if we'd like more drinks. I asked for a whisky and ice.

He smiled, picking up his beer, without taking his eyes off my face. I felt like he was looking into my soul. My stomach flipped. He lightly touched the rim of my glass.

'To collecting,' I said.

'To attractive collectors on planes.'

My cheeks were burning with heat and I took a large sip of my drink to cool them down.

He took me by the elbow. 'So. What got you started?'

I thought about his question for a moment. 'Loneliness.'

'You? *Lonely*. I don't believe it.'

I looked straight back at him. 'I had nothing else to do as a kid. My grandmother wanted to promote a healthy hobby.'

'You don't strike me as a person who's stuck for something to do.' I noticed him giving me an appraising glance.

I let myself sink back into my seat, taking a deep breath. The conversation was about to go one of two ways. I could either nurture it slowly, or suffocate it quickly, like plunging a butterfly into an airless jar.

'When I've been looking for a particular specimen, I seem to get incredibly excited, I guess you could say *high*.'

'Like a drug addict?'

I rolled my glass in my hand and thought about the addictive nature of my collecting. 'I guess so.'

'You meet all kinds of collectors. We're a mafia.'

He was silent for a moment while he seemed to be considering something. 'Where did you say you buy your butterflies?'

'I didn't. But, I usually purchase from the net, sometimes contacts, fairs, occasionally garage sales, auctions –'

'EBay?'

'Once.'

'Good. EBay's for amateurs and the net's rubbish. It primarily deals in black-market butterflies, contributing to the eradication of their species all over the world.'

I could feel the heat slowly creep up my neck. I was too old for lectures, didn't want to hear another 'expert' tell me how to live my life. I was ready with any answer. 'I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I don't know that it's any of your business.'

He rubbed his hand up and down his thigh. 'We can't be apathetic.'

'To answer your question, I'm not sure if they're black market or not, I suspect they sometimes are.'

'I can help you.'

'Really?'

'Seriously. I can get you captive-reared species. Bred for people like you.'

'People like me? You mean arseholes who buy butterflies?'

'Look,' he said with a smile, 'there's a right way, and a wrong way, like with every –'

'So. What are you suggesting?' My hobby was starting to look like everything in my life – regulated.

'I'll trade for you.'

'You don't even know me.' I found myself wondering why on earth he would want to help me. 'What do you get out of it?'

'Not much,' he winked. 'Perhaps a *donation*?'

I laughed. 'So, your information does come at a price?'

'Depends on who it's for. Who's asking?'

'I am.'

'You attached?'

He reached out, putting his hand over mine. Inside, I shuddered. It was the warmest smoothest hand I had ever felt. I looked at his fingers and thought about how they would gently separate butterfly wings. How they would finger the body of a downy Silver Fox Moth. A moth so dense and fluffy it looked like a chinchilla cat.

'So are *you*?'

'Huh?'

'*Are you attached?*'

I couldn't believe his persistence.

'There is someone I see from time to time.'

'Seriously?'

'No, he's older.'

'Older?'

'Yes, much. It's more of a mental thing.'

I felt like running down the aisle and leaping from the plane. His flirting was outrageous. It scared me.

'What's he like?'

'Why should I tell you?'

'Because perfect strangers tell each other secrets all the time.'

'Like what?' *I'm playing your game.*

'The best kind of secrets.'

'Butterfly secrets?'

He leaned over, almost touching my face. He was so close I could feel his warm breath in my ear: *'Private worlds are the pleasure we all have.'*

I froze. Still aware that his hand stroked mine. I eased my hand away from his and placed it in my lap. Who was this man?

A hint of a strange smile played at the side of his mouth. 'Yes, Grace. I have the best butterfly secrets. Better than anyone else.'

'Well, I'll have to put you to the test then.'

'That doesn't sound bad.'

I nodded again, dumbstruck. I was unable to speak. I was sitting next to someone who I found attractive, though what I would do with that 'attractiveness', I had no idea.

He ordered another round of drinks.

'So, holiday? Work? Or is it a *secret*?'

I put down my drink and stared at the headrest in front of me. *Work?*
Holiday?

'Both. I have a client in Honour Bay, she's a friend, we mix business and pleasure.'

He looked at me, nodding. 'Far North Queensland? Near Mackay?'

'Yes, it's the launching pad to the Barrier Reef and the Whitsundays. You should see it sometime.'

'Is that an invitation?'

'Maybe.' I absently flicked invisible fluff off my pants, aware that he was staring at me.

'Be careful, I might take you up on it.'

'That's a bit forward, isn't it? We've just met.'

He shook his head, smiling, 'Not really.'

My hands trembled and I could feel my insides turn to liquid.

I smiled. I was speechless. 'I need to sleep.' I had to halt the conversation.

He looked surprised. 'Me too. I'm exhausted.'

~

As if we had never had the conversation, he closed his eyes and fell asleep. I sat there staring at him, my eyes wandering all over his body. Why a man is attractive can be mysterious. Mind. Body. Something intangible? Or, was it the secrets you found in the most ordinary people? I had been single a long time, I couldn't remember. A combination of everything? Something I couldn't touch.

I estimated him to be about thirty-five, though it was hard to tell with people who spent the majority of their time outdoors. He wore a black cotton shirt, fitting his muscled torso snugly. On his feet he was wearing vegan Birkenstocks – inoffensive vinyl from the buckle to the sole. His head rested on his shoulder and his mouth was slightly open. He had soft full lips, perfect for kissing.

I looked at his hands, checking his fingers. There was no gold band, no signet ring. He wore thin strips of plaited leather around one wrist, like souvenirs from different places. One strand held some charms. Sentimental, but I couldn't be sure.

The lights in the cabin dimmed and I looked more closely at him. My eyes tiptoed over every inch. Absently, he scratched, as if he had an itch and I noticed his shirt buttons give part way. I could see small windows of his stomach flesh. His soft, black, curly body hair. Four buttons down, closer to his waistband, I noticed something like white Elastoplast peeking out. Strange. It looked post-operative. I wondered what had happened. I flushed again. I was being voyeuristic. Intruding. I closed my eyes.

~

In the darkness I saw visions of floating butterflies over swaying green grass. When I was a young girl I went to stay with my grandmother at her home in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales, a working property buzzing with the frenetic energy of chickens, dogs, cats, cows and pigs. It had a vegetable garden, various outhouses and fields and fields of wild flowers.

One afternoon we went butterfly-catching. Equipped with a homemade bug-catcher and a butterfly net, we set out to explore my grandmother's property. For hours we skipped all over her land, chasing butterflies and following long lines of insects. Eventually I bought my net down over a lilac-coloured butterfly. 'Gotcha.' I screamed. It was a victorious moment.

It wasn't till I put my prisoner in a glass jar with ethyl acetate that I realised that I'd have to kill it. Render it flightless forever. I was old enough to know that what I liked about butterflies was what I was taking away from

them. Freedom. Transformation. Concealment. Nevertheless, I squeezed my eyes closed and smothered the butterfly in the fumes of the jar. I killed it and kept it in my grandmother's freezer for ages.

So, Grace, what do you want to be when you grow up?

A butterfly.

How come?

Because they're free and because they float.

Anything else?

Yeah... they start out ugly little grubs and turn into beautiful fairies.

Years later, my grandmother mounted our first catch, the Common grass blue (*Zizina labradus*), and gave it to me as a birthday present. It was my first and favourite specimen. It was nothing at all special, the colour of an out-of-season lavender sprig, but there is always beauty in the most unusual places. I took the frame everywhere and hung it next to my bed. It was my only sentimental possession. It reminded me of where I had been and where I was going. Or as my grandmother reminded me every day, *'If you know where you've been, you'll know where to go.'*

I created the map in my head. I had places to go.

~

The plane landed. We disembarked. We stood side by side at the baggage carousel. We were so close I could feel the heat radiating from his body. As though it was too much to bear I took a step sideways. I needed to put some distance between us. Without speaking he walked off in the direction of the men's toilets and returned minutes later, clean and fresh.

To fill in the silent spaces, I asked him a question. 'So, where are you staying?'

'I'm in Sydney for the night, with a friend,' he replied, seemingly reluctant to expand on the conversation. He reached into his pocket and handed me a business card.

'I'm serious about the butterflies,' he said. 'I'd love to keep in contact.'

I looked at him, interested. Wondering if we could work together. Was it possible for a butterfly guardian to be friendly with a property developer? I wasn't sure. 'I'm serious too.'

'Listen,' he said. 'I'm about to receive one of my finest deliveries. Why don't you email me next week?'

I nodded. 'I'd like that.'

'You can have the first pick.'

I smiled. Silent.

'I might give you a discount.'

'In that case, how could I resist?'

He held out his hands, squeezing my fingers. He looked at my face closely, as though he had something more to say. He leaned forward, kissing me on each cheek and for a second I smelt something strange. A sweet musky aroma; a mixture of cloves and some kind of essential oil.

'Next week, I'll be back in my office. Email me.'

I blushed with disappointment. 'I will.' I wanted more.

From out of the heaving and sweaty crowd a man dressed in a casual cream pyjama-like outfit grabbed him. They slapped each other on the back and laughed. At the same time, my case spun past me on the baggage carousel. I ran to grab it, heaving it on to the ground. I was alone again, back at home.

Everywhere friends and families locked their arms around each other, many driven to tears of emotion and great laughter. I looked over at Henry in the horde and looked down at his business card. On one side of the card were Singapore details, on the other side were New Zealand particulars, and on both sides was a badly drawn illustration of a Papillion butterfly. Funny, I'd imagined him to be less clichéd. You could never tell with butterfly people.

Absently, I traced my finger over his name, feeling my stomach flip. Would I really email him? If we were to remain in contact I would have to. I hadn't given him my business card. I couldn't. It would take him seconds to realise I'd been lying about House Scout.

I watched as his companion swung his arm over his shoulder; they looked related or very good friends.

I watched as they wove their way through the crowd, he turned around, waving. A few metres later he turned around again, yelling over the top of the crowd. 'Catch you later.' He paused for a moment. '*It's been great.*'

Catch you later. Just like a butterfly. A net dragged over my head, pulling me to the ground. Smothering me. I'd been captured.

Great. Had it been? Maybe. I liked him. But he wouldn't like me once he knew who I was. I was the professional enemy. My knees shook as he disappeared into the distance.

I turned around for a last time. He was standing outside, watching me.

Chapter 2

G is for Glide

Butterflies are known for their flight of freedom and dance; it can be erratic and jerky; lofty and wafty; powerful and swooping or hard and fast.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

Not desire. Not me. *He won't want me. We're too different.* For two days I toyed with the idea of emailing Henry Stern. I would half-write emails then dump them, trying to affect a casual tone. I had no clear request, didn't know what to say. I was excited, attracted, morbidly fascinated.

By the second morning, and before I had time to change my mind, I slipped my *Parson's Butterfly Classification* book out of my top drawer. He said he could get the *best*. So, with a certain amount of hesitation, I requested an unusual Kaiser-I-Hind (*Teinopalpus Imperialis*). If he could get me one of those, he could get me anything.

This is a hard one, Henry. Beautiful, but elusive.

See what you can do.

I typed his name and rolled it around on my tongue. *Hen-er-ree*, I repeated it again, *Hen-er-ree*. His name sounded strange. My handsome, my hunger. My hallucination? I wondered if he was real. I'd had a childhood friend, we'd called him Henny. *Henny Penny, the sky is falling in!* We screamed like banshees. I couldn't imagine ever calling Henry Stern, Henny. No, I was certain the name Henry meant *The Hunter*.

Strong. Reliable. Decent.

Impress me, Henry. I pressed send on my mail icon, closed my eyes and hoped for a successful delivery.

~

'Knock, knock.'

I looked up with a start and saw Eve standing in front of me.

'You okay?'

I opened my eyes, like slits in half-shut louvres. A wave of dizziness rose in me and white lights flashed like a strobe light at a teenage disco. A migraine was descending.

'Fine, fine.' It felt like someone was moving my face. 'Stressed, tired, that's all. Two flights, delays, the usual thing.'

'Well, we've got a big week.' She sat down in the chair opposite me, placing a large file on the desk with a thud. 'Tony wants to call a meeting as soon as possible. He's been up North and says it's damage control time.'

I could barely focus. I studied her face, as sharp as she was, her features looked fuzzy. '*Damage control?*'

'In Tony's words, *the shit's hit the fan.*'

'Is Tony over-reacting, or is it serious?'

'I hate to tell you this Grace, but it's B-A-D.'

I looked at my watch, it was nine-thirty, the time was galloping away. 'Can we make it ten?' I pointed to the file in Eve's hand. 'Give me that and I'll read a couple of things first.'

Eve stood up to leave, 'I'll come back in twenty, put an hour aside.'

'Before you go, make sure there's iced water in the jug before the meeting. I just went to pour myself a glass and it was empty. Speak to the tea-room about it.'

The door closed with a defiant thud. I sat up, attempting to disengage myself from my sloppy jet-lag mood. I hated feeling so fuzzy.

I looked over my office. The flowers were in position and the floor-to-ceiling glass was flawless, but an empty water jug and a spread of lacy grey clouds across the sky disturbed me. I reasoned that the clouds were beyond my control but the staff could do something about an empty jug.

I opened the folder and started reading. I had been developing property for twelve years and couldn't recall a development that had caused

so much trouble. But then, Honour Bay was different. It had to be. It was inhabited by sea-change folk, greenies and pot-heads. People who hated change, people who *protested* against change. A tough opposition. I flicked through Eve's notes, two hundred and fifty-five objections, all of them difficult. My heart sank.

I paged Eve from my phone. 'If Tony's available, I'm ready.'

'I'll let him know.'

After a week's absence I called a meeting of my top-line circle. Eve Clarke, my personal assistant, and Tony Bivano, my senior project manager and *sometimes* salesman extraordinaire. Together, we scheduled the week, flagging everything yellow and red. Divided up our responsibilities.

A rap on the door jolted me out of my spongy mood. In front of me stood Tony. He slouched in the doorway with a pen dangling from his lips, and for a second, I half-expected him to light it. His hair tones suggested monthly trips to the hairdresser, but I knew that his shiny black mane was natural.

He wore a well-cut, pinstriped suit with pleating in all the right places. The fabric was firm from pocket to pocket, and for a second I was reminded of a Northern Dante (*Papilio Dantus*), a dramatic plate-sized butterfly with wings the colour of clotted blood; rich in tone; warm and deep and wine-dark. It was difficult to avert my gaze.

'Looks like the holiday did *you* wonders,' he said, waving the pen in the air like a flag.

'Yeah, great holiday. I did nothing for ten days.'

'Got lucky, Grace?' he snorted.

'Tony, it was all work.'

'You know what they say, Foxy, all work and no play —'

'Tony, stop it.'

I leant over my desk and pretended to click through a program on my computer. I tapped the keyboard heavily, stabbing all the wrong keys. Tony's statement hung in the air like a thick smell. I could see him from out

of the corner of my eye. He crossed his legs, jiggling a polished black loafer in the air. It hung off his foot like a dog with its mouth open.

We had gone to the same primary school, following each other to high school, and then a real-estate course. Finally, working in the same suburban agency, spending four years battling it out over sales. In recent times, he'd requested more money, more responsibility. I gave him a healthy commission on everything, whether he sold it or not, and promoted him to Project Manager. He was good at his job—loyal, aggressive, and results-driven. Perfect for the real estate game. In some respects, better than me.

I looked from Eve to Tony, and back again, flipping back and forth through folders and making notes.

'You've heard, then?' said Tony.

'I've seen the DA notes. Eve said there's been problems.'

'Problems? More like fucking suicide bombs. Where do you want to start?'

Eve shifted in her seat. She detested bad language.

'Well, we knew it was going to be difficult. What's happened?'

I looked back at Eve, hopeful. Forcing myself to hear the news.

Honour Bay was my sentimental favourite.

'It's not all bad. We've done enough research on the failed Pro Club proposal to avoid the same mistakes. We sent Laurie Peters up to the site last Friday to put up a sign and clear a few camphor laurel trees away. A local reported it. Now everyone at Honour knows, there's been a stream of protest letters to the paper.'

'Well, that didn't take long.'

'A greenie ball gathers no moss.' Tony looked almost pleased. 'Local council and the media started a campaign against us months ago. A local Greens upper house MP and the deputy mayor are in charge. They'll nail our arses to the wall. We need to get up there as soon as possible.'

'Fine. I don't have a problem with that, do you?'

'Grace, you've never dealt with this kind of outrage. These guys shit on the city folk; this could be a war zone. I've heard there's an ex-army major up there printing t-shirts with 'No Cape Rape' and 'Don't Touch Honour.'

'Are you serious?'

Tony leaned back and put his arms behind his head, 'What do you reckon?'

'Come on Tony, it's all hearsay,' said Eve.

I looked at her for some help. 'What do you think, Eve?'

'Looking at the numbers, Grace, we can't afford to waste any time. I say we call a meeting Monday. It'll be the end of us if this thing drags on.'

I looked at my watch and checked the date. 'That's in three days.'

Eve shrugged.

'What about selling?' said Tony.

Before I could answer Eve was shaking her head in agreement.

'I've owned that property for over fourteen years. I couldn't sell.'

Tony frowned at me, dusting something invisible off his hands. 'Take your own advice.'

'What's that?' I asked, knowing very well what he was going to say.

'*Sales, not sentimentality.*'

There was a moment's pause. I looked at the picture of my grandmother on my desk. She was out in her garden, a huge smile on her face, a butterfly net in hand. I couldn't do it to her. I'd promised. She'd worked too hard for it. I'd keep my word. I had to.

I looked at Eve. 'What's your take?'

'It's the council. It's fronted and dominated by Greens hell-bent on saving the town from Club Meds, tourists, McDonalds and anything else with flashing lights. That includes us. The town thrives on a culture of protest.'

I stared at Tony, 'Any ideas, other than selling?'

'Same idea I always had. First, we go up there, grease them up. Second, we launch a big, glossy marketing campaign and sell Honour to the world. Third, we give them whatever they need.'

'And what's that, Tony?'

Eve and I exchanged a brief glance. Tony was always one step away from bribery.

'Everyone wants something, the community will definitely have a wish list – new council chambers, new road, new bus, school oval, supermarket. Grace, use your imagination. We're *building dreams*.'

Eve shook her head. 'It's not that bad, Grace. It's not entirely local, the State Government has the final word, and they have to process the plans.'

'We just have to convince them that it's in the town's best interest, we'll improve the transport infrastructure, bring business to town and create at least twenty new jobs.'

'Who are you trying to convince? *Me*?'

'Well, I didn't want to tell you but they're demanding the amount of accommodation on the site be halved.' Eve pulled out a folder, opened it and started reading. 'Do you want to hear the rest?'

'Give it to me,' I said.

'Basically, there's been a freeze on any major development for six years because the sewage system is inadequate. But, that's the least of our problems.'

I could feel the benefits of the drugs on my muscles as they began to pulse through my system. 'We've been selling the project all along as a \$100-million environmentally sustainable sensitive holiday village. They get jobs and cash. Most towns would jump at it.'

'Most towns aren't Honour Bay, Grace.'

'Thank God, we'd be broke,' I said, as I rotated my fingers around my temples.

'What else?'

'We've had to do an environmental audit on-site since you've been away.'

'Shit.'

Tony laughed. 'Every bush, bug and bird. We had to tag them all. There are 1,350 trees on the site; we only have to remove about ten for the villas.' Tony rubbed his eyes. 'There's more. Have you heard the latest rumour? The site is host to a regular gathering of Southern Cassowaries. If that's true, we're finished.'

I eyeballed Tony. 'Who the hell overlooked that?'

He laughed at me.

'I think you've forgotten something, Grace. We've spent two million on planning consultancies and there are fifty consultants listed on the master plan. We've even got an expert on mosquitoes and biting midges. No one has seen a *big bird*. Take my word.'

I ignored Tony and focused on Eve shifting in her seat. 'I take it there's more.'

'We haven't touched the sides, Grace. I'm serious. I've got a seven-point agenda to detail, everything from environmental issues to coastal lands and economic issues. The latest is the Fauna Impact Statement requirement.'

'Are there any butterflies on-site?'

Tony threw his arms into the air. 'Who fucking cares! There's probably a million of them.'

'I think at least two protected butterfly species. We've got someone checking now.'

I cradled my head in my hands. 'What now?'

Tony sneered. 'Easy. We come up with a few dollars, go straight to the top, lobby the Premier. Forget about all this shit.'

I looked closely at Tony, considering his suggestion. 'What exactly do you mean, Tony?'

'Money talks, Grace. It's the only way we're going to get some support. The groundbreaking is scheduled to be in three months, and at the moment it's three years away.'

I balanced my head between my fingers, fixing on the desk top below me. Slowly I looked up at my two most crucial employees. 'I can't do this right now. Let me read the notes and we'll call a meeting tomorrow.'

Tony stood up suddenly. 'Bumped again.'

'Not bumped, I need to think straight,' I said.

Tony walked towards the door, speaking to Eve. 'I've got a meeting in ten minutes, Eve, email me with the time for tomorrow.'

'Sure.'

Just before he walked out the door, Tony leant over and mimed a golf swing. His eyes followed an invisible ball through the room and out the window. He punched his fist in the air and screamed: *hole-in-one*. He tipped an imaginary golf cap at me and walked out the door. I couldn't help but smile.

With Tony gone, I was free to talk to Eve. 'Why didn't I know about all this sooner?'

'In the past three months you've been to Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and had a ten-day trip to Indonesia. There wasn't the time.'

'Has Tony *really* got a strategy?'

'Well, this only started a couple of weeks ago. There's not much we can do, until we meet the council, local rag and the enviro centre.'

'That's all?'

'The best thing to do is go up there and have a community meeting. Face-to-face, every person in Cape Honour. Meet them all head on, answer all their questions and smooth a few feathers. It's much more powerful and the overall perception's better.'

'That's my thinking. Check the schedule and organise a trip for the three of us to go Monday. Get onto Sally Garret and Dylan Brown and tell them we're coming and we want to clear up as many misunderstandings as we can.'

'Good idea.'

'Then, see what you can find out about this guy,' I pulled Henry's business card out of my top drawer and slid it across the desk. '*Google* him or something.'

'Has he got a property he wants to offload?'

'No, nothing like that. I met him on last week's flight. He had some interesting ideas, that's all.'

I watched Eve smirk. 'You're not serious. It says he's a butterfly conservationist. They're the fucking enemy, Grace.'

Embarrassed, I spun the ring on my finger. 'God knows, he just had some interesting ideas about mediation between development and conservation. We need all the help we can. Just check him out.'

Eve opened her mouth to say something and then thought better of it.

'What's wrong?'

'I was going to tell you this joke Tony told me the other day, but I thought better of it, not so funny any more.'

'Give it to me, I need a laugh.'

'Okay, what's the five stages of a project?'

'No idea. What?'

'Stage one, euphoria; stage two, disillusionment; stage three, panic; stage four, blame the innocent; and stage five, honour and glory for the non-participant.'

I smiled sadly. 'Sounds like every project we've ever built. Print it on a t-shirt and let's make some real money.'

Eve stood up and collected her things off my desk. She looked me directly in the eye. 'Go home and get some sleep, you look terrible.'

I nodded. 'Have a good night, Eve.'

After Eve had left I checked my emails. A couple of business emails, a few meeting reminders, but no word from Henry. I wondered if he would reply.

I was tired. My brain hurt. Visions of an Honour Bay auction flashed before me. If I sold the property my life would be simpler. We had always known that developing the site would inflame the locals. It was surrounded by National Park, and it was debatable whether or not it should be returned to public land. But, my grandmother and I had purchased it years before the words *public land* meant anything to anyone. It was just a cheap investment; somewhere we could go camping on my school holidays. The perfect place

to hunt butterflies. Before she died she'd made me promise that no matter what, I would never sell it. She said it would be my saviour. Instead, I was transforming it into a playground for rich holiday-makers from all over Australia. I wondered if she would approve. I knew the answer.

~

The bath filled quickly. I measured out a cupful of sea-salts, trickled in five drops of lavender oil and sat on the edge of the porcelain. Bubbles rose to the surface, floating around the water like islands adrift, and salts swirled around in a whirlpool. The water looked soft and inviting. I'd been waiting all day.

I stood up, pulling my clothes off, dropping them into the laundry chute. I stood naked in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror, studying every inch of my body. I turned around and looked at my backside, twisting this way and that. Firm, tight, smooth. I stepped forward, standing inches from the glass. The water roared behind me. I leaped around and flicked off the taps.

Turning around again to face the mirror, I ran my hands down my thighs, over my calves and quickly up and down the length of my arms.

I turned to my side and touched the mirror. My skin cold at its glassy surface. Looking over my shoulder, I fingered a bluish patch; lines were smudged and there was coloured weeping. A potato print came to mind.

It was twenty years old and the wings were indistinguishable. It looked more like a bleeding swallow than a pretty monarch butterfly. Years ago, trying to get rid of it, I'd scratched it with a compass. It was a patchy and faded scar. I traced my finger over the name, feeling the letters like Braille, almost readable. I looked at it backwards in the mirror, it read *RIMIDALV*.

I thought of him often and not.

Chapter 3

N is for Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most famous writers of the mid-twentieth century. He caught his first butterfly in 1906, at the age of seven and remained a passionate and highly-regarded butterfly scientist for the following seventy years.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

I sat down at my kitchen island and felt something brush against my legs. Nabokov, my Russian-Blue cat, twined himself around my ankles and struggled to claw his way up my shins. I stooped down and picked him up, tucking his silky head under my chin. I rubbed my cheek against his head and inhaled deeply. He smelt of cat talc and gnocchi dough. He was more cunning and fatter than I cared to admit.

I glanced at his corner to where his cat bowls were kept, neatly on a checked plastic place mat: a bowl of milk, dry cat food and a plate of specially cooked mince were left untouched.

‘Well, you’re fine now. I’m home.’ I squeezed him tighter, listening to his engine-like purr, ‘*Did ya miss me?*’ I whispered into his ear.

I thought I saw him nod.

Every time I went away, Norma, my housekeeper, looked after Nabokov. And every time I returned, she said I was *in love* with my cat. *Less trouble than a boyfriend*, I always replied.

I placed him back at my feet and started sorting through a pile of mail – invitations, documents, bills and one tired, standard post pack. It was wrapped in bruised brown paper – recycled, well-travelled and covered in childish scribble and too many postage stamps. It had a Florida address and was my one-and-only eBay purchase. For five months I’d waited, assuming it had never been sent.

I ripped the top off the parcel, pulling it out of a small bubble-wrapped package. It was firmly wrapped and sealed together with bright strips of old Homer Simpson Christmas tape. I grabbed some scissors and cut through Homer's mad grin. I was expecting a Chimaera Birdwing (*Ornithoptera Chimera*) from the Family Papilionidea, one of the most celebrated butterfly families, a bargain at only three hundred US dollars. I could hardly wait to see the flash of its jewel-like wings; I could barely contain my excitement.

I blinked at my insect, refusing to believe what I held. I studied its pale golden stripes, its dusty frayed edges. It wasn't worth waiting for. Worse, I hated wasting money. Children rarely adhered to the golden rule of collecting — *don't touch the wings*. Little fingers couldn't resist fondling a fragile wing of powdered magic.

I returned the butterfly to its former home. Safe and wrapped in paper. I'd re-advertise it on eBay later. Fool someone like myself.

I picked up a note off the kitchen bench from Norma. In her neat, precise, printing she'd listed the past week's ongoings. She'd detailed every Nabokov nuance and everything that had happened. The last paragraph reminded me that Annie, my best friend, was coming for dinner. She signed off with the dinner menu and the cooking instructions: oysters; homemade gnocchi with tomato Passata; and fruit salad for dessert.

~

I poured myself a generous whiskey and ice, found a pastel-coloured Sobrani and went outside to the terrace. The incongruity of the combination made me smile; the smoke of a starlet washed down with the liquor of an old man.

Outside, the balcony was bathed in an inky night-time light. I rolled the cigarette between my fingers and inhaled it from end to end. Somewhere in the recesses of my memory it felt like an action I'd seen my father perform, but I couldn't quite remember; it seemed like a learned behaviour, not something instinctual.

I lit the baby-blue coloured cigarette, sucking on it strongly. Above my head soft plumes of smoke curled through the air. I felt myself relax. It was the first time in weeks.

~

At twenty past eight the intercom gave a short, sharp trill. For a moment I watched Annie on the monitor. She was wearing pale-green tracksuit pants and sneakers, and for a second I contemplated changing. I adjusted the resolution on the screen, looking closer at her bouncing frame. She squinted into the camera, waving, hoping I was there. Of all my butterflies, she reminded me most of Rajah Brook's Birdwing (*Troides brookiana*), a common specimen from Borneo, but no less brilliant. Its wings were a velvety black and ornamental, with brilliant green eye spots. It looked wonderful when touched by the sun. They were a perfect addition to any collection.

I looked closer at Annie. She had long auburn hair that fell over her shoulders, and she was quick to point out that it was completely natural. She claimed it distinguished her from the *bottle blondes*. I heard her tell men at parties, 'I'm Lucille Ball, not Marilyn Monroe.' Her chutzpah caused her more trouble than it was worth.

She referred to our relationship fondly, and often. Loyalty was her mantra. After my mother died, we'd caught the school bus together. Every day for eleven years. She made sure she waited for me at the bus stop, no matter what. She claimed that part of her inability to find a lover was largely my fault. I was better-looking, smarter and an orphan. She said that orphans always got the sympathy vote. I didn't agree. For one, I wasn't really an orphan; I'd lived with my grandmother. And more importantly, she was funnier, sexier and less threatening. I was married to the job.

I hit the buzzer and waited a few minutes while the lift transported her to the door.

'Jesus! I thought you were going to leave me out there,' she said, barging forward, almost knocking me backwards with her enthusiastic hug.

I handed her a glass of champagne. 'Sorry,' I shrugged.

'Never return my calls, never turn up for drinks. I speak to your housekeeper and secretary more often than I speak to you.'

'Nothing interesting Annie, I've been away.'

'Well, I hope you're making money.'

I laughed. 'I don't know what I'm doing, to tell you the truth.'

'Bullshit, you always know what you're doing.'

'Come and sit down in the kitchen.' I offered. 'I have to heat our dinner.'

I read over Norma's notes on the fridge and then reread them again. I'd often found the most simple domestic task challenging; I knew I was better off navigating an office. Somehow operating a computer seemed more simple than turning on the oven. I flicked the timer for the stove, switched on the sauce to simmer and took the oysters out of the fridge.

'Oysters?'

'Sure, But let's eat outside.'

I followed Annie out to the terrace, too tired to do anything but follow orders. We sat like two schoolgirls head to toe, with the tray of oysters balancing between us.

We touched each other's glasses. 'Cheers. To us, and seeing each other more.'

'Feels like I saw you yesterday. Anyway, it's great to see you.'

'So what's been happening?'

'Well, the apartment is finished ... work is stressful ... I'm healthy. Nothing new. You?'

'You're always stressed.' Annie smiled with a flirtatious tilt of the head. 'How's Tony?'

'Same.'

'Still with Nina?'

I held my glass close to my face, looking at Annie over the rim. 'What do you think?'

'Can't believe it. I should've snapped him up years ago. Big spunk, I bet he's great in—'

'Please, Annie. He works for me.'

'Well, he can *work* for me if he wants.'

'Well, you had your chance.'

'I was sixteen, Grace.' She shook her head and muttered, '*Sixteen years ago*. What about you?'

I laughed a short dry cough and felt the heat rise up my neck.

'Nothing.'

'At least you're consistent. You still wetting yourself over that dead Russian – American guy, Vladimir *what's-his-name*.'

'He gives me something to think about.'

'Who was he again?'

'A brilliant lepidopterist and a writer.'

Annie looked at her oysters, then at me. 'Lepa-what?' she said.

'Sounds weird.'

'Not really. A butterfly scientist.'

'Wow, a renaissance man. How you goin' to find one of them? Wasn't he *old*?'

'What's wrong with *old*?'

A vision of Vladimir *what-his-name* floated past. I didn't tell Annie my fantasy man had been married – happily – for fifty-two years. I could always watch and wonder.

'He's perfect ...'

'Perfect? I thought they were an endangered species.'

'They are, just like an Emperor Gum Moth.' A vision of a handsome, strong and wise moth dashed past. He was dazzling.

'You're not still into that insect shit?'

'Why wouldn't I be?'

'*BORING*. You know what? I think I could come back here in ten years' time and I'd still get the same response. You'd still be a butterfly pervert with no lover and obsessed with making bucks.'

I stared at Annie, wondering if she was serious.

I drained my drink. 'I love my butterflies.'

Annie didn't say anything for a minute. Her smile and cheerfulness instantly evaporated. 'They're dead, Grace.'

'They're harmless,' I replied.

'So is a designer handbag.'

'It could be worse. I could be drinking or getting stoned. Or it could be someone else's husband.' It was a low blow.

'At least if you were out-of-it, or fucking someone else's husband, you might be enjoying yourself. Why don't you get interested in something useful?'

'Do you want to see them?' I asked. I was sure that if Annie could see my new family, she'd change her mind.

'I'm sure they're lovely, it's just that you're not going to meet anyone collecting dead bugs.' Annie cast a knowing glance at me. Sympathy I didn't need. 'I bet you're doing most of it on the net?'

I nodded.

'*Fuck*, Grace, the Internet is for social misfits and pedophiles. You're a good-looking woman, you could have anything you want.' She paused for a moment. 'EBay?'

I shook my head.

'Well you should be. It's about the only place you can get a bargain these days.' Annie pulled on the fabric on her tracksuit pants. 'These were half price.'

I smiled.

'Butterflies?' Annie shook her head. 'I mean —'

'I could ask you the same question. Andrew? Is he still on the scene? He's not healthy, he's married.' Annie reeled back as if I'd punched her.

'That's different.'

'How's it different? You're obsessed with a married man and I'm addicted to butterflies. We don't have to commit to either and they're not in the present tense. What could be easier? Neither needs to be fed or flattered.' I took a large swallow of my whisky and poured Annie another glass of wine. 'I'm going to check the sauce.'

In the kitchen I examined the blood-red tomato passata simmering on the stove-top. I stirred the sauce hypnotically, imagining the bloody mess to be me after Annie had finished insulting me. Sighing with humiliation, I was reluctant to return to the terrace. I spooned the pasta and the sauce into two oversized white bowls and uncorked my best bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon – maybe if I gave Annie more to drink she'd settle down. I disliked her insensitivity. There was no warm-up, no discretion, just straight to the point. Nothing had changed.

She was living historical proof of my past, she was like the duplicate memory. She knew about my insatiable appetite for the rise of my bank balance. It was like my monetary wall of protection. And now I'd told her about the butterflies. The red wine could save us. I surrendered myself to a hangover.

As if the conversation had never happened, I marched out to the terrace. 'It's Tomato Passata and homemade gnocchi.' I gave Annie a steaming bowl. 'Can we start again?'

'Sure, what's happening with Honour?'

'Nothing at the moment,' I said slowly. 'More of a disaster than anything. The local town wants to go to war.'

'Shit.'

'Even worse, I think Tony's lost confidence. He wants to sell.'

Annie spoke with a mouthful of pasta, 'Tony wants to sell? You're kidding me.'

I shook my head. 'Too much trouble.'

'No way! Your gran would die.'

'She is dead.'

I suddenly didn't want to talk about Honour Bay or Tony any more. There was a council and community meeting scheduled for Monday. I had the weekend to write a speech convincing them why they needed the Honour Bay development. I wasn't sure they'd agree.

'Last chance. Any dates?'

My pasta bowl wobbled on my knee. The last time I'd slept with someone? When was it? It was too embarrassing to even admit the answer to my best friend. 'Jason. I think he was the last one.'

Annie look surprised. 'That was over two years ago.'

'I think so.' I mumbled.

'There must have been someone else other than *Vladimir Perfect*?'

'Perhaps. Maybe a butterfly collector.'

'What?' Annie's eyes bulged. She had a mouth full of food.

'Well, he's not what I usually like. He's different. A Greenie type, he wears all-vinyl Birkenstocks.' I ate another mouthful of food in an attempt to save myself from imparting further details. 'He's handsome. But, nothing's happened. Just a conversation on a plane. He was a little flirtatious, wants to come to Honour Bay.'

'YOU'RE KIDDING. Invite him this minute.' Annie sat bolt upright and grinned insanely at me. 'He'd be perfect.'

'I've emailed him and ordered a butterfly.'

'Emailing is for teenagers, call him.'

'There's a small problem; he's transnational, he seems to live everywhere.'

'Since when's that a problem? You can afford to fly where you like. Besides, you work all the time, how're you going to fit a butterfly collector in? You can barely see me twice a year. So what's his name?'

'Henry Stern.'

Annie burst into laughter. 'He might be a Greenie, but Henry's a name for a geriatric.'

~

After dinner, Annie ate all the dessert and I drank a second bottle of wine. The more we drank the more outlandish her taunts became, till I agreed to invite Henry Stern to Honour Bay. And if I didn't? I promised to give Annie my car. Forever. And if I came, Annie promised to coach me through the whole ordeal.

‘Seeing you’re a novice, I’ll let you email him. But you have to do it tomorrow, or your car’s mine.’ I shook Annie’s hand in a drunken deal of agreement.

‘I promise, I’ll email him tomorrow.’

‘Something saucy, Grace. A little bit sexy. You’ve got to make him want you. Make him hungry.’

‘Hungry?’ I shook my head.

‘Yeah, ravenous.’

I laughed. The idea of making anyone ravenous with lust seemed ludicrous.

‘I’ll try.’

Annie squeezed my shoulder. ‘That’s better.’ She checked her watch. ‘Shit. It’s past one, I have to go.’

I hugged my friend, ‘Thanks for the reality check.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll be waiting to hear from you. You’ve got till midnight tomorrow night. Or the car’s mine. What are you doing tomorrow?’

‘I’m going to a garage sale. I saw an advertisement in the *Trading Post* for a butterfly collection. It’s old but sometimes you find something special. Three and a half hours south, might be interesting. I think the seller said he was an ex-taxidermist.’

‘Do me a favour Grace, find someone you can have a conversation with, I don’t care if you can’t sleep with them, just find someone real, someone beating and breathing.’

Annie stood up and put her shoes on. ‘I mean it. Call the Greenie.’ She leaned forward and hugged me. ‘Good luck Monday, and whatever you do, don’t let anyone convince you to sell Honour.’

I nodded, wanting Annie to leave, turning from her and going inside the apartment. I had too much on my mind: an outraged Queensland mob; a questionable Honour Bay property; and a man I was interested in, whom I could probably never call.

I went to bed and dreamed of angry protesters.

~

I slept late the next morning, almost missing my appointment in Orville Park. I crawled out of bed, remembering why I never drank.

Generally, butterflies or the sale of personal collections were rare. So when I saw an advertisement for an entire collection for sale three hours south of Sydney, I leapt at the opportunity. It was my favourite weekend occupation. A long drive alone and the hunt for a butterfly. According to the seller, I was the only person who'd called.

I flicked through the racks for something suitable to wear. The choice was conventional and safe; an expensive array of colour-coded and pressed shirts, tailored pants and jackets. On the other side of the walk-in was a very limited section of tasteful eveningwear, and at the very end of the wardrobe was weekend wear. I pulled on a pair of jeans and one of the t-shirts. I liked the way the jeans fit snugly, closely hugging the shape of my slim body. Everything took hard work.

~

I caught the lift down to the basement and called up my car from the car-stacker. Apart from my apartment there was only one other extravagance I'd allowed my money to buy. A luxury car. Generally the domain of bald, rich men, my BMW seven-series, was, as the advertising promised, sheer driving pleasure. I loved taking it on a long solo stretch through the country, zigzagging around hilltops and highways. It embodied comfort and style and reassured my professional purpose. I would have slept in it if I could.

~

The car escaped the CBD in less than one hour, passing through barren industrial suburbs and speeding past a sequence of identical brick-veneers. It wasn't long before I was speeding down an empty freeway, fantasising about a boot full of pre-loved mounted butterflies. At the Bender turnoff I turned right, and knew I was only another thirty minutes from the Riverbanks property at Orville Park. The house was easy to find; the car had GPS. It stood alone and desperate, hardly the home for a rare and special butterfly.

I knocked on the door of the fibro shack and waited. The moment seemed to last forever. The property was on a gum-shaded plot surrounded by an assault of junk: remnants of more than one car, ancient farming equipment, disused petrol drums, broken chairs, upturned boxes, old milk crates and the stink of dog shit. It felt like an abandoned cemetery. A few more moments and I knocked again, this time louder. Still no answer.

I checked the address in my wallet. It was the right house, but was it the wrong time? I sat down on the doorstep and watched thick storm clouds explode in the distance. I could sense an uncomfortable dampness in the air. I opened my wallet again and found Henry Stern's business card. I flipped it over and saw his handsome photo. He was both attractive and unusual. I liked the casual grin and the funny hair-line split in his lip.

His cards details included a website. He had said it was an online catalogue featuring farmed species only. A strap line on the card read: *The kindest way to collect*. I knew that web shopping had to be more straightforward than sitting in a stinking paddock. But no matter what happened, I would not go home empty-handed.

~

A half hour or so later, the crunch of a boot on gravel snapped me out of my humourless wait. 'You're the butterfly woman then?' The voice hung in the air like the heavy grey clouds above my head. His face was hard and chinless, his voice dull and nasal. He stared at me, not smiling.

'I've been knocking on your door for ages.' I held out my hand and he let it drop.

'I've been out the back,' he said looking at me unapologetically.

'I've been waiting. My name's Grace.'

He didn't tell me his name, he just pointed in the direction of the garage. 'They're this way ...'

I followed him to the garage and he kept talking. '...they belonged to the wife. I'm not interested in bargaining.'

'Neither am I.'

The corrugated roof was lifting off and the gates were wedged together. With our combined effort we dragged the doors open to reveal a room swollen to the roof with taxidermy paraphernalia and junk. It was cloaked in dust. I followed him down a narrow passageway that was just wide enough for the width of one person. I could feel my eyes and throat scratched by the thick dirt choking the atmosphere. On each side, stacked high to the roof, were filthy old boxes full of books and videos, rusty tools, bottles of chemicals, plaster and clay, fur and antlers and an array of miscellaneous stuff. Nothing had been touched for years.

Leave the room, now.

'What's that?' I said, trying to shatter the silence.

'Fleshing machine, gets the shit off the animal. You can have it if you want it. Four-fifty.'

'No, thanks, I'm looking for butterflies.'

'Nice car.'

'Thank you, it belongs to my boyfriend.'

'They're in here somewhere. Saw them a couple of months ago.'

'Great,' I said, feeling uneasy.

'I'm sure they're down the back here.'

'Pardon?' I could barely hear him.

'DOWN HERE SOMEWHERE.'

Outside I heard the sky crack. I struggled to keep my breathing under control.

The further down the garage we walked, the darker the path became. The daylight from the doors was barely enough to illuminate the back of the garage and I wondered what I was doing trailing a stranger down a dark passageway. My butterfly addiction knew no bounds. He stopped at the end of the passageway at a large doorless wardrobe. Inside were two tall piles of dirty picture frames. He picked one up.

'Thought they were here,' he grunted.

I could just make out the silhouette of a butterfly behind the filthy glass. 'Can I have a look?' I licked my finger and rubbed it over the glass.

Inside was a mounted butterfly. A tattered wing floated around the frame; it was detached from the butterfly's body. I rubbed harder to get a better look. The butterfly was a sweet-coloured Purple-spotted Swallowtail (*Graphium Weiski*), its single wing still a striking pattern of garnet-pink and emerald-green. It used to be perfect.

'It's broken,' I whispered.

'So. There's others.'

'Can I have a look?'

I stepped in front of him and flipped through the frames. I couldn't see a thing. 'Could we take them outside?'

It had started to rain, and the corrugated roof was vibrating like a soft rhythmic drum. Every so often I felt a splatter of raindrops touch my skin. I strained to hear his reply.

'I said, could we take them outside?'

'If you buy them.'

'I don't purchase sight unseen.' I felt ill. There was nowhere to go.

'I'm not taking them out if you decide you don't want them.'

I didn't say anything for a second. 'How much do you want?' It was a gamble.

'Thousand cash.' He was standing so close. His breath was fouling the air.

I looked at him bravely. 'OK. But you're carrying them to the car.'

Stepping back, my first impulse was to turn around and run. But for some unfathomable reason I wanted the butterflies more than I cared about my safety. I strode down the passageway, without turning or saying a word. I didn't even carry a frame to the car. Outside the rain was heavy. I prayed I'd left the car door unlocked. I knew my nerves couldn't handle finding my key-card in my bag. I'd used all my courage in the garage. The door was unlocked and I leapt in and locked myself in. I was sure he wanted the money more than he wanted me.

I opened my bag and counted out ten one-hundred-dollar bills. In the rear-vision mirror I could see him struggling under the weight of the frames.

As he came closer I flicked the boot open and called out the window. 'Put them in the boot, I've got your cash.'

'There's another stack,' he called.

'Well, hurry, it's raining,' I screamed.

He placed the frames in the back of the car, turned around and went back to the garage. Minutes later he was back at the car putting in the last load of frames. I allowed the window to slide down a few centimetres and slid my hand out. Neither of us said a word as he took the money.

He shoved the cash in his pocket and said nothing. I pressed my foot to the accelerator, speeding back to the main road. I had never driven so fast.

~

That night I sat cross-legged on my terrace cleaning my new acquisitions. Occasionally, Nabokov tried to climb into my lap, but I was single-minded about getting the job finished by morning. I had two piles stacked beside me; one to store, one to discard. One pile towering over the other. It was a sad collection of the dried and neglected, the tattered and torn. I questioned my motivations as I cleaned and polished, scrubbed and dried. I shook my head at my absurd behaviour. Annie was right. I was *nuts*. How could I pay a thousand dollars for a large pile of dust?

Addiction had been endemic in my family. Apparently it was hereditary. They put themselves at risk for something that was fleeting. Something only *one* could enjoy. I had to be more careful. I could feel the tingle in my fingers every time I unwrapped a new specimen. I never knew what I would find. I liked anticipating the unexpected. The surge of adrenalin. The danger. Too expensive. Too indulgent. No more Internet purchases, no more trips to unknown homes with strange men.

There was an easier way. Henry Stern. I would email him in the morning. Just like I promised. Only, I had no idea what I'd say.

~

Four hours later, and an hour after midnight, I had five clean butterfly frames in one pile and over thirty in the other. Five frames were going into my study and the other thirty were being donated to the local charity. I carried the five frames to my office and placed them on my desk. The question begged, where was I going to store them?

In the past year, I had bought two custom-made cabinets and built a large filing drawer. They were all full. There was no space on the walls. I had already hung three different frames on each wall and they couldn't carry any more. I sat down at my desk and considered my options. I could create a situation at the office in the city, but I didn't really want to mix work and pleasure. Moving wasn't an alternative; I had lived in the apartment for less than a year and the renovation had recently been completed. There was one room in the apartment that was never occupied. The upstairs guests' retreat. It was 70 square metres of sound-proof space with a postcard view.

With a few minor adjustments, I would create a sanctuary of silence and perfection. I would get a butterfly room started immediately.

Chapter 4

B is for Blood

Before setting off on their first flight, many young butterflies spill a few drops of a yellow-orange liquid called *meconium*. This liquid, gave rise to the superstition of blood-red rain falling as an omen of war or other disaster.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

Early on Monday morning, I manoeuvred the hire car into a crammed car park at the White Bay Community Hall. The hall was situated about fifty kilometers from Honour Bay and provided the locals with a sport and community meeting place. It's white weatherboard charm used for football reunions, bingo and teenage discos belied its forthcoming gathering. Inside, I cringed.

I parked on the football oval and saw a playing field dense with utilities and vans from all over the district. Most of the vehicles were plastered with stickers of rainbows, butterflies or slogans for environmental causes. Some had feathers or trinkets hanging from their rear-visions. What had I agreed to?

On the flight I had studied my notes, rehearsing my pitch. No one said a word on the trip and it was hard to tell what Tony and Eve were thinking. At least when Tony was ranting, his motivations were obvious. Today, I had no idea.

We got out of the car, not speaking, walking towards the double doors of the hall. I stood in the doorway, contemplating the sea of sweaty faces. I wove my way through the packed crowd and climbed the steps of the stage to sit beside my colleagues and opposition. Sitting down, I pressed my fingernails into the pads of my hands. I looked from one face to another, searching for something that looked like empathy. *What the hell was I doing?*

My body ran hot. I grabbed my shirt, shaking it away from my body, desperate for some air.

I scanned the room, my eyes darting left and right. My tongue flicked around my mouth trying to salvage some saliva. I wanted to hide. Selling the property had to be easier.

I looked up at the ceiling, avoiding the gaze of the waiting mob, half-expecting rotten fruit to splatter me across the chest. A smash of an over-ripe tomato, or worse, a fetid egg. Beside me sat Dylan Brown and Sally Garrett. As the president and vice-president of HEC, they were in charge of representing the local community.

With more than three hundred people, the room had a greater population than many small towns in far north Queensland. Sally had said that she was a fifth-generation Honour Bay resident and that she liked to keep involved; she ran pottery classes for visiting tourists; she was also the town's naturopath and self-appointed administrative know-all. If you wanted to send an email; write a letter; receive a fax; or research some gossip; you went to Sally's house. There was *one* in every town.

According to Tony, Dylan Brown was Sally's ex-lover, an ex-Sydneysider, part-time lawyer, occasional painter, NA member and budding environmentalist. He was unmitigated trouble and passionate about keeping everyone and everything out of Honour Bay. He was also good-looking and got his own way. Tony knew all of this because he had fucked Sally last time he was in town. *Just business*, he said.

~

I looked out the door, watching rain as sharp as needles stab the surrounding forest. Strands of hair clung to my face like seaweed and I couldn't remember a time I'd felt so nervous.

Dylan whistled, hushing the crowd. 'Mornin' folks.' He shook a clenched fist in the air. '*What a turnout!*' It seemed like every word was slow, every syllable emphasised.

Someone whooped from the back of the room. An ear-piercing whistle rang out.

‘As you know we’re here this morning to listen to the development proposal of BETTA properties—’

‘BOOOOO ...’ thundered throughout the hall.

I felt my sphincter open and contract.

‘QUIET PLEASE!’ hushed Dylan. He paused for what seemed like forever and nodded around the room. ‘We have agreed to hear what the BETTA Group have to say and to allow them to answer our questions. They, in turn, have agreed to discuss and negotiate many of our concerns regarding the Bay’s tourist cabin development application.’

Something in the tone of Dylan Brown’s greeting belied his promise of a fair go. I looked back at my notes and wondered if it was worth even reading them.

‘Without further ado I’d like to introduce BETTA Company Director, Grace Fox.’

A thunder of stampedeing feet and a chorus of booing echoed throughout the room. As I stood up, Eve squeezed my fingers. The crowd stopped yelling as I walked over to the lectern.

I coughed, clearing my throat, ‘Good morning, thank you for coming today.’

Fuck off scum, bellowed out of the anonymous background.

Dylan yelled *shut up!* from his seat beside mine.

‘I’d like to take this opportunity to explain our project and answer your questions as best as I can. BETTA has a lot to offer the people of Honour Bay—’

Fuckwit tourists!

‘We have no intention of destroying or upsetting the natural environment or its surrounds. I am a keen advocate of enviro-tourism and—’

From somewhere at the back of the room, a withered hippy stood up. ‘Bullshit, man!’

‘I’m sorry.’

The crowd yipped and whistled. Someone yelled. ‘Go, Glen!’

The jeering continued.

I turned around for support, and saw Tony leaning forward, whispering something into Eve's ear. I looked back at my agenda, the words on the page wobbling. I searched the room for a sympathetic face, but it was empty. I read on over the noise. It seemed each subject was as inflammatory as the next; *Tourism Zone; Public Consultation; Environmental Issues; Traffic Issues; Sewage Issues; Coastal Lands and Economic Issues.*

If I addressed every subject in detail the meeting would take hours. From the look on every face, I knew my agenda was hopeless. I decided to put the question to the crowd.

'My mother always said: *honesty is the best policy*, and I agree. Last night I spent the evening writing this speech —'

That was a fucking waste of time, came from someone in the front row. I didn't dare look for the face.

'Is there anything that someone would like to address?'

A thickset blonde woman from the back of the room stood up. Her face looked like sandpaper. She was surrounded by a sea of waving hands.

'I'm Sandrine.' The crowd clapped. 'I want to say a few things. I've lived here since I was a girl.' Sandrine shifted from one foot to another. 'This town is overburdened by dickheads using our roads that can't cope now. The sewerage system is stretched to breaking point, and on some days you can smell shit for miles. And you guys want to bring more of your city crap to our living paradise.'

Sandrine paused for a second and took a deep breath. Sweat slid down the sides of her face.

'We want to know. Is this a tourist development or a residential settlement? Is your joint just a playground for city wankers? And, how many of those villas are you really building?'

I bit my lip, relieved the first question wasn't unbridled abuse. 'Good question. The site has tourist zoning, that's 2T. We're not going to change that. We're building holiday villas. That's important to this town. We have over thirty consultants working with different environmental groups and councils. We have looked at similar projects all over the world and ...

On the other side of the room a hand shot up, 'ANSWER THE QUESTION, how many fucking villas?'

'Excuse me?'

A man who looked like Sally Garrett's brother stood up with his arms locked to his hips. He repeated his question. 'I said how many of them fucking villas?'

'Approximately three hundred.'

'THREE HUNDRED!'

'Excuse me, sir, I appreciate your concern, but if I could just tell you a little about the villas first. The plan is that the villas will be environmentally friendly and have low impact on their surrounds. To prevent any further stress on the town they will all have rainwater tanks and solar panels on the roof, some will be made of rammed earth, a wind turbine will be built and every villa will come with two bicycles.'

'That's a fucking laugh, the rich can't drive their own bloody cars, let alone fit their fat arses on a bicycle seat.'

The hall erupted into wild laughter.

'Well maybe we'll also have bike riding lessons then.' I was glad for the joke, pleased someone had created some momentary empathy between myself and the crowd.

'Like a caravan park there will be a small shop, a restaurant, a pool, and a massage and beauty therapist. Of course, all facilities will employ locals.'

Another hand shot up and I nodded to its owner. I recognised the face of ex-army general, Paddy White. He was the town's passionate wall of defence. I braced myself for an attack.

'Miss Fox, did you know that your proposed site is home to the Southern Cassowary? What are the birds going to do when your bulldozers move in? Are you giving them eviction notices?'

'Thank you, Paddy. We've had an environmental expert on the land and so far we've located three Cassowaries on site. We're organising with

the EPA to fund a relocation program. I'm aware that it's vital to enable their effective conservation and the management of remaining populations.'

'Five. Not three.' Paddy White challenged. 'Those birds aren't going anywhere. There are less than eighty Cassowaries in the area, twenty of them breeding females. Did you know that two of your birds are females? And the figs? What about them? At least twenty of them are over one hundred years old. You are aware it's a state offence to touch them?'

I hesitated. 'I can assure you, Mr. White, I have engaged the best environmental and heritage consultants in the country. Not a bird, nor fig will be harmed in the process of building Honour Bay. If anything, the forest and wildlife will only be protected and nurtured.'

~

For the next two hours, I answered questions. One exhausting query after another. Every time I thought I'd made progress, someone would stand up berating me about the Southern Cassowary. If it wasn't the bird, it was the forest, or the roads, or the buildings. Nothing was left uninvestigated. Finally, when the meeting terminated, and I was thanking the crowd, Tony jumped up and addressed the room.

'On behalf of Grace Fox, BETTA Properties and myself, I'd like to thank all the people of Honour Bay for coming today. In appreciation of your support, I'd like to extend an opportunity for a quiet drink at the Sundowner.'

A hush fell over the crowd and confusion was written on every face. Tony's invitation was a surprise. I'd had no indication that we were shouting the population of Honour Bay a drink, but I knew him well enough to know that this was another of his lubrication methods. On the way out of the hall I whispered in his ear.

'You're on your own. I'm done.'

'Leave it to me, Grace. I know exactly what needs doing.'

What would he tell them?

~

Dressed for the meeting, I decided to take the car and visit my land. I told Tony and Eve I was going for a walk and that I'd be back in time for dinner. It had been three years since my last visit and for a moment I had to think about how to get there. I left White Bay and drove for half an hour along the coastal road, catching glimpses of the beach and mountainous tropical rainforest. Every so often I passed a car, but the area was miles of twisted and tangled loneliness, with slivers of aquamarine flashing through the dunes.

As I rounded a bend, I noticed a hitch-hiker making exaggerated gestures to stop the car. I wasn't prone to moments of spontaneous gestures, nor did I ever pick up strange men, but he looked clean and young.

I decided to stop for him, locking the door before pulling up. The hitcher came running up to the side of the car, leaning his face into the passenger window. He was fresh-faced and burnt.

'Hi. Where're you going?' I asked him.

'Honour Bay. You?'

'Same place. Lift?'

The boy nodded and I opened the door for him. He threw his backpack in the back of the car and made himself comfortable.

'You do realise that this is one of the quietest parts of the coast. What are you doing here?'

'Mid-summer break. I'm studying land reform and I heard that FNQ and the east coast is one of the best places to learn. I'm thinking of writing my final-year project on it, but I wanted to check it out first.'

I nodded. What a joke. Of all the hitch-hikers to pick up, I had singled out a young environmental enthusiast. He wouldn't even know what he was talking about.

'Isn't it pretty warm to be wearing a suit?' he asked, noting my heels and conservative suit. 'The humidity's wicked.'

'I've just been to a meeting. I didn't have time to change.'

'Meeting?'

'There's a community meeting hall at White Bay. As I was in the area I thought I may as well drive to Honour Bay. I've got a property there. I wanted to check the land. It's been a long time since I've visited.'

'If I owned a place here, I'd never leave. What could be better than all of that?' he said, as he pointed out the window, the ocean rushing by. 'You'd be mad to leave this behind.'

'I don't want to leave.'

The hitcher nodded as if he understood.

'What are you doing around here? You know there's only one pub for miles, a general store and the beach.'

'Camp on the beach, light a fire, fish. There's no one around to stop me. A mate at the hostel told me it's the *best place in the world*.'

'Your friend's not wrong.'

The backpacker paused for second. 'It's a real shame you know, my mate said that this place was being turned into a Club Med.'

'Sounds like a rumour.'

'You think so? Look's like the whole world's fallen victim to overdevelopment.'

I didn't reply. I didn't want to argue. I checked the clock on my dashboard and knew I'd be on-site in minutes. I would drop the hitcher at the general store and he could walk the five hundred metres to the ocean. I was tempted to tell him that if he wanted to stay on the beach he'd have to ask me first, and since when was it okay to light fires on the coast? Another environmental hypocrite; the world was full of them.

I drove into the car park at the general store, stopping to let the hitcher out of the car.

'Good luck with the fishing,' I said.

'Yeah, same to you, enjoy your holiday.'

Enjoy the holiday. What made him think I was on a holiday? Perhaps that's what most people did when they visited a coastal nirvana. As I drove off, I watched him the rear-vision mirror. He waved, giving me a thumbs up.

I turned left, drove for another kilometre, turning left again, continuing down an unsealed gravel road. The car crawled up the track, dodging potholes and craters. I hunched over the steering wheel, watching for the gate to the property. Years ago, I'd tied a white scarf to the post. I wondered if it was still there.

I found the boundary to the property and followed the fence to the gate. The fence was falling down and covered in bramble. On the side of the hill I could make out a small shack, partly obscured by a tangle of forest ferns. All over its peeling façade and balustrades crept bright fuchsia flowers. I got out of the car and walked up the driveway. I struggled up the path, tripping over branches, batting off flies from my face. I was thankful no one could see me in my heels and cream linen suit. I felt out of place and clownish.

I stood in a clearing at the front of the cottage, circling the outside. I went and sat down on the steps and looked into the vastness. From where I sat, I could see the horizon and the glittering blue water in the distance. The outlook was more beautiful than I remembered.

A bird shrieked, punctuating the silence. I looked up into the high ceiling of verdant green, inhaling the intoxicating forest smells. For the first time in months, the Honour Bay project made perfect sense. I squinted and visualised the pool, the tennis courts, the enviro-villas and the crew of white uniformed staff that would attend to my guests' every need. I could see trays of cocktails gliding through the air; golf clubs swinging over greens; and tennis balls springing over nets. Every day the dollars would arrive with my tourists, deep in their pockets with their demands. It would be an instant success. *A place of endless smiles and dreams.*

~

Several minutes passed and I heard a hum near my ear. Centimetres from my head, a vine curled its way around a wooden balustrade; tropical flowers and large leaves wrapped themselves around a rotting banister. My eyes fixed on a moving stem. A caterpillar the size of my little finger munched its way around the edges of a leaf.

Mesmerised, I focused on the grub. I knew from experience that it would ravage one leaf, and then migrate to another. Painstakingly, it could outstrip a branch. It could take hours, maybe even days. Eventually, its tight little suit would grow uncomfortable, it would wriggle, then struggle – and then zip, the skin would burst and the whole outfit would slide off just like a stripper at a buck's party.

It would peel off one suit, only to reveal another. Soon, stuffed and uncomfortable it would shed another skin. I thought of a fat man. Greedy, gluttonous, phlegmatic. Always wanting more. Never satisfied. Groping the coins in his pocket, turning over beads.

I looked back at my caterpillar. I watched as he chomped his way from one end of the leaf to another. Soon he would transform. Be someone else, be something else. VN had said that a caterpillar is a *he*, the pupa an *it*, and the butterfly a *she*. I wondered. Could this thick grub ever be an insect with tissue paper-wings the colour of silver sand? Could anything change that much? My grandmother always said: *Grace, people don't change*.

I stared at him for ages. His consumption passed like a dream. Birds screamed, insects rustled; somewhere I thought I could hear rumbles – an abrupt rough grunt. Cassowaries could be loud; aggressive when provoked. They had been known to kill people. Kick, fight and punch. Charging, they would lower their helmets, their spongy casques, and crash headlong into a target. Kicking, they would leap feet first, slashing their victims with the sharp spikes on their inner claws. I wondered if they were watching me? I wondered where they would go? Did they sense what I was about to do?

As if on cue a butterfly took flight, swooping from the trees above. Instinctively, I put my hand up, shielding my face from its plunge. Without warning, it swooped again, narrowly missing my head. It dipped and dived like a tiger-moth plane, finally arching and landing somewhere above my head.

I got up from where I sat, watching as the butterfly balanced on the edge of the shack's gutters. Its wings moved like it was blinking, it looked

like a cheeky wave. I smiled to myself, felt my shoulders relax. *I cannot control you. I cannot control anything.*

I glanced at my watch; it was close to five, time to leave. I walked back down the driveway and got into the car. I drove off without turning around.

~

Hot cheeks on rumpled pillows. I woke up and rubbed my face. I felt sick. I had sat down on my bed and fallen asleep, fully dressed. *En masse* the community meeting had been overwhelming and I wondered if it had been worthwhile. Had Tony's attempt in buying the whole town a beer really amounted to anything? I would soon know.

I stood up and went into the bathroom, turning on the cold-water tap, watching as water rushed into the basin. It splashed up, drenching me. Filling my hands with water, I hung over the sink, covering my face in the soothing coolness. I brought my head up and looked at my creased reflection. I looked terrible. I looked like a hypocrite.

I recalled the circumstances of purchasing the land. My mother and father were killed driving. I was five. They were drunk. I didn't know. They didn't care. I went to live with my grandmother, and together, we created a life. Any life, but a future that was better than the one lost in a car smash.

My grandmother had insisted I saved money. Coin-by-coin, note-by-note, it was all diligently stuffed into the swollen stomach of a piggy bank. She said it would guarantee opportunities. Together, we pooled our savings, putting a deposit on a block of land. The Honour Bay property. It was cheap, an orphan block, no one wanted it. It was too much trouble, too tangled and in the middle of nowhere. Years later, I made the discovery that *nowhere* and *no one* meant *something* to *someone*.

As business thrived, I purchased the surrounding blocks. Land values increased. Queensland became popular. My grandmother had stipulated as her dying wish: *keep Honour Bay, live by the sea and have a good life*. What would she say now? Though the visit had only reassured my purpose, I knew it would still be difficult. If I was truthful, it was the idea of

my grandmother and Henry Stern. The incongruity of the situation had not eluded me. It would have to be another of my secrets.

I dried my face and went and sat back on the bed. As I fell back into the pillows there was a loud knocking on the door.

'It's me!'

'You're early, I haven't had a shower.' I didn't want to see him.

The door thumped again.

After a few seconds, I opened it to see Tony. His shirt was hanging out and his tie was crooked. He had a red bruised look on his face. He staggered in, stinking of beer, slamming the door behind him.

'My God,' I said. 'I guess the whole town's in the same shape.'

'Kind of.' He said, lurching forward.

I took a step back.

'I've *nailed* it.' He said, dancing on the spot like a child at a party.

'What?'

'*Yeah*. Coupla beers and the whole fuckin' town can't keep their mouths shut. Dylan Brown started raving on about the Cassowaries. He said, *sort out the birds and you're laughing*.'

'Those *birds* are a little more difficult than that. They've been listed since '99, they're federally endangered.'

'Who gives a shit?'

'I do.'

'I don't.' Tony ran his hands through his damp, sweaty hair. 'Listen, Grace, it was the *way* he said it.'

'What do you mean, *way*?'

'I mean—' Tony made a motion of strangling something with his hands, his face looked demented.

'You're not—'

'Dunno?' He giggled.

'You can't be—'

'Poison the fuckers. It'll solve everything.'

There was an awful silence. I didn't say anything for a second. 'It's illegal.'

Tony smiled. 'So?' He picked up my hand. We locked eyes.

'We'd go to jail.'

'Together, I hope.'

'Tony, JAIL!'

'Who said anything about getting caught?' Tony wiggled his hips in a provocative move. He was drunker than I'd first thought.

'Come on. It'll be easy.'

'I can't'.

'FUCK, GRACE! What else are we going to do? I've got data from every bloody development proposal on the Eastern Seaboard. No one's ever built a thing with a helmet head on it. The EPA protects blowflies, for God's sakes.'

I shook my head.

'GRACE, at the most it would be four, maybe five birds. Listen to me.'

'I'm listening.'

'In the time it will take to get the DA to go through we'll go broke. I need this thing to get built.' Tony pulled his hair from the roots, making him look even madder than he was suggesting. 'And you need it to get built. Do you know what we owe the bank?'

I considered the interest on the overdraft for a minute. My cash flow had disappeared into another construction site and I was about to mortgage my apartment. 'How do you propose we do *this poisoning?*'

'Easy. Pay some redneck or Dylan to do it. There's so many dole-bludgers living here we'll get a hungry knob-head in a second.'

'Are you serious? Dylan'll talk the minute he's had a smoke. Imagine if the media got hold of it? We'd be finished in a minute.'

'Grace, you were at that meeting. We're fucked.'

'And Dylan?'

'Don't worry about Dylan, I've got him sorted.'

'Tony, there must be another way.'

'Grace, I have a family.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow,' he said, inching closer. 'They could do it in a couple of hours.'

'Just us.' What was I agreeing to?

Tony whooped. 'Now, that's *the thinking*.'

He came forward, engulfing me in a tight squeeze. He planted an alcoholic kiss on my lips. I didn't think he was going to let go. I struggled to break away from his grip, pushing him away with two hands, 'Tony, you're pissed.'

Be back at dawn, leave it to me. It's all fixed, he whispered in my ear. He walked backwards towards the door, laughing, congratulating me on my newfound ruthlessness. I heard him whistle down the path as he headed towards the hotel bar.

Chapter 5

D is for Dead.

The Morning Cloak butterfly pretends to be dead when approached by strangers. Wings closed, it falls over and lies flat. When least expected, it gives a little 'click' and flies away before it can be captured.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

It was dawn. The sky was unclouded and clear. A warm orange glow painted stripes across the still surface of the sea. It would be a hot and steamy day.

Neither of us spoke as the car sped along the empty stretch of road, though I toyed with the idea of telling Tony to *stop the car, I'm getting out*. I watched as he clenched and unclenched the steering wheel, waving non-existent flies from his face. We both knew what lay ahead. What would happen if we got caught? It wasn't worth entertaining. As if he could read my thoughts, he coughed and cleared his throat.

'You know, I could get done for this.'

I shook my head. We could both get *done* for what we were about to do, but I didn't feel like an argument. It was bad enough we were killing something, let alone doing something that was a criminal offence.

I thought about Henry as the car raced along the side of the ocean. He would never compromise his ideals. He wasn't a hypocrite; the idea of slaughtering ten fig trees and three, maybe four, protected Cassowaries would be abhorrent to him. And I didn't blame him; I was repulsed myself.

Tony continued, 'You are aware of that, aren't you?'

'We'll be fine,' I said, 'we won't get caught.' I smoothed my moist hands down over my thighs. 'Besides, we're not trespassing. I do *own* the land.'

'Good, you have to think like that.' Tony leaned back in his car seat. 'You know I'd rather do time than go broke. I couldn't face losing everything. What would I tell Nina? What would I tell my parents? They depend on me.'

I found Tony's justifications difficult to listen to. 'You'd find something to tell them, Tony.'

We drove on in the early morning. I dared to breathe. I could sense apprehension in his silence. He was unusually quiet.

'You okay?' I asked.

'You know,' he said, 'I know you don't like what we're about to do, and I know I really piss you off sometimes, but it's the only option. This property is the only way we're going to make big money. Ever. There's nothing like it, and if we let some birds get in the way, we'll be stuffed. There will always be more projects, Grace, always, but there won't be another opportunity like this. We're either the best in the business, or we're not. I want to be the best.'

I nodded. I'd heard Tony's pep talk before. I knew he was right. I wanted to be the best too. There was no other choice.

It had all been decided, Tony had written the plan. Detail by painstaking detail.

~

The car crawled down the unsealed road. It was as though Tony was driving on a thin sheet of ice, not at all like his driving technique. A glove box bursting with parking infringements told the whole story.

'It's less than two hundred metres to the gate,' I said. 'I'm surprised you remembered how to get here.'

'Remember the first time you brought me here. We sat on the steps of the cottage for hours. We discussed *the* dream.'

I nodded. I was amazed that he remembered. Finally, the car crept around the bend and through the trees we could see the worn-out shack on the hill, surrounded by thick, wet rainforest. In my weird state, I listened to Tony reciting our plan. He kept repeating: *we must be careful*.

He parked as close to the gate as he could. It was a feeble attempt to hide the vehicle. I watched as he climbed over the car seats, noting it had been years since I had seen him in jeans and a t-shirt. He was always bound by a suit and tie, always tied to his uniformity.

'Everything's in the boot.' He grinned.

I went around to the back of the car, watching as he took out half a dozen plastic bowls, three plump sacks of an unknown substance, two large plastic bottles of *Roundup*, two funnels and a drill.

'How'd you get all this?' I asked.

'I have my contacts,' he replied.

'Well, you didn't waste any time. I'm impressed. It's amazing what you can do when you put your mind to it.'

'Listen Grace, I'm doing this for us. I don't see you busting your arse to get us out of this mess. It's our money.' I smelt Tony's acrid breath on my face as his head trembled centimetres from mine. As fast as he'd picked up my hand he let it drop it into the air. He muttered *sorry*, and something about *stress* under his breath.

He gave me an elbow-length pair of heavy-duty gloves, gumboots and a large plastic bowl. They were all covered in fine splashes of white paint, and had been used for painting. I frowned and looked up into the tangle of rainforest treetops, feeling I was playing uninvited before a live audience. I hoped they would forgive me.

I checked my watch. More than an hour had passed since we'd left our rooms. We had to act and get back to the hotel as soon as possible, we had an arrangement to have breakfast with Eve mid-morning. Tony had organised our breakfast meeting as an alibi, said he'd thought of everything.

I took a deep breath, walking up the driveway to the house. I knew Tony would be close behind.

~

Side by side we sat on the first step of the house, surrounded by our goods. Tony had carried it all up the hill, straining under the weight of the sacks, bottles and protective wear. Whatever we needed he had thought of. I was surprised at his adeptness in matters of manual practicality, remembering he'd been a plumber's apprentice before switching to real estate.

'How are you planning on doing on this? I asked.

'Just wait and see.'

I watched as he lined up all the bowls, reaching in to one of the sacks, pulling out what looked like a handful of chocolate.

'You're not —'

'Yep.'

'Chocolate?'

'And coffee. Didn't you know? Chocolate and caffeine both contain theobromine. In a decent dose, they're both lethal to dogs, cats and birds.'

'They'll never eat it,' I said, shaking my head.

'Course they will. Ever known anything that doesn't eat chocolate?'

Tony didn't speak. He reached into one of the sacks, distributing large handfuls of diced chocolate into the six different bowls. Following the chocolate, he reached into another bag, throwing in a handful of what looked like coffee granules.

'I can't believe you.'

Without replying, Tony reached into the third sack, the largest, pulling out a huge handful of wild berries. He divided the berries between the bowls and mixed the whole concoction with his hands. It looked like a summer dessert.

'What are they?'

'Three types of berries. Cassowaries are gluttons for fruit: *Crimson Berry*, *Davison's Plum* and *Wax Berry*. They'll eat anything. But, they *love* berries.'

'Since when have you been such an expert?'

'Since, yesterday.'

'You know, I've never seen a Cassowary, here.'

'They're here, all right. Haven't you seen the droppings? Everyone in town knows that this place is a thoroughfare for a certain family of birds. According to our mate, Dylan, trespassers come out here all the time to bird-watch.'

I shook my head. *Chocolate. So sweet, so deadly.*

'How will they die?'

'Those little pin-heads are going to get the worst fucking gut aches.'

'How long?'

'Who cares? According to my source, they'll either croak from liver failure, dehydration, heart attack, hyperthermia or if they're lucky —'

'Enough, Tony.'

'It's the only way, we won't be detected. And if we are, what's the crime against a bit of chocolate?' Tony pointed to a group of figs surrounding the cottage. 'It's those things we've got to worry about. Not as easy to hide.'

'So. What do we do now?'

'You're taking the berry bowls and putting them near any berry bushes, and I'm taking care of the figs.'

I nodded, numb.

Tony's eyes flitted over the property, 'By the looks of it, if we work fast we'll be out of here in an hour.' He pointed to the furthest corner of the property and grinned. 'There's a bush over there. Get going. We'll celebrate later.'

'I can't believe we're doing this,' I said.

'Think of what it's worth to us, don't think of what we're doing.'

'Yes,' I sighed, 'that's the only way to look at it.'

'Grace, that's a fucking bird poison,' he said, pointing to the bowl in my hands. 'And this is our fucking life,' indicating the area around us.

'I know what we're doing, Tony.'

I stood up with steadfast determination and headed to an area near a fence. I could feel rainforest ferns brushing against my ankles as I stumbled over thick, corded fig roots. Every inch of the property was alive with every imaginable insect noise and every kind of bird screech and squawk. I hated myself for what I was about to do, but I could see there was no alternative. When I looked up, all I could see was an optical illusion of Henry Stern's face bleeding through the treetops, his eyes staring at me in accusation.

I wiped my sleeve across my face, licking my upper lip. Tiny beads of perspiration rolled down my forehead and slid across the bridge of my nose. The combination of humidity and anticipation was insufferable. Even the rainforest filled with the perfumes of a million different flowers could not distract me from my task.

I walked around the boundary of the property following Cassowary droppings. Every so often I planted a bowl at the foot of a berry tree. I stepped over the forest floor with a featherlight foot, aware that my steps were perversely protecting the land and killing it at the same time. I had always taken cautious steps in the bush, aware that every step counted. Now, here I was killing trees and birds.

With every bowl of poison I was obliterating lifetimes' worth of biodiversity, a bustling network of interconnected microhabitats. The Cassowary was well known in the area for its ability to spread the seeds of over one hundred and fifty rain forest species. Everything would be affected by its death. I performed my environmental execution as I did everything, *Gracie Fox, if you're going to do something, do it properly*. The project's Fauna Impact Statement would be meaningless in less than an hour.

I could see the bob of Tony's baseball cap, as he drilled deep, long holes into the trunks of the chosen figs. I stared as he drilled a hole then filled it with a syringe of *Roundup*, plugging up the cavity with a dose of epoxy. He explained the process in the car, telling me that when all the punctures were made the poison would prevent the root system from taking water. The wounded trees would starve from lack of nutrients and water. They would shrivel up and die.

'Bastard', I thought. It was all his fault, entirely his idea. But I had agreed. I had vowed to maintain business integrity in all that I did. So far, so good. Until this moment I could say that I had acted with all sincerity and honesty in all my business dealings. But then again, until this moment I had not been in this financial situation. Tony reminded me that we were financially coasting close to the edge. *Very thin ice*, was what he said.

I'd been walking in a trance-like state when I was startled to hear Tony's voice bellowing from the top steps of the cottage. 'GRACE, LET'S GO!'

Squinting into the sunlight, I surveyed the forest. It was the last time I'd be there like this.

Last time an innocent.

I walked to the car without waiting for Tony. *Fuck it*, he could collect the gear. Waiting for him, I stared out of the open car window and into the formless and seductive forest. Every so often I could see a startling flash of brilliant colour or hear the rustle of some creature scuttling along the forest floor. I wondered if a hungry Cassowary was hiding; waiting for us to leave.

From the car I could see Tony sit on the cottage steps and pour the remaining contents of the *Roundup* out onto the forest floor. I thought I could hear it glugging over the grass and steeping into the dirt. Everything was dying.

~

Tony swung into the driver's seat, 'Good job.'

'Depends on what you call a good job.'

'I call saving this place a brilliant job, Grace.'

My head moved up and down in a mechanical nod. I watched as Tony patted his pockets down. He pulled out a crumpled packet of Peter Stuyvesant, tossing the empty packet out the car window. His casualness stunned me if only I could be so flippant. The full implications of what we had just done were still sinking in. I fought the urge to burst into tears. I didn't dare break down in front of him.

'I think we did an excellent job, I think it will solve everything. In a couple of weeks we'll send someone up there, get them to check it out and hey presto, no more trees or *big birds*.'

'I'm glad you're so confident. What will we say, if a park ranger pays us a visit?'

'Grace, what can he say? I didn't see you there? Did you?'

I nodded, my eyelids felt thick and I wished to be somewhere else. The smoke from Tony's cigarette was filling up the car's cabin and I felt myself struggling to breathe. As we drove off I stared out the window, watching the forest flash by, tiny slivers of the ocean sneaking through the trees. Every inch of me ached, from my head to my heart. I just wanted to curl up and evaporate. Forget any of it had ever happened.

Depressed and contaminated, I fell asleep in the car.

~

'You're late,' Norma said, brushing past me and going straight to the kitchen.

'I know. I'm sorry. The plane was delayed. Thanks for waiting for me.'

'I'm not back till next week and there's good news.'

I waited for her to go on. I was tired. It was late, and I hadn't eaten for hours.

'It's nearly finished. They've worked non-stop for two days.' She pointed up the stairs. 'Shall we?'

I nodded.

I knew from the smell that the room was underway. Paint fumes hit me the minute I'd walked in the front door. I was impatient to store my butterflies and had called four builders off another project to complete the work. I knew with a generous building budget, top hourly rate, anything was possible.

I held onto the stainless-steel banister, aware that I never visited the room. There was never any reason to. It was a guest room, and there were

never any guests. I could hear Norma in front of me, her breathing quicken as we both reached the top step. She stepped aside for me to walk through.

‘Well?’ she said.

I stared at the surreal sight in front of me. The bed, the wardrobe, the chest of drawers, the paintings, the carpet, everything was gone. The space was naked. In the centre of the room was a marble island featuring a large stainless steel sink. There were cabinets in various stages of completion; they were still to be painted and integrated.

‘What do you think?’

I ran my hand over the Italian marble bench top, leaning down to study its surface. It was cream with black streaking, reminding me of blue vein cheese. To the touch, it felt frozen.

‘I don’t like it.’

Norma looked upset. ‘It’s not finished, yet.’

I shook my head again. ‘The details are wrong.’

I watched Norma scanning the room. ‘There are still days of work.’

‘No. The builders need new specs.’

Norma nodded. I said what I meant.

I stood in silence for a minute, observing the details. ‘Norma, where are my butterflies?’

‘They’re in the ensuite, I had the builders bring them up.’

I walked into the ensuite and saw nine large, well-stacked towers of boxes, each one containing my collection. I opened a box, pulling out an oversized bubble-wrapped frame. Resting on top of another box was a postal package with my name scrawled across it. I picked it up.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot,’ said Norma. ‘That arrived this morning.’

Flipping over the package, I saw Henry’s name. His delivery speed was faultless.

‘A man called this morning to make sure it arrived. I think he was hoping to speak to you, he said it was a surprise. I thought he may have called you on the mobile.’

Norma's information stunned me. I stared at her, confused. 'You said I was up north? Doing what?'

Norma looked perplexed. 'Working.'

I was stupid being so suspicious. Of course I was working. I peeled the end of the package open and slid the gift out. Inside the parcel was a worn recycled envelope. I opened the letter, reading the details. It had been sent the day we'd met.

Hi Grace,

Surprise!

I decided that rather than wait for an order from you I would send you one of my personal favourites. You can see the quality of my stock.

One of my farmers has just bred a magnificent family, he invited me over last night to see them. I thought of you when he opened the box. They were stunning, something I knew you would love.

In my opinion this is the finest of the moth species, Actias Luna. I hope you like him; personally I think the Luna Moth is incomparable. Unique, but we can talk about them later.

Anyway, I'm tying up a few loose ends and filling three months of back orders. That way, I'll be free to come to Australia and not worry about business.

There's a conference soon and I'm looking forward to attending it, I believe it's this month. I was hoping we could visit Cairns together, you mentioned you had business there.

Keep in touch

Enjoy Luna.

Fondest, Henry.

I gripped the edge of the cool white bench, the neon light of the room almost blinding me. I could feel Norma's eyes on me, see her jaw drop in a fish-like breath. Unsteady on my feet I wondered how many steps it would take to the bathroom. *Two, three, four*, if I ran I could make it. I bolted into the bathroom, hanging my head over the toilet bowl. Watery bile spewed out of my mouth.

Norma followed me, 'Oh my god, Grace?'

I shook my head, embarrassed. After the stress of the morning, the intoxicating glyphosate fumes, the flight, the overwhelming smell of the paint, the lack of food, it was no surprise I was retching over the china-white porcelain. And now Henry was promising to visit.

I stood up and straightened, wiping my hand across my forehead, relieved I felt better. Norma handed me a glass of water and a damp, white towel. 'Grace, come downstairs, sit down.'

'I'm fine, Norma, really. The last three days have been hectic, and you know what Tony does to me sometimes. He doesn't let up for a minute.'

Norma took my elbow and directed me towards the stairs. 'Come on, go to bed.'

For the following half an hour, I allowed Norma to fuss over me. I felt too sick to move.

At one point she disappeared, returning with Henry's gift and the letter it had arrived with. Side by side we sat next to each other on my bed, rereading Henry's letter. The package remained unopened.

I felt Norma's hand on my shoulder and was aware of her caring squeeze, 'Grace, open it, see what he sent you.'

After a minute I opened my eyes and looked at the white tissue, smoothed out and reused. Everything he had written, every description, every action, had been thoughtful, practical, careful. I removed the tissue and its underneath cellophane. Lying in my hand was a ten-centimetre pale-green magnificent moth. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Its damp velvet wings were a bright apple green, bounded by aubergine stripes. It had long trailing hindwings, punctuated with yellow and brown eyespots. I thought I saw it wink.

'It's heavenly,' I whispered, as I turned it over and checked its underside.

'Norma pass me the *Parson's*. It's on the other side of the bed.'

‘How much is it worth?’ She whispered under her breath. She moved in closer to take a better a look. ‘Where would something like that come from?’

Without replying, I flipped through my *Parson’s Butterfly Classifications*, stopping when I found the entry for *Luna Moth*. The photograph in the book was the same as the butterfly that rested in my lap. I scanned the page, learning that its natural habitat was the Deep South of America and throughout the eastern half of the Untied States.

Norma listen to this: ‘*Luna Moths mate shortly after midnight and as a rule often stay in the mated position for an entire day. The females begin laying their eggs the day after mating is completed ...*’

‘What a funny gift.’

Flushing, I didn’t disagree. Henry had sent me a moth that had sex all day. I assumed it was intentional. *A magical fucking moth.*

I landed back into my pillows, feeling odd. I found it difficult to believe that he’d sent me something so exquisite, something so personal. What was even stranger, was that I had never given him my address or phone number. My phone was unlisted. How did he find me?

I noticed Norma checking her watch. ‘It’s late, I’m off.’

I looked at my watch and saw it was close to midnight. Norma had stayed a long time past her finishing hour.

‘Norma, thanks for helping me.’

She leant down, kissing me on the top of the head. It was the first time she’d ever shown me any affection. For the briefest moment, I thought of my grandmother, her tender love and sweetness.

I fell back into my pillows like a stone. Alone, for the first time in days. I thought about Henry. I thought about his gift. A big masculine moth. It begged to be stroked. I picked up the *Parson’s* again, rereading its description. It shines like a rainbow. It’s the colour of a leaf. It flies all night. It relies on scent. I looked for the word *Luna*. It relates to the moon. They do not have a proboscis. They cannot take in food. They have strong muscles to fly. They fuck all night.

I shut the *Parson's*, closing my eyes. I dreamt of Henry Stern.

Chapter 6

L is for Lepidoptera

Lepidoptera is the order of insects comprising butterflies and moths. There are approximately 18,000 known species of butterflies and 147,000 moths. The biggest difference between the two is that butterflies fly during the day, most moths do not. The moths shape is less graceful, their body is thicker, they have a heavy coat of down. Their antennae, fringed or feathered, never have the clubbed end of a butterfly's. On the other hand, a butterfly tends to be brightly coloured and have distinct clubbed antennae; most butterflies rest with their wings clapped together, most moths do not.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

At ten o'clock, the intercom buzzed. I picked up the security phone and saw Frank's bulky frame and squinty face come into focus on the camera. His brown regulation backpack made him look like a bulging European purple hairstreak pupa (*Quercusia quercus*). I wondered if he would explode. I hit the button and let him in. Life was happening in slow motion.

'You, again,' I said, smiling, as I attempted to snatch the package out of his hands.

Frank gave me the parcel and fumbled around in his bag for what seemed like an eternity, finally pulling out his registration book. He read down the page searching for my name.

'It's from a Harry Stern.'

'Harry? It's Henry.'

Frank tapped the page. 'Nope, this definitely says Harry Stern.'

I knew that Harry was an abbreviation for Henry. Though I couldn't imagine Henry being called Harry.

'Harry? Henry? What's the difference? Just sign.'

I signed my name and turned over the parcel. It had been sent via express courier. I smiled at Henry's efficiency.

'Two in two days. Only brought one yesterday.'

I nodded.

'Nice?'

I nodded again. I didn't want to tell Frank about the sexual appetite of my Luna Moth.

'Expensive?'

It was too embarrassing to admit that I often spent Frank's monthly salary on one purchase.

'Keeps me out of trouble.'

'Reckon it'd take a lot to keep you out of trouble, Grace.'

'Would you like to have a look, Frank?' I shook the package. I knew I could convert him.

'Can't, I've got a whole lot of things to deliver by two.'

'Hold on a sec, Frank. I've got something for you.'

I went into the kitchen and fetched a Tupperware container that Norma had recently filled. 'Muffins, baked this morning, regards from Norma.'

'What about you?' he said as he lifted up a corner of the box and sniffed.

'Norma knows I don't eat cake. I'm sure they're for you.' I made a point of looking at my watch. 'Thanks again for the delivery, might see you next week.'

For a moment Frank stood rigidly at the door, refusing to budge.

'Forgotten something, Frank?' I asked.

'How many of those things you got now?'

'No idea, I don't count them.' Which wasn't the truth. At last count I had three hundred and twenty-seven butterflies, today made it three hundred and twenty-eight.

'Grace, if you don't mind me saying so—'

'I'm sure you'll tell me anyway.'

'I think you're single because you make too much money. Men don't like it. Not to be rude or anything, but look at your place.'

I stared at Frank. I had never asked for his opinion. The words squeaked in my ears: *You're single because you make too much money.* To emphasise what he had said, he pointed behind me. I turned around and glanced back at my home. The word 'ordered' came to mind. A three-leveled farm of cream wool carpet and metres of gleaming glass. The floor space was punctuated with great towers of magazines and books. An oversized vase of pale yellow Oriental Lilies broke the white uniformity.

I was too shocked to continue the conversation. I considered telling him to *fuck off*. But Frank was a good delivery man; trustworthy and punctual.

'I'm not sure what to say.'

'I better go,' he said.

Without saying goodbye I shut the door. I was too upset even to think about what I held in my hands. After all these years Frank was brave enough to tell me the truth. Men found it difficult to be with a career woman who made more money than they did. It wasn't just Frank's observation; the more money I made, the less frequent the dates were. It might have made me safe, but according to Frank it didn't make me sexy.

I turned the package over in my hands and took a deep, calming breath. The important thing was to be cool and controlled. I had a long marketing meeting planned for the morning and a brand-new butterfly to open. I looked down at the package in my hands and my stomach somersaulted.

As I opened the package, I swallowed. I didn't like disappointments. Slowly, I dared myself to steal a look. It was eighty centimetres wide and lovely. A velvety fern-like shade, more captivating than a peacock's eye. I wanted to stare at it forever.

I had read that the Kaiser-I-Hind was classified as rare in the *Red Data Book of threatened Swallowtail butterflies of the World*. It spent its time living in high mountain altitudes, drifting among the tree-tops, occasionally coming down for short periods of the day. I liked its little idiosyncrasies, and admired

the fact that unlike most Papilionidae it was not attracted to flowers, but they liked to visit wet patches on the forest floor. Not everyone was obsessed with beauty.

As if to shatter the silence, my mobile rang. Eve's clipped voice reminded me that the marketing meeting had commenced over twenty minutes ago. I placed the butterfly into its box and raced to catch a cab. I waved fifty dollars at the cab driver and told him it was an emergency. I knew how angry Tony could be about my tardiness.

On the way to the office I thought about Henry. I wanted to email him and say thank you for the gift and the Kaiser-I-Hind. But I had met him once, and that was in the confines of an aeroplane cabin. I worried that if I invited him, he would refuse me. He already seemed preoccupied with Lepidoptera, with little time for anything else. But Annie's voice reverberated around in my brain. Was he my last chance?

~

With astonishing speed I arrived at the office, I ran into the boardroom faster than I'd intended. All my key people plus a handful of creatives from the agency occupied the room. Everyone looked up, and no one looked happy. I crept down the side of the room to sit at the head of the table.

I caught Tony's eye first. He made no pretence of a welcome.

'It's called *Salt*,' he said, without a hint of irony. 'It'll remind the punters of the briny sea.'

In that brief moment, Tony leapt up and started reeling off names like some proud over-bearing father. *Calypso*, *Sea Spray*, *Crystal Waters*. The list was ridiculous.

'What about *Sandy Bay*?' A voice from the back of the table said.

'Boring. Sounds like a caravan park.' said Tony, 'Anyway, the site is not in a bay, and sandy does not conjure up images of upmarket aspiration.'

Tony crossed his arms and glared at the marketing executive. 'I hate it,' he said, 'awful,' he added as an afterthought.

'What do you think, Grace? *Salt*?' Tony glared at me from the other end of the boardroom table.

'Salt?' I repeated the word. It felt silly on my tongue. 'I can't imagine saying, *I'm staying at Salt*. Can you?'

Something you put on your fucking fish and chips, Tony muttered under his breath.

As the marketing executive turned a deep red, I looked around the room. The mood was sombre. If the agency didn't deliver a brand name, they didn't earn their fee. Naming off-spring was one thing; naming a development was something else. You didn't charge someone ten thousand dollars to name their child. There was complex brand science in selecting the right name for your property project. *Alliterations, acronyms, soft sounds, more vowels, short words*, and in the end it could be anything. Make it unforgettable and watch it sell.

Kaiser-I-Hind (*Teinopalpus Imperialis*)? How did they name her? It was hardly memorable, it was difficult to pronounce and impossible to spell. But the butterfly was completely unforgettable. I thought about butterfly names. I thought of the origin of the word butterfly. I was sure it had something to do with butter. My grandmother had said that her English mother claimed that butterflies were named after the common butter-yellow, Brimstone.

Melody stood up, holding a small, but neat pile of white flash cards. Every card had a name on it. Helvetica typeface, clean, modern and commercial. I saw her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth.

'Coast?' There was a stony silence. 'Does *Paradise* strike a chord with anyone?' Melody forced a smile and looked from face to face. No one budged.

Tony barked, 'done-to-death.'

The head of the marketing team eyeballed the senior designer. Melody continued, '*Sea Spray? Horizon? Latitude?*'

They all sounded terrible.

The cards flipped, '*Pearl, Sands, Ocean Towers, Marina.*' They were all clichés, one after another.

Tony picked up the pile of cards off the table and chucked them behind his head. They hit the back wall and fell onto the floor. The clatter was deafening. 'They're all shit. Don't like any of them.'

Melanie hesitated. 'I've got one more.'

'Let's hear it,' Tony said, his voice rising with irritation.

'*DUNE*,' Melody bit her lip.

Tony looked at me out of the corner of his eye. 'What do you think, Grace?'

'Isn't that the name of that cult 80s book?'

'The science fiction one, written by Frank Herbert, then it was a movie.'

There was a brief silence as this remark sank in, and Melody stood up, determined this time to win. 'Grace, every name we suggest has connotations. If it's not a magazine, it's another building, or a car, or a book. There's no new names.'

'I didn't say I didn't like it, Melody. Eve just commented that there was a film called *Dune*. Does anyone think that naming the project *Dune* is a problem? I mean there's no sand dunes in the area.'

Everyone around the table shook their heads. Good, great, was mumbled around the table. 'Any other suggestions before we finish?' More nods, left to right.

'Just before we finish, did anyone consider naming it *Honour*? Naming it after the area.' I asked.

'You mean,' Tony said, his voice sounding incredulous, 'the very first name I suggested?'

'Yes.'

'Doesn't *Honour* mean respect? It seems logical. Don't we like location names?'

'*Honour*.' I whispered the word under my breath. I loved the silent H.

'Show of hands. Who likes *Dune*?' Two hands dangled in the air. Tony smirked.

'*Honour*?' Six hands shot up. It was a foregone conclusion.

Tony smiled, '*Honour* it is.'

The room clapped and everyone beamed at each other.

I stood up and left the room. I always preferred my own names. Fuck the agency. They could forget their fee.

~

I returned to my office, smug. It was just past one o'clock and I had saved the company over ten thousand dollars. The art director's poise had dwindled, and Tony had pushed hard to break her confidence. We had hijacked the marketing meeting before, and it had always achieved good results. I could just imagine what was happening in the agency's office right now.

'Where the fuck were you?' said Tony, barging into my office.

'Sorry, Tony, I got held up at home. I couldn't leave, there was a tradesman.'

'Don't you realise how uptight those meetings are?'

I shrugged my shoulders; lateness was my prerogative.

'Anyway, Grace. It's all systems go now we've got the name.'

'So quick?'

'Yep, and I've got a proposition for you.'

'What are you talking about?'

'We need a shit-hot marketing campaign. And I've got just the idea.'

I grinned. 'From what I've seen, this is a marketing-sensitive community. They'd probably set fire to it. Or to me.'

'Listen to me, Grace. What if we do a community newsletter as a cross-pollination marketing exercise?' Tony clapped his hands together, 'even better, it'll be just like a lifestyle magazine, we'll feature all the regional businesses, everything up and down the coast; the pubs and all the local identities; they'd love the self-promotion. And they'd distribute it. I can see it now, it'd be brilliantly interspersed with lifestyle shots of the region. They'd love it.'

I shook my head. 'They're not self-promoters, Tony, they're hippies and sea-change types. They're not stupid, either.'

'Come on, Grace, hear me out.'

'What do we get out of it, other than an enormous marketing fee?'

'Simple. Profile elevation and goodwill. There's a smallish story about the environmental village we're creating. It reaffirms everything we've done, there's a list of the environmental features and a profile for the architect. Sam Stone is the country's best-know.'

'Tony, if you brief the agency and get a costing proposal together, I'll think about it. At the moment our first priority is throwing a bucket of cold water on their anger. As far as the community's concerned, all we want to do is destroy their environment. We have to prove them wrong. And while we're doing that you get a brief to me on what you intend to present.'

'Done.' Tony slid a file across the desk. 'Sales brainstormed it, this is what we've come up with.'

I flicked open the file and read: 'Honour Bay Marketing Proposal' stamped proudly across the top of the page. Six months ago, I'd devised an incentive structure in which I gave Tony a generous percentage of every villa sold. In effect it made him a major stakeholder of the project. My scheme had worked. He'd never been so motivated.

I leaned back in my chair, and put my hands behind my head, I looked at Tony for several moments. 'Impressive. How long did this take?'

'Three weeks. I really believe in this project, Grace.'

'Then I'll owe you,' I said smiling.

'You bet.'

With exaggerated ceremony, Tony leaned back in his chair and stretched. I could feel his eyes on me as I turned to look at my computer. The screensaver quivered in a splash of sea-colours morphing into an ocean scene. The graphic was tacky, but there was nowhere else to look. Was it my imagination? Was Tony staring at me for a moment longer than necessary?

I raised my eyebrows. 'Anything else?' I asked.

He took a deep breath. 'We did the right thing yesterday. I don't want you to think otherwise.'

'I never have regrets.'

He smiled, stood up, and left the room.

~

After Tony was gone, I started typing an email to Henry. I had been thinking about it for days. I ached about the situation. Didn't know what to do. Since my dinner with Annie I had rehearsed different scenarios in my head. Before I

could change my mind, I took a deep breath and started stabbing the keyboard. *Saucy. Sexy Suggestive.* You only live once.

Dear Henry,

Firstly, thank you for the Luna Moth and Kaiser-I-Hind, as you guaranteed they are both spectacular specimens. Every time I look at the Luna Moth it takes my breath away.

The reason for my email is two-fold. One, I need information regarding the construction of a special butterfly room. I am looking at building a place to store my collection and was curious as to your attitude regarding the specifics. The other reason is detailed below.

Without sounding too forward, I've been thinking about the day we met.

You mentioned your desire to see the butterflies of North Queensland.

We could correspond for months and talk about them. I could ask you for a seductive specimen with wings splashed with gold. Or something delicate, elfin, rare, collectable. Something that sweeps, that swoops, something that puddles, or preens. Someone that hovers or hides.

Our butterfly banter could last for months. Back and forth. Here and there.

Up and down. Sometimes emailing more often. Sometimes daily, sometimes not all. We would wonder what was going on. There would be misunderstandings. Assumptions. Presumptions. Hurt feelings. You know what email is like. Instant letters that would taste like noodle soup.

Immediate satisfaction, but no resonance. Personally, I'd prefer a ragu. Slow cooked and laboured.

I could ask you for something too difficult. Your asking price could be outrageous. We may irritate each other. I could ask for too much. The dealing could go on for years. The relationship as flimsy as a butterfly's wings. We would be like stamp collectors, never meeting, trading over paper. We could be penpals.

Or. We could meet each other. I could invite you to Honour Bay. You could see the finest butterfly habitat in the world. We could have an adventure.

What do you think?

I reread the email and blushed. It was what I was feeling, but was it what I could send? I contemplated dumping it and saw the Luna Moth flash before me. I wondered, not for the first time, what had possessed him to get in contact with me so soon. Why had he sent me a Luna Moth? I am not the type of woman who attracts men easily. I am not typically cute, nor am I needy. I am not a blonde. I am not buxom. I don't laugh in all the right places. I can't cook. I can't have children. I collect butterflies because I get lonely. What did he see in me, that others could never find? If I saw him again, part of me would like to ask.

Within half an hour my computer sounded with the tinkle of incoming mail. I went to the mailbox and saw that Henry had replied.

Dearest Grace,

I'm so happy you liked the Luna Moth and the Kaiser-I-Hind; two of my personal favourites. I knew you'd appreciate them.

Now, your two questions. Both exciting.

As far as butterfly storage conditions go, I have a colleague at the Natural Science Museum who would be more than happy to help you. She is one of the finest lepidopterists in the Southern Hemisphere. Her name is Renee Clifford and she is simply brilliant, she could give you endless advice on your butterfly room. Her details are: XXXXXX. I will email her and tell her to expect your call.

Always remember collecting butterflies is a passion and a spell. A vocation where science partners art. What could be better?

And in answer to your invitation to meet in Queensland. No number of letters or emails could match another meeting with you. Name your time.

Looking forward to seeing you again.

Fondest,

Henry.

My God. Name your time? When? Where? How? And he knew Renee Clifford. She was the most renowned lepidopterist in the country. Over the years I'd been fascinated by Renee's theories regarding butterflies. Her views were not

only well researched, but also controversial. She claimed that butterflies were not only important because of their unique life cycle, but because of their medicinal qualities. It was a theory that was yet to be proved and had spotlighted Renee as being a quack. Nevertheless, I was keen to meet her and discuss the details of my butterfly room.

I picked up my phone and summoned Eve to my office.

'Eve, I've got a job for you. Call the Natural Science Museum and make an appointment with Prof. Renee Clifford. If you have any trouble, drop the name Henry Stern.'

'What time and when, Grace?'

'If you can, tomorrow.'

'But, you've got back-to-back meetings all day.'

'Cancel something.'

'Grace —'

'If there's any problem, just tell them I've just become the museum's biggest benefactor.'

Eve screwed up her face. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well, we saved ten grand this morning by blowing off the agency. I'm giving the funds to the museum.'

'Jesus, Grace. Isn't that a bit sudden? What if the agency insists on payment for work completed?'

'What if?'

I didn't like the look Eve gave me.

'You know the story Eve, we didn't get here by luck.'

Eve didn't speak and left the room

As soon as she had gone, I sent Henry another email. It was brief and to the point. I would love to meet Renee Clifford; I had been a fan of hers for years. But, it wasn't only the butterfly room details that motivated me. I had ulterior motives.

Chapter 7

F is for Flight

Some butterflies can fly for miles and miles to their new homes. Monarch butterflies are famous for their annual migrations of thousands of miles each year — an astonishing distance for such fragile creatures.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

By quarter to two the next afternoon, I was sitting in my car outside the oldest museum in the city. I fiddled with a small piece of paper and watched as the city foot soldiers battled their way back to work. I put the scrap of paper into the ashtray and started leafing through my sketchbook, studying my chicken scratches of the proposed butterfly room.

It had been more than twenty years since I'd last visited the Natural Science Museum and in my memory the floor plan was a labyrinth of rooms storing the silent and the dead. My grandmother had promised me a place with hundreds of exotic butterflies from all over the world. I'd closed my eyes and opened them, scanning the room, searching for someone, something, to take flight. I remember my horror at seeing them all pinned down, row after row, prisoners in wide glass cases. Halfway through the collection I burst into tears, kicking a case and ran out of the building.

Nan, they're all dead. All of them, I screamed. And we never mentioned it again.

Despite the bad memories, I was eager to return. I closed my sketchbook and quickly got out of the car. I didn't want to lose my sense of purpose. I glanced at my reflection in the car window, running my hands over my knife-sharp suit. I wanted to make an impression. I wanted to appear *serious*. I didn't want her to think I was a remote businesswoman who didn't understand the fragile sensibility of the prudent butterfly specialist.

All the way up to the front door I kept taking in deep breaths, breathing through my nose, then hissing out the air. It was a technique I'd been taught in relaxation classes. Once up the stairs and standing in the foyer I took a moment to contain myself.

A directory on the ground floor directed patrons to exhibitions and display, whilst the second floor was for administration, design, publishing and the curators. I looked at my surrounds and felt a tingling sensation all over. This was my fantasy. A building swollen from the ceiling to the floor with dead and rare insects. Prized and extinct specimens from all over the world.

I took the stairs to the second floor and was faced with another directory, heavy with names and directions. Renee Clifford was on the top of the list. I held my breath and pressed the buzzer on the counter. I felt cold all over.

A humourless woman with a narrow face appeared within seconds. 'Yes.'

I took out a business card and gave it to her. 'I wonder if I might talk to Renee Clifford. We have an appointment at two o'clock.'

She picked up my card, giving it a funny look. Her gaze lifted to mine. 'That's me.' She held out her hand. 'You must be Henry's friend. Come through.'

I shook her hand, it was icy-cold and stiff. Something about her tone made me think she was impenetrable, possibly even trouble. I followed her white flapping coat down a mushroom-coloured corridor. Our footsteps clapped on the lino floor.

We walked into a large room that was crowded with waist-high partitions and wide wooden storage cabinets. It was devoid of colour or noise and was lit by low-slung fluorescent tubes. The operations budget was obviously minuscule.

She pointed to a chair on the other side of her desk. 'Take a seat. Can I get you something to drink?'

I declined and twisted the strap on my handbag. I watched Renee's whippet-like face as she shuffled through some paperwork before speaking.

'So, Henry Stern?'

I felt ill at ease. Her expression was doubtful.

'We've recently met, yes.' I said hesitantly.

'So, how is Henry? Still in search of the world's most extraordinary butterfly?'

'We haven't known each other long, but it seems so.'

'I've always thought he's mad. I've never met anyone who knows more about Lepidoptera than Henry. There's nothing he wouldn't do for his butterflies. Nothing.'

'You're old friends?'

Renee scoffed, flushing a deep red. 'I guess you could say that. We've known each other a long time. I've been buying moths and butterflies from him for years.'

'I see.' I felt a twinge of jealousy.

'Though, you *never can tell* with Henry.'

I shook my head. What was she implying?

'So, Grace. What brings you here? Henry sent me an email about a butterfly room.'

As I spoke I realised the bizarre nature of my request. I told Renee that I was in the process of building a butterfly room, but that my builders needed more information to get the design more authentic. Renee frowned at my use of the word, *authentic*; I could see she was unimpressed my indulgence.

'Similar to a temperature control wine-cellar. I'd like details like optimum moisture and warmth, conditions and storage. Henry said you would know.'

Renee frowned again, folding her hands carefully on the desk in front of her. 'We're certainly not dealing with wine.'

I flushed. 'Of course, not, Henry just said –'

‘Don’t be fooled by Henry, he’s an itinerant butterfly trader. If he had his way, the whole world would be dealing in butterflies and we’d all be building special rooms. I’d be farming them, and you’d be running around net-in-hand.’

I wondered whether Renee liked Henry or not.

‘As I said, we’ve only just met.’

Renee shrugged herself into her coat. ‘So you’d like a room similar to a personal museum, then?’

I nodded. From where I sat, Renee looked like a hungry animal. I was regretting contacting her. ‘One day, I intend on donating the collection to this museum.’

‘But not for some time?’

I stared at her. ‘I heard you are the leading butterfly expert in Australia.’ Flattery usually worked.

‘So how big is this room, and where is it?’

‘It’s 70 square metres of space on the top floor of my apartment.’ I took the floor plans out of my bag and laid them on her desk. I tapped my finger on the proposed room.

‘So there are large windows, facing a view?’

‘Yes. It’s very bright.’

‘Well, optimum conditions for the safeguarding of your collection are low light, moderate, controlled temperatures and dryness. You could put in a system that extracts all the humidity out of the air. We don’t have one here, but one of the finest museums in the world, the Californian Insect Museum, has superb dry conditions.’

‘And what about storage?’

‘That’s up to you. There are various ways to store collections, depends if you want them on show or not. I’ve got some very good suppliers and builders.’ Renee took a file off her desk and flipped to the back. She started writing down names and numbers. ‘Without having seen the space it’s difficult for me to say exactly what you need, but my best advice is keep it simple.’

‘Yes, simplicity. That’s exactly it. I like to keep them concealed. I think they’re more protected that way.’

I watched as Renee wrote something on her notepad. She seemed pleased that I wasn’t a butterfly exhibitionist, less narcissistic that way.

‘Here’s a few numbers and a sketch of a possible layout, it’s only an idea. It’s a rough plan but you seem to know what you’re doing.’ Renee folded the notes and slid them across the desk. From the look on her face I could see that our time together was over.

As I stood up to leave, an older man appeared from the back of the room. He looked at me and smiled. I wondered if I knew him.

‘Hello, I’m Kevin Potter, director of the museum. You must be Grace Fox.’

I returned the handshake.

‘I heard you were here and I just wanted to express my gratitude. On behalf of myself and everyone at the museum, we’re very grateful for your donation.’

I was embarrassed. ‘It was nothing.’

‘No, it’s been very kind.’

‘Well, Renee’s been very generous with her information.’

For a moment it looked like Kevin Potter was about to leap over the desk and kiss me. He inched closer and closer. I glanced at Renee, who was still seated at her desk. There was a confused look on her face, a mixture of embarrassment and shock.

I shook Renee’s hand and thanked her

‘Anytime. Please let me know if you’d like some more assistance.’

‘I’ll think I’ll be fine.’

Renee stood up and nervously adjusted the collar on her lab coat. I saw she had something shining around her neck. I strained to get a better look. A tiny glass bead sat in the hollow in her throat. It looked like a miniscule butterfly. Like one I had seen before, but I couldn’t quite place it. The world was full of butterfly trinkets and mementos. They were everywhere. Most of them forgettable.

It was raining hard as I left the museum and I bolted to my car. Instead of racing back to the office, I sat watching horizontal rain pelt the windscreen. I looked across the road and stared at the austere concrete exterior of the museum. It still smelt of dust, and the walls and halls were still the colour of cold porridge. But I was different. I didn't dart out of the museum a screaming child, desperate that the building was numb with dead things.

I flicked open my pad and read my notes. Detailing the room wouldn't be difficult. Probably more expensive, but that was irrelevant. If I acted quickly, I could get it finished in the next fortnight. I decided to make it the deadline. According to Renee, with a few minor design adjustments and some wise spending, I would have the finest private museum in the country, probably the world. Exactly the way I wanted it.

~

At four o'clock, I took the lift to the forty-third floor and went straight to my desk; I urgently wanted to send another email to Henry. I wanted to tell him I would have the best butterfly room in the world. A place where I could groom my little family. A place where one day we might be together. There would be a special place for him; a grand desk; a beautiful chair; the perfect setting equipment; anything he wanted. He would think me mad. It was an indulgent thought, relationships were beyond my comprehension. My butterflies were my lovers. Silent, submissive friends. The outcome of the meeting and the donation induced a euphoria I was unaccustomed to. What would I say? I logged on and started typing.

Dear Henry,

Thank you for introducing me to Renee.

We had a very exciting conversation about my new room, she had some interesting points. I was wondering if you could review the plans for me, a second opinion would be helpful.

I stopped typing and read the email. It meant nothing. Bland. Detached. Routine. Is that what I'd become? Surely I could write something more spontaneous? Perhaps I was afraid that if I was too suggestive, something might happen. Something I couldn't control. It was pathetic. I deleted the message and started again.

I thanked him for the introduction to Renee Clifford. Then, I asked him when, and if, he was coming to Australia? *I said it would be fun.* I told him he was more than welcome to visit my property and I would love to show him my collection. I finished the email with a fond farewell and, *looking forward to seeing you soon.*

I read over my email. If nothing else, it was forward. *Fun*, a word I rarely used. It was not too late to try. I'd never sent anything so impudent, but nor had I ever been so curious. Before I had a second to change my mind, I pressed send. In a funny way, I saw my email float through the sky and land like a wafting butterfly on exactly the right flower.

On the way home I thought about my motivations. An uncomfortable realisation crept over me, something I didn't want to face. I was divided by my passions. My love for my butterflies, my ambitions for Honour Bay and a curiosity for Henry. A dangerous combination. I thought about my interest in Henry. How he reminded me of a butterfly.

A large, ample-winged specimen. Flitting. Floating. Flirting. Swarming. Sailing. Silken. Sucking moisture from the ground. A sweep of the net. The thrill of the chase. A rare species. Caught?

When I got home I went directly to my study to admire the new Kaiser-I-Hind (*Teinopalpus Imperialis*). Not only was it a mental experience, but also it engulfed me physically. My heart raced at a fantastic speed, my feet tingled, and I could sense the slow collection of sweat pool in the crevice of my back.

I took the butterfly out of its careful package and stood staring at it for a while. I laid it on my setting mat and was careful not to touch it. I flipped it over with the forceps and studiously looked at its underside.

The Kaiser had not died recently. A slow chemical death, trapped in a bottle, breathless in a can. I preferred them fresh, almost living. It was more real that way. I would have to tell Henry, new specimens only. I was surprised he had bothered to send it.

On closer inspection, the exoskeleton was dry and stiff and needed to be treated. I took a syringe out of my instrument case and filled it with ammonia, gradually releasing its contents into the thorax of the butterfly's body. All the time I was touching the insect, I was thinking about Henry. *Delicate hands and fine fingers.*

I pricked the joints of the wings with a minuscule pin tip. Cautious not to break them. I stretched its wings out, like I was unwrapping a baby, careful not to harm my Kaiser. It was a slow, careful process, exclusive to those who were patient.

As I separated the butterfly wings and laid them flat, I went through an elaborate scene in which I imagined myself seducing Henry. He would be lying naked on the specimen table; a long white peninsula bench in the middle of my new butterfly room. I would tie his hands and feet to the four corners of the marble bench. Without saying a word, I would blindfold him and my fingers would tiptoe all over his muscular body, gently teasing his erogenous zones. Beside me, I would have a special tray, not unlike a butterfly stretching kit. It would contain feathers, oils, and different wooden implements perfect for applying a variety of pressures. Then, I would lean over him and slowly lick every crevice, savouring the saltiness of his skin. He would squirm and beg. I would tickle and lick. When he started pleading, and I felt I he couldn't tolerate the titillation for another second, I would climb on top and fuck him. Just thinking of the scene made my head rush. I felt powerless to stop the fantasy. In some ways it would be like stretching a butterfly. The same precision. The same attention to detail. Our bodies would swim with pleasure.

I knew the fantasies were derailing my concentration and I had to focus on Honour Bay. I spent the greater part of my life being obsessed with

my work, especially in developing this project. I couldn't hijack the development now. A butterfly man wasn't worth it.

Chapter 8

S is for Scale

Butterflies wings are made up of tiny overlapping rows of scales, similar to the shingles on a roof. The butterflies extraordinary colour can come from the pigment in the individual scale; the physical structure of the scale causing light to scatter or diffract; or from the effect of the overlapping scales, or from a combination of all three.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

His response had been immediate. *See you in three days.* I had to cancel. How could I show him my life and disguise who I really was? I sat down at my desk and reread the email. Twice. The email was flirtatious. It had made me smile. *What could be nicer than luring tender ones with you?* I was surprised at his answer, it seemed poetic. *Looking forward to a journey in paradise.* What did he expect? Honour Bay was a tropical North Queensland Rainforest. Damp, tangled, humid. Has he never seen an Australian butterfly? *Catching shimmering blue satin and black magic.* I wondered.

I checked the next week's work calendar. With a minor amount of rescheduling, I would be able to meet Henry in Honour Bay and finish the butterfly studio whilst we were away.

There was a loud rap as Tony pushed the door open. I jumped. Every time I saw him I thought about Henry. I thought about my guilt. I saw the birds dying. We'd been avoiding each other.

He strode into my office, taking extra long steps to walk from one side of the room to the other. Something made me think of a shiny tin soldier. His face was smiling and red. Adjectives and expletives littered the room like confetti at a church wedding.

'I have the *ultimate sales tool.*'

I didn't say anything. I looked around the room. My walls were lined with posters of previous advertising campaigns. Big, glossy professional shots. Glittering city views. Dazzling harbour vistas. *All minutes to the beach and cafés. Walking distance to everything. Absolute lifestyle.*

I wondered if Tony had more.

'How are you?' I asked. I was still shocked that he had proceeded without my formal sign-off. I gaped as he threw a pile of cling-wrapped newsletters onto my desk.

'I'm fantastic,' he said. 'Here it is. Seventy thousand copies to be distributed to every corner store, newsagent, petrol station and real estate agent between Honour Bay and the NT.'

Tony threw his arms in the air and walked around the side of the table to stand beside me. I picked up a newsletter and read the masthead. *Honour Living* was printed across the top in a swirling colourful typeface. It looked like any home interior magazine that filled the stands of every city newsagent. The cover was adorned with two dolphins hurtling through the air, with *Escape* emblazoned across their bodies. I wondered if the dolphins were Honour Bay locals or if they were anonymous library images. Probably the latter.

'So, what do you think? Not bad for three weeks' work. We've interviewed every business within a hundred kilometres of the site. By the time we finished, we had them eating out of our hands, couldn't put a foot wrong.'

'I'm sure you did.'

'Come on, Grace, we've worked hard. Can't you show a bit more enthusiasm?' Tony slapped the pile of newsletters again, 'Say something nice. There's a profile on every business within the region. Everything from *Mac's Scuba Tours* to *BB's* banana plantation, even that freaky couple who run that *Fantasia* butterfly farm.'

'I'd like to read it first. I've never even seen a proof. How can I be *in love* with something I haven't even seen?'

‘Grace, come on. We’ve got it all wrapped up. We’re going to hit our target, no worries, 60% presales before one earth-mover hits the site.’

‘I’m serious Tony, you’re giving me a headache.’

‘Okay, have it your way. I’ll be back as soon as you’ve read *Honour Living*.’

I was reminded of an eel as Tony slid out of the room. In his usual confident fashion, he blew me a kiss as he walked out the door. Sometimes I couldn’t make up my mind how I felt about him. Without having any siblings, I imagined the relationship was something close to the banter of a brother and sister. And as for his newsletter concept, I wasn’t sure if it was a brilliant piece of marketing collateral to grease up the locals, or if it was a gratuitous real estate ad. Probably both.

~

Without thinking any more about Tony, I got down to the business of work. Every day I checked the quality of the ads we bought in the local broadsheets. It had become habit to systematically check every ad, something I’d employed a proofreader for, but a task I perversely enjoyed. After examining the Real Estate section I leafed to the classifieds. I was surprised to read the following column:

Collector’s Butterfly Auction

The stars of this 30-year-old collection include a hypolimnas anomala albula, one of two known males collected by the CSIRO, and five Hercules moths, the world’s largest species. Also pinned and displayed are plenty of glamorous Papillos, Cairns, Iron Range and Cape York Butterflies. A total of 1,950 specimens and 270 species from Australia, Japan, Malaysia and Indonesia. Auction Saturday from 11 am; viewing Monday – Friday, 9 am – 5 pm City.

I laughed, thrilled. A real butterfly auction. I checked my diary, and paged Eve. *Did I have anything urgent to attend to?* Eve said *everything was taken care of, I was free to leave the building.*

An hour later I pulled up outside Pawson Morton Auction House. I marvelled at what I was about to see. Perhaps, I would find a gift for Henry? I gathered my notebook, digital camera and marched to the front of the building. I greeted the men and went inside. From the doorway of the main viewing area I scanned the large heritage space. It was stuffy with other people's secrets. My eyes darted all over the Chinese furniture and bric-a-brac; I couldn't see an insect or animal, let alone a butterfly.

I pulled the newspaper out of my bag and checked the viewing details – right time, right place. The room was a monument to stuff, packed with such an assortment of disparate items, I wondered if it were some kind of joke. Puzzled, I strolled from one end of the room to the other, looking at everything from an alcoholic's collection of turn-of-the-century corkscrews to Italian Fornasetti plates. Convinced it was starting to look like a terrible kind of newsprint typo I decided I needed help.

I approached a woman watching the tribal jewellery. 'Excuse me, isn't there a butterfly viewing today?'

'Over there,' she pointed.

My eyes followed the woman's finger to the far corner of the room. If anything, the brown wooden cabinet she pointed to looked like a chest of drawers belonging in a beaten motel on a highway. It couldn't be the resting place of a rare butterfly collection. Feeling stupid, I went over to a small group looking at the butterflies inside the drawers. I nodded to the couple pulling out the drawers.

'Are you a collector?' I asked the man who was wearing a navy-blue tracksuit and dirty trainers.

'Kind of. I like to draw insects.'

I asked the woman who was also scrutinising the collection the same question. 'No, I make gift cards out of them.'

For a moment, I thought I might drown in an awkward silence. To continue the conversation was futile if not depressing, so I concentrated on inspecting the butterflies and taking notes. One by one, the small group drifted away, leaving me in peace to study the precious collection. They were arranged in families beginning with the large Papilios and the dramatic Birdwing sub-species. Their colours were pretty, if not a little faded, but nothing like the psychedelic brilliance I'd envisioned in my mind. In my imagination (and in the classifieds), the butterflies were brilliant participants in an insect mardi gras.

Halfway through rolling out the drawers, I had the sense that someone was watching me. I stood up and scanned the interior of the room. I didn't notice anything unusual. I went back to the inspection of my butterflies and started studying each drawer. On the second drawer I gasped. I got down on my knees and scrutinised an odd-looking butterfly. Surely not. I checked the room again and decided to take the chance. I rolled the drawer out as far as it would go and slid the glass back. With great care I picked up a pin that was piercing the thorax of a perfect Hercules moth. I wasn't certain, but it looked like the moth had been restored with some kind of artificial colour. Before someone noticed what I was doing, I returned the butterfly to its space.

Three compartments later and I was convinced. Every second specimen had been retouched or tinted. Most of the restoration was invisible to the untrained eye, but I knew my butterflies. In many cases, the artist had used the wrong colour combinations or been too heavy-handed. Most people wouldn't notice.

According to my watch, it was ten minutes to closing. I looked around to find the most officious person in the room. In a lot not too far away an older man was locking the doors of a large Victorian cabinet. I approached him. 'I'd like to report the butterflies in lot 366.'

The man twisted his neck as if it were stiff. 'Yes?'

I continued, 'Well, I don't think they're bona fide. They're fakes.'

'Excuse me?'

I shifted on the spot. 'I would say that most of the collection's been touched up. I'm a collector. I just thought someone should know before they go under the hammer.'

The man did his best to laugh it off. 'I'm not sure I know what you're talking about.'

'It's simple, someone's tinted the butterflies. I'll show you.'

'I'm sorry, Madame, but we're about to close for the day. I'll report your news to the auctioneer and we'll investigate in the morning.'

'I was wondering if you knew who owns them?'

'I'm not privy to that kind of information and besides, all vendor details are kept confidential. I'm aware that those butterflies are part of a charity allotment. Any monies raised from their sale are being donated to a worthwhile environmental cause. Anything else, I can't tell you.'

I hated mendacity. I was not leaving the auction room until someone told me who the vendor was. I couldn't bare the idea of a naïve butterfly collector purchasing a doctored collection. I decided to pursue the matter.

'Could you tell me who's in charge here, please?'

'I'm sorry Madame, but we're closed. You can call in the morning and speak to Clive Howard. He's your man.'

I stared in disbelief at the man who was speaking.

'But the auction's Saturday. It'll be too late.'

'Not my problem.'

'I can't believe you're employed here.' Without waiting for him to reply I turned on my heel and departed Pawson Morton.

First thing the next morning, I gave Eve a business card. 'Call Pawson Morton for me and find out who owns lot 366?'

'What is it? *A painting? A new rug? A series of tribal totems?*'

'Nothing like that, thanks, Eve. It's a collection of dead butterflies. About two hundred of them. I saw them last night and they're all touched up. I just want to find out from the director who owns them and if he won't tell me, I'm reporting him for misleading information.'

'You're crazy, you know that? You're even more fanatical than I thought you were.'

'Eve, I'll tell you something. My grandmother always told me that the world is empty of truth and full of fantasy. I'm not sure I disagree with her.'

'Whatever you say, Grace, I'll call first thing this afternoon.'

'No. Do it now. I'm sure they go to auction in the morning.'

'Now?'

'Yes, now.'

I returned to the pile of paper work on my desk. The mountain of *things to do* was depressing, especially when all I wanted to do was stretch butterflies. I had a meeting scheduled with Tony later that afternoon to discuss the distribution of the newsletter. A property journalist had already seen a sample and wanted to have an interview with me about its contents. I flicked through its pages and smiled. Among the hundreds of accommodation options in Queensland, I knew I would build the best.

The spread in the brochure featured life-like computer renders of development, each picture showed off the project to its full potential; acres of landscaped rainforest; panoramic views over the glittering ocean; a lake-sized kidney-shaped pool; three tennis courts and plenty of formal and informal recreation areas. *Fun for the whole family*, the tagline boasted. *Honour Living* looked good.

I examined the newsletter and saw that it had been divided into three distinct sections: the first five pages were devoted to the development's features; two further pages highlighted the natural beauty of the surrounding land, and the final three pages included a story on the locals who loved Honour Bay.

It was while I was scanning this section that I started to feel sick. Tony, or someone he'd hired, had gathered together an incongruous group of *so-called* locals. I scanned the faces to see if I recognised anyone noteworthy, someone who lived in the township or the surrounding forest or beachside. To my best knowledge, not one of the featured interviewees lived within one hundred kilometres of the site. The only familiar face was Dylan

Brown, a wide goofy grin stretched tight across his sun-blasted face. I wondered how much Tony had paid him. I read on and was appalled to discover that Dylan was, *'thrilled with the location of the villas, and believed that Honour Bay was designed to suit the most discerning purchasers.'* It was a line I'd heard Tony regurgitate year after year. Not only that, but Dylan went on to say: *'Honour Bay is the finest coastal address on the eastern seaboard.'* I felt dizzy to my bones.

I closed the newsletter and flipped it over to see what was on the back cover. A huge surge of blood rushed to my head. Prickles ran up the nape of my neck. I wanted to run to the toilet. The strapline read: *My most memorable journey*; in a break-out box to the left of the title was a quote about Honour Bay, with my name underneath it. But worst of all was the large photograph, taken ten years ago, of me in my swimsuit holding a fish on Honour Bay beach. I wanted to vomit.

Suddenly, unable to look at it for another second longer, I picked up my phone and paged Tony. I wondered how long it would take him to get to my office. I told my secretary it was a *matter of urgency*. Within seconds, Tony was swinging through my door. 'Don't ya love it?'

I shoved a pile of newsletters across the table. 'I'm assuming you're talking about these.'

I watched Tony's face crumple. 'What's wrong? Are the display apartment details incorrect?'

'I wish.'

'From the look on your face, Grace, it looked like someone died.'

'Tony, the newsletter is an aberration.'

'You're joking? You're just jealous, that's all. You wished you'd thought of it.'

I sighed with disgust. 'Tony, I object to anything that screams: *Meet the people that make Honour Bay tick*. There's one bloody local on this page.' I stabbed the head of Dylan Brown. 'And the local you're profiling is a two-faced fool. That's what's wrong. And, *worst of all*—'

'Grace, think about the target market. Most of them won't know one local from the next.'

'The BACK PAGE? What the hell were you thinking?'

'Grace, STOP. Listen to me. What's happening to you? It's marketing. People want to see the face behind the product. It gives them faith.'

I sat down in my chair. I had always given my staff responsibility and Tony was no exception. But, an old photograph of me in a bikini was too much. I wanted to cry.

'Come on, it's a great shot. It took us a week to find it. Everyone loved it.'

'That's not the point, Tony. I like my privacy. But, more than that, if we're bullshitting about the local community, what else are we bullshitting about? Everyone from Brisbane to Cairns will know that we haven't got a testimonial from one authentic source. If we can't get a local to endorse the project, it'll look desperate. What will the real locals think?'

I could see Tony digesting the dilemma. I could see the thought hadn't even occurred to him. As far as he was concerned, *Honour Living* was perfect.

I pulled at the hair on either side of my head. 'What have you done to us?'

Tony stood up to his full height and shook his hands in the air. 'More like, what've you done to me? Where the hell have you been? Every time I try to talk to you, you're in fucking cuckoo land. Have you checked the financials on the property? Have you seen the interest we're paying? We're haemorrhaging cash, while you're in butterfly la-la land.'

'My private life has nothing to do this.'

'Come on, Grace. Everyone knows. You're surfing the net half the day trying to buy fucking insects. It's a joke.'

'Bullshit, Tony. *Noelle Peters, Graham Parks, Candy Spirit*, they're the joke? I've owned that piece of property for fourteen years; none of those people live anywhere near the borough of Honour Bay.'

'I thought you wanted to sell this place.'

'Of course I do. But not like this. Just tell me, we haven't sent any out? Have we?'

'Ten thousand went yesterday, they're a supplement in the local Saturday paper.'

There was along pause while I fingered a pile of newsletters. 'Fine, then. Any complaints and you're handling them.'

Tony came closer and leaned over my desk. His head hung inches from mine and I thought he was going to kiss me. 'Grace,' he whispered. 'Stop stressing. Just so you know, they won't catch us. Dylan Brown collected the dead bodies of the birds last night. It's all fixed.'

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

'Gone. Up in smoke. No one will ever know.'

Without saying another word, Tony stood up and left my office.

~

Ten minutes later, the door knocked and Eve walked in. I didn't want to talk about Honour Bay or butterfly breeders. Tony's news had taken me by so much surprise, I couldn't speak.

'I've called the auction rooms. It took some sweet-talking, but the owner of the butterfly collection is an off-shore company called *Vladimir Pty Ltd*.'

'Christ. Did you tell them about the butterflies?'

'A little. The woman I spoke to was clueless. All she said was that the butterflies had come from an international source and the proceeds were being donated to a charity. The owner wasn't interested in receiving any profits.'

'Do a search on *Vladimir Pty Ltd*. Google them or something. I'll contact them and report them.'

'I've already googled them. *Vladimir Pty Ltd* is owned by a Dr Harold Stark. He's a leading American scientist. Seems he does some dealing. I don't think calling him, or emailing him, is going to make much difference. But one question, Grace. Why?'

I slumped back in my chair. 'I'm just trying to protect the interests of my fellow lepidopterists.'

Eve nodded. I could tell she had no idea what I talking about.

'Some time ago, I bought a few butterflies as an investment. I was conned, I'm just making sure it doesn't happen again. A friend of mine deals in butterflies and he might be interested in tracking this company down. I was going to pass on the details. That's all.'

'I see. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?'

'No. I just have to finish reviewing the newsletter before Tony gets back. What do you think of it?'

'I think it's great. If it looks anything like the rendering of the villas, we're onto a winner.'

'And the interviews?' I opened to the centrespread and pointed to a bearded farmer. 'Who the hell is this *Grant Flowerpot* creature?'

'I don't know how he did it, but Tony seems to have most of the locals on side. Funny, even that Dylan Brown.'

'Dylan? I'm just wondering how much he paid him?'

'There's a rumour he was paid fifty K.'

'You're kidding me.'

'No, I thought Tony just told you.'

'We've just had an argument. He wasn't about to tell me he's bribed a local councillor.'

'Grace, there's something else you should know. The Honour Bay Cassowary interest group has just sent us a letter, as a courtesy, of course. As far as they're concerned we're not touching the land.'

Blood flooded my face. I looked away from Eve and stared at my computer monitor.

'Could today be any worse?'

'Grace, I think you're over reacting. This is nothing, we've dealt with far worse.'

I sank back further into my chair and Eve sat down. She asked if I was okay and I said I had to go to Honour Bay. I said it was personal, hoping

she wouldn't ask any questions. I told her that I was going in the morning and asked her to manage the details of the butterfly room and book my flight to Honour Bay.

'You know, you're right, Eve. Leave it with me. I'll deal with it later.'

'Just call me, if you want any help, I'm just sorting out the distribution deal with those.' Eve pointed to the pile of newsletters. 'Don't worry, it's a winner.'

I nodded at Eve. 'Yep, it's, uh, a winner.'

I said nothing more, fearful that she would sense my guilt.

As if to alleviate my stress, I checked the auction results online. I scrolled through the hundreds of items; the nineteenth-century stoneware relief jug; a Royal Doulton display plate; a Victorian cast iron hallstand; a Chinese rosewood chest; a pair of Tibetan pillar rugs; a collection of eighteenth-century corkscrews and various items of vintage clothing. Finally, I found sale 3807, lot 366. I clicked on the *details* and read down the page. In a tiny square it said *results*. I tapped on it and read the sale price: \$22,200.

Shit. I had to find out who and what was behind *Vladimir Pty Ltd*. I couldn't wait to tell Henry.

Chapter 9

T is for Trickster.

Butterflies are the insect order's masters of mimicry and they love to play hide-and-seek. Their fragile wings can act as a camouflage to protect them from predators and enemies. They can blend and disappear into the environment or be as bright and beautiful as an angel of the garden. They are excellent at pretending to be someone or something else.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

The early morning passed in a blur. Family by family, species by species, I scrutinised them all: the long-tailed swallowtails; the sulphur and white pieridaes; the small, but coloured gossamers; the gold, silver, and copper-coloured metalmarks; the stumpy-legged brushfoots; and the old maiden skippers.

Still, I couldn't make up my mind.

What on earth constituted the perfect gift?

Everything I owned was recorded on my computer with a digital photograph, date of purchase, cost price and place of origin. And in case there was technical catastrophe, it was all backed-up on a manual card file system.

I knew I was being typically Virgo; systemised, methodical, painstaking. But, as far as I was concerned, everything important in life needed a replacement version. If not one, then two, and sometimes dozens.

I decided on the Bhutan Glory (*Bhutanitis Lidderdalei*) or Glory, as I liked to call it. It was just one of the many butterflies that I'd given a nickname. Glory was a long-winged graphically striped butterfly, which, I thought, should have been attending the races or going to a ladies' afternoon

tea party. It shared the same monochrome disposition as the zebra, penguin and Dalmatian but it also possessed a large red-and-orange hindwing with several prominent tails, like feathers in a hat. And though not rare, nor especially vibrant, it did possess one unique quality – it produced a lovely fragrance. There was nothing ostentatious about it; it was the perfect combination of appropriateness and good style. An ideal gift.

I recalled an email Henry had sent me a week ago. *A specimen cannot be common or rare, it can only be poor or perfect.* He went on to explain how various butterflies had indicative symbol markings. If you looked closely enough you could see a pattern within a pattern. He said one of the things he loved about butterflies was that they were just like a mini traveling art show. *We are all circus acts waiting to perform.*

The Map butterfly (*Araschnia levana*) looks like an aerial road map; the Owl butterfly (*Catoblepia orgetorix*) with its hind-wing eye spots, looks like its namesake; the Peacock butterfly (*Inachis io*) has iridescent and neon-mauve eyespots on all its wings. But the one I loved the most was the Pinocchio butterfly (*Papilio Pinocchio*). If you looked carefully at its vermilion wings, you could see that its hindwings were in the shape of the famous puppet's growing nose – long, thin, and tapering off at the end. Thinking of it made me smile.

I asked him to send me a Pinocchio butterfly. It arrived within days, comfortable and neatly packaged. I opened the parcel and marvelled at its quirkiness. I decided that my favourite butterflies were the ones pretending to be something else. *Nothing is what it seems.*

Different butterflies reminded me of different people. Take Tony, for instance. Like many of the butterflies in my collection, Tony had the propensity for unlimited mimicry. He told me it was one of life's essential survival skills and that he could be anything anyone wanted. I loved a butterfly's capacity for fancy dress and the way they were nature's genetic canvases, even the ugliest and hairiest of the moth species possessed a Neanderthal glamour.

I picked up the Bhutan Glory with my tweezers and studied its underside. I turned it over, looking at it from every angle. Satisfied it was flawless, I wrapped it up in tissue paper and slipped it into a folded paper envelope. I was sure he would like it. A Luna Moth was definitely worthy of a Bhutan Glory.

~

I stood in the doorway to the tarmac, staring at the runway, liking the way the warm wind blew on my face. I could smell jet fuel and the ocean in the air. I looked around, trying to find a computer monitor or anyone who could help me. I twisted the strap of my handbag and checked my watch. It was the third time in ten minutes. I walked over to the only airline counter and waited.

‘Can I help you?’ a tanned and blonde woman asked.

‘Um – yes. Flight WB423? I think it’s late.’

The woman looked at her computer monitor, striking random keys on her keyboard. ‘Due over thirty minutes ago.’ She leaned in closer to the monitor, squinting. ‘And ...good news, any sec.’

Shit, ten minutes. I smiled. I thanked the woman at the counter and went looking for a bathroom.

Standing in front of a full-length mirror I studied my reflection, smoothing down my neat, clean hair. I was dressed in my simple well-fashioned style; dark denims, white short-sleeved t-shirt, Italian sandals and a face almost devoid of make up; there was barely a tint of lipstick. Not bad for thirty-five.

Walking back towards the arrivals area, I took my wallet out of my bag and pulled out his business card. Looking at his photograph, I wondered what I was doing. We had met eleven days ago, and stayed in contact via technology, butterfly trading and fantasy. On one occasion, he’d sent me a photograph via a text message of his favourite butterfly. How had it come this far?

I had a theory that the Internet and email communication had transformed the concept of courtship. Where once upon a time, a date

required a mandatory period beside the telephone and multiple calls, now all it took was one email. One question. One request. One suggestion. *One butterfly order*. It was a practice I was becoming accustomed to.

~

The terminal doors swung open and passengers started spilling into the arrivals area. Warm air flooded the room and my head swam. I shifted from one sweaty sandal to another, feeling beads of sweat dribble down my stomach, back and neck. I wiped my hand across my forehead.

I studied every male looking for his face. Would we still recognise each other? Little by little the passengers disappeared until the airport was deserted. I looked out to the empty airstrip, half-blinded by the sun hitting the white aeroplane and smooth concrete runway. *Where was Henry?*

I made my way back to the check-in counter, my eyes staring at the ground. *Where was Henry, you stupid fool?* I reached into my bag, fumbling for a handkerchief to wipe my face, when I crashed into something. I reeled with shock. A figure, tall with strong hands, grabbed me by the shoulders. I could see by his face that he recognised me. We stared at each other, for a long moment unable to speak.

'Grace, thought you'd stood me up.' He smiled out of the side of his mouth. 'I've been looking for you for ages.'

'Henry?' I could barely breathe.

He dropped his bag, taking a step towards me. It really was him. Tall and unshaven with the same bushy eyebrows that hung like wild exclamation marks, framing his face like some funny hello. He leant down, kissing me. I wondered if I smelled something on his breath, or if it was the same strange body scent.

'You look great.'

'Thank you. I wasn't sure we'd find each other.'

'Serious? Look at the size of this place.' He said, brushing the moist hair off my forehead. 'You okay?'

'Yes, well – yes,' I stammered. 'Just hot.'

I took a step backward, uneasy on my feet.

'Are you sure you're all right?'

'Sure I am,' I said. 'Just fine.'

We stood for a moment, and Henry shook his head. I hadn't forgotten anything about him. Not the sexy smile, not the wicked look in his eyes.

'How was your flight?'

'Fine, caught up with some work and read most of the way.'

'I guess we should get your bags, then.'

Henry shrugged, picking the small backpack up off the floor, 'No need, I've got everything with me.'

It seemed impossible that everything that he needed for the week fitted into something slightly bigger than an over-stuffed shopping bag.

'Well, that's easy then. Let's go.'

~

On the way to the *Golden Sands Motel* I drove in a trance, just missing a pedestrian as I swung out of the airport car park. Henry's presence had rendered me speechless. I glanced at the passenger seat, sensing he could read my baffled expression. He was much bigger and better-looking than I'd remembered, and much more natural. The air-conditioning blew cool air on my face, but I still felt hot and sweaty. As if he sensed my discomfort he patted his bag, breaking the silence.

'I've got something for you,' he said. 'A present.'

'Funny. I've got something for you too.'

'You do?' I could feel him staring at me. 'Will I like it?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Mine's better than yours,' he said, laughing.

'I doubt it,' I said, trying my best to be light and frivolous.

'You haven't seen it yet,' he leaned forward, looking out the window, 'So, where are we?'

'We're on the beach road about thirty kilometres from the hotel.'

Why?'

He turned to me, smiling. 'Fancy a swim?'

'Now?' I glanced out the window at the coastal scrub rushing by.

‘Why not?’

I felt my body flush. I didn’t feel like exposing myself so soon. ‘Wait. The beach is nicer near the hotel.’ I looked out the window. ‘And besides, it’s difficult to stop and I’m not sure if there’s beach access around here.’

‘Whatever you say, I’ve got no idea where we are.’

I nodded, staring straight ahead. I didn’t want to catch his eye. A prickle of anxiety crawled up the back of my neck. It was difficult to stay focused on the road. I squeezed the wheel of the tinny hire car, expecting it to come off in my hands. Beside me he flipped through the radio stations, finally stopping at the monotone murmur of an *expert* discussing the symptoms of *lactating mothers and milk banks*. I brushed his hand out of the way and searched the channels, listening for something upbeat. It was difficult to fill the car’s uncomfortable silences.

We stopped at a roadside petrol station to buy drinks and some fuel. By the time we’d reached the outskirts of Honour Bay, we were discussing our common ground – butterfly trivia. With over 17,000 known Lepidoptera species, the conversation was inexhaustible, a discussion that could easily last a lifetime. For twenty minutes we talked about the Nymphalidae butterflies. A huge family of over five thousand species, characterised by their undeveloped short front legs. And though they might be challenged by the powers of fast-forward movement, their control of mimicry was unsurpassed.

I nominated my favourite specimen as the Indian Leaf Butterfly (*Kallima inachus*), one of the most remarkable mimics of all. Once flattened out and resting on a tree, one’s ability to distinguish them from a leaf was impossible. Henry sited its carnivorous cousin, the Pakistani Memory Butterfly (*Pakilima inachus*) as his Nymphalidae butterfly of choice. He said any species that could camouflage itself, while nibbling on a dead cow carcass, was surely an Academy Award winner. I felt I had to agree that it won the camouflage award of incongruity; a feather-light butterfly wishing to look like a heifer-like cow. It was unequivocally the actors of actors.

~

At four-fifteen the car swung into the palm-lined circular driveway of the *Golden Sands Motel*. Palm trees and hibiscuses lined the driveway, waving in a tropical salute as I pulled up outside a large stripy awning. The hotel was dated, the colour of steamed salmon fillets, trimmed with a border of pebble mix, not dissimilar to a breadcrumb crust.

I pushed open the door to the hotel's reception and was surprised to find it empty and arctic cool. I hit the bell on the desk and waited. Henry stood beside me inspecting racks of tourist pamphlets and holiday brochures, all of them tacky. He picked up a pamphlet, waving it in front of my face.

'Looks good,' he said, smiling.

I looked at what he was holding. *Relax and Romance. Heavenly Honeymoon Sunset Tours*. I stared at an image of a couple lying back on a catamaran holding champagne flutes. They grinned at each other idiotically.

I raised an eyebrow. 'Do you want to book?'

Henry nodded, smiling.

'It's with six other honeymooners.'

'How do you know?'

'I've been on one.'

'You've been on one?' He was astonished. 'How come?'

I nodded. 'Long story.'

I could see Henry was digesting this information. The concern in his eyes made me want to roar with laughter.

'I'm joking.'

His face relaxed into a grin. 'Good.'

Without warning, a receptionist came bouncing into the room. 'There you are. We've been waiting for you two.'

'You have?' I asked.

'Yes, Gail and Peter said we're to look after you.'

The girl handed me two keys and I handed one to Henry. It occurred to me by the look on his face that he thought we were in the same suite. He smiled, dangling his key in the air. 'Connecting rooms?'

I shook my head, embarrassed. Our rooms were on either side of the hotel.

'It's booked out.'

'Nice place', he said, looking out the door and into the landscaped gardens. 'Been here much?'

'Occasionally.'

'How about it?' asked Henry, as he pointed towards the beach. 'I hear the ocean is nicer around here.'

'My body's aching,' I said as I headed for the door. 'You go. It's less than three hundred metres away. We can meet for dinner in a couple of hours, say six-thirty.'

'Any suggestions?'

I pondered Henry's question for a moment. I was so confused I couldn't think of anything else other than lying down. I wondered if the week together was a mistake.

'Pebble Beach is five minutes away. Walk straight out of the driveway, cross the road and there's a track directly facing the Golden Sands light-box. You can't miss it.'

'Easy. I'll just grab a towel and get on down there.'

Before we left the reception office I saw Henry return to the stand holding the tourist pamphlets and brochures. He picked up half a dozen and put them in his pocket. I rolled my eyes. 'You don't need any of those. I'm your tourist guide.'

'What if you get sick of me?'

There was long pause. 'I won't.'

We left the office together and went in our different directions. I watched as Henry sauntered down the path towards his room. His hips swaggered in an easy roll. I worried about how I was going to resist him.

~

I realised that I did not want to go to the beach with Henry for fear of what may happen. I was keeping myself at a distance. I was like a Field Soloist (*Phyciodes Solo*), an unusual butterfly that patrols its territory, mating only

once and dying. Aggressively, they protect their personal space, and unlike other butterflies, they are always seen alone.

In the hotel room, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My face was flushed with anxiety and my hair stood at odds to its usual style. It wasn't very often that I felt my demeanour resembling an unhinged door. I lay down on the hotel bed and closed my eyes.

I knew it was more than the circumstances of our trip that was affecting me. It was shame. For the past week, I'd endured sleepless nights full of images of myself tramping all over my property. My moods had oscillated between relief and mortification. My grandmother had instilled in me a sense of respect for the land. The idea of using an insecticide would have been abhorrent to her. I was glad she wasn't alive to witness my behaviour.

~

I was in the bathroom washing my face when the phone rang. I answered it and heard Henry on the other end. He was excited, I wondered if a little drunk, and getting ready to go out. *Would I like a pre-dinner drink?*

'I couldn't think of anything better,' I said.

See you in ten.

On my way out of the room, I took Glory out of my bag. A gift was the perfect way to melt the ice.

I followed a path to the hotel bar and restaurant and noticed how little the *Golden Sands* had changed. There was the scent of tropical flowers and the smell of barbecue smoke in the air. Spotlights sat in the base of ferns, casting strange shadows across the path. I thought it looked like a weird fairy garden.

The poolside bar was empty and I welcomed the time alone. I went and sat at a table beside the pool and tried to catch the bartender's eye. He was busy polishing glasses. I needed a drink before Henry arrived. I raised my hand in the air and held an imaginary glass to my lips. He smiled and came over. Weren't you here a few weeks ago, he asked. I shook my head

and ordered a martini. A double. I noticed that my hands were shaking. I didn't want anyone to remember my last visit to the *Golden Sands*.

While I waited for my drink I watched the ripples on the pool's undulating surface. One liquid wrinkle chasing another. My eyes watered. I shuddered. I felt a surge of desire. What the hell was I doing with a handsome butterfly environmentalist in Honour Bay? I didn't know him. Knew very little about him. One chance encounter on an aeroplane. A dozen emails. Professional suicide. Tony's words rang in my ears. *Keep your enemies close*. Henry was so near I struggled to breathe.

Somewhere I heard a whistle. I looked up and saw him coming down the pathway. He waved at me as he came closer. He was wearing white linen pants and a loose white linen shirt. He was chewing on a piece of gum. I couldn't imagine him chasing butterflies.

'You should have come to the beach, it was magnificent. I saw some dolphins.'

'I'll come tomorrow, I promise. Sit down. Would you like a drink? I've just ordered a martini.'

Henry smiled. 'Love one.'

I nodded to the waiter behind the bar shaking a stainless steel canister. I held up two fingers.

Henry rubbed his hands together. 'So. Plans?'

'Tomorrow? There's a butterfly farm not far from here and—'

'Forget the farm. I'd like to walk, see the landscape, swim, relax. Have some fun.'

I nodded. Of course, he knew what he wanted. *Fun?* What was that?

I took the parcel out of my bag and gave it to him. 'It's something small. A welcome gift.'

'You're the host. I'm the one who's supposed to be giving you something.'

I felt sick with nerves. 'You've probably got one, but I think they're very special.'

He unwrapped the package, folding the tissue paper into squares. When he saw the butterfly he laughed. 'How did you know? I've enjoyed the best times of my life in Bhutan. It's a very sentimental choice.' He leant over the Bhutan Glory and sniffed. 'And I love its scent, it reminds me of crushed raspberries.' He shook his head as if in disbelief. 'Very unusual.'

I grinned.

'My turn.' Henry took a thin plastic package out of his top pocket and handed it to me. 'It's not as sexy as yours.'

'I'm guessing it's a ring,' I said, joking, as I opened the small palm-sized gift.

'Maybe.'

'What is it?' I said as my hand trembled.

'Wait and see.'

I opened the packet and gasped. I was too shocked to speak.

'It's not what it seems.' He leaned in closer.

'My God.'

Henry's voice was excited, his face animated. 'It's one of the world's most collectable moths, most scientists believe they're extinct.'

I ignored his information. 'I think it's the most repulsive specimen I've ever seen.' Without looking away from the moth, I added, 'It's so hairy.'

I looked at the moth I held in my hand. It did not fit my theory of a moth's Neanderthal glamour. It reminded me of a bulbous spider.

Henry looked at me in surprise. 'So, you've never seen one?'

Still shocked, I shook my head. 'Never.'

The barman came suddenly from behind me and placed our drinks in front of us. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to hold the moth for another second. I picked up my drink and sipped.

'Why did you give it to me?' I asked.

'Because it's special. Because you're one of the few people I've met who really appreciate the enigma of the butterfly.' Henry's eyes met mine. 'You understand their power.'

I took a large sip of my drink and swallowed. I glanced at the moth again. *Power?* It didn't make sense.

'You're holding a rare Peyote Moth (*Automeris Peyotus*), part of the diverse family of saturniid moths, found in Mexico South and Central America.'

'Rare? I can't imagine any collector wanting them. Look at the hooded spine at the back of its abdomen.'

'That's its secret. That minute spine is one of the world's best hallucinogens, it's so overpowering men have been incapacitated for weeks.'

'It's disgusting.'

'Not at all,' said Henry. 'It's also a painkiller, a poison and an aphrodisiac. It just depends on how much you take, and how you ingest it — people smoke it, snort it, and some even make a drink out of it. The Mexicans seem to think it's better than Viagra.'

'And you've tried it?'

'I had a tea in Mexico once, in the hills of Oaxaca. It was like I'd had an epiphany; it was an extraordinary experience.'

I screwed up my face. I wasn't amused.

'It's not as bad as you think, Grace. I took it out of my collection. It's especially for you.'

'I'm sorry, Henry, it's just not what I'd expected.'

'I guess we won't be drinking Peyote tea,' said Henry. His tone was off-hand.

I shook my head. I had no intention of ingesting a moth.

~

Hours passed, and I forgot the gruesome appearance of the Peyote Moth. In between butterfly talk, we drank three martinis and a bottle of wine, all punctuated with mouthfuls of the Golden Sands surf 'n' turf. At one point, we discussed the famous migratory habits of the Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*), agreeing that it was definitely the king of the butterfly clan. Any creature, specifically one as flimsy as a Monarch butterfly, that could fly almost 1,900

miles in a single season between Canada and Mexico deserved its well-chronicled history.

As the night wore on, Henry described his childhood. Binoculars in hand, hidden in sand dunes counting the Monarchs. He said that though they looked like miniature floating tigers in the sky, it was their bobbing and wafting, like autumn leaves in the air, that seduced him forever. Listening to him speak, I imagined myself weightless and soaring through the sky. I hadn't felt so free for years.

~

At some point after we had finished dessert, Henry put his hand on my thigh, I felt it inch its way towards my crotch. I took it away and laid it across my knee. He looked surprised. I was flooded with an intense wave of desire. I didn't know what to do.

'Grace, I like you.'

I wanted to laugh. I had wanted him to like me. But, I didn't want it. *Property developer versus butterfly environmentalist*, flashed like a Broadway neon in front of my eyes. My heart did a somersault. *Romance was out of the question.*

'Is everything all right?' He asked me.

I nodded. 'Of course, I've drunk more than normal.'

'I do, I really like you.'

'I can't.'

'But —'

'Another time.'

'But —' He reached out his hand and ran it down the length of my bare arm.

I shook my head and hair fell all over my face. 'I've had too much to drink.'

'Nonsense. You're fine.'

I shook my head again, wishing I was sober.

His hand lingered over my fingers. 'I've made an intriguing discovery tonight.'

‘Something good, I hope.’

‘I’ve discovered that you and I are the same.’

Henry smiled as though we spoke the same language. I didn’t know what to say.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘You don’t really know me.’

‘I know you well enough to like you.’

‘I’m curious, Henry. The Peyote Moth. How can a Peyote Moth have the pungency to devastate a football team?’

‘Think about it. The toxicity in some plants and animals is phenomenal, just one or two mils and you can be delirious for hours. What about entomophagy? It’s a day-to-day activity for people all over Asia and South America.’

‘Entomophagy?’

‘Sure. Insects are a cheap substitute for meat in many developing countries: Mexicans eat grasshoppers, chocolate covered ants, tortillas filled with agave worms; the Phillippinos eat everything from crickets, locusts and water beetles, all stirred fried, and Columbian love ants and termites—’

I held up my hand. ‘Stop.’

‘What about indigenous Australians, they’re famous all over the world for their bush tucker. Surely, you’ve eaten a witchy grub?’

I shook my head.

‘You’re kidding me? Marijuana?’

‘Nope.’

‘You’ve *never* been stoned?’

‘No, I haven’t. This is the most I’ve drunk for years. You?’

‘Of course,’ he said, surprised.

I felt the blood rise to my cheeks. I felt a fierce, irresistible desire to grab him by the shirt and kiss him.

‘I dare you Grace. A Peyote Moth.’

‘Mmm.’

‘I’m perfectly capable of supervising. We’ll take certain precautions.’

‘Where?’

I stared at Henry, too nervous to move, just in case a slight nod of the head indicated *yes*.

‘Here.’

‘In Honour Bay?’ I asked.

‘Look, Grace, it’s just that –

‘Yes, it’s just what?’

‘When was the last time you saw a butterfly in the wild?’

‘A few years ago.’

‘It’s decided, then. We’re going on a rainforest chase together – who knows what we’ll find. Perhaps an unidentified butterfly? It would be a crime if we didn’t.’

‘I’m not sure, Henry.’

‘Rubbish. There is nothing finer than to stand waist-deep in lush grass, swinging a net above your head. Or even better, lying on your back and seeing a Ruby-spotted Swallowtail float by your face.’

I ran my fingers through my hair and took a mouthful of my wine. I couldn’t tolerate alcohol, let alone the distasteful idea of eating a dehydrated butterfly wing. Inviting Henry Stern to Honour Bay had just revealed itself to be a momentous mistake.

Chapter 10

P is for Personality

The weather can have a profound effect on a butterfly's personality and lifestyle. Most butterflies respond to the absence of sun by a total cessation of activity. So necessary is a sunny day, that most species will avoid a shadow, preferring to take the long way around by flying up and over into sunshine.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

I dreamed about him all night. Tossing and turning, twisting myself into a knot of bed linen. I kept going over and over what had happened the night before. Or what I had possibly agreed to. *What have you got to lose?* whirled around my head like a child's spinning top. And what did I have to lose? I had never been fearful of anything in my life. Well, not until Henry. What had he done to me?

I got out of bed, showered, slipped on my swimsuit and sarong, and went to look for him. On the way to his room I saw him sitting under a banana palm, legs crossed, palms skywards, eyes closed. As I walked across the grass towards his figure, he looked up and winked.

I sat down beside him, crossing my legs. 'I've been thinking about it. I'll try the moth. But, I want to know everything about it. What's in it? How long it lasts? What's going to happen?'

'Well, for one, it's safe.' He said, closing his eyes. 'And, two, you're with me.' He kept his eyes shut and breathed deeply. 'But you can't forget, ingesting an organic substance is an unstructured experience. Anything could happen.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. You could take your clothes off, dance around the fire light, seduce me ...' Henry smiled. 'Or you could do it all.'

'Oh, come on, Henry.'

‘Or,’ he said, brightly, ‘you could howl like a wolf.’

I sat on the grass, breathing hard, and staring at him. His face was calm and Buddha-like. *Anything could happen.* I remembered the first time we’d met. I had wanted to touch him. Today was no different. I wanted to run my finger down the centre of his face, down his forehead, over his nose and lips and trace the centre line of his stomach. I wondered if he knew.

‘The point is, Grace, taking drugs is about the unexpected. It’s about adventure. Surprises. Experiments. It’s about having some fun. If you knew what was going to happen, you probably wouldn’t do it.’

‘Please, Henry –’

‘I’m interested, Grace.’ Henry shifted and re-crossed his legs. His eyes were still shut. ‘When you do something, do you always know the outcome?’

I thought about his question. ‘Yes. I guess, I do.’

He shook his head. He turned to face me and opened his eyes. He stared at me for what seemed like forever. ‘That’s your problem.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘Good. Anything else?’

‘One more thing. Is it legal?’

‘What do you think?’

I shook my head.

‘Is that a problem for you?’

‘Should it be?’

‘Are you a law-abiding citizen?’

‘Yes.’

Henry laughed. ‘Let’s change that.’

He took a deep breath and uncrossed his legs. He leaned back into the spongy grass and looked at me.

‘To make you feel better I’m going to tell a little about our Peyote Moth. It lives in the desert of northern Mexico and Texas, it feeds on the Peyote Cactus *Lophophora williamsii* and it appears at certain times of the

year. The moth ingests the pulque, assimilates the mescaline and there you have your hallucinogen. Satisfied?’

‘No. How do you eat it?’

‘You can powder the dried wings in a pestle and mortar and smoke it, or you can chew on the dehydrated thorax. Though I think the snap of its crunching body would make you want to throw up. I think we should drink tea.’

I nodded as if I understood. ‘So you’re familiar with this process?’

‘A little. The sooner you drink the moth post-mortem, the cleaner the feeling is.’

‘Meaning?’

‘My moth has been dead for two weeks; it’s a good time to take it. Two weeks ago, if we’d smoked it, we’d be hallucinating for days. If we took it in a month, it would barely make a difference. Maybe a subtle adrenaline shift.’

‘Anything else? History? Additional pharmacology?’

‘If you want to know the moth’s parents, Grace, I have no idea if came from a good family or not.’

‘Is it safe?’

‘*Nothing’s safe.*’ He sighed. ‘Well, anything’s okay in small doses. Its main ingredient is mescaline thrown, in with about with forty-three other alkaloids like anhalonidine and lophophorodine. Its primary effect on the central nervous system is its exceptional colourful visions and mystical effects. It also has an interesting history: from its Aztec past as a medicinal; to its divine ability to ward off evil sorcerers; and its sacred power to visualise the past and future. It has properties similar to the hormone adrenaline and it also has antibiotic effects. That’s about all I can think of for the moment.’

‘So it fixes everything.’

‘Pretty much.’

‘Where will we do it?’

'Your call. I might advise somewhere peaceful. We could go for a walk, lie on the beach. You know the area better than me.'

I paused for a second. 'Okay. When?'

'This afternoon, about dusk.'

I nodded.

And just like that, I took a risk.

~

I lay beside the pool and went through a list of potential locations. Where could we drink the precious moth tea? My drug virgin status didn't give me any insight into good places to get inebriated. The beach was a nice idea, but what if I collided with someone I knew? Or worse, was tempted to swim naked? No, that was out of the question. There was the Eungella National Park, one of Queensland's most majestic forests, featuring tracks that twisted their way through rainforest and waterfall, everything from two kilometres to forty. But, what if we became confused under the influence and I had to call in a ranger?

I closed my eyes and slumped back into my sun lounge. The sun warmed my body as I listened to the cackle of tropical birds. I went through all the locations in the area. National park-by-park, beach-by-beach, walk-by-walk. Nothing seemed right. There was even the possibility of the Barton's Butterfly Sanctuary. As soon as I thought of that, I saw myself dart through the butterfly enclosure being chased by a butterfly the size of an aeroplane, swooping down and nudging me as I attempted to slide between the roots of a tropical fig.

As if it had been hiding in the recesses of my memory, I knew of the perfect place. The perfect combination of untouched rainforest and a place to find respite. There was little danger we would get lost and no one would ever find us. If we wanted to we could swim at the waterfall or the private beach. Why hadn't I thought of it in the first place?

~

Later in the afternoon, there was a knock on the door. I could hear footsteps shuffle on the doorstep. My heart raced as I went to answer it. Henry stood

outside with his hands deep in his white cotton pants, his white shirt was open to the navel and his well-worn brown leather sandals looked like they could speak. One day in Queensland and his face was already golden.

He tapped his watch. 'It's time.'

'I don't think I should do this, I'm a thirty-five-year-old businesswoman.'

'I'm a thirty-three year old lepidopterist. Is it your age or your occupation that's worrying you?'

'Everything's worrying me, Henry. And if I'm honest, you worry me.'

'ME?' Henry shifted on the spot and scratched his groin, 'You couldn't be in safer hands.'

'Maybe another time, perhaps tomorrow?'

'Fine. Let's call it off.' He turned around to leave.

'No. I'm ready,' I mumbled, 'I've been ready all afternoon. Do we need anything?'

'I've got all our supplies.' Henry lifted up a shopping bag. I could see a picnic blanket poking out of the top.

'What's in there?'

'A couple of beers, water, a thermos, lantern, cigarettes, some crackers and cheese.'

'Cigarettes?'

'I don't usually smoke, but sometimes cigarettes seem like the only way to contemplate.'

'Should I bring anything else?'

'A bed.'

I pretended I didn't hear him and walked out the door, slamming it hard. Henry laughed, following closely behind me.

~

I drove along the two-lane asphalt highway, past the beach scrub and the dense green rainforest. The afternoon was warm and sunny, the sky was a Monet blue. The swell of the rainforest in the distance indicated the size of

the area. It was immense and easy to get lost. Much more difficult to be found.

I tried to relax but the sweat on my back was causing me to stick to the upholstery. My fingers were glued to the steering wheel. I didn't even trust my legs to work.

Henry cleared his throat and turned to look at me.

'Do you know, that the Peyote Moth contains some of the rarest substances in the world?'

'Really?' I tried to move my fingers. It was difficult to peel them off the steering-wheel's sticky surface.

'Uh-huh. There are some ancient religions that you used to administer the moth just prior to death. Similar to morphine.'

'Right.'

Henry took some chewing gum out of his pocket and popped a piece in his mouth. He started chewing, talking between mouthfuls.

'You know, you're very privileged. Most Australians have never heard of the Peyote Moth. Let alone have had the opportunity to try one.'

'Well. Thanks for that.'

'I'm getting the feeling that there's something wrong?'

'Fine. Everything's fine.'

He folded his fingers, then flexed them out in front of him.

'So, ah, where are we going?'

I didn't answer him.

'Grace?'

'That's my surprise.'

~

After we'd been on the road for twenty minutes, I started to relax. The windows of the car were open and I breathed deeply. The smell of the ocean and the forest filled the car.

'Henry. I'm curious. How come I've never heard of the Peyote Moth? Or never heard of its drug-taking benefits. I mean if it's as good as you say it is. Why isn't everyone doing it?'

'Now, that's my secret.'

~

I swung the car down the unsealed road and drove over the bumpy gravel. I rolled my fingers across the top of the steering wheel, keeping in time with my beating leg. I kept driving, swerving to miss potholes, and once we reached the gate, caught glimpses of the falling-down cottage. I stopped the car and Henry jumped out. He tugged on the gate, eventually shoving it open. I saw him stumble and nearly fall. I went through the opening, stopping metres from where we had entered.

I got out, grabbing the blanket, thermos and supplies. I felt tiny droplets of perspiration roll down the sides of my face and pool in the hollow of my back. I scanned the site and saw the six figs. For the moment, they looked healthy; it would be weeks before they started to die. I looked from the trees to the partly obscured sky and down to my feet. Areas of the ground cover had been flattened, cleared in places to allow access to the cottage. A long narrow path wound its way from the gate to the house.

I stood in silence and inhaled, breathing in the smells of the dank earth. The site was deathly still. It looked wilder than I had ever remembered. There was no wind and little light. The occasional shrill of a bird. The figs and trees were poised, their branches and logs draped in moss. Thick layers of leaves and limbs created shadows, everything looked like something else. It was a place of twisted gardens.

'Where are we?' Henry whispered.

'Where do you think?'

'Your place.' He nodded, approvingly.

'And?'

'*Perfect.*'

Without saying another word, I gave Henry the bag of supplies. He strode up the dirt path to where the house stood. I followed behind.

~

I sat on the bottom step of the cottage, watching him mount the stairs. He scanned the horizon and looked down at me and smiled. Shaking his head,

he mouthed, the word *beautiful*. Was that me or the property? He walked up and down the length of the verandah looking for somewhere suitable to sit. I could see him press the palings with his foot, checking to see if any would break. In an instant, I saw myself falling through the wooden floor, screaming as I hit the ground.

Carefully, he laid out our drug picnic as though he were making a nest. It was easy to see us peeling off our clothes and having sex in the warm and moist forest.

Henry looked at me through the wooden rails. 'You okay?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, are you ready?'

I walked up the stairs, step-by-step. The blanket was laid out and I thought of the Mad Hatter's tea party. I watched as he went through the preparations with a dogged sense of purpose. He counted out and examined half a dozen mud-coloured moths, pulling their wings apart and smelling them. He placed them in the cup of the thermos and then poured boiling water over them, explaining that it was like making tea. '*The longer they steep, the stronger the brew.*' I didn't drink tea and checked my watch for safety. I would give it five minutes.

'Not long, now.' He swirled his finger into the mud-coloured water as the moths floated on the surface. 'I'll throw these out in a second and then we can drink it.' He looked into the cup's muddy depths. 'You can see the sediment sink to the bottom of the cup. Just about—'

'Why are you doing this?'

He looked at me sideways. 'Because I enjoy it. It's a full body experience. Face it, Grace, how could you really love butterflies and moths without actually trying one?'

I nodded as though I understood. Henry had a point. He rebuffed me, saying that I wasn't a real lepidopterist if I wasn't prepared to eat one.

'Ready?'

I nodded and took the cup out of his hands. I blew on its steaming surface and inhaled. Its smell was familiar, something like honeyed tea. I

raised the cup to my lips and tasted the muddy drink, gagging with disgust. The flavour was worse than I thought possible, reminding me of medicinal herbs. I sipped the gritty water, closing my eyes as I swallowed. I drank six times and handed the cup back to Henry. I smiled with relief as he ran his hand over my shoulder.

‘Give it ten to twelve minutes and we’ll know what kind of moths we have.’

Still speechless, I grinned at Henry. I felt like a teenager. I’d finally done something unpredictable, something I had no control over. The idea of it made me giddy. I watched as he wrapped his lips around the white rim of the cup, slurping on its chewy plastic. He drained the remainder of the tea and when he finished he wiped his sleeve across his mouth. The action seemed magnified. Was it really as quick as I thought?

From where we sat at the top of the stairs I could see the whole property, how it stretched out to the sea in a sprawling green mass. A map would never do its size justice; it would never convey its depth, its height, its creepiness. Nor could it speak of its manic growth. I sighed and leant back against the cottage. I slid towards Henry.

‘Are you alright?’

I looked at Henry for a long moment, wrestling with the idea of reaching out and running my hand over his face, plucking the hair on his chest. I searched his face to ask the question, again. *What was it he just said?* My head felt heavy and my jaw anaesthetised. I wondered if I could still open and shut my mouth. I ran my tongue over my lips; they felt fuzzy and fat. A wave of intense nausea inched up my throat and I swallowed over a bulk that threatened to explode from me. In slow motion, I reached for the bottle of water, drinking half it in one thirsty gulp.

In a bag next to me were the cigarettes. I pulled out the packet and shook it, smiling as one popped out. It reminded me of a rabbit poking its head out of a hole. I put the cigarette in my mouth, clasping it between my teeth. I lit it and breathed in deeply, filling my lungs with volumes of

cement-coloured smoke. In one outward breath, two streams of fast-flying clouds discharged from my nose, making me think of a chimney.

I watched in amazement as Henry stood up and went down the stairs. He sat on the first step and stared into the distance. I marvelled at his ability to stand up and walk. I wanted to follow him, but couldn't. I had a desperate urge to hold his hand.

'What are you doing?' seemed to squeak out of my mouth like some tiny forest animal.

I glanced up at the sky and saw clouds explode into fluffy white bombs of powder. They burst like huge silent fireworks. I stood up on the ends of toes, stretching for the tree tops. From the bottom of the stairs I heard Henry say the word butterfly. I saw a cloud transform into a downy white moth; it flew off into the horizon.

Between bouts of laughter and squealing, I moved down the stairs to sit beside him. It seemed to take forever to stagger the twenty paces. I grabbed his hand, breaking into rapturous laughter.

I sound like a Kookaburra on Helium gas.

That's the funniest joke in the world, he screamed loudly.

For a moment I felt myself drift between reality and the colours of the forest. I stared at a giant twisted fig. A curtain of aerial roots unravelled like tangled hair in front of me. At that moment the roots started growing, twisting their way around my ankles, winding their way around my thighs. A thousand hands meandered all over my body, inching their way up my torso. *Crawling, creeping, uncovering.* I watched as they snaked all over my stomach, as they moved their way up to my throat. My clothes melted into the ground. Henry stared at me, dumbstruck. He reached and held onto my arm. I pulled him down on top of me, feeling the roots bind us together. *Tighter, tougher twisted.* In a second, we were like corkscrewed spaghetti. In a moment, I was out of control.

As though he could read my thoughts, Henry started to wriggle. I felt him inflate his body, attempting to break free. Finally, he expanded and stood up, pointing to a branch on a tree.

I threw my hands around my neck and screamed, *'I'm suffocating.'*

Henry grabbed my arms and held me. Desperate, I awaited for the return of the familiar. Where colours are colours, and not painted pictures, where trees make sense.

Gradually, the colours began to subside. I heard Henry's voice in my ear, a gentle whisper purring down my canal. *'Come with me'*, he urged.

I felt him pull on my sleeve, drag me over to a nearby fern. A butterfly, the size of a dinner plate, beat in the heart of the plant. Its wings moved in an orgasmic pulse, keeping in time with our breathing.

'What is it?' I whispered to Henry.

He shook his head. *'I have no idea.'*

I blinked in disbelief. Did the butterfly just turn into a bird? Henry shook his head again. *'No, you're just hallucinating.'*

Relieved, someone had said it. I took Henry's hand. *'Thank God, I'm not going mad.'*

'It's a rare butterfly, I've never seen one like it. It's a Papilionidae butterfly, looks like an unusual Birdwing.'

'You've never seen one?' I asked.

Henry was silent as if trying to absorb the curious beast. Then, looking at me with his pale green eyes, he confirmed it. *'Never.'*

'Is it the Peyote?'

Henry shook his head again. *'I know every Papilionidae, I've collected and studied them all. There are twelve species. I think we've just discovered a thirteenth.'*

'I think I need to lie down.'

My vision swam. I closed my eyes. I walked up the stairs, lying on the wooden palings for a long time, half-doing until I became aware of the changing colours. Slowly, the colours ebbed, the aquamarine of the sky washing away with a monochrome watery replacement. The jungle was once again a rain forest. I tried to stay awake, to be closer to Henry for just one more minute. I could hear him treading softly, his footsteps following the

butterfly. I was sure I could hear squeals of delight. I was too tired to join him.

I heard his footsteps mount the wooden stairs. He walked over and eased himself onto the floor, muttering something under his breath about being too stoned to do anything. I nodded my head in agreement. We were coming to the dip in the roller coaster ride. After what seemed like an eternity, I laid my head in his lap, wallowing in the pleasure of being back. I could see his watch resting centimetres from my head. Two hours had passed since we'd sipped our brew.

Suddenly, his face came closer. I stared at the spidery veins weaving through his eyes like road maps. I imagined him leaning forward to kiss me. He bent forward and gripped my head in his hands, framing my face between his spread fingers.

He whispered inches from my face, 'I'm very attracted to you, Grace ...'

I couldn't move. I could barely speak. My tongue felt as thick as a raw steak. I wanted to kiss him on the mouth and I ran my tongue over my lips. My flesh felt like dry paper. I knew I was very stoned.

I shook my head and said *no* without speaking.

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He said, *why not?* without a noise. For a few seconds we stared at each other without moving. A bird screeched an ear-piercing squawk. I stopped, the forest was spying on us.

'Come on then, Grace, Let's get back to the car and get some sleep.'

I stared at him. 'Why?'

'I'm coming back tomorrow.'

'How come?'

'Because that Birdwing is one of the most unusual creatures I have ever seen. It is an incredible opportunity.'

As I followed him to the car I whispered, 'Opportunity Butterfly', under my breath.

Chapter 11

J is for Journey

Butterflies and moths are well known for their endurance and skills of flight. Some butterflies are like long distance runners while others are sprinters. Many butterflies can fly for miles and miles to their new homes. Monarch butterflies are famous for their annual migrations and are known to travel thousands of miles each year – an astonishing distance for such fragile creatures.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

It was nearly six o'clock when I spied my watch on the bedside table. I felt so anchored to the bed I couldn't move. As I pulled the sheets up, I glanced out the sliding glass door at the end of my room. Clear, sunny skies, probably humid, and sticky. My head thumped as I inched back down under the covers.

As the jumble in my brain began to clear, I was able to recall the events of the evening before. *I find you very attractive* darted around my head like a dragonfly barrelling out of control. It had all happened so fast.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the arrival of the gigantic pulsing butterfly. It seemed so big as to resemble a tropical bird, or was that the Peyote tea? It reminded me of a grand Queen Alexandra Birdwing (*Ornithoptera alexandre*) – the largest of all butterflies. At 280 mm, the Queen Alexandra Birdwing had become folklore for being felled by a gunshot. It was the Marilyn Monroe of the butterfly world, famous and beautiful living, and even more so posthumously. I would ask Henry if the Opportunity butterfly was really was that big, or if it were only the hallucinations.

When I used to camp on the property while I was at college, I would take my camera and notebook and record the different species and their flying routes. The reasons for my visits were multitude: on the one hand I had an acute desire to be alone, and on the other I was obsessed with perfecting my butterfly approach. Any authentic lepidopterist knows that there is a real difficulty and technique in stalking, caution is key to success. To get close enough to your insect without disturbing it requires a featherlight foot. At the same time as perfecting your step, you have to second-guess every movement and watch for a twig that might snap, or a root that might trip you up. You needed to learn how to glide – a sharp movement or a shadow could send your butterfly swooping into the rainforest canopy. Eventually, I learnt to move with the skill of a prima ballerina. They were the happiest days of my life.

~

I picked up the phone beside my bed and dialled Henry's room. I was surprised to discover that the phone rang out. I left a message after the recorded prompt, indicating I'd love to have breakfast or a swim. *Thanks for last night*, I whispered into the receiver. Instantly, I regretted it. I wondered where he had gone.

I got out of bed and went into the bathroom, where I washed my face and brushed my teeth. I looked at myself in the mirror: everything shimmied and wobbled. My eyes looked terrible and spider veins wove a web over the whites of my eyes. So this was what Peyotaine toxicity felt like.

Once dressed, I decided to go and find Henry. Perhaps he was meditating Buddha-like under the shade of a banana palm. I left the room and walked down the path in the direction of the dining room. Walking produced a weird, lightness in my head, and I wondered if I were still stoned.

The car park was half-full, but the hire car was nowhere to be seen. I changed my mind and walked towards the reception. I pushed through the double glass doors, and a receptionist smiled at me brightly.

'Beaut' morning.'

'Lovely,' I replied. 'I'd like to leave my room key here for the day.'

I turned to leave, then stopped. 'You haven't seen my friend this morning?'

'Some guy came into the kitchen this morning, said he was looking for a bucket and netting or something.'

I stood at the door, nodding. Curious as to whether Henry was able to get his supplies.

'Wouldn't take *no* for an answer. The chef wanted to get rid of him and handed over a food container and some other stuff.'

'Sounds like him.'

'Pretty weird, huh? Good-lookin' bloke.' She laughed. 'He's not goin' to catch much with a bucket and a net. He needs some bait.'

I did my best to shrug it off, saying it was: *typical, you know what men are like*. So that's where Henry had gone. My property. I felt mildly pissed off. Why hadn't he taken me? Perhaps he wanted to catch the biggest butterfly in the world alone. *It was a game of intricate enchantment and deception*.

All sorts of terrifying possibilities were hidden in the idea. Worried, I walked back to my room. My villas felt like sand castles.

~

For the remainder of the morning, I settled in beside the swimming pool and waited for Henry. Ten minutes became twenty minutes; an hour became two hours; two hours became three. I considered ringing Tony, but he knew me so well he'd be able to detect even the slightest panic in my voice. What would I say anyway? *Oh, by the way, I'm tripping 'round a rain forest with a butterfly environmentalist, and we've just seen a butterfly the size of a parrot living at the site*. He would be in Honour Bay in a minute, spray-gun in hand. As far as he was concerned, nothing would prevent the development of the Honour Bay villas. Especially, not an insect.

I thought about the butterfly and Henry. If he returned with such a specimen it would ruin me. In one way, I prayed he came back empty-handed, and in another I hoped he appeared with the butterfly in my

memory. I had owned the property for nearly fifteen years and had never seen anything like it. It couldn't possibility exist in such grandiosity. It had to be the drugs. I would wait till one o'clock and if he still wasn't back I'd borrow a car and drive to the property.

~

At twelve-thirty, I heard tyres crunch across the gravel driveway. I jumped up and raced around to the front of the hotel to see if it was him. Without acknowledgment, he got out of the car. He paused when he spotted me, flashing a smile. He held a finger to his lips.

He went around to the back of the car and opened the boot. He took out a rough-looking handmade net, a navy backpack and a large white kitchen bucket. He walked over to where I stood without taking his eyes off my face. I didn't budge, couldn't bare to breathe, between my legs I felt hot. He dangled the bucket just a few inches from my chest and smiled. The intensity of his gaze spooked me.

'I brought you a *real* present back,' he said, holding the bucket out to me. 'It's not *repulsive*.'

'Or hairy?' I asked, smiling.

He shook his head. 'Not hairy.'

I reached out to take the bucket. My hand trembled.

I pulled my eyes away from his face and peered into it depths. Lying in the bottom of the container was an unconscious butterfly the size of a spread-eagled finch. Its huge velvety wings resembled an acid-green Persian carpet. A flash of a blood-red underside peeked out. It was unequivocally the most incredible thing I'd ever seen. I peeled the cling-wrap back to get a closer look at its satin wings. I thought that at any moment it would disappear. Fly away and be gone forever. I leaned in closer and breathed deeply. Hoping to inhale some of its beauty. A vague scent of musk and vanilla filled my nostrils.

'What do you think?'

I shook my head in disbelief. 'So, I didn't imagine it,' I said, smiling. 'You have to tell me everything.'

Henry pointed to the backpack and tapped the bucket. 'I found more than a butterfly.'

One by one, Henry pulled out various bits of plant matter out of his bag. Every piece of broken bush or fern was chemically scorched or the colour of burnt toffee. Then he paused for a moment and raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. I shook my head, appalled. He reached into the bottom of the backpack and pulled out a broken drill bit and a small cap from a glue gun. I felt a second surge of blood flood my cheeks. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Finally, he opened the side pocket of the backpack. He extracted a parcel, roughly wrapped in newspaper, it was no bigger than a clenched fist. He lifted the paper off and I gasped. In his hand he held a tiny black Cassowary chick. *Oh my God*, I whispered.

He looked at me sadly. 'What's the story?'

'I've got no idea.'

'Come on, Grace. It's your land, why would someone be killing the undergrowth?' I felt like he slapped me. He raised the Cassowary in his hand, 'Grace, any idiot knows that these birds are protected.'

I shook my head. 'I'm rarely here. I don't know what's going on.'

'I think you do. I think you're protecting someone.'

'Henry. *Please*.' I was on the verge of tears. 'I really don't know.'

'We trust one another, don't we, Grace?'

We looked at each other for a long moment. His eyes were steady and pale green.

'Of course,' I whispered.

'Is there something you're not telling me?'

I shook my head, speechless.

'I'm reporting this to the land and environment council. Someone is poisoning the butterfly habitat and killing endangered species. It's environmental vandalism.'

'Impossible,' I said quietly.

I paused for a moment, caught completely caught off guard. In front of me, a man I hardly knew, a man I desired, held a priceless, rare

butterfly – a gorgeous vision of flight. In a small dead pile to the right of my leg, lay evidence to destroy my company and put me in jail for the next two years. I felt the colour drain from my face. What had Tony done to me?

‘Grace,’ Henry said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I think it’s a hangover and the heat.’ I said, wiping away the rivulets of sweat that were forming on my forehead. ‘I’ve been feeling ill all morning.’

He put his arm around my back and picked up the bucket and backpack off the ground. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Once we’ve reported this, you’ll be feeling much better.’

I would never feel *much better*. As long as Henry had the Opportunity Butterfly in one hand and an insecticide nozzle in his bag, I was finished. I let out a long heavy sigh and went limp under Henry’s arm. In an instant I sank to the ground.

~

When I woke up I was lying on a sun lounge, under a beach umbrella facing the glittering pool water. A cool damp cloth was wrapped around my forehead and I felt oddly relieved. What was I going to do? I had to either destroy the evidence or destroy the butterfly. Henry could not return to Sydney with an Opportunity Butterfly and a suspect nozzle. Somehow, I had to get rid of them. No evidence. No case. I could buy my way out of it.

I finally pulled my eyes away from the pool’s rippling surface. ‘So how did you do it?’ I asked him, he was sitting less than a metre away.

‘Do what?’

‘How did you catch it? It couldn’t have been easy.’

‘It wasn’t. I hunted for over five hours. That’s how I found the nozzles and things ...’

I continued to stare at the pool’s shimmering surface. I couldn’t look at him.

‘... it was a stroke of luck. Nothing in the world could’ve prepared me for seeing it. Magnificent. Like magic. That property is like a sacred place. It’s Lepidoptera Nirvana.’

I nodded my head. 'I know.'

Henry kept talking, as though in a trance. 'I couldn't sleep after we left last night. I wasn't sure if it was Peyotaine hallucinations, or if we'd seen something really unique, and when I'd sobered up, I knew it was real.'

'Why didn't you come and get me?'

'It was 4.30 in the morning, Grace. You were still pretty out of it when I carried you to bed.'

'CARRIED?'

He smiled. 'Don't worry you're a feather-weight.'

'God.'

'And besides, you know. One person is better than two.'

'Really?'

Henry ignored me and continued. 'The kitchen gave me everything I needed, none of it was perfect, but I knew what I wanted. I had the keys to the car from the night before and luckily remembered how to get there.'

I rolled my hand in the air for him to continue. I was eager to find out how he'd located the butterfly in the morning sunlight.

'Simple. I went straight back to the shack and waited. I took some banana skins for it to eat, dampened them and drizzled them with water. By seven o'clock, the butterfly was puddling. Within moments, I had totally lost track of time; it looked like an enormous scrap of flying paisley.'

I tried to imagine Henry moving all over the undergrowth, shorts and t-shirt, net-in-hand.

He flushed. 'It's been years since I've experienced such an adrenaline rush.'

He spoke of his catch with sensual delight. I adored my butterflies, and sometimes felt sick with appreciation, but I wasn't sure I was capable of such emotion.

'Tell me more,' I urged.

'I followed it for hours, not wanting to catch it straight away. I felt cruel, depriving it of its freedom. As it floated it omitted the sweetest odour, difficult to define.' Henry stopped and smiled before he continued. 'This is

the ambition of every naturalist.' Henry waved his hands to emphasise his point, 'Grace, it was magical.'

'So, what are you going to do with it?'

Henry looked perplexed. 'Isn't it obvious?'

'No.'

'Give it to you of course. It's yours.'

'ME?'

'It's your land, Grace.'

'You can't just give it to me.'

'Of course I can, we'll record it as the Opportunity Butterfly. I'm sure it's unlisted and I might return to do some research.'

~

For the following hour, I listened as Henry went over the bliss of catching the Opportunity Butterfly. It was like a male repeating the finest moments of a football match: the tackle; the kick; the goal; a victory. I listened to his fluent and graceful language as he described every silent movement about his subject. He talked about the butterflies' different scents; their magic masks of mimicry, and about their curious ability to fly like the most graceful dancers. In his opinion some butterflies swooped, some bobbed, some floated and many just plunged through the air like a missile plane. By the end of the conversation, I looked at Henry as if for the first time.

'Wow,' I said when he finally finished.

'I know,' he added.

~

With a sinking feeling in my chest, I got up to go to my room. I ran my hands through my hair and rubbed my face. Inside, I wobbled. I knew what I had to do.

'What is it?' Henry said.

'I don't know. I still feel dizzy.'

'Something I can do?'

I shook my head. 'I'll have a shower, pack my things and meet you in an hour.'

'You're the boss.'

I walked back along the pebbled path to my room and noticed heavy rain clouds moving in. I was leaving my tropical paradise on a warm stormy afternoon, one of the best, and possibly worst days, I could remember. I opened my door and surveyed the surrounds. The bathroom was clean, dated, painted peach, with tiny beige flowers printed on the wall and floor tiles. The living-cum-bedroom was similar. The bedspread and valance were an 80s geometric print, correlating with the curtains and carpet. It was nothing like my vision for my state-of-the-art eco villas. I knew I would do it better.

I got into the shower, soaping myself vigorously, smothering my head in shampoo. I tried to scrub off my lies, attempted to wash away my dishonesty. I felt tainted and confused. The spray and rush of the shower were so intense I wanted it to drag me down the plughole. I wanted my dilemma to go down in one long croak of water.

When I'd finished, I got dressed and sat down on the bed and called Tony. He answered promptly.

'Grace, here.'

'Gracie, how you doin'?'

'Fuck you, Tony.'

'Grace. Hold it, what's going on?'

'I'll tell you what's going on.' I took a deep breath. 'I have seen a nozzle, parts of a glue gun and a bag full of insecticide-scorched plants, all from HONOUR BAY!'

'OH FUCK, Grace, you're joking.'

'What the hell have you done?' There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. 'TONY, are you listening to me?'

'You have to meet these guys on their own turf, pretend they're part of the action.'

'It had to be *fucking* Dylan Brown? What were you thinking?'

'Don't panic, Grace. It's —'

'Did Dylan go back there and finish the job off?'

'Don't panic, Grace, he's on our side.'

'*Don't panic? Don't panic?* What are you talking about? The person who found them is reporting them. Their words to me were, *environmental vandalism.*'

'Shit.'

For the following five minutes I screamed at Tony. By the time I'd finished, it was close to five o'clock. I picked up the phone again and rang Henry.

'Ready?'

'Sure am.'

'See you in five.'

I put my swimsuit and sarong in my case and zipped it closed. I walked out of the room and slammed the door behind me. Outside, I knocked on Henry's door and waited for him to answer. I could hear him humming and moving things around the room.

I knocked on the door again, 'Come on Henry, we'll be late.'

As though he was standing behind it, he opened the door instantly. I felt my heart leap into my throat, just standing there looking at him.

'Well,' he said as he came through the door, 'it looks like it's over.'

I glanced at my watch, didn't reply to his statement. We had an hour to get to the airport.

'Time to go,' I said.

'Yes,' Henry said, patting the backpack on his shoulder. 'And time to do something about this.'

'Definitely,' I said.

I left Henry's room and looked at the pool, tiny raindrops dappled the water. The air was so thick I felt I could move it. I stood for a second staring at the raindrops, watching as the gentle dappling increased. Soon the raindrops were stabbing the pool. *Shit.* I hated driving in a downpour. I could hear Henry's footsteps following me, trying to catch up. I didn't dare turn around. I couldn't risk him reading my face.

I clutched on to my handbag and car keys and headed for the car park. Quickly, I walked past the motel rooms, attempting to protect my face from the sideways rain. Henry's voice got closer, he was laughing about not needing a shower. As we reached the car, he raised his voice, pointing towards the sky.

'You were talking about clouds last night.'

'I can sort of remember.'

'You described them.'

'How?' I could barely recall.

'First you said they were bombs of icing sugar, then they reminded you of an old lady's whipped-up hair style and then you wanted to eat them. You stood up, reaching for the stars, saying you could see floating ships of cotton candy.'

I thought of the big, fluffy, nebulous clouds. I wanted to catch one and drift away.

'So you enjoyed yourself?'

'I guess so,' I said.

'Tell me the rest later.'

The car was parked at the rear of the car park. Our footsteps crunched across the gravel and I worried about how I was going to carry out my plan. Henry carried my suitcase to the boot, I clicked it open, placing my case inside. The rain got heavier and puddles filled pot-holes. I unlocked my door and threw my handbag on to the seat. I hurried around to Henry's side and opened his door for him. 'Jump in. It's pouring.'

As he got into the passenger seat I grabbed his backpack. 'There's more room in the boot.'

I ran around to the back of the car, slamming the boot and returning to the driver's seat.

'Let's go, then.'

'Sydney, here I come.'

I put my hands on the steering wheel, holding it tightly, and reversed out of the car park. I flicked the windscreen wipers on and watched as they

slid across the window. *In a minute everything would be wiped out.* I drove out of the rear exit of the motel and in doing so, glanced out my rear-vision mirror. Lying in a puddle, in a splash of dirty rain, was the navy-blue backpack containing the poisoned plants, drill and nozzle. It would be hours before anyone discovered it, and when they did, Henry and I would be halfway to Sydney.

Chapter 12

K is for Kiss

A butterfly kiss is an action whereby a person lightly brushes another's cheek with one's flickering eyelashes.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

I sat in the rental car at the car park, watching the deluge and wondering how we were going to get from the car to the reservations desk. I flicked the wipers off, watching as the rain pummelled the windscreen. It streamed down the glass in rivulets, running off in different directions, finding its own course. I couldn't remember when the rain had been quite so heavy.

My heart was thumping so fast I thought it would burst like a butterfly breaking free from a chrysalis. I glanced at Henry sitting beside me, blissfully unaware of what was about to unfold. He looked at me and smiled, raising his eyebrows in an expectant arch. 'Well, what are we waiting for? We go now, or we go in ten minutes? We'll still get drowned.'

I bit my lip.

'It's only water.' He ran his hand down my arm. 'I tell you what. I'll get our gear out of the boot and you make a run for it.'

I nodded again. Speechless, unsure of what to do.

He elbowed me, 'Come on,' he said, 'let's go.'

I yanked on the boot lever and watched as Henry ran around to the back of the car. In the rear-vision mirror, I could see his eyes search the inside of the boot.

Suddenly, and with a fury that scared me, he thumped his fist on the rear of the car. 'SHIT!'

I sank back into my seat, my stomach churning. He slammed the boot shut and stalked around to my side of the car. He was oblivious of the rain

streaming down the sides of his face. His hair looked like black seaweed. His eyes bulged like a rainforest frog. I wound the window down, breathing hard, staring at him. His face was a contorted mass of anger.

He shook his head. 'How the fuck —'

'What's happened?' I stammered.

Henry's face loomed inches from mine. 'What do you fucking think? The backpack's not in the car.'

I held onto the steering wheel, trying to steady my shaking. 'Are you sure?'

'Have a look for yourself.'

I tried to figure out what I was going to say. How I was going to react. The pounding in my heart was such that I thought I was going to collapse. Everything would be okay if I could convincingly affect a shocked response.

I flicked the boot switch again and hurried around to the back. 'I don't know.' I shook my head, 'I can't explain. I must've left it in the car park when we were leaving. It must have been the rain.'

'*The rain?* How in the hell does the rain have something to do with it?'

My reaction was pathetic. 'I was getting wet.'

'We're going back.'

I looked at my watch. 'We can't Henry, our flight leaves in twenty minutes.'

'*Un-fucking-believable.*'

'It's okay. I can ring the motel as soon as we get inside. They'll send it to Sydney.'

Henry leaned forward and grabbed what was left in the back of the car. He walked off without speaking or turning around. I stood in the rain, watching him stride towards the automatic doors. I wondered what he would do when he got inside. In my handbag, I had our plane tickets.

I closed the boot and locked the car. I walked towards the airport, not bothering to run, I was soaked to my bones.

~

Inside the departure area, Henry sat without moving, staring ahead at a tourist poster. A couple galloped along a beach, holding hands, grins from ear to ear. A government logo was stamped across the bottom of the picture, and a tagline screamed: *Fun in the Sun*. At that moment, nothing felt like *fun*.

He looked up at me and smiled. He pulled a beach towel tighter around his shoulders.

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s okay.’ I said, sitting down. I felt wet through.

‘No, really. It was uncool.’

‘Stuff happens.’ I stared ahead. ‘It was stupid of me. I was more worried about getting my hair wet than the pack. I must have left it on the ground and driven off.’

‘I’m sure if you call the hotel, they’ll have it.’

I nodded. ‘Well, at least we didn’t leave the butterfly behind.’ I stroked my bag. ‘She’s in here.’

‘Will you do me a favour?’

‘Sure.’

‘I’d like you to call the *Golden Sands*. It’d make me feel better if I knew they were sending it.’

‘Of course.’

I pulled my mobile phone out of my bag and scrolled through the address book. I hit the green phone icon. Henry looked at me, smiling.

‘Hello, it’s Grace Fox speaking. I checked out a couple of hours ago and I think I left a small blue backpack in the car park.’ I paused and smiled at Henry. ‘Oh, you’ve got it. Fantastic. Could you send it to my office address? Thanks. Uh huh. Via a courier.’ I nodded. ‘Yep, that’s the one. Cheers.’

I turned off the phone and returned it to the side pocket in my bag.

‘Sounds like good news.’

‘It should arrive tomorrow – overnight courier.’

I stood up and looked around, people were preparing to leave. 'We depart in five minutes. We should get out of these wet clothes.'

Henry winked at me. 'And, what? Into something more comfortable?'

I shook my head. 'I'll be back here in a minute.'

I walked off in the direction of the bathroom. I swallowed. My eyelid quivered and twitched. I placed a finger on it to steady it. Is this what I had become? I thought about my phone call to the *Golden Sands*. It was an ingenious moment. A mad split-second. It was him or me. My grandmother whispered in my ear: *see what you can do, when you put your mind to it*. I doubt this was what she had intended.

My answer machine calmly explained: *You have called Grace Fox, I'm sorry I'm not home to take your message, but please leave your name and number and I will get back to you as soon as possible*. I waited for the electronic beep and delivered my instructions into my empty apartment. *I think I accidentally left a small blue backpack in the car park*. Henry would never know. With any luck, the backpack would sit in the *Golden Sands Lost Property*, waiting to be claimed, forever.

~

It was close to six-thirty when the cab pulled up outside my apartment. After the altercation at the airport, Henry and I had said little on the flight.

We moved through the glass security doors, soaring our way up to the top of the building. We walked through the door, dumping our bags in the hallway. I went straight into the living room, hitting the light switch. The room was bleached in a flood of white-light. *Shit*. It looked like a stage production. I turned down the dial on the control panel, bathing the room in a soft mellow glow. For a moment, the room looked immense. I sat down, leaning back in a white comfortable lounge. I tried to look relaxed. Everything looked magnified.

'Jesus. You call this a home or a hotel?'

'It's work. My clients have appointments here. I lend most of these things out. It's like a furniture library.'

'Furniture library?' Henry walked over and sat beside me. His gaze met mine. 'You sure about that?'

I was startled. 'What do you mean?'

'You sure you lend all this stuff out?' He pointed to various pieces of furniture. My head rushed with blood.

I twisted some hair around my finger. 'That's the Sydney apartment market for you. People borrow furniture to make their houses look smarter. It's a sales technique.'

Henry picked up a large white glass bowl sitting on a table beside him. He turned it over and looked at its underside, fingering the signature embedded in its base. 'It's all *smoke and mirrors*.'

'Not at all. It's like a woman wearing make-up. Everyone wants to dress up. Anything wrong with that?'

'Right.'

I could see Henry thinking. I looked around the room again. How was I going to explain my apartment. Could I reasonably expect him to believe me?

He turned around and glanced over his shoulder. He nodded in the direction of the stairs. 'What's up there?'

'I was waiting to show you. It's the new butterfly room.'

Henry frowned, his eyebrows knotting. 'Hasn't it just been finished?'

'I'm hoping so. I haven't seen it yet. It was meant to be completed while we were away.'

'Well. What are we waiting for?'

I shrugged and headed for the door.

~

I walked up the stairs and entered the former guest room. Henry followed behind me. As we went through the doorway, we both gasped.

The interior was bridal-white and flawless. The whiteness was almost blinding. I could see wide custom-built storage cabinets lining all sides of the room. Each cabinet held at least eighteen drawers, every one of them slim, compact and seamless. In the centre of the room stood a stainless steel

peninsula featuring a large custom-made glass sink. I stood at the sink and picked up the head of a long spiral hose. It was joined to a freestanding stainless steel pole. I was reminded of a strong metal python. I looked up, a row of specially designed lights and air-conditioning ducts controlled every aspect of the room's comfort.

On the wall in front of me hung four large Perspex frames, each housing one special butterfly. I looked from one frame to another: a Blue Triangle (*Graphium sarpedon*); a Ulysses Swallowtail (*Papilio Ulysses*); a Richmond Birdwing (*Ornithoptera richmondia*) and a glorious Cairns Birdwing (*Ornithoptera euphorion*). All sublime specimens.

I took a deep breath. Swallowed. Wasn't sure what to say. Somewhere Henry wolf-whistled. We were both transfixed with wonder. It was a museum fit for a dead butterfly kingdom. Better than I thought possible.

I looked at Henry. 'What do you think?'

'Expensive.'

'I had no idea,' I whispered.

Henry pointed to the cabinets; to the frames; to the surgical-looking benchtop. 'She's done a good job.'

'Who?'

'Renee.'

Of course, Renee. She'd suggested it; I paid for it. Every detail; every sublime corner. I went over to a cabinet and rolled out the top drawer. It slid out effortlessly. Inside, were rows of catergorised butterflies. Column after column of perfect magic. Whilst I was away, I had engaged a junior lepidopterist to organise my collection. I had left strict instructions; I knew exactly what I wanted. The result was a methodical display of enchantment.

Henry walked around the perimeter of the room, easing out drawers, rolling them back in. Every so often he sighed. I sat on the stool at my new bench, marvelling at the space.

I watched as he circled the room. I wanted him to stay. I never wanted him to leave. An expression of something like awe stretched itself

across his face. Without a word he came over and embraced me. Whispering, *congratulations*, in my ear. For a moment, I let myself be touched.

~

It was a strange night. It was our last. How was I going to let him go? I had to. I knew I couldn't be a property developer and enjoy a butterfly lover at the same time. What was I thinking? It wasn't fair on either of us. He didn't know the half of it. I had started lying and I couldn't stop. I was reminded of a caterpillar that produces silk; a sticky thread emerges from an opening near the mouth, allowing it to secure itself to a particular surface, or maybe to spin a rare cocoon. I was spinning a web of pretence, something impossible to break free from. It was tight. It was suffocating. I wanted to unravel my lies. I needed to confess. Something had to go.

I looked at his face as he stared at the city. The night sky was bright with stars, the city twinkled in the distance. A mild breeze moved my hair. A plane roared somewhere in the background. Down below, tiny dots of traffic snaked along the road.

We stood there perfectly still, our elbows touching, drinks in our hands. I leaned against the railing, eyes closed, trying to relax the tension in my neck.

'To us, Grace.'

'No, to the Opportunity Butterfly, Henry.'

As though he hadn't heard me, he glanced up at the moon. 'You know, Grace, I didn't expect it to end like this.' His look was distant.

'End like what?'

'I didn't expect the last few days to finish with such intensity.'

'I guess, we hardly –'

'You're right. We hardly know each other.' Henry leaned over the balcony and stared at the ground thirty floors below. His drink hung loosely in his hand. For a second, I thought I saw it plunge through the air. 'I don't know what I was thinking, but I didn't see you living like this.' His arm gestured at the terrace and view in front of him.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t strike me as woman who would live in a *vertical village*.’

I stared at Henry. It was as though he was opening a gate. I knew what he was thinking: a million-dollar apartment. How could she afford it?

I looked into his pale-green eyes. Was it my imagination? Was he asking me to tell him the truth? Or was it my guilt. My relationship with honesty had become so tenuous; I’d lost touch with what was real. Tony’s voice echoed in my ear: *Grace, we don’t sell lifestyle, we sell lies for a living.*

Henry was looking at me. He ran a hand through his hair. ‘I can’t explain how this feels. It’s just as Nabokov said: my pleasures are the most intense known to man: butterfly hunting and writing.’

‘Writing?’

‘Well, only, sometimes. But the exhilaration from a hunt can last for days. Does that make sense?’

‘Of course. Please continue.’

I looked at him for the longest moment. I wanted him to tell me more.

‘You know, when it comes to my hunting. I can distinguish four main elements.’

‘Such as ...’

‘Come and sit down. I’ll tell you.’ Henry took a deep breath and moved away from the balcony. He went and sat at the outdoor table setting. ‘I think the netting of the Opportunity best illustrates my first point. Catching a new specimen, unknown to science, is the dream at the back of every scientist’s mind. Secondly, and almost as satisfying, there is the capture of a rare specimen, something you have always admired in a book. But, never seen. Thirdly, and no less interesting ... I’m not boring you, Grace?’

‘No, not all, please go on.’

‘As I was saying, thirdly, there is the idea of disentangling a history. It’s like unscrambling a mystery, finding out about the butterfly’s structure, habits and classification.’

He paused to take a drink of his wine. I looked at him.

'I can't imagine what the last factor could be?'

'Sport.'

'Sport?'

'Yes, the actual physical feat of a hunt. What could be more thrilling than the quest of chasing something that floats and flies like a fairy? Just when you think you've got it, it bobs away, as though attached to a retractable elastic.'

I smiled. Since I was a child butterflies had always reminded me of fairies. I used to think they were spirited insects, transporters of spells and wishes. I wanted to make a wish now.

~

After dinner, which consisted of soggy take-away pizza and more wine, Henry discussed the prospect of meeting up again. My head swam with the possibilities. We discussed the rainforests of Brazil; the canyons and canopies of New Guinea; and even the mountains of Bhutan. For over an hour, I saw myself hunting in the most extraordinary of situations. My business merely a memory.

I wasn't planning on mentioning it, but I knew the subject would eventually arise.

'Grace, I've been thinking. That backpack arrives tomorrow.'

I nodded, feeling my whole body flush. 'I think so.'

'With your permission – it is your property after all – I'd like to go and see someone at the land and environment council. I want to report what we saw the other day. Show them the evidence. And, a friend of mine's a journalist, he's currently writing a story of the destruction of Australian forest's biodiversity. I thought we could contribute to the story.'

The agony pulsing through my body was unbearable. I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying. Headlines flashed across my eyes: *Eco-property developer destroys precious flora and fauna; Company director gets three years jail; Betta Property Outfoxed!*

‘So, could I borrow a computer and a printer and write up a few notes?’

‘Sure,’ I stammered.

‘And do you think you could follow it up for us? I’ll do what I can long distance – via email. But, I think it would be more effective if it came from you.’

‘Naturally.’ Words were falling out of my mouth like I was diving off a cliff.

‘It’s vital we follow this through. It would be a great shame if someone destroyed that butterfly habitat.’ Henry rolled his glass in his hand. ‘How can anyone justify *cold-blooded slaughter*? I mean, that Cassowary chick?’

‘I’d prefer not to think about it.’ I was close to tears.

‘Sorry, I know it’s upsetting. Leave it to me.’

I nodded, my eyes staring into my lap.

‘Anything else you can think of that might be useful?’

‘Nothing. I think I need to get some sleep. The trip was exhausting. I feel like I’m still drying out.’

There was a brief silence. Confused, I avoided Henry’s gaze, I put my glass down and stood up without looking at him. I kissed him on the top of his head and walked off in the direction of my bedroom. I could hear him calling my name. I kept walking without looking back.

~

Five hours later, I was woken by a thumping on my door. Foggy with sleep, I put on my bathrobe and switched on the bedside lamp. I stumbled to the door and opened it. Henry was standing in front of me trembling. His head was slashing violently left and right. His eyelids were fluttering. It took me a moment to realise that he was still deeply asleep.

I took him by the elbows and held him. ‘Henry, it’s alright,’ I whispered.

‘They’re coming to get me.’ His voice was panicky. ‘They’re going to put me away.’ Henry shook so hard I thought he would collapse.

‘Henry,’ I raised my voice, ‘you’re dreaming.’

I started to feel scared. Henry’s shaking was so aggressive, I could barely hold on to him. He was tall. Difficult to move. I gripped him more firmly, this time around the biceps. Carefully, I turned him around, pointing him in the direction of his bedroom.

‘Please don’t hurt me,’ Henry pleaded. ‘I’ll never do it again.’ Henry’s tone changed. It was simple and childlike. It alarmed me. What and who was he talking to?

‘No one’s going to hurt you Henry. Just take one step.’ I stood behind him, guiding him forward. Attempting to push him in the direction of his room. ‘Another step, Henry.’ He moved again.

For five slow minutes, I steered Henry back to his bed in the office. One step following the next. When we reached his bed, I guided him down into a sitting position, and then to lying down. I pulled the sheets up and forced them under the mattress. His face took on a new sleepy peacefulness. I switched on the light next to his bed and watched his calm face. I had no idea who I was looking at.

~

Just before I woke up, I had a horrible dream. My face was damp, the pillow wet. My body twisted in sheets.

I am in my office late at night, and Henry walks in unannounced. In his hands he is holding a large navy-blue backpack. Without smiling or saying a word, he unzips the bag and hundreds of Deaths-Head Hawk Moths (*atropos* Linnaeus) fly out and fill the room. The dream is so real and the skull-like markings on top of the moth’s thorax so vivid, that I jolt out of bed, slashing the air.

I knew I was being foolish and that the Death’s-Head Hawk Moth had an undeserved reputation, but I would get flashes of the large fearsome moths dive-bombing my face and puncturing my skin with their needle-point proboscises. In reality, it was a truly unique specimen. When handled, it would emit a series of high-pitched squeaks and hisses, a device to protect the moth when it visited bee-hives to feed on honey. Some said it was an act

of mimicry to imitate the pre-swarming sound of a queen bee, but I wasn't convinced. Moths did not like handling, and why wouldn't they squeal? In some ways its character resembled Tony's.

~

Before I left the apartment for work, I decided I had to see him one more time. I was drawn into his bedroom like an insect is sucked down a plug hole. I felt like I was drowning in a quicksand of syrup. I was being dragged into vortex of obsession. Powerless to maintain any control.

I hugged my bathrobe close to my chest and slipped into his room. I crossed to his bed, tiptoeing across the carpet. My cheeks were hot with fear. I dropped to my knees and ran my finger over his shiny hairline scar. The touch was feather-light and he didn't move. I leaned in closer and smelled his face, nuzzling his hair. Closing my eyes, I leant in nearer, running my tongue gently over his soft, warm mouth.

I must have imagined it: a faint smell of Peyotaine? Marijuana? Something weird on his breath. The smell was distinctive, difficult to mistake. I shook my head. Impossible. A wave of dizziness overcame me. I stood upright, pressed my cold hands to my face. My cheeks felt like sunburn. We were alone. I was nervous. I was stumbling over the line.

There I was touching him, excited, breathless, like I yearned to do it for weeks. I turned around and fled the room. Thankful, he didn't wake.

Chapter 13

P is for Pattern

Butterflies look like they were created by a painter or a designer. There patterns and colours include a vast range of designs, everything from paisleys to prints; stripes to dots; swirls to stained-glass windows, and even chevrons, eyespots, zigzags and teardrops. They just don't seem real.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

I drove to the office in a trance. *Damn, what am I doing? I'm going crazy.* I was the woman who never got involved, rarely attached. I started to cry. Warm, leaky tears ran down my cheeks, streaking my face and occasionally landing on my shirt. I thumped the steering wheel, cursing out loud. *What the hell have I done?*

I wished I could stop myself from thinking. Strange thoughts had plagued me all night. Henry's outburst seemed out of character. His reaction at the car park, both mentally and physically, reminded me of a butterfly's metamorphosis. In a second he'd transformed from *Dr Jekyll* to *Mr Hyde*.

In fact, so many things about him seemed odd. The sleepwalking. His funny smell. His obvious lack of attachments. I didn't really know him. And, yet, I knew him very well. How could I talk? I had spent the last four days never fully telling him the truth. What did I expect?

~

I stood in the lift and stared at my reflection in the facing mirror. Grey rings shadowed my eyes, and my hair, always so neat, looked dishevelled and out of style. The lift doors opened and I hurried into my office. Careful that no one should see me. I sat at my desk and turned on my computer. I hadn't replied to an email for five days.

Outside the door, Tony's voice bellowed to the new receptionist, *bellissimo*. In a second my door came shot open.

Tony pointed to the clock on the wall above my head. 'Right on the dot.'

'You could never accuse me of tardiness, Tony.'

'So, what happened?'

'Sit down for a moment.'

Tony went and sat in the brown leather lounge in the corner of my room. He'd strategically selected the chair furthest away from me.

I set my paperwork aside and got to my feet, walking around to sit on the top of my desk. 'There's a lot I want to talk about.'

Tony pulled a face and shrugged. He knew what I was going to say.

'Firstly, what the hell happened up at Honour Bay?'

'Calm down. It's sorted, I've spoken to Dylan—'

'Tony. My friend wants to go to the media.'

Tony's face dropped. He knew I was serious.

'I want to know how this *fucking* happened?'

Tony shook his head, muttered *shit* under his breath. Then he started faltering.

'We had a drink two weeks ago ... last time we were up there. We were pissed, Grace ... blind. He said he'd like to help us.'

'For what Tony? What did he want?'

'He implied that if we gave him the painting contract for the villas at the resort, he'd make sure that the town wouldn't lodge any complaints.'

'You're telling me it's *bribery*?'

Tony nodded.

'I'm sure there's more, keep going.'

'I also asked him to visit the site, see if there were any dead birds. I told him to *keep an eye out*.'

'Jesus, Tony. Of all the people. Seriously.'

Tony leaned forward and sighed. He came over and put his face so close to mine I thought he was going to kiss me. 'He's the town dope dealer. He's like the Honour Bay lord.'

My mouth dropped. 'The town's fucking *dope dealer*? You've got to be kidding me. We're in bed with the local crook.'

Tony held up his hands. 'Grace, it's not as bad as it seems. All he wants is the painting and maintenance contract. Seemed like a good deal at the time.'

I shook my head. 'And, he wants us to turn a blind eye. Where's his crop? Backing onto my property, I assume.'

It was a moment before Tony answered. He sat back down in the soft leather chair, swinging one long leg over another. 'I don't know.'

I was astounded. Tony didn't seem at all worried. 'So where to now?'

'I did think, that with Dylan on side, the DA wouldn't be such a problem. We could sell the site with approved plans. It might be simpler.'

'No, Tony, I've been thinking. I've made a decision; I want you to understand that it's one I haven't made easily.'

'What are you talking —'

'I've changed my mind about Honour Bay.'

Tony stood up and sat on the edge of my desk, his head loomed inches from mine. 'You're kidding me. To what?'

'I'm not going ahead with the development. I'm going to leave the land the way it is. For the time being, anyway.'

Tony shook his head and spluttered. 'Tell me you're joking.'

'It's a long —'

Tony looked away, he sat picking at his fingers for a minute, and an expression of shock was on his face.

'What do you think?'

'I think it's the most *fucked* idea I've ever heard!'

I looked at Tony sitting on my desk: one leg crossed and swinging, colourful polka-dot tie; shiny loafers and floppy black hair. If nothing else, he was passionate about BETTA Properties.

'Have you got a cigarette?'

I shook my head. 'You've given up.'

His gaze travelled all over the room, carefully avoiding my face. He muttered *fuck* more than once under his breath.

I stood up to speak. 'There are other —'

'I've known you a very long time, Grace —'

'— and I you.'

'I don't believe that you would tie up all your money and then not do something with that land.'

'Perhaps.'

Tony appeared to relax for a second. 'Well, that's sounding better. What did you have in mind?'

'A butterfly sanctuary.'

'A what?' Tony said, his voice shaking and out of control.

'A place for —'

'You can't do this. I've got cash tied up in this as well.'

'Well, theoretically. Commission.'

Without warning Tony stood up and started marching around the room. As he walked, his voice got louder. 'Nina's told me this morning she's pregnant. We'll have three kids under five.' Tony shuddered for a second. 'Build something, sell the place, but an insect farm? WHY?'

'Many reasons.'

'Who the fuck melted the ice queen?'

'You're looking at this the wrong way.'

'Grace, I don't care if you've got the world's weirdest insect at your place, or if you're dating George *fucken* Clooney. You're not doing anything with that land other than turning it into holiday villas for rich arseholes. We have a contract — in writing — everything. If you pull any stunts, I'll drag your arse through every court in this country. You'll never build another property again. Do you hear me?'

My voice softened. 'You couldn't, Tony. *Come on*. Anyway, I've got an offer for you.'

'Offer? Who wants an *offer*?'

'Managing Director.'

The minute I said it I felt the heaviness lift from my body. The relief was such that I felt I would break down sobbing.

'What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about me taking less of an active role in the business. And you taking more on.'

Tony came over and stood very close to me. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

'I've been thinking about it for a very long time. I don't think it's fair to do anything else. I'm not focused.'

I checked the manilla folder on my desk and listed off the eight different projects we shared within our portfolio. In most instances I knew Tony could do it without me.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at me. He was flabbergasted. He looked like he had never seen me before; he shook his head and his mouth dropped. His expression made me think of a fibreglass sideshow clown with its mouth open.

'In all the time I've known you, Grace, I would never have expected this outcome. You have never relinquished any control. Are you sure you're all right?'

'Very. You can think about it all you like, but I know you would've done the calculations while you were sitting there. You know how good this is.'

'And you're doing all of this for a bloke? What did he say?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't get it. A guy. You?'

'Like I said, Tony. It's not about him. He just gave me the idea.'

'Well, Grace, I think you should tell him.'

'I have to, he's leaving tonight.'

In telling Tony, I had made things clearer to myself. But, not to anyone else. My new scheme depended on Henry's assistance. How would I

tell him that I owned the Honour property, but that I was also the butterfly bully?

‘What’s he going to say when he finds out what we did two weeks ago?’

‘I don’t know.’

I sighed. My biggest confession was ahead of me.

‘And, anyway that’s mine,’ Tony said, pointing to my chair.

He came over to my desk. I stood up and kissed him on the side of his face. He whispered, *best of luck* in my ear. He turned around, walking backwards out the door. He placed his hand over his heart and mouthed *thank you*. I didn’t regret my decision for a minute.

I checked my watch and saw that it was twelve-thirty. I picked up the phone and dialled my apartment. I wanted to meet Henry for lunch. The phone rang several times before it was picked up by the answering machine. He was probably upstairs. I waited till the message had finished and spoke loudly into the receiver.

‘Henry, if you’re there, please pick up.’ I waited a moment. I repeated my request, this time louder. ‘HELLO, HENRY.’ There was no response. I wondered where he had gone. I spoke into the phone again, asking him to call me. I left my mobile number and hung up.

~

It was close to one-thirty in the afternoon when I parked my car in the basement car park. I tried to think about what I was going to say. How I was going to say it. I caught the lift up to my apartment, rehearsing my next speech in my head. *I’m a property cheat and a liar. But, I love you. Can you forgive me?*

I opened the door to the apartment, and called out to Henry. My home was silent. Where could he be? *Hello, is anyone home?*

I walked into the kitchen, wiping my damp hands on a tea-towel. I checked my answer-machine, but there were no messages. I didn’t think anything of it. Nabokov curled himself around my legs, meowing for me to pick him up. He was demanding and I didn’t have the energy.

My legs felt as thick as wooden planks as I climbed the stairs to the butterfly room. When I walked in, Henry was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a tray of Amour Butterflies (*Amour Placebos*) in his lap. His face was flushed and pink.

In one hand he held a magnifying glass, which made his eyes look absurdly large, and in the other he had a pair of forceps, holding a butterfly.

'You okay?' I said, sitting down beside him

'Fine.' He kept staring at the butterfly in his hand.

'I think this is a favourite, though I don't like to discriminate.'

'How come?'

'Because there is honesty in their vulnerability. They're subtle. Have a look —' Henry handed the butterfly to me.

'Many butterflies are all show and no delivery. These are not only exquisite, but intelligent — they're different.'

'Really.' I held the magnifying glass closer to my face.

'See the eyespots, the hindwings, the tails, they're all a restrained shade of another body part. No garish colours, no mardi gras aspirations. Every scale is an opulent, but delicate shade of crimson. And they have an excellent history.'

'Tell me.'

'Nearly every year approximately 650 million Amour Butterflies fly 5000 kilometres south to Mexico to escape the winter. The red butterflies pack tightly onto the trunks and foliage of boab trees. The Mexicans believe that these butterflies are reincarnated princes mourning their beloved in blood colours. When they all beat their wings at once, the tree looks like it's bleeding to death. It's an extraordinary sight. I think the tree looks broken-hearted.'

'It sounds sad.'

'Not at all.'

'And, you've seen them?'

'Of course, years ago. But I'd like to follow them one day, track their course.'

'So would I.'

The idea of confessing to Henry was starting to make me feel queasy. I found myself light and empty-headed with the idea of a confession. Before one more minute passed, I spoke. 'Henry, I have to talk to you.'

'Sounds serious.'

I wanted to scream. I wanted to sob. I had his attention, but I didn't want to speak.

'Grace?'

'It was me.'

I could see he understood in an instant. His eyes registered relief. He was quiet for what seemed like an eternity

'I can explain everything.'

I took a deep breath and rearranged my legs. I started talking, staring in to my lap. I couldn't bare to see the look on his face. I knew he was looking at me with the poise of a Buddha.

'It was my business partner and me.'

His silence was excruciating.

'The Honour property has been slated for development for years. The ground-breaking is scheduled in three month's time. It's mine.' I stammered, 'I'm a property developer.'

I felt Henry's hand on my knee. 'I know.'

'What?'

'I saw the Honour Bay newsletter.'

There was a long silence. Minutes ticked by. I froze all over. My blood had turned to the temperature of ice. I shivered as though a spider crawled up my neck. 'YOU KNOW?'

'The day we arrived at the Golden Sands—'

'You've known *that long*?'

Henry held up his hand to silence me. He put the butterfly back in its tray. 'Let me finish.'

'We were standing in the reception area, you were speaking to the receptionist. I was looking at promotional leaflets. There was a copy of

Honour Living concealed within a whole lot of other things. It was tucked away, hiding.' Henry sighed. 'I almost didn't see it.'

It took a moment for the information to sink in. I shook my head.

'Why didn't you say something?'

'Because I felt you would eventually tell me.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Grace. Come on. You've seen one of the world's finest butterfly specimens. It was more than good luck. You can't see something like the Opportunity Butterfly and be unchanged by it.'

I was startled. He had known all a long. He had listened to one lie after another. Never saying a word. I shook my head. His composure was astonishing.

'I've been waiting for you to tell me. I didn't think it was going to take this long.'

'Oh my God. Do you know *everything*?'

'The Cassowary?'

I was startled. Astonished.

'You called an hour ago.'

I nodded. I didn't want to hear my lies.

'I ran to get the phone, but just missed it. I heard the last few numbers of your telephone number. I took the liberty of rewinding the tape. I pressed the play button and heard it all. Every word of yesterday's conversation.'

I coughed to clear my throat. My voice was scratchy. 'I couldn't risk it.'

'I understand.' He touched me on the knee again.

'I'm so sorry. I never meant to —.'

'Why are you telling me now?'

The gate was wide open. My grandmother's voice thumped in my ears: the world his empty of truth and full of fantasy.

'I'm ceasing all current activity. The project is on hold.'

Henry raised his eyebrows.

'You're right, Henry. Seeing the Opportunity Butterfly, meeting you. I've changed my mind.'

'Won't you lose money?'

'Probably.'

'And what would you do with the site?'

'Leave it. Turn it into a butterfly farm. I've had a few ideas.'

'Interesting. I can't say I'm that surprised.'

'There's something else —'

'Go on. No more surprises, I hope.'

'I just wondered if maybe you would think about helping me. Perhaps as a consultant. It would be good money. I don't think I can do it by myself.'

Henry looked at me steadily; I knew his answer before he even opened his mouth. 'It's not that easy. I have a business to run, staff to look after, my own butterfly research.'

'Are you sure? Take some time to think about it.' I felt a tear roll out of the corner of my eye. I didn't dare touch my face. My fingernails were pressed into my palms. 'I'm sure you must think that I'm naïve. That this is all some impulsive tree-change, but I've been thinking about it for a long time.'

'It's an interesting plan Grace, but it's just the beginning. I appreciate that you've told me the truth. Amazed that you are brave enough to liberate yourself from your security, but there's more to butterflies than purchasing them and placing a silky triangle on the palm of one's hand.'

I didn't know what to say. Never, in my mind did I think Henry would refuse my offer. Heat flooded my face like a hot poker. I couldn't believe that he had known everything about me for four days, and not said a word.

'I'm shocked.'

'Shocked because I knew you were a property developer, or because I can't help you?'

‘More about my own behaviour. I’ve been lying to you for days and had expectations. I wrongly assumed you’d be like my associate, Tony. I thought you’d drop everything.’

‘Grace, you’re the one making the life change, not me. I’ve seen how you operate your business, how you’ve run your life. Setting up a farm will be simple by comparison.’

I nodded, stupefied.

‘Things happen in their own time, Grace.’

‘I guess they do.’

We didn’t say another word, there was nothing more to say. He had made up his mind. I stood up and went down the stairs, stunned. He had delivered the ultimate blow. I was rejected. I was at a loss to explain his attitude. Perhaps, that was what happened when you tried to sketch out other people’s lives. There was a niggling thought at the back of my mind. Perhaps he’d done it all deliberately. Maybe this was what he’d planned all along. I was now one of his recruited butterfly disciples; a butterfly-farming convert.

~

I spent the afternoon telling Annie my story. Like a zombie, I marched down the stairs to the kitchen and dialled her number. She answered on the first ring. ‘It’s me,’ I said.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s an emergency.’

‘You?’

The line was silent for a moment. I didn’t make SOS calls. Fifteen minutes later, we were sitting in a café around the corner. Annie was holding my hand.

‘Oh my God. What’s happened to you?’

‘I did what you said.’

‘What? You didn’t listen to me?’

‘You told me to ring the greenie – Henry Stern.’

'You didn't? Fuck, Grace don't tell me, he was a bloody psychopath.' Annie leaned over the table without taking her eyes off me. She grabbed me by the elbows. 'He didn't hurt you?'

I shook my head and stirred my coffee. I couldn't look up. Small islands of frothy milk sailed around my cup. I stabbed them with my spoon.

'Look at me! What happened?'

'We went away.'

'Huh? I only saw you two weeks ago.'

'You dared me.'

'Jesus, Grace, you're confusing me. You went where? *When?*' Annie took a huge gulp of coffee. 'Oh shit, I'm so stunned at what you're saying, I forgot that was hot.'

She looked stricken. Her eyes darted around the café. She removed her hands from my elbows and squeezed my fingers.

'Listen, take a deep breath and tell me everything.'

I filled my lungs and sighed. For an hour, I told her everything about the butterflies, Henry and Honour Bay. Every so often she nodded her head, squeezed my fingers or wiped a tear from my cheek. When I finally finished, she leaned back in her chair and shook her head.

'I can't believe you did that. I really can't.'

'Neither can I.'

'You've should've stuck with Vladimir *what-his-name?*'

'I told you that, but you kept telling me he was dead.'

'Look, it's not over, yet.'

'Are you crazy?'

There was a brief silence. The waiter hovered nearby. Annie shooed him away.

'Have you told him yet?'

'Told him what?'

'Fuck, do I have to spell everything out?'

'Probably.'

To my surprise, Annie said firmly: 'You must tell him you like him.'

I laughed with a low incredulous laugh. 'Annie, look what you've done to me already. Why would I take any more of your advice?'

'Because it's your last chance. That's why.'

I was stunned. I threw twenty dollars on the table and walked out of the café. Annie came running up behind me. 'Grace, what have you got to lose?'

'I guess you're right, I've lost my pride.'

'No, Gracie. You're a gambler.'

'Not any more.'

I leaned down and kissed Annie. I hugged her and thanked her for meeting me. In one way I felt better for seeing her, and in another I felt so much worse. If I was cruel, I could've blamed her for my life's biggest disaster. If I was real, I would thank her.

~

After dinner, I drove Henry to the airport. The car was silent as I sped along the freeway. I turned the dial to a classical radio station and beat the steering wheel in time to the music. It was a dramatic Mozart quartet. Loud, dramatic, emotional. Appropriate. I couldn't find the spirit to speak.

'You're driving fast, Grace.'

I checked the speedometer. It was five kilometres above the speed limit. I pressed my foot to the accelerator and pushed the car up another five kilometres. I could feel Henry squirm next to me.

'Is there something wrong?'

'Nope.'

'How come you're driving so fast? Trying to get rid of me?'

'Nope.'

'Come on, Grace, this is ridiculous. We can't part company like this. If anything, I'm the one who should be upset with you.'

I pushed my foot down another couple of millimetres and felt the car increase with speed.

'Grace. Stop it!' His voice was urgent.

I ignored him and gave the pedal another slight tap. The car lurched forward and went faster than ever before.

‘FOR CHRIST’S SAKE, PULL THE CAR OVER!’

Without the slightest tremor of fear, I pulled the steering wheel to the left. The car went swerving into a shallow gully on the side of the freeway. I stared ahead, without moving.

‘Grace, we’ve barely spoken since this afternoon. I’m very sorry if I upset you, but I can’t stay here. It’s more complicated than you realise.’

I glanced at Henry, his expression was strained.

‘I don’t get it, Henry. I don’t understand.’

This can’t be happening.

‘Grace, I have obligations. I was sure you understood. I just can’t drop everything.’ Henry ran his hands through his hair. ‘And how could we ever trust each other?’

‘Stop. You don’t need to explain. I understand. You have a job to do.’

‘There’s more to it. Just give me a couple of weeks and I’ll explain. Trust me.’

I looked sideways at Henry. He looked different. The skin beneath his eyes was puffy. He looked tired and unwell. A faint dull throb filled my head.

Henry whispered. ‘Trust me.’

I nodded and re-started the engine. If we drove off now, Henry would still make his plane.

~

We stood at the gateway and waited for his flight to be called. I replayed the outcome in my head. *Nothing makes sense. What does this all mean?* I looked up as passengers started to gather around the door of the terminal. My vision was blurred. *Please don’t go. I’ll miss you. Who will talk to me about the butterflies?*

‘Well, Grace,’ said Henry, carefully, ‘it looks like it’s time.’

I nodded. Without warning, I was overcome by a rush of emotion. Tears streamed down my hot, flushed face.

'We've only just met,' I sobbed. 'Do you forgive me?'

'What for?'

'For everything.'

'There's nothing to forgive.'

'This has never happened before. It was the butterflies, the —'

Henry placed a finger over my lips. He nodded his head and whispered: *I'll be back.*

We clutched each other, squeezing hard for a moment, and then a voice coolly announced the departure of Henry's flight. He leant down and gave me a warm, soft kiss that tasted of something familiar. He then turned around and went through the gates. I watched him until he disappeared down the corridor.

Seconds later, I was standing in the middle of the airport, surrounded by hundreds of people. I dug my hands into my pockets and felt for a handkerchief. I touched something hard and box-like. I pulled out a small package, the size of a matchbox. A present. I smiled, wondering what he had given me.

Chapter 14

M is for Metamorphosis

The journey commences as an obsessive, chewing grub and ends as a butterfly, free of any material concerns. In many ways, it is like the transformation from Dr Jekyll into Mr Hyde.

Alphabet Butterfly for Children

The Complete A-Z of Butterfly Facts

by Florence Stamp

How to end? When is an end a finale? When is the end a full stop? Where does an ending start and where does it stop? Is a good story like an obscure art-house film script? Featuring a wring-your-eyeballs-dry ending? A gunshot shattering a still night? A dead body lying shapeless at the end of an alley? Does a story heavy with tension culminate in a reward, a punishment or a surprise? Is every story meant to teach you something? Are they only good when they resonate; staining your memory like red wine. Are stories organic? Synthetic?

You'd think, after all I'd been through, after everything I'd learnt, after all the butterflies I'd collected and nurtured, that I would've seen it coming. I should've predicted my story, should've foreseen the end. It wasn't like he deliberately tried to hide who he was. I deliberately ignored it. I believe from the minute I sat next to him on the plane, it was destined to happen. I wanted a butterfly man. I wanted someone to be who I wanted him to be. But the signs were there from the very beginning. I should have seen it coming.

~

The following days passed in a fog. I woke and worked hard at keeping visions of Henry at bay. When I left the apartment to go to the local store I caught glimpses of people I thought were him: men walking down the street going to work, or simply buying coffee. I didn't know what was wrong with me. He was everywhere. He stood at the end of my bed every morning; he

was in the shower, naked, holding soap; he was in every cupboard I opened, every door I unlocked. At night, I lay in bed, watching flashes of butterflies and moths weave in and out of my dreams, Henry and I in hot pursuit. I called the office and told them I had the flu. I said I'd be back in three days.

~

I spent my time in the butterfly room, occupying every moment, inspecting every specimen. I was still trying to force back the most paranoid of thoughts; the merest suggestion of it sent me reaching for a wine. Was Henry who he said he was? I knew from friends, especially Annie, that men were difficult to understand. She said the Internet and email had changed the nature of courtship and dating. She said it changed the truth. What used to take a month, or even two, was accelerated to occur in days. Henry and I had come to know each other through a rapid progression of events. Our affair, if that's what you could call it, had begun and ended in less than two weeks.

I sat at my examination table and inspected a tray of new butterflies. I felt my heart weigh down in my chest, and was upset by it. What used to excite me, now left me flat. I picked up my latest specimen, my most expensive acquisition, but felt nothing. Perhaps, because it was dead. It had arrived two weeks before and was recognised as being one of the most exceptional butterflies in the world: a Marceau Butterfly Moth (*Lepidopterus pretendus*). It was as if *my* insides had been drained away.

It was the only known butterfly that could mimic a moth. Or the only known moth that could mimic a butterfly. Its cunning was so great, that its wings and abdomen could change shape according to geographical conditions. But what really astounded the Lepidopterists were the insect's sleeping habits. Unlike other butterflies and moths, it slept both night and day, it was not preconditioned to choose daylight over dusk. It slept when and wherever it wanted. I placed it back in its position and stared at it for a moment. It was dark and glossy and shone like patent leather shoes; tiny pale green satin freckles shimmered under the light. Something about it reminded me of Henry.

I picked up another specimen and this time found some peace. I held an Atlas Moth (*Attacus atlas*). They are not particularly beautiful, nor bright or fancy. They would not lead the line-up in a butterfly parade. But they have the distinction of being large and great – the biggest moths in the world. They are also strong, warm and rich brown. They remind me of a tanned, woody tree. Their wings are curved and snake-like and they look like they could fly forever. They are sturdy, straight and honest.

~

On the morning of the fourth day, I dragged myself back to the office. I grabbed my coat out of the hallway cupboard and caught the lift to the basement. Groping in my pocket for my keys, I felt something hard and box-like. I closed my eyes and swallowed, pulling out a small red cloth-bound box. *How could I have forgotten his gift?*

I walked to the car holding my present. As I held it in my hands I felt something akin to pleasure, a sudden rush of excitement. Nervous about what was inside. *Sparkling, pink, luscious, gloriously sweet and sensitive. What had he left me?*

I got in the car and held it, slowly turning it over. Daring myself to open it. I switched the car light on and started to peel the paper off. Pausing and taking a deep breath, I lifted off the lid and took out a tiny folded envelope. I unfolded the tissue gently, curious as to what was inside.

I sat where I was, unbelieving. Squinting, I held it up to my nose. The smell was sour and unmistakable. It had been on his hair, on his breath, on his skin. It had risen in the steam of the teacup. I leaned back in my seat and cried.

~

After the meeting, when the issues had been resolved and Tony's new contract signed, he asked me what had happened to my butterfly man.

'He's around somewhere.'

Tony raised an eyebrow. '*Around somewhere?*'

'I think he's on a hunt. He has a butterfly expedition business and runs a farm. He's busy.'

Tony shook his head and picked up the folder on my desk. He smacked it on the cover. 'I don't get it. You've handed me this, on a platter, everything I've worked for and your insect bloke has disappeared?' Tony shook his head. 'Why?'

'Tony, he explained before he left. He's busy. He said he wouldn't be in contact for a couple of weeks.'

'But, I bet you've emailed him.'

I blushed. 'Maybe.'

'Shit.'

'It's okay. I'm fine.'

'I should've met him. Checked him out. Are you sure you're happy with your decision?'

'Tony, I'm very happy. My resignation as MD of this business has nothing to do with Henry. I'm still a director. I'll still be here. I just wanted to take some leave, pursue a few other things for a while. I haven't had a proper break from this place for ten years. I need it.'

'You're telling me.'

'Don't worry.'

'Well, whatever I think, it's irrelevant.' Tony held his contract to his chest. 'I've got this.'

I was unable to answer. I smiled at my new Managing Director. I knew he would run my business almost as well as I. I stood up and looked around the room. 'I've got butterflies to tend. I'm going.'

Tony stood up and shook my hand. I left the office and headed for home.

~

I went upstairs to look over my butterfly tower. Every corner of the room was decorated with butterflies, moths, books and paraphernalia. I walked around the room, pausing after every few steps to examine the specimens under glass. Most of them were rare, endangered, expensive, but all of them were lifeless. In a way the room was a monument to my old life. It was packed with dead lepidoptera of monumental value, an alluring graveyard

of butterflies neatly ordered and controlled. Every inch of the room was dense with mounted and labelled specimens, each sample inanimate under the perspex.

I went over to my instrument cupboard and took out a large airtight screw-top container. I had been saving the job for a moment like this. A celebration. The beginning of a new life.

Looking into the jar I saw a butterfly. It was lying limp, but settled, ready for its new home. The jar was filled with a layer of fine moist sand and a teaspoon of chloro-cresol crystals. I had relaxed its stiff and dried muscles. I eased it out of the jar and placed it flat on the balsa wood-setting board. Its body fitted comfortably into the custom-made channel.

I picked it up with my forceps and held it under a magnifying glass. It was superb, easy to mistake as unreal.

Its abdomen was large and bulbous, probably full of its last meal. With all the care of a surgeon, I took out a scalpel and made a small incision along the ventral, then, as though I was squeezing a small pimple, I pinched the butterfly's abdomen firmly between my thumb and forefinger. Without making a mess, the butterfly's organs slipped easily onto my finger.

Next, I gently dusted magnesia powder around the inside of the abdominal cavity. It would absorb any residual fat. I followed this with the careful rolling of a new custom-made and cotton-wool abdomen. When I was satisfied I had shaped it to the right size, I slid it neatly in to the butterfly's stomach cavity. The fit was perfect.

I turned it over and placed it back on the setting-board, carefully pushing a stainless-steel pin through the centre of the thorax, just between the second and third pair of legs. I couldn't but help think of a crucifix. I couldn't help but think of sex. I remembered the last time I'd prepared a butterfly. I had imagined fucking Henry. Stretching him out carefully and climbing on top of him. I felt an irresistible urge and an uncontrollable desire to seize a stranger, anyone, anywhere, grab them and seduce them. My veins and body throbbed with frustration.

I thought about him a lot. I thought about his face the night we drank the tea. I had my chance. *I find you very attractive* danced around my mind and taunted me. Why was I holding back? Was I worried what he would think of me? Fear? Trust? Trepidation?

For the following hour, I gently manipulated my darling into a position that would last forever.

When I'd finished pinning her, I wrote her name. Like a tombstone, I knew a label should be written at once and not left to a memory. Diligently, in my small handwriting I wrote down all the relevant information; the date of capture; the locality of where she was found; our names; and any other specifics. I grinned when I thought about the details.

I secured the Opportunity Butterfly to the board and sat and stared at her for ages. Was this what it was like staring at a newborn? A child, eagerly awaited. Of all my hundreds of specimens, of everything I had ever seen, this one was perfection. For the hundredth time I looked around my butterfly room. The walls were complete, the drawers all packed. Carefully, I put her into a custom-made travel box and wrapped it securely in brown paper. I wrote his address on the front of the box and scribbled two big black crosses on the back. Two thick black kisses. I didn't sign it or leave a return address.

~

It was four o'clock and I went to my home office, wanting to check my emails. The office was like a vault, organised, illuminated by soft lights and a desk lamp. Above my head, and lining every wall, were endless shelves of ordered books. Most ledges were filled with property and financial manuals; occasionally there was something personal.

On one wall was a small, naive water-colour. A gift from my grandmother. It was faded and yellow, and quite out of place. Difficult to read, but I liked to look at it every day. I went over for a closer look. It had an air of sentimentality. In the bottom right-hand corner it said: F is for Flirting. The inscription read:

Butterflies love to flirt. A female butterfly will land and the male will follow. He shivers and fans his wings. He twirls his antennae. He arches his back and sprinkles a chemical pheromone like love dust. He lingers. He loiters. He waits for love.

Is that what I was doing? Waiting? Lingerin? Lost?

I ran my finger around the inside rim of the glass, wiping the lip of the frame. For a moment I wondered what I was doing – perhaps I was still waiting for a word from Henry.

I went and sat at my desk, switching on my computer. In time-lapse photography a large wriggling cocoon split open and a large, bright-blue butterfly took flight. It was an immaculate Ulysses butterfly – stunning, gorgeous and bright. The ultimate butterfly cliché, but I never tired of looking at it. The butterfly flapped on my screen, eventually taking flight and flying off into the bowels of my computer. I tapped on the keyboard and waited for the tinkle of incoming mail. One email downloaded. The sender was Henry. My heart skipped a beat. I opened it and read it quickly:

Hi Grace,

I have been meaning to email you for days. I wanted to say thank you for your hospitality. The trip was wonderful. I have been busy with a new species of moth, seems like they are my newest obsession. As if I need another!

I have recently acquired a new property. One of the finest pleasures I have discovered is to open my window on a muggy night and watch them appear. I am infatuated with their frenzied nighttime dash.

Every moth has its own unique bedside manner. Last night, one settled quietly on a wall to be boxed in comfort, another darted and crashed against the lampshade before collapsing upon the table, and a third wandered all over the ceiling. Sometimes, they remind me of my friends. Just, don't ask me which ones.

His email went onto to say that he was going into the garden that night to catch some moths. He said he would sugar the trees and smear a score of tree trunks with a mixture of sugar, stale beer and rum. They would come from nowhere, a mass of moths settling on the tree bark, ready for him

to collect. *I wish you were here to see it. You must come as soon as I am organised. See you soon, Henry.*

I went and sat in the armchair in the corner of the room. I smiled. He had finally written. I would be seeing him again soon. I knew I had to write to him but what would I say?

~

The next morning, I went to check my emails. The night before had been terrible—every dream had been filled with images of killer moths and I wondered why my conscience bothered me.

I tapped the mail icon and *no pending schedules* flashed onto the screen. I clicked on the Internet Explorer icon and scrolled down to my bookmarks, looking at all the listings. There was a collection of butterfly sites, butterfly auctions and dealers, financial and property information and a selection of the world papers.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to read, but decided to start with the news. I had five preferred media sites: the local Australian news; *The Times*; *The Financial Times*; *The New York Times* and *News of Today*. I tapped on the last listing.

A series of headlines, photographs and breakout boxes downloaded, all bordered by a series of colourful, flashing ads. I scrolled through the paper, randomly, looking for something of interest. Nothing caught my eye. I was probably too weary to read.

Suddenly, I gaped at the screen. A cool sharp knife punctured my throat. My finger hovered over the keyboard, pointing at a photo. It was as if it was stuck in mid-air. I felt my body throb with blood. My head fill with heat. I experienced a genuine feeling of horror. I stopped and stared at a photo, unable to remove my eyes.

The headline screamed:

Flight of the Butterfly Man

Con-man with a conscience is caught—netted with a female companion.

A photograph clearly showed a man with his hands pinned behind his back. In a matter of weeks he looked older. Eyes a bit heavier. Cheeks a

bit hollower. He was wearing jeans, Birkenstocks and a white t-shirt screaming: *Freeze Global Warming*. Two policemen led him through a crowd, their faces stony. The shot looked like it had been taken at an airport. Beside this photo were another two shots. A smaller photograph, the size of a passport picture, showed a woman. Her face was serious and bird-like, her hair longer. There was no mistaking who it was. Professor Renee Clifford. The third photograph was a closely cropped image of a man's naked torso wrapped firmly in white Elastoplast strips. There was no mistaking the abdomen. The muscled stomach and the wisps of curly black body hair. How I longed to touch it. I hung my head into my hands. How could he have been so stupid?

With a pang of dread I skimmed the details. I didn't have the stomach to concentrate on all the facts. The story mentioned well-known naturalist Henry Stern, of no fixed address, had been caught trafficking one kilo of an unknown substance into Singapore. The authorities believed the substance was similar to a natural hybrid of Crystalline Methamphetamine, Methylenedioxy and Peyote. My knowledge of illicit drugs was minimal, but I knew that Henry had been caught with a drug that sounded like a lethal combination between ecstasy, crystal meth and something like LSD. It was found strapped to his body and hidden in the soles of his shoes. It was suggested the market value could be as much as US\$750,000.

The rest of the story didn't surprise me. According to customs officials it wasn't the first time they'd arrested someone with such a haul. The police had reason to believe that the suspect was not only a trafficker but also a supplier of the Peyotaine. The article alleged that Henry was also known by various aliases: Dr Harold Starck, Vladimir Nabotoff, and Henry Walter Bates.

It took me a second to recognise the first name on the list. Henry Stern was *Dr Harold Stark*, who was the vendor of the fake butterfly collection at the Pawson Morton Auction rooms. I was amazed at his ingenuity. I smiled at the other aliases on the list. *Vladimir Nabotoff* was obviously a tribute to *Vladimir Nabokov*, and *Henry Walter Bates* was a world-

famous naturalist. I reread the article, curious to know if I'd missed anything.

I wondered if the Peyotaine that Henry was caught with was extracted from the sugar-eating moths he so lovingly caught. It was likely. If that was true, Henry faced life or a very long sentence in a foreign jail. If only he'd borrowed the money from me.

I touched the screen of the computer, running my finger over the image of Henry's frightened face. Fear was frozen in his eyes. A lump the size of a boulder lodged itself in my throat and I couldn't swallow, could barely breathe. Suddenly, everything made sense. He wasn't only an eccentric, he was a con-man.

I sat and stared at the screen for what seemed like forever. Minutes passed and then I knew what I had to do. I typed Henry's various aliases into the Google search engine. When I typed in the name *Harold Stark*, the entry returned over five hundred search results. I hit the first listing and was alarmed by the appearance of a full-page photo of Henry's face. His hair was longer, he was sweaty and he was wearing shorts and a singlet. He looked like his own twin brother.

I moved the cursor over the screen and hit the play icon. In a second, a smaller screen the size of a matchbox appeared. This time a small hand-held camera wobbled as it filmed Henry standing in front of a flattened forest. Peasants waved crude handmade signs and shook their fists in the background, jostling for some camera time. He delivered his speech with such solemnity, and such a real sense of commitment, I started to cry. I turned the volume up and listened to his speech:

'Billions of people – almost half the developing world's population – live in rural areas encompassing slums, forests, coastal areas, rivers and dessert. The Natural Nations Land Protection Program, in a 2007 report titled 'The Challenge of our Planet', declared, 'The forest dwellers and rural poor are trapped in an illegal world destroying their livelihood every day. They have no other alternative. They live in forests and natural landscapes that are not depicted on maps, where taxes are not paid, and where public services are not provided and where jobs are not

advertised. Officially, they do not exist. To ensure their day-to-day existence they destroy their precious environment and animal kingdom to put food on their table. The western world has an obligation to ...'

For the next five minutes, Henry talked of the desperate plight of butterflies, fish, animals and apes. I watched him plead with his unknown audience, attempting to convince his viewers not to be apathetic with regard to the animal kingdom. When it looked like he'd finally finished, he took a deep breath and started walking out of the camera's frame, but he didn't stop talking. The next subject was about global warming. I clicked off the site and returned to the search results.

I scrolled down the list and clicked on an article titled, 'Flying High.' The site featured another story on Harold Starck. There was another photograph of Henry, this one oddly out of focus, as though it had been taken without his knowledge. The story was about ethics and hypocrisy and detailed Henry's crude moneymaking ventures. Specifically, breeding hallucinogenic moths to save butterflies. Or, as the article said, 'When is it all right to use one insect to protect another?' Basically, the story claimed that Henry used the profits of his Peyote moth breeding to reinvest the money into sustainable butterfly farming.

I didn't know what to think. I knew from experience that the Internet was a very effective medium for spreading news, views and lies. I got up and walked over to the window, which had a view facing the park and the greater city in the distance. In the background I heard Norma opening and shutting cupboards, methodically chopping food. I leaned forward, resting my forehead on the cold, smooth glass. My breath left a tiny smudge of condensation in my reflection. I saw my life flash before me, saw my butterflies floating and free.

There was the slight sound of a throat being cleared and I turned around and saw Norma standing in the doorway.

'Hungry?'

I shook my head and turned back to the view. Anything to avoid looking at her face.

'Any word from your friend, Henry? We haven't heard from him for weeks.'

'Nothing, not yet. I think he's on a trip somewhere.'

Norma laughed and read a Nabokov quote that was framed on the facing wall: *'Everything in the world is beautiful, but man only recognises beauty if he sees it seldom or from afar.'*

Although she'd never met Henry, she'd repeatedly asked me about him. I knew she wanted us to be together. But I couldn't tell her. Not yet. I was still trying to digest the information myself. Henry Stern, my authentic, genuine, lepidopterist was a drug dealer. A con. A criminal. An insect vigilante. An eco-vandal. An environmentalist. But most of all a hypocrite.

'Trip? He's always travelling.'

I smiled at the incongruity of the comment. Some trip. Without saying another word, I walked over and shut down my computer. I closed my eyes and knew I'd never see him again. I wondered where to send the butterfly.