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KAOS COURT

'Is that cow shit in your hair?' Paul asks from the couch as I pass him on my way to the kitchen. I pull a fork out of a drawer and wrench its prongs through my hair.

'Yep,' I mutter through clenched teeth.

'Is it good for you? You know, like a poultice to draw the rest of the shit out of your head?'

One of the prongs bends under the strain and tears jump to my eyes, not from the pain, but the fumes.

I pretend I don't hear him over the sound of Dave laying rubber on the road outside.

'You know, he could make a lot of money laying bricks, tiles or lawn instead,' Paul grizzles from the couch.

I've been in a half-hearted relationship with Paul Banks for three years. We live in my house, an ancient white Queenslander with a somewhat dilapidated paint job, at the end of Kaos Court. In the time Paul has lived here he's managed to accumulate more junk than I have. I think he believes more possessions is nine-tenths of the law. He has a kind of scruffy macho appeal, with long brown hair and a pair of slightly larger and sharper canines than most, which gives him a wolfish air. He frightens my mother when he smiles. Paul could be safely said to have gone to pot, not so much in the physical sense - he's six foot two, brawny, and with only the slightest amount of superfluous flesh on his toned abs - but more in the sense that pot is one of the few substances he believes to be environmentally sound. Coffee, tobacco, aspirin or any form of artificial stimulant will not pass his lips, but give him organically grown cannabis and he's anyone's.

Our sex life relies on the belief that there are two parts to every porno movie, me being the inevitable conclusion. Our love life, well, it's an oxymoron really. Besides, with my first name *Robyn* and his last name, *Banks*, we were doomed from the start. Our relationship is based on the fact I'm too polite not to listen to him and too concerned with where he'd go if I asked him to leave. Still, he's a nice enough guy.

The sound of Paul is a bubbling bong. No, that's not it, it's a middle of the night explosive fart, the kind that terminates sleep and involves a great deal of fearful bunching of the doona around your face as you wait for the mustard gas seep of his release. Which is fairly hypocritical of him; he's so hell-bent on curbing emissions, you'd think he'd lay off the organic, wheat-free liquorice in order to reduce his own. I do that, I don't associate people with names, but with noises. I also do things like interpret a person's character by observing the state of their wheelie bin.

I work the henna into my hair with the fork and stiff, plastic-gloved fingers, while Paul sucks through another cone. Between my hair and the half dozen incense sticks the smell should be sufficiently masked. The burnt rubber is enough to clog nostrils, hopefully enough for when, inevitably, someone rings the cops.

Both our pause buttons are pressed when there's a piercing scream from Kaos Court. Paul's the quickest to recover. He jumps to his feet, his teeth leering in the flickering TV light. He looks dangerously excited. He's always been into street theatre, and says Kaos Court has the best shows.

'Hoo hoo hoo, I gotta feeling this is gonna be a good one!'

He makes a leap for the door. I tear off my gloves, and despite the lateness of the hour, grab a flowered sunhat, jam it on my caked head and make off after him.

The road's dark, lit only by two street lamps, one of which is acting like a spotlight on a bizarre scene. Peter, dressed in a full dinner suit, is struggling with Bundy the Pit Bull. Bundy has Peter's right ankle in a vice-like grip and is trying to haul it under a bush, no doubt so he can chew the rest of him in peace. I know Peter already has thirteen raw stitches beneath his left, *\$40 a pair*, Ralph Lauren sock. Four days ago Bundy, Dave's pit bull, crash-tackled his left ankle with all nine hundred of his teeth, and it seems he has intentions of evening the score.

Peter's an accountant who can be counted on to attract attention with his method of hooking his rubbish bin to his M Class Mercedes 4WD with a custom designed clamp, *Doesn't come cheap at \$399*, and towing it up his twenty metre long driveway. He then swings down in his Giorgio Armani suit, *\$1200 a pop* with his Moschino tie, *costs an absolute fortune* swung over his shoulder.

Peter's noise is ka-ching! A monetary form of feng shui.

Jasmine, Peter's girlfriend, is the one doing the screaming. She's standing in the middle of the road in a shiny gold cocktail dress, wearing her legs shamelessly up to her armpits, hands gracefully suspended either side of her face, framing the screams like an Edvard Munch. When she runs out of air she looks uncertain as to her role, and so opens her mouth and emits another screech. I always thought she was a bit of a siren. Jasmine has long legs and a short fuse. She doesn't officially live in our street, but is here often enough to allow for a brief introduction. I can't stand her, she can't stand me, her sound is that of a hissing cat, accompanied by a hand gesture simulating a raised paw with all claws extended.

Dave, the beast's owner, is sitting in his bright blue Holden Commodore, his hand slung casually out the window. He's laughing. Paul slows to a stop. Bundy is monstrous and has the personality of Ted, only with more teeth and a huge power to weight ratio. Blood and saliva leach through Peter's trouser leg, pooling in his sock. The majority of the neighbours are standing stock still with horrified looks on their faces. I know they aren't as horrified about what's happening as what it is they're expected to do. Helping Peter would be the noble thing, but nobody likes Peter and nobody particularly feels like being main course to Peter's entrée. Peter is flailing his fists at Bundy's head. Bundy just shakes his head as he grinds his teeth deeper.

'Dave! Do something!' Paul yells at him.

'Nah, he's just playing.' Dave grins maliciously. If Bundy is Ted, then Dave is Hannibal Lecter without the cultured background. No one messes with Dave. Dave is too stupid to weigh up consequences and is just as likely to kill you before getting around to thinking about spending a lifetime in jail.

Dave's renting the place opposite mine. It's paint job makes mine look respectable. I'd tell you more about Dave and his rubbish bin, but considering he's soon to end up dead, I think I'll hang onto it just a bit longer. Besides, it's becoming clear that Dave is our common link, the guy who, through our mutual hatred, holds this neighbourhood together.

'Has anyone rung the cops?' I yell. They shake their heads and then simultaneously realise that if they're the one to make the call it will absolve them of any need to get in and get bloody. They all turn and start to run.

'Has anyone slapped Jasmine?' I screech over her screech. That pulls them up. There isn't one of them who wouldn't be happy to oblige. Jasmine has offended everyone ten times over, especially when she announced at a party that the neighbourhood was "just a cancerous growth of low-class nobodies." She must've heard the sudden gasp of appreciation as the slapping idea blooms in their minds. She sucks in her breath and the next crescendo. Peter, meanwhile, is on the verge of hitting the dirt. He's been hopping around on one leg for five minutes and he's wavering. Should he fall, he'll be dog meat.

'Anyone got a hose?' I yell.

'No!' screams Peter, 'This is a \$1,200 Armani suit!'

'He'll kill you!' Brendan Buchanan yells at him.

'I don't care! Don't damage the suit, just get this rabid bastard off me!'

Brendan and his wife Suzanne are a childless couple in their late fifties. They're most noted for their affinity with their dog and God. The dog was called 'Jezebel.' I say *was*, because their next-door neighbour, Dave, ran her over. She was a miniature poodle, best known and associated by all with the sound of her incessant yapping. No one knows for sure how intentional it was that she now resides in a small porcelain jar under a tree in the Buchanan's perfectly manicured backyard. No one's dared question Dave, but there's not a resident who isn't secretly glad the dog is dead. It's not often that Dave performs such a community service. Oh, and the Buchanan's rubbish bin is rinsed out with noxious chemicals on a two-weekly basis, and has three apple scented air fresheners hanging inside.

I see Dorothy's wheelbarrow in her front yard. I've an idea, it might not end up the least practical - not all of my ideas are - but someone has to do something. I take off, dodging their frozen forms. I grab the barrow, race back, flip it upside down, and with the aid of several grams of adrenalin, throw it over Bundy. The wheelbarrow makes a startled leap and a hollow howl of protest. I jump on top. The front rim of the wheelbarrow is pressing down hard on Bundy's snout. It must hurt. He reluctantly relinquishes his slobbery grip on Peter's leg. He tears the fabric as he snatches his head

back under the wheelbarrow. Peter backs off, falls over and lies there panting. I stand precariously as Bundy growls and snarls and twists beneath me.

'Hey! What the hell you doin' to my dog!' It's Dave, the other rabid beast.

I try to face him, balancing perilously on Dorothy's lurching wheelbarrow. You don't turn your back on dangerous animals like Dave.

'I said, what the fuck are you doin' to my dog. Get the fuck off of him!'

I search for Paul in the crowd; he's snarling too, canines flashing in the dark.

Peter's whimpering behind me, 'My suit, my suit, look at my bloody suit.'

I look at Dave and realise I'm fresh out of ideas. There is, however, no way I'm getting off the wheelbarrow. I'd be mincemeat.

Dave's in front of me, foaming at the mouth. He shoves me hard in the chest. I grab hold of the wheelbarrow's legs. My hat falls off. Dave's transfixed, his snarl turns to sneer.

'What the fuck! Is that shit on your head?'

He's so wired it's almost like he's tap dancing on the spot.

'Looks like shit, smells like SHIT! Paul shits on your head! Oh my God, you two are too fuckin' weird. See that everyone, this bitch has got shit in her hair. Rub it all over does he? Hey, Dorothy, you mangy bitch, you gotta see this, this is the real dirt, man, this is the dirt. This bitch lets Banks shit on her head. Rank man, too fuckin' rank.'

He looks around at the crowd, 'Whadda ya call those people who like playing in their own shit?'

'Coprophiliacs,' Gary the Geek supplies, just a little too quickly.

Gary lives in the rental at the bottom of the street. He spends his whole life in front of the computer. Apparently he's a programmer, but the only thing anyone's seen on his computer screen has been pornographic. He once told Paul he only eats sandwiches, and that after ham and cheese got boring, he became inventive. Now he eats popcorn and chocolate chip sandwiches, and Mars Bars wrapped in lettuce leaves, sandwiched between Wonder White. His only muscles are in his wrists and fingers; the rest of him has atrophied into scrawny white guy slump. His noise is the tap of computer keys. I can't say I've ever noticed the condition of his rubbish bin and can't imagine he has either. He and Dave go way back. They went to kindergarten together; Gary has internal and external scars to prove it. Dave used Gary as his side-kick at school. Dave was the perfect bully, and Gary the perfect victim.

Gary once told us he'd seen God. He'd stared at the sky so long God had emerged from it like one of those images that if you stare at long enough a picture pops out. He says God's pixelated, and he believes computers were really invented by God to communicate with us. So far he hasn't re-appeared in his Microsoft Office Suite.

Dave looks viciously pleased with himself, 'Yeah, a couple of meat loafers!'

As if on cue, some of the henna on my head landslides over my left eye. While I'm blinded Dave takes the opportunity to shove me square in the chest and I'm off the wheelbarrow and rolling.

By the time I look up Dave's on the ground and out for the count. Brendan Buchanan has taken my place riding the upside-down barking barrow, Paul's shaking his hand and blowing on his knuckles and Peter's on the ground sobbing inconsolably. A cop car pulls up. A blinding light passes over the scene and someone yells, 'What's going on here?'

I know when everything is wound up and the excitement's over, the only thing anyone will remember is the bit about me parading around Kaos Court with Paul's 'shit' in my hair.

I lie on the ground, look up at the stars and scream, 'It's henna!'

There's a bleary face looking at me from behind a flashlight. It's a cop; the light is shining straight in my eyes. I flinch.

'Who's Hannah?' he asks.

'It's henna,' I sigh. I can feel either rough stones or broken glass pressing into my spine. 'It's a natural hair colour derived from plants. It's the stuff in my hair,' I exasperate.

'Yeah? Looks and smells like the dog, um, shit on you.'

I sit up, my eyes wild.

'For Christ sake!' I point at my head, 'this crap is not shit, it's bloody henna!'

From a vertical position, and with the light from the flashlight no longer blinding me, I can get a better look at his face. He's cute, the kind of cute that'd normally make me sweet and smiley, really aware of how my lips press against my teeth, how my hair falls around my face. Right now, the only reason my lips are pressed against my teeth is because I've bitten half way through them, and my hair is falling around my face in big, fat, stenchy ropes. I glance past the cop and see an ambulance has pulled up; they have Dave in the recovery position and are preparing to put him on the stretcher. He looks like he's dead. Peter's being assisted into the ambulance, still blubbering. Another cop is talking to Paul. Paul's shaking his fists trying to get his point across; the cop's looking at his swollen knuckles.

'Calm down,' he says, 'you're under arrest.'

'What for?'

'Apart from assault it appears you are under the influence of drugs. You'll have to accompany us to the station.'

Paul's livid. 'Have you heard *anything* I've said?' The cop manages to look bored, with just the right amount of condescension to infuriate Paul still further. I turn to look at Dave again. His face is turned away from everyone, and I'm the only one who sees him open his eyes and give me a wink.

'He winked at me!' I squeal. I'm on my feet and over there. The cop's behind me, reaching for my arms before I can do anything. What I'd planned was simple. I was going to shove him off the stretcher.

'Prod him! Go on, prod him! There's nothing wrong with him, he's pretending!' I hiss.

The ambulance driver and the cop, who has me pressed up against his chest, exchange a look. The cop drags me away. When he lets me go I turn around to see I've smeared him with henna. It looks like muddy red blood across his chest.

'Ugh! You're going to have to get that out real quick.'

I sneak him an apologetic look. He looks down at his shirt and shrugs. That one simple gesture inspires me to like him even if he won't let me prod Dave.

'Miss, I suggest you calm down. You're not helping things here. We'll get your statement shortly. First, I suggest you go wash that shit out of your hair.'

'What's the time?' I ask.

He looks at his watch and tells me. I sigh.

'It's already Ronald McDonald orange.'

He suppresses a smirk.

Behind me I hear the other cop congratulate Brendan on his heroic capture of the dog. No one seems to recall I was the one with the wheelbarrow. An engine starts up; I get a flash of Paul, head back against the car seat as it drives him away.

'That your boyfriend?' the cute cop asks in such a way I'm not sure whether this is an official question or not. I find myself wishing I could say no. I resign myself to a slight nod.

On my way back to the house I notice Harry the Hermit's Venetian blinds twitching spasmodically and the rounded end of his telescope poking through.

Rubbish day is the only time I see Harry the Hermit crab. He scurries out at 4am to take his rubbish to the street. Then he retreats to his brick veneer house with its permanently drawn blinds, state of the art security system and three huge reverse-cycle air conditioners, whose only known state is *on*. It drives Paul, who's big on environmental issues, crazy. No one around here has ever been invited in. None of us is likely to want to. I associate Harry with the sound of a door slamming shut.

I disappear into the shower where I spend fifteen minutes trying to scour the cowpat out of my hair. It's supposed to be mahogany. Instead I've managed six shades of fire engine. I shrug into a black satin robe and towel dry my head. I reach for the blow dryer. Only when it's dry will I know the full horror. I stand in front of the mirror and study my reflection dubiously. I have Slavic cheekbones courtesy of an unknown father, along with his brown, puppy-dog eyes and long, should really be brown, but I torture into various shades of red, hair. I wear headscarves on bad hair days, and dangly earrings are a given. I'm a part time masseuse, part time Tarot card reader. But I'm not into flaky new ageism; there're no dolphins in my house and as for feng shui... I see myself as a romantic, but with a big touch of realism. I eat tofu, I love mung beans, I have an interest in eastern philosophy, yoga, and own lots of Buddhist artefacts usually found submerged beneath Paul's environmental magazines. I love quiet nights by myself, in the bath, reading a good book by candlelight, and sucking on a bottle of cheap, unwooded chardonnay. My one misgiving is that, while I can see into other people's futures, I can't see into my own. If things change in my life it's never as a direct result of anything I do. I think this spineless quality comes from the father I never knew who, after impregnating my mother, decided life would be easier in the Navy and took off for shores unknown. Mum's fairly circumspect about it, but I have a chip on my shoulder. When it's just me and my chardonnay I get morose about the whole

thing. I guess that brings me to my noise. My noise is a heartfelt sigh. My rubbish bin is a different matter – it projects the face I show to the rest of the world. I've painted a big smiley face in neon pink with *have a happy day!* on its side. I never clean it, and I usually get it to the side of the road two seconds before the truck arrives. I always say 'have a happy day!' to the driver, even if I'm two seconds late and it's the rear end of the truck I'm talking to. The only thing worse than being a schmuck is knowing you're a schmuck and not doing something about it.

When I leave the bathroom, it's to find the cute cop sitting on the couch staring at Paul's bong. I shudder. I take a seat beside him and stare at it too. I'm peeved that Paul's making me look bad in front of the cute cop. I'm peeved that I've been caught with a cowpat on my head and I've been stupid enough to do something nice, like try save Peter's worthless life and his precious suit. Other people know how not to get involved, what's my problem? All around me people have to struggle to become involved, while my whole life it's been an effort to resist. Doing nothing is easy. When in doubt, stand still. So your neighbour is about to be masticated by a mastiff? Big deal; turn on the TV, turn up the sound, change the channel. I resolve to stiffen my spine.

The cute cop heaves a sigh, reaches over, drops a tea towel over the incriminating evidence and turns to me with a weary smile. He's seriously drop-dead cute. I find myself looking for wedding rings. There aren't any. It doesn't mean anything.

'Sorry, the door was open.' he explains his unexpected appearance on my couch.

'Your hair,' he smiles, 'it's wild.' There's that unmistakable spark in his eye. I wonder whether to respond by sparking up too. But I have no energy for this. It's midnight in the garden of evil. No doubt Dorothy is on the phone right now relaying my dirty debut street revue.

Dorothy has the distinction of being one of the few people who aspires to be born and to die in the same house. She's old blood around here. She knows everyone, and everything about everyone. The things she most likes to know are the things you'd least like her to. Everyone tolerates Dorothy; be rude to Dorothy and the gossip gets turned up a notch. Last year she started a rumour that my preferred method of contraception was based on the alignment of planets such as Pluto, and strange incantations, along with liberal squirts of lemon juice. Dorothy's sound is a disdainful sniff.

Dorothy's rubbish bin was once nondescript, but is much more easily identified since our neighbour, Dave, took it for a quick spin tied behind his car with a full week's rubbish inside. I feel sorry for the poor, scratched, dented and otherwise misshapen beast, as it bore the brunt of a Dorothy inspired rumour that Dave had once been fined for sexually interfering with a kangaroo. According to Paul, the injustice of it all made Dave hopping mad.

And somewhere Paul is being tested for ten different drugs and is being read his rights. No doubt he'll use his phone call to ring me. I'm not sure how I got saddled with all this responsibility.

'How's Dave?' I ask.

'He's at the hospital getting his head read.'

'That shouldn't take long, he's a few chapters short of a novel.'

I'm rewarded with a brief twitch of his mouth; a quick dimpling, and it's all over.

'How's Peter's leg?' I ask.

'It'll take less stitches to fix than his trousers. In which he has more interest.'

'It's Armani,' I tell him.

He nods. '\$1200 worth.'

'Yes. No doubt he's insured; he'd insure a scab in case it got knocked off.' This time he ups the stakes and grins.

'Would you like to give me your version of events?' he asks.

'What part are you most interested in? The part where I single-handedly deal with a rabid dog, or the part where I get accused of Kaka-whatever.'

'Coprophilia.'

'Yeah, that one.' Suddenly, I start to laugh. But it's not like it's me. There's this silly bitch in the room sniggering, even on occasion snorting. I keep it up till the cute cop gets uncomfortable.

'Tell me about Dave,' he interrupts.

How can I explain to him the strange nature of this neighbourhood? How it's made up by a group of fatally flawed people. Together we make a discordant cacophony of mutually antagonistic sounds.

'I hate him, everyone hates him,' I say. 'Everyone just wishes he would hurry up and get dead.'