

False Start

By Amy Wolter

Isabelle lay in her bed staring at an unfamiliar ceiling in an unfamiliar apartment. She followed the lines of the decorative cornice with tired eyes and observed the moonlight slipping through the crack in the torn curtain. Tucked under the covers of the feather duvet she enjoyed the sensation of pressure on her body, her muscles tight from the unexpectedly long day on her feet and her mind weary from the years and weeks of uncertainty which had followed her around.

From where Issi lay she looked over to the small pile of boxes comprising predominantly of cheap furniture and bare essentials haphazardly packed in her rush to leave earlier in the day. There had been a raised eyebrow when the man with the van stared at the belongings alongside the disproportionately large amount of ski equipment. Multiple pairs of skis, three pairs of boots, travel bags weighed down with old airplane tags clearly owned by someone too busy to remove them. She already knew it was worth more than the entirety of anything else she owned but these things tend to happen when you are an Olympic hopeful and so when the mover reached out to help with her ski bag after they had arrived at her new home, she redirected him to the less-valuable items and simply said, 'I'll do these.'

The move was accelerated days earlier when her now ex-housemate had been caught red-handed attempting to steal a set of skis. With little thought of the consequences, she had chased him out of her bedroom in the city share house and along the hallway knowing full well he was headed to the pawn shop only two blocks away. The housemate who was slowed by the heavy pair of skis and a set of poles charged out to the back yard, only to see Issi seconds behind him. In a fit of rage, he dumped the skis in the long grass and threw the ski poles, javelin style, over

the fence and into the next-door neighbours' garden narrowly missing an unsuspecting gardener before he made a quick dash down the driveway barefoot, not to be seen again that day.

Adrenalin ran through Issi's veins, a feeling she knew well, and so she headed for the boundary fence to see where the ski poles had landed.

'This yours?' The gardener called over the fence staring in her direction as he ran his hand along the smooth surface of the ski pole.

Issi's cheeks were red with anger, 'I am so sorry!' she called back as she climbed on the fence reaching out for the pole in anticipation of its return. The gardener approached the fence and instead grabbed her hand and shook it.

'I'm Eddie', he said.

'Issi,' she said quickly. The red from her cheeks turned to pink and her breathing slowed as she returned a smile to match his warm sun kissed manner. 'You have my ski pole?' she said releasing his hand and reached out further.

'That guy needs to be reported,' Eddie said.

'Yes, I know, he's an asshole,' she replied in defeat.

'He your boyfriend or something?'

'No, God no,' Issi replied, 'just a housemate... the worst kind. I'm in the process of finding a new place to live,' she sighed.

'Ok good, cos it doesn't look like a safe place, each time I come here to garden there's something going on over there,' Eddie said with concern.

'It's not great, but there are others living here so most of the time we try and stay out of his way. I'm at work mostly.'

‘You need help finding a place to live? I know somewhere, it’s not in great shape, but it’s cheap and safe.’

‘What are you, some kind of fairy godfather rent tycoon or something?’ She said wondering how someone so young could possibly own his own property and having little patience for bullshit.

Eddie smiled, ‘No definitely not. It was my grandmother’s place, I couldn’t sell it after she passed away so I rented it out, some dickhead has trashed it and I have been trying slowly to fix it up, it’s yours if you want it.’

‘Can I see it first?’ She asked knowing this was the best offer she had had in weeks.

‘Of course,’ Eddie said pulling out a business card for his mowing business. ‘Just give me a call in the next few days, we will get something sorted out.’

‘Ok, thanks,’ she said to Eddie as he handed her the ski pole and she jumped off the fence collecting the skis from the grass on her way back.

She returned to the now empty house and closed the door of her bedroom. It was time to move and without even thinking, she began packing clothes into the suitcase which hadn’t had a chance to gather any dust. As the last of her clothes squashed into the bag, she heard the front door close and she hoped it wasn’t him, back already.

‘Issi! You home?’ She heard the call from the other side of the door. She released the stale air from her lungs.

‘Yeah! Sorry Dave, I’m a bit busy right now, be out in a moment.’

‘Ok, I got pizza, there’s enough here for you too if you want - Vego - I remembered,’ Dave said louder now as the sound came directly from the other side of the door. Issi sighed, relieved to know she would not be alone - for now.

Dave was Issi’s ex-boyfriend, ex-team mate, soon to be ex-housemate. He had made it to the Olympics two years ago when Issi had not. Despite taking her into the house a few months back when she was looking for a fresh start, Issi soon realised it was a poisoned chalice, if only she had known Dave had “more than a housemate” on his mind. Still, feelings of guilt crept in, like she owed him or something, but self-preservation was a life skill she had learnt early and had needed regularly.

She grew up quickly, with her teenage years lost to chasing winters and endless competitions. Her career had begun at the local mountain near to her family’s farmhouse, during a time when she had friends and had trained and skied the mountain like they owned it. Issi remembered the late afternoon hot chocolates at the shop attached to the Chalet where the rich would spend the winter. But her friends moved on, or turned their attention elsewhere, and by the time Issi had been sixteen, she was training hard and her dedication was noticed by the race club leader and soon after she qualified for the national championships and then the travelling began. Her parents were always thousands of kilometres away only interested in her latest time or whether she had kept up with distance education - more focussed on what it was costing them than her welfare. Rarely there was good news on either front and she finally abandoned both her education and the competition.

She arrived home six months ago to little fanfare spending most of her days in her childhood bedroom on the farm. Her parents were now with a busy life of their own, and so that is when Dave had drawn her to the big city to live the share-house life. The day she had left the farmhouse in her beat-up VW, her parents had cautioned, ‘don’t expect the city to be kind to you...’

Issi stood in the middle of her room, with some of the packing done, she breathed deep and readied herself to break the news of her departure to Dave.

* * *

On this first night in her new place she lay there watching the moonlight under the duvet, wondering what she was doing with her life. Awake and in a heightened state of alert she listened to the sounds outside the door. The noise of the cars on the main highway metres away rushing in each direction, the rev of a car in the car park below and the group of boys not much younger than her remarking on the performance of said car. One had offered to help earlier, but Issi put the wall straight up, she wanted to be left alone, a hard task given it was a sunny Saturday and all and sundry were out and about, tending to their little courtyard gardens or rushing here or there. That was until the neighbour who eventually introduced herself as Alma poked her head around the corner through the open door of Issi’s apartment.

‘Yoo-hoo!’ the cheery voice sung into the dark space not yet resembling anything liveable.

Issi, startled by the unexpected visitor, had been a million miles away taking a moments rest on the edge of a box doing its best to imitate a chair in the middle of the lounge room.

She turned towards the voice and couldn't make out the figure, it was a dark shadow with bright rays of sunlight behind her.

'Hello, can I help you?' Issi asked formally.

'Oh no dear, I am your neighbour and I am just popping over to see if you need anything.'

As Issi's eyes adjusted to the bright light, she made out the elderly woman who was in her mid-eighties at least. She had a spark in her eye letting Issi know straight away she was as sharp as a tack.

Issi replied, 'Ummm, not really, I don't have much stuff. I would offer you a cuppa but I am afraid its BYO tea and milk.'

'Well, dear, we can't have that, come on then, I'm next door we'll go to my place and I will make you a proper cup of tea - you look like you could do with a break.' Alma looked at Issi in such a way that she Issi followed her the few metres to the next-door apartment, both comforted by her directness and knowing she had little choice.

Issi had little experience speaking with anyone older than her own parents. She had never seen any of her grandparents - the painful result of having parents who were long disconnected from their own families and the isolation of rural life. She sat in the small kitchen with the steaming hot tea and digestive biscuit in front of her, her unease noticeable with anxiety firing in all cylinders. For the most part, she had no idea what to say or where a conversation might even begin with someone who's age was so vastly different from her own. Thankfully however, this was no concern for Alma whose abilities in conversation had always been a strength.

'Now that Eddie is a sweet boy for putting you up in Maude's apartment.' She said taking Issi by surprise.

‘So, you know Eddie then?’ Issi said quietly.

‘Of course dear, I was best friends with his grandmother for over fifty years. Maude and I moved to this apartment complex many years ago so we could be close together after our husbands passed on. Now she is gone too. Shame about the last tenant though, Eddie has been trying to fix the terrible mess ever since he was moved on.’

‘It’s okay in there,’ Issi said. ‘I’ve seen worse and had even worse housemates.’

‘We all have to start somewhere, my dear and everything takes time, but safety first and you’ll not find a safer place to live in the whole of this part of the city. Most of the residents are retired and look out for each other. The young boy’s downstairs are a good sort too - the type to help carry the shopping which is very helpful to me these days as my weary legs struggle with the stairs, they offered to trade me one of the downstairs apartments but I told them I will never give up the view I have.’

Issi turned her head to the direction Alma was staring but she couldn’t make out much beyond the rooftops and a distant parkland - definitely not the Swiss alps... But Alma already knew what Issi was thinking and went on to explain.

‘We scattered my husband, Bill’s ashes in View Park behind those houses, whenever I look out the window I can see him and still feel him near me,’ she said pointing towards the parkland.

Issi didn’t know what to say so she sat there for a moment thinking how she couldn’t possibly know what Alma felt. She had never loved or lost and the best relationship she had ever managed was casual sex with Dave on the circuit. They had both known it was purely a stress relief strategy - jet lagged, have sex, get to sleep. Nervous anxiety about the next event, have sex, feel relief, perform well - well, Dave did anyway, her efforts had got him a gold medal at the

world championships while she had crashed out in the first heat. Alma and Issi could not have been from further corners on the planet and yet here she was.

‘I’m sorry,’ was all she could muster and wondered if it was enough, she had no experience with these kinds of conversations.

‘Oh, my dear,’ Alma said returning her gaze to Issi with an unexpectedly large smile, ‘do not feel sorry for me, I got fifty years of a wonderful life with Bill. Oh, the things we did,’ she said with a song in her voice. ‘We had such a busy fruitful life. I am now at the end and have the joy of knowing much of everything - you my dear, are just at the beginning of your journey and it sounds like today might be your first step into a new chapter. What do the next few pages have in store?’ she asked with such genuine interest it caught Issi off guard, she felt the wall going up again and her jaw clamped, but this didn’t faze Alma in the slightest - she seemed to have all the time in the world.

Issi breathed deep and began to relax into the silence, ‘I, I, I don’t know....’

Alma reached for a nearby tissue box - her years in this world meant she could see the tears long before Issi’s body could initiate the chemical reaction to result in such a deluge. When it finally did arrive, they came thick and fast like a summer thunderstorm dripping in large splotches on to Alma’s kitchen table. Issi’s could feel her heart breaking into tiny pieces as her whole body shook as the cries became uninhibited. Alma waited patiently knowing the process that needed to happen, even with a life blessed with the love of a husband and family, she too knew much of what Issi was feeling and in her experience, waiting was always the best medicine. She knew Issi needed to go through this and Alma felt a sense of privilege that she could be there for this young woman clearly lonely and scared.

As Issi's weeping slowly settled into rhythm, Alma guided her away from the kitchen table the short distance to her couch and offered her a crochet blanket. Issi lay on her side she could see the sun slowly descending and another day could be marked off as done and dusted. She wrapped the blanket around her neck and used her free hand to wipe away the last of the tears and through the blur she could see Alma slowly potter around the kitchen. Within half an hour she had made something from nothing - a sweet smelling vegetable soup and toast with lashings of butter.

'Come and fill your belly,' Alma insisted calling over to Issi who had returned to a tenuous place of calm.

She didn't reply, but instead stood and slowly returned to the table to eat and take comfort in the safety and warmth of Alma's hospitality.

'Tomorrow is another day my dear Issi, do not despair', she said between sips of the soup.

'Thank-you Alma.' Issi said feeling a strange sense of comfort.

'Good, now I am not finished with you yet, tomorrow we call Eddie and together we get your new apartment back to its former glory, something Maude would have been proud of. Eddie can bring the paint and you and I will find something for you to sit on from my friend's op-shop. Then while you are scrubbing the bathroom, I will bake the scones.'

* * *

Issi's mind was still racing with thoughts that both comforted her and others that didn't. She covered her ear with the flannelette sheet and the thoughts of Alma's hospitality faded and a far darker character emerged she was not sure if she would ever be able to shake.

Two months earlier, Dave's out of the blue text message felt like a free pass from the farm which was beginning to resemble a jail cell and the memories of her unbalanced relationship with him had long faded. She had never phoned anyone quicker in her life and by the afternoon she was in her car with every morsel she owned and by dinner she was on the doorstep of something looking more like a frat house in the inner suburbs of the city rather than the modern organised situation which Dave had described over the phone, but it had a room for her and the rent was reasonable so she would take it until she got on her feet. Tomorrow, she would look for a job.

Dave ensured Issi felt at home, welcoming her into the house and helping her settle in while later in the evening the other member of the house emerged, a little like his day was just starting.

'Issi,' Dave called down the hall.

Issi entered the kitchen and smiled at the two men, each with a beer in hand.

'Zane, this is Issi, she is joining at the house for a while, 'Issi, meet Zane.'

'Err, hi,' Issi said feeling overwhelmed and shy all of a sudden.

'Sup,' Zane replied barely registering her presence and continued to drink his beer which looked like it might have been his first meal of the day.

'Well, it's been a big day and I still have some unpacking to do, I might leave you boys to it for now,' she said politely excusing herself and returned back to her room.

As the next month passed, she kept to herself as best she could, but Dave's advances were tiresome and the share house had the feeling of being in a pressure cooker. One afternoon, she

had returned from her shift at the local deli, to interrupt an argument between Dave and Zane about missing money. Dave insisted on keeping a bills jar on the top of the fridge and everyone was to put their rent in the jar by the first of the month. Issi always waited till the last minute, she couldn't risk having her contribution pilfered and this was the unfortunate scenario the boys were arguing over. Zane was out of work and Issi had no idea how he got money, and frankly didn't want to know. The boys did not resolve the issue that night but Dave could afford to replace the missing money and Issi guessed Zane knew it. But things started to feel more personal when Issi discovered her favourite gold earrings were missing and she knew it was time to move on.

A week after the missing earring incident, Issi returned home from work to find Zane digging through her cupboard, hungry as an animal desperate for its next meal. She stood in the doorway of the small room shocked at the sight of the contents of her wardrobe being flung in all directions.

'Hey, what the fuck!' Issi called out. 'Dave!' She called down the hall into an otherwise silent house.

Zane had his hands on Issi's ski gear now, each item worth a small fortune and she could see the dollar signs in his dilated pupils.

'Oh, no you bloody don't! I'm calling the police, get away from my stuff, leave it alone!' She yelled but Zane had snared a ski pole and held it like a weapon.

'Get out of my way,' he snarled and pushed her to the floor with such force she felt winded.

'Give me my stuff back!' she screamed after getting her breath back. She quickly pulled herself from the floor and bolted down the hallway with no intention of giving up. She pursued him through the house and out into the open backyard until Zane who could see the game was up

dropped the skis and rather than accept defeat, flung the ski pole javelin style over the fence before bailing barefoot down the driveway. She would have no idea of how close the pole had come to hitting the gardener over the other side of the fence.

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Issi closed her eyes still under the covers as she thought of Zane and the non-stop apologies from Dave in the aftermath. So, when Eddie had made the offer that day over the fence, she didn't waste any time in calling him the next morning.

Issi listened to the ringing as the phone connected to Eddie the gardener from next door. There was an honesty in his face, something which was generally lacking from the boys she had known on the circuit. Not to say the boys on the circuit were not honest, but the collective determination of competitors participating in international events meant most of the time it was every person for themselves. Eddie didn't give her that sense at all.

'Eddie's gardens,' Eddie said cheery and business-like.

'Eh, hi Eddie, it's me, Issi from yesterday,' Issi said with an uncharacteristic nervous wobble.

'Hi Issi, how are you after yesterday's events? Have you thought any more about taking a look at my rental?' He asked.

'I have... when can I see it?'

'You are actually in luck, I just finished a job. I will swing by in about ten minutes to pick you up. I am warning you though, the place is still a bit of a mess.'

‘Ok, let me be the judge, and... thanks,’ she said trying to hide her sense of trepidation, knowing she needed to trust him in order to get out of the hole she was in.

They didn’t need to drive far and so it wasn’t until they arrived at the apartments that Eddie spoke beyond pleasantries.

‘I am warning you again,’ he said still holding the steering wheel. ‘It’s not in the best shape.’ Issi turned her head slightly in order to see his face in the corner of her eye, he clenched his jaw and the bright blue eyes which had caught her attention a day earlier were now much stormier.

‘Stop stressing,’ Issi said unlocking her seatbelt and opening the passenger door. ‘Are you going to show me or what?’ She said, wanting to get this part over and done with.

Eddie chuckled under his breath, and shook off the dark memories of his beloved grandmothers trashed apartment. ‘Yeah, come on.’ He said as he directed her towards a narrow stairway which split the building into two halves.

Issi and Eddie walked together across the forecourt and she noticed how quiet and relaxed he was and what comfort it gave her. Eddie was a man of few words so when they reached the top of the stairs he simply touched her elbow to direct her to the apartment on offer.

He opened the door and the darkness flooded out. Issi could see there was work to be done but it wasn’t unliveable. As she stepped across the threshold into the main lounge room, she noticed the small kitchen/living room and a bedroom with en suite. Holes in the plaster walls, yes. Broken kitchen drawer, yes. Curtains in disarray - noted. But aside from the cosmetic turbulence, she knew immediately she could live here for now and be safe.

Eddie couldn't read her. He didn't want to pressure her either. He simply rested his shoulder against the front door with a feeling like he was doing a good thing, and he had an overwhelming urge to not let her go. He watched her as she looked around opening cupboards and inspecting the bathroom, her long sun-bleached hair and athletic figure were not lost on him but girls had never been a priority, when he wasn't landscaping, he was at the beach on a surfboard.

Issi stared out the kitchen window and across the suburban rooftops, 'I'll take it,' she said turning to face Eddie. 'What are you charging?'

Eddie looked up from his mid-air stare and a small flutter of joy reached into his heart. With a smile he couldn't quite suppress, he replied, 'How's \$150 a week sound?'

Issi, surprised, turned to look at him as the sun lit the room momentarily, '\$150! That's... you... I can't possibly pay that little, they are charging more at the share house,' she said with concern he might be selling himself a little short - well, a lot.

'Please don't worry about the money Issi, I don't owe anything on this place and I want someone here who will care for it and be a good neighbour - something tells me you will be. And if you feel really bad, then a little bit of time to help me fix up the place would be appreciated, but that's up to you. We can leave it as it is, or we can give it a new coat of paint, fix some of these holes - it's my job I know, so whatever you want,' he said avoiding eye contact and self-conscious all of a sudden.

'Well, my experience with home improvements is non-existent so I might be a bit shit, you know, I don't know how to fix stuff and all.'

‘That’s okay,’ he said liking her directness, his smile returning again. ‘I will show you, it’s not too hard to slap a coat of paint on the walls, I will have you up to scratch in no time. When do you want move?’

Issi made her way towards the door, ‘Is tomorrow too soon? I have to get out of that place,’ she said with renewed hope and an accidental eye contact in the moment which had both of them pause, but as Eddie’s phone pinged with a text message, the mutual sense of closeness was over all too soon.

Eddie held the key in his hand and offered it to Issi who felt the warm touch of his rough hands in the exchange and the subsequent goosebumps ripple over the tops of her arms.

‘It’s all yours - welcome home,’ he said.

* * *

Issi woke the next morning to the sun replacing the moon - streaming through the rip in the curtain. The clock showed 10am and she was surprised at how well she had slept. She took a moment to enjoy the quiet calm of having a place of your own before rising to dress and brew coffee to see what the day would bring.

She opened the windows and the front door to let the fresh air and warmth of the day in and could see Eddie in the carpark unpacking boxes from his surfboard laden ute.

‘Eddie!’ She called from the front door and he waved back.

Alma opened her door and shuffled towards Issi’s place with a plate of scones as promised, ‘Good morning Issi,’ she pipped as she invited herself into Issi’s apartment.

Issi giggled as she greeted Eddie at the door, 'Thank-you for Alma,' she said, 'I don't think I will ever go hungry again.'

'She is a gem,' Eddie replied with a wink knowing that Alma would keep an eye out for Issi and vice versa. 'And these are for you,' he said handing her a rainbow of cards, 'your choice for the walls - I want you to feel like this place is yours, and I will teach you how to paint.'

'I would like that,' Issi said, her cheeks developing a rosy hue.

'Come on you two!' Alma called from the kitchen, 'morning tea!'

Issi and Eddie headed into the lounge room and joined Alma for coffee and fresh scones. They talked about colours and where repairs were needed, Alma giving all the advice and Issi and Eddie taking it on board.

Not long after the plate of scones were demolished, Eddie began clear the table but Alma insisted, 'No, no dear, I will do that. I see you are heading out surfing today - now Issi here looks as pale as a ghost, you should take her along with you to get some sun?' Alma said matter of fact.

Eddie's eyes lit up and he turned to her, 'I don't mind,' he said trying to read her, 'I usually go alone, but if you don't mind listening to Pearl Jam on the way you can come along.'

Alma rolled her eyes at his noncommittal response - she was trying her best here!

'I like Pearl Jam,' Issi responded with a smile, 'I will go find my bathers and a towel.'

'Excellent!' Alma responded making her way to the kitchen with a cheeky smile knowing that two hearts were better than one.

As the midday sun beamed from high along the open stretch of highway, Issi and Eddie began their journey towards the coast. Issi hadn't seen the ocean in years and dove into the warm ocean greeting it like she would have an old friend. As she starred up at the endless blue sky, she felt ready to live a simpler life with Alma and Eddie close by and for the first time in a long time, she was relieved to admit her next chapter had already begun.