

The First Edition

by Naomi Manuell

Winner: Body in the Library category

Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2024

The First Edition

The afternoon is oppressively hot and the Esplanade heaves with cars and people dawdling back from the beach. I arrive early, then waste a quarter of an hour finding a spot where I don't have to pay for parking. St Kilda in a heat wave is the last place on earth I want to be on a Saturday. Not to mention I'm snowed under with marking which I'll need to finish tomorrow. It's just not fair.

I squint up at the shiny apartment block that faces the beach. My skin is foul and sticky from the walk and my makeup is melting off my face. The last time I was at St Kilda beach, these apartments were still under construction. That would have been six months ago, the dead of winter. I'd met Joey at one of the beach cafés to fix up the last of our bills. We ordered coffee, agreed on a final figure, then Joey got out his phone and transferred me some money. We walked outside under the feeble winter sun and he made some bland comment about how calm the water looked and then we said goodbye. He was wearing his old winter coat. The only coat he owns.

Passing through the apartment's main entrance, it's cool and quiet. A blond, ruddy-faced lad looks up from the reception desk and says, 'Alright, darlin?' in the over-confident tone of an English backpacker who'd rather be on Love Island. He approaches, sunburned biceps bulging from a white polo shirt tucked into matching shorts, which I assume is his uniform because you wouldn't choose to dress like that.

'I'm with the caterers,' I say.

He looks me up and down and checks my name off a list. I catch a whiff of lime-scented cologne and suppress a smirk when I see his name tag: Ollie. Executive Concierge. Tonight's job should be easy, a party of twelve for cocktails and a sit-down dinner. But as Dale, my boss, says, 'the smaller the party, the bigger the fuck up'. You're more invisible at crowded functions like weddings. Smaller events at private homes are trickier. Guests are more likely to notice something they don't like and complain. Which is why Dale always books me on these shifts. He knows I'm teaching full-time now, but I'm also very experienced and I can't afford to say no to the extra money.

Ollie ushers me to the lift, which opens with a cheerful 'ding!' He reaches inside, swipes his security card and sends me up to the penthouse. Moments later, the same 'ding' echoes as I step out of the lift and into a cavernous entranceway, dominated by a staircase that twists upwards like a curl of smoke. Tony, the barman, already

wearing his shirt and black tie, bustles out of a doorway carrying a crate of glasses.

'Kitchen's through there,' he says without stopping, then hurries upstairs to the roof terrace. I follow a corridor and find the kitchen, which overlooks St Kilda Esplanade ten floors below. Chef has her back to the dazzling view as she checks boxes of produce stacked up on a stainless-steel bench. Her name is Tamsin, but she insists on 'Chef' when we're working. She looks pointedly at her watch when she sees me even though I'm early and we both know it.

* * *

Chef is a nuggety wombat of a woman in her early forties and often bad-tempered. There's a dark-eyed young kitchen hand working with her. He's tweezering micro herbs onto canapes and I nod politely at him. Chef doesn't bother introducing us but I take a guess he's Colombian. There's a lot of Colombians in hospitality these days and Dale seems to have most of them on his books.

Strands of grey hair escape from Chef's greasy bun. She runs a cloth around the back of her neck and indicates a set of doors:

'They just delivered the flowers. They're in the laundry.'

'And my uniform?'

'In the library. You'll need to change in there too. The host doesn't want us using the guest bathrooms.'

'Have you met him yet?'

Chef blinks like she doesn't understand.

'The host,' I say, 'what's he like?'

'Ryan? Yeah, he's fine,' she inspects the contents of a foam box packed with seafood and crushed ice. 'He just stepped out. Some kind of drama with his ex-wife's dog. Did Dale tell you the party tonight is to celebrate his divorce?'

He did. According to *The Daily Mail*, the divorce was bitter and Ryan Gardiner was forced to downsize to the penthouse of his newly completed luxury development on St Kilda Esplanade. Bitter? Don't make me laugh. I moved back to my mum's when Joey and I split. This place is a palace.

I begin by setting up the dining room, which also looks out over the beach through floor to ceiling windows the length of the room. Looking down at the Esplanade, I can almost feel the asphalt melting under people's feet. But up here with the double glazing and the aircon whispering, it's like I'm floating on a cloud. I pull out my phone to look at Dale's instructions.

'I want a stealth wealth neo boho St Barts beach party vibe,' he's written.

I have no idea what that means. I just want things to look crisp, which is easy, because all the décor is white, from the rugs on the floor to the light fittings that hover ethereally over the long table.

I smooth out the white tablecloths and place vases of white peonies at intervals along the middle, then arrange the candles.

I unpack plates and cutlery from the delivery crates and lay out twelve place settings, carefully measuring the space around them the way Dale showed me years ago. Same with the glassware. Finally, referring to the seating plan, I lay out place cards with each guest's name especially printed in gothic blackletter font.

Just as I'm putting the last card in its place, Ryan Gardiner appears in the doorway with a golden retriever on a dog lead. He's not as handsome as the airbrushed photos in *Good Weekend Magazine* would suggest. On the other hand, it's an improvement on the paparazzi shot of him stumbling dishevelled out of Totti's after the split from his wife.

'Hey, I'm Ryan,' he drawls, unclipping the dog. It's a distinctly Australian accent, but one smoothed out by private schools and ski seasons at Courchevel. He's tanned and skinny in the way a lot of rich people are. Like all they do is go to the Maldives and eat steamed bok choy. His white linen shirt fits perfectly, as do the faded jeans that hang loosely from his slim hips. His sandy hair is damp from perspiration and his face, flushed from the heat outside, is covered with greying stubble.

I introduce myself, but he's already looking through me and surveying the table like a General inspecting his troops. I doubt he'll remember my name, but the golden retriever's tail begins wagging furiously when I speak. The burly dog waddles toward me, greeting me like an old friend and its broad backside swings wildly from side to side as it pants heavily with its tongue hanging out.

‘Table looks great, thanks,’ Ryan flashes a well-practiced smile. ‘Could you do me a massive solid, though? All those crates? Could you stash them in the library down the hall?’

‘No problem,’ and I bend down to pat the old dog. ‘What a sweetie’.

‘You reckon?’ he says, ‘My ex’s idea of a parting shot. I specifically told her I didn’t want him. So of course, she goes and dumps him on me this morning. Just before she gets on the plane up to Byron.’ My hand melts into the dog’s silky butterscotch fur. I scratch behind his ears, and he lifts his snout, closing his eyes in blissful appreciation.

‘What a good boy,’ I say.

‘He’d better be. It’s going to cost me a bomb to courier him to Byron on Monday.’

‘Wait – you don’t want him?’ I’m incredulous.

‘It’s not what we agreed,’ he replies, peevishly. ‘Typical Amber. Serves me right for marrying crazy.’

The dog has gentle, cloudy eyes and white fuzz around his muzzle.

‘How old is he?’ I ask. He screws up his face like he’s trying to remember, then abruptly loses interest.

‘I just brought his bed up. It’s by the lift. Could you stash him in the library tonight as well? The last thing I need is him slobbering on everyone’

The dog follows me to the kitchen, wheezing like an old man. I fill a plastic container with water as his tail pounds loudly against the dishwasher in delight. His tongue is like a giant koi fish as it thrashes about, lapping loudly and splashing water everywhere. When he’s finished, he trails behind me as I pick up his bed by the lift and carry it all the way to the library.

The penthouse library is bigger than the flat Joey and I used to share. There’s floor to ceiling books and even one of those brass rails with a ladder that runs along the top of the shelves. The windows face towards the city and the skyline gleams orange in the late afternoon sun. In a far corner of the room is a long leather couch and a coffee table neatly stacked with books on architecture and design. I drag the dog’s bed behind the couch and call for him to follow.

‘It’s nice and quiet here,’ I say. He looks at me steadily with trusting eyes, then there’s a ‘pfffft’ from his backside. As he steps onto the bed, the air fills with a rotting stench. He circles around to find his comfy spot, then sinks down with a groan of relief. When I return minutes later with the crates he’s already snoring soundly. I change into my uniform, fix my makeup and stash my backpack beside him.

Upstairs, the roof terrace looks out over St Kilda’s palms. With a slight breeze blowing, it’s no longer unbearably hot and when the guests arrive, they mill about chatting and drinking. Most are

couples, old friends that Ryan greets warmly. The men wear white linen and jockey for position around their host like sailboats at a regatta. The women are more colourful, bronzed and shimmery in sleek dresses the colours of gelati. They wear chunky jewels, oversized sunglasses and hug one another profusely. Tiny leather bags hang from their bare shoulders.

My presence doesn't register as I weave in and out, bringing tray after tray of canapes up and down the winding staircase. Tony – sorry, Antonio – fares better. They love his roguish Sicilian charm. I'd never dream of telling them he's from Reservoir. Antonio is a seasoned performer. There's not a cocktail he doesn't know how to mix, and the guests buzz around his makeshift bar, calling out orders for French 75s, Gin Rickeys, Mai Tais and every type of Martini – the stupider the better.

The only guest that stands out from the group is a semi-famous model. She's exotically pale compared to everyone else, with wisps of blonde hair and childlike features. Her name is Pip, but I hear a couple of the guests half-jokingly call her 'The Body' behind her back. She wears a satin oyster-coloured dress that skims her elongated frame and accentuates the gravity-defying swell of her chest and bottom. I catch the other women casting hungry, regretful looks in her direction while Ryan hovers at her side, pointing out the views and cajoling her to order the most obscure cocktails she can think of.

With the sun about to set, I hurry downstairs with a tray of uneaten sashimi and stop by the library to see the dog. He's asleep, but springs to life when I spread a linen napkin on the wooden floor and lay the seafood out before him. His big nose twitches crazily and he licks his chops. But he also has manners, so he's waiting for my signal.

'Bon appetit, Big Guy,' I smile, and he gobbles up the seafood in an instant.

In the dining room, I light the candles just before sunset and pause for a moment to savour the space between the end of one day and the beginning of another. Back in the kitchen, the Colombian is prepping entrées and Chef has several pots simmering on the stove.

'How's it looking up there?' she checks her watch.

'They've settled in. Tony's swamped.'

'Bugger,' and she pauses to turn down the heat under a large saucepan. 'Tell Ryan I need them down in fifteen. I can't push service out any more than that.'

As it turns out, my ability to control a class of Year 9s is no help herding a bunch of property developers. It's only when I catch Tony's eye and he dramatically bellows 'Andiamo! Mangiare!' that the crush of linen and tiny handbags finally totters downstairs.

There's a squeal of delight from Becca, who's married to Ryan's best mate Ash, when she sees the candlelit table. She whips out her

phone for a shot of my peony arrangements and I feel a small glow of pride.

But the next few hours are relentless. Between Tony and me, we're bringing out dishes, filling up glasses, fetching bottles of San Pellegrino, turning down the music and then turning the music back up – whatever they want. Worse, they're hyperactive – up and down to the bathroom in twos and threes or going upstairs to vape. At one point, I check the bathroom to make sure there's enough toilet roll because everyone's spending so much time in there, but it's fine. Their restlessness makes getting the dishes out on time impossible and, of course, Chef keeps giving me shit for it but there's nothing I can do.

Ryan's thick-set sister, Shaynna, is seated beside her friend D'arby, who runs an online fashion brand. You'd think it was their party the way they nitpick every dish and point out every empty glass. To be fair, Ryan did ask us to be generous on the refills, but the way they're churning through the booze, I can barely keep up.

Pip, the model, is seated at Ryan's right hand. She smiles agreeably, leaning forward on long alabaster arms, listening to gossip about people she barely knows. She's doing her best to seem like one of the grownups, but her eyes glaze over once or twice. I feel bad for her when she gets up and sashays to the bathroom. The room goes quiet and then Shaynna brays, 'Look at the tiny fucking arse on her! Ryan – does she even eat?'

He's classy enough to ignore her. On the other hand, he can't shut up about his ex. Like how she got the place in Byron Bay and how she's going to live there full-time, and how he'll never be able to go there again without bumping into her at Rae's.

'Doesn't matter,' says Ash, 'Noosa's better anyway.'

As I refill Shaynna's champagne, she mutters to D'arby, 'Amber was only ever going to be the starter wife for Ryan'. D'arby sniggers as Pip returns to the table. 'So is he auditioning for the role of Wife Number Two tonight?'

'Her?' Shaynna snorts. 'Not if Amber finds out.'

'Too dumb. He just wants to fuck her and then make sure...'

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In the lull before dessert, I return to the kitchen to wolf down some pasta Chef's saved. Then I go to check on the dog again but when I get to the library the door is ajar. I panic. Did I leave it open? What if he got out and ran away? Then I realise Ryan's in there with someone, and I hover outside, debating what to do.

'I told the architects I wanted a New York style penthouse,' he says, 'I showed him a picture of one with a library and told them: Make it like that.'

'Wow that's a lot of book-sh'. The other voice slurs slightly – it's Pip's. 'I'd never be able to finish all those.'

'I wouldn't either,' he laughs, 'I just like owning them.'

‘Those old ones with the leather covers? What’s it called with the gold writing?’

‘Gold embossed’.

‘Libraries make me sleepy,’ she says.

‘Hey, you’re not thinking of crashing out, are you babe?’

‘No but those cocktails were ... strong. Were they doubles? I can barely stand.’

‘So do a line with me.’

‘I caaan’t’ she wails, ‘Coke makes my skin break out and I’m booked for a shoot on Monday.’

There’s silence, then a couple of snorts followed by a sharp ‘gah!’ as Ryan clears his throat and then lets out a groan of pleasure ‘Sure you don’t want one?’

Then there’s another snort followed by some indistinct rustling, and I wonder if maybe he’s kissing her or feeling her up. But then he exclaims, ‘Hey, I meant to show you something!’ And then comes the sound of an object sliding from a bookshelf.

‘Oh,’ Pip sounds disappointed. Then she says, ‘Wait – is that even real?’

‘It’s a first edition, baby!’ he says proudly, ‘I picked it up in London a couple of years ago.’

‘Is it even...is it even allowed?’ She sounds so unsure of herself, almost like a little girl.

‘What do you mean “allowed”?’ Of course it is!’

Then he giggles, manically, ‘Fuck, it’s only a book!’

‘Sure, but some books are banned, right? Shouldn’t that one be too?’

Then she’s mumbling and slurring, and I miss what she’s saying.

‘Creepy?’ Ryan continues to giggle, ‘Who cares? Anyway, it’s a rare signed first edition. The inscription and signature are authenticated, which means it’s worth a fortune. I’d get 30 grand for it tomorrow if I wanted. Not that I’m looking to sell right now. It’s just a cool piece of history to own.’ Then there’s a pause, and he says, ‘Hey, are you ok?’

That’s when I decide to barge in, and I feign surprise at finding them there. The girl looks wrecked. There’s no colour in her face and her eyes are glassy.

‘I...I just came in to check on the dog,’ I explain. ‘Is she alright?’

‘She’s fine,’ Ryan says through gritted teeth as he guides her towards the couch.

‘Prolly shouldn’t ... had so much ... to drink,’ she mutters slowly and then topples onto the couch. ‘Lemme just...have a little nap. Byeeee...’ and her voice trails off and she passes out. Ryan leaves abruptly.

The girl’s marble flanks rise and fall beneath the folds of her satin dress and her soft blonde hair spools around her. The book is on the coffee table where Ryan dropped it. At first, I can’t even bring myself to look at it, but I gradually inch forward and then force myself to pick it up. My stomach lurches as I check inside the cover for the date of publication. It’s 1925, a real First Edition with an inscription written in faded back ink. I don’t speak German, so

I have no idea what he wrote, but I'm not sure that even matters. It's bad enough this book is in my hands and I'm standing here after so many years and I can still trace the shape of his spidery signature with my own trembling finger.

I'm so overwhelmed with fear and revulsion that I lose track of how long I've been standing there holding that thing in my hands. It's like being dropped into an enormous black hole and free-falling past scenes of depravity and destruction. How is it this book still exists? And of all the rare books in the world, why would anyone want to keep this one? For the resale value? Why? But eventually, I regain my senses. After all, I'm not that naïve and I've studied enough history to know the Second World War wasn't caused by one book alone.

But seriously – \$30,000? Really?

I could easily slip it inside my backpack. I could put it up on eBay and have the money in my bank account before anyone even noticed it was gone. By now, my mouth has completely dried up and my chest is pounding. Meanwhile, from behind the couch, there's a stirring and then another 'pffft' as my old friend waddles out to greet me. He sits and looks up at me with his kind, steady eyes and, immediately, I toss the book on the table and scratch his big fluffy chest. I'd make a terrible thief.

'You are such a good boy'. He looks at me adoringly and wags his tail in hearty agreement.

* * *

'Have they even mentioned the food?' Chef asks. All I manage is a half-hearted shrug. 'These people,' she mutters, 'Why do I even bother?' She's got a two-hour drive ahead of her tonight, regional Victoria's the only place she can afford to live with her kids. At this rate, she's not getting home until 3am.

Dessert is lemon tartlets with sorbet and berries. Chef plates them up and the Colombian arranges a huge cheese platter. If I told them about the book in the library, would they be as shocked as me? Or would they just find it bemusing, the weird shit rich people spend money on? I teeter under the weight of the cheese board and return to the guests. They're slowing down. I'm not even sure if all that coke they've been doing is even working anymore.

Shaynna's face is blotchy and bloated. She and D'arby have been dancing. Up the other end of the table, Antonio serves Ryan a rare port.

'What happened to Pip?' one of the guests laughs. 'What have you done with her, mate?' They're trying to make light of her absence, but it's obvious they're disappointed for their host.

'Way past her bed time" D'arby quips. Shaynna rolls her eyes, 'Some people just can't handle an open bar'

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'It's ok, Tim,' says Becca, 'I got a romantic photo of you two on the roof with the sunset in the background. Say the word, and I'll post it to Instagram, so Amber sees.'

'Priceless,' says Ash. 'Ryan and The Body. Talk about a solid return to form!'

I'm clearing the dessert plates when Shaynna starts telling a story about her brother from back when they were kids, something about Ryan losing his shorts in the surf at a resort in Hawaii. But before she can finish, he cuts her off angrily,

'Give it a rest Shay, they've heard it before. You told the same stupid story when you gave that speech at my bloody wedding.' Shaynna looks crestfallen and everyone else frozen in shock. Ryan drains his port and gets up from the table.

'I'll be back, I just need to check up on The Body in the library.' Everyone cracks up laughing at that, and the awkward moment passes. But minutes later, Ryan is back with a look of cold fury on his face, and he's beckoning me to follow him.

'Bit of a situation in the library,' he says. I immediately feel sick with dread and my mind races. Has something terrible happened to the poor drunk girl? I'm tripping over myself as I race to keep up with Ryan's long strides. When we reach the door, he opens it, and we step inside. My eyes go straight to Pip on the couch but she hasn't moved and it's obvious Ryan isn't even concerned with her anyway. Instead, his arm has gone rigid and he's pointing down at the floor.

'It's that fucking dog of Amber's,' he fumes. The dog sits forlornly and it takes me a moment to register that he's vomited everywhere. Then the cloying smell hits me.

'Oh no,' I say, 'the poor thing.'

'Look,' Ryan says, 'I can't be dealing with any of this right now. I've got to get back to my guests. Can you clean this up, please?'

I stare at him blankly and say nothing. Chunks of bright orange salmon shine from the floor amidst the slush of bile and half-digested grass. But it's not the puke I'm revulsed by. It's that awful book. That's what's bothering me, only he wouldn't know. So instead, I wait silently until panic sets in behind his eyes.

'Ok, I'm sorry,' and he tries a different tack, 'I know it's not what you're being paid for tonight. But I promise, there'll be a generous tip in it for you.'

I hesitate, then say, 'Sure. No problem. You get back to your guests.'

I find what I need in the laundry. Rubber gloves, kitchen paper, a mop and bucket. When I return to the library, the dog is still there, sitting in the same spot. I look at the mess.

'Oh boy, you really went for it, didn't you?' I say to him. He looks so remorseful that I think he'd grab the mop and bucket and clean it himself if he could.

* * *

Meanwhile, I can't seem to get started. The smell's not getting any better, but I can't stop asking myself: How did it come to this? And again, it's not the dog vomit. It's the book. I'd feel guilty if I didn't do something about it. Even if it's something small.

Rip! I tear out the first page, the one with the inscription. I stand over the vomit, let the page drop and watch as it soaks up the watery bile like a sponge. The ink runs. Then it blurs. And then it fades to nothing at all. It's wonderful.

Rip! I let another page drop to the ground. Then another. The pages are nothing now, they're just sawdust chucked on the floor of a butchers to soak up the gore.

Rip! This time it's a chunk of insane gibberish from the middle section. Next, I tear out a couple of pages from the back. Then I go back to the front of the book and do it all over again. By the time I'm done, Ryan Gardiner's valuable first edition of *Mein Kampf* is no more than a toothless mouth. It's exhilarating.

It's only when I've finished and pause to look up, that I realise Pip is awake. She's still lying on the couch, but she's looking right at me. She's seen it all. Gone is her earlier, vacant stare. Instead, her eyes are bright and wide with amazement. I stare back at her, saying nothing, and take the remains of the book – just its spine and the front and back covers – and carefully return it to the bookshelf. Pip smiles warmly at me. She lets out a sigh of contentment, then falls back to sleep.

Working quickly, I scoop the vomit-soaked pages into a pile that I wrap in kitchen paper and then swab the floor with the mop. After that, I spend a few minutes in the guest toilet, carefully flushing again and again until the entire lot is gone.

The kitchen is spotless when I return. Tony and the Colombian have already left.

'I heard about that mess in the library,' Chef says.

'All sorted,' I say.

'Good, it's time to knock off'.

'Shouldn't I say goodnight to the host?' I'm thinking about that tip.

'I wouldn't worry,' but she's avoiding my gaze. 'I went in and said goodbye from all of us. It's late, they just want to enjoy the rest of the night in peace.'

'He didn't mention anything else?'

'Just leave your uniform with the rest of the dirty linen. The driver's coming by to pick everything up tomorrow'.

Chef reminds me she has a two-hour drive ahead of her, then hurries out. It's only after she's gone, I realise she's probably pocketed my tip.

My feet ache as I trudge back to the library and change into my street clothes. The girl on the couch doesn't stir but just as I'm walking back up the corridor, something nudges the back of my leg. It's the dog. He's wagging his tail and looking up at me with an air of pleasant expectation. When the lift door opens with a ding I almost laugh when the dog follows me in. 'Are you sure?' I ask him.

It's only when we exit the building and begin walking along the Esplanade that I think to check the silver dog tag on his collar and his name engraved in fancy cursive script: Louis.

'Louis,' I say as his tail swishes joyfully in the warm night air, 'I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.'

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