



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

THIS SHEET MUST BE THE FIRST PAGE OF THE ASSIGNMENT YOU ARE SUBMITTING (DO NOT SEND AS A SEPARATE FILE)

For completion by the student:										
Student Name: Prithi Sabrina Nathan Shukla										
Module code: HPEN7018 Module title: – Writing Workshop: Researching and Writing to a Single Focus – Assessment 1	Student ID number: 1708142	Educational support needs: Yes/No								
Module tutor: Jeni Williams Rosalind Hudis Assignment due date: 02 nd August 2021										
If your module has multiple submissions please indicate which piece of work this is. 1 st ☒ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐										
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Assignment Mark <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 70%; padding: 5px;">1st Marker's Provisional mark</td> <td style="width: 30%;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">2nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">External Examiner's mark (if relevant)</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">Final Mark</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			1 st Marker's Provisional mark		2 nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark		External Examiner's mark (if relevant)		Final Mark	
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Writing Workshop: Researching and Writing to a Single Focus

HPEN7018

Assessment 1

Task Description: To write a focused narrative on one particular subject.

Assessment 1: *Tangled Strands* is a short story set in a village in present-day France. The topic of ‘hair’ is used both literally and metaphorically, dealing with the challenging realities of complex family dynamics.

Tangled Strands

“You have beautiful hair, Bella.”

Astra replaces the brush on the counter, alongside jars of hair gel and mousse. She gazes at her niece seated before the salon mirror. Bella sits huddled in her chair, eyes pink rimmed, her hands clasped together in her lap. Astra strokes her arm. She’s certainly not the same ten-year-old she was eight weeks ago.

Bella shifts uncomfortably, blinking. Astra lightly touches her shoulder.

“Bella?”

Bella looks up. She stares at both their reflections. Silent. She looks only for a moment. She misses Maman, Paris and home. Her hands fumble through her pockets. A sudden pang of anxiety surges through her. She leans forward, puzzled, searching for something on the floor.

“What have you lost?”

Bella hops off the chair. Her heart thumps. Did she have her cap on when she arrived at her aunt’s salon or did she drop it somewhere outside? Another glance around. It was a present from Maman – she can’t lose it. And then there, on the floor, is the purple cap, under the

chair. She picks up the beret, dusts it, and buries her face into the felt, inhales its scent. Astra smiles - it's the same one Celia had bought at the Saturday market in Paris.

"Yaay, you've found it." Astra puts out her hand, "Come on, let's see what we can do with your hair."

Bella, hesitant, clutches her beret tightly and clambers onto the chair. The red and white spiral pole outside the window makes her wince. Her aunt Astra's hairstyling shop is so different from her maman's in Paris. She looks round, sniffs and sighs – she misses the Fleurs d'Orange that scented her maman's salon. This place smells funny – of old men.

Astra threads her fingers through her niece's long hair. It's clear Bella's miserable. She pauses and observes her niece for a few moments. The similarity between mother and daughter is obvious. She is so much like Celia. Her facial features, her eyes, and lips, that same sensitivity.

As Astra untangles the knots from her niece's hair, Bella pulls away. The brush's bristles catch the silver filigree of her starfish earring. She immediately repositions it. No one can brush her hair like Maman.

Astra rests her hand on Bella's arm, "I'm so sorry." From her hair, she removes a silver and jade chignon pin, a Japanese hair clip, also decorated with starfish. She places it on the counter. The accessory matches Bella's starfish earrings.

"It's yours."

For a few seconds Astra gazes at the chignon pin. She gathers her short hair, now hanging loosely around her neck, into a French twist and anchors it with a claw comb. She can't help but feel a sense of déjà vu. Her journey with Celia beyond the borders of France will always be cherished.

"Your maman and I, we travelled a lot. Once we met an old Japanese lady, who gave your maman the earrings and me the hairpin. She said they were a set that belonged to the sea king's daughter. That's why the starfish are there. The lady owned a salon, and she also had many charming things for girls to put in their hair."

Astra lightly touches the earrings in Bella's ears. "Let's visit the lady in Japan. What do you think - we can go during your holidays in August?"

Bella blinks. But tears just keep gathering.

"What's wrong Bella?"

Bella quickly wipes her eyes.

Astra looks round the barber's shop to see if anyone else has noticed. *Barbiers Salon Bleu* is buzzing with men getting shaved or their hair cut ready for their Saturday evening jaunt. Of course, they aren't interested in some kid from Paris.

Astra surveys the shop again. If only there were more women. She feels wasted in this male-oriented salon. Damn the village ladies. They visit only when the hairdresser down the road is overbooked. Fresh from her course at the exclusive hairstylist academy in Paris, she's full of new ideas. But Pierre is stubborn. He just wants to keep a business going, he has no sense of fashion. He can't see that it would be better to bring a little bit of Paris to attract the ladies – *Barbiers Salon Bleu* has a prime location on the corner of the village's High Street, and it would be great to expand.

Pierre releases the cocoa-coloured man-bun of a man transfixed and preening at his image in the mirror, stroking his beard. Monsieur Chaize and Andre are waiting. Pierre runs the comb through the man's ruffled hair before he fetches a pair of scissors out of his sleeve. The blades snip out layers on one side. Every now and then Pierre admires the effect of the new style. He casts Astra a furtive glance. He had secretly been looking at the magazines in her study. Pierre didn't want her to know. If she sees he's interested in her Paris styles, she could pressure him to expand - the shoe shop *Chaussures Fantaisie* adjacent to them is up for sale.

A quick scan of the salon brings a satisfied smile to his face. There are only men in *Barbiers Salon Bleu*. Astra hasn't been able to lure away the ladies from the hairdresser down the road. He doesn't want to lose his male customers he knows so well to those nosey women. The drone of blow dryers, scissors clipping and men in conversation, some hollering, exchanging the results of last night's football game, creates an ambience of friendly warmth.

Astra watches the men absorbed in themselves.

“Bald men don’t have a bad hair day...huh Bella? -

Should I do something to your hair?”

Bella shakes her head.

Astra points at a picture on the wall. It’s a painting of Marie Antoinette with a birdcage atop her head with live birds inside.

“Promise, I won’t do anything like that.”

Bella stifles a giggle.

“A new look?”

“Maman used to cut my hair in our salon.”

Astra sinks down to Bella’s level and cradles her hands between her own. A change from the past will be good for her. “You can try one of Maman’s Paris styles?”

Bella glances up at Astra. For a moment she feels her maman close.

“Um - I don’t know.”

“How about one of Maman’s styles?”

“Oh yes. One of Maman’s styles, please.”

“Perfect.”

“Colour it Pink.”

“Really?”

“Yes, yes, just like Maman’s!” Bella spins round and round in her chair, her eyes mischievous; the remnants of her tears still visible. Astra smiles at her niece’s enthusiasm.

“You can bring some of your Paris fashions here. This salon is not the same as your maman’s, but you can make it like hers.”

For a minute Bella squeezes her eyes shut. She sees girls in rainbow braids covered with glitter and sparkle. She'll crimp their hair with styling tongs like her maman's, and use mousse, and sprays and highlights and gel.

"I think your maman would've been very happy." Astra gently traces her finger down the line of Bella's cheekbone to her chin – she's so like Celia.

Bella jumps out of the chair and throws her arms around her aunt. Astra smiles and kisses Bella on the cheek.

"Okay honey, come on, then..."

Bella clambers once again onto the salon chair and faces the mirror. Astra ties the cape around Bella's neck. She contemplates their reflections in the mirror before she gently pulls Bella's hair forwards.

"Whisps of pink highlights I think, you okay with that?"

"With blue extensions too. Blue extensions are my favourite."

Pierre finishes cutting the bearded man's hair. He dabs the man's cheeks with aftershave. A hint of musk fills the air. Pierre notices Monsieur Chaize and Andre sitting by the window. They are still waiting. He turns and glares at Astra. He and the two other assistants could do with her help. Pierre runs his hands through his thinning hair. He shakes his head, annoyed at Astra fussing over her niece.

"Could you get Monsieur Chaize and Andre a coffee, Astra. Monsieur Chaize keeps it light."

Astra narrows her eyes – if only he could understand but then he is an insensitive man who dislikes children. She remembers the argument they had about Bella coming in the first place. She was Celia's only sister; of course, they must be her guardians. Pierre always kept his distance from her family – he never accompanied her on her trips to Paris to visit Celia and Bella. His excuse: *Barbiers Salon Bleu*! Astra shudders, Pierre only thinks of his salon. He is great with the customers but with her, no. And she has just lost her sister.

Astra is at home in her study, shuffling through a stack of papers on her desk. She can't find the receipt from the pharmacy in Paris. It's already June, a month since her return from the city. Through the half-open French door, a cool breeze enters the room. A sudden flutter of pages in the far corner distracts her. One of her hairstylist magazines is open. The rest are piled in untidy columns on the table, which surprises her. She knows she left it all in order. The receipt she is looking for is under a paperback...this is also strange. Astra extracts it from the pile with mixed emotions of relief and apprehension.

The house is unusually quiet, as Pierre is at the salon and Bella is at school. The phone rings, Astra starts.

"Hello?"

"Afternoon Astra. This is Dr Fernel. I've got the report. Will you be coming with Pierre?"

"Pierre is really busy but it's okay I can come alone. In the morning when Bella's at school."

Astra stares at the receipt in her hand. How foolishly careless of her. Her eyes fix on a candle above the fireplace. She burns the receipt, then discards the ashes into a potted plant on the balcony.

Her lips quiver. For a moment, a deep urge to tell Pierre surfaces. But she dispels the idea – she always thinks the worst.

Astra tugs at the pearls around her neck and gazes out, through the open French door, distracted by the chime of tiny bells suspended by a ribbon on the balcony. She was delighted when Raoul gave them to her last year. He knew she needed cheering up and brought them back after visiting his family in Lhasa. She was so touched by the gesture and also, as a hairdresser, fascinated by this gift - a silk ribbon embroidered with hair. Raoul had laughed at her astonishment, explaining that Tibetans use visual 'mantras' and that the hair was supposed to weave a net of protection around her, taking its strength from a holy Lama. That was so sweet of him.

Astra reaches up and cups the little bells in her palm, stopping their gentle metallic chime for a moment as she steps out onto the balcony. She's sceptical of its significance. It

hasn't worked for her. Pierre inherited this beautiful chateau, on the edge of the precipice surveying the landscape below. Everything around her seems solid and permanent, even the antique clock on the table – all Pierre's. Astra feels disturbed about seeing the doctor and facing Pierre.

She smooths back her hair from her forehead with both hands. Did Pierre see the pharmacy receipt? She had bought the pregnancy test in Paris, knowing that she wouldn't be able to get one from the village store – it's better to keep the Rochelle rumourmongers at bay. But now she's three weeks late. The pregnancy test was negative, but could it be wrong...could she be carrying Max's child? She's never missed her periods before. Pierre is bound to suspect if he's seen the receipt. She can't remember the last time they had sex...it must have been over two years.

Astra gazes down to the narrow street and the village below with its terraced houses sneaking up the hill. For a moment she sees it through Bella's eyes and smiles. Bella's favourite sweet shop, *Confiserie Jacques* nestles amongst the houses at the bottom end of the rue. Little bits of Paris, here in Rochelle, like the home artisan confectionary in a restored walkway on the hill. It reminds her of the confiserie near Celia's salon on rue des-Saint Pères.

Bella is at school for another hour. "I wonder if I can get her some marshmallows or bonbons before she gets back." She anticipates her niece's sweet-tooth delight as she unwraps the foil-covered candy. She reaches for her bag and heads for the front door.

Astra follows the cobbled lane down to *Confiserie Jacques*. Her summer frock flutters in the breeze. Waves of swallows and swifts glide between the buildings. Suddenly dizzy, she leans against the solid wall. The birds' screeching cries summon scenes of Paris and Celia's Salon on rue des-Saint Pères. She wipes away tears, hurries down the street, away from the recollections.

She stops abruptly. At *Café Aroma*, two men are exchanging business cards. The man with Monsieur Dupont is not from the village but from Paris. He doesn't seem to be here as a tourist – he seems here to do business. The man recognises her as well; he stares, then nods, courteously, but Astra blunders past with her head down. Her stomach tightens, she doesn't feel safe. The last time she saw Max he was at the 'MCB Hair Show' in Paris. Astra scurries on to *Confiserie Jacques* and does not look back.

Inside, old Madame Badeaux holds court with her customers. She is the perfect model of a traditional shopkeeper, dressed in black lace collar attire, her hair coiled in a bun. The shop smells deliciously of peppermint and chocolate-covered cherries. The store is busy, full of conversation, villagers and tourists slipping in and out to the continuous jingle of the shop bell. Astra selects marshmallows and bonbons from a rack and waits her turn in line. She shivers, still shaken by the encounter outside, staring blankly at the exit.

Astra is jolted out of her reverie by Madame Bedeaux's crooked teeth, too close.

"Are these for Bella?"

Astra nods.

"The change must be difficult for her, huh?" Madame Bedeaux asks intrusively.

Astra just smiles. The last thing she wants at the moment is to be caught up in village gossip. Madame Bedeaux notes Astra's reticence and curbs her inquisitiveness with a generous scoop of chocolate caramels.

"Tell Bella these are from me," she whispers and adds the caramels to the rest of the sweets.

"I've got a new lodger. Very smart. He tells me this makes me look older. He's right and it never stays in place." She pats her unruly bun. "Astra, can you please do something to this wretched hair?"

"Are you sure – I've always admired your classic hairstyle. But if you really want a change, how about one of the new bobs – it would really suit you."

"A bob?"

"Uh-huh, similar to Louise Brookes. You know her?"

"The jazz singer?"

Astra nods. "It was popular in the 1920s and '30s but is the height of fashion today. Really easy to maintain. A fresh look. It's true long hair ages you."

"When can I come, today?"

"I'll send you a message. I need to look at my bookings." Astra steps back, forces a smile and picks up the gold packet on the counter. In haste to escape, she knocks over a small jar filled with coins.

"Don't worry" Madame Badeaux fusses. Astra flushes, and leaves. The bell chimes as the shop door shuts behind her.

Outside, on the cobbled street, a strong hand grasps her elbow and pulls her around. Max peers at Astra, annoyed by her evasion. Did she think he would be content with the few times they had managed to rendezvous at his apartment? A no-strings-attached affair like theirs was very much to his taste.

"There's no need to avoid me, little lady," he says, grinning.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm here on business." He slowly inhales his e-cigarette. "Monsieur Dupont feels this place needs a good Salon. He wants a bit of Paris here. And well, you know, your sister's place, you've trained yourself there – this village needs something like that, better than what you have here – it needs a Salon with an edge."

This is her village. How dare he. She compresses her anger, "Well he could try investing in us then. You obviously haven't been in our place. Rochelle already has a chic Salon and we're developing it."

Max throws up his hands "Whoa, whoa - we can carry on this conversation another time," and then with an amused smile, "I'm here for a while. Perhaps we could meet some evening?" His words create a small knot of fury. She fizzes. What is he playing at?

Max turns to walk away but before he does, he glares at her intently. "I'm staying at Madame Badeaux' if you need to get in touch." As he strides away down the rue, Astra feels herself recoil – he is a user. Her phone vibrates in her pocket. What now? Astra draws it out hastily. It's Max, his name lights the display. Irritated, she looks up. Max is staring at her over his shoulder; he runs his fingers through his slicked-back hair and winks at Astra with a roguish grin.

Her heart sinks. A suspicious voice inside her head asks why, but obviously he would stay there at Madame Badeaux's – after all Monsieur Dupont had invested in the sweet shop makeover. But it couldn't be worse. Madame Badeaux is such a gossip. If she even suspected anything it would be everywhere. Astra flinches. She was stupid to have slept with him and even stupider for continuing the affair for a month. What would happen if Pierre heard something? What is Max up to? He must have told Madame Badeaux he knew her and now she would have to spend a good hour and more talking to her as she cuts and styles her hair. Just then Max sends her a text, "I'd still like to buy Celia's salon."

Next morning Astra hurries to the doctor's. Her shoulders tense, she hesitates on the clinic steps. Tucking her hair behind her ears, Astra enters. She startles - the receptionist is new.

"Morning, I'm Astra."

"Morning, I'll tell Dr Fernel you're here," the receptionist intones as she paces across the room. The woman disappears behind the door leading to the doctor's office. Astra waits by the desk. She's grateful she doesn't know the woman. The last thing she wants is to engage in small talk and village gossip.

A familiar ring: Pierre's frequent calls concern Astra – his wariness lately makes it alarmingly likely that he's seen the receipt. She flushes at the prospect. Instinctively, to quell his suspicions, she swiftly goes to answer the phone. But a closer look displays Max's name. Astra doesn't answer.

Seconds later there's a message, "I'm at *Chaussures Fantaisie*. Is your Salon the one next to it?" She freezes. There's no knowing where Max would draw the line. As an ambitious and shrewd business entrepreneur with a thriving enterprise like *La Prévoyance*, he has no scruples. Dread fills her. His plan to buy Celia's salon when she was in Paris was as audacious as it was calculating. He is definitely a user.

Dizzy, Astra leans on the desk, thankful she's the only patient in the waiting room. Soon the receptionist appears.

"Dr Fernel will be with you shortly."

Astra can't help badgering herself with questions over Max's call, but her train of thought is interrupted by the doctor's voice. "Astra Chapelle."

The results were negative! As she reaches for her bag on the chair near the window, she catches a glimpse of Pierre and Max outside *La Saveur Restaurant* opposite the clinic. Why is Pierre with Max? She drops back into the chair.

"Are you okay?" Dr Fernel asks.

"Uh-huh." Astra bites her lower lip. "I'm so sorry. I just need a moment. May I have a glass of water?"

The doctor nods and walks to the bottled water dispenser on the other side of the room. Astra grasps the arm of the chair, rises and peers out of the window. Max and Pierre have gone.

Handing her the water, Dr Fernel observes, "It's a long walk back. Shall I call you a cab?"

"No. I'm fine."

Astra hurries home. She is in no mood to face Pierre at *Salon Bleu*.

Relieved to be back from the doctor's, Astra collapses onto the chaise longue in her study. She keeps her hands busy with tresses of hair and ribbon from her collection of extensions. The red silk and white cord twists under her deft fingers. Bella perches beside her. With excited curiosity, she leans forward, watching her aunt. The braid, laced with beads, transforms into a replica of an ancient Egyptian hairpiece, which is the height of fashion in Paris.

Astra holds up the wig. "A Queen Isemkheb style." She touches the beads. "These were gemstones."

"Gemstones?"

"Uh-huh...turquoise, carnelian, garnets."

Bella listens. The culture and history behind the Egyptian hairstyle fascinate her. Bella's eyes gleam as Astra comes to the end of the braiding and passes it on to her to finish. Without losing a moment, Bella bends her head diligently over the braids and ties up the ends neatly.

Astra marvels at the wigs of different Paris-inspired hairstyles displayed on the cabinet near the door, ready for sale. Each one is unique, and all demonstrate her creative skills.

The relentless ticking on the mantelpiece distracts her. Astra glances at the clock. Pierre will be back soon. She is thankful to have her own private space in the house. Astra draws the curtains and turns to Bella.

"It's time for your bath, Bella."

"Aww, can't it wait?"

"Pierre will be home soon. Go on, off with you."

She wants Bella to hurry and be downstairs when Pierre returns. Her presence will hopefully keep angry questions at bay about her absence at the salon. From the cupboard behind her, she unfolds a damask cloth in which many carefully plaited tresses woven with colourful beads lie in the tissue.

"You can select one of these, after your bath."

Bella peers down at the selection.

"I'll have this." She points with enthusiasm at an extension with glass coloured rainbow beads and reaches for it.

"Oh no, you cheeky monkey. After your bath. Hurry!"

Bella scurries out of the room.

Astra pours herself a brandy and stretches out on the chaise longue. As she attempts to relax, a wave of sadness washes over her again. Nothing seems right anymore. Her sister Celia is gone. Eyes closed; guilt gnaws at her stomach. If only she hadn't agreed that Max could collect her after her shopping spree with Celia, then her sister would not have been driving back home alone that evening.

Astra's phone rings. It's Max, again. She really needs to work out how to confront this problem. She's tempted to answer and learn more about the discussion Pierre and Max were having earlier that day, but resists. Max is and always was devious. He'd used her to pressure Celia into selling her salon to him. Astra hates him for it, hates herself for being so gullible.

Upstairs, Bella sings as she shampoos her hair, making a hair tower. A medley of childish melodies echoes throughout the house. Through the open door, Bella calls out to Astra.

“Aunt Astra, can I have some of your bath salts, please, the ones that Maman gave you?”

Startled by the yell, Astra hastens upstairs, to Bella’s bedroom and enters. She knocks on the half-open door of the ensuite bathroom.

“What is it?”

“Can I have some of your bath salts, please, the ones that Maman gave you?”

“Of course.” Astra fetches the salts from the cupboard and hands them to Bella, reflecting how her mother’s tastes live on in her.

“I want to go to Paris?”

“Not just yet honey. Why?”

Bella blushes, and shrugs.

“After you settle into school. Your teacher’s concerned that you’re not playing with the other children?”

“I don’t like anyone but my own self,” Bella yells and punches incessantly at the bathwater to change the subject of school.

“You mustn’t say...” Just then, Astra hears the front door shut and keys clatter into the glass bowl on the sideboard downstairs.

“Astra, I’m home.”

“Give me a sec, I’m with Bella.”

Pierre bolts up the steps, stops outside Bella’s door and knocks.

“Can I come in?”

Bella grabs a towel and shakes her head furiously.

“Uh no! Bella’s in the bath.”

“I need to speak to you alone. We never get time to talk.”

“You sound angry.”

“I’m not angry!”

“Good. I’ll be down soon.”

Twenty minutes pass. Pierre is in his study, but the kitchen is a safer refuge. Her heart beats faster and faster recalling Pierre and Max together outside the clinic. What and how much does he know?

She hasn’t even thought of what to prepare for supper. In the kitchen, she automatically places water into a pan and lights the stove. An imprisoned bluebottle suddenly buzzes around searching for an escape and settles on the glass windowpane. Her eyes wander to the window. As she opens it, a breeze rushes in. A dry dishcloth blows onto the cooker and catches fire. As she douses the flame with an extinguisher, Pierre storms into the room.

“What are you doing,” he growls, and resets the alarm button. “The house could have caught fire.”

“Don’t exaggerate. I opened the window to let a fly out and then a gust of wind...”

Bella quietly enters the kitchen. Her hair is still damp after her bath and her extensions hang messily around her shoulders.

Pierre glares at Bella, angry at her interruption. He ignores her and turns to Astra.

“We’ve got to talk. It’s urgent.”

“After dinner. It’s late for Bella.”

“I wish we could have some time alone together.”

Pierre’s eyes fix on Bella, again. Her presence annoys him. “Remove those awful extensions.”

Bella tiptoes out of the kitchen. She worries her uncle dislikes her.

“That was unnecessary.” Astra turns her back on him and picks up a knife to chop the onions.

“It’s madness how you spoil Bella.”

Astra grips the knife tight.

“Will you leave and let me finish and please send Bella in. And be NICE!”

Five minutes later Bella is in the kitchen, glad her angry uncle isn’t.

“I’m here.”

“Time to lay the table little miss.”

“Do I have to?”

“Uh-huh. Please.”

“Can we use the silver forks and knives...the ones same as Maman’s?”

“They’re in the cabinet. Don’t forget the mats and napkins.”

Bella runs frantically around the table, placing the cutlery and mats. She sets an additional place, props herself upon a chair next to it, then breaks into a prattle.

“Who are you talking to?” Astra asks as she arranges the bread in the basket.

“Maman.”

Bella is in her room. It’s after dinner. Her uncle said he had important business to talk about with her aunt. But she doesn’t mind, being by herself. Her aunt gave her the rainbow beads and braids before she was sent upstairs.

Astra broods in Pierre’s study, perched on the edge of the couch. His determination to talk with her alone, added to Max’s vindictive treatment of her, fuels her anxiety. She watches Pierre at the drinks cabinet. Familiar dread sets her mind agonising again – is this about Max and his visit to *Salon Bleu*? This probability wearies her. The whole room feels infused with impending trouble. She adjusts her position on the couch with nervous impatience. Her phone slips out of her pocket into the gap between the seat cushions.

Pierre pours himself a glass of whisky first, then half fills hers with brandy. He passes the glass to Astra, raises his, and has a sip.

“Ah. I needed this.” Pierre sinks into the large armchair opposite the television. He sets his drink down on the coffee table, stretches out his legs, and leans back with his hands clasped behind his head.

“Why didn’t you turn up this morning?”

“Oh, I wasn’t feeling well.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh - I’m fine now.”

“Ahh. Good. I saw you at the clinic. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just the usual check-up.”

“I was worried. I was with this guy Max. He came looking for you.” He observes her solemnly. “You had asked him to check the salon, for redecorating?”

Astra leans back into the cushion behind her and glances up at him, feigning a quizzical expression.

For a moment Pierre studies her intently.

“You weren’t there, so he suggested we lunch at *La Saveur*. I hadn’t had breakfast, so I agreed.” Pierre watches Astra closely. There’s too much at stake here. He doesn’t want to upset her.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“Oh...no – of course not.”

“We were outside the restaurant, that’s when I saw you, at the clinic window. I wanted to come up, but Max convinced me you would’ve told me if there was something wrong. He’s a nice guy. He says he knows you through Celia?”

Astra pushes a loose strand of hair away from her face. There’s something conniving about Max’s visit to *Barbiers Salon Bleu* and his lunch with Pierre. What is he up to?

Pierre drops his voice lower than usual, cautious, "Celia's salon is all boarded up now. Max had hoped to..." Astra interjects:

"If he wants to buy, it's out of the question! Celia wasn't going to sell." She realises her error as soon the words leave her mouth.

"Did Celia tell you that?"

"Uh-huh."

"You never told me."

"It wasn't important."

Pierre sips his drink.

"I looked him up. He's listed amongst the *Ten Top Business Entrepreneurs* on *Business France*. He's got his own fancy salon in Paris, two of them actually and lots of other properties!"

"It belongs to Bella!"

"But it will be better for us," Pierre persists sharply. "This is good for her too – we aren't exactly doing well with our debts."

Astra firmly shakes her head. She feels lonely in her mission to protect Bella. Pierre has no wish to be part of her upbringing, but it seems he's interested in her inheritance. She draws a long breath.

"It's not for sale."

"Come on, that child is expensive! Her expenses come out of my pocket."

"No! It is not for sale."

Pierre drinks his whisky. He places his empty glass on the table before rising from his chair and sits beside her on the couch, too close. He leans into her, but she draws back, trying to keep a distance between them.

"I've been waiting for something like this. I need your help. Maybe we should all go out, you, me and Max. Talk it over with him and then you make your decision?"

Astra rises and heads for the window. She peers out.

"I don't think that's a good idea." Pierre's sheepish expression in the reflection on the glass windowpane troubles her.

"Oh, but he's coming here tomorrow. I invited him. He wants to see the chateau...and after that, we go out for dinner."

"Coming here tomorrow?"

"I thought it would be a good idea! What's so wrong? Bella can come too. He said he's heard so much about the chateau from Celia."

Her throat feels suddenly dry. She quickly drains her glass.

"Do you want another drink?"

He hears the chill in her voice. He hands her his glass. She takes it in silence, pours his whisky, hands the glass back to him and heads for the door.

"Hey, where're you going?"

"To the kitchen, I need some ice."

Watching the door, Pierre pulls out his phone from his pocket and taps at the keys. Max answers.

"Hey, Max, sorry, I've got to call tomorrow off."

"Why?"

"It's Astra. She's not well."

"Oh. Okay. Hope she gets better."

"Thanks, mate."

"Did you ask her about selling?"

"She doesn't want to. Sorry."

"It's a good offer. Did you tell her that?"

"Uh-huh. She doesn't want to know."

"Hmmm. Okay. Should I talk to her?"

"Not a good idea."

Max feels anger well up inside him, but he drives back his temper.

"Don't worry, we must catch up another time."

"Yes. Sure."

Astra returns. Pierre scrutinises her as she walks over to the drinks cabinet. Her quietness worries him. Since her return from Paris, she's been distant but now he's conscious he has driven her even further away. Astra tops up with ice and brandy. She turns to face him.

"Who was that?"

"Max. I called him. Told him it's off."

Astra frowns.

Pierre quickly attempts to cover up with light conversation, "Your glass, it's good you've topped it all the way with brandy!"

Astra shakes her head and sits down in the armchair.

"Oh, come on Astra? I thought you'd be happy. I've done what you wanted."

"Seriously?"

Her fingers clasp tighter around her glass. Pierre infuriates her these days. She despises the pressure to sell and his colluding with Max makes her squirm. A muffled sound startles her. The short buzz is familiar; it seems to come from between the cushions on the couch where Pierre lounges. It could only be Max. She freezes. Pierre reaches for her phone, pulls it out and hands it over to her.

Astra trembles with indignation at Max's message - "If you don't sell, I'll tell Pierre about us!".

Pierre rises from the couch, startled by her reaction. He moves to stand over her as she leans away in the armchair.

"Talk to me. Who was that?"

Astra responds with silence.

Impatient, Pierre takes a step forward, closer to her.

“Talk. I have so many questions. I need answers.”

Astra places the phone on the arm of the chair and stands up. She faces him, her eyes filled with loathing.

“You want answers, I’ll give you answers.”

Pierre puzzles at her reaction, “You’ve stopped sharing things with me. Do you realise how that makes me feel?” His voice is hoarse but loud. “Why are you so angry. Who was that?”

“It’s Max, pushing me to sell. You should’ve never started this with him.”

Pierre grabs her phone. Sees the message. Astra wrenches her mobile out of his hand and backs towards the door. Pierre glares at her. He’s been such an idiot. How could he have not seen it, there were so many clues – the receipt, the clinic, Max turning up at the salon. How could he have been so naïve – especially after he found the receipt? But he thought the pregnancy test was Celia’s. He grabs her arm and yells:

“If there is anything, now’s the time to say it?”

The loud exchange of voices filters through the gap under Bella’s door. She sits up in bed. She can’t help herself; she scrambles down the stairs to Pierre’s study. Through the open doorway, the light streams into the dark hall. Bella creeps closer and closer and leans against the door frame. She peers into the room - Pierre has her aunt’s arm in a tight grasp. She is facing him. They’re so close to each other, their noses are nearly touching.

Pierre clenches his fists.

“How long?”

“What?”

“You and Max?”

“What does it matter.”

“Just once, it would be nice if you could give some thought to someone other than yourself.”

“Speak for yourself. Your precious salon is all you think of, so you can’t blame me for seeking affection elsewhere.”

A rush of blind anger overwhelms him. His face flushes, his muscles stiffen. His hands reach out. He grasps her throat. His grip tightens - she coughs. A slow burn grates against the back of her throat. She can’t breathe, she must unclasp his fingers. But a pain, worse than she has ever felt before, attacks her lungs – the agony drowns out all other sensations. Sweat clings to her skin. Her hands and feet turn cold. As he squeezes, his grunts fade into silence.

Bella shrieks, pulling Pierre back to earth. He hurls himself violently off Astra. She collapses onto the floor. He stands trembling for a few moments beside her, horrified at his own reaction. He strives to get his senses back. His eyes, filled with shame and anger, turn towards Bella.

“Get out now.”

A shudder of fear rushes through Bella. She scurries up the stairs and shuts her bedroom door. She clambers onto her bed. Her fingers twirl around her blue extensions. She whimpers - she wants her maman.

Astra lies beside the armchair in a dizzy whirl, aghast at what has just happened. Her breath wheezes through her lips. She waits a few moments before reaching for the chair and laboriously pulls herself up.

Pierre reaches for her, “Astra...I...I’m so sorry.” She shrinks away.

Mute, she staggers from the room.

In his study, Pierre can hear her feet scruff against the steps as she struggles up the stairs.

Astra jerks Bella’s door open. Her niece is awake, on her bed. Astra locks the door behind, making sure they’re safe. She puts her finger to her lips. “Shhhh.” She lies down gently next to Bella on the narrow single bed and embraces her niece tightly to comfort them both. Almost all night, Astra lies awake, staring into the dark.

Early next morning, Astra awakes just as the sun rises. She blearily squints out of the window. Light, warmth – she reaches a decision. She hurries about the house, careful not to wake Pierre, asleep in his study. After sorting her and Bella’s most valued possessions into a suitcase, Astra returns to her niece’s room. She gently strokes Bella’s hair to wake her.

The morning paces as she waits for the taxi. The whirring of a car engine outside wakes Pierre. His head throbs. He rubs the sleep from his eyes and peers out of the window. Astra and Bella are seated in the back of the cab as the driver places their luggage into the boot. The car begins to pull away. Astra looks up at Pierre for a moment, then turns to Bella.

Bella asks: “Where are we going, Aunt Astra?”

Astra cradles Bella’s hands between her own, “To your maman’s house – to the salon.”
