

ONE

There are two things I know right now: one is that a guy is holding a gun to my head, the other is that I don't want to die. I guess I could try to look at it from the positive side: I've made it seventeen years without anyone trying to kill me. But it's hard to maintain a sunny outlook when there's a guy threatening to shoot you.

He yells at me in a foreign language and the only word I recognise is my brother's name. I don't know where Max is. I feel utterly responsible for him. I *am* utterly responsible for him. When I think about that I automatically think of my mum and it's not helpful to think of your mum in a situation like this. It makes you want to cry.

I'm not the kind of person people normally want to shoot in the head. I didn't used to be. But a lot of things are different now; the need for food makes people do

crazy things. I don't mean crazy like my step-mum used to get when she'd only eaten one rice cracker all day and couldn't remember our names or where she parked the car. No, not that sort of crazy. It's a raw, blind sort of crazy that'd make you throw your step-mum off the car park roof if you thought it would mean an extra bowl of rice in your belly.

To understand how I got here, we have to go back to the start. And it's going to hurt. Thinking about those last days – before this all began – always hurts.

But it's all I have.

Three months ago I woke up in the morning and it was the same as any other day. I had slept in and if I didn't get my arse out the door soon I was going to miss the bus. I got out of bed and rescued my school pants and shirt from the pile of clothes that lived at the foot of my bed.

You can probably imagine the morning routine stuff; Kara, my step-mum, was there, making some sort of guava and wheatgrass concoction. (People often used to mistake Kara for my sister, if you get my drift.) My little brother Max was eating toast, and there was no sign of my dad. He had recently taken up jogging in an effort to prove to the world he wasn't too old for Kara. It was like a feel-good cereal commercial, except there was no smiling and there was no cereal. I didn't have time to eat; I skulled a glass of juice and bolted out the door.

I lived in the Blue Mountains, about an hour's drive west of Sydney. Between here and the city there were acres and acres of suburbia. The main difference between this place and the suburbs used to be that we had a national park instead of housing estates. Plus it was whiter up here than a loaf of Tip Top – still is, I guess. There's a highway that snakes up through the mountains with townships most of the way along it. Tourist brochures used to really push the whole 'village atmosphere' thing, which really only meant that the trains came less often and there was only one McDonald's. My town wasn't high enough up to be a touristy place though; it was the place you drove through to get somewhere else, somewhere with better views and more kangaroo key rings.

I've lived here my whole life, even stayed in the same house after my parents split two years ago. My mum left to live in the city. She's an advisor to the government and had to travel to Canberra a lot. It made sense for her to be near the airport. That was her reasoning anyway. It was probably also pretty convenient that her boyfriend had a shiny inner-city pad.

I had been working pretty hard at trying to guilt either of my parents into buying me a car, post divorce is the optimum time for that sort of thing. It hadn't worked and I was forced to catch the school bus. The bus did have its perks, namely Lucy Tenningworth.

My bus stop was right near where I am now – at the top of my street. There's a strip of five shops, one was a little supermarket (there wasn't a whole lot of 'super' about it), three other shops that had been empty for years and the last one was a Chinese restaurant; the kind where you could pick up a packet of weed with your chicken chow mein. It's not like my town was some sort of seedy crack-hole, it was more that, other than bush-walking, there wasn't a whole lot for the 'young people' to do. So a side business in recreational drugs was a pretty smart move.

When I got to the top of the hill I saw that I hadn't missed the bus. There were about five kids standing in the drizzle, waiting. The rain wasn't heavy enough for an umbrella, but heavy enough to make you blink continuously like a moron.

Lucy wasn't waiting in the rain. She was a bit away from the bus stop, leaning against the wall of the supermarket, under the awning with her ankles crossed. (I don't know what it is about girls' ankles; they make me crazy.) She was reading a book and looked up when I came toward the bus stop. I pretended I hadn't noticed her at first – I didn't want to appear too keen.

I noticed Lucy Tenningworth on the first day of year eleven, the same time as every other male in the school. She had come from a girls' school that only went to year ten, and instantly eclipsed every other girl I had ever had

a thing for. Lucy turned up with her chipped black nail polish and a well-thumbed copy of *A Clockwork Orange*. She was allocated the seat next to mine in modern history. She had clear, pale skin and legs that I knew would cause me some serious concentration issues. Mrs Bryan, our teacher, announced to Lucy that I was her ‘star pupil’, at which point I think I actually physically shrank with embarrassment. Mrs Bryan went back to the lesson and Lucy leaned across and wrote something across the page of my textbook. *Number one? I’m going to kick your arse*. She raised an eyebrow and gave me a little smirk. I somehow managed to collect myself and wrote *I’d like to see you try* on her book. Her response? *Game on*. Her smile was ridiculous.

‘Hello,’ I said after a bit.

‘Hello yourself.’ She gave me a smile and turned back to her book.

I waited a few moments. ‘Beautiful weather.’

‘Isn’t it just. I loathe winter.’

‘Hey, aren’t we supposed to be going to the library this arvo? Research?’

‘Indeed.’ Her long dark hair was pinned in elaborate coils behind her ears. She tilted her face up to look at me. ‘Still free? Or are you otherwise engaged – rugby practice or something?’

I laughed. ‘No, they still won’t let me on the team. I’m too intimidating for the other guys.’

‘Well, let’s do it then. Although I really think you’re wasting your time. We both know I’m going to kick your skinny arse.’

‘You keep saying these things, but I’m yet to see the evidence.’

‘Oh, you’ll see the evidence, my friend.’

The bus came over the hill. Lucy closed her book and tucked it into her satchel with a sigh.

‘How many more days of this do we have to endure?’ she asked.

‘Too many.’

The bus pulled to a stop. We watched as the year sevens scrambled for their bags, as if the bus leaving them behind would be a bad thing. At the last possible moment we made our way over. I stood aside and let Lucy get on before me. She took one of the last free seats and I sat next to her. The bus shuddered and pulled away from the kerb.

‘So, do you think the world’s going to end?’ I said.

‘Beg yours?’

‘The nuke testing. Was on the news last night.’

‘How could I forget; our impending doom! I wonder when it will occur to everyone that the best way to solve differences might not be to annihilate each other. I’m taking comfort in the knowledge that we are on the other side of the world.’

‘Depends what you class as the other side of the world. It’s a bit too close for comfort in my book.’

‘If the world is going to end I don’t want to spend my last days writing a history essay. Although . . .’ she paused, ‘if I don’t do it and the world doesn’t end then I will fail and you will be at the top of the class. And we can’t have that, can we?’ She glanced at me and the corner of her mouth curved up a little.

‘I would be honoured if you would spend your last moments researching with me,’ I said.

‘Hmm? And what would we be researching exactly?’

I nearly fell off my seat. She looked casually out the window with a little smirk. I had absolutely nothing to say. I cleared my throat. The bus pulled up at another stop and more kids got on. It was standing room only except for the one seat next to Arnold Wong. Kids crammed on and swayed in the aisles but no one sat next to Arnold Wong. No one ever did.

Arnold Wong had been at my primary school; he joined my class in year three. I don’t know if it was because he had a funny name or because he had skin a few shades darker than everyone else and thick black hair that stood straight up like a Chia Pet’s, but everyone took to hating Arnold Wong from that very first day he arrived. Arnold was the carrier of Arnold-germs that could be transmitted by standing behind him in the canteen line, talking to him in a non-hostile way or touching any of his stuff. Once you got Arnold-germs you were considered almost

as bad as Arnold himself and subjected to taunts for a few days afterwards. Arnold seemed to take all of this pretty well for a few years. He was even considerate enough to step off a bit of pavement if you happened to step onto it, so that you'd be spared the burden of carrying his germs. But one day in year six, as he was walking down the corridor, someone must have said something – added a final straw to his load – and he put two palms against the plate-glass window and rammed his head through it. He stood there in a pool of shards, blood dripping from his scalp and no one said anything until Alex Loke yelled out, 'Hey, it's Wong King Kong!' Alex Loke wasn't a dickhead in my book, he was my mate (aka Lokey) and he was no different to any of us. We laughed nervously and then a teacher came running down the corridor and questions were asked and Arnold was sent to the principal's office via the sick bay. Afterwards, everything carried on like it always had, except with the occasional yell of 'Hey Wong King Kong, there's a window – why don't you put your head through it?' I'm not going to pretend I was any different. I said crap to him. I pelted him with spitballs. It was dangerous not to.

It would be nice to say that we hit high school and things changed for Arnold. But traditions stuck, rituals stuck. No one ever sat next to Arnold on the bus. It was bullshit and it was pathetic but I was also part of it.

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The bus rounded a corner and my knee touched Lucy's. (She was wearing black tights; she wore them every day of the school year, no matter what the weather was like. She once said no girl over the age of fourteen should wear ankle socks.) We were approaching the school and I didn't want to get off the bus.

'Is this nuclear missile fiasco actually something we have to worry about?' Lucy asked. 'Haven't loads of countries tested nuclear weapons?'

'Yeah, but it's who's doing the testing that's the worry, apparently. My mum's a bit paranoid about it. Disasters are her speciality.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah, she has a PhD in disaster response management or something. Works with the government and the defence force on strategies to stop human extinction if there's a natural disaster. Or nuclear disaster. She's a real light-hearted sort of person.'

'Sounds like it. Not a job I'd envy. What would you do anyway? In the event that the whole human population faces extinction?'

'Are there zombies involved?'

'No zombies.'

'Is Will Smith there?'

'No Will Smith.'

'Bear Grylls?'

'No Bear Grylls either, my friend. Just your sorry

skinny arse. I'm serious. What would you do?'

'I don't know. I'd try to help my family, I guess. Beyond that? I really don't know. You're putting a kind of dampener on my morning with this stuff, you know that?'

'I'd say your morning was already on the damp side.'

'Very clever. What would you do? Mass destruction, you've only got a screwdriver and a box of sultanas on hand. Go.'

'Sultanas? Eeeew. I would stab the nearest person with the screwdriver and eat them instead of the sultanas.'

'You don't really do things by halves.'

She laughed and I liked that I could make her do that. 'Precisely, my friend. Seriously, should we be worried? And would the government even tell us if we should be? I think they'd put on a smiley face just to avoid panic.'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Are you going to the march tomorrow?'

There was a march planned for the city. The idea being that if enough people turned up with placards our government would impose trade sanctions against the offending country.

'Dunno. It's not as if the government's going to notice. And as if they'd stop testing missiles just because Australia doesn't want to play any more.'

'You don't think there's any point.'

'Not really.'

‘Right. What do you think would happen if everyone had that attitude? Apathy is what leads to this stuff in the first place.’ She wasn’t smiling any more.

‘I take it you’re going?’

‘Yes I am.’

‘And your opinion of me has just plummeted.’

She narrowed her eyes and gave me a half smile. ‘Yes, but not beyond repair.’

The bus pulled up at the school. We got off and started to walk in together.

Lucy nodded toward my sketchbook. I carried it under my arm in the hope it made me look thoughtful.

‘Give me a look,’ she said.

‘What? Nah. It’s boring as.’

Her mouth again curved into that mischievous smile. It was a total turn-on and she knew it. ‘Come on, a peek.’

‘Nah. Hey, did we have homework for English?’

‘You’re trying to change the subject.’

‘I’m not, I—’

She reached over, snatched the sketchbook away and skipped a few metres ahead. She opened it up and my heart ended up somewhere near my tonsils.

‘Hey,’ I said, trying to laugh convincingly. ‘Come on, hand it over. You don’t want to see it, it’s crap.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that, thank you very much.’

‘It’s just roughs for my major work – a graphic novel. The characters are based on people I know.’

‘Is that guy our bus driver?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Wow. You’re right, it is crap.’

‘Hey!’ I elbowed her and she laughed.

‘I’m joking. It’s really good.’

She kept leafing through the pages, they were dog-eared and almost etched through with ink where I’d reworked stuff over and over. I tried to get the book back but she dodged away and kept looking. I swallowed hard.

‘That’s all really, there’s nothing else . . .’

And then she got to the page. She stopped walking. I felt myself melting with embarrassment. I wanted to seep into the ground. She looked at the drawing without speaking. I’d sketched her one day when I was sitting behind her on the bus. It was of the side of her face and neck. My breath felt all boxed up and tight in my chest.

She turned her lovely eyes up to me and bit her lip.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’m not stalking you, really. There’s this famous drawing by a French guy, Toulouse-Lautrec. It’s a profile of a woman called Madame Lucy. I was thinking about it once when I was sitting behind you and . . . I’m sorry.’

She smiled slowly. ‘Well, it’s not very good,’ she said. ‘I’m not that pretty.’

I gently took the book from her. ‘I’ll be the judge of that.’

She grinned and looked away. Then she elbowed me in the ribs. We walked in silence until we got to her homeroom for roll call.

‘If your mum calls and tells you that chaos is going to break out, will you let me know?’ she asked.

‘I’ll let you know. Bring your screwdriver.’

She smiled.

‘See you after homeroom?’ I asked.

‘Indeed.’

Our school was one of those classy places built in the seventies: brick buildings with tiny windows and ceiling fans instead of air conditioning. The rooms smelt of pee and mildew, and were carpeted in industrial polyester carpet the colour of baby vomit. What the place lacked in style it made up for in location: the grounds were carved into the top of a mountain ridge and overlooked a valley of bush. Instead of the standard tree-less bitumen grounds of most schools, we had acres of grass and trees. (Too many trees – the science block fried in a bushfire three years ago.) The room I was in for homeroom was right on the edge of the bush. In summer it was a sweatbox and the air was so shrill with cicadas Mr Effrez would swear at them and shut the windows. In winter it was quiet and we were lucky each period was only forty-five minutes because any longer sitting in one spot and you’d freeze your arse off.

Lokey was already inside when I got to homeroom. He was in the back row, his usual position. His feet were up on the desk, which meant Effrez was nowhere to be seen, yet.

‘Hey,’ he said.

I dropped my bag and took a seat next to him.

‘Hey.’ I tried to appear casual.

‘What’s up? Your grin is freakin’ me out, man.’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oh, come on.’ Lokey jabbed me in the arm. ‘Is it a chick? Who? What have you done?’

‘A gentleman never tells,’ I said.

‘Serious?’

‘Serious.’

‘You are a total wanker,’ Lokey said and took his feet off the desk as Effrez walked in the room.

‘Ah, my faithful pupils,’ Effrez said.

‘Sir.’

‘What are you doing in here? Bell hasn’t gone yet.’

‘It’s raining, sir,’ Lokey replied.

‘That it is. You don’t appear to have defaced anything, so I’ll let it slide. How are you going with *Heart of Darkness*, Mr Findlay Heath?’ He put his briefcase on the desk and unwound his scarf from his neck. He actually managed to wear a scarf and look more like a poet than a wanker. He was a mixture of Professor Snape from Harry Potter and Badger from *The Wind in the*

Willows. Other than taking our class for homeroom, he refused to teach anything other than senior English.

‘Good, sir,’ I replied. I’d read four pages.

‘Excellent. You know that the essay is due in a week. I’ll be interested to hear your thoughts.’

So would I.

The bell rang and students filed into the room. Effrez leaned on the front of his desk and watched everyone take their seats. He didn’t have to call for quiet.

‘And how are we all today?’

The tone was more menacing than conversational. Effrez folded his arms, eyes scanning the class as if looking for prey.

‘All looking very relaxed, aren’t we? Anyone got any idea what is happening out there?’ He gestured toward the windows. ‘You know, out in the *world*? Out there beyond Facebook and your smart phone and whatever reality television show they happen to be spoon-feeding you these days?’

No one made a sound. It was safest not to when Effrez was having one of his ‘episodes’. Morning announcements began to crackle through the intercom but he turned the volume down. Then he smiled and sat in his chair as if he was about to tell us a nursery story.

‘Did you know, dear pupils, that there are two countries out there – neighbours – who don’t like each other very much? They both like to puff out their chests and

show how big and tough they are. Well, one of them has some special missiles, not very nice ones, and they are going to test them. It would be nice to think that our government, good honest folk that they are, would put their hand up and say that Australia will impose sanctions unless the tests are abandoned. But they won't. Don't want to jeopardise all those big trade dollars, do they? Have any of you heard about this?'

Half the class raised their hands tentatively.

'Well, that's better than none. Assuming you're being honest. I suggest the rest of you pull your heads out of your arses.' Mr Effrez walked to the door and shut it. 'And who is going to the march tomorrow? Come on.'

Nobody moved.

'WHO IS GOING TO THE PROTEST?'

The class shuddered.

'Have I taught you nothing? If you have anything vaguely resembling a spine, you will go. I want to be asked why none of my pupils were in class. If I hear any of you are at school tomorrow, I will be bitterly disappointed.'

He strolled back to the window, hands in his coat pockets.

'Not everyone's as relaxed as you lot about all this. There's a group of activists building a self-sustaining settlement – complete with underground water-table access – outside the city. They believe that climate

change is going to cripple our resources, either global warming, or more terrifying, nuclear winter if there is a full-scale nuclear war, which there may well be. Any of you heard about these people?’

Lokey raised his hand.

‘Mr Loke? Wonders will never cease.’

‘Saw it on *Today Tonight*, sir. My dad said they’re a bunch of commie hippies.’

‘Did he now? Do you even know what a commie is, Alexander?’

Lokey grinned. ‘Someone who drives a Kombi van, sir?’

‘Ahhh, very amusing. I’d rather be with a bunch of commie hippies than rely on our government if it were a matter of life or death.’

The bell sounded.

‘So,’ said Mr Effrez. ‘To conclude, tomorrow, come to the march. Don’t just bugger off to Westfield.’

I spotted Lucy in the corridor. She smiled and walked over.

‘What did your class do?’ she asked. ‘I could hear Effrez through the wall.’

‘He wants us to wag tomorrow,’ Lokey said.

‘No kidding?’ She looked at me. ‘I’m not the only one, then.’

‘He’s a freakin’ nut job,’ Lokey said. ‘Talking about some hippies starting a freakin’ commune.’

Lucy looked puzzled.

‘It’s not important. You coming to bio?’

‘Unless it’s been cancelled. We live in hope.’

At recess Lokey and I went to our usual spot behind the science block with some other guys. Our group had semi-merged with Lucy’s, but I didn’t sit with her, trying again to play it cool. I saw her briefly in the corridor after third period and she winked at me, which I definitely didn’t handle as coolly as I would have liked. I went to English, where I bluffed my way through a conversation about *Heart of Darkness* before spending the rest of the period reading an article on climate change that Effrez had photocopied out of *The Monthly* magazine. (He was introducing us to investigative journalism, something I’m pretty sure wasn’t part of the syllabus.) After English was modern history where I sat next to Lucy and didn’t learn a thing I was so bloody distracted.

By lunch the rain had cleared and I kicked a ball with a few guys until we were booted off the basketball court. We all went down the bottom of the oval and dumped our bags at the edge of the bush. Then we noticed Mr Effrez leaning against a tree further in the scrub, he was looking out over the valley and smoking a cigar. As we sat down he slowly turned around.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said gravely.

‘Sir.’

Effrez flicked his scarf over his shoulder and strolled over.

'I'm fairly certain this area is considered out of bounds,' he said.

'Would you be more comfortable if we were smoking cigars, sir?'

'Slightly. I should give you each a detention.'

'Except you're down here smoking a cigar, sir,' Lokey said.

'Except I know that another detention for you, Mr Loke, and you'll be up for a suspension. Don't see why you should get a holiday.'

'Looking out for us, sir?'

'Always. You did an excellent job in class today, Mr Heath, bluffed your way through an entire conversation.'

I wasn't sure whether to thank him or apologise.

'Interesting how as soon as a book becomes mandatory reading no one wants to read it. You do read though, don't you, Fin?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What was the last thing you read?'

'*The Road*, sir. Cormac—'

'McCarthy. Excellent. Read *Heart of Darkness*, Mr Heath. Read it in light of McCarthy's work. McCarthy, like most of us, owes a great deal to Joseph Conrad.'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Will you gentleman all be attending the protest march tomorrow?’

Lokey pushed the toe of his sneaker through the dirt.

‘Don’t see the point, sir. It’s got nothing to do with us. If they want to blow each other up that’s their business.’

The bell rang. Mr Effrez stubbed the end of his cigar against a tree trunk. He took a small metal box from his pocket and placed the cigar end inside it. He turned and started walking back toward the school. Then he stopped and looked at Lokey over his shoulder.

‘I dare say it’ll be your business, Mr Loke. You can trust me on that.’

TWO

The guy with the gun is screaming now. He's saying something about Max again. He grabs a handful of my hair and wrenches my head back. His mouth is next to my ear, his breath tobacco-drenched and foul. My eyes try to focus in the dark, but all I can make out is the pattern of the brick wall in front of my face.

I found Lucy in the corridor after last period. She was standing with two of her friends. They looked me up and down in that way girls do; I must have passed their examination because they relinquished her.

'Do you still want to go to the library? Or do you just wanna go home?' I tried to sound like I was completely neutral.

She grinned. 'You really think I'm going to give up that easy? There's no way you're beating me on this

essay, Findlay. Your arse is mine.'

I swallowed.

The school library was empty except for a few other seniors. The librarian gave Lucy and me a warning look, as if she suspected us of using the reference section for purposes other than research (I wish). We actually got more work done than I was expecting. Lucy was a good influence. After we were done photocopying, Lucy started to pack away her things and I thought that maybe it was going to be nothing more than a study session. Maybe I had imagined this thing between her and me and she really was way out of my league. Maybe I was just a curiosity to her. Maybe she was just toying with me; practising for someone more popular. We'd been friends ever since that first modern history lesson. Maybe what I saw as flirting she saw as a way to ease her boredom. She laughed at my jokes. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

'So, Findlay, tell me. What do you like to draw, I mean, besides people you are stalking, of course.'

'Of course. Um, people mostly. At the moment it's usually people with, like random things.'

'Random things?'

'Objects that they are kind of linked to, in my head, in an abstract way. But, um, I like to play with the scale, so I did a drawing of my mum sitting next to an alarm clock, but the alarm clock was bigger than her. It sounds

really dumb when I say it like that. But I think if you met her you'd understand. I did another one of her with a massive empty birdcage. With one of those mirrors that people put inside them, for birds to look at themselves or whatever. I did that one after she left. So, you know, paging Dr Freud.'

'Your mum left?'

'Yeah. Two years ago. My brother and I got home and there was all this stuff missing from the house. I thought we'd been robbed, but I couldn't work out why a burglar would take our kitchen clock. Then I found this letter on the table in the hallway. My dad was supposed to be home earlier that day. He was supposed to find it, not us. But he didn't come home, so I was the one who found it and I . . . read it. I shouldn't have. I really wish I hadn't, but . . .'

'Shit, Fin.'

'Yeah. I mean we still see her a lot and stuff, but she made it pretty clear she didn't want to be at home with us any more.'

Lucy looked at me intently, like she expected me to continue.

'She was really young when she had us so maybe that has something to do with it . . . She's really smart, she's done a lot of study into human behaviour, had some stuff published. She was offered some amazing jobs when we were younger. What I mean is, I think she missed out

on a lot, having us so young. And Dad can be a total prick. He stuffed up a fair bit . . .’ I could feel my throat tightening. I hadn’t talked much about this stuff, wasn’t the kind of thing you could really debrief with Lokey.

‘But, to leave? That’s horrible.’

‘Yeah. It’s pretty bad.’

‘I understand about drawing her. I don’t draw, but I play the piano a bit. Write songs.’

I had seen her play. It should be illegal to look that sexy in a school hall.

‘I think it’s how I process things. My sister was quite sick a few years ago. Eating disorder; she nearly died. I wrote a lot of music around then. For me, it’s like I’m not thinking about the thing I’m writing about, not directly anyway. But something clicks over in my head and music comes out and I don’t even know where it comes from. Does that make sense?’

‘Totally. If you asked me to talk about how I feel about stuff, I can’t. But I can draw it.’

As she looked at me I could feel her gaze reaching right inside of me. Like she could see into the tunnels of my mind that no one had ever seen before. She didn’t speak. I inhaled slowly, trying to get the balls to do what I wanted to do. I leaned toward her, testing a little to see if she would shift away. She didn’t.

My phone rang, shrill in the quiet of the library. I grabbed it. Mum. I blocked the call. It rang again.

'Jealous girlfriend?' asked Lucy.

'Yeah. Sorry, I better get this.'

'It's your mum, isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

She laughed. I gave her the finger and answered the phone.

'Fin?' Mum was panicked. I could tell from the pitch of her voice. It wasn't an unfamiliar sound.

'Yeah, Mum. Who else would it be?' I rolled my eyes at Lucy.

'Where are you?'

'School. The library.'

'Have you seen the news?'

'What? No. What's wrong?'

'God, Fin. Get home. Where's Max?'

'I don't know. What's wrong, Mum? Would you just chill for a minute?'

'Fin, go to the supermarket, get as much non-perishable food as you can carry. And water. Get water—'

'What are you talking about?'

'The missiles, Fin. Something's gone wrong, very wrong. We don't know much, but it looks as though regions in the north of Asia have been hit as well as the Gobi Desert. Word is it's a nuclear test gone wrong, but it might have been deliberate. We don't know—'

She dropped out.

'Mum?'

‘Fin? Can you hear me?’

The line crackled. ‘Just,’ I answered.

‘I’ve tried to get on to your dad but I can’t. I can’t get Max either. I want you both at home as soon as possible, but you need to get food and water, Fin, understand?’

Lucy was making faces at me, trying to make me laugh.

‘Yeah, Mum. It’s cool, it’ll be fine.’

‘Call me when you get home, promise.’

‘Yes, Mum.’

I hung up. Lucy frowned.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I think we should go.’

‘Sure, you know we could grab a coffee—’

‘No—’

The wail of a siren sounded over the loudspeakers: the evacuation alarm. It was usually reserved for bush-fires. An announcement followed, it told anyone who was still on the school premises to go to the quadrangle immediately.

‘What’s happened?’ Lucy asked.

I told her what my mum had told me.

‘We should go to the quad,’ Lucy said.

‘No, I reckon we should get out of here. Go into town, get food. Get a bus from there.’

We shoved our stuff into our bags and left the library, ducking down a side path that led behind the science

blocks. Soon we were on the driveway and then out onto the main road.

By the time we got into town the sky had changed. It was like the sun was being choked with thick orange dust. The sky glowed, throbbing with colour, but it was like it had swallowed up all the sunlight. Everything beneath the sky – the streets and buildings – was monotone. People were standing out on the street looking up, like they expected to see Godzilla crash through the streetscape.

‘Oh my God,’ Lucy whispered.

We looked up, absorbed by it. It was beautiful – and wrong.

Lucy tried to call her mum but couldn’t get through. She tried again and again. I could see her bottom lip starting to tremble. She put her phone away and took my hand.

We went to the big supermarket near the highway. The aisles were already half empty. Mute, we both grabbed trolleys and filled them with whatever was left. Baked beans in barbecue sauce, canned sausages, creamed corn, canned baby carrots, as much bottled water as we could carry home.

We carried the shopping bags up to the bus stop.

‘It’ll be okay,’ I said, even though I had absolutely nothing to base that on.

I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Lucy was distracted and she twisted a strand of hair around and

around her pinkie. When the bus came we got on and I sat next to her. I wanted the trip to be over because I felt awkward, like I was failing. But at the same time I didn't want the afternoon to end. The sky was weighed down with colour and light and under any other circumstances it would have been romantic. We didn't say anything the whole way. The bus reached our stop and we both got off.

'Can I help you carry some of your stuff?'

'No, it's okay, it's fine.'

'Really, it's no problem.' I held out my hand. She gave me one of her grocery bags to carry. We walked across the road and down the street a bit to Lucy's house. I followed her up to the porch and waited while she unlocked the door. I handed her the grocery bag.

'Thank you,' she said.

'I'll call you, okay?'

'Bye, Fin.' She leaned over and kissed my cheek. I watched her go inside and disappear from my life.