

# ONE

I have three months left to call Katie my older sister. Then the gap will close and I will pass her. I will get older. But Katie will always be fifteen, eleven months and twenty-one days old. She will always have a nose piercing and a long curly knot of dark hair. She will always think that The Cure is the greatest band of all time. She will always have a red band of sunburn on her lower back from our last beach holiday.

Forever.

The bus jolts and shudders along the street, a box of heat and sweat and BO. My fellow students flick the odd spitball and hurl the occasional insult. Someone is a fat cow. Someone is going to do something filthy to someone else's mother. Someone has a thing for Ms Thorne. There is laughter up the back but none of it is directed toward me. Nothing and no one touches me.

A fire is burning somewhere, across a gully, gums and leaf mulch are smouldering, the eucalypt oil hissing, tree-flesh twisting. The smoke drifts in a thick, putrid mass, up from the gully, over the ridge. It clings to the air, that acrid scent. It might be technically in its last month, but the Australian summer doesn't stick to the calendar rules. The heat will hang around past its welcome.

The bus heaves itself around a corner and onto my street. It was a good street to invest in, my dad said. A fire ripped through years ago and took out nearly every house on this side of the gully. It scared the crap out of everyone. Prices dropped and my parents swooped. 'Won't see anything like that again for a while,' he had told us, meaning the cataclysmic firestorm that ate homes and schools and the scout hall. We were smarter than those people. Dad designed a house with fire protection: sprinklers that cast great curtains of water mist, double brick, heat-proof glass. All that.

The people who live around this area fall into three main categories: tree-changer families, pensioners, and the people that have lived here forever, raised their kids in the family home and never moved. You can tell the tree-changers and forever families because they drive hybrid cars and have rainwater tanks and bird-feeders in their yards. The pensioners have flat squares of treeless grass out the front of their homes and hose leaves off

their driveways. It's weird to live in the Blue Mountains if you hate leaves so much – the place is full of trees.

A highway runs up and over the mountains, with small towns most of the way along it. Some places are popular with tourists and have cafés and boutiques and gift stores. Then there's towns like ours: we have a newsagent, a bottle shop and a bakery that sells pies I'm pretty sure are just Sargents heated up in a microwave. There's an unspoken rivalry between the upper and the lower mountains; those up the top think that the people who live further down are middle-class snobs and the lower-mountains residents call the ones up in Katoomba feral hippies or worse, greenies. We live midway up and my mum grew up here, so I guess that makes us middle-class forever greenies.

The bus pulls into my stop and I peel myself from the vinyl seat. I follow a handful of others down the aisle and off the bus. The air outside is fresher, but no cooler. I walk the two hundred metres from the bus stop to my house. My elderly neighbour, Mrs Van, is in her yard. She's of the variety that despises leaves and she's armed herself with a rake that's bigger than she is. I don't feel I have the resilience for a Mrs Van conversation right now. Katie would have stopped. She would have stopped and chatted to Mrs Van, not because she was a particularly

chatty person, but because she knew the more she talked the more cash she would get in a Christmas card from Mrs Van at the end of the year.

She would stand next to me on our driveway and tell outrageous lies to Mrs Van. She once told her she was going to spend the holidays in Borneo building shelters for diabetic orangutans.

I wave to Mrs Van and quicken my pace up the front steps.

Inside the house is dark, curtains drawn against the heat. A pedestal fan whirs in the corner of the living room. Its blades make a tick, tick sound, like a slowly dying insect. I go up the hall. I turn the handle of her door very quietly and push open the door. The carpet is soft and spotless beneath my feet. Her bed is neatly made. A selection of lilac cushions are arranged on the silver-and-white striped doona cover. Her desk is clear. Pens and pencils stand in an empty jam jar. The corkboard on her wall remains crammed with photos and pictures torn from magazines: clothes, catwalk models, close-up shots of fabric patterns, feathers, coloured glass. She was always pinning new things up. Now dust clings to the curled corners of photos. Normally I don't touch anything but this afternoon I slide the top drawer open and there on top of notepads and exercise books is her

iPod. I put it in the pocket of my skirt. Then I just stand there in the middle of her room, my backpack still on my shoulders, my heart pounding.

I close the door behind me when I leave. At the end of the hall is Mum and Dad's room. Mum is asleep on the bed, all the stuff that was piled on it – unread mail, used tissues, dirty clothes – is in a pile on the floor. I go to the kitchen to find something to eat.

My mother used to be a professional homemaker. She had a section in the weekend newspaper magazine where she would offer instruction on things like how to make a festive table centrepiece out of pine cones or the perfect method for roasting a leg of lamb. She was the type of person who could take an oil drum and turn it into a decoupage occasional table if you gave her fifteen minutes and some craft glue. Her true passion – and she was the kind of person who used that phrase a lot – was organic, GM-free baking; there was always some weird sort of muffins waiting for us when we got home from school, like pawpaw and flaxseed or something. She'd had a book published: *The Wholefood Manifesto*. Note, a 'manifesto' not a cookbook. As if she were the type to wander down to the local dairy and pick up a fresh pail of milk for our muesli every morning. Katie called it 'The Wanker Manifesto'.

Mum is no longer that person. She is like a husk from the organic buckwheat pancakes she doesn't make

anymore. She sleeps for large slabs of the day and I am not exaggerating when I say she hasn't left the house since Katie's funeral. That was almost a year ago.

Now, as I scout around for something to eat, I find that the pantry is almost empty, bar a bag of potatoes (not organic), and a couple of packets of two-minute noodles (definitely not organic). I open the freezer, it's not much better: some meat from the butcher, still in its paper bag, and about seven almost-finished loaves of bread. I salvage two pieces, put them in the toaster and flick through a Kmart catalogue. Up the hall the toilet flushes and then Mum comes out into the kitchen, yawning like it's six in the morning, instead of four in the afternoon.

'Hi sweetie.' She leans her hip on the counter. She has a habit of hovering around me like she's about to say something meaningful. It's terrifying. The side of her face is patterned with red marks from the pillow. The silver roots of her hair are showing. She watches me with the intensity of someone who's trying to perform a Jedi mind trick.

'How are you?' she asks.

You never know, maybe one day it will work. Maybe one day I will open my mouth and it will all come rushing out. I'll be able to tell her how I am, I'll know how I am. Not today.

'Okay,' I answer. I sit on a stool and continue looking through the Kmart catalogue at pictures of friendly-looking people having barbecues and playing table tennis.

Mum gives up watching me, sighs and opens the fridge, which is possibly a breach of several environmental laws. The thick, sour smell of past use-by dates and rotting vegetables seeps into the kitchen. Mum doesn't seem to notice, she rifles through the shelves and pulls out a tub of yoghurt. I wonder how old it is. The smell lingers after she closes the fridge.

She peels back the lid and stirs the yoghurt with a teaspoon. She doesn't eat any, just stirs it around and around. She shifts her gaze to the back window and its view of the deck. On our lounge room wall there is a framed photo of Katie as a toddler splashing in a paddling pool on that deck. Now the deck is strewn with leaves and twigs, probably the messiest it has ever been. It's certainly not bushfire safe.

'How was school?' she asks finally. Almost absent-mindedly, as if she's remembered there's something else she should probably ask me from time to time.

'Fine.'

She just nods.

I leave her and go outside, down the steps off the back deck and along the little path that leads through flowerbeds to the edge of the scrub. There is a large flat rock there that juts out over the gully. Katie and I used to pretend it was a pirate ship/stage/New York apartment.

I pull her iPod from my skirt pocket and turn it on. There are one thousand, eight hundred and seventy-four songs on it. I put the earphones in my ears and hit 'shuffle all songs'. First up is a song by a guy who insists repeatedly that he doesn't have a gun. I lie on my back and feel the warmth of the day's sun melt into my bones.

My father's garden languishes in the heat. He will come home later and hobble about with the hose, watering everything in the twilight. He will probably take a broom and hide a grimace as he clears the back deck and path of leaves and twigs. He won't say a word about the pain that must run rivers through his limbs. He will go inside and get his painkillers from the medicine cabinet while my mother watches television without a word.

There is a court date in six weeks' time. For the last year the police have asked me to provide a witness statement. Dad can't remember what happened. He doesn't remember anything from that morning at all. I have heard him say to my mother that everything went black and then he woke up in hospital with two steel pins in his left leg, four broken ribs and a fractured arm.

And a dead daughter.

# TWO

*Shoes in Katie's wardrobe:*

- \* *Three pairs of wedges (black, red, pale blue)*
- \* *Black eight-hole Doc Martens*
- \* *Four pairs of high top Converse Chuck Taylors, various colours and patterns*
- \* *Two pairs of sandals (one silver, one blue)*
- \* *One pair of Givenchy heels (hidden right at the back of her wardrobe under some other stuff, which indicates they were probably stolen)*

When you're in a position like mine you get to see a fair few different counsellors and everyone's very keen to offer advice. Once I saw this woman (she made me call her Doctor Wendy) who tried to hypnotise me. Doctor Wendy made me lie down and then she started trying

to get me to imagine things. She told me to envisage myself in a safe place where I felt relaxed and calm. Apparently Doctor Wendy did heaps of counselling for people who've had traumatic experiences – like being held hostage or watching their family be incinerated in a bushfire – so if there's anyone who should know that the world isn't a safe place, it's her. It seems pretty stupid to me to pretend that it is. For all I know, I could be lying there in my 'safe place' and a truck could come crashing in through the wall. Needless to say Doctor Wendy and I didn't get on like a house on fire, so to speak.

The last counsellor I went to was a guy named John Piles. All I could think about the whole time was what Katie would have said to him. I could practically see her sitting next to me in his Ikea-decorated office. When he introduced himself I pictured her with a smirk, eyebrow raised. *He's probably had a fair bit of counselling himself with a surname like that.* He was a nice enough guy – really good at looking concerned – but useless when it came to actual counselling. His favourite thing to say was 'I understand', which was an acute lapse in judgement if you ask me. In my mind Katie burst out laughing. *Do you buy that? 'Cause I can see a picture over there of him and his wife and their two smiley kids. Think he ever watched one of them get crushed to death? His baby looks like an alien, by the way.*

Isn't having a counsellor just paying someone to listen to your problems? A rent-a-friend? You pay them a fee to put up with you for an hour, to listen to you go on and on about yourself and not judge you for it. But they probably judge you anyway. Who's to say what they write in all those notes? People assume it's all compassionate psychoanalysis, but it's probably stuff like: 'Self-obsessed, delusions of grandeur, poor hygiene. Boring.'

I have no idea what John Piles wrote about me, but I know it was costing Mum and Dad two hundred bucks a session. Mum isn't making any money at the moment and Dad had six months off from work – I really felt they were wasting their mortgage repayments on John Piles. Mum didn't really have an opinion on the matter either way. Dad rang my homeroom teacher.

While the parenting load may have halved as a result of Katie not being around, we are also effectively one parent down thanks to Mum's walking-dead status. So Dad has been leaning heavily on what he calls our 'support' network. This mainly involves a lot of phone calls to the school, specifically to my homeroom teacher, Mr Black.

I've been in Mr Black's homeroom since the start of year seven, back when I had friends. He's the Design and Technology teacher – a short man with a head that is almost perfectly round and bushy eyebrows that commune in the centre of his forehead when he speaks.

He wears blue overalls all the time, with a ruler and pencils stuck in the front pocket, in case he's required to measure something on the fly. I think that's why Dad likes him so much. He seems to take every one of my dad's calls very seriously. The result of this Hannah-won't-go-to-counselling-call was Mr Black pulling me aside during homeroom today.

We were sitting dutifully reading our books (he makes us read during homeroom so he can focus on sudoku) and Mr Black said, 'Hannah, may I speak with you outside for a moment.'

A year ago that kind of thing would have triggered a whole heap of comments and wolf-whistles from the class. I would have heard about it all the way home on the bus. 'Hannah, what did you and Black do?' et cetera. But now there was nothing. I got up and followed Mr Black out of the classroom. He closed the door behind him.

'Now. Hannah, as your homeroom teacher it's my responsibility to look after your emotional wellbeing.'

Despite the attention he gives my dad's calls, I doubt Mr Black could look after the emotional wellbeing of a cactus.

'Your father gave me a call yesterday. He's a bit ... concerned. He informed me you don't want to see your current ...' he lowered his voice, 'psychologist anymore.' He said it like the fact I have had contact with mental health professionals is a classified state secret.

‘In the past we’ve discussed the possibility of you seeing the school counsellor to talk through things.’

This is true. I was strongly encouraged to see the school counsellor even before the accident. But I have spent most of my high school career feeling like a freak, I never felt like confirming it by spending time in the counsellor’s office.

‘I think you could find her helpful. Nobody thinks you should be dealing with things on your own since the loss of your sister.’

I kept my eyes focused on the area near Mr Black’s shoes.

‘How have things been for you socially?’

‘Better,’ I whispered. Yes, my social life is booming now that I don’t get pelted with bits of food during recess.

‘Well, I’d like you to go and speak with Anne. I have made an appointment for fourth period.’

All of the buildings at St Joseph’s are sandstone – except for the one right at the back: a seventies red-brick number. It’s full of asbestos apparently, so it’s just used to store gym equipment, the school counsellor and the careers advisor. It looks like a prison from the outside, but inside is a wide, blue-tiled staircase that winds up five floors and a stained-glass window that spans its full height. As I climbed up the staircase it reminded me of a deep, clear swimming pool.

When Anne opened her office door, I was immediately sceptical. She had a purple woven shawl wrapped around her shoulders and looked like the kind of person who might collect crystals and use the term 'spirit animal'. She smiled, held the door open for me and told me to take a seat. The room is large and square, and looks almost like a lounge room except there's no television. Anne sat opposite me. In the empty chair next to me was Katie. I could picture her so clearly. She was chewing gum. She looked at Anne, then at me. *Hannah, she's going to ask you what shape your pain is. Katie widened her eyes. What are you going to say? Is it Katie shaped? As in, totally bangin'?*

I swallowed and waited for Anne to start asking me questions. She opened the folder and took a deep breath.

'Jeez, I'm going to need a smoke after this one. Bloody hell.'

Katie raised her left eyebrow.

'What class did you get out of?' Anne asked.

'Maths.'

'Well, I made it worth your while, didn't I?'

I smiled.

'I've got your academic record here.' She said 'academic record' in a funny voice, mock-posh and held a piece of paper up, peering at it over her glasses. 'You're in the top five for everything but Maths and PE. Can you find the shops?'

It was a weird question. ‘Um, yes.’

‘Well, go there and buy a calculator. Problem solved.’ She smiled. ‘Your marks haven’t dropped off since your sister died. Clearly there’s something wrong with you.’

‘Okay.’

‘I’m joking.’

‘Okay.’

‘Well, I suppose you know why you’re here.’ She spoke patiently, like she knew I had heard it all before. I looked at the patterned carpet. It was disgusting, the type they design so you won’t notice if anyone vomits on it, so ugly you could understand why that might be a risk.

‘You’ve been through something awful, actually “awful” doesn’t really cover it, does it? Bloody hell.’ She glanced at her notes, raised her eyebrows. ‘And your dad is going to court in six weeks. You’re going to be assessed by a psychiatrist and, depending on what they say, may be questioned in court. Am I right?’

I nodded.

‘Because you were a witness?’

I could feel it then, it started as a pain in my chest and then I couldn’t find my breath. I closed my eyes because that’s the only way I can feel like I’m hidden in a small space without actually being hidden in a small space.

‘Hannah? Are you okay? You’ve gone a bit pale. You need to open your eyes. Come on. Good. Look out the window and tell me what you see out there. Go on, tell me.’

‘Trees.’

‘What colour are they?’

‘Green.’

‘Green all over? Come on, what do you see? I need details.’

I tried to focus on the window and not the feeling in my chest. I told her what I saw, the green leaves swaying on branches high up in the blue sky.

‘Does that happen to you a lot? That panic response just there?’

I nodded.

‘You can flick your brain out of it, but it takes practice. We’ll work on it. Let’s leave that alone and have a chat about your social life. Electric, I presume?’

Katie pipes up. *Do you think it’s ethical for a school counsellor to use so much sarcasm?*

‘It’s fairly quiet,’ I answer Anne.

‘Aha. Can you name the last person you were good friends with?’

I shift my attention back to the carpet.

‘Oh, come on,’ Anne says. ‘You’re the most fascinating person I get to talk to, Hannah. It’s usually all just playground spats and teacher crushes. You’re the only one keeping me awake here. Name the last person you were

good friends with. That's all I want, a name. I'll leave you alone after that.'

I look up.

'Charlotte.'

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I met Charlotte at preschool. She had white-blond hair cut in a thick blunt fringe across her forehead. I remember that I wanted to be her friend because I liked her hair and the dress she was wearing. Things must have been pretty simple back then because I picked Charlotte to sit next to and that was that – we were best friends. I guess she must have thought my outfit was okay too.

Charlotte's mum's name was Karen and she worked at the newsagent. She had bright red hair, like the colour of ink from a red biro. She also had a Chinese symbol tattooed in the middle of her back, you could see it above the band of her jeans when she sat down. I don't know what it meant, she wouldn't tell me. I used to call her Mrs Burke because that was Charlotte's surname. But one day she told me to call her Karen and that Mrs Burke was her mother's name. Charlotte comes across as quiet, but she isn't shy. She is just very deliberate about everything she says. She would come out with these killer one-liners that left a lot of people a bit shocked. She was useful arsenal to have nearby when Katie was around.

Charlotte and I ended up at the same primary school and in the same class, and we clung on to each other in that creepy obsessive way you do when you're little. (My mum said we were thick as thieves and I remember I was really hurt by that because I thought she meant thick as in dumb.) Karen started working Thursday nights and Charlotte would come to my house every Thursday. It was a given that we would go to the same high school. I don't think either of our parents would have split us up for fear of inflicting some horrible trauma.

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'Would you count Charlotte as a friend currently?'

'No.'

'Do you have any friends at the moment?'

'No.'

'How long has it been like this?'

'I don't know, a few years.'

'Right. Your dad said you went to see a psychologist for a bit. After the accident.'

'Yes.'

'What was that like?'

'Okay.'

'Did it help?'

There is, of course, the possibility that I could lie to Anne. I could just make stuff up, keep her busy for the forty minutes of our allotted time with a wild-goose chase

of invented emotional red herrings. Why do that? you might ask. Can't I see that I have a wide range of problems to do with my sister, who also happens to be dead, a fact that only compounds the said problems? Well, yeah. I know I need psychological help, everyone knows I do. But I feel that if I start talking it's like opening a trapdoor in my mind, and all the black lurking stuff will crawl out and take over my whole brain, my whole self. And I'll never be able to shut it away again. But of course it is a tricky thing to fool a person with a degree in psychology. I shake my head.

'Your dad said you wouldn't talk to the psychologist much ... why was that?'

'I don't know. I didn't like him.'

Anne didn't tell me that talking was the path to healing. She didn't tell me that all of this was part of a special journey that would make me a strong person. She just tilted her head to the side and looked as if she was waiting for me to say something else. Eventually I did because it seemed rude not to.

'Everyone wants to know about the accident. But I can't tell them anything. I don't see how constant questions about it is going to help that.' I swallowed. 'Sorry.'

'Who's everyone? The police?'

'Everyone. Mum, the police, my grandparents, the counsellors, even my dad because he doesn't remember anything.'

‘You can talk to me about whatever, Hannah,’ Anne said. ‘It doesn’t have to be anything to do with your sister if you don’t want it to be.’

I looked at the carpet. It’s fair to say I spend more time studying floor coverings than most people. Anne took a plastic thing like a pen out of her pocket and sucked on it.

‘See? Told you. I’m supposed to be done with ciggies in six months’ time. Not likely ... I’m not going to bullshit you, Hannah. Can I ask the same of you?’

I felt Katie’s eyes on me.

‘That I not bullshit myself?’

‘Do you think that’s a risk?’

I couldn’t answer her.