









‘Where we going?’ I ask, after a while.

‘The Hilton,’ Zak says. ‘We’ll stay at the Presidential Suite. Egyptian cotton sheets, a spa bath, bottle of the finest French champagne. All the room service you can eat.’

‘Seriously. Where?’ I don’t want to go to Edward James on the Square, it’s mostly for boozers. Luke House is in The Cross, near the red-light strip and it’s full of junkies and prossies.

‘Hope Lane in Darlington. It’s a temporary shelter,’ says Zak. ‘I was a resident there once. If they allow me back in, it’ll provide good respite.’ He studies my face, clocks the deep frown between my eyes. The light is getting soft, the sun losing heat. ‘Don’t worry. I have connections there. We’ll be welcome.’

It’s tough to crack a bed any night, but particularly since the past few have been cloudless and single digits. Nobody wants to sleep rough in winter. Tents are coming up in parks around the edges of the city. People scrambling for a warm place to hibernate.

★

Hope Lane is an old sandstone terrace that I reckon used to be a church. There’s an iron fence outside, and people are strung out across it like Christmas lights. Talking on phones, smoking, waiting for the doors to open. The building is wedged between an Italian restaurant and a done-up pub. The smell of roasting garlic and onions drifting from the restaurant makes my mouth water. I’m starving and light-headed.

Zak sits down on his suitcase, breathing hard, alcohol coming out of his pores like a rotten perfume.

‘Open up!’ someone shouts at the locked doors. ‘It’s freezing!’

I pull my hood over my head and duck my face into my knees. I’ve become good at curling into my shell at the first sign of danger. There’s no telling what people will do when they’re tired or off their heads. Zak squeezes my shoulder gently. He seems to know, even before I do, that I’m getting wound up too tight and might unravel. I wish my mum had seen it in me. Before things spun out of control.

Zak’s a dad and he misses his kids bad. He used to do supervised visits once a month, but he couldn’t stay straight and he hasn’t seen his two sons in years. He gets quiet sometimes and I know he’s thinking about them, wondering where they are. Do they think about him, too? I feel that yearning. It pulls me under when I’m not expecting it; drags me to a dark place.

On the walls of the shelter are Christian posters which I read to distract myself from the restless crowd around me, rattling the doors to get inside.

*Only God can turn a Mess into a Message.* Try to fix my mess, God. Make sense of it. I can’t.

*A Victim into a Victory.* I’m not a victim. I’m a villain.

*A Trial into a Triumph.* All I can see is the trial. Long and exhausting.

The doors open, and an unruly line forms. Inside the foyer there’s a glassed-in front desk. On the other side is a carpeted waiting room, lined with plastic chairs. The walls are sandstone, and it’s chilly and bare. The only decorations are flyers stuck on the noticeboard. Dozens of pamphlets

about sexual health, rooms for rent, jobs, outings, groups. One catches my eye.

*Hope Lane writing group. 2pm Wednesdays. Level 6. Afternoon tea! See Aimee for details.*

When I was little I liked writing stories. Mum used to stick them up on our fridge.

The residents sign in and push through the security doors. Past the front entrance is a hall with a pool table, TV and couches. Tables set for dinner.

Zak and I fill in thick forms in the waiting room. They're making my brain hurt and remind me of school. I was a hopeless student. Things didn't line up in my classes. Not like a pile of carrots needing to be julienned into orange matchsticks. Or a shortcrust pastry I could mix and roll out in minutes. My last class at Dubbo High was two years ago. It feels so much longer.

'Is that you, Zak?' shouts a woman at the front desk, knocking on the glass that surrounds the booth. She comes out of a door at the side. 'You grew your hair. Let me look at you.'

She kisses his stubbled cheek, then holds his face in her hands for a moment as if she thought she'd never see him again.

'Hello Aimee,' he says. 'Are you well, my dear?'

'Good, good. Actually, I'm having a baby.'

'Are you?'

'My first. Five and a half months now.'

She runs a hand over her small, swollen bump and I feel a pulse of regret. She has no idea the joy that's about to come her way – and the heartache.

‘We missed you around the place, Zakkie. How you been? Keeping out of trouble?’

Zak shrugs. He’s an alcoholic and a junkie so trouble tends to find him.

‘I’ve been mentoring this young lady,’ he says, gesturing to me. ‘We’ve been residing at St James Place, but then they put up those dreadful homeless spikes, so ... here we are.’

‘I heard about the spikes,’ says Aimee. ‘As if we don’t have enough to deal with. The Churchill is at capacity. The women’s shelters in Marrickville closed. There’s nowhere to put you all.’

‘You got beds?’ I say, anxious to be inside the doors.

‘We’ll get you in,’ says Aimee. ‘What’s your name, sweetheart?’

‘This is Tiny,’ says Zak. ‘She’s one of the good ones.’

I yank my hood over my head and stare at a stain on the opposite wall. I’m not good. I’m evil.

‘How old are you, Tiny?’ Aimee asks.

‘Eighteen.’ I would’ve missed my last birthday if Zak hadn’t found out and taken me down to Rough cafe for a free feed and made everyone sing. It’s not how I thought I’d turn eighteen. Before, I wanted a big party down at the RSL, using the money I earned working in the bistro kitchen. I would’ve had a cake. Mari was doing her apprenticeship as a cake decorator and she had plans. Many layers. A lot of cream. I had a dress picked out from a place in town. It was sexy, silky and the colour of a ripe mango.

Aimee puts out her hand to shake mine and I’m shocked. Nobody nice and clean has wanted to touch me since I arrived in the city. Her smooth skin reminds me of putting

my lips to the spot behind a perfect curled pink ear, velvet soft and all mine.

I relax a little. Aimee's okay. This place doesn't seem too bad. At least I won't wake up to street cleaners and garbage trucks. I won't have a bat piss on my head in the middle of the night, and never feel completely warm. I'll get breakfast in the morning and a coffee.

'Welcome to Hope Lane, Tiny,' says Zak grandly. 'The next chapter in our journey.'

★

My room is small with wood-panelled walls and a narrow bed. From the grimy window I can see two used syringes sticking out of the planter box outside. A lightly read bible sits on the bedside table.

I drop my shoulders and breathe out slowly. It's a hole, but it's mine. I've had a shower in the women's communal bathroom and even though I'm still in filthy clothes, my skin is washed and sweet. I bring my arm to my nose and sniff hard. That's what I smell like. I'd forgotten.

Aimee calls out behind the door and I let her in.

'Settling in okay?' she asks.

She puts clean linen and clothes on the foot of my bed and a small plastic bag full of tampons and pads.

'You might need these,' she says.

I start to cry. It's not the cruelty of people that'll pull the threads of you until you come undone. It's the small, kind things they do when you least expect it.

★

I'd just started sleeping rough when my period came back. Soaking my undies and staining the crotch of my jeans.

My body was ready to return to normal programming. It had no idea nothing would ever be the same again.

Zak hadn't found me yet, and I didn't have anything to stop the blood. I had no money left. A few gold coins and nothing left to sell. I'd dumped my car and it'd been smashed and vandalised. Wheel-locked and then towed. That crappy Hyundai had been my hotel room for weeks, but then I couldn't afford the petrol to move it. A couple of drunk guys had knocked on the window one night and tried to convince me to let them in. They said they'd come back another time. I was too scared to stay. It wasn't safe.

It was a problem, this blood coming out of me. I couldn't afford to wash my jeans at a laundromat. I didn't want to walk into a supermarket and spend my last few dollars on a pack of tampons. What was I supposed to do? Ask a woman on the street for a vampire's tea bag? Hold up a sign begging for feminine hygiene products?

The first day I used balled-up toilet paper from Maccas, stuffed into my undies. Then newspaper. I retreated to Hyde Park and lay in the shade. Bent double from cramps. No painkillers to pop. I changed the sodden paper in a public dunny with music and a robotic voice instructing me to flush and wash. I pressed my hands on my back and bent forward trying to relieve the pain.

When the flow got heavier on the second day, and I'd bled through the business, real estate and sports sections, I went into an underground chemist in Chinatown. The store was big enough that I could get lost in the shiny, white aisles with row after row of shampoos, toothpastes

and deodorants. I mixed in okay with the grungy uni students stocking up for the semester.

I'd never stolen before. Never had to and never wanted to. Mari did sometimes. The odd chocolate bar and pack of chips. She called me chicken and clucked with her arms at her sides. But I refused. I didn't want that black mark on my soul. Not when I had plenty of good food at home in our pantry. Why would I want stale mixed lollies when I could make buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and slices of banana?

In the tampon aisle, I pretended to be considering my purchasing options. Anti-fluff was important because 'fluffy is only cute on kittens', according to the pack. Non-bleached cotton. Applicators, wings and tapered edges. Mini, regular and super. Designer series and collector tins. I turned my back to the counter and slid a box of regulars into the waistband of my jeans. There was plenty of space, I was getting thinner every day. Soon, I wouldn't get my period anymore. Wouldn't have to feel so desperate.

I hated myself for having to do it. For not thinking ahead and leaving with my head so messed up. As I left the store a girl stopped me. She was my age and seemed nervous. I guess I looked scary to someone in a pencil skirt and cream blouse. Probably this was her part-time job. I bet she studied hard at school. I tried to hide my blood-stained fingernails in my pockets.

'Excuse me, Miss. Can I check your bag?' she said.

I pulled my backpack off my shoulders, sweating bullets.

She took a quick glance in my bag, smelly and stuffed with clothes and a small pillow. Her eyes flickered over the bulge at my waist. She knew I'd taken the tampons. I could see the pity in her blue, innocent eyes. I felt like a criminal in the floodlights. Caught. I waited for the most humiliating moment of my life to get even worse.

Then something passed between us. I understood she didn't want to get me arrested, not over something as pathetic as a box of tampons. Maybe she had her period, too. Maybe she was like Mari – loose about stealing things from big chain stores. In that moment she decided it wasn't worth it. Not for the minimum wage \$17.29 an hour she was getting. Not for the scene I'd have to make.

She nodded and smiled politely, glancing nervously at the security cameras on the ceiling. Counting the seconds before I would be out of her lovely, clean store.

'Have a good day, Miss.' What she was really saying was: 'Don't come back'.

'I will,' I said, because that's what everyone says, to be polite. The truth was my day would be misery. Misery wrapped in loneliness.

A good day used to be sleeping in, riding my pushie down to the one decent cafe in town for creamy scrambled eggs on sourdough toast. A good day was meeting up with my boyfriend Scott at the park. Lying out on a soft blanket under our tree and letting the hours go past like thick honey, his fingers running gently through my hair. Scoring some beers and scoffing on burgers from the fish 'n' chip place. Getting buzzy and giggly listening to the pub fill up down the street and TJ's cover band start

playing their old eighties rock stuff. ‘Sweet Child O’ Mine’ and ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’.

Today my good day was huddling against the rain and cold under the light rail in Glebe. Scabbing a feed at the Youth off the Streets van. Watchful and full of fear.

★

I push my fists into my eyes to stop the tears coming. Aimee nods sympathetically as if she’s seen this all before. People falling to bits.

‘It’s not forever,’ she says, not realising I’m crying with relief. ‘Cool your heels for a bit, get things straight. I’ll sort out a case worker. Centrelink comes in once a week. Lots of our residents end up in secure housing eventually. You’ll see.’

She puts her hand out, as if to reach for me, then drops it. Perhaps she thinks I’ll bite. ‘We have a games night going downstairs. Monopoly? Cards? Might take your mind off things?’

‘Nah, thanks.’

‘Okay, sleep tight. We’ll talk in the morning. Breakfast is from seven to eight-thirty.’ She closes the door, leaving me alone in my room. I put the sheets on the bed, lock the door, turn off the lights and crawl under the covers. I miss him, of course. He’s the last thing I think about when I go to sleep and the first thing when I wake up. And every minute I’m awake. The love of my life, and I left him. I’ll never forgive myself.

But I don’t have to keep one eye open here and the sleep comes in fast and hard. Black and thankfully dreamless.

## NOLA

I knock on the door of my year level coordinator, practising my excuse for not handing in my biology assessment.

Mr Jeffreys lets me into his room, which is plastered wall-to-wall with positive affirmations:

*If it Doesn't Challenge You It Won't Change You*

*If Life Was Easy Where Would All the Adventures Be?*

And my personal favourite:

*The Only Person You Are Destined to Become Is The Person You Decide to Be.*

Today I wish I'd decided to be a person who handed in her biology assignment two days ago, instead of leaving it half-finished on my laptop.

'You wanted to see me, Mr J?'

'Ah, Nola, come in.'

He finds a folder with my name on it from his filing cabinet and I sit down and await a lecture on my uncertain future. It is halfway through term two of my final year of school, and I've yet to select my university preferences, or make any effort to improve my below average marks. I have absolutely no idea what I want to do after my HSC. Every time I think about it, my brain goes into a kind of static fuzz that leaves me unable to form full sentences.

'Is this about my biol assessment?' I ask. 'I know it's a bit late, but I swear I'll hand it in tomorrow.'

'No, I wanted to discuss your community service. As you know, it's a requirement at our school and you

won't graduate at the end of the year without logging the minimum twenty hours.'

'Doesn't forcing us all to volunteer take away the whole purpose of volunteerism?' I ask. I'm not trying to be rude, but my parents always taught me to speak up when I thought something was bogus. They're big on fairness. Even bigger on equality.

Mr Jeffreys sighs deeply and looks up at the ceiling as if he hopes a rope will drop down from above and save him. I share this feeling.

'You're one of the last Year Twelve students to complete your service,' Mr Jeffreys reminds me.

He was right. All of my friends have already done theirs. Ebony sang in a choir at an aged care facility, Kara did tree planting and Lolly worked at a community garden. I could never figure out what I wanted to do, so I stayed quiet, hoping I could slide by without it.

'Do I *have* to do it, Mr J? I'm *so* busy with the HSC, and I'm on the formal committee this year.'

'Formal committee is fine, but picking place settings and a DJ isn't the same as contributing your time to the community. Do you have any idea what you want to do?'

'No.'

'I was contacted recently by a group that I thought you might enjoy working with – especially given how well you express yourself in writing.'

My English results are the only bright light in my studies. I loved words and they loved me back. It is the only class I look forward to.

'What is it?' I ask, a small glimmer of interest forming.

‘They’re a small group that meet up each week to conduct a creative writing workshop in a homeless shelter in Darlinghurst called Hope Lane.’

Hanging out with homeless people writing sad poetry wasn’t my top pick for community service, but I needed to get Mr Jeffreys off my back. At least there was writing involved. It was better than picking up rubbish in parks.

‘Okay, that sounds fine.’

‘Great. I’ll let them know I’ve found a suitable volunteer. They meet up Wednesday’s from 2 to 4pm. As a silver lining, you can do your service during school hours. I think this will be really good for you, Nola. I’m sure you’ll do our school proud.’

Mr Jeffreys gives me a service logbook and an info sheet about the writing group. I get up to leave and he eyes me seriously.

‘Hand in your biology assignment, Miss Piper, or you’ll be seeing me again soon.’

★

Ebony is waiting for me at our usual spot – the blue couches next to the tuckshop. She’s got her fluorescent markers out, colour coding notes in a binder.

‘What did Mr J want?’ she asks, handing me a cup of tea, made exactly to my specifications. White. Two sugars. This is our lunchtime ritual. One of us gets tea, the other gets snacks. I throw down some inedible kale chips (hers) and a snickers (mine).

Ebs and I have been mates since Year Seven, when we were seated next to each other in our homeroom and she commented on the bright red streak I had snaking through

my hair. We've stuck together like glue ever since, despite being complete opposites.

Ebony is a featured student on our school's website – on the homepage she looks thoughtful and studious as she examines something under a powerful microscope in our cutting-edge science labs. She knows exactly what ATAR she needs for a Bachelor of Commerce down to the percentage point, what her top universities are in number order, and what career she's going to devote her life to – Business Management. I know none of the above.

'He wants me to do my comm services at a homeless shelter. That'll be fun.'

'I loved singing in the oldies choir. Give it a chance.'

'Sure. So Tom and I have been together a year this Friday.'

Ebony claps her hands together, her eyes shining. '*Anniversary!* Have you planned anything?'

'Not yet. Tom hates all that lovey dovey stuff. He says Valentine's Day makes his skin crawl; it's such a consumerist cash grab.'

Ebony sighs as if Tom has cancelled Christmas. Romance is Ebony's favourite thing in the world.

'Really? Do you think Tom is right for you, Nola?'

'Of course I do.' I feel my skin prickle in irritation. 'Don't worry about it,' I say, taking a big bite of Snickers, the caramel lacing my chin. If it were her one year anniversary with her boyfriend Beau I'd be talking about it every lunchtime for weeks.

'I don't know how you can eat *so much sugar*. It's a kind of poison you know. You can actually become an addict.'

I take another bite, bigger this time.

‘I’ll get Tom a present,’ I decide. ‘Something low-key.’

‘That sounds perfect. We have twenty minutes until the bell. Do you want to go over some formal stuff before the meeting?’

Ebony retrieves another binder from her bag, this one dedicated to *every last detail* of our upcoming Year Twelve formal. She’s head of the planning committee. Somehow I’ve been roped in as well.

‘Sure,’ I say, slumping down and preparing myself for a monologue on venue options, photo booths and after party themes. ‘Fire away.’

★

On Friday I go to Tom’s place after school with an anniversary gift tucked into my bag.

‘Nola!’ says Tom’s mum, letting me into the house. ‘He’s in his room, brooding. I hope you can snap him out of it. You’re staying for dinner?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘Good, I’m trying an Ottolenghi slow-cooked lamb dish that’s apparently out of this world.’

I walk down the hall to Tom’s room, feeling at home. I’m always here. Dinners, weekends. I’ve even been on their family holiday down the coast. I like their noise and mock arguments. That there’s always someone in the kitchen, pottering with kettles or baking. The verandah light is on when it gets dark and dinner is at six-thirty, sharp. Every food group represented. Gravy made from scratch.

Tom’s lying on his bed throwing a mini basketball into

a ring attached to the wall. He barely looks up when I enter the room; grunting when I say hello.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and expect he'll put the ball down. He doesn't. He keeps throwing it. Over and over. Thump. Thump.

Tom's little brother Jeremy is skateboarding up and down in the hall outside, the wheels spinning across the floorboards. The noise doesn't bother me. I prefer it to the gaping silence of my house, which descended the day Dad moved out, but Tom is on edge. He's pissed off at me for some reason. I can't figure out why.

'Jem! Can't you do that on the street?!' Tom shouts. He gets up and slams his bedroom door shut, breaking a loosely kept house rule. If it's a non-related boy/girl, then the door stays open. But the Maloneys aren't exactly sticklers for maintaining order, and Tom and I are often alone on his single bed, our bodies entwined. After he reads my card and opens the gift, I want to take my shoes off and lie with him. Let his hands roam my body, his tongue rough in my mouth.

On this night 365 days ago, Tom leant into my ear during a clumsy waltz and asked me to be his girlfriend, sending goosebumps down my back. We met in Year Eleven, at dancing class. A major social event between Zara College and our 'brother school' Fairhill Boys High. He ran across the room and grabbed me out of the line-up. He told me he had a thing for girls with long legs and eyes like the ocean. He was a charmer. Still is, most of the time.

I knew we'd end up together, right from our first dance. Our palms sweaty, his size twelve feet miss-stepping on

mine. I fell hard for the gap between his two front teeth, the blue-black mole on his cheek and the way he wore most of his T-shirts inside out, because he didn't like to be branded. Later, when I met the Maloneys, I fell for them too.

'Here,' I say to Tom, handing him a present. 'We've been going out a year today. Did you forget?'

'Oh,' he says. 'I did forget. Sorry.'

'It's okay,' I say, hearing a shrill note in my voice. Why is it always up to me to keep track? Buy the gifts. Write the cards. Make all the effort.

Tom doesn't get up from his reclining position – continuing to throw the ball into the hoop. Thump. Thump. His eyes locked on the ceiling, and not at me. I fight the urge to rip the ball from his hands. Lately we'd been arguing, more than I liked to admit. But today is different. Today feels like something terrible is about to happen.

'Did we say we were going to do presents?' he asks coldly.

'No, but ... I *always* do presents.'

'Yeah. You do.'

'You could open it,' I prompt.

He rips off the wrapping, casting the paper on the floor. He doesn't notice that it's printed with a map of Sydney, with Xs marking all our hangouts. The Pavilion on Bondi Beach, where we first kissed. King Street in Newtown, when we first said 'I Love You'. Neither of us wanting to be the first. Here, on this tree-lined street in Vaucluse, where we lost our virginity in a few breathless minutes on raw, sweet summer afternoon. I collect the ripped pieces in my hands and try to piece them back together.

I've given him a JB-Hi Fi gift voucher and a plain blue T-shirt. He doesn't seem happy with either. Tom's hard to buy for and I usually go generic.

'Thanks,' he mutters, avoiding my eyes. He fiddles with the presents and then re-wraps them and hands them back to me. I consider throwing his present at the basketball ring, wishing I bought something with smashable qualities.

'I have a no-returns policy,' I say, trying to lighten the toxic mood.

'I don't think we should go out anymore,' he says. His words are like a karate chop to my throat.

'Why not?' I think of all the ways I could keep him – most of them sexual.

'I went around to your place yesterday, to surprise you. I bought those cupcakes that you like.'

'Oh, really?'

I rack my brains for what I was doing yesterday. I was shoe shopping, with Ebony. Bored to tears. Then I stayed over at her house. Why didn't I go straight home?

'Your mum was there. She invited me in and while I was there she told me *all* about your family. Funny, it was a completely different version to the bullshit story you spun.'

'What do you mean?'

'That your parents are gay. Why didn't you tell me?'

It was a good question. I'd hidden my family set-up – *lesbian mum plus gay dad plus syringe equals me* – from my friends for years. Not even Ebony knew. At first I'd done it to fit in, and to protect my parents from the inevitable stares and snide remarks, but the longer it went on, the harder it was to untangle myself from the lies

I'd told. I flashback with horror on the hundreds of faux casual conversations I've had with Tom – telling him my parents have been together since high school (not entirely untrue, they've been soulmates since kindergarten) and all the times I led him to believe they were a typical hetero suburban couple.

'Now I get why we never hung out at your place,' says Tom. 'Why you didn't want me to meet your parents. What's wrong with me? Wait a minute ... what's wrong *with you?*'

What is wrong with me? My parents are the greatest humans I know. But they're also über gay. Mum's often mistaken for a guy in her usual outfit of charcoal men's suits, ties and black boots. She stands with her feet wide apart, hands in her pockets, hips thrust slightly forward. She has her hair cut at a men's barber. Dad wears minimal (but not invisible) eye make-up, a touch of foundation and beautiful tailored skinny pants in peacock colours, usually teamed with fabulous scarves and tight shirts. His hair is tipped blonde. I avoid telling them about school events. I don't have friends over. I keep them in the background deliberately, thinking life would be easier for all of us.

'Why did you lie to me?' Tom asks

This is my chance to explain, but words can't fix this. I'm not sure what can.

'I don't know. I'm sorry. I haven't lied about anything else, I promise.'

Tom laughs hollowly. 'How can I know that? Or trust you again? I feel like I don't even *know* you.'

'You can come to dinner,' I say. 'We could start over.'

Family dinners were rare these days. Mum works fourteen-hour days and Dad travels constantly for his job. But if they did manage to get it together it would almost certainly be a disaster. After the meal (takeaway in plastic containers) Mum would take out the ukulele she was learning to play. Maybe Dad would come over and he'd throw on some tunes and show us his nineties dance moves, most of them involving Madonna and Kylie songs. He'd mention Kitty Glitter – his old drag character. They'd share stories of being on the podium at Stonewall – the most obvious gay bar in Sydney or even worse, a float at Sydney Mardi Gras.

'I don't want to come over for dinner. I want to end it,' says Tom.

'Please, Tom, don't do this,' I say, reaching for him. Hurting in places I didn't know could hurt.

I lie down next to him and we hug. I put my face to his chest and breathe in his grassy boy smell. This can't be over. I slide my hand down past the button of his jeans. He rolls away.

'Not a good idea.'

'That's the first time you've ever said that,' I say. When we argued before, sex would bring him close again. He stands up and opens the door of his room. Jem is still skating outside, and he stops and gawks at us.

'What's wrong with Nola?' Jem says. 'Why is she crying?'

'Jem! Seriously, go outside!' shouts Tom. 'You should go, Nola.'

'Really? You want me to leave?'

'I do.'

‘Fine.’

I grab my bag and what’s left of my dignity and leave, taking a last glance back, in case he changes his mind. But Tom has resumed chucking his basketball against the wall. As I walk out of the house I try to bottle the Maloney essence. The pile of unfolded washing looming in the front room. Someone’s undone chore. The sound of X-box battles from the study, where Tom’s sister Tilly is supposed to be doing her homework. The smell of scones baking in the kitchen. Fluffy balls of dough I was expecting to have warming my stomach later with whipped cream and homemade jam. Tom’s surfboard leaning up against the hall cupboard, filled with different sizes of jackets. S to XL.

I’m not only breaking up with Tom. I’m breaking up with his whole family. Jem, Ivy, Viola, Tilly, Mr and Mrs Maloney and their cat, Cake Pop.

I’m devastated.

★

At the station I fumble with the ticket machine, finding it hard to focus on the screen. My head whirls. There’s the formal a few months away. Our HSC exams, schoolies week and summer holidays looming. A gap year, maybe. We’d talked about travelling around Europe. Tom was my future.

I wipe my nose with the sleeve of my school jumper. I don’t have enough change for a ticket to Stanmore. After emptying my wallet, I’m twenty cents short.

‘Work with me,’ I say to the machine.

I rifle through my bag and find the fare, but the machine spits out my coins. Time expired. I sigh and start again. As

I finally collect my ticket I notice a guy standing next to me.

His feet are bare and black and there are weeping, open sores on his legs. His clothes are shredded. God, he stinks. I hold my hand to my nose and mouth and tense up, feeling anxious about what he might do. I shove my ticket into my pocket, thinking, *leave me alone*. I grab my schoolbag, but he steps in front of me.

‘Can I have two dollars?’ he asks.

His hair is matted into dreadlocks, which fall over his face. His eyes are glazed and look through me. He’s more animal than human.

‘No, not today,’ I say.

He moves closer and I take a step back, panicked. Frightened now. I check the station for help and wonder if I should shout out. Scream. Is he going to hurt me? He’s skinny, but tall. If I push him, I could make a run for it. I’m strong. I’ve done self-defence.

‘Two dollars? I haven’t eaten today. I’m hungry. Please?’ he says.

‘I said no, so *piss off*,’ I say in a voice I hardly recognise. It’s low and threatening and takes us both by surprise.

I run to my train platform, feeling even worse about myself than before. How on earth was I going to be a volunteer at a homeless shelter if I couldn’t even handle bumping into one of them at a train station?

★

There’s a light on in the study. Mum’s home. ‘Hi! Down here, Nola!’ she shouts.

I drag my feet down the hall, preparing for her to be

mad at me, too. She's sitting in front of her computer, working on a case, her face glowing in the screen glare.

'I thought you were at Tom's for dinner tonight?' she asks.

'Yeah – he ... Tom. Um. He broke up with me.' I drop my chin and sob into my hands.

'Oh, Nola.'

Mum jumps up and hugs me awkwardly before I have a chance to dart away, fish-like. The last time we properly hugged was months ago. Around the time Dad moved into his own place, things got strained between us. He's the parent I've always gone to for cuddles and heart-to-hearts. Mum has set the rules and schedules, paid the bills on time and supervised homework. Without him around the house – playing his music, cooking and filling in the spaces while Mum works – we've both been lost.

At first, my arms hang by my side, then I grab onto her, burrowing my face into her shoulder.

'Are you okay?' she asks.

'I don't think so.'

I can't tell her that the moments after Tom broke up with me, I thought I might die. That the pain was so sharp, so excruciating, I didn't see how living was a viable option. That the reason he broke up with me was because she told the truth, when I couldn't.

'I think I know why,' Mum says.

She looks as disappointed in me as Tom. It makes me feel small and guilty.

'Tom came around yesterday. I had no idea you hadn't told him about Dad and I. Is it some big secret that we're

gay? Why did you let him think we were straight, Nola? He seemed very confused that you'd lied to him. I must admit I feel the same way.'

'Can we not talk about it now? I can't ... I just can't ...'

I'm crying even harder now, my nose running.

'Alright. It can hold. Let's sit down as a family when Dad gets back from his work trip. Come on. You might feel better if you eat something.'

Mum scoops my favourite cookies and cream ice-cream into a bowl and I eat it at the kitchen bench. The cold feels good on my salty, swollen throat.

'How much devastation and heartbreak on a scale of one to ten,' says Mum.

'Twelve,' I say, miserably. She chucks a ready meal for herself into the microwave from our bomb-shelter size stash.

'You sure you don't want a freezer feed?' she asks. 'I've got butter chicken, Thai chicken and parma chicken. Or I could make you two-minute noodles with cheese?'

My stomach swims from too much ice-cream. Will I ever eat at the Maloney's table again? I'd gotten used to buttering freshly baked bread, scooping up grilled vegetables in a rainbow of colours. Cutting into tender meat, cooked by Tom's dad on the barbecue. Joining the family kitchen clean-up roster, with a sponge or a broom.

Mum hates cooking and I don't know how. There's a lot of toast in my future. 'I'm not hungry, Mum. I might have a shower.'

★

Under the shower I cry until my ribs hurt and the water runs cold. I pull on a pair of pyjamas – my softest, oldest

ones with a strawberry print – and fall miserably into bed.

Mum knocks at the door and swings it open tentatively.

‘It’s still early ... we could watch something on Netflix? There’s a Norwegian crime drama that looks okay.’

‘I want to sleep.’

If I could pass out, at least I’d get through the next eight hours. She walks to my bed and rests a warm hand on the side of my face. I close my eyes and miss Dad with an intensity that I haven’t felt since I was a little kid. I want him to pat my back until I fall asleep. ‘You’ll survive this,’ she whispers.

‘If you say so.’

‘I say so. Sleep tight.’

‘Mum? When does Dad get back?’

‘Week after next? I’ll check.’

‘I wish he was here.’

Mum pauses at the door.

‘Yes. Me too.’

In the dark I reach for my phone and turn it on. There are no messages from Tom and he hasn’t posted on social media, which isn’t a surprise. I pushed him to get a Facebook account and he never even checked it. I type a text to Ebony telling her about the break-up that I slowly delete, letter by letter. I don’t have the energy to re-live the nightmare or explain why Tom dumped me. The only thing I can do is close my eyes and hope I can fix it, all of it, somehow.