

ELLIE

They've been featured almost every day since the story broke. No names, of course, and pixelated faces, but I know who they are. Everyone knows. They slipped out of the headlines for a bit because of a more important story, but today they're back. Today, they are everywhere.

There's a shot of Alex from behind, getting out of the police car in front of the courthouse. His hands are cuffed, and he seems unsure of his step. Jake is sitting in the backseat of a car. His hoodie is pulled down low and his cuffed hands are held up to cover his face. Will this be the last time I ever see them?

My parents have been so concerned about how I'll take it all that they keep turning off the news and switching off the radio, as if they can somehow protect me. I haven't told them yet about the journalists calling. Leaving messages in the night. Asking around about what makes me tick. But I know it's only a matter of time before something pops up in the news about me too. The girlfriend. The friend.

I've been home from school for a couple of weeks leading up to the sentencing hearing. Mum said I could stay home longer. Dad said we could move again. But I'm not running. Not because of Alex and Jake. They don't get to make me leave. I've already lost both of them; I can't lose anything else.

So today I'm going back to school. I know it's going to be all stares and whispers, but I can handle that. What I can't handle is that I didn't guess what they'd done, that I didn't see how guilty they both were. That I didn't understand what was pulling them together and what was tearing them apart.

Usually I'd ride to school, but today I'm on foot. I feel more secure on the ground. I've only ever been at this school with Alex or Jake. They were my introduction. Now they're in court waiting to be sentenced, and I'm walking through suburban streets, dodging little kids on scooters, and pretending to be okay. I expected more to be different, but nothing is. Everyone else looks the same. The rubbish bins are still parked in their lines waiting to be emptied. The milk bar is still closed when it should be open.

It's just me who's changed.

'Hey, Ellie,' says a voice.

I turn, expecting the worst. But Tien's face lights up in a smile and I exhale. He's wearing his favourite t-shirt. The one with the periodic table on the front, announcing to the world he's a science geek.

'Let's pretend it didn't happen,' he says, walking closer.

I nod. 'Great idea.'

'Thought we could hang out at lunch. You've missed heaps, but I can catch you up,' he says as we walk through the open gate and into the school grounds. A couple of kids stare as they pass us, but Tien doesn't seem to notice. Or if he does, he's ignoring it. Of course this is getting to him too. It's affecting all of us. The pool of damage has spread to anyone who cares. I hadn't considered that.

We pass the bike shed and I automatically look across, like I'm trying to find Alex, because that's where he'd wait for

me in the mornings. Instead, it's just a couple of year sevens goofing around with a bike lock.

'Ellie, if anyone says anything, let Lucas know. He'll sort 'em out. He's looking for excuses to punch someone,' says Tien as we reach the door into the main red brick building.

I laugh, surprised I still can.

Then Tien pauses and reaches out to rub my shoulder. It's so tender that I don't know where to look. Then he shrugs like he can't offer me more than that, and I watch as he heads the other way down the corridor, leaving me alone in a school of more than a thousand.

Everywhere I look I see their shadows. The wall Alex kissed me against. The seat Jake used to wait for me at before lunch. I keep walking until I reach their lockers. Someone has got to them with a Sharpie. Angry words shout out in black and I try not to read them.

I open Alex's old locker and shove my bag in. I see his neat handwriting on the inside of the locker wall:

Alex 4 Ellie

I remember when he scribbled that on his last day of school. And how I wanted him. How I loved him. And how I hate him now ... now that everything is changed.

If only we could all go back to the way it was before.

ALEX

Through the wall I can hear Sass practising her violin. It's surprisingly pleasant. I had no idea she was so good at it. I listen carefully, trying to hear her fumble, but the notes are clear and strong. Horrified, I realise that I'm actually jealous. I've never played an instrument that well.

Then the door to my bedroom crashes open and Mum bursts in. Weird. She always knocks. I'm about to give her a hard time about it when I see that she looks grey. Strands of hair have crossed over her usually perfect part, making her seem stressed out, like something is very wrong.

'Mum?'

She looks at me, but not. It's like she's looking through me.

'Has something happened?'

'That was the police,' she says, her hand starting to shake as she holds out her mobile, like they're still on the phone.

I swing my legs out of bed and sit up. Then I hear a wrong note from the next room and Sass's violin goes quiet.

'What the hell have you done, Alexander?' she says, looking straight at me.

I shake my head, too fast, my brain bangs around inside. 'Nothing ... I've done nothing.' But I know what this is. Shit.

'They want you to come in for questioning.'

Controlling my breathing, I loosen my body and stand up, walking over to where she stands. My voice sounds light as I say, 'I'm sure it's nothing, Mum.'

I make myself look her in the eye. Like Tone taught me to do when I'm asking Dad for money. Look her in the eye and smile just enough to seem calm and in control. I can see it working. I can see her wanting to believe me. But the police must have told her why they want to speak to me, so why isn't she grilling me further? Perhaps she doesn't want to know if what they told her is true.

'Well, we have to go,' she says, walking out of my room towards the staircase.

'Okay,' I say, like it's the most natural thing in the world to be heading to the police station for questioning after school.

I'm still in my school uniform; my tie hasn't even been loosened. I follow her down the stairs and through the lounge room. I notice the cushions aren't in their usual corners, but spread out across the couch like she's chucked them on.

'Mum,' I say quietly, making her stop. 'They only rang. They didn't send anyone around. So it's obviously not a big deal. Okay?'

'Your father's meeting us there. We have to go,' she says and grabs her black handbag from where it hangs on the back of one of the dining chairs. 'I can't find my keys. Where are my keys? Have you seen them?'

I watch her frantically searching through her bag, but I can see them behind her on the bench. I consider saying nothing. But her panic is more than I can bear. I squeeze past her and grab them.

'Here,' I say, holding out the keys, shaking them to get her attention.

She snatches them from me. She's all rattled. 'Go and get changed. No, don't get changed. Stay in your uniform,' she says, because it's obviously important to rock up looking important.

I have to stall her a bit. I don't want to go to the police station without knowing what they know.

'Mum, I need my shoes,' I say, wiggling my socked foot in front of her.

She nods and I turn away, rushing up the stairs to where my phone lies on my bed, still charging. I can hear Sass playing again and wonder if Mum's going to leave her here on her own.

I ring Jake. It goes straight to message bank.

'You promised, Jake. No police. What've you done? Call me.'

I hang up and hit redial, hoping he'll see it's me and pick up. Straight to voicemail again. His phone must be off. I can't believe he's done this. I look around the room. Everything is in its place. My rug has been vacuumed today and Mum's changed the sheets on my bed. It's Wednesday. She always changes sheets on a Wednesday. My school shoes are under my desk where I kicked them off.

Through the wall I hear Mum talking to Sass. I hear her incredulous voice and her questions. I hear Mum telling her to stay here. To lock the door and keep her phone on. Sass wants to come with us. But Mum shuts it down.

'I don't care if she comes,' I say, stepping out onto the landing. In fact Sass would be a happy distraction. But Mum shakes her head forcefully.

'No.'

'Okay. Sorry, Sassy,' I say, smiling at my sister with all the lightness I can find.

Sass is staring at me, her violin in one hand. I see the anger on her face and I wonder what she thinks has happened.

‘Get your shoes on, Alex,’ says Mum, taking in my socks. ‘I’ll be in the car.’

I nod, and suddenly my tie feels like it’s choking me. I loosen it from my neck. I grab my black Vans from under the bed. I can’t wear school shoes.

I grab my phone and pocket it. Maybe Jake will call.

‘What have you done?’ I hear my sister’s voice.

‘Nothing. It’s nothing.’

She raises an eyebrow at me like she thinks I’m an idiot. It makes me want to scream. Smash her stupid violin across her head.

‘Told you not to hang around with Tone. He’s bad news,’ she says smugly from my doorway, plucking the strings of her violin with one finger. ‘Everyone at school says so.’

I say nothing. I have nothing to say. I walk as slowly as I can past her and down the stairs, wishing the ground would trip me, tip me, pull me under so I can’t go anywhere. My phone beeps and I scramble to grab it, hoping its Jake.

Sk8?

But it’s just Tone.

I hear Mum toot the horn and I walk even slower, but still the front door is suddenly there and I have no choice but to go through and out the other side. Mum has backed the car out. It’s idling angrily in the street, like even it knows I’m guilty. The street is quiet. It’s always quiet. Nobody hoons up here looking for something to do. The neighbours all drive SUVs like Mum does and they crawl along at a respectable speed and then pull into their matching driveways. From here I can see Mum’s profile. How set her face is as she stares out at the road ahead.

I yank my tie completely off and toss it onto the path. I don't look up at the window where I know my sister is watching. I make it to the car. I open the door like I'm on autopilot. I sit down, and Mum tries to reach across so she can grab my seatbelt. I get there first. The click is too loud. I'm belted in. We're driving.

It's only for questioning. It's not like I've been arrested or anything. But I don't bother saying the words again. It'll just look like I'm trying to convince her. So channelling an exercise I used to do in drama class about changing conversational direction, I try a different tack. 'Did you tell the neighbours about the party?'

'Alexander!' she snaps back.

One word. That's all I get from her. I always know I'm in serious trouble when she calls me by my full name and not the short version.

I reach out to turn on the radio, needing noise to fill the gaps. But she stabs it off again, sentencing us to silence. I can hear her breathing. I can hear my own. Ragged. Sharp. Worried. My blazer's too tight on my shoulders and I start trying to take it off, but Mum says, 'Leave it.'

I do. I sit as still as I can. But I can feel my body wanting to move. My hands wanting to fidget. My legs wanting to run. Mum turns into Riversdale Road and the traffic's clogged. Cars are trying to sneak past the tram that's stopping and starting. I see the grand iron gates of my school and wonder if I'll be going back there or if that's it for me now. Mum speeds up and overtakes the tram on the inside.

'We finally round the bend to the big police station in the junction. It's a red brick building. I've noticed this place so many times, but I never thought I'd be going in. Not like this.'

Mum circles trying to find a park. She starts backing in to one right out the front, but reverses too quickly and bumps into the Volvo behind her. It's all she needs. The tears start flowing before she's even turned off the ignition. I've always hated seeing Mum lose control so I rub her back, surprised by how thin she feels. How bony. When did that happen? She shrugs me off, like I'm the reason all this is happening.

'You don't have to come in,' I say, desperately wanting her to drive away.

But she's already out of the car, slamming her door with more force than she needs to.

I wish I'd worn normal clothes instead of my blazer. I feel ridiculous waltzing in like this. I'm sure school has a policy about turning up to the police station in our uniform. Probably not the sort of image they are hoping for.

Under the itchy wool, my arms have gone all goose-bumpy. Mum doesn't wait for me to open my door. She comes round, like I'm a toddler again, and does it for me.

'It's not even a scratch. But I've left my name,' she says as if I give a shit about the damage to someone's bumper bar when I'm about to be questioned over something I can't even bring myself to name.

I nod and get out of the car, staring up at the police station. I can't go in. But I have to. Mum grabs my arm and her fingers burrow in through my clothes. She's pulling me along. The doors open. The air changes. It smells cold. And it's noisy. Something hums. People are talking. I hear a man laugh.

Ahead of us is a big solid front desk covered in posters about missing people and various appeals for information. We could be at any police station in the country. There's a

policewoman behind the desk. She's young. I want her to look up at me and smile. But she looks up and scans from me to Mum and back to me.

'Alex Cormack?'

I nod. Worried she knows exactly who I am. Mum fills the hole in the conversation. 'Alexander. Yes. That's right. And I'm Mrs Cormack and my husband will also be here shortly.'

Thanks Mum, I try to whisper. Thanks for pretending you're on my side.

'If you'd prefer to wait for your husband to arrive that's fine, or you can come through now.'

Mum and I both answer this time, our responses crashing into each other and blowing apart all the truth in our relationship.

'We'll wait,' Mum says, while I say, 'Now's fine.'

Mum grips my arm with those manicured nails she has done once a week. I feel them digging in again, warning me with their shiny red gloss.

'We'll wait for your father,' she says in a quiet voice, intended just for me.

'Okay,' I say, half dreading his arrival and half hoping he'll explain that boys do this sort of thing all the time, and he's sure it was just an accident.

We sit, far enough apart on the little bench so we don't risk touching knees, but close enough for a stranger to know we are definitely in this together. I wish Mum would hold my hand and tell me it's going to be okay. I just want to know it's going to be okay.