

CHAPTER 1

Frankie leans forward, clasps Joely's hand and squeezes it. 'We're going on a holiday, a holiday, a holiday,' sings Frankie to her best friend who is sitting in the front seat of her mother's car, while Frankie sits in the back like a little forgotten kid.

Joely laughs, and then falls silent as her mum opens the car door. She lets go of Frankie's hand and straightens up.

Mrs Walker hands over a wad of twenty-dollar notes to her daughter. 'If you need more, Joelene, just call,' she says.

'Yes, Mum,' says Joely.

Frankie watches Joely slide the money into her purse, and wonders how much is there.

'And call me when you get there, Joelene.'

'Yes, Mum.'

'And make sure you listen to your aunt and uncle.'

'Yes, Mum.'

'And don't spend too long in the sun.'

'No, Mum.'

As Joely's mum starts the car, Frankie stares out the window, wondering how her friend can be so calm and mannered. Frankie thinks about her own mum and how indifferent she is, how little she cares where Frankie is or

what she does. She probably doesn't even know that Frankie's going away for a week and, if she does, she probably won't actually miss her. Frankie isn't sure what's better: having a mum who controls everything you do or one who doesn't even notice you're gone.

Closing her eyes, Frankie wishes the train station closer. When she opens them, they're pulling up. She smiles, happy that for once her magic skills have actually worked.

'Thanks again, Mrs Walker.' Frankie doesn't wait for her to answer. She steps out of the car and stands on the footpath, watching Joely be fussed over. She sees Joely kiss her mother awkwardly on the cheek, and Frankie's strangely pleased it's so similar to the awkward farewell kiss she gave her own mum. Then Joely is waving goodbye and they are free.

As soon as the car drives off, Frankie and Joely collapse into each other hugging. They both giggle at the same time.

Suddenly, Joely pulls away and grabs her phone from her pocket.

'Oh my God, run! We're going to miss the train.' Joely takes the stairs in groups of two, reaching the top in a second.

Still laughing, Frankie chases after her. If they miss this train they'll have to wait for hours in the Melbourne sun for the next one. It's not like trains run often where they're going.

'What platform?' Frankie yells.

'Nine,' Joely calls back. 'It's down on the regional bit.'

Joely runs straight towards a lady with a pram. Frankie expects her to dodge it at the last minute, but instead, she clips the rear pram wheel and falls across the grey concrete. Her things get tossed out of her bag as she falls.

Frankie runs over, helps Joely up and then scoops everything back into her friend's bag, pleased to see Joely remembered to buy them chips.

'You okay?' Frankie asks as she places Joely's bag firmly back on her shoulder.

'Yes,' manages Joely.

Frankie nods. Satisfied things are right again, she takes Joely's hand, and starts running, forcing her friend to keep up. Laughing, Joely pulls Frankie to the left and they run down onto platform nine.

They burst into the carriage and look around for seats, the last to board the train. Faces look up. Joely blushes, but Frankie smiles, not minding that rows of strangers are staring. A loud whistle shrieks and, as the train takes off, they lurch forward, bumping the knees of a businessman trying to work. He glares and Frankie shrugs at him, not caring that he's twice her age.

'Sorry,' whispers Joely, but the man ignores her.

Frankie grabs Joely's arm and pulls her towards the back of the carriage, where graffiti welcomes them.

Frankie takes the forward-facing seat. She always does. She told Joely it's a superstitious thing. She wants to see death coming if there's a crash. Joely told Frankie she'd rather die without knowing, so she always travels backwards, not seeing where she's going, only where she's been.

Frankie looks at Joely and grins.

Joely grins back. Then she squeals, 'Oh my God! You did it!'

'What?' says Frankie, pretending she doesn't know what Joely's talking about.

‘Your nose!’

Frankie shrugs and touches the tiny stud.

‘What’d your mum say?’ says Joely.

‘I made sure she stayed on the other side of me so she hasn’t seen it yet.’

‘Really?’

Frankie laughs like it’s the funniest thing in the world.

‘Nah. She doesn’t care. She didn’t have to pay for it. It was my Christmas present to myself.’

‘Did it hurt?’

‘Not as much as the dentist. Now you have to get one, too.’

Frankie checks out her nose stud in the window.

‘Yes, wouldn’t my mum love that?’

Frankie looks back and shrugs. ‘Just blame me. She already hates me.’

‘She doesn’t.’

‘She does,’ says Frankie.

When Frankie first met Joely’s mum two years ago, Frankie really wanted Mrs Walker to like her. She tried hard, at first, making sure her clothes were clean, her pierced bellybutton hidden and her hair brushed, but it didn’t seem to make any difference. It was like she’d sussed Frankie with one glance. After that, Frankie decided she might as well play at being the wild one, letting Mrs Walker believe that her judgement was accurate. At least her own mum never judged anyone. Although, sometimes Frankie wished that she did. Maybe then her mum wouldn’t get into so much trouble with men and jobs.

‘I’m starving,’ says Frankie.

‘You’re always—’

‘Don’t. You sound like Mum.’

‘Your mum doesn’t sound like that.’

‘She used to,’ says Frankie.

Joely pulls out two packets of chips. She keeps the barbecue-flavoured ones and holds out the other packet to Frankie.

Instead of taking the one offered, Frankie looks at Joely’s chip bag and says, ‘But I want the barbecue ones.’

‘Good. Cos I actually want chicken,’ replies Joely, tossing Frankie the packet of barbecue chips.

Frankie tears open the bag and pulls out a chip. She holds it up. ‘These aren’t chips. More like ... barbecue crumbs.’ She turns the piece over and over. ‘I think you landed on them when you fell. But it doesn’t matter, Joely, it’ll still taste the same.’

Joely’s annoyed but she doesn’t say anything. She knows it’s Frankie’s way of showing Joely that she messed up, and then trying to be magnanimous by offering her a way out. Usually it doesn’t bother her when Frankie plays these games, but after getting up super early, listening to her mum going on and on about eating healthy at Jill’s, and then buying the snacks in the first place, it pisses Joely off that Frankie is now picking fault with them. If she were more like Frankie, she’d say all that. Instead, she sucks it all down and watches her friend tip the chip crumbs into her mouth.

‘Do they still taste like chips?’ says Joely.

Frankie shrugs, pissing Joely off even further. Then Joely sees Frankie eyeing her bag of chicken chips and she knows what’s coming next.

‘They don’t taste like barbecue flavour,’ Frankie says.

‘So now you want chicken, Frank?’

Frankie smiles at Joely and holds out the barbeque chip packet. 'Swap?'

Joely takes back the chips and picks at the crumbs. She feels like she's with her mum and she's been bullied into buying a dress she hates instead of the one she wanted in the first place. Terrified she's going to cry, Joely looks out the window at the endless rows of houses built too close to the train line. They speed past a backyard where a girl is bouncing on a trampoline and Joely wishes it was her.

All month she's been excited about this holiday and now Frankie is doing what she always does and is making things difficult. Joely decides not to buy them snacks anymore. She doesn't even really like chips. She was just trying to do the right thing and make their holiday good from the start.

Frankie kicks her leg. Joely moves hers away.

Frankie leans over and holds out her packet. 'How come the chicken ones aren't broken?'

Joely wonders why Frankie keeps pushing things long past when anyone else would. She decides not to answer.

'Joel? Did you hear me?'

Another kick of her foot and Joely sighs. Nobody else ever calls her Joel. Only Frankie. Joely can still remember the thrill of hearing Frankie shorten her name for the first time in that way only someone who really loves you can do. It felt like the point where their friendship crossed into something else, something special.

Amazed at how easily Frankie can draw her out of her mood, Joely answers, 'I don't know. Maybe I only fell on the other packet.'

'You could take back the broken ones.'

‘But they’re open. And besides, I don’t think they’ll last a week.’

‘They might.’

‘I don’t mind broken chips,’ says Joely.

‘These ones are really good,’ says Frankie, shoving in a mouthful.

Even eating as fast as Frankie eats, she still looks beautiful. Frankie grins, chip crumbs around her mouth. Joely almost smiles back, then remembers she’s supposed to be cross and looks out the window.

‘I thought vegetarians didn’t eat chicken,’ says Joely, watching her friend in the window’s reflection.

‘It’s just chicken flavouring.’

‘Yes, but it still tastes like chicken.’

Frankie shrugs. ‘Chemical chicken.’

‘And that’s okay?’

Frankie shrugs again, and then asks, ‘How much further?’

‘We haven’t even left the city.’

‘But is it much further?’

Joely wants to shrug an answer, but that gesture belongs to Frankie. ‘We’ll be there by lunchtime.’

‘That’s ages.’

‘Yep, about three and a half hours.’

‘What’s the place called again?’

‘Payne.’

‘And is it? A pain?’

Joely doesn’t answer. She watches as Frankie drains the chicken chips into her mouth, then leans over and sneaks her hand into Joely’s barbecue ones.

‘What are you doing?’ says Joely.

‘Sharing.’

Joely snatches away the packet and stuffs the chips into her mouth as fast she can.

‘Didn’t your mum teach you to share?’ Frankie says.

There are so many crumbs in Joely’s mouth, she’s having trouble chewing. The pieces jab her gums. She wishes she’d just handed them over and eaten something else. But she didn’t want Frankie to have any.

‘What are they like?’ asks Frankie.

Joely points to her mouth. She tries to swallow, but little bits of chip wedge in her throat.

‘What? The chips?’ Joely manages as she chews.

‘No. Your cousins.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are they tall? Fat? Short? Ugly?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come on, Joely.’

‘I don’t know. They’re just guys.’

‘Well, I didn’t exactly think they were girls.’

‘Mack’s nearly two years older than us. He’s seventeen. And Thommo’s a year younger so he’s fourteen.’

‘And?’

‘And they’re my cousins. That’s all.’

Joely’s heart beats faster. She doesn’t want anymore questions. She doesn’t want to doubt her decision to bring her friend. She knows Frankie is watching, waiting for her to say something. But she can’t. She can’t tell her that Thommo used to wet his bed or that Mack used to play with himself when he was in his bathers. She won’t tell her about the time she kissed Thommo in the bath when they were little or when

she stole Mack's favourite racing car and buried it out by the shed because she didn't want to go home.

'Are they cute? Or country daggy?' says Frankie in a voice that makes Joely look away.

Sometimes Frankie scares her. The way she knows how to play people, how to get answers. She doesn't want Frankie to steal her cousins. She wishes, just for a moment, that she'd kept them to herself. But now they were only a few hours away from Frankie entering their lives.

Ever since she asked Frankie to come, before she'd even checked with her aunt to make sure it would be okay, she'd played out the scene in her head, wondering what her relatives would make of Frankie with her flyaway hair and eyes that made you feel special just by seeing you. She didn't expect Frankie to say yes, but Frankie seemed almost relieved by the idea of escaping to the country for a week. And that's something Joely understands. She looks forward to this holiday every summer because it means getting away from her mum. No nagging. No endless questions. Just freedom.

CHAPTER 2

Joely scrunches up the chip packet and shoves it into her bag.

‘What’s the matter?’ asks Frankie.

‘Nothing,’ says Joely.

‘Yes, there is.’

‘No, there isn’t.’

Frankie shrugs. She knows something’s up, but she isn’t going to pry.

Finally Joely says, ‘I just don’t want to talk about my cousins.’

‘Okay.’

‘They aren’t like the boys we know.’

‘Whatever.’

‘They’re different.’

‘Fine.’

‘Fine then, Frank,’ Joely laughs.

Tired of playing Joely’s games, Frankie hunts around in her bag and drags out her novel. It’s thin and the spine is cracked because it’s been read a hundred times before. Frankie doesn’t know why Joely can’t just tell her about her cousins. Joely was the one who invited her, and now she’s being all moody. Frankie wishes Joely would understand that she wants to know what she’s walking into.

Opening the book, Frankie breathes in its musty smell. She finds the most recent bent corner and starts reading. She's already read this page, but she likes re-reading the same bits over and over, studying each sentence so she can try to understand the author. Sometimes she imagines how the story would read if she wrote it. How different it would be.

Frankie found this book in an op shop's free box near her last house. She always takes books if they're free even if she doesn't think she'll like them. It's not only because they're free. She likes leaving it up to the universe to choose what she's going to read, and picking up whatever crosses her path is the most random way to select a book.

She's been in this world with Miranda and Irma for some time now, wondering if she would have followed them through the crack in the rock or stayed behind screaming like Edith with her great, trembling fear.

It's much sadder than she imagined. When she first started, she thought it was about a time before she was born that would have no relation to her life. But she was wrong. Now she was desperate to know what happened to the girls and if they'd ever come back. She worried mostly for Miranda. There was just something about her, and Frankie feared the author would sacrifice her for the good of the story.

She'd like to talk to Joely about it, but doubts her friend would have much interest. And it's hard to explain a book like this. Frankie feels lost in it when she's reading, like she's actually there, walking off from the picnic and to the rock because it's calling to her, luring her in, forever. She's not sure Joely would get that because she's so sensible, she even carries a sewing kit in case a button falls off.

*

Joely sits watching Frankie, but she doesn't want to be quiet. She wants to talk, laugh, prepare for their big adventure. But she wants Frankie to start it and Frankie won't. Now she's reading, deliberately shutting her out. Frankie always has books in her bag, books nobody else has read. Joely would like to read them too. She wants Frankie to offer to lend one, but she never has. There's no way Joely will ask because she doesn't want to seem too interested. That's just what Frankie wants and, sometimes, Joely thinks it's better for her friend to believe that not everything she does is noticed by the world.

So Joely opens her bag, takes out her mobile and considers ringing Tess or Lucy. But then she'd have to talk, and she doesn't want to do that, not here, not on a train with Frankie pretending not to listen. Anyway, Frankie isn't impressed by any of Joely's old friends. Frankie's a loner. She doesn't act like the other girls Joely's known since primary school, the ones she used to hang out with, more because they were just there rather than because she actually liked them. Joely was even part of their weekly baking club, where they'd rotate houses and host cook-offs. Frankie lives on canned soup, broken Saladas and pasta with Vegemite.

That's why it was so weird when Joely and Frankie became friends. Joely didn't believe for ages that Frankie actually wanted to hang out with her. She spent months waiting for Frankie to wake up. But she never did. Instead, one day, Frankie started calling her Joel and they turned into those friends everybody assumes are joined. They were no longer two individuals: Frankie and Joely. They were 'Frankie and Joely'. But not, Joely quickly realised, ever 'Joely and Frankie'. At first it irritated her. Especially because she'd been at the

high school since the beginning and Frankie was new. But after a while she accepted it. After all, Frankie was the first person to ever choose *her*. The other girls were a random collection and Joely was just making up their numbers. But Frankie wanted her.

Joely starts texting one of the unimpressive friends, and notices that Frankie drops her book slightly. Joely keeps texting, but then worries that she won't get a reply, and Frankie will know. But she can't put her phone away because she's already started and Frankie will think she's sent a message anyway even if she doesn't.

So Joely does something she hopes nobody ever learns about; she texts herself.

Have a great holiday J. I'll miss you! X

The beep of the message sounds a second later and she reads the text, laughing aloud. Frankie looks up, but then immediately looks back at her book. Joely feels ridiculous. She slips her phone back into her bag and tries to read the title of Frankie's book. Before she can stop herself she asks, 'What are you reading?'

The cover is flashed and Frankie disappears again behind the old pages.

Joely's sure she's seen this book before. It's been around for ages. Either Frankie's a slow reader, or she carries it as a prop and isn't reading it at all. Joely likes the second idea best.

Joely gives up and watches out the window, trying to work out where they are. It doesn't look the same as last

year. There's no thick green grass or brown muddy dams. Just acres and acres of dust. No wonder Jill said they'd had a bad year.

The first time Joely made this trip without her parents she was twelve. Her mum let her catch the train alone and she'd spent all summer with her cousins. Joely was so amazed that she was allowed to go by herself. It was just before her dad moved out. Joely knew they'd sent her away so they could fight without worrying she was listening, but she was so happy to be away from it all that she didn't care. It was a good summer. Nobody made her do things or asked her to take sides. They just let her be. That was the year her aunt Jill started treating her like a grown-up, asking her opinion on things. Like how Joely thought Jill should get her hair cut, and whether Jill should buy the blue dress hanging in the window of the only clothes shop in the main street. Joely loved hanging around her aunt. She laughed all the time and wrapped Joely in hugs that lasted longer than any hugs she'd ever had before. And she always smelt like baked goods: bread or scones or something sweet. Joely's mum never smelt like that.

Ever since then, her mum has let her go alone for a week each summer. Really it suited her mum because she had to go interstate for a conference and preferred Joely being with family rather than staying in the city on her own.

There's a bump as Frankie's head hits the window. She slumps down and Joely realises she's asleep. Somehow Frankie's managed to tuck her book close to her, so even when she's sleeping Joely still can't see what she's reading. Frankie can sleep anywhere. She says it's because she stays up

late studying, but Joely thinks she stays up wondering where her mum is and if she's okay.

Joely watches Frankie sleep, her mouth slightly open, her face relaxed. She's never seen anyone quite so beautiful. Not up close. She knows that's why the other girls at school don't like Frankie. They're jealous of her perfect skin and her long brown hair and those brown eyes that make boys forget what they were doing. She just looks right, even when she's asleep, dribbling with her head banging against a window.

Staring at Frankie, Joely feels panicked for a second. She's been imagining seeing the boy with the suntan all year and her skin prickles at the thought of not talking to him again this time. What ifs are rushing around her head. What if he's moved away? What if he sees Frankie first? The thoughts make her nervous. She should've thought about it more. That's the thing about being friends with Frankie. It makes her do things she'd normally be too cautious to consider. Like spontaneously inviting Frankie on a week's holiday to her aunt and uncle's farm in Payne because she was desperate for Frankie to explain the rumour Joely had heard at school. But even after Joely invited her, and even after Frankie said yes, her best friend still didn't tell her what she had apparently done with Jamie Marks in the gym at school. It hurt to think Frankie didn't consider she was up to hearing all the gory stuff about boys. She'd even invented a few stories about things she'd done herself, but Frankie didn't confess anything in return.

Joely reminds herself that Frankie's her best friend and remembers how her skin tingled when Frankie agreed to come. She couldn't believe anyone could make such a quick

decision. Joely would have thought about it for a few days, changed her mind a couple of times, then persuaded her mum to let her go and, only then, said yes. But she'd probably still worry about her decision for weeks wondering if it were too late to back out. But Frankie didn't even think twice.

CHAPTER 3

Frankie opens her eyes. The train's passing a small dam. She wonders if the drought has dried it out because it's just a cracked circle with a tiny puddle of water dotting the centre.

'Good sleep?' says Joely.

'I didn't sleep.' Frankie wipes away the dried spit around her mouth.

Joely smiles.

'Tell me again about Payne,' yawns Frankie. She slides her book into her bag and fixes her sunglasses on her head.

'There's not much to tell,' says Joely. 'It's a small town. There's a few shops, a dam and there's a pool.'

'And the farm?'

'It's a big old house on land. They have cattle, potato fields and a shed.'

Something zigzags past the train window.

'Look, Frank! That's Mack and Thommo.' Joely starts waving madly.

Frankie swings around thinking how nice it must feel to be so excited about seeing your cousins. Two boys on motor-bikes are chasing the train. They have no helmets and she can see their faces clearly as they pull up close to the window.

She smiles, liking their tanned bodies and silly grins. One turns to look at her and then the other does too. Frankie feels a flutter of excitement and has to turn away for a second.

‘Which one’s which?’

‘The one with the red hair, that’s Thommo.’

As if he heard Joely, Thommo tries to wave, but his wheel wobbles as he steers with one hand. Then Mack passes him and Frankie sees them yelling at each other. She wishes she could hear what they were saying.

‘And that’s Mack.’

Frankie takes in Mack’s bare brown shoulders. He’s big. Bigger than the boys she’s used to. She looks at his face. He’s looking straight at her and lifts both hands in the air, a crazy look on his face. Then he disappears.

‘Where did he go?’ Frankie looks back down the track but she can’t see either boy. ‘Are they okay?’

Frankie’s surprised when Joely laughs at her. ‘They’re fine. They’re just showing off. They’ve been riding like *that* for years.’

‘Yeah course,’ says Frankie, disappointed they aren’t showing off just for her.

In the carriage, a few people are standing up. Joely grabs their rubbish and pulls her bag onto her shoulder. She looks confident and Frankie wonders when that change happened. She doesn’t look like the girl who tripped at the station, or the girl Frankie hangs out with at school. She looks like someone who knows her way. Frankie feels a bit out of sorts. What if Joely leaves her?

‘Come on, Frank.’

Frankie doesn’t want to get up. She’s not sure about this

holiday anymore. But Joely is already walking towards the doors, so Frankie grabs her bag and follows.

There's an awful screech of metal wheels dragging along the tracks. As the train slows Frankie tenses, expecting it to speed off again and take her away from Payne.

But then the train stops, the doors open and people push through in front of them. Normally Frankie would push back, but today she's happy to take as long as she can to reach Joely's cousins.

'Joely,' says Frankie. 'Before it starts ... This holiday ... It's about us. Right?'

'Yes, of course. Come on!' Joely jumps onto the platform and walks off without looking back to check if Frankie's following.

Stepping off the train, Frankie swallows, feeling the sting of the hot air drag down her throat. Joely warned her about the heat, but she didn't think it would be this bad. It's so fierce she almost feels like she'll burn where she stands. She tugs at her skirt and sees the two boys waiting. Frankie watches Joely reach them, expecting her to kiss them or something, but instead her friend stops and wheels around, pointing at Frankie.

Mack and Thommo stare at her. It's a look Frankie's used to, but not like this. Not with Joely's relatives. She glances at Joely, seeking comfort, but even she has a strange look on her face, and it makes Frankie want to run in the other direction.

Instead, she decides that this is just like starting at another school; she can charm her way into this town and be fine. As Frankie walks along the platform, she feels her

city skin shedding and feels relieved that she's finally free from her mum's boyfriend with his sleazy smiles and hands, free in a place where nobody knows her and she can be whoever she likes. She smiles as she steps up to Mack and Thommo, ready now to be part of whatever this summer is going to be.

'Can I take your bag?' says the taller one.

'No thanks,' says Frankie. 'I'm fine.'

'That's Mack,' says Joely.

Frankie looks up. Mack isn't just tall, he's broad. His shoulders are thick and strong, like a Mack Truck, and Frankie wonders if Mack's his nickname. Her eyes settle on his face. The rest of him feels too big for her to take in. His eyes are a dirty-blue and his skin looks like the dust has settled on it and he's given up trying to keep it clean. He's handsome, Frankie thinks. But the way he stares at her without talking makes her uncomfortable. Then she notices a tiny smudge of freckles across his nose and cheeks, like the freckles that Joely hates so much and, suddenly, Frankie isn't scared of him anymore.

'Hi Mack,' she says in her sweetest voice.

'Hi Frankie.' Mack's glad he wore his best blue singlet to meet the train. He's pretty sure it brings out the colour of his eyes. Wanting the first impression to be a good one, he moves his shoulders back and tries to stand even taller. Poor Thommo. He didn't even have a shower this morning, and Mack's pretty sure Thommo slept in the shorts he's wearing. There's no way his little brother looks his best. Besides, Mack knows girls never go for red hair.

Mack edges forward a bit. He wasn't expecting *this* girl.

He can't quite work out how Frankie could be a friend of Joely's. It just doesn't fit. Not that there's anything wrong with Joely, but compared to the girl who is standing in front of him, it's like Joely's from another universe. Within seconds, Mack decides she might be a good way to make Anna jealous, and he smiles.

'And that's Thommo,' says Joely.

'Hi Thommo,' says Frankie.

'Yeah, um, hi,' says Thommo.

Frankie smiles, wondering how long it will take her to crack Thommo. He's nearly as tall as Mack and his hair is bright, carrot red. She only got a glimpse of his green-grey eyes before he looked away at his feet, but she can see the freckles on his skin. They are thick like he's been flicked with spots of dirt. His arms have threads of muscles, but he's not like his older brother. Not as big and not as male. He's nothing to be afraid of.

'And this is my best friend, Frankie,' says Joely. It always surprises Frankie to hear those words. It's not something she's ever had said about her before meeting Joely. Hearing it now makes Frankie feel like she's being claimed. And she's not sure how she feels about that.

'Hi again,' says Frankie.

Joely grabs Frankie's hand and starts leading her out of the station. 'We might walk through town and get the bus back.'

'Righto,' says Thommo.

'You could come with us on the bikes,' says Mack.

Joely laughs. 'I've seen you ride. No way.'

Frankie turns her head to watch the cousins walk to their bikes. She wonders if they'll look back at her. As they climb

on, Mack looks up, and then so does Thommo. Pleased, she waves, wanting them to know that she isn't unfriendly. Then she lets Joely drag her across the narrow road towards town.

CHAPTER 4

‘So this is the town,’ says Joely.

‘One street?’ asks Frankie. A dry breath catches in her throat like the asthmatic gasps that plagued her when she was young. How was she going to cope with this heat for a week? How does anyone actually *do* anything here?

‘Well, sort of. There’s a few other council buildings and the primary school, but pretty much all the shops and stuff are here,’ says Joely, randomly waving her hand.

The town is even smaller than Frankie expected. It’s really just a line, a punctuation of shops among dry paddocks and slow cattle. Frankie scans the street, trying to see what’s there. She can see an ice-cream shop. The word ‘shop’ is spelt with ‘pp’ and an ‘e’, ‘Shoppe’, like it’s trying to be old-fashioned or posh or both. Frankie guesses it’s neither. There’s a supermarket, a newsagency, a clothes shop, a chemist, a hamburger place, a coffee shop and something that looks like it says op shop, but Frankie can’t be sure from where she stands. She hopes it is. The country ones are always the best. There are also pubs at either end of the street, like they’re daring the locals to make a choice.

‘We can walk this way to the bus stop,’ says Joely.

They step into a line of shade, where dogs lie on the footpath panting, buckets of water beside them.

‘Is there anything to do?’ says Frankie, crankier than she means to. She knows Joely will probably take it the wrong way, but she’s too hot to apologise.

‘There’s a pool,’ says Joely in a terse voice.

‘Can we go?’

‘No. Not now.’

‘But I’m hot,’ says Frankie.

‘Told you,’ says Joely.

‘Yeah. You did.’ Frankie rubs the sweat away from her face. She can feel her skirt riding up and she wonders if she’s flashing her undies. She catches a look from a group of teenagers staring at them. Girls mostly. Frankie knows they’re checking her out, the strangers from the city who they won’t say anything nice about. But Frankie doesn’t care. She didn’t come here to make friends. She certainly didn’t come here to be polite to the local girls, or to try to change their minds. She’s happy to be judged, and she’s even happier if they leave her alone.

‘God, everyone is looking at us.’

Joely smiles. ‘Cos your skirt’s too short.’

‘No, it’s not.’ Frankie tugs at it again.

‘Should have worn shorts. Told you.’

‘Shut up, Joely.’

‘Come on, there’s the bus.’

Frankie and Joely rush past the Ice-cream Shoppe. Inside Rory is waiting for Anna to scoop ice-creams for a bunch of little kids so she can sneak off with him for a five-minute break around the back. He looks out the window and sees Joely walk past. He remembers her from last summer as

Mack's skinny cousin from the city who was always smiling at him whenever he looked up. Rory could never get close because Mack was always around. Not that he really wanted to. She's not really his type: too freckly.

Then Frankie runs past. Rory can't see her eyes because she's wearing big frame sunglasses, but he can see her hair, and her short skirt, and her laugh. He wonders if Mack's already met her and what he thinks of his cousin's friend. Rory smiles as he imagines the perfect way to mess even more with Mack and get him back for taking the job at the servo.

'Want a cone?' says Anna, dragging Rory's attention back from the window.

He looks up at Mack's ex-girlfriend with her dyed blonde hair and small teeth and shakes his head.

'Nah. I've gotta go.'

'But I thought—' Anna starts in that voice that used to make Rory excited but now just bores him.

'Not today, Anna. In fact, probably not tomorrow either.' He turns to walk out, thinking he'll jump on the bus.

'You're not dumping me?' she calls. The kids look up from their ice-creams.

'Nah,' he says, enjoying the fact that Mack's ex-girlfriend is about to hate him even more than she hates Mack. He can see Anna start to relax, thinking she's safe, and adds, 'Cos we were never going out.'

Rory swipes at the plastic strings hanging in the doorway and bashes his way through, just in time to see the bus pull out. Now what's he going to do? Maybe he was a bit hasty dumping Anna after all. He turns and walks back through the plastic strings, smiling at Anna like it was all one big joke.

CHAPTER 5

Of course there's no air-conditioning in the bus, thinks Frankie as she slumps down in the first empty chair. Joely squeezes past her and Frankie wishes she'd sit somewhere else. She wants to spread out on the vinyl seat, not be squashed up against her sweaty friend.

'The pool is open, isn't it? It's not just decoration,' says Frankie.

'Yes, they open it every summer.'

'Is it a real pool? Not a toddler pool?' Frankie wants to pick an argument because she's so hot and Joely's arm is pressing against hers.

Joely shoots her a look. 'It's an old pool with really blue concrete. It's super deep and small, too. It's not like our pools in the city. The fence is pretty easy to climb so Mack used to sneak in when it was hot at night. 'Til he got caught and my uncle Ged went off his head. He made Mack do community service.'

Frankie smiles at the thought. She likes boys who break rules.

'There's a dam, too,' says Joely.

'Yuck. I like being able to see the bottom,' says Frankie, imagining her toes squishing mud.

‘It might be gone anyway. Looks like the drought has swallowed everything up,’ says Joely.

‘What about New Year’s?’ Frankie imagines sitting around with Joely’s aunt and uncle, counting cows.

‘There’s probably a party. Sometimes in the old hall there’s a movie.’

‘A party sounds good!’

Behind them a kid starts screaming. Frankie hears the mum try to calm him. But it makes him scream louder. All this heat. She wishes she could scream like that, too.

‘What’s your uncle’s name again?’ says Frankie.

‘Ged. And Jill,’ says Joely, irritated that she’s repeated this information about twenty times.

‘Hope Ged and Jill have good air-conditioning.’

‘No, just a couple of old fans.’ Joely remembers last summer when she lay in bed for a whole day not moving, watching the fan blades turn.

‘Great,’ Frankie groans and leans back against the plastic seat, closing her eyes.

Joely knows they have to get off in a minute. In the time it takes them to walk the rest of the way to the farm, her skin will be burnt, fried, crispy. So she opens the front of her bag and pulls out the extra-large tube of sunscreen her mum bought. Squeezing the tube, a huge lump of white cream oozes out. She tries to close the lid quickly, but it’s too late. She has enough cream on her hand for the whole bus.

‘Want some?’ she says to Frankie, forcing her to open one eye.

‘Ergh. No. Thought you were offering me food.’

‘It’s sunscreen. It’s sunny outside,’ says Joely, trying to rub the cream in at the same time.

‘I’m fine,’ says Frankie, turning away.

‘It’s hotter than it is in Melbourne,’ says Joely, hating that she sounds like her mum.

‘Whatever.’

Dripping with sunscreen, Joely still can’t get rid of it all. She has a hand full even after applying it over and over again on her arms, neck and face. She’s so preoccupied by it, she almost forgets to look out the window for the gum tree that marks their stop. She sees it just in time and jumps up. ‘Next stop,’ Joely calls to the driver. Frankie hasn’t even moved.

‘Don’t get too comfortable. We’re getting off here,’ says Joely nudging her.

‘Comfortable. As if.’

They hop off the bottom step onto the ground. The air outside is the same temperature as in the bus. It drives off, churning up the dust and Frankie spins around trying to hide her face. When she looks up, Joely is standing off to the side of the road, shaking her hand in the air.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Trying to get rid of the sunscreen,’ Joely says. Splatters of white mark the dusty ground. Finally Joely leans down and wipes her hand on the dry grass. As she stands up, Frankie notices the cream hasn’t been rubbed in enough across her nose. She debates telling her, but decides to leave it. It’s kind of cute and there’s nobody around but cows anyway.

‘Come on. It’s about a ten-minute walk,’ says Joely.

‘Awesome,’ says Frankie, sounding as sarcastic as she can, but Joely doesn’t respond.

*

Mack and Thommo are waiting on the back step when Frankie and Joely make it to the farm. It's obviously much faster riding across paddocks on motorbikes than it is waiting for the meandering old bus. Now they've arrived, Joely doesn't care that she's dripping wet with summer heat. She's just happy to be back. And now she has her best friend with her as a witness to this place; as long as Frankie stops complaining.

'Where's Jill?' says Joely.

'Inside. Peeling potatoes,' laughs Mack.

'Oh no, I forgot.'

Mack smirks at Frankie as he explains, 'Mum cooks potatoes every day.'

'Oh, right.' Frankie doesn't understand why potatoes are funny, but she appreciates being included in the moment. Just as Frankie is thinking of something to ask about the farm, the back door bangs open. A short, wiry woman squeals, skips down the steps and wraps her arms around Joely.

'You're almost a lady,' the woman exclaims.

'So are you,' jokes Joely.

The woman laughs and kisses Joely's cheek. Then she turns to Frankie and kisses her too.

'Nice to meet you, Frankie. I'm Jill.'

Frankie nods, feeling the touch of the kiss.

'Come on inside. It's no cooler, but at least you can sit down.'

Frankie follows her friend and Jill up the stairs into the old weatherboard house, with its worn floorboards, whirring fans and sparkly Christmas decorations. A cat sneaks past, rubbing itself along her ankles.

‘That’s Jasper,’ says Joely.

‘Hello Jasper,’ Frankie says as she bends down and slides her hand along the cat’s back. ‘Is it a he?’ Frankie looks up and realises her friend has already gone further into the house without her. She hurries after Joely and the cat slinks off.

Stepping inside the kitchen, Frankie feels immediately jealous of Joely’s cousins. They probably have no idea how calm it is, or how unusual to have a mother that even boils potatoes. Frankie can’t remember the last time her mum cooked anything.

‘The farm’s a bit dryer than when you were last here,’ says Jill.

‘Has it been really bad?’ asks Joely.

‘Didn’t your mum say?’

Joely shakes her head. ‘Say what?’

‘Oh, it’s been dreadful, Joely. We’ve lost lots of cattle,’ says Jill quietly.

Frankie watches Joely take in the information. She hears her friend whisper, ‘Not Bluey?’

‘Yeah, love. I’m sorry. I rang your mum—’

‘He’s dead?’

Jill nods. ‘At the end of last summer, Ged found him in the paddock.’

Frankie’s worried Joely might cry, but Jill bustles her to the table before she gets a chance. She manoeuvres Joely into a chair, hands her a glass and pours her a drink with lots of ice from a large jug.

Frankie feels like she’s spying, loitering on the threshold.

‘He went fast. No suffering,’ says Jill kindly. Joely nods.

Frankie wonders who Bluey was and why he meant so

much to Joely. And she wonders why Joely's mum didn't tell her.

Jill smiles at Joely and reaches over to rub the sunscreen into her nose. Joely glances over at Frankie, and Frankie knows her friend is wondering why she didn't do it. She turns away to look at the kitchen, feeling exposed.

It's like a kitchen from a book, square and functional with cupboards and benches and pots bubbling away on the stove. Jill jumps up to offer a plate of biscuits to Joely. Frankie bets they're homemade, not cheap packet ones that her mum buys, discounted even further because they've been dropped so many times.

Jill suddenly looks over at Frankie and smiles warmly. 'Frankie, sorry, we've been ignoring you.'

'What?' she snaps, sounding like her mum when she's looking for an escape.

'You going to sit?' says Jill with a half-smile. 'I made lemonade. If you don't get a glass, Joely'll drink it all.'

Joely tries to smile but still seems distracted by Blueey.

Frankie isn't ready to sit. Afraid of the sting in her eyes, she lingers in the doorway, ready for a fast escape. She's not sure about this place or about Jill. She's not ready for someone who makes their own lemonade and hugs without judgement.

Frankie pulls her bag onto her shoulder thinking she might go outside for a bit. But then Jill's hands are on her shoulders, steering her to the big old wooden table with its marks and stains and worn grooves. Suddenly, she's in a chair, and told to eat a biscuit. She does because it might steady her legs and stop the stinging sensation in her eyes from getting worse. The biscuits are so good, she takes another one.

‘Lemonade, Frankie?’ says Jill.

Frankie nods, not trusting herself to speak. She picks up the glass causing the ice to clink as it bumps together. Frankie swirls it around before taking a sip. A sweet, lemony taste fizzes in her mouth. She thinks about her mum, wondering if she’s lying on the couch with Tom or Jeff or whatever his name is, and if she’s remembered that it’s bin day.