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keep you safe

APARTMENT
303



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BETTER READING on *All She Wants*


KELLI HAWKINS

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES*

APARTMENT

303

KELLI
HAWKINS

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

Dedication

For Mum and Dad. Thank you.

Contents

Dedication

10.59 pm: Wednesday, 18th January

3.14 am: Saturday, 31st December

3.10 am: Sunday, 1st January

5.46 pm: Monday, 2nd January

2.22 pm: Friday, 6th January

7.10 pm: Sunday, 8th January

10.10 am: Wednesday, 11th January

3.14 am: Thursday, 12th January

8.01 am: Friday, 13th January

6.34 pm: Saturday, 14th January

10.26 am: Monday, 16th January

5.18 am: Wednesday, 18th January

9.02 am: Thursday, 19th January

12.14 pm: Saturday, 21st January

1.29 pm: Monday, 23rd January

8.31 am: Tuesday, 24th January

9.05 am: Wednesday, 25th January

1.38 pm: Thursday, 26th January

8.00 am: Friday, 27th January

12.19 pm: Saturday, 28th January

10.21 am: Sunday, 29th January

11.35 am: Monday, 30th January

10.02 am: Tuesday, 31st January

3.33 am: Wednesday, 1st February

10.01 am: Thursday, 2nd February

7.47 am: Friday, 3rd February

7.24 am: Monday, 6th February

3.21 pm: Tuesday, 7th February

9.21 am: Sunday, 12th February

12.12 pm: Tuesday, 14th February

About the Author

Also by Kelli Hawkins

Copyright

10.59 pm

Wednesday, 18th January

The apartment building is much fancier than I expected.

Beyond the glass façade, the lobby glows. The floor and walls are gleaming black marble. A uniformed security guard perched behind a tall desk reads a magazine. The man yawns and stretches, runs a hand through greying hair. I turn my attention to the apartments above. Though it's late, almost half of them are lit up.

I know her the minute she appears at the wide window on the third floor. She stands still, then her eyes find me. Her body jolts in recognition, but she doesn't back away or shut the blinds. I hold her gaze, flicking ash onto the concrete.

Behind me, one of the homeless men who lives outside the car park coughs. 'Dirty whore,' mutters another under his breath. I ignore it, as I have the previous hundred times he's said it.

Sweat beads on my upper lip and I wipe it away with the back of my hand. Summer nights in Sydney are muggy, though nowhere near as humid as I'm used to.

No, it's the sight of her that makes me sweat.

Rory's blonde hair is shorter now, around shoulder-length, still parted to the left. She is slighter, no longer the athlete she was at sixteen, but she's stronger than she looks. Stronger, perhaps, than she realises.

She ducks out of sight, reappearing moments later with a fluffy white dog in her arms. She holds the wriggling animal between us like a shield.

'Got a few bucks, mate?'

Behind me a man sways, his long white beard matted. He reeks of sweet alcohol and sour body odour. I check my wallet and pass him a ten-dollar note.

'Cheers,' he mutters. He stares at the money as if confused, then keeps talking. 'A guy was killed here a couple of weeks back. One of us.' He lifts his eyes to mine and I see him baulk, belatedly taking in my size. 'Reckon you'll be right, but.' He wanders off.

When I look back, Rory's apartment is in darkness.

No matter.

I know where she lives now.

3.14 am

Saturday, 31st December

Almost three weeks earlier.

I pick up Buster's lead. 'Sit.'

My dog drops his furry behind to the floorboards, his body quivering with excitement. I can't help smiling, despite the tremor in my hands and the damp stickiness of my skin against my clothes, both side-effects of the nightmare. I'm used to this, though it never gets any easier.

'Good boy,' I murmur, attaching the lead to his collar. 'Off we go.' He trots to the front door.

I pick up my keys from the console table and put my eye to the peephole.

The dim corridor is empty, so I twist both locks and open the door. Buster steps into the hallway, staying by my side as I close the door behind me. I jiggle the handle several times to make sure it's properly closed, then cross the hall and press the lift button.

Buster sniffs the peace lily in the planter between the two lifts as we wait. A low whir signals its approach and I cock my head. No voices. Regardless, I draw Buster to one side. The door opens. It's empty, so we enter and I press 11. Buster sits by my feet, impatient but still, his ears pricked.

Inside, the lift smells of Daisy perfume. That's Leo Rankin from the seventh floor. Well, not Leo; his girlfriend, Ingrid. She's no doubt been over for their regular Friday night dinner

before Leo unceremoniously bundles her off home. Ingrid drives a convertible BMW and is high up in PR for one of the state ministers. She's been going out with Leo for over a year but his Facebook status is still set to 'single'; I'd dump him if I was her. His eyes always linger on me if I'm unlucky enough to be caught in the lift with him – and that's despite my reputation in the building.

Huge gilt-framed mirrors hang on three of the four lift walls. I've always been worried that the mirrors are too heavy. Surely mounting three five-foot-tall mirrors in a box that is dragged up and down eleven floors by a cable can't be a good idea . . .? I mentioned my concerns to Ron once, years ago, not long after I moved in. Being the sweetheart that he is, he called the lift maintenance company to find out. According to a company engineer, the mirrors had been factored into the lift's weight limit during construction. Ron put the guy on speaker phone so I could hear him for myself.

I sneak a glance at the mirror to my left. Infinite Rories and Busters stand behind one another. The effect is disorienting, making the confined space somehow feel smaller. I regard the multitude of mirror-Rories without vanity. Their lank blonde hair and pale faces are unsurprising – unremarkable. They wear hastily-thrown-on t-shirts and pants that hang loose. The poor fit is because I buy my clothes online, and since every brand is different, I usually order things a size up to be on the safe side. I'm unlikely to trek down to the post office to return anything, so it's less wasteful that way.

Under the baggy clothes I'm fit enough, thanks to daily aerobics in my living room, though I'm much thinner than I used to be. My cheeks look hollow, like they belong to someone older than twenty-six. The mirror-Busters wag their tails, and at the sight of the legion of upturned little faces I shake off my melancholy. This daily walk does us both good.

*

We emerge into a small vestibule, glassed-in on three sides, and I swipe my security fob to access the communal roof. Despite the humidity I suck in the fresh air as we pad soundlessly across the artificial grass to look at the city.

The Sydney Harbour Bridge is luminous, anchored by glowing yellow pylons at each end, the water below the arch as still as glass. To its right, the tips of the Opera House sails rise over the lush green of the Botanic Gardens, their curves familiar yet striking, almost alien.

To the left of the bridge, the CBD is dominated by skyscrapers overlooking the grass of the Domain, most with more lights on than off, demonstrating scant regard for climate change. The spires and stone of St Mary's Cathedral in the foreground provide a touch of Europe. Overhead, the inky sky is vast, the stars dimmed by the glow of the city.

This is the Sydney I'd wanted to live in since I was a child dreaming of escape from my small town and my family. I almost laugh at the irony. I've escaped. I look at this view virtually every day. Yet I'm more of a prisoner here than I was in Bowra Creek.

Buster starts walking clockwise, our usual direction. I check my wristwatch. It's an old digital one, far too big for my wrist. The numbers are hard to read, the light behind them fading, which worries me. I'll have to find someone to fix it if it worsens.

3.26 am. We're a little earlier than usual.

I do some calculations in my head. A lap takes almost three minutes. Three times eighteen is fifty-four.

Fifty-four minutes.

Eighteen is a good number. Eighteen laps it is.

*

The Panorama is a relatively small building. Ten storeys plus this communal rooftop area, with its undercover space in the centre, complete with bar-style tables and outdoor sofas for

residents and their guests. It sits on the eastern side of the Domain, separate from the newer and gaudier high rises in the CBD, and is considered one of Sydney's most prestigious apartment complexes. The apartments have high ceilings, generous windows, and narrow balconies, most of which overlook the Domain and the city, with high partitions giving each resident privacy from neighbours.

My apartment is one of the building's smallest; one bedroom, a single car space. I don't own a car, but the spot is handy for Lucinda's Monday night visits. There are other communal facilities at the Panorama, including an enclosed pool that was added to the rear of the building in the nineties, as well as a gym and sauna, all at ground level. I don't use those, but Buster and I need these early-morning rooftop walks.

I listen to the hypnotic *shush-shush* of the traffic below, breathing in the faint briny smell of the harbour. The outside world.

Freedom.

*

What if someone comes up here? The familiar voice muscles into my thoughts. You'll have to talk to them.

My heart beats a little faster.

Maybe you'll snap. Push them over the edge.

I won't do that. I would never do that. But now it's all I can think about. *Snap.*

The word pulses in my head. *Snap. Snap.*

Buster twists back to face me, his eyes bright.

You could throw Buster over too. Right now. He's so tiny. Light as a feather.

The voice is sibilant.

Insistent.

My throat constricts. *They're only thoughts. They don't mean anything. It isn't me.*

It's not enough to know this. I need to do something.

I blink three times. Pause. Blink again. Repeat. Over and over again, until it's enough.

When I'm done, my eyes are blurry and dry. Buster has fallen asleep at my feet. I kneel beside him, hesitating before grabbing fistfuls of his warm fur in my trembling hands and pressing my face into his neck, breathing in his musky, doggy smell.

'I'm sorry, Buster.' A flash of a memory jars; another warm furry body, this one with fine ginger fur, slick with blood.

So much blood.

I shudder and stand up. We'll need to do twenty-one laps. I take another deep breath. There's a scent up here that's hard to describe but that I think of as simply 'Sydney'. Eucalyptus and hot asphalt? With a touch of petrol and salt water? I don't know.

I'm not sure if I like it or not.

As we walk on, I reassure myself that no one will come up to the roof. Not at this time of the morning. I hurry now, but stay near the perimeter, within a metre of the concrete wall. If we move too far from the edge we'll have to start again.

By lap thirteen I've calmed but I'm annoyed at myself. I thought I had the compulsions under some measure of control.

You'll never have them under control, the voice scoffs.

The voice is right. Dr Shaw said they'll never go away. Still, they've been better over the past couple of years, with exercise and routine and regular use of the meditation apps on my mobile.

And probably because nothing exciting or different ever happens in my life.

Ever.

*

‘Fourteen, fourteen, fourteen . . . *fifteen*,’ I murmur as we turn the corner. I halt. Ahead, a shadowy shape is perched on the railing. In the dim security lighting it takes me a moment to realise it’s an owl. I want to move closer but don’t dare.

My eyes adjust and a ripple runs through me. Not just any owl, but the *Ninox strenua*, the Powerful Owl. They’re almost unheard of in the city. I’ve seen them in my *Australian Bird Guide*, but never out the window. Never on the rooftop.

The owl is motionless, its beak curved in profile. It swivels its head towards me, its yellow eyes bright with arcane knowledge, the hawk-like visage that makes it so distinctive watching me as if I’m the one out of place. As if I’m prey.

I shiver.

The owl isn’t afraid of me. It seems to exist out of time, like a creature of myth.

Buster, nervous at the unfamiliar shape, gives a low growl. The owl spreads its wings and rises silently into the darkness. It’s gone. I stand and blink at the space where it was, feeling a matching emptiness inside.

Buster stops growling, looking around as if he too thinks the owl might have been imagined. Then he shakes it off. His front feet dance and his sweet face tilts up at me, as though asking permission. ‘Off we go.’ He trots on.

I wonder where the owl came from, why it was here. Powerful Owls are endemic to the south-east of the country, I know that, but they usually stick to forests and woodlands. It’s rare to see them in cities, though I suppose this one could have flown across from somewhere on the North Shore to hunt in the Botanic Gardens, or even in the Domain. I’ve seen possums over there through my telescope – one of the owl’s most common sources of food.

I'm still thinking about the bird on lap sixteen when I see blue lights flashing from below, down at ground level, their strobing a faint flicker in the sky.

Without peering over the edge, I know what those lights are. The police.

Though I've seen police lights around here many times before – after drunken fights and rowdy parties and domestic 'disputes' – the prickle at the back of my neck tells me this is something worse.

Somebody is dead, I'm sure of it.

And I'm worried I know who it is.

*

Buster whines, wanting to move on. Numbers jumble themselves up inside my brain.

Fifteen laps completed. Eighteen minutes. Six laps to go.

Above, the sky is too vast, too empty. The stars seem so far away. I concentrate on taking deep slow breaths like Dr Shaw taught me.

It's all your fault.

I grasp the railing with my free hand and peer at the city. With an hour or so 'til dawn, it's still dark, the wet heat making it hard to fill my lungs. I need to get back to my apartment, but I can't leave, not until Buster and I complete our twenty-one laps. The thought of what might happen if we don't finish them makes me nauseous. I tap my fingers on the railing –

Three taps. Six taps. Three taps. Six taps.

– again and again until my breath starts coming slower. We resume our walking. Eighteen minutes later I lead Buster back downstairs.

*

Inside, the apartment is blessedly cool. When I glance through the blinds, the flashing lights have gone, though a glow tells me the police are still there – exactly where I suspected – at the homeless camp across the road from the building.

The Domain car park has long been the site of a tent city. I'm not sure for how long exactly – I moved in seven years ago and it was already there then. Outside the car park runs an undercover area, and men have commandeered sections of it, personalising their own patch with a makeshift bed or a folding chair, or a tarp pinned up in the hope of a little privacy. The area is littered with cardboard, shopping trolleys and sagging black garbage bags.

They even have a name – the Domain Dossers.

I dump a cup of kibble into Buster's bowl. He sits, waiting for my signal before lowering his head to the food. I creep over and peer through a gap in the blinds.

Two police cars are parked on the verge. Behind them is where the Dossers live, an expanse of dirty concrete and shadow that tonight is lit up like daytime. Police canvas stretches across the side facing the road, blocking my view. A lanky plainclothes detective – he has a notebook and looks authoritative, so I presume that's what he is – stands beside one of the sedans, talking to Skinny Santa, who tugs up his dirty tracksuit pants every so often and gestures animatedly.

I can't see any of the other regulars. Not Sad School Teacher, who writes in his notebook every day before daylight fades, or Bully Boy, who throws stones at stray cats stupid enough to venture close. Skinny Santa is always drunk on cask port. The men are usually back by nightfall, having spent their days at a soup kitchen or begging in the CBD. They return as the sun sets, like vampires or roosting birds. All of them, that is, except Long Socks.

Long Socks is my favourite. He doesn't go out much – he has the camp's prime position and he's very protective of it. His patch is inside a hurricane-wire cage littered with air conditioners, or generators, or some other ancient equipment.

There's enough room on one side for his cardboard bed, a bottle of Diet Coke, and some scraps of food – half a loaf of bread, or a packet of Home Brand biscuits.

The cage gives him a measure of safety the other men don't possess. A small door has been cut into the wire with bolt cutters, and Long Socks gets down on his hands and knees to enter – a difficult ask for an old guy.

Going by his stick-like legs and stiffness, he must be the oldest of the Dossers. He reminds me of this dignified elderly man who used to walk past our house in Bowra Creek on his way to buy a morning paper. He'd wear a three-piece suit – rain, hail or shine – though of course Long Socks doesn't wear a three-piece suit. He wears beige shorts and a dirty button-up shirt, and long socks with scuffed brown leather shoes.

In the morning he sweeps out his cage with a straw broom that's missing half its bristles, runs a comb through his thinning hair, and straightens his socks. For the rest of the day he reclines on a blanket on his cardboard, reading an old paperback he's fished out from God knows where. Currently it's *Right Ho, Jeeves*, which feels ironic.

Long Socks is different from the others. He's not desperate, like Skinny Santa, or forlorn, like Sad School Teacher. I can tell he hasn't given up on life. The way he holds himself is contained. My guess is that he was an accountant once, or worked in a bank. He seems comfortable being alone, but I reckon he must have been married. Perhaps his wife died, and in his grief he spiralled out of his ordinary, suburban life.

*

But right now, Long Socks is not there. I press a hand to the glass, shivering as the air conditioning cools the sweat on the back of my neck.

A woman in blue coveralls appears by the detective's side. The detective nods at Skinny Santa – I'd bet money *he* never had a wife – and turns his back to me, walking towards the lit-up area. I absentmindedly rub at a spot on the window, then

realise it's bird shit on the other side of the glass. I can't work out whose patch they're examining. It could be one of several of them, including Long Socks's cage.

Is he safe . . .? What's happened over there?

The police regularly front up to Dossers to deal with complaints from our building – mostly about public urination or noise disturbances. Often it's just a general request to move the 'riff-raff' along. But this is clearly different.

I go to pick up my binoculars from the windowsill, but with the police cars and the canvas in the way I realise I won't be able to see a thing. The telescope in the corner is similarly useless.

'I'm worried about Long Socks, Buster. Skinny Santa won't be any use to the police.' Buster, resting on the sofa, opens one eye. 'Something has happened, something *bad*. Who's on duty tonight, I wonder?'

It's Ron, as we both already know. Ron's eaten far too many Monte Carlo biscuits over the decade he's been here, so he'd be pretty useless in fighting off an intruder, but he's big and smart enough not to let anyone dodgy into the building. Then again, the other regular security guard, Grumpy Ian, is a real stickler for the rules, so either way I'm good. Emmanuel fills in for them both on a casual basis. He's younger, and though I don't know him as well, he's competent.

Lucinda often reminds me that the presence of security guards at the front desk twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week was one of the reasons she bought me this apartment in the first place. It's safe here.

'We're safe, Buster. And I'm sure Long Socks will be alright.'

*

The flutter in my chest suggests differently. Outside, the playing field above the car park is still and dark. Beyond that and to the right squats the dimly lit Art Gallery of New South Wales. A group of keen joggers in reflective running gear

moves in a pack along one of the paths towards the Domain, flickering like a mirage as they disappear into the trees.

I touch the screen of my phone. It's after 5 am. No point going back to bed. Buster is asleep, his chest rising and falling. I open the blinds, unlock the balcony door, and step outside. The detective stands by his vehicle. His gaze zeroes in on me and I stumble backwards.

'Stay in the shadows,' I whisper to myself. 'Out of sight.'

*

By the time the sun rises, they've gone.

The police, the lights, the cars. I wonder if I dreamt the whole thing.

Long Socks's cage is still in shadow, so I force myself to follow my normal routine. I pull on a pair of shorts and a singlet and do aerobics in front of the TV. I'm heading for the shower when I hear the buff guy from apartment 302, Mike, start grunting. The grunts build to his usual crescendo and I wonder idly how heavy his weights are. I have a cool shower, then return to the window. The sight of Long Socks stretched out on his cardboard makes me smile.

'I told you he'd be OK, didn't I, Buster?' I almost skip over to the kitchen to scoop more food into my dog's bowl before moving back to the window, noticing that crime scene tape now marks off a small area nearest the train line.

Slouchy Ricky Gervais.

That's who lives closest to the train line. He's only been at the camp a couple of months. A redhaired, heavysset man, maybe mid-thirties, he's a quiet guy who has always seemed harmless enough. I pick up my binoculars and take a closer look.

His patch is empty. No cardboard, no camp chair. Nothing. I distinctly remember Slouchy Ricky Gervais had a khaki camp chair – one of the large ones with a bottle holder in the armrest. And there were several flattened cardboard boxes

with an orange sleeping bag on top. It's all gone. I lower the binoculars, my stomach fluttering.

What happened to him? With a lurch, I remember my bad thoughts, and I know.

I *know*.

This is all my fault.

*

I crawl into bed where I curl up and count to 333 three times. It's not enough, so I do it twice more. Before I drift off to sleep the last thing I see is the Powerful Owl, his yellow eyes offering me something. I don't know what it is, but whatever it is, I want it.

*

When I wake my mouth is dry, and Buster is asleep on the bed beside me.

I walk into the kitchen and pour a glass of water, drinking so desperately it spills over my chin. My kitchen window faces the raised railway line that heads to Bondi, and I watch as a train full of tourists trundles past, the *ker-clunk, ker-clunk* barely registering anymore, then take a chair out to the balcony to watch the swell of people arriving at the Domain, all of them staking out a position to view the fireworks later.

It's a brilliant Sydney day. A breeze takes the sting out of the sun on my legs. Extended family groups unfold camp chairs, and friends meet with air kisses and champagne flutes. They spread out picnic blankets and set down Eskies filled with beer, unaware of the homeless people right below them. In our building there'll be a residents' party on the roof, hosted by the social committee. There'll be free drinks and fancy canapés.

I won't attend. Not from any dogmatic standpoint. I just – can't. Instead, I've arranged to cook myself paella as a special New Year's Eve meal. I consider not bothering after all that's

happened, then decide it might take my mind off things. Cooking calms me.

You don't deserve it.

It's your fault.

I stagger to my feet and return inside, walking over to my coffee table and pulling a wad of square pieces of coloured paper from its sleekly concealed drawer. I sit down on the sofa, placing the paper on the tabletop.

Left, right, left. Breathe. Left, right, left. Breathe.

Swimming has a natural pattern that still calms me, though it's been years since I was last in a pool. I pick up the topmost piece of paper, enjoying its crispness, the crackle as I flex it.

I bend over the table, and begin to fold.

*

When I rise, my fingers are stiff, my mind mercifully blank.

On the coffee table is a small pile of delicate origami cranes, each one cast aside as soon as I completed it, falling with a soft rustle to lie amongst its discarded brethren. I stretch, close the blinds against the glare of the sun and the air of celebration coming from the Domain, and switch on my portable speaker, starting my music app. ABBA blasts out.

I give my shoulders a shake and move to the kitchen, pull out my paella pan, and find the recipe I've saved on my phone. Time for the next distraction.

I'm chopping garlic when my phone rings. It's Lucinda. I tip the garlic into the pan with the onions, inhaling the scent. I've had quality prawns and chorizo delivered, and I can almost smell the smokiness already, taste the metallic brine of the mussels.

'Hey, Rory.' My aunt's voice is upbeat, though I can tell she's trying hard to dampen it for me.

'Hi Lucinda.'

‘Look, did I say I was coming over to your place tonight? Because I have plans with Alex. I can’t remember what we decided.’

‘No, you’re all good. I’m not expecting you. I have dinner on already. And you should go out with Alex. You can’t leave him alone on New Year’s Eve.’

‘Yes. Maybe. He *is* lovely.’ She sounds almost girlish. ‘You really have to meet him.’

‘Hm-hm,’ I say, noncommittally, giving the onions a stir. I’ve put off meeting her new boyfriend for a couple of months now. As we talk I toast rice in the pan then ladle hot stock over it before returning to the window. I want to tell Lucinda about last night, about the police, but she sounds so happy. She’ll be over for dinner in a couple of days. I’ll tell her then.

‘What have you been up to for the last day of the year?’ she asks.

‘Oh, you know me. I’ve been at the pub, met some friends for a walk around the harbour. Busy, busy, busy.’ My voice is light, but there’s a bitterness I can’t hide.

Lucinda is quiet for a couple of seconds.

‘Oh, Rory, I’m sure you’ve been busy in your own way. Been reading that book I got you for Christmas?’

‘Yes,’ I lie. ‘It’s very interesting. I’m thinking of doing a round-the-world yacht race myself now.’

I hate how snidely flippant I am. It’s not Lucinda’s fault I am the way I am. I change the subject, trying hard to sound pleasant. ‘What about you?’

‘Just my usual beach run and swim. Manly was ridiculously busy though. So many tourists.’

I picture the white sand. The smell of hot chips and coconut sunscreen. The salt water on my skin. A wave of jealousy washes over me.

‘Sounds lovely,’ I manage.

Lucinda must hear something in my voice, as she speaks in a gentler tone. ‘Why don’t you have another try of the pool in the Panorama? You were a first-class swimmer, Rory. An athlete. You could try getting back into it. Do some laps. You used to love it so much.’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘If you change your mind . . .’

‘I won’t change my mind.’ My voice is brusque.

‘Alright.’ Lucinda sounds hurt. I feel a pang in my chest. ‘I’ll sign off then. Happy New Year, Rory.’

I watch Long Socks on his cardboard, a book by his side. I think he’s dozing.

‘Happy New Year to you too, Lucinda.’

*

I lower the phone to watch a group of people my age stroll past the Dossers, swinging bottles of beer in their hands. The girls wear heels so high they struggle to walk, each of them in a version of the same short floral dress. The boys are preppy in polo shirts and chinos. One pretends to pick up a rock and mimes hurling it at the homeless camp. The others mindlessly laugh.

A stab of loneliness hits me, coupled with a memory. Rachael and Maddie and I, arm in arm, walking the dusty streets of Bowra Creek, cruisers in our hands, one eye peeled for our parents. I smile and lean against the window, closing my eyes. We thought we were so cool, each nursing our one drink, presented to us under sufferance by Rachael’s older brother. Unlike my friends, I was always terrified we’d be caught. And I hated being terrified. It made me feel like my mother.

I open my eyes. Outside, the group has disappeared. A cloud passes in front of the bright sun, darkening the sky.

Another memory: the summer holidays of the year I turned thirteen. My brother and I found a small bird’s nest in one of

the eucalypts in our backyard. Inside were the skeletons of a mother and baby bird; Indian mynahs – pests, we'd always been told. So much so that several weeks earlier our neighbours had shot some with a .22 borrowed from farmer friends. I'd been fascinated by the bird skeletons. They were so delicate their tiny, brittle bones could be crushed with a finger.

After that, whenever I looked at my mother I was reminded of that mama bird and her child. I used to wonder what had happened to them, why they'd died and been left there to rot. Had they tried to fight whatever killed them? Or had they just laid down and given up?

What happened to our family was my father's fault. But I blame my mother almost as much as I blame him.

She should have fought harder to be free.

3.10 am

Sunday, 1st January

I jolt upright, my chest heaving.

The nightmare again. The slab of steak on the sink, glistening in a pool of red. The bloody fur. The stench of chlorine and cigarettes, acrid and smoky all at once.

The thuds of fists and feet on skin.

Buster's rough tongue licks my cheek and I'm back in the here and now: in my apartment, sweating in the cold air, doona cast aside. I flop back onto the pillow. I've already decided I'm not walking Buster tonight. There's a chance that revellers will still be on the roof, and I don't want to risk it. We both drift back off to sleep and I'm woken at 5 am by my alarm.

I exercise, forgoing TV-aerobics for a YouTube yoga session, and then shower, feed Buster, eat breakfast. When the sun's up I check on the Dossers. Long Socks is motionless in his cage. The crime tape flutters around Slouchy Ricky Gervais's site. I yawn. I'd watched the 9 pm fireworks and then the midnight ones from my balcony, unable to resist the spectacle. It's one of my favourite perks of living at the Panorama.

And, after that, the nightmare.

This morning I'm at a bit of a loss. I polish the inside of all the windows in my apartment, then clean the dirt from the tracks until my roll of paper towel is used up and blackened. Afterwards, I lay on the sofa with the book Lucinda gave me

for Christmas – feeling guilty when I remember how I spoke to her the previous day – but I have difficulty focusing. Slouchy Ricky Gervais keeps coming to the forefront of my mind. I contemplate searching news websites or calling Ron or Ian, but since what happened to him was probably my fault, I’m not sure I want to know.

Work. That’s what I’ll do. Work always distracts me.

In my inbox is the latest job from Lucinda. My aunt is a private investigator who runs her own business, and I work for her, transforming her surveillance operatives’ notes into something more professional. I watch video footage and add photos and information to a template, prettying it up for our clients. Most jobs are insurance claims, though Lucinda also gets more sensitive requests – suspected adultery, missing persons, custody transgressions.

The most recent job is an insurance claim for a supermarket worker who slipped and injured his neck in November. Last week our operative videoed him kitesurfing on a weekend getaway with his mates. He’d even posted about it on Facebook. As if that wasn’t enough, he only thought to put on his neck brace in the car park before heading off to his medical evaluation.

I open the report template and begin typing in the guy’s name, claim number and other basic facts.

*

I’m adding screenshots of Mr Kitesurfer mid-leap when there’s a knock at my door.

I stop typing, holding my breath. Another knock, louder this time.

A visitor.

Why hasn’t Ron called me?

It must be someone from inside the building.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

‘Hello?’ A voice comes from beyond the door. It’s young. Female. ‘Rory Campbell? Are you in there?’

I walk down the hall, the carpet muffling my steps, and put my eye to the peephole. A teenager with a round face and a mass of frizzy brown hair peers back. I hesitate a moment longer, then open the door.

‘Oh hi, I was worried you were out.’ The girl smiles broadly. She is short, her face still soft with baby fat, though she has the self-confidence of someone much older. She has lovely thick eyebrows and long eyelashes.

‘I’m Farrah Fotos, from 403 – right above you.’ She points at the ceiling. ‘This parcel was delivered to us by mistake.’

Farrah holds up a small rectangular box that I know contains the expensive shampoo and conditioner I bought myself for Christmas and have already reported to the company as being mislaid.

‘I’m sorry we’ve had it for so long. Mum told me to bring it around on Christmas Eve but I was reading this book about travelling through Peru, and the narrator had almost reached Machu Picchu – the Aztecs are so amazing! – and I forgot because the story got so interesting, and the parcel must have slipped under my bed, because I found it this morning when I was looking for my joggers because Mum said we had to go for a walk – it was her New Year’s resolution to get fit – then she changed her mind and baked healthy treats instead. Bliss balls.’

Farrah finally takes a breath, then continues. ‘They’re not very good. They taste like raw cocoa. Which is weirdly dirt-like, don’t you think? Or maybe it’s only the texture that’s off-putting. Anyway, I’m so sorry. I brought the parcel down as soon as I found it. What’s in it?’

‘Some hair products.’

‘I hope you didn’t need them too badly. Your hair looks good so I guess you didn’t run out.’ She thrusts the parcel at me. ‘Oh, hello!’ she exclaims.

I see her look towards my feet and glance down. Buster's there, tail wagging. Farrah drops into a squat to pat him. 'Oh, my God! He's beautiful! He's so fluffy and small. What's his name? My dad is allergic so I can't have a dog. Or a cat. He's allergic to everything; well, almost everything.' She rolls her eyes. 'I'll have to wash my hands before I go home or he'll be sneezing all day.' She smiles as she strokes Buster. 'Hello!' she says again in a softer voice.

'His name is Buster.'

'What breed is he?' Farrah asks.

'A bichon frise.'

'I don't know that one. He's very cute though. Like a teddy bear.'

Buster drops and rolls onto his back, exposing his stomach in a classic scratch-me pose. 'He likes you,' I say. Farrah's grin broadens. 'They were Incan, by the way.'

'What?'

'At Machu Picchu. They weren't Aztec, it was an Incan citadel.'

'Have you been there?' she asks, unperturbed by my correction. 'I'm so jealous!'

'No.' I answer shortly. 'I'm just a history buff. I like learning about other countries. Other people.'

'Me too! Can I come in?' she asks guilelessly. 'I've always wanted to see if apartments on the other floors are the same as ours.'

I say yes with hardly a glimmer of alarm, which confuses me. I let Farrah enter first, Buster leaping up to follow, while I close the door behind her. I don't forget to double check that it's properly shut and locked.

'Oh wow, this is way different from ours. Smaller. No offence.' She grins. 'It's pretty. Did you get someone to decorate it?'

‘No, I bought most things online, though I made some of them myself.’ I don’t tell her there’s no chance of me letting renovators or decorators into my personal space. If I need to get a repairman in I spend the day hiding out at Lucinda’s.

The apartment is pretty, though, she’s right about that. It’s light and airy, with white walls and large windows. Several large houseplants echo the greenery of the Domain outside, including a fiddle-leaf fig that’s taller than I am, and smaller pots containing mother-in-law’s tongue, bird’s nest ferns, and several types of dracaenas.

The sofa is fifties-style; teal and timber. I’ve added a couple of vintage art deco posters in shades of blue and yellow and I re-upholstered the dining chairs in orange fabric myself, purchasing a staple gun specifically for the purpose after watching an online tutorial.

There’s a whole wall of well-stocked bookshelves with a TV in the centre. The books are interspersed with plants and a few smaller artworks and vases, so that it looks styled but not too styled.

Farrah wanders around picking up things and putting them down, making me glad I remembered to stash my origami cranes away last night. Despite her nosiness, I find it endearing the way she makes herself at home. I’ve seen Farrah around the building before, nodded to her and her parents in the lift, that sort of thing. She’s a girl who’s not afraid to meet your eye, which I admire, though I have trouble returning her gaze. The family appears wealthy and well educated, as are virtually all residents of the Panorama. I know a fair bit about most of the building’s occupants, though I’m not on speaking terms with almost any of them.

‘*Jane Fonda’s Workout Collection*,’ Farrah picks up the DVD on my coffee table. ‘This looks old-school.’

‘It is. It’s hard though. Keeps me fit.’

She nods, setting down the DVD. ‘So many books!’ She approaches the bookshelves. ‘You don’t have an e-reader? A

Kindle or something?’

‘I do, but I like the real thing too.’

‘So do I.’ She runs her fingers over the spines of the ones at her eye level. ‘Quite a mix you’ve got here.’ She’s right. I have access to library books online, but my favourites are all here. Everything from astronomy and bird books to fantasy and classics.

Farrah’s eyes light up at a smaller selection I keep together in a far corner. ‘Ooh, chick-lit! Excellent. Mum won’t let me read romance. Definitely keen to borrow if you don’t mind lending them? I promise I’ll bring them back.’

I nod. She moves on, noticing the only framed photo on the bookshelf, half hidden behind the hanging pea-green baubles of my string-of-pearls plant. She points at it. ‘That’s you, isn’t it? You’re so little! Who’s with you?’

‘My brother.’

‘You don’t look alike.’

‘No.’

I don’t invite questions and Farrah spins around, picking up the origami horse that sits beside the television.

‘Did you make this?’ She cradles it with appropriate gentleness.

‘Yes. It took me most of a day,’ I say. I’m usually kind of embarrassed about my origami – well, the cranes at least. They’re a tool to manage my problems, nothing more. But I’m proud of that horse. One piece of pure white paper had become something beautiful, with a life of its own.

Farrah shakes her head and places the horse carefully back. Her curious gaze falls on the telescope in the opposite corner of the room. ‘I gather from your books this is for astronomy. Not for spying on people?’

‘That’s right. I’m teaching myself the constellations.’

‘Cool. Though I bet this baby would also be great for peering into people’s windows.’ She jerks as if remembering something, her eyes wide. ‘Oh! Did you hear what happened to that homeless man two nights ago? Over at Dossers?’ She lowers her voice. ‘He was murdered. Did you see it? You look right at them, the same as us.’

‘No – I mean, yes. Well, I saw the police there, after. Do you know what happened to Slouchy Ricky Gervais?’

‘Who?’ She frowns. ‘No. A man called Joe Hudson was murdered. A Dosser. Mum told me.’

It’s your fault.

‘The police came this morning to ask us about it,’ she continues. ‘Have they talked to you yet?’

My stomach flutters. ‘No.’

‘Reckon they’ll come today. Mum didn’t want me knowing about it, but I could hear them from my room. The man was beaten to death, the policeman said. They don’t know who did it.’

‘Oh,’ I manage. ‘That’s terrible.’ I picture Slouchy Ricky Gervais sprawled on the concrete, blood seeping out from beneath his stocky torso. I hear the thudding of flesh on flesh, feel the violence of it in my guts.

‘We were at my aunt’s house in Newcastle for my cousin’s birthday when it happened, so we didn’t see anything.’ She sounds regretful. ‘We got back yesterday. And then last night was the New Year’s Eve party on the roof. It was great. Did you go? I didn’t see you there. It was pretty crowded, though. The fireworks were *amazing*.’

‘Ah no, I didn’t go.’

‘Oh, you should have. It was fun. Everyone was there.’

‘I don’t like parties much. Especially busy ones.’

‘Really?’ Farrah regards me with a tilted head. ‘I get it. Too many people. I want to travel when I’m older, but I’ll

make sure to avoid the tourist traps. See the essence of a place, yeah? Be a traveller, not a tourist. My current top three picks would have to be . . . Chile, Greece and France.’ She ticks them off on her fingers. ‘Chile for skiing and, like, the mountains, Greece for history and beaches, and France for the baguettes.’ She grins. ‘I could never do Keto. I mean, how good is bread? What about you? Have you ever been skiing? Have you travelled much?’

I tell her no, all of a sudden tired of the young girl’s chatter. Her questions. Perhaps she isn’t so endearing after all.

‘The pandemic was a travel-killer, wasn’t it?’ she continues. ‘At least we can finally get out there again. When I finish school, that’s what I’m going to do. Travel.’

I give a small nod. Farrah seems to notice my fatigue.

‘Well, I should be off. Can I wash my hands in your bathroom? I’d hate for Dad to spend the rest of the day blowing his nose.’

‘Yes, straight through there.’

She enters the bathroom, leaving the door open. The tap runs. Over the rushing water she starts talking again. ‘It’s school holidays at the moment and I’m so bored. Mum works from home – she’s a translator – and Dad is down the road at the Australian Museum. He’s an anthropologist. He comes home for lunch. Can you believe that?’

I *can* believe that, of course, as I’ve already found both her parents on Facebook. Her father rarely posts, but her mother regularly updates the world on her trips to the farmers markets and her homemade baklava. ‘My parents are *always* at home. Always *there*. And they don’t let me go out on my own in the city. I’m *fourteen*.’ She sighs. ‘They baby me because I’m an only child.’

My mind flits to my own parents. I banish them quickly. Farrah doesn’t know how lucky she is. The tap stops and soon after she comes back out.

‘You can drop by again if you’d like,’ I find myself saying, somewhat to my surprise. ‘I work from home, and Buster obviously likes you.’

‘Seriously?’ Her face lights up. ‘I’d love that. I’d better go, Mum told me not to bother you for too long on a Sunday. She’s always telling me I talk too much.’ She pulls a face.

I suppress a smile and lead the way to the door.

‘Nice to meet you, Rory Campbell,’ she says. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

*

By the time the police arrive I’ve done the two workouts on my Jane Fonda aerobics video, scanned my regular OCD and bird-watching Reddit groups, and searched for Farrah online, discovering only that she’s a typically internet-savvy kid with few public profiles. I dust three shelves of books and wipe out my cutlery drawer. Finally, I attempt to use my meditation app but the snow-capped mountains aren’t cutting it today. Instead, I chew my fingernails down to the quick.

Knock, knock.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

I peer through the peephole to see a plainclothes policeman and woman. I recognise the man as the detective who spoke to Skinny Santa. He’s holding a notebook and wearing tortoiseshell glasses that give him the look of a mild-mannered librarian. The woman is much shorter, stocky, with a dark complexion and chin-length dark hair parted neatly to one side. I open the door.

‘Good afternoon. Miss Campbell? I’m Detective Brooks and this is Detective Raco. We’re canvassing the building in relation to an incident that took place two nights ago outside the Domain car park. May we come in?’

‘Yes.’ My voice catches and I turn away before they see how nervous I am. Brooks reaches down to scratch Buster behind the ear as they enter and Buster looks like he’s in love.

‘You’ve got quite the green thumb, haven’t you?’ Brooks says, admiring my plants. ‘That’s a magnificent specimen.’ He gestures. ‘A fiddle-leaf fig, isn’t it?’

‘Mm. *Ficus lyrata*.’

‘I wish I had some of your talent. Every plant I bring into the office dies, doesn’t it, Andrea?’

‘Well, you have to remember to water them occasionally. Isn’t that right, Miss Campbell?’ Raco asks, shaking her head.

I nod my agreement. I don’t tell them that all it takes is some research into the plants’ needs. Some need a little more or less water, others love the sun. It’s not hard. Plants are far easier than people.

I offer the police something to drink. They both refuse, gravitating towards the balcony where the angle of the sun forces them to raise a hand to shade their eyes.

‘You have a clear view of the homeless camp, Miss Campbell. Perhaps the best of anyone in the building. A lovely view of the city too.’

The room feels much smaller with the police inside. Despite the air conditioning, I’m hot. Detective Brooks motions to my small dining table and I give a curt nod. The detectives sit with their backs to the view, as if to focus on me. I peer at them through the glossy leaves of the Zanzibar gem that’s in the centre of the table. Brooks has dark circles under his eyes. Raco smells of a perfume that I associate with someone older than she appears to be. Buster curls up near Brooks’s leather shoes.

‘Did you see anything unusual the night before last, Miss Campbell?’

‘No. I didn’t see anything strange at all. I mean, except you.’ I wave a hand at Brooks. ‘I woke after midnight and saw you talking with Skinny Santa.’

‘Skinny Santa?’ His brow furrows.

‘Oh, I don’t know his proper name.’ I squirm in my seat. ‘That’s what I call him. He’s one of the homeless men at Dossers. He has a long white beard. And he’s skinny.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘What happened? I heard someone was murdered.’

‘Yes. A thirty-seven-year-old homeless man named Joe Hudson was beaten to death.’

It’s your fault, hisses the voice.

I wring my hands. Brooks watches, then sets his notepad on the table. ‘I’m sorry to upset you, Miss Campbell. It’s unpleasant, I know.’

I force my hands apart and take a deep breath. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t see anything.’

‘You have a direct view of the men,’ Raco says, wearing a bland smile. Her intelligent dark eyes would be pretty but for the heavy black bags underscoring them.

‘I do. I feel like I know many of them in some way, if only from a distance. It’s terrible to think that someone could do this. Do you have any leads?’

‘We’re working on several theories,’ Detective Brooks says noncommittally, though his eyes are sharp. ‘However, the case is still very much open. Any information you might have – if you saw anything, anything at all – please let us know.’

It’s your fault he’s dead.

I swallow. My foot taps soundlessly on the carpet. *One, two, three. One, two, three.* Buster lifts his head and stares at me, as if wondering whether he should reach out a comforting paw, before deciding against it. My gaze wanders to the coffee table, my fingers itching to fold and crease, desperate for the release of the familiar.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

‘Be alert, Miss Campbell,’ Raco says, and my attention snaps back to her. ‘The Panorama is lovely, with decent

security too, but this isn't the safest neighbourhood for a young woman on her own.' She pauses, leaning back in her chair, regarding me with slightly narrowed eyes while Brooks examines his fingernails. With a start I realise Ron or Ian must have told them I never leave the building, not on foot, anyway. Heat floods my face. I concentrate all my willpower and manage to keep my leg still.

'I'll be very careful,' I pause then add, deliberately, 'all those times I'm out, strolling around the neighbourhood.'

Brooks meets my eyes, and I catch a glimpse of sympathy. Raco smiles at me, her expression still bland. She's good at hiding her feelings, but underneath it, I sense she's contemptuous – or worse, that she pities me.

'Please do. We'd hate to see you harmed.'

I picture my fist connecting with Raco's smug face, hear the crunch as her jaw breaks. I fight the urge, consciously relaxing my shoulders. My bicep twitches. I manage a nod.

I told you, the voice crows. It's your fault.

'Here's my card, Miss Campbell,' says Brooks, fishing one out of his wallet. 'Please contact me if anything comes to mind. It could be something from earlier in the day, or a noise you heard in the night. Anything at all.'

'I will.' I stand up on shaking legs. 'Let me see you out.'

Buster trots after the police but halts at the front door when I say his name. 'Thank you for your time, Miss Campbell.' Brooks makes for the lift. Raco follows without acknowledgment. I stare at the point between her shoulder blades, at the curve of her neck where her pale skin is visible. Exposed. Beneath her apparent sturdiness she is vulnerable. I clear my throat.

'Oh, detectives?'

They turn around.

I take a deep breath. 'It seems you've been told that I have OCD. But I'm not the only one in the building with a mental

illness. A lot of people in here have issues – addiction, depression, eating disorders – just like the rest of society. Someone on seven was once in jail. There’s a convicted arsonist on nine. I know of a couple of reformed alcoholics, and several who are definitely not reformed.’

I cock my head at them. ‘You should keep an open mind. No one is perfect. And not all mental illness leads to murder.’

I shut the door on their open mouths, press it hard and engage the second lock, then turn and lean against it, sliding down to the floor. I’m at a loss to know if my words were a defence or an attack.

*

Buster climbs onto my outstretched legs and licks my face. My trembling hands grip his fur. There are people in my OCD Reddit group who say we should lean into our intrusive thoughts. That’s the only way we’ll control them, they say. It’s called Exposure and Response Therapy. Dr Shaw didn’t think I was ready for that, but maybe she was wrong. I breathe deeply and focus on my dog, the feel of the pads of his feet pressing into my thighs, his breath on my cheek, his wagging tail. Then I picture Raco’s face.

My heart races and I feel like I’m about to throw up. Dr Shaw was right. I can’t do it. I can’t let myself think about hurting Raco – or anyone.

You wouldn’t hurt her, I reassure myself.

I hope I’m telling the truth.

*

I find some empty plastic containers and fill them with the leftover paella.

I heat them in the microwave and pack them into a recyclable heat-proof bag, then attach Buster’s lead to his collar. After checking that the hallway is clear, I double-lock the door behind me and lead Buster to the fire stairs. The

floors, walls and ceiling are bare concrete, the handrail cold steel. It smells of old air.

I descend.

At the next landing I hear the clang of a door above me. I stop and listen. Buster lets out a nervous bark, and I shush him. Steady footsteps echo, coming closer. I start moving again, jogging down the final two flights with Buster leaping along beside me. My heart beats faster as I open the door to the lobby, peering out through a small gap as the footsteps behind us gain ground.

Ron is behind the desk, eating a sausage roll. The lobby is otherwise empty.

I emerge from the fire stairs and shut the door with relief. My soft-soled slip-on shoes make no sound as I cross the space. The entire front wall of the lobby is glass, and I can see the traffic is halted, cars stretched in front of the building in a long queue. I'm most of the way across the lobby before Ron sees us.

He smiles, pastry flakes falling from his moustache.

'Azerbaijan!' he calls out.

'That's an easy one, Ron. Baku.'

'Yeah, sorry, love, I'm a bit behind on my research.' He rubs his hands together. 'I'll find something harder for you next time. Ah, I see you've brought my favourite little guy down for a chat! Hey, Buster! Are you a good boy?'

He stands up and comes out from behind the desk. Buster's claws tap and scratch on the marble floor. 'Can he?' Ron asks, gesturing at the sausage roll on the desk. I nod. He leans over and tears a piece of meat from the end of it, more pastry crumbling away, and drops it to the floor. Buster falls on it and Ron addresses me.

'Happy New Year, Rory! I thought you might have come down last night to wish an old man well for his last New Year's Eve in the Panorama.' His voice has a teasing note.

I stop. ‘What do you mean, your last New Year’s Eve?’

‘You didn’t hear? I announced it to the residents at the party last night. I thought I’d already told you. I’m retiring. I’ll be finishing up before Easter.’

Ron dusts pastry crumbs from his hands, and Buster pounces on them as they rain down onto his nose.

‘What? Oh Ron, what am I going to do without you?’

‘I’m sorry love,’ he says, his brows drawn together. ‘The thing is, I’ll be sixty-three this year, and security’s a young man’s game.’ He uses a softer voice and I know I’m being selfish. I can’t help it. Ron gets me. He’s a friend, and I don’t have many of those.

‘I’ll miss you, and Buster too. Ian will still be here, and Emmanuel is staying on as a fill-in. Plus, I’ve started training a new guy. He’s been in a couple of times now. You should come downstairs tomorrow and meet him. His name’s Blayde Porter – Blayde with a ‘y’. Pretty good security guard name, don’t you think? Sounds tough.’

He makes fists with his hands and holds them up in a boxing pose before dropping them again. ‘He *is* tough, by the look of him. And he’s closer to your age, so he’ll be way better to chat with than an old codger like me.’

Ron is failing miserably in his attempt to cheer me up. I muster up a smile and congratulate him. He’s got a tonne of grandkids he talks about all the time, and this means he’ll be able to be a hands-on granddad. I’m happy for him. I *am*, I tell myself firmly.

It’s your fault Ron is leaving.

When the voice pipes up this time, I feel a prickle of annoyance.

Everything is my fucking fault, according to it.

I put my bag down. ‘Is Ian around tonight?’ At busy times there are two security guards on duty. Or ‘concierges’ as Ian

likes to be called. I eye the door to the fire stairs – no one has emerged.

‘He’s doing a lap around the building, love. After what happened the other night we’re being extra careful.’ Ron walks back around behind the desk and sits on his tall stool with a sigh. He glances at the monitor in front of him. ‘Did you hear about the guy from Dossers?’ I nod. Ron points at the screen. ‘I’d hoped we’d be able to help the police but there was nothing useful on the cameras, unfortunately. That prick – excuse my French, Rory – he got lucky. Have they come and talked to you yet?’

I tell him they have, wanting to ask why he told the police about me. But Ron means well. If it was him who told the police, he did it thinking he was being helpful.

‘Sorry I didn’t warn you they were coming, love, it’s been flat-out since the murder. The gossip in this place has been next-level, let me tell you. It was a nasty business, what happened to that poor man.’ His jaw clenches. I don’t know how much Ron saw, but it seems to have affected him. All thoughts of grilling him for details about what happened to Slouchy Ricky Gervais evaporate.

I clear my throat. ‘I brought some paella for the Dossers.’ I hold up my bag. ‘Could you or Ian take it over soon? It’s been heated up.’

‘No problem, Rory. You don’t have to do this, you know. You’re not a one-woman soup kitchen. No one else in the building goes to such trouble for the Dossers. And God knows they can afford to,’ he mutters under his breath.

‘It’s only leftovers. There’s one for you if you want it.’

‘I’ve eaten, as you can see.’ He raises his eyebrows and brushes more pastry to the floor. ‘But thank you, Rory, that’s a lovely offer. I’m sure it would have been much nicer than my sausage roll. Ian should be back in a minute to man the desk. I’ll take it over then.’

‘Thanks Ron.’ I want to say more. To beg him to stay. To promise him an endless supply of Monte Carlos and sausage rolls.

I don’t, though. It wouldn’t help. So I say goodnight and begin to lead Buster towards the lift, deciding it’s preferable to the stairwell on the off-chance that somebody is still in there.

Before I get far, the revolving glass door starts up. I stop and pretend to examine my phone as an older couple in activewear blow in with the late afternoon wind. Both are slim in that wealthy way and give off an air of aloofness, walking stiffly, their outfits not the same but coordinated. The man gives a curt nod towards Ron and they approach the lifts. The way his wife looks at Buster and me is openly hostile. Many of the residents want dogs banned from the building. People like me too, I imagine. Finally, the bell dings and they enter.

‘They’re new,’ Ron says after the door closes. ‘From level ten. They bought the Wiesner’s old apartment, the one that takes up half the floor. Tom and June Larsson.’ He rubs his thumb and two fingers together to indicate money. ‘I haven’t seen them say a word to one another since they arrived.’

My gaze snags on a movement outside the building. It’s Sad School Teacher, a fishing rod in his hand. He crosses the street and as he comes level with Ron’s desk, he peers inside and gives a friendly wave. His smile transforms his usually mournful expression into that of someone you could enjoy a schooner with at the local pub.

‘That’s Gerry. Off down the harbour to catch a fish.’ Ron raises his hand in return. Gerry catches my eye and nods, then walks on. ‘I don’t know why he bothers. As if he’s got anywhere to cook something if he catches it,’ Ron says with affection.

‘Was Gerry a schoolteacher?’ I ask.

Ron blinks rapidly. ‘How did you know?’

‘Lucky guess.’ I say a second goodnight and enter the lift. I picture the uptight older couple, no doubt perched on their

Eames chairs on the tenth floor, gin and tonics in hand as they watch the evening news on one of their several enormous flat-screen televisions. But it's Gerry's smile that stays with me.

The spring in his step as he walked away gave me the oddest sense that he was happy.

5.46 pm

Monday, 2nd January

Tonight's my regular dinner with Lucinda, so I take off my old digital watch and put it in the top drawer of my bedside table, replacing it with the Apple watch she gave me for my last birthday.

I'm not due for a grocery delivery until the end of the week, so I've defrosted a couple of salmon fillets to pan-fry and serve with a cucumber and radish salad.

Lucinda lets herself in as I'm chopping a jalapeño. She holds a cake box in one hand and has a suede tote bag over her other shoulder. She's wearing neat navy capri pants and a fitted white top. I know she's still on summer holidays, but Lucinda has never been one for casual wear. As a former police officer, she likes to be ready for any eventuality, so it's also rare to see her in anything like stilettos or a tight skirt.

She is wiry from daily runs and beach swims, and looks her age, forty-three. She's never shied away from that, disdaining Botox and fillers and lip injections. She says she refuses to be what other people want or expect.

Her beliefs, however, don't extend to her hair, which is dyed chocolate brown and hangs straight past her shoulders, or to makeup, because as usual she wears a frosted shade of lipstick that even I recognise as outdated, and a slightly too-light layer of foundation. Despite that, there's an air of confidence about Lucinda that's attractive. She might eschew plastic surgery and fillers, but she does love to spend money

on face creams, facials and other beauty products. They can't hide the tiny lines around her lips from decades of smoking, which she gave up for me, but they give her prettiness an edge.

She looks tough and hard. Which she totally is.

Lucinda places the cake box onto the counter, then withdraws a bottle in a brown paper bag from her tote, setting it down.

'Rory. Happy New Year! I come bearing cheesecake.'

She gestures at the box, knowing baked cheesecake is my favourite. 'And wine for me.' She winks and smiles, creases appearing in the corners of her eyes.

I smile in return, but we don't hug. We aren't huggers. I unravel the foil from the wine bottle, then grab a glass from the cupboard.

'So, why didn't you tell me about the guy who was killed over at Dossers?' Lucinda never wastes time on small talk. 'Ron filled me in,' she adds in response to the way I've paused with the bottle in the air.

'I was going to tell you tonight.'

'How are you?' She eyes me sharply. 'Has it brought up any issues?'

'No. I'm fine.'

I know my OCD is getting worse, but I'm not ready to admit that, not even to Lucinda. Not yet. I wash the jalapeño from my hands with soap, scrubbing vigorously. I sense her scrutinising me as I rinse my hands, then hunt out a clean hand towel from the drawer to dry them.

'Capsaicin,' I say with a wry smile. 'Not compulsion.'

Lucinda has always been able to read me like a book. I rinse a glass under the tap and take several gulps of water, then look over and meet her eyes.

'Alright, sure, yes, I was a bit freaked out. I feel like I know some of those guys. I'm fine, though.'

Her gaze softens. ‘Well, it’s times like this I’m glad you aren’t out wandering around the neighbourhood. This place is like Fort Knox. You’ll be safe in here.’

I add the salmon skin side down to the hot oil, pressing it with an egg lifter, the sizzle saving me the need to reply. I think about telling Lucinda that Fort Knox is so impenetrable no one has ever even *tried* to break in, let alone succeeded. I doubt the Panorama is in the same category. And while our building’s security system is adequate, generally speaking, and our few guards are capable, they aren’t exactly on par with the forty thousand soldiers on site at the Fort Knox army base.

‘So, how’s the app going?’ Lucinda asks, taking a sip of wine. ‘Did you fix that bug?’

I’ve started developing a surveillance app for Lucinda’s business. It’ll be private – not available on any app store – and allow operatives to input their notes and upload them directly to me in a format I can then use to produce standardised reports. Eventually it will save us time, and hence, money. I haven’t created an app before so it’s a learning process, but I’m finding it fascinating – and frustrating.

‘Yeah, I’m working on the back end at the moment, but there’s a few glitches with syncing the data. I’m starting to regret customising it myself.’

‘You’ll get there – you always do.’ She shakes her head. ‘I’m in awe of your computer skills, as usual. That reminds me, I brought you a present.’ She returns to her tote bag and rummages inside, extracting a box. ‘I know you’ve been wanting some.’

She hands the box to me and I examine it, then grin, my mood improving. ‘Night-vision binoculars! The really good ones.’ For ‘good’, read ‘expensive’. ‘You didn’t have to do that, Lucinda.’

‘I know. I wanted to. Now you’ll be able to solve any murders over at the camp all by yourself. Perhaps *you’ll* become a PI one day.’

My smile fades as I imagine watching someone beat Slouchy Ricky Gervais to death in the green and black hue of the night-vision binoculars. I'd wanted them to view some of the nocturnal birds that fly past my window. The gulls that circle the Harbour Bridge at dusk come close to the building, and I'm hoping to spot an owlet nightjar. My stomach clenches as I recall the curved beak and mottled feathers of the Powerful Owl.

Perhaps it will return.

I feel an ache at the thought of seeing it soar through the night sky. Or even better, seeing it hunt. I picture the creature swooping in to pluck a glider or possum from a tree, carrying it off in its talons. Like something out of a David Attenborough documentary, right outside my window.

I have zero interest in watching a homeless man being beaten to death. Even watching the Dossers in the daytime now seems tawdry. Slouchy Ricky Gervais's death reminded me that these are real people with real lives. Perhaps I'm more like the other residents of the Panorama than I care to admit.

Lucinda notices my discomfiture. I smile for her sake and say thank you. It's a generous gift. Lucinda's always telling me that money is something to spend, not hoard, and she regularly arrives with unexpected gifts, no matter how often I tell her I don't need them. I think it comes from being the youngest of six siblings who grew up dirt poor.

My father was the oldest – four boys, two girls. I don't know what became of the others. I don't remember us having much to do with them. The last time I saw my other aunt or any of my uncles from Dad's side of the family, other than Lucinda, was at Mum's funeral.

I wasn't in much of a state then, but it was nice of them to be there. They weren't all the most upstanding citizens – one of them hadn't come because he was in jail for robbing a servo – but I think one of them might have been a teacher out west. My memories of that time are blurry.

I observe Lucinda across the stone benchtop. She doesn't have a hair out of place – her clothes are understated designer brands. She reeks of money.

At least one of the Reynolds made good.

When the salmon is rested I slide it onto plates and take our meals over to the table, Lucinda following with the salad and bread.

'This looks amazing.' Lucinda doesn't cook, and she's always ridiculously pleased with whatever I dish up, acting like I'm a genius in the kitchen. But following a recipe isn't that difficult. Mind you, Lucinda has other things to do – sailing, golf, dating. For me, cooking something delicious, even if it's a dish for one, is an outlet.

We sit down, serving ourselves the salad and starting on the salmon, which is lovely and pink in the centre. I take a mouthful and set my fork on the side of my plate. I tamp down a strong compulsion to tap my fingers on the side of the table, words spilling from my mouth that I've hardly thought through.

'Lucinda, I want – I *need* – to change. I can't live like this anymore.' I gesture around at the opulent apartment, registering the irony and continuing anyway. 'I know Dr Shaw says it's virtually impossible to move on from OCD, especially trauma-induced OCD, but I feel like I need to try. I want to be able to get out of here one day – just go to a pub, or wander around a shopping centre without panicking. Maybe even travel.' I pause, then add, somewhat wistfully, 'Chile is supposed to be nice.'

'Chile?' She blinks a couple of times.

'Well, it doesn't have to be Chile.'

Lucinda puts her own fork down. 'What brought this on?'

'New Year's Eve? I don't know.'

It's the hint of censure in Detective Raco's gaze, the sympathy in Detective Brooks's eyes. The twenty-one laps I

had to do. The voice telling me to throw Buster from the roof. The death of Slouchy Ricky Gervais, which I know – I *know* – was my fault. I don't share any of this with Lucinda.

'I think it's my last chance, you know? If I don't do something now, I'll never leave.'

I don't tell her I'm terrified, lonely. Desperate.

You can't do it, the voice says. *You're a coward*.

I don't tell her I'm worried the voice is right.

'Maybe you should go back to Dr Shaw, then . . .? It's been, what, nine months since you had a session?'

'Actually, I wondered if I should get a new psychiatrist.' I pick up my knife and fork, avoiding Lucinda's eyes.

'You don't like Dr Shaw? She's very well connected. Well thought of in the medical community. And she's been helpful in the past, hasn't she?'

'She has,' I say reassuringly. I've been seeing Dr Shaw for years and though neither of them have ever explicitly said so, I have the feeling she and Lucinda are friends. 'But maybe a second opinion might be a good idea.'

'If that's what you want.' Lucinda sounds put out. She puts a forkful of salad in her mouth and talks through the crunch. 'I'll get on to Dr Zhang and see what she thinks.'

Dr Zhang is my GP. She's one of those tiny, straightforward women I've always found very intimidating, so I'm more than happy for Lucinda to speak to her on my behalf. Luce has been authorised on my Medicare account since I was a teenager.

'Thanks Lucinda, I'd appreciate it. It's not that there's anything wrong with Dr Shaw . . . I just think it's time for a different approach. Time to shake things up a bit, see if something sticks.'

The thought of that change makes me feel like throwing up, but that's how I know I need it.

We eat for a while in silence, though I mostly push the salmon around my plate. Lucinda is quiet too, so I change the subject, using a brighter voice.

‘I meant to tell you that I’ve made a friend.’

‘Really?’ Lucinda sits up straighter, finishing the last of her wine. It’s been a while since I’ve talked about anyone new. ‘Someone online?’

I’ve joined dozens of forums and groups over the years I’ve lived alone. Online book clubs, virtual bird-watching groups, OCD support groups, that sort of thing. It’s fine – they’re fine, and I chat to a dozen or so people regularly via different forums – but I’m not sure that it’s enough anymore. It’s different from having flesh-and-blood friends.

‘No, in real life. Her name’s Farrah. She lives in the building.’

‘Well, that’s lovely. What does she do? Does she live on her own? Has she got flatmates? What floor is she on? Does she know about your . . . issues?’ Lucinda worries about how other people see me. She thinks they won’t understand my OCD, my anxiety. That they’ll think I’m crazy. She’s usually not wrong. ‘Should I meet her?’

‘Um. Well, she’s only fourteen. She lives with her parents in the apartment above this one.’

Lucinda tilts her head and regards me for a long moment, then she smiles, a little tentatively. ‘Well, still. That’s wonderful, isn’t it? A friend is a friend, after all.’

I try not to let my embarrassment show. I can’t even make a friend properly.

*

After the salmon is finished, we bring the plates into the kitchen.

‘I’ll wash up,’ I say. ‘I haven’t quite got the dishwasher working again yet.’

‘Why don’t you let me call someone to come and fix it? It’s been – what – two weeks now.’

‘No, no. I’ll figure it out. I’ve got the manual and checked out a few YouTube videos. I can do it.’

Lucinda clucks at me. She knows I hate having strangers in the apartment.

I change the subject, asking about Lucinda’s New Year’s Eve date with Alex.

‘So, did he take you to one of those flash restaurants on the harbour with views of the fireworks?’ I tease.

‘Not quite.’ One side of her mouth pulls up as she rinses a plate. ‘We went to a party at his cousin’s house.’

‘Really? You met his family?’ I raise my eyebrow.

‘Yep. His parents, his sister, his brother-in-law and their kids. The whole shebang.’ Lucinda rolls her eyes, but I sense she’s been waiting to tell me this all night.

‘And? Don’t leave me hanging. How’d it go?’

‘I think they liked me,’ she says with a hint of a smile.

She speaks with her usual confidence, but I know Lucinda. She would have been terrified that Alex’s parents might not approve of her. After all, she’s ex-police, an older woman, and she and I aren’t from the upper North Shore like Alex and his family. No matter how many designer labels Lucinda wears, she’s still a poor Bowra Creek girl at heart.

‘Of course they did! You’re a catch. More importantly, did you like *them*?’

‘Yeah, though I avoided the littlest kids, even when they kept trying to hand me the toddler. It had snot under its nose all night and no one tried to wipe it away.’ She pulls a face and I laugh.

We finish with cheesecake and tea before Lucinda prepares to leave. As we walk through the living area she catches sight of my origami horse and stops in her tracks.

‘Did you make that, Rory?’

‘Yeah. Took me ages but I’m really happy with it.’

‘I didn’t know you were into origami.’

‘I dabble a bit. It helps me feel calm.’

She nods and gives a close-lipped smile. We walk to the front door where she turns around to face me. My heart sinks a little at her concerned expression.

‘It’s not so bad here, really, is it, Rory?’

‘Of course not.’ I force a smile. ‘I adore the Panorama, you know that. I know I’m lucky. I live in a beautiful apartment, right in the centre of Sydney. I’m forever grateful to you for all that you’ve done for me.’

I hesitate. I don’t want to worry my aunt. The words come out anyway.

‘It’s just . . . I’m terrified at the thought of living here – in this apartment on my own – forever. I want to do the things people my age are supposed to do.’

Lucinda analyses my face. She frowns at what she sees there, blinks several times, then answers softly. ‘OK. I get it. I’ll look into it for you.’

*

After Lucinda leaves, I try out my new night-vision binoculars.

The clarity is startling. Long Socks is stretched out on his cardboard, the world around him the exact same eerie green of those war movies where elite forces attack a compound in the dead of night. I can even see the rise and fall of his chest. Skinny Santa sits in the gutter, waving a fist at cars driving past as he drinks from a coffee cup that I doubt holds coffee. I don’t see the Powerful Owl, only a few flying foxes flapping over the Domain.

Buster’s snoring signals that it’s time for bed, so I leave the window and start my night-time routine. My first circuit of

the apartment begins at the front door as usual. I peer through the peephole, and then check the locks. Then I test the windows, going clockwise, until I'm certain they're securely closed.

While brushing my teeth I realise I can't remember checking every single window lock, so I rinse my mouth out and start again. The same thought occurs as I fill up my water bottle, so I go back through it all another time. And once more, to be totally sure. Then I brush my teeth again.

I take two Panadol to quell the buzz in my head. I won't do harder medication, and some of the stuff Dr Shaw has given me in the past – Zoloft, Ativan, Valium – leaves me out of it. I can't stand that feeling. I need to be in control. Of some things, at least.

Buster watches me come and go from his side of the bed until after midnight, my head still buzzing, when I climb under the sheet and open my book. I can't concentrate, so I switch the lamp off.

Tonight I count down from 3242 by threes. That should be sufficient. I've reached 2906 when I'm plagued by the thought that I've left the oven on, despite not having used it tonight.

I get up and make my way out to the kitchen and switch the oven on and off, then do it again ten minutes later, thinking that I might have left it on while checking it.

Back in bed I start counting down again, Buster pressed against my side. As I drift off my last thought is to wonder how on earth I think I'll ever be ready to face the outside world, when I have so little control over the thoughts in my head.

And then the nightmare comes.

2.22 pm

Friday, 6th January

‘How old are you?’ Farrah asks.

‘Twenty-six.’

‘Yeah? You look younger. You must have to show your ID all the time when you go out.’

Farrah arrives that Friday afternoon with a tub of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream in some strange sweet-savoury flavour combination and a bulging tote bag. She says she’s *so* bored at home, and flops onto the sofa as if we are already firm friends. I’m pleased to see her. Buster apparently is too, as he jumps up and stretches out against her legs as she eats.

I shrug. ‘I don’t go out much.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘I don’t have many friends.’ It’s true, even if not the full story. ‘We moved to Sydney when I was seventeen, and I never went back to school. I guess I never had a chance to make any.’

Farrah jumps up and comes over to sit near me at the table. She’s scraped her hair back from her face and the resulting ponytail looks like a giant pom-pom. She wears denim shorts and a striped t-shirt in pastel colours I hadn’t realised were back in fashion.

‘I don’t have many friends either,’ she says, matter-of-fact. ‘Stupid bitchy girls at my fancy school. I hate it there, but Mum and Dad think it will provide me with a “good all-round

education”. They are so into learning. *Urgh.*’ She grimaces. ‘You know they make me go to Greek school every week? They don’t want me to forget my heritage.’

She finishes the ice cream, licking her spoon clean and dropping it into the empty container. Buster, who followed the ice cream and Farrah to the table, snuffles at her ankles so that she squeals and laughs, reaching down to pat him. He looks up at the empty container hopefully and Farrah holds it towards me in a question. I nod and she puts it on the floor. Buster pushes it around with his tongue, enjoying the potatochips-and-cherry combination, or whatever the hell it is.

‘So, you don’t get out much?’ she asks, wandering over to the window. ‘I would love to live by myself.’ She sighs. ‘I’d go to restaurants, clubs. I’d get a season pass to Taronga Zoo and get the ferry over to see the animals like, every second day.’

‘That does sound pretty good.’ I smile.

‘Well, so, why don’t you?’

Her gaze is so naive I answer her truthfully.

‘Honestly, I don’t tell many people this, but I have . . . issues.’ My heart beats a little faster.

‘Issues?’

‘Mental health issues.’

Farrah is unperturbed. ‘Depression? An eating disorder? We’ve learned heaps about mental health issues in PDHPE at school. One of the girls in my class has anorexia.’ She tilts her head. ‘Actually, two of them have eating disorders, I think. Lots of girls my age do,’ she confides.

‘No, it’s not an eating disorder. It’s anxiety, mostly. And PTSD. OCD.’

Farrah frowns. ‘I don’t know much about PTSD.’

‘Post-traumatic stress disorder. It can happen when you’ve been through something traumatic. I’m OK at home, most of

the time. I just don't get out much. And some things are kind of like, triggers.'

'Oh, sure. Triggers. I know what they are. Things that make you crazy.'

I nod.

'Like what?'

I wipe my palms on my pants.

'They'll sound silly.'

She looks at me questioningly.

'Mostly it's smells. Cigarette smoke and chlorine.' I pause, watching her reaction. 'Also, I don't eat red meat. Beef. Like steaks, that kind of thing. I can't be around it.'

Farrah's thoughtful. 'Huh. I guess they aren't so bad. Cigarettes are gross and red meat isn't great for the environment anyway. And chlorine, well, that's not an issue unless you like to swim.'

'I was very good at swimming once. Back when I was about your age.'

'Oh. That sucks, then.'

'It does.'

'Why are they your triggers?'

'I don't remember.' I shift in my seat. This is partly true.

Farrah comes back and sits at the table. She gives me a hopeful half-smile. 'Maybe I can help you get better. We could work through your issues together.' Her brows draw together. 'Are you eating well? Getting enough exercise? Just talking to a friend can help, you know.'

I almost laugh at her parroted school wellbeing checklist, and at the same time I'm touched. 'That's sweet, Farrah, but it's not that easy. I do have a psychiatrist, though I haven't been to see her for a while.'

‘A psychiatrist can be useful.’ She scrunches up her nose. ‘I see one too. One who specialises in children’s issues and . . . other stuff. My parents insisted.’

‘Oh.’ I don’t want to pry.

‘Because I’m gay.’

‘Oh.’

‘It’s not that they have a problem with it,’ she adds hurriedly, ‘they just want me to be comfortable in my own skin. I’ve tried to tell them I’m fine, but they are a bit helicopter-y, you know?’

‘Not really.’ I smile.

‘Anyway, my psych is great. Well, sometimes she’s a bit much. She tries out all these new terms on me, trying to see if I’m pansexual or non-binary or something. I’m just gay, you know? I like girls. I don’t have a *problem* with how I am.’

I nod.

‘Anyway,’ she changes the subject, ‘at least you have a cool apartment and a nice view. Do you have family to come visit you?’ She glances towards the photo of me and Theo. ‘Your brother?’

‘My brother is dead.’ My voice is brusque, and I continue before she can comment. ‘My aunt, Lucinda, comes every Monday night for dinner. She’s my only family.’

‘Do you work?’

‘I work from home. I write surveillance reports for Lucinda – she’s a private investigator.’

‘Cool! So you watch people doing dodgy shit?’

I’m a little shocked to hear her swear, which makes me annoyed at myself. Have I forgotten what it’s like to be fourteen? In some ways I still feel like I’m a teenager myself.

‘Only on video. I review the footage and read the notes the operatives make, then put everything into a template for the

client.’

‘That explains your desk and fancy computers.’ She points at the nook I’ve set up in an alcove between the kitchen and my bedroom. There’s a large desktop monitor there with a laptop beside it, plus a printer and a modem.

I don’t tell her that my computer is my only real lifeline to the outside world.

Farrah removes a packet of Twisties from her bag, opens it and offers me some. I demur.

‘Well, it sounds like a great job.’ She pats Buster with her Twistie-free hand. ‘And I know about OCD. That’s the handwashing thing, isn’t it? Being neat? And, like tapping and counting and stuff?’

‘Kind of. For me hand washing is not really a problem, though I do count and tap sometimes. The worst thing is that I have these . . . intrusive thoughts that stress me out.’

‘OK. Like bad thoughts?’ She licks Twisties powder from her hands. ‘Nightmares?’

‘Yes.’ That’s enough talk about me. ‘So, what do you do in your spare time? When you’re not at the bitchy school?’

‘Well, I like reading. And . . . I don’t know. I watch TV on my phone. The thing I most want to do is travel. You haven’t travelled anywhere, have you?’

‘No. I don’t even have a passport.’

‘I’ve got three more years of school, then I’m out of here. I’ve decided I’ll go to South America first.’

So much for Greece and France.

‘First stop: Peru. Then maybe Mexico. Or Costa Rica. I haven’t made my mind up yet.’

‘What about Chile?’

‘Yeah, there too. I’ll go *everywhere*.’

‘Sounds great.’ I can’t keep the envy from my voice.

‘You can’t help how you are, Rory,’ Farrah says gently. ‘It’s not your fault. Same way it’s not my fault for being gay. I like who I am, even if I’m different. Not perfect. Maybe you need to like who you are a little bit more.’

I wish Farrah was right about this. She isn’t. Being gay is how Farrah was born.

While I am merely a coward.

‘Rory?’ Her dark eyes catch mine.

‘Hmm?’

‘What caused your PTSD?’

I freeze, feel the vice clamping across my chest so I can’t breathe. I push out some words, focusing on my hands, which are gripping one another so tightly they’ve turned white. ‘I’d rather not talk about it.’

7.10 pm

Sunday, 8th January

Farrah comes over to watch the *MasterChef* Summer Series.

Her parents don't like her watching reality TV, even cooking programs, but she says what they don't know won't hurt them. It's nice to relax after spending most of the weekend working on Lucinda's app. I'd created a wireframe for the design then tested it, discovering a few problems as a result. It was a fiddly process but oddly satisfying, though I was glad to put it away and watch some mindless TV with Farrah. We laugh a lot, complaining about how the show spends too much time on the ubiquitous *journey* rather than the cooking, about how the contestants make way too many weird ice creams. I refrain from mentioning the cherry-chip monstrosity she brought over on Friday.

I'm squished onto the end of the sofa; Farrah and Buster are curled up together at the other end. I've made pizzas from scratch with Farrah helping roll out the dough and adding her own toppings, using so much pepperoni and cheese I thought the base might fall apart. She said it's because her mum makes her put spinach and mushroom on her pizzas and has banned salami, and that she was making up for it.

Halfway through the program there's the familiar, unmistakable screech then thud of one car hitting another, the sound coming right from the street below.

'Car crash!' Farrah says in a sing-song voice, leaping up.

Not a major one, I can tell, but we both move out to the balcony. The sun is low in the sky, making it difficult to see, and we peer down with our hands shading our eyes. Below us a taxi driver has pulled over, the rear bumper bar of his car dented. A silver BMW swings in behind him and the driver, a short slim man in a navy suit with silver hair that matches his car, climbs out. He walks over to the taxi with a rich-man strut. It's the man I saw in the lobby a week earlier, minus his disapproving wife. Tom Larsson. On his own he seems more powerful, as if she diminishes him somehow.

'Oh, he's angry. This'll be a good one.' Farrah grins, tucking a lock of curly hair behind her ear and leaning further over the railing. 'Got any popcorn?'

The men sweep their arms towards one another's vehicles, obviously each blaming the other for the accident.

'I wonder if he lives here. I don't know him,' Farrah muses.

'He's just moved in. He owns a dozen upmarket Italian restaurants here and in Victoria,' I tell her.

'Nice,' Farrah nods, looking impressed. 'Maybe he'll cater something at Christmas for the whole building.'

'Don't hold your breath. He's being sued by his staff for wage theft, so I doubt he's the generous type.'

'Ooh, nice gossip.' Farrah gives me a look. 'How'd you find out that?'

'Oh.' I'm annoyed to have spoken. 'I saw something about it online.' I don't tell her I spent a couple of hours reading up on Tom and June Larsson, that I know everything about them, from her alleged affair with his brother, to what posh schools their now-adult children attended.

'Look,' I say, pointing to a third man who climbs out of the front passenger seat of the taxi.

The man is tall, maybe thirty years old, with messy, sandy hair. He wears dark jeans, a checked shirt and green Cons. He

takes in the situation before approaching the men.

‘Ooh! The passenger is joining in. I wonder whose side he’ll take?’ Something about the man is . . . interesting. I catch myself staring.

‘He’s cute,’ Farrah says. ‘For a guy. An old guy.’ I feel a blush creep up my neck. She eyes me and smiles before looking back down at the drama.

The sandy-haired man strolls over to the men and starts talking. Grumpy Ian appears – he must have witnessed the commotion from the lobby. The sandy-haired man has a relaxed vibe about him that’s made more obvious by the agitation of the others. His words seem to do something, as within a couple of minutes both drivers return to their vehicles. The passenger stays and talks to Grumpy Ian.

When the drivers come back, gripping documents and phones, they shake hands with the sandy-haired man and, grudgingly, with each other. The sandy-haired passenger walks to the taxi and opens the back door, removing two stuffed duffel bags. He slings them over his shoulders and follows Ian towards the Panorama, leaving the other two men to exchange details.

‘Well, that guy’s a miracle worker.’ Farrah pushes back from the railing and stands up straight. ‘How’d he sort them out so quickly?’ she asks. ‘I wonder if he’s moving in?’

Buster jumps up, his paws reaching to her knees. She rubs his ears, telling him in a baby voice that he’s a good little boy.

I peer back down.

The sandy-haired man halts and lifts his head. It seems like he’s looking right at me and I freeze. My stomach drops. He lowers his gaze and walks inside and out of sight.

‘I wonder what floor he’ll be on,’ Farrah says. ‘Hopefully mine. My floor is *sooo* boring. Do you know the Van Ordens? The Liepeis? They’re all old. No one has any kids. I could do with someone a bit younger on my level.’

‘Don’t get your hopes up. And he’s not that young.’

‘Young enough! Anyway, it doesn’t matter what floor he’s on, I’ll find a way to see him. Steal another parcel, maybe.’

‘What?’

‘Oops!’ Farrah pulls an *uh-oh* face, then turns and walks inside. I follow. She faces me.

‘I’m sorry, Rory. I stole that parcel, the one I returned to you. It had been left down on the table in the lobby and I took it.’ She wrings her hands. ‘I was so bored, and really curious. I’d seen you around and thought that bringing you your parcel would be a good way to meet.’

Farrah makes her eyes pleading, like Buster used to after he weed on the floor.

‘I’m sorry. I wanted a friend, you know, and you look younger than twenty-six. The stuff I said about Mum and Peru and forgetting about it when it went under the bed, that was all true.’

Before I can determine how angry I am, we hear muffled laughter from outside my front door.

‘It can’t be . . . can it?’ Farrah’s eyes go very wide. ‘Is it him?’

At the same time we both run for the front door. Farrah gets there first. She puts her eye to the peephole. She leans close to me and stage whispers, ‘It is! Not only him. He’s with Grumpy Ian! And Ian’s *laughing!*’

I smile to hear Farrah call him Grumpy Ian like I do. She widens her eyes at me and I giggle. She stands aside and I step up to the peephole. Farrah’s right. Grumpy Ian is pointing through the open door of the apartment next to mine, the sandy-haired man nodding in response. Up close, through the distortions of the peephole, the man isn’t exactly handsome. His nose is a little too large, his eyebrows too thick. He’s unshaven, his stubble ginger and somewhat patchy. But there’s something contained about him. It’s as if he’s alone in the

world and he's alright with that. Like he's comfortable with himself.

He says something and Grumpy Ian laughs again, a wheezy sound.

'I've never heard Grumpy Ian laugh before,' I whisper, glancing at Farrah. 'That's that doctor's apartment. Dr Carey. The one who's never there. 304. He's moving in next to *me!*'

Farrah claps a hand over her mouth to hold in her giggles. I shush her and when I put my eye to the peephole again, the two men are looking our way.

'They've heard us!' I grab Farrah's wrist and we run back to the living area where we both burst into laughter, me still shushing her between fits of laughter.

'Oh, man. Anyone who can make Grumpy Ian laugh must be pretty funny,' Farrah says. She imitates the wheezy *hee-haa*. 'I wish the new guy was on my floor.' She flops onto the sofa again and sighs theatrically. 'You're not angry with me, are you? About the parcel thing?'

I realise I'm not. In fact, I'm having fun. I'm not thinking about Slouchy Ricky Gervais, or how many laps of the roof I'm compelled to walk, or people being beaten to death outside my window. It's been a long time since I've had fun. Simple fun. With another real, live person.

'Look, don't lie to me again, Farrah – but no, I'm not angry. I could do with a friend too. Even if she is only fourteen. And a thief.'

She claps her hands, gives Buster a squeeze hug he wriggles out of and chases him as he dances away, yapping.

I walk over to the kitchen and place my hands flat on the bench. I've made a friend. I really have. I suppress a smile as I think of us running like children down the hallway.

She'll be the next one killed, says the voice in my head. *Because of you.*

I flinch, my nerves suddenly taut.

Though I know – I *know* – I can't trust the voice, I have to be sure. I have to keep Farrah safe. I duck into the bathroom and run the tap while I count to 300 in sixes, tapping in time on the side of the basin.

'The show's finished,' Farrah calls. The sound of the television is disjointed, staccato, as she flicks between channels. 'You have Netflix, don't you? How do I switch it on? Let's watch something scary. The new season of *Stranger Things*?'

I take a breath and open the door. Farrah puts her feet on the coffee table, squealing as Buster jumps on the sofa and licks her face.

My earlier equanimity has vanished.

Why is Farrah still here? It's been over two hours. I want to put on my pyjamas and use my night-vision binoculars to look for the Powerful Owl again. I haven't seen it since that night on the rooftop. And maybe do an hour's stargazing before I start my bedtime ritual.

'Um, perhaps you should be getting home.' I clear my throat, speaking over the television. 'I've got some things to do before the morning. Sorry.'

'Oh, sure. No problem.' She presses a button and the television pauses on the still of a car on a deserted highway. I pretend to fiddle with the dishwasher – which still isn't working – as she gathers her things and walks over.

'Thanks for having me, Rory. Real-life drama as well as a cooking show. It's been fun.'

I look up and she's beaming at me. Some of my apprehension melts away. Not enough to want her to stay any longer, but some. My shoulders loosen and I smile back at her.

'It has.'

*

All is quiet at Dossers.

Above them, on top of the car park, the playing field is floodlit for the locals' regular Sunday-night soccer match, the whistles and the yells of the competitors piercing the tranquillity of the evening.

I dim the lights and set up the telescope, pointing it towards the full moon and peering through the eyepiece. As always, I'm in awe at the sight of earth's only natural satellite. Goosebumps break out over my arms as craters appear like shallow rockpools on its grey surface. I adjust the telescope to find Orion, the saucepan, one of the easiest constellations to identify, and set my eye back to the eyepiece. After examining the three obvious stars that make up Orion's Belt, I search for the others that form Orion's Sword and Head, then contemplate the billions of far-flung stars that blur together behind them, a milky glow in the sky. I settle my breath and let the stars – so distant, so untouched – calm me. After some time my thoughts wander to the new man on my floor.

So you like him, do you? It's not as if you'll do anything about it. You never leave this apartment, the voice digs at me.

I could run into him in the corridor. My left fingers tap a rhythm on the window. If I did, what would I say?

One, two, three. One, two, three.

My eye is caught by movement at Dossers. A shape steps out from under cover. It's a man. He's wearing dark tracksuit pants and a hoodie. With him are two of the Dossers, Skinny Santa and Bully Boy. I make a face. My least favourite Dossers. The man is heavysset, broad-shouldered. Muscular. Not a Dosser, that's for sure. He motions at the homeless men, the gesture tight and controlled. The men step backwards. The hair on the back of my neck lifts. Something is wrong.

I walk to the bench and snatch up my night-vision binoculars. When I come back, the man has vanished. Skinny Santa and Bully Boy are talking, their heads together. Skinny Santa waves an arm violently at Bully Boy, then turns and stomps back to his patch. Bully Boy stands still. He's staring at something, and I follow his gaze. It's the man. He's moved

down to the road, closer to the Panorama, and has halted there. From this angle his face is hidden by his hood.

Without warning, the man crosses the road and strides towards the Panorama. Part of me wants to rush out onto the balcony and see if he enters the building or continues further down the street towards Woolloomooloo or back up towards Surry Hills, but I'm frozen in place.

Unbidden and unexpectedly, the image of another man pops into my brain. Someone of a similar stature. Someone dangerous. Someone who I know from experience is more than capable of beating a homeless man to death.

A tremor runs through me. I banish it, push it down, bury it.

He's gone and he's never coming back, I remind myself.

You're safe.

I stand up, trying to shake off my disquiet, walking over to the photo of Theo and me. I pick it up. I'm about twelve in the shot, Theo ten, both of us skinny with unflattering haircuts and wide grins, our arms slung across each other's shoulders.

Theo has Dad's flat features but Mum's gentle eyes and long eyelashes. I didn't take up swimming until later that year, so I'm gangly, looking awkward in my changing body.

I remember that holiday so well. It was Easter, and we were at our grandparents' house. Mum had been better than normal at the time, bundling us into the station wagon and driving us the eight hours to her parents' imposing homestead. Gran and Gramps had kelpies and cows and chickens. Theo and I adored it there, getting muddy and collecting eggs for breakfast. Dad had pissed off camping somewhere with his mates. After we returned, I don't think Mum told him we'd ever been away.

I run my finger over the cool glass and smile at the chocolate smeared around our mouths. It's the only photo I have where Theo and I don't look wary – watchful. I realise

I'm only a couple of years younger in the picture than Farrah is now.

I put the photo back and lift my left hand, looking at my weather-beaten watch. I touch the screen lightly, a wave of sadness washing over me.

Why did you have to try and be a hero, Theo?

10.10 am

Wednesday, 11th January

Nearly two weeks have passed, and the police haven't been back to visit either me or the scene of the crime.

The tape that cordoned off Slouchy Ricky Gervais's patch lies tangled in the long grass. No other Dossers have taken over his area, and I wonder if they are superstitious, or perhaps fearful of another attack. As far as I'm aware, no one has been arrested for his murder.

Work is picking up as insurance firms return from their Christmas break, so after my usual morning routine and a quick vacuum and mop of the apartment, I sit at my desk and fire up my computer. The job request is for surveillance on a man named Justin Bailey. He's a sales rep from Melbourne whose boss suspects he's skiving off work when he's interstate meeting with clients. According to Lucinda's email, one of our most diligent investigators, Moshe Stern, found the guy drinking alone in a hotel bar in Chatswood when he should have been working. It's a good result for us. I type in the basics and get the footage cued up.

The first shot is of the outside of a mid-range hotel, taken to set the scene. There's a date stamp in the bottom left corner that tells me this video was captured two days earlier. The next shot is from a moving camera, at about knee height. I know Moshe's equipment – he's got an overnight bag with a built-in camera. The quality of the footage is excellent. I see the hotel door opening, then the lobby, which is indistinguishable from

a hundred other mid-range hotels. The video stops as the subject reaches the check-in counter.

Next, it cuts to the view from a table in the hotel bar, another bland modern space. It's dim, the bar half in darkness, even though the time stamp tells me it's the middle of the afternoon. There aren't many patrons, just a few men who appear to be watching horse-racing, rugby and soccer simultaneously on a wall featuring half a dozen screens. The beeping of pokies can be heard over their murmured conversations.

Then I see him.

A bulky figure. Tall. Huge, really. He is sitting at the bar, so I only see his back. He wears a white shirt and it's stretched tight. His neck is thick. He's powerful enough that I'm surprised he's a sales rep – he looks as if he would prefer a physical job. Beside him on the bar sits an almost-empty schooner of beer.

I stare at the screen. There's something about the man. Something familiar.

A tingle runs down my spine.

The man stands up. He finishes his beer in one swig and walks towards the exit, moving sideways past Moshe, who swivels his bag surreptitiously so that the camera follows him. The man's shoulders look even broader now, his hair wavy and dark, and slightly curly at the nape of his thick neck. Right as I wonder if we'll be able to identify him, he faces the camera. Just for a moment. He smiles.

I feel like I've been kicked in the guts.

It's him. The man from my nightmare.

It's my father.

*

I run to the bathroom and vomit into the toilet, then lean over it for a minute as I watch clean water run from the cistern. I breathe in and out, in and out. Buster whines from the other

side of the door. I tense and then relax my muscles, first my face then my arm and so on, one by one – another of Dr Shaw’s techniques. I focus on the numbers on my watch. 10.31. 10.32. 10.33. Slowly my panic subsides.

My father.

How?

I thought he was dead.

I *hoped* he was dead.

I have to look at the video again. I don’t want to, but I need to be sure. I dig my nails into my palms, using the pain to distract me. I count to 384 by threes, and I’m finally ready.

I wrench myself up and stumble back to my desk. With trembling hands, I manoeuvre the arrow to the approximate time my father’s face is shown onscreen, watching for several seconds before he appears. The flat nose. The thin lips.

My skin crawls. It has to be him. Yes, the lighting is quite dim, but the man is looking – smiling – down the camera lens. Straight at me.

*

I call Lucinda. I’m almost hysterical over the phone, so she calms me down as best she can and tells me she’ll come right away. I curl up on my bed, squeezing my eyes shut against the nightmare, my body clenched tight, repeating the same words over and over in my brain.

It’s not him. It’s not him.

It feels like hours – days – later when I hear Lucinda’s key in the lock and I unfurl myself, my muscles aching.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

‘Rory?’ she calls as she enters. ‘Rory, where are you?’

I jump up, blinking. Almost too late, I slip off my old watch and grab the Apple one before tidying my clothes and ducking out into the kitchen.

She's placing her bag on the bench as I fasten the watch. When she lifts her head she takes in my dishevelled state.

'What's happened?'

'It's Dad. I saw him.'

'I thought that's what you said on the phone. What do you mean, you saw him?'

'I just saw my father. On the Moshe Stern footage of Justin Bailey. Except it's not Justin Bailey, it's Dad!' My voice rises on the last word.

'What?' she says again and blinks. 'Eddie?'

'Yes, Eddie.'

She examines my face, then narrows her eyes. 'Show me.'

The footage is cued up. I play it for her, pausing on the shot of the man's face.

'Well, granted, it does look a little like Eddie.' She presses her lips together and shakes her head. 'It can't be him.'

'Why? We don't know for sure he's dead, do we?'

'No, we don't, that's true,' she says slowly. 'But this is – what was his name again? Justin Bailey. Remember?'

'Maybe it's not. Or maybe Dad has changed his name.'

She pinches the bridge of her nose and squeezes her eyes shut, then opens them, her jaw set. 'Play it again.'

I watch Lucinda as she watches the video, but her poker face has always been impressive. I have no idea if she agrees with me.

'No. It's not him.' She sounds decisive. 'The nose is different, I think. And this guy looks too young to be Eddie. I'm not convinced. Are there any better shots?'

'No.'

She turns from the screen to look at me.

‘Look, Rory, it’s not your dad. I told you, he left town before your mother died and hasn’t been heard from since. Why would he come back now? And why like this?’ She waves her hand towards the screen.

‘Maybe he wants money?’ I suggest.

‘If he’d wanted cash we would have heard from him when *I* started making money. Or when your mum died and you inherited the house. Not now. This is Justin Bailey, remember? A pharmaceutical rep whose boss is having him investigated. There’s nothing to suggest he’s actually your father.’

My certainty wavers. Lucinda’s right. Mum’s parents were graziers out west, and for sure Eddie would have shown up if he thought I’d get some of their money when she died. I didn’t, mind you. Mum never saw a dime from them after they died in a car crash, a year before she died herself. She was estranged from them by then. All I got was the money from the sale of our house, which wasn’t much, considering the state of the real estate market in Bowra Creek at the time and the size of our mortgage.

Mind you, our family was never properly poor, not by Bowra Creek standards. Dad managed the local pub, and we got by. Mum took in ironing to make some extra cash. We had money for school excursions and uniforms that fit us. But Dad was always searching for the next big thing.

‘Are you sure he hasn’t changed his name?’ I’m like a dog with a bone.

‘Well, no. I’m not *sure*,’ Lucinda says, sighing heavily. ‘Look, I’ll follow it up and contact the guy who hired us to find out more about Justin Bailey.’ She grabs the job request where it sits on my desk. ‘Adam Childs. I don’t remember any previous referrals from him. But I still don’t think it’s Eddie on the footage.’

‘You really believe he’s dead . . .?’

‘I do. I think he must have done something he shouldn’t have, or got on the wrong side of bad people. A man like that

doesn't just disappear.'

I'm not upset at the thought of my father being dead.

I only wish I believed it.

Lucinda takes my hand. 'You're safe, Rory,' she says, softly. 'You're safe in the Panorama. You know that, don't you?'

When I don't answer, she changes the subject.

'Heard anything more about the murdered Dossers?'

I drop her hand and walk into the kitchen. Lucinda follows, sitting on a stool opposite me. Outside, the gorgeous Sydney sunshine is almost offensive.

'No. Nothing. I don't think they've caught the killer yet.' I hesitate. 'Actually Lucinda, I saw a man over at Dossers a few nights ago who looked a bit like Dad.'

Lucinda cocks her head to one side, her eyes widening.

'You think Eddie was outside the Panorama? At Dossers?'

'He was wearing a hoodie so I didn't see his face. But it could have been. Don't you think —'

'Rory, I'm going to stop you there.' She examines my face, concerned by what she sees in it. 'You're not thinking straight. With all that's going on – the murder over the road and Moshe's footage, I think it's a good idea for you to go back to Dr Shaw.' She strokes my cheek with her thumb. 'Just a session or two to work through it?'

My first instinct is to object. *I'm fine*. Then I look down, notice my hands are shaking. Maybe I'm not fine. Maybe talking to a psychiatrist would be a good idea.

'You haven't talked to Dr Zhang yet about finding me a new shrink?'

'No, I'm sorry. I haven't had a chance. How about we stick with Dr Shaw, at least for now? She already knows the background so you won't need to spend time getting someone

new up to speed. I think that's probably important right now, don't you? If it doesn't work out we'll find someone else.'

Lucinda leans over and puts a hand on my arm. 'I'll set up an appointment as soon as I can and send Bertrand around with the car. I'll text you the time, OK?'

'Fine. But you'll follow up this Justin Bailey, won't you? And let me know what you find out?' I bite my lip.

A truck horn sounds, long and low, and I flinch.

'I'll follow up, don't you worry.' Lucinda is grim. 'I might even do some surveillance of my own.'

3.14 am

Thursday, 12th January

'Eddie?' Mum's voice wavers. 'Are you home?'

Theo and I exchange looks as we follow her inside. Suzie meows stridently, twining between our legs. Theo is stinky in his soccer clothes, smeared with mud. I'm no better, my skin prune-like and reeking of chlorine after swimming training. The house smells of charred meat and old cigarette smoke. My stomach roils.

'I'm going for a shower,' says Theo, turning at the end of the hall. The hairs on my arms stand up and I want to call him back, but when I open my mouth no sound comes out. I spin around to follow Mum. She's vanished. I run to the kitchen, my pulse racing. Dad's at the table, the puddle of watery red liquid on his plate all that's left of his steak. His fork and serrated knife lie discarded in it. Two beer cans sit on the table, one upright, one on its side.

The dregs have left a large wet patch on the green Christmas tablecloth that Mum's still using, though it's almost February. She's ahead of me now, walking across the kitchen, as slight as a child from behind. Her body quivers like a hummingbird.

'I could have cooked that for you,' Mum says in a too-cheerful voice that's at odds with the tightness in her body.

Dad stands and the room shrinks. He dumps his plate into the sink with a clatter that makes me flinch. His red face is greasy with steak fat, his wiry hair dishevelled. Several raw

steaks sit in a glistening pool of thick blood. A single fly buzzes around them.

'I'm off,' he says, his voice hard. 'Meeting Troy at the pub.'

'OK,' Mum says.

'You got a problem with that?'

Suzie leaps onto the bench and I grab her, putting my body between her and my father, who hates cats, and especially hates them in the kitchen.

'No, of course not, love. Have a good night.'

Dad harrumphs but lets it go. As he turns to leave Suzie wriggles from my arms and slinks over to the steaks on the sink, her tongue darting out to lick the topmost one.

'Fucking cat!' Before I can react, Dad crosses the kitchen, backhanding an oblivious Suzie. Her meow is cut off as she falls to the floor and lies motionless.

'Suzie!' I cry. Blood seeps from her mouth.

There is red behind my eyes and a pounding in my ears. I run at my father, teeth bared, scratching at his face, aiming for his eyes.

'You fucking prick!'

His curled lip is the last thing I see as his fist strikes my jaw and I fall backwards, my head smacking on the table as I pass out.

I jerk awake.

I roll over and put my legs on the floor, dropping my head to my knees as I fight the panic, Buster pressing his weight against my back.

Tonight the nightmare is even more vivid than usual. Once my heartbeat slows and I can think again, I realise why. My father's face looked different in the dream this time. More like

the face I saw on the video footage – the *alleged* Justin Bailey. A little more tanned, a bump on his nose – perhaps it had been broken in the years since I last saw him. Dad certainly knew how to push peoples’ buttons. It would be no surprise if someone broke it in a fistfight.

Why has my dream changed?

Does it mean something? Is Dad Justin Bailey?

Or am I going crazy?

*

It takes longer than usual for me to calm down. I lie back on the bed, hugging Buster to my side. This time I count down from 4509 by sevens. When my heart is beating normally, I rise and get dressed, put Buster’s leash on him and head up to the rooftop.

As I walk I think about my father. Of course, I googled Justin Bailey the minute Lucinda left the previous day. There was no mention of him on LinkedIn or Facebook. That was suspicious, but not all that uncommon. Some people, particularly older men, have a limited social media presence. If I had some other details, like his full name or the company he worked for, it might help me find him, but I didn’t want to ask Lucinda for that information.

Not yet.

*

By 5 am we’ve returned and I complete my routine. I wipe the bench and tidy the fridge, then at 6.30 am I creep out to put my rubbish in the chute. I check that the hallway is clear, lock the door and take my keys, even though the trip is barely two dozen paces. I’m almost back when I hear a door opening.

‘Hi there.’

I rein in a gasp, then spin around. It’s my new sandy-haired neighbour.

‘Oh God, sorry! I didn’t mean to startle you.’

I summon a shaky smile. ‘It’s fine. I’m fine.’

‘It seems I’ve moved in next door to you.’ He gestures at 304. ‘I’m Simon Taylor.’

‘Rory Campbell.’

‘Nice to meet you, Rory. It’s nice to know another early bird lives nearby.’ He’s dressed in shorts and a moth-eaten t-shirt. ‘I’m off for a run. My first in Australia, actually.’

I’d noticed his New Zealand accent, but ask anyway, ‘Where are you from?’

‘New Zealand. For my sins.’ He exaggerates his accent, smiling. Up close, he’s got crow’s feet that make him seem older, though he’s still attractive. ‘Auckland. Have you lived in the building long?’

‘Um, yes.’ I hesitate, then continue. ‘Seven years.’

‘Oh wow! So you’re one of those disgustingly youthful looking people who make us thirty-one-year-olds feel every bit of our age.’ He smiles with such blasé confidence that all I can do is stare. He gives me an appraising look and I almost cower. ‘Do you live with your family?’

I blink, my mouth opening and closing.

‘Or a partner?’

I’m saved from answering when the lift pings, then opens. Ian comes out, dragging a recycling bin behind him.

‘Ian.’ Simon swings his focus to Ian.

‘Simon.’ Grumpy Ian acknowledges him, even inclines his head towards me, no doubt so he doesn’t look like a dick in front of Simon. Then he smiles – genuinely smiles – something I have never seen him do, not even when sucking up to the head of the strata committee. He continues around to the garbage room and Simon turns back to me. I’ve moved a couple of steps away and am already opening my front door. He looks startled.

‘Well, it was nice to meet you, Rory.’

‘Nice to meet you too,’ I manage. I catch a glimpse of Simon watching me, a frown on his face, before I shut the door and he disappears from sight.

8.01 am

Friday, 13th January

There's a knock on my door.

I take a quick peek through the peephole. It's Amal, as expected. I unlock it.

'Hi, Amal.'

'Rory. Great to see you.' Amal grins. 'Got some real good stuff for you today.' He's pushing a trolley loaded with trays of food in recycled bags. I gesture him in and he manoeuvres it through to the kitchen, Buster at his heels.

I've spent the past couple of days stewing over the video of my father – or whoever it is. Lucinda hasn't got back to me with what the guy's boss said, and in the previous night's dream my father was again the 'new version' of himself. I haven't seen Simon again, thank God. I feel sick imagining what he thinks of me. No doubt he's joined the crazy-girl-in-apartment-303 club. After he left I'd folded enough paper cranes to fill a paper aviary.

The voice was right. I have no idea how to talk to a man.

My compulsions have been worse too, my bedtime ritual taking hours longer than usual. My eyes are gritty from lack of sleep, my nerves are frayed. In short, I'm a mess.

However, I'm happy to see Amal. He's been delivering my groceries since he got his P plates four years ago. I trust him enough that I've given him a fob to the car park. That way he

can drive his little delivery van inside the building and bring the trolley up in the lift.

Amal hoists my bags onto the benchtop and removes a paper bag from the topmost one. He opens it proudly, holding it towards me.

‘Get a load of these. Smell them,’ he says, with a lift of his head. I lean forward and peer in the bag, then grin and sniff deeply.

‘Are these home-grown?’

He nods. ‘Mum wanted you to have them.’

I pluck out a ripe tomato. They are a thousand times better than supermarket ones. I decide to make bruschetta for dinner, knowing that somewhere else in the delivery is a superb sourdough loaf and a bunch of fresh basil.

‘They smell so good! Thank her for me.’ Nadine, the owner of Woolloomooloo Gourmet Grocers, used to deliver my order herself, but several years back she asked me if I minded if her youngest son took over. I have a regular 8 am Friday delivery, and update my order online on Thursday mornings. I get everything from toilet paper to lobster tails from these guys.

Amal now sports stubble and a tattoo of his mother’s name on his bicep, but he’s polite and he respects my space. Nadine knows about my situation and still goes over and above for me, often adding something homemade or home-grown.

‘Ian’s in a funk,’ Amal says, withdrawing an apple from his pocket and munching it as I unpack the groceries. He usually hangs around so I can unpack and return the bags to him for the next week’s order. Buster sits motionless at his feet, watching the apple with greedy eyes. ‘The residents are ringing him every five minutes for updates about that dead Dosser guy.’

‘Ian doesn’t like the extra work,’ I say, ‘or talking to people.’ Then it occurs to me that Amal might know more

than I do, since he's not stuck inside all the time. 'Did you hear more about what happened?'

'Nah, not really. Just that the guy was harmless. Not a druggie or nothing. And that he was beaten up pretty bad, probably by a big bastard, I heard. Someone real nasty.'

My heart skips a beat. *A big bastard.*

Like my dad.

On autopilot, I pull out a packet of cling-wrapped duck breasts.

'They look great, hey?' Amal continues. 'We got a new supplier.'

'Yes, lovely.' Duck passes my no-red-meat test, though today the glimpse of dark flesh poking out from under the fatty skin makes bile rise in my throat. I might need to freeze them for later.

'Oh, see them pomegranates?' He points. 'So nice. Mum went down to the markets herself to choose them.' He pats the back pocket of his pants with a hand, withdrawing a folded piece of paper. 'Oh, and she gave me this recipe for you. Her fattoush. She doesn't usually give that to *anyone*. You should be flattered.'

I open the warm paper to find a hand-written recipe, the printing neat and sure. 'She's a treasure, your mum. I can't wait to try it. Tell her I'll do some of that shortbread she likes for you to take home next week.'

'Yes! My favourite.' Amal slaps his rock-hard stomach. 'Keep some for yourself, too, yeah? You need to put on some weight.' He blushes. 'Not that you don't look good.' He bends over and gives Buster his apple core, avoiding my eyes.

I know Amal has a crush on me. I'm different from the girls in high heels and makeup that he meets with his mates up at the Cross.

I'm inaccessible. Aloof. A challenge.

Amal thinks he can save me. That it's romantic. He doesn't realise I'm not really a damsel in distress – despite all evidence to the contrary.

*

After Amal leaves, I lock up properly and start work, anticipating the falafel plate he brought for lunch, my regular Friday treat. Less than an hour later Farrah knocks on my door. She has a notebook, pencil case and a textbook in her arms, and hands me two fifty-dollar notes with a smile.

'What's this?'

'It's your pay,' she says, clearly enjoying herself.

'I'm sorry?'

'I told Mum you were a maths tutor – a very good one – and she's paying you to tutor me.'

'I'm not a maths tutor,' I say, stupidly.

'I know that, and you know that, but Mum doesn't know that.' She comes inside, leaning down to pat Buster as she enters the living area. 'It's the best way to get over here on a regular basis. I told my parents I was struggling with maths and want to get a head start on this year's syllabus. And it just so happens that we have a renowned maths tutor living in our building.' She dumps her books on the bench and sits on the floor. Buster licks her face and she giggles.

'Won't they find out?'

'Nah.' She looks even more pleased with herself. 'I took ten minutes last night to make you a website.'

'A website?'

'Yes. ABC Maths Tutoring.' I'm impressed at her computer skills, though I probably shouldn't be. Half the people on my online forums are young, and they are very tech-savvy. It's usually the older people who struggle to learn new things.

'That name is wrong on so many levels, Farrah.'

She laughs again. ‘I know. Mum rolled her eyes when she read it. I think it sealed the deal. Only a maths whiz could be so bad at English. But now I can visit, and you’ll get paid.’

‘I can’t teach you maths. Geography, maybe. Or whatever they call cooking in schools these days.’

‘I know.’ Farrah shrugs. ‘I’m doing OK in maths, anyway. And I’ll do extra study on my own to make sure I’m keeping up. Think of it as Mum paying me to study on my own, while we get to spend time together.’

I sigh. ‘Fine. Sure.’

‘Great!’ She jumps up and sits on the kitchen bench, placing the money beside her. ‘So, what’s happening with you?’

‘Well, I’m working.’

‘Shit, sorry!’ She climbs down. ‘Should I go?’

I realise I don’t want her to go. I’m way ahead of my deadline, I can finish my reports over the weekend.

‘No, it’s all good.’ I pause. ‘I’ve got falafels for lunch if you want some? And some pita bread.’

‘I’d love that!’ She bends over and scratches Buster’s head. ‘How’s your week been?’

I hesitate and she straightens, sensing something in my silence. I can’t mention my meeting with Simon, that’s too embarrassing, but I wonder if I should tell her about my dad. Is that the sort of thing you talk about with a friend? Even if she’s a fourteen-year-old thief you’re supposed to be tutoring in maths?

‘Actually, something did happen. A couple of days ago.’

She forgets about Buster, watching me with bright eyes. ‘Oh? That sounds bad. What is it?’

I pace back and forth in the small kitchen space as I fill her in about seeing my father on the surveillance footage, and how it might have been him across the road a few nights earlier.

About how I believe he is more than capable of doing something like what happened to Slouchy Ricky Gervais. I don't tell her about my dream or that my compulsions are returning. The first is too personal, the second too humiliating.

'Wow. That's wild.' She's barely moved, absorbed by my story. 'He's a bad guy then, your dad?'

'Yes. The worst.'

'That sucks.'

Excitement wars with pity in her eyes. I remember how invincible some of my friends seemed to feel at fourteen.

'And you think he's come back to find you? Why wouldn't he buzz you on the intercom? Or bust the door down if he's after you so bad?'

'I'm not listed. Lucinda made sure I'd be hard to find. I mean, she thinks Dad's dead, but she also says it's better to be safe than sorry.'

'But Rory.' Farrah hesitates, then continues. 'If your father killed that Dosser – if you saw him over there the other day, he most definitely knows where you live.'

I nod. I've already thought of that.

And it scares the shit out of me.

6.34 pm

Saturday, 14th January

I'm leaning over the dishwasher, a bottle of white vinegar in my hand, when I hear the knock.

It's not Amal or Farrah, I can tell that much, and I'm certainly not expecting anyone. I put the vinegar on the bench beside my toolbox and walk down the hallway, creeping up on the peephole like it might be dangerous.

Shit, it's Simon.

After our meeting the other day it's a shock to see him at my door. He's dressed in neat jeans and a white shirt, standing with his thumbs in his jeans pockets. He's attempted to tame his sandy hair, which has given him an endearingly childish look. He knocks again and rocks back on his heels, looking relaxed. Against my better judgement, I open the door.

'Rory! I'm so glad you're home.'

Despite the sick nervous feeling in my stomach, I can't help but notice he smells amazing. A fresh aftershave smell.

'Yes.'

'Look, I know this is a little last minute, but I'm in dire need of sustenance and I wondered if you might like to join me for dinner?'

I shrink against the door frame. 'Uh . . .' He sees something in my face but continues unfazed.

‘It’s just that I don’t know anywhere good, and I thought perhaps you might? Maybe we could get pizza or something, and you could tell me more about the neighbourhood.’

‘Uh,’ I say again, gesturing to my tracksuit pants and sweatshirt. ‘I’m kind of busy. My dishwasher is busted and I’m trying to fix it.’

‘A handywoman.’ He makes an impressed face. ‘I’m afraid I’m hopeless at anything like that. Unless you need a clarinet fixed. Or some other kind of woodwind instrument. I’m a classical musician,’ he clarifies. ‘I’ve just started with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.’

‘Oh right.’ I know I should nod or smile or act in some way normal but though he seems to calm everyone else in the universe, he is having the opposite effect on me.

‘We could do takeaway, if you prefer? Your place or mine?’ He takes a step forward and I panic, stepping back.

Simon stops suddenly. His face changes and he raises his hands with his palms towards me.

‘Look, I’m sorry. I’m being pushy. I’ll get out of your hair. Enjoy your evening, Rory.’

He backs away. Part of me wants to call out, to tell him to come back, but I let him go.

10.26 am

Monday, 16th January

I hover at the window in my good pants and a blouse, waiting for Bert to arrive.

I've kept even quieter than usual all weekend, watching the Dossers and looking out for my father with binoculars through a small gap in my blinds like I'm a private investigator myself, but it's been uneventful. Long Socks spent the weekend pottering around his cage. A mobile soup kitchen arrived last night and he ventured out to eat, standing alone while the others chatted in groups or talked to the volunteers. Afterwards, he took a hot chocolate back to his cage and lay down with his book, reading by torchlight for a short while before sleeping.

There was no sign of my father.

Lucinda called on Saturday night after Simon left to say the email she sent to Justin Bailey's boss went unanswered, and admitted she didn't have a phone number for him.

'I'm on it,' she says reassuringly. 'I'm not a private investigator for nothing, Rory, I'll find out what's going on. Also, I've made you an appointment with Dr Shaw for Monday. I'll come for dinner afterwards and we can talk about it, alright?'

And of course, Simon's been in my thoughts.

Despite the fact we've now had *two* extremely awkward meetings, I can't help daydreaming about him. I imagine

asking him over for dinner at my apartment, setting the table with the fancy linen napkins that have never been used by anyone other than Lucinda and me. We'd eat oysters *au naturel* or a saffron risotto, or – no – maybe something more playful, like a cheese fondue. We'd hold hands and he'd point out the constellations, and I'd pretend not to know them already.

And then . . . nothing. My fantasy ends there. Perhaps, if I was a different person, I'd lead him to my bed, but my thoughts don't extend to that, not even in fantasy.

In some ways I'm still a seventeen-year-old girl.

*

So now it's Monday and I jiggle my keys, transferring my bag from one shoulder to the other. I've been fussing all morning, rearranging my books and dusting the furniture. I managed ten minutes on my meditation app and skimmed a few of my regular online OCD forums. Those forums are a lifesaver, and I usually have something to add to the conversation.

But today, when I sit down and see that flashing cursor onscreen, I can't do it. I offer nothing about my own situation, I don't ask for help or advice. I don't know what to say.

A noisy miner shrieks as it soars past the window. 'Shit!' I mutter, dropping my keys.

The going-outside nerves.

It's not that I *can't* go out, particularly if I have someone like Bert to stop right at the door and drive me where I'm going. I just don't enjoy it. My fear of leaving the building reminds me of my mother, adding an additional level of shame to the whole procedure. By the end Mum was so scared of leaving the house that I did all our grocery shopping – even collected the mail from the end of the driveway.

I don't want to be like Mum. She was an even bigger coward than me.

I exhale and pick up my keys. Perhaps Dr Shaw can help me. I remind myself that there is nothing shameful about seeing a psychiatrist. And I believe that. I do.

Still, I am ashamed of me, for so many reasons.

I peer down at the front of the building in time to see a black four-wheel drive draw into the waiting bay beside the driveway leading down to the car park. Bert is punctual to the minute. Buster opens one eye as I pass him on the way to the front door. As my companion animal, he comes most places with me, but not to see Dr Shaw. Dr Shaw is even more allergic to dogs than Farrah's dad. I suppose it doesn't hurt him to stay home alone occasionally. He probably enjoys the peace and quiet.

I double check the locks and use the lift, determined to be on my most psychiatrist-pleasing behaviour from the outset today.

In the lobby, Ron's behind the desk, leaning across a younger, bigger man who sits facing the computer, and he straightens with a groan as I appear.

'Rory! I thought that was Bert outside. Will you be gone for long today?'

'Hi Ron. No, off to an appointment. I'll be a couple of hours.'

'Wonderful. See you when you get back.' The man shifts in his chair. 'Oh, Rory, this is Blayde, our new security guard – my replacement. Rory's the young lady I was telling you about who lives in apartment 303. The one with the assistance dog.'

I nod at Blayde. He has the shoulders of a bodybuilder, dwarfing Ron, who looks his age beside the new guy. Blayde's jaw is chiselled, and his lips are full. He's handsome in a beefy way, though older than I expected, over thirty, with light brown hair cut short.

'Like a guide dog?' he asks, his voice surprisingly high. 'Is he big?'

Ron laughs. ‘Buster? No, he’s a gorgeous little thing, isn’t he, Rory?’

I nod again. ‘Better go.’

I walk off, then turn around.

‘Oh, Ron.’ I pause. *‘Belize.’*

He squeezes his eyes shut. ‘Ah shit. I know this. It’s not Belize City, is it? Starts with B, I think . . .’ I just smile. ‘Bel-something? I know. Belmopan!’

‘Good work!’ I laugh, then catch Blayde’s eye. He’s staring at me, his gaze probing. Unsettled, I wave to Ron and hightail it towards the exit.

‘Now, where were we?’ Ron continues. ‘Ah yes. Security cameras. Cameras four and five cover the loading docks and car park . . .’

Outside, I clamber into the back seat of the four-wheel drive, slamming the door, my shoulders slumping as I lock it.

‘You alright, Rory?’ Bert asks. I haven’t seen him since he took me to a dental appointment several months earlier. He looks tanned, his hair a little thinner.

‘Fine thanks, Bert. You been doing some sailing?’

‘Yeah. I get out there most weekends.’

‘Still racing?’

‘Always.’

I nod. Lucinda told me Bert competed at the Olympics a long time ago. Or was it the Commonwealth Games?

‘Over to Dr Shaw in North Sydney?’

‘Yes, please.’

I don’t know why he asks me, as Lucinda always gives him instructions. He pulls out, drives under the train line then merges with traffic heading north through the Harbour Tunnel. Bert has the radio tuned to some smooth classic oldies station and we are silent while a Savage Garden song plays. I stare at

the back of his head. I've known him for years, ever since Lucinda decided it would be handy to have a driver on call. He drives her around too, usually bringing her to dinner on Mondays and waiting in the car park while we eat.

I've tried to invite him to come in for dinner, as it feels uncomfortably servant-like having him wait in the car. He always refuses, though I think sometimes he goes up to the lobby, and Ian or Ron make him a cuppa and talk sport at the front desk. And I have to admit, though I've asked him to come for dinner, if he accepted I'm not sure what I'd do. Lucinda and Bert have a rapport, but Bert and I don't. Not really.

Bert is older, maybe fifty-five or sixty. Despite our shared history and hours spent together in this car, I know little about him, other than that he loves to sail – he and Lucinda met at a yacht club event – and that he's never been married or had kids. He's as wiry as Lucinda and fit for his age. Bert keeps to himself and shows little interest in me bar the professional, but I don't hold that against him. Driving me around is his job, nothing more.

We burst from the tunnel into the Sydney sunlight, several lanes of highway stretching ahead. Bert veers left and negotiates the streets of North Sydney. He stops in front of a stationery supplies store and I thank him and climb out, walking over to a neat royal blue door to one side of the store. There are several plaques near it for the offices above. The last one looks to have been added as an afterthought, the space between it and the others wrong, the font a little different. It reads *Dr Chelsea Shaw, Psychiatrist. By Appointment Only*. I press the buzzer marked '6'.

There is a click and I push the door open, turning to give the waiting Bert a wave. He'll come back in an hour, smelling of coffee, usually with a takeaway latte for me, which I appreciate. So maybe we have a rapport of sorts after all.

*

I climb the steep stairs to the first floor, both comforted and unnerved by the familiar smell of a pine-scented air freshener from the shared toilet at the back of the building. I feel like one of Pavlov's dogs.

I lift my knuckles to the door. Before I can rap on it, it opens.

'Rory, how lovely to see you! Come in.'

'Hi, Dr Shaw.'

My psychiatrist holds the door open and then locks it behind me. She doesn't have a receptionist, operating as a one-woman show. According to Lucinda, Dr Chelsea Shaw was once a big deal in the psychiatry world. At one point she was one of the leading trauma psychiatrists in the city. Now in her forties, she works only a couple of days a week, picking and choosing her patients, most of whom have been seeing her for years. Many of them are even more troubled than I am, apparently.

Dr Shaw herself is a marvel. She's been Botoxed to the level I think of as 'constantly surprised'. Fillers in her cheeks and collagen lip injections have given her that generic look that women of a certain age have after a lot of work. Sometimes, given her appearance, I wonder if she has her own issues she should be seeing someone for. Then again, who am I to judge? Lucinda said Dr Shaw's new, third husband is fifteen years her junior, a catalogue model. As she smiles at me I see she's noticeably different from the last time I saw her, and I feel a strange pang of pity.

She leads me into a high-ceilinged room with attractive bay windows and a couple of sofas facing one another. I slip into my customary seat as if I've never been away, while she takes a seat in a chair to one side of me, a coffee table in the centre of the space. After a few pleasantries, Dr Shaw picks up a notepad and an expensive-looking pen that she taps on her pillowy upper lip before speaking. Something about the familiar gesture relaxes me.

‘So, Rory, how have you been? It sounds like you’ve had a rough time lately. Your aunt mentioned there was a murder near your apartment. A homeless man. That must have been terribly upsetting.’

‘Yes. It was Slouchy Ricky Gervais. Though I was relieved it wasn’t Long Socks. Does that make me a bad person?’ A look of confusion flits across Dr Shaw’s face and I remind her about the made-up names I have for the Dossers. We talk about the murder and the police visit.

‘I had this urge . . .’ I force the words out, looking out the window and focusing on a rapidly dispersing contrail in the otherwise clear blue sky, ‘ . . . to break the detective’s jaw. Smash it.’

‘I see. And where do you think that rage is coming from, Rory?’ she responds, no censure in her voice.

‘I don’t know.’ I’m almost whispering. ‘I worry that I’m a dangerous person. Like my father. That I might snap and hurt someone.’

Dr Shaw doesn’t answer immediately and I keep my eyes averted.

‘That must be terrifying.’ She says it in such a kind voice that I look over at her.

‘It is.’ A little of the weight I’m carrying lifts from me at having told someone.

‘Do you know what I think, Rory?’ She adjusts her skirt and leans forward a little. ‘I think it’s fear. I think you’re scared. That’s all. And that’s natural. It’s normal to be fearful and angry after something like this has happened. It’s normal to feel concerned about the wellbeing of a man you feel close to, even if you don’t know him personally. The world out there can be a scary place.’ She smiles. ‘Is anything else upsetting you?’

‘Yes. I guess Lucinda told you about the man on the videotape? The man who looks like my father?’

Dr Shaw frowns, or at least that's what I think she's trying to do, as her face changes very little. 'She did, yes.'

'Lucinda says it's not him.' I picture Justin Bailey. 'I'm not so sure. It really looks like him. The way he smiled at me . . .' I shiver.

'OK. And what would it mean to you if this man turned out to be your father?'

I don't have to think. 'I'd be terrified.' I go to touch my digital watch, then remember I'm wearing my Apple one. For some reason I've never told Dr Shaw about the old watch and how it comforts me. It's the one thing I've kept just for me.

'Why is that?'

'After what he did . . .'

Dr Shaw looks at me, then writes in her notepad. I glance down, realise I've picked at the cuticle of my thumb with my forefinger. Blood seeps from the tear. I surreptitiously put it in my mouth and suck the blood away while Dr Shaw is scribbling her notes, then drop my hands to my lap, pressing my other thumb to the wound to stem the bleeding.

'I thought I saw my father over at the Dossers' camp too. Lucinda thinks I was mistaken.'

'I see.' She writes again in her notepad then focuses her full attention back on me. 'Rory, is it possible that your fears for Long Socks and that knowing someone was killed right outside your building have affected you more than you realise? Perhaps it's brought old fears to the surface.'

'I guess.' My thumb is throbbing where I tore the skin open. I press harder. 'Yes, perhaps you're right.'

She leaves it at that. 'Are you sleeping?'

'Less than usual.'

'Feeling anxious? Sad?'

'Worried, yes, as usual. Well, worse than usual. I'm not particularly sad, though. I made a friend.'

‘That’s wonderful.’

I tell her about Farrah. Dr Shaw makes a note, and I check my thumb. The bleeding has stopped.

She looks up. ‘So it’s just those intrusive thoughts we need to get under control. As much as we can.’

I recall again how I wanted to hurt Raco. How I’d been scared to touch Buster. ‘Yes.’

‘OK. Well, how about we schedule some more sessions for you. Maybe once a week to start? Just until we make sure you’ve come to terms with what’s going on in your life right now.’

‘Yes, that sounds good.’

‘And medication? How do we feel about that?’ It annoys me when she uses ‘we’ instead of ‘you’. Dr Shaw’s all well and good, but I’m not on her team. We aren’t a ‘we’.

‘I don’t want medication. Everything I’ve tried makes me groggy.’

‘If you’re sure . . .’ Her brows draw together. ‘Keep a close eye on those intrusive thoughts, Rory. You know how insidious they can be. You must contact me if you feel you need something to help with them, alright?’

‘Sure.’

‘It’s nothing you don’t know, but try to keep in mind that giving in to your compulsions will only give you short-term relief. The rituals seem to help at the time, but you’ll still feel untethered afterwards.’

Swivelling in her chair, she puts down the pen. ‘And Rory,’ she adds, holding my gaze, ‘there is no shame in being scared. There is certainly no need to rush this process. Staying right where you are and being comfortable and happy in your own small world – and if you have a new friend it sounds like that’s a positive step in that direction – isn’t shameful. Try to be mindful of the things that bring you joy.’

I think of how I laughed with Farrah the other night. Of my aunt, with her gifts and cheesecake, and gazing at the stars, and seeing the Powerful Owl. I feel myself relax.

‘Thanks, Dr Shaw.’

I have so much to be grateful for. Perhaps living a small life suits me.

*

When Bert drops me back at the Panorama I feel a new lightness inside – even the voice has quietened. Lucinda was right to suggest I see Dr Shaw. The stress of what happened to Slouchy Ricky Gervais is making me see things that aren’t there. The man on the video is Justin Bailey, not my father. And the man at Dossers could have been anyone. As I climb out of the car I tell Bert I’ll see him at the same time next week and go inside.

Grumpy Ian is at the front desk now, staring sullenly at the computer, his straw-coloured hair standing up on one side as if he’s been rubbing it. ‘What was Ron thinking? We can’t go changing the codes —’ He lifts his head, then, on seeing me, he nods and resumes his angry scrutiny of the screen.

Ian’s nice enough to those he deems important – residents on higher floors with bigger apartments, for example, or people on the strata committee – but barely acknowledges the rest of us, like Farrah and me.

As I make my way to the lift, Ron and Blayde enter the lobby, coming from the car park. Blayde towers over Ron. There is something primitive about his bulk; about the way he carries himself. As the lift closes he catches my eye and the corner of his mouth twitches. Is he laughing at me? I avert my gaze. Now I’m even more annoyed at Ron for leaving. I can’t imagine asking Blayde to take Long Socks my leftovers or him bringing me a slice of his wife’s pavlova at Christmas.

By the time I get off on my floor I’m almost as grumpy as Ian.

I type Blayde Porter in the search bar of my browser. He's been a finalist in several bodybuilding competitions, looking extremely tanned and veiny. On Facebook I see he's listed as working at a hardcore gym in the eastern suburbs, presumably his last job. Most of his posts are semi-naked post-workout shots taken in dimly lit bathrooms, or of cheat meals and protein shakes. I find a couple of old photos of him as a bouncer at a club in the Cross but there's not much else. It seems the gym is Blayde's life. I wonder why he decided to apply for a job at the Panorama. We must seem pretty boring compared to the fit young things he'd find at a gym. Perhaps the pay is better.

I finish my report, scrub the shower recess and scum from the glass screen, then spend the rest of the afternoon preparing a gruyere, onion and sour cream tart for my dinner with Lucinda in the evening. Kneading the pastry, chopping and sauteing onions, grating cheese – time passes pleasantly and I look forward to chatting with my aunt, to tell her how well the session went with Dr Shaw. She'll be pleased.

Lucinda has barely dumped her bag on the table before she's updating me about the video.

'Good news, Rory,' she starts, perching herself on a barstool. She waves her arm around and I notice she's wearing a silver tennis bracelet. *That's new.*

'I had an email from Justin Bailey's boss and he confirmed everything. Justin Bailey is definitely not Eddie. He doesn't have a social media presence, but Adam assures me he's legit. He has a wife and two kids and lives in Coburg in Melbourne. So, there's no need for you to worry.'

'OK,' I say, breathing out. 'Thanks, Lucinda.'

I pause, tea towel in my hand, pleased, and a little surprised to find that even after what I'd decided in Dr Shaw's office, there's still a small part of me convinced that I was right. My eyes fall to my wrist, again expecting to see the digital watch. It's not there and I drop my arm, feeling tense.

‘I can send you the details if you want to check for yourself . . .?’

‘No, no. That’s all good. I’m pleased to hear it’s not Dad.’

‘Yes, of course. This was a scare for you, I know.’ She motions for my hand with hers across the benchtop and I grasp it. It is cool and callused from yachting and golf.

‘I love you, Rory. Everything is going to be fine. You’ll see.’

I nod. ‘Of course.’ I point to her bracelet. ‘New?’

‘Yes.’ She raises her arm, holding it this way and that, then gives an appreciative sigh.

‘From Alex?’

‘No, it was a gift to me, from me. Women are allowed to buy themselves jewellery, Rory.’ Lucinda grimaces at me good-naturedly. ‘Do you like it? It’s Cartier. Not cheap, but it’s so pretty.’ She lifts her eyebrows. ‘I could get you one.’

‘No, that’s not necessary, Luce. It’s lovely though. Perhaps it will entice Alex to admire your slim wrists,’ I say, teasing her.

She laughs.

I open the dishwasher and dump some cutlery inside.

‘You fixed it?’ Lucinda raises her eyebrows.

‘Yeah. Vinegar worked. It turns out there was a blockage.’

‘Well done! I’ll be calling you next time I have an appliance go on the blink. Cheaper than getting a repairman in.’

‘It’s amazing what you can learn from YouTube,’ I say, pouring her a glass of wine, my mind returning to my father’s face on that footage.

I want to be over it. I want to let it go.

But I’m not sure I can.

5.18 am

Wednesday, 18th January

I'm in a good mood when I arrive back at my apartment with Buster after our walk.

Last night, for the first time in ages, I didn't have the nightmare. I sleep until 4 am, which is unheard of for me. I wake almost euphoric, knowing that Dr Shaw was right, and that I can make a life for myself in the building. A safe life. A happy life.

I haven't tapped my foot or counted backwards from anything since I woke up. I resolve to make ricotta pancakes for breakfast as a special treat.

*

Simon is closing his door as I step out of the lift.

'We've got to stop meeting like this.' He is again wearing running clothes. His hair is rumpled from sleep and he looks soft and warm, as if he just climbed out of bed. I want to run to my apartment and hide, but I have an equally strong urge to reach out and run my fingers along his arm.

'Did you have a concert last night?' I manage to ask. 'You're up early again.'

'No, just rehearsals yesterday. I'm fresh as a daisy.' He yawns and I suppress a smile. He blinks at Buster. 'Who's this little guy?'

'This is Buster.'

‘Hey, Buster.’ Simon drops to his haunches and Buster jumps at him, trying to lick his face.

‘Buster, sit!’ I say, annoyed that he’s misbehaving.

‘He’s fine. I miss having a pet.’ Buster licks Simon’s chin. ‘I didn’t think they were allowed in this building.’

‘Buster’s my assistance dog,’ I say, not explaining how he assists me.

Simon gently sets Buster’s paws on the ground and stands up.

‘Look Rory, I wanted to apologise for turning up unannounced on Saturday night. That wasn’t cool.’

I shrug.

‘No, I mean it. Sometimes I stick my nose a little too far into other people’s business. I forget not everyone is as comfortable with strangers as I am.’ He seems to genuinely get that I was upset, and accepts he was wrong. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I live on my own,’ I blurt out.

‘What?’ His brow furrows.

‘Last week you asked me if I lived with family, or if I have a partner. The answer is neither. I live on my own.’ Only once I’ve said it does it occur to me to be more circumspect. Simon could be a mass murderer for all I know. Nevertheless, I blather on, my voice scratchy and my mouth dry.

‘You’re probably wondering how I afford it. It’s because my aunt bought the place for me years ago. And it’s tiny, the smallest apartment in the building. A one-bedder.’

He gives me a crooked smile and my heart does a little flip in my chest.

‘It really is a lovely apartment building. Very fancy. The gym is amazing.’ He draws the word out. ‘I haven’t seen the pool yet, but I’ve heard it’s heated and good for swimming laps in?’

I nod, though I've only ever seen photos of it. 'I could never afford something like this on a musician's wage. The apartment I'm staying in belongs to an old friend, Will – Will Carey. Have you met him?'

I tell him I haven't. I don't tell him I've seen Will Carey through my peephole once or twice and that I've researched him, discovering he's a surgeon from Auckland with five kids and three ex-wives.

'I don't think he's come over very often. He always threatens to spend summers in Australia but you know what surgeons are like – they never take holidays. Or if they do they run a marathon in some far-flung corner of the world. Anyway, he offered it to me for as long as I need it. I'd planned to find my own place in time, though now I'm here he'll have to physically kick me out! The view's incredible, and it's a short walk down to the Opera House for work.'

He grins, and shakes his head as if in wonder at his good luck. 'I never thought I'd get to say that.'

'That is pretty cool.' Buster is resting at my feet now, and I feel my shoulders loosen. 'Are you enjoying it?'

'I only just started, but yes, so far it's great. I needed a change. What better change is there than a new job and a new country, hey?'

'And you play the clarinet?'

'Yep. Not exactly the coolest instrument, I'm afraid. Us clarinetists are pretty nerdy. Not like the saxophonists, or —' my stomach drops at the way he lifts one eyebrow, 'the French horn players. Those guys are next-level sexy.' I let out a small laugh.

'Sorry, I'm monopolising the conversation. I do that when I'm nervous.'

He doesn't look nervous, but the thought that he might be makes me feel a little more relaxed. 'How about you? Do you like classical music? I could get you tickets some time. We've got concerts coming up.'

‘Oh, I’m sorry. I’m not overly familiar with classical music.’

‘What do you usually listen to?’

‘Um, well I like ’80s stuff. Some ’70s,’ I say.

God, you’re unsophisticated, says the voice. *So embarrassing.*

‘Old school. I get it.’ He grins. He has a gap between his front teeth that makes his wide smile goofy. ‘Nice.’

There’s a moment of silence.

‘You were asking about pizzas,’ I find myself saying. ‘Try Rosina’s. They’re old fashioned but pretty amazing. The pepperoni is my favourite.’

‘Pizza at Rosina’s,’ he says, as if to imprint it in his memory and I nod agreement. ‘Thank you, Rory. And if you need anything – a cup of sugar, or a clarinet solo – please come and find me.’

Suddenly, a fantasy pops into my head. I picture us holding hands, looking at the stars from my window. Buster dancing around our feet as I feed Simon an oyster.

The feel of his lips on mine.

‘I’d better go,’ I say. I’m sure that I’m blushing.

‘Of course.’

Simon smiles and presses the lift button as I open my door. When I turn back he gives me a friendly wave. I feel as if I might float away. This is what Dr Shaw means. *A good life.* This is how it could be. I might learn to keep my compulsions, my nasty thoughts, to myself. I could have Farrah as a friend and perhaps – just perhaps – even have a relationship with a man. The thought makes my cheeks flush red again.

*

I’m halfway to the living room when I smell it.

Cigarette smoke.

In my apartment.

Someone has been in here.

My father.

I open my mouth and scream. And scream.

*

Somewhere in the back of my mind I'm aware I'm screaming, but I can't seem to stop.

The smell of the cigarette grows stronger until it's in my mouth, in my eyes. I gag, falling to the floor, trying to melt into the ground. My scream becomes a whimper as I press my face into the carpet, the fibres rough against my teeth. My eyes are squeezed shut. Buster sniffs around each room of the apartment, checking that everything's safe, then gives a satisfied yap and comes over to nuzzle his fluffy face into the back of my neck.

'Rory! Are you alright?'

Simon's voice comes as if from very far away. The sound of whooshing in my head, like a tornado, is louder. I need to count but I can't even think of a number to start with.

'Rory!'

I hear him thumping on the door. I can't breathe.

'Rory!' Simon's voice is hoarse, muffled.

I turn my head, pressing my cheek into the floor. I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

'Rory!' The fear in his voice rouses me. Not much. Just a little. I take a breath, then concentrate on each limb one by one.

Left, right, left. Breathe. Left, right, left. Breathe.

I repeat it over and over until I can come up on all fours. I start crawling down the hall. Simon continues to say my name. I hear another voice now too. On jelly legs I rise, my hands clawing their way up the door to the handle, then using it to

lever me all the way up. I open the door, almost falling backwards. Buster ducks past me and runs circles around Simon's legs, urging him to come in and help.

'Rory!' Simon grabs my arm and I stumble into his chest. His t-shirt is warm and he smells of sleep and coffee. It's too much. I push him away, bending over and letting my head hang between my knees, trying to take a full breath. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

I realise Ian is there when he says something in a low voice. I catch a few words – *crazy*, *weird* and *aunt* – before I can lift my head. 'Get Farrah. Please. 403.'

'What?'

'Farrah from 403.'

'You don't want me to . . .?' Simon points inside.

'I need Farrah.' For some reason she's the first person I think of, even before Lucinda.

He turns to Ian. 'Please?' Ian glances at me then nods and presses the lift button.

Simon helps me sit with my back to the wall, then crouches beside me.

'Breathe, Rory,' he says. 'It's going to be alright.'

I focus on the peace lily in the planter on the opposite wall, directing my gaze to each leaf, one by one.

'What is it?' he asks. 'What happened?'

'It smells of cigarette smoke in my apartment. Someone's been in there. They might still be there.'

'I'll go in and check.' He moves to stand. I put my hand on his arm.

'No, don't leave me. Wait for Farrah. Please.'

The lift dings again. I hear her before I see her. Farrah's talking to Ian, or judging by her tone, interrogating him. Then her face is in front of mine. Her wild hair is even bigger than

usual. She's wearing checked pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt with Hello Kitty on it. She has mild morning breath.

'Are you alright?' Farrah asks me, with a sideways glance at Simon. She puts a warm hand on my shoulder, the gesture bringing tears to my eyes.

'Not really.' I nod towards the apartment. 'Inside. It smells of cigarette smoke.' Her eyes widen as she remembers my triggers.

'I'm going in.' Simon stands and strides through my front door. Ian follows a few steps behind, a walkie-talkie in his hand. They are back in less than a minute, Ian leading the way. 'All clear. There's no one in there.'

'Can you smell smoke?'

Simon and Ian look at one another.

'Yes. Cigarettes,' Simon says.

Ian grunts. 'Maybe a little,' he says, grudgingly, 'though it could be coming in through the vents.'

'I've opened the windows so the smell should be gone soon,' Simon says.

Farrah touches my arm lightly. 'Let's go inside,' she says.

'In a minute.' I sit with my head in my hands while the others converse in low voices. Buster licks my face with his tiny raspy tongue and I let his presence calm me.

'OK, I'm ready.'

*

Simon helps me up. I walk through the front door, his hands hovering at my shoulders in case I stumble. Farrah follows. I hear her say, 'Thanks for your help, Ian. We can take it from here. Oh, but could you go and tell my mum I'm OK? Pretty please? Tell her I'm helping Rory.' I hear him grumble. 'Thanks so much, Ian. You're a treasure.' The door shuts. Despite his innate grumpiness, I suspect Ian will do what Farrah asks. She's pretty hard to resist.

As we enter the living area, I take a breath. The smell is gone. Simon helps me to the sofa where I sit with my head in my hands. After a long moment I lift my gaze.

‘Did you double check the door’s locked?’

‘I’ll do that now.’ Farrah jogs out and I hear the locks click. ‘Locked!’ she calls as she runs back.

‘Do you want to look around and see if anything’s been stolen?’ Simon asks. Something inside me clenches.

It’s my father, I know it.

Slowly I make my way from room to room, the others following. Everything is its usual neat self, except for my bedroom. After leaping out of bed that morning my sheets are awry, the doona spilling onto the floor. On the bedside table is a glass of water, a box of Panadol and, worst of all, the stress mouthguard that prevents me from grinding my teeth away. I am humiliated the others see this, though since a part of me is calmed by their presence, I tap a rhythm with my index finger and thumb and try to let it go.

But I can’t help thinking that my lovely safe haven has been violated. First by the intruder, and again, in some way, by our little group.

‘It’s all normal. I don’t think anything’s been taken.’

Back in the living room we sit at the table, Buster settling near Simon’s feet. ‘What’s going on, Rory?’ Simon asks. His voice is strained. ‘Do you know who would do this?’

I don’t want to tell him about my compulsions or about my dad. I’m pretty sure it will put an end to any chance of my fantasy taking place. Still, Simon deserves an explanation.

He already thinks you’re crazy! You may as well tell him, the voice says, sounding gleeful.

Before I can speak Farrah clears her throat and looks at me pointedly. I realise she and Simon haven’t yet met.

‘Oh, God, I’m so sorry. Farrah, this is Simon. Simon – Farrah. Farrah is a friend of mine. She lives upstairs. Simon’s a classical musician who moved in next door.’

They exchange hellos.

I look helplessly from one to the other.

Where to begin?

In the end I spit it out, telling Simon what I’ve told Farrah. That I suffer from PTSD due to childhood trauma, and there are some triggers involved.

‘And one of those triggers is cigarette smoke?’ he asks in a casual voice. I incline my head in agreement. ‘So, it’s not only that someone’s been in your apartment. You think they know about your trigger and are doing this to, what? Scare you? Who would do that? You don’t seem the type to have enemies.’ He smiles kindly.

‘Well, there’s more to it. My father, he isn’t a good man. I think he’s back in my life. And he may have murdered a homeless man.’

I flinch, aware of how unlikely it sounds, but tell him about the video and the man standing in the shadows across the road.

‘Wow. That’s a lot to take in, Rory.’ Simon searches my eyes, apparently looking for something there.

‘I know.’ He stares a moment longer and I want to break eye contact but don’t. Finally, he gives a short, satisfied nod and leans back in his chair.

Farrah regards me questioningly and I give a slight shake of my head. I can’t tell Simon about my OCD, not on top of all that.

She nods, apparently agreeing. ‘You have to find out who has keys to your apartment, Rory.’

‘What?’

‘We need to know who can get in with a key,’ explains Farrah. ‘Your lock doesn’t appear tampered with and I’m pretty sure Spiderman didn’t climb up the side of the building. It must have been someone with a key.’

‘She’s right,’ Simon agrees. He’s now absently rubbing Buster’s stomach with the toe of his sneaker. ‘But let’s leave this up to the police, eh? Shouldn’t we call them?’

I picture the way Brooks and Raco looked at me. The pity.

‘Nothing’s been taken. I mean, what could they do about it?’

‘Maybe we could make a few enquiries first.’ Farrah is obviously excited at the opportunity to play detective. ‘About the key. See what we can find out.’

‘If Rory’s dad is as scary as she says, it’s best we stay out of it.’ Simon frowns. ‘I wouldn’t want either of you to be in danger.’

‘We won’t *do* anything. Only ask a few questions.’

‘Well, I can tell you about the key,’ I interrupt. ‘I have one and so does Lucinda – that’s my aunt, my dad’s sister – and the security guards have a master key for emergencies. No one else would have a copy.’

‘Any chance Lucinda would give her brother the key?’

‘Absolutely not. Anyway, she thinks he’s dead.’

‘You don’t?’

‘I did, I guess. Now I’m not so sure.’

‘Then the main thing we have to do is to double check everything,’ Simon says. ‘You should talk to Lucinda and make sure she hasn’t given her key to anyone. I’ll call Ian now, see what he says.’

‘Thanks. I’ll check with Lucinda later.’

*

Simon walks to the hallway, Buster at his heels, and seconds later I hear murmuring.

‘He’s nice.’ Farrah says, her eyes wide. I shoot her a look. ‘What? He is!’

‘Now is not the time,’ I whisper.

‘Sorry, you’re right.’ She pauses. ‘I like that gap between his teeth though.’ She points to her own teeth and grins. I can’t help a laugh escaping, despite everything.

Simon walks back to the living room, his brow furrowed.

‘What did Ian say?’

‘Well, at first he insisted the smell was coming through the vents, but I convinced him that it wouldn’t hurt to be sure. We wouldn’t want the strata committee to have to get involved.’

Farrah grins. ‘I like you, Simon whatever-your-name-is.’

He smiles, then continues. ‘Both him and the new guy, whose name is Blayde if you can believe it, were on duty this morning. They still are. Blayde’s being trained so he’s not allowed to work a shift on his own yet, although this morning he was alone in the car park, the pool and the gym. Ian said he spoke to the guy and Blayde insisted he never came up here.’

I frown. ‘Blayde was on his own?’

‘Yes. I get the feeling Ian doesn’t like having a work buddy so he sends him off on little made-up jobs. Neither of them had any reason to come into your apartment today, did they?’

‘No.’ I am sure. ‘Perhaps someone stole the master key?’

‘Ian said they keep it on their person or locked up. He sounded adamant.’

I’m not Ian’s biggest fan, but he doesn’t have any reason to scare me. Could he know my dad? How? And Blayde is an unknown. My skin crawls as I remember him watching me. But what would he gain from coming into my apartment? Unless he’s some sort of sex predator. I shiver.

‘There is one thing. Security footage. Ian says there is a lift camera, and one in the lobby. He’ll check them for the time you were out. They’re bound to show whoever was in here. He’ll call me when he’s seen the tapes.’

Farrah and Simon stay while I put the kettle on and make a pot of tea, pulling out some Anzac biscuits from the freezer.

Farrah calls her mum and has a conversation in a low voice, then hangs up and smiles at me. ‘All good,’ she says.

We keep talking, the others working to take my mind off things. Farrah tells us how she was named after an actress from the original *Charlie’s Angels* her mother adored. Simon admits he ate some of the hidden Haigh’s chocolate stash he found in his apartment and now fears he’s addicted to it. My heart rate slowly returns to normal. I look from Farrah to Simon, hardly able to believe they are here, helping me. Normally Lucinda is my only confidante. She’ll be pleased I have others to confide in.

Friends, even. Maybe.

Until your father kills them, says the voice. Or perhaps you’ll beat him to it.

*

Simon’s phone vibrates on the table and I flinch. ‘It’s Ian.’ He answers, though I can’t decipher much from the one-sided conversation. Finally, he puts the phone away, his expression grave. ‘The security footage is missing.’

‘What? You’ve got to be kidding.’ Farrah voices my outrage.

‘Ian was apologetic. He said that Blayde hadn’t reset the computer system correctly so the cameras haven’t been working for over twenty-four hours. He said it seems to be an honest mistake. He insinuated Blayde is a bit slow on the uptake.’

Or maybe he’s like you and has something to hide, the voice says.

‘That’s outrageous,’ Farrah jumps up. ‘I’ll get my mum to complain. Dad’s a big softie, he’s useless. But Mum can be a real Karen about things like this. I’ll —’

‘No.’ My head aches. Suddenly Farrah’s voice is too much. They are both too much. ‘I need to be alone now, I’m sorry.’ I lower my head, ashamed at my snappy tone. The voice is right. I’m not a good person. There’s a few seconds’ silence.

‘Of course, Rory,’ Simon finally says. ‘You know where I am if you need me.’

‘And me.’ Farrah sounds contrite and though I feel bad, I’m happy when they go. I double-lock the door and walk back to the living room. At the window, I scan Dossers for anyone suspicious, including my father. I see him almost immediately.

Not my dad.

Long Socks.

This time he’s not resting, or reading, or sweeping out his cage. He’s standing in it, his hands locked into fists around the wire.

And he’s staring right at me.

*

I freak out and drop to the floor.

Is Long Socks watching me? Why?

Does he know something? Is he trying to tell me something?

After fifteen minutes on the carpet, tapping a pattern with my fingers while Buster licks my arm, I struggle to my feet. Hiding behind the blinds, I peer out.

He’s gone.

Long Socks isn’t in his cage. I look up and down the street, across the Domain. Everywhere.

I can’t see any other Dossers either.

Perhaps Long Socks was looking at something else. Or not looking at anything at all. Or perhaps, though I've never seen evidence of this, he was on drugs. Or drunk.

I close the blinds then count backwards in threes until I'm calmer. I make a couple of dozen paper cranes before finally deciding to see if work will distract me. I sit at my desk and write two short, lacklustre reports. At 1 pm, in an effort to cure myself with fatty carbs, I cook a creamy pasta dish for lunch. Finally, I call Lucinda and tell her about the cigarette smoke and the intruder. She worries that I had to deal with this alone, but I reassure her that Farrah and my new neighbour, Simon, were with me. She's at work and insists on coming over.

'I gave Ian a piece of my mind,' she says twenty-five minutes later. 'How could this happen? You're absolutely sure someone was inside your apartment?'

She dumps her bag and sits heavily onto a stool. I pour her a water. Her cheeks are red with outrage. I hate to think what she said to Ian.

'Yes.'

'Bloody hell! I pay a fortune in strata fees and most of it goes to those bozo security guards. Yes, some is for the pool and gym, but most of it goes to security. In return, I expect you to be safe.'

'I'm fine, Lucinda.' I realise I haven't removed Theo's watch and bend over, slipping it off and putting it into a saucepan in a low drawer before rising.

'Yes, *this* time! How dare they blame an incompetent new staff member for this stuff-up? It's not good enough.'

'Really, I'm fine.'

Lucinda is breathing heavily, her jaw clenched. I can't believe I'm the one trying to calm her down for once. She notices my expression and seems to deflate.

'I'm sorry, Rory. I'm not a fan of things happening that are outside my control.'

I smile. ‘You’re preaching to the converted here, Luce.’

She returns my smile, which then fades. ‘I should be asking how you are. So, how are you?’

‘Not great. Luce, do you know much about the building’s security cameras?’

Lucinda frowns. ‘Not especially. I don’t deal in that sort of security, and everything’s changed since I was a cop. I know it’s an old system. Hard-wired. I’ve suggested to the strata committee that they look at upgrading, but it’s not a priority. Having said that, there have never been any issues with the cameras before this.’

‘Hm.’ I pause. ‘Ron’s let me have a look once or twice, just while we had a cuppa at the desk. The system is stored in that cupboard behind it and you watch the feed on the monitor at reception. See, Ian told Simon that Blayde hadn’t reset the computer correctly, which means the cameras haven’t been working for the past twenty-four hours.’

‘And?’

‘Well. That’s possible, I suppose. Once the computer is reset the cameras *are* disabled. And the system needs to be reset occasionally – if there’s been a power outage, say, or if its software needs upgrading. But the thing is, there’s a reminder that flashes up on the screen once the computer is reset. It’s hard to ignore. Honestly, I think you’d have to consciously ignore it.’

‘You think it was deliberate that the cameras were left off?’

I hesitate. ‘Perhaps.’

Lucinda rises from the stool and walks around to stand beside me. Up close she smells of lollies and I realise she’s still vaping. She quit smoking after we moved to Sydney and my reaction to the smell of cigarettes intensified. She always insisted she had no trouble quitting, but I know she missed them. For a while I’d glimpsed nicotine patches, and then a

few years back she started vaping, though she insists it's not an addiction.

‘Interesting.’ She puts her hands on the bench and leans forward, her eyes unfocused. For Lucinda, she seems rattled. After thinking for a few seconds, she turns back to me.

‘It might be worth talking to this new security guard, Blayde. Though I think it's likely he just made a mistake. Maybe he's not the smartest guy, which, mind you, isn't a great quality for someone in charge of the safety of the residents. Perhaps I'll talk to Ron, too, find out if Blayde is up to the task.’

She lifts a hand and pushes a tendril of hair behind my ear. I've shoved it in a messy bun that has sagged over the course of the day. ‘Do you remember how I used to braid your hair for gymnastics?’

I grin. ‘Yes, you were the braid queen. The other girls were jealous I had my own hairdresser. God, remember what sticklers those gym judges were for a perfect braid? It was ridiculous.’ My smile fades. ‘And Mum wasn't too crash hot at it.’

‘No. She could never seem to focus for long enough.’

*

Mum would walk around the house for hours on gym comp mornings. She'd rearrange the kitchen drawers, scrub the bathrooms – not eat, not talk to us. She dreaded sitting on the side lines in the school gym, making conversation with other parents. Braiding my hair with the precision demanded by the fastidious Coach Maree and the judges was beyond her on those mornings.

One day Lucinda came around, saw the state of the braid I was attempting in front of the bathroom mirror, and took over. I don't know if she did it for Mum or for me, but soon Lucinda started asking for comp days off, swapping shifts with the town's other policeman if necessary. She came to every comp after that.

Mum would stay in bed until after we left, avoiding me so she'd feel less guilty. I didn't mind. Lucinda was cool. Sometimes – if she had a shift afterwards – she'd wear her uniform and the other girls would ask if she had a gun – if she'd ever killed someone. She'd answer them seriously, let them hold her handcuffs, while I puffed out my chest. She was so tough, so composed.

I had always assumed Lucinda was pleased that I was terrible at gymnastics and had such a short career competing. But looking back, I realise that she'd enjoyed it too. She'd got to be a mother for a little while.

A year after that I took up swimming. Mum could manage swimming training, even comp nights. She just waited outside in the car, an ABBA CD on, her latest romance novel for company.

*

'May I?' Lucinda gestures at my hair. 'Not a full braid, but I could plait it for you.'

I nod and we move to the table. I perch on a chair while Lucinda stands behind me, her sure fingers dividing my hair into sections and drawing it tight. I close my eyes. I could be twelve years old again. I feel a tug inside of me for all that has happened since.

'Too bad your gymnastics ability wasn't up to the gold standard of my braiding.' Lucinda's tone is teasing.

'Hey!' I said, not game to move lest I get in trouble.

'Done. That's much better.'

I lift a hand to my scalp. 'Neat as ever.'

'What else did you expect?' She pauses. 'Hey, where's your watch?'

My brain scrambles, though I answer calmly enough. 'Oh, I was washing up earlier and I didn't want to get it wet.'

'It's waterproof, you know that, right?'

‘I know. I never trust it when they say that.’

She walks around to look me in the eye. ‘If you don’t like it, I can get you another one. You can choose it.’ Her expression is pinched and she sounds offended.

‘Don’t be silly. I love it. I wear it all the time.’ The lie comes easily. I can’t tell her about Theo’s watch. I can’t. That’s mine, and mine alone.

‘Thanks for this.’ I pat my hair. ‘It takes me back. I loved gymnastics, though I was bloody hopeless at it.’ I smile, and her shoulders loosen a little. She takes a seat beside me and takes hold of my hand.

‘Rory. Come to lunch on Saturday. Please. I’d like you to meet Alex. You can give cooking a miss for once. Alex is a whiz on the barbecue.’

I open my mouth, nothing comes out.

‘Please.’

‘Fine.’ I wish I didn’t sound so ungrateful.

‘Wonderful. I’ll send Bert with the car at about twelve.’

I walk back into the kitchen.

‘Rory?’

‘Yes?’

‘Your mother couldn’t help it, you know. And you can’t either. There’s nothing wrong with living this way if it works for you. And I’m only a phone call away if you need a friend. Or anything.’

My heart aches at the love in Lucinda’s voice.

‘Thanks for all you do, Luce. I mean it.’

I don’t tell her that I feel like I might be stuck in here forever, so I’d better get used to it.

*

I put off going to bed until I'm dead on my feet, dreading the nightmare which I'm sure will return tonight.

I'm drawn to the window overlooking the Dossers, pulled over there as if by a magnet. It's dark out, clouds hiding the moon, but I see him right away. In the shadows.

My father.

He's just under the cover, standing in the middle of the camp looking up at me, cigarette in hand. As I watch he ashes his cigarette onto the concrete, far too relaxed, and this time, instead of being afraid, it makes me angry. My adrenaline spikes, and I stare at him, a small, defiant part of me wanting to issue a challenge.

Here I am, Dad – come and get me.

Fear takes hold then and I scrabble to take back the thought as if he can hear me. Buster brushes against my shin and I lean down, breathing deeply as I pat him, whispering 'good boy, good boy' several times, more to comfort myself than my dog. I take another breath, pick him up and look out the window.

My father is still there.

Buster wriggles in my arms, wanting to be put down, but I hold on to him, his warmth giving me courage. Skinny Santa approaches my father, swaying. They speak and the homeless man wanders off, waving something in his hand.

I need to call the police. The thought hits me and I run over to my phone, setting Buster on the sofa. In my contacts I search for Detective Brooks, whose number I copied from his card, my fingers trembling as I return to the window. But when I look out again, my hand drops to my side.

My father is gone.

9.02 am

Thursday, 19th January

I'm trying to figure out the cleanest way to back up the data from Lucinda's app when Farrah knocks. It's doing my head in, so I'm happy for the distraction. I know Farrah's knock by now, it's hard and staccato. Insistent.

'I'm here for my maths tutoring,' she tells me with a grin, ducking past me. Buster chases her down the hall.

That girl is too cheerful. You should do something about her, the voice says. Punch her in the face.

I push the thought down, shaking the sudden tightness from my shoulders.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

The voice is wrong. Farrah is exactly what I need right now. A breath of fresh air, so to speak. I follow her inside. She's on the floor, holding one end of a rope dog toy while Buster tugs the other, his tail wagging.

'How are you feeling today?' she asks, glancing at me.

'I'm alright.'

I'm not. Last night, that man. Was it my father? It was dark so I can't be sure, but it had to be – didn't it?

Dad used to watch me, back when I was in primary school. I'd see him at random times. Sometimes it was recess, sometimes lunch. He'd be walking past the school or sitting in his car outside the gates. Not often. Just often enough to keep

me on edge. Other times he'd drop a comment into conversation around the dinner table, usually when Mum or Theo weren't listening. 'Your friend, Maddie', he'd say. 'Her new haircut makes her look like a boy.' Or 'Rachael's piled on the weight, hasn't she? Too many sausage rolls from the canteen, hey?' And I'd know he'd been watching.

Lucinda told me she'd spoken to Ron about Blayde and the camera situation. Ron said the younger security guard was popular with the residents. They were reassured seeing someone of his large physical stature on reception. I could tell them that being physically strong didn't mean that person was invincible, that brains were as important as brawn, but it looked like Blayde was here to stay.

Ron had told Lucinda he hoped the man's attitude would improve a bit as he settled in, that he'd become a little more 'Panorama'. He was satisfied that Blayde had made a one-off error when he didn't reset the security cameras. And Blayde was adamant he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

I'm not so sure.

But that's not the only thing that's bugging me. Everything is sliding backwards. The nightmare has returned. The voice is a pain in the arse. I can't concentrate on work. I haven't walked Buster. My routine has gone to shit. And I'm now one hundred per cent sure that I'll never leave here. Never have a normal life.

'I've got an idea.' Farrah is jittery with suppressed excitement, her voice higher than usual.

'Oh?' My stomach flutters. I'm not sure I'm going to like this.

'You know what we should do?' She throws the rope toy a couple of metres away and Buster bounds after it.

'What?'

'Go to the hotel.' She emphasises the words with her hands.

‘What hotel?’

‘The one where the video of your dad was taken. Or Justin Bailey, or whoever he is. There might be a clue there.’ Buster shoves the toy at Farrah’s arm and she grasps it absentmindedly, letting Buster growl and tug at it as she watches to see my reaction.

‘I don’t know about that, Farrah. I don’t like leaving the apartment unless I have to. And what do you think we would discover, anyway? He’ll probably be long gone by now.’

‘Maybe someone there will remember him. Maybe —’

There’s another knock on the door. This one must be Simon. It is measured and unthreatening.

‘Do you want me to . . .?’ Farrah asks, jumping up, letting go of the rope toy.

‘No, I’ll get it.’

Through the peephole, Simon stands back so I can clearly see it’s him. He’s in jeans and a sky-blue t-shirt.

‘Hi Rory. We missed our early morning catch-up, and I, uh, wanted to see how you are.’

‘Looks like it’s the day for that.’

His t-shirt has two bags of ice and a cartoon baby on it. *Ice Ice Baby*. The pun makes me happy. Plus, I love that song.

‘Oh, I ordered a pizza from Rosina’s last night. Mushroom. It was amazing. Thanks for the tip.’

‘You’re welcome.’

I open my mouth to invite him in when Farrah calls out. ‘Hi Simon. Come in. I’ve got a plan to track down Rory’s dad.’

Simon lifts his eyebrows at me and I give an exasperated shake of my head.

‘Farrah is a little overexcited this morning.’

I lock the door and follow Simon in, talking to Farrah as I walk. ‘I can’t jump in an Uber and head over there, Farrah. I don’t work that way, remember? And anyway, I’m not convinced I want to track him down.’

Farrah frowns from where she stands at the bench, mugs in front of her. The kettle is rumbling. Buster has given up and chews his toy in the living room. I fight the urge to bundle Farrah out of the kitchen and make the tea myself.

‘Don’t you want to know for sure? How can you live *not* knowing?’

‘Lucinda looked into it, and she says that the man I saw on the video is definitely Justin Bailey.’

‘Well, if that’s true, who was in your apartment? And what’s to stop them from coming back?’

A prickle runs down my spine. I open and close my mouth.

‘Are you alright, Rory?’ Simon asks.

‘I think my dad was across the street again last night.’

‘What?’ Farrah exclaims. She almost pours boiling water on her hand in her excitement. I fill them in.

‘So you couldn’t tell for certain if it was him?’ Simon asks.

‘It had to be!’ Farrah says, wiping the water she spilt with a tea towel.

‘Not for certain, no.’

‘We definitely have to go to the hotel now,’ Farrah says, undeterred. ‘He might still be there!’

Simon frowns. ‘If it was him I don’t think he’d be that brazen – or stupid.’

‘I have to tell you something,’ I interrupt them, facing Simon. My words come fast, before I can change my mind. ‘I don’t only have PTSD. I have OCD. Actual OCD, tapping, counting, inappropriate thoughts, all of it.’

I don't know why I'm telling him this now.

'Oh Rory, I'm sorry to hear that.' He walks over and stands in front of me. I think for a moment he might hug me and I tense but he doesn't reach out. 'I'm sorry, I should have been more sensitive when we met. If I hadn't been my usual bulldozing self, maybe I would have noticed.' He lets out a breath. 'My sister had depression. I know how hard mental illness can be.'

'Had?'

'Yes, she died.' He sees the look on my face. 'Not from depression.' His eyes cloud over. 'I did two years of medical school – I don't think I told you that – but we learned a bit about mental illness during the first few semesters, too.'

'Medical school?' Farrah tilts her head to the side and looks at him. 'What happened?'

'It wasn't for me. It's a long story.'

'Let me get this straight,' Farrah says, standing up straighter. 'You were a medical student, and now you're a concert pianist?'

'A clarinettist in an orchestra, actually, but kind of.' He takes in her raised eyebrows and sighs. 'Let's say I've got a few obsessive traits of my own. I'm a workaholic, for starters. Or I was. It's mostly under control now. But it affected my relationships. Not in a good way.'

Farrah laughs. She points to me.

'So, you're OCD, PTSD. Basically, all the Ds.' She swivels to Simon. 'You're a workaholic.' She gestures to herself. 'And I'm a kleptomaniac.'

'What?' Simon asks, obviously surprised.

'Ah, that's not important now.' She waves him away. 'It's funny, that's all. We're a bunch of misfits, aren't we? Like that old movie, *The Breakfast Club*. That's one of Mum's favourites. I've seen it heaps. I *heart* Judd Nelson.'

‘I love that movie,’ I murmur.

‘Me too,’ says Simon.

The three of us smile at one another.

It’s Simon who breaks the silence. ‘OK. Look, I’m not saying I’m in favour of this plan, but I’ll put it out there that I hired a car yesterday. I have it for the next three months. I’ve been planning on seeing a few things outside the city on my days off, trying to kick the whole workaholic thing, once and for all. Maybe going to the Hunter Valley or the Blue Mountains. But if you want a car, it’s at your disposal. I mean, I’ll take you.’

Farrah puts the carton of milk she was about to pour into the mugs on the bench and gives me a look.

My mother wouldn’t have gone. She’d have stayed home and let Lucinda do her dirty work. Like she always did.

‘Yes,’ I say, surprising myself. ‘Why not?’

So much for staying in the apartment. For being safe. But I’m *not* safe as long as my dad is out there, and despite Lucinda’s assurances, I’m sure he is out there.

‘Let’s do it. Now, before I change my mind.’

*

Simon’s rental car is parked in the Panorama’s underground car park.

We take the stairs, but when we reach the ground floor, instead of continuing down, Simon pushes open the door and we come out into the corridor that leads back to the lobby. Both the pool and gym are reached from here.

‘I thought we might have a quick look around the pool area, if that’s alright with you? I still haven’t seen it. It’s down this way somewhere, isn’t it?’ My heart pounds and I lean against the brick wall. Simon must see something in my face. ‘What? What’s wrong, Rory?’

‘Chlorine,’ I say in a tight voice, my stomach clenching. ‘It’s another trigger for me. I’ve never been near the pool.’

‘Oh God. I’m sorry. Don’t worry about it. We’ll get going . . .’ He starts to go back towards the fire stairs.

‘No, no. You go and have a look. Really. You just follow that corridor.’ I wave a hand. ‘I know where it is. I’ve seen pictures.’ I try to smile. ‘I’ll be fine. I’ll wait here for you.’ He looks unsure. ‘Seriously. I’ll feel bad if you don’t, now.’

‘OK. If you’re sure. I won’t be long.’ Simon moves off and I lean my back against the rough brick wall. I don’t tell him I tried to go in there once. Just once. Not long after we moved in. This was back when I decided I could beat my OCD if only I wanted it badly enough.

Needless to say, it didn’t end well. Ian found me passed out just inside the doorway.

Simon returns after a couple of minutes. ‘It’s nice. Nothing too flash though. You aren’t missing much.’

Just a few seconds in the pool room was enough to imbue Simon with the faint smell of chlorine. I moan involuntarily, hit by a wave of memories. The rhythm of my arms scything through the water, the muffled quiet. Silence. Peace.

Blood.

‘Oh God. I stink of it, don’t I?’ Simon asks in concern. He backs off, flapping his arms. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘No, it’s not too bad,’ I manage. Now that he’s moved away it’s a little better. ‘You go ahead. By the time you get down to the car park I’ll be fine and the smell will be gone. I’ll follow in a few minutes.’

‘OK, sure,’ he says miserably, slipping past me as I hold my breath.

I find a mint in my bag and suck on it as I count the bricks on the section of the wall opposite. Finally, I feel capable of walking and I straighten up, entering the stairwell and descending another two flights of stairs to the car park.

I haven't been down here for months, though it hasn't changed. Large expensive four-wheel drives and small expensive sports car are squeezed into tiny spaces. I spot Simon at the far end of the lot. He waves and I smile. When I reach him I start talking before he can return to the subject of my triggers.

'Farrah wasn't happy about being left behind.'

He seems to understand I don't want to talk about what happened in the corridor.

'No, she wasn't. She knew we couldn't take her, though. She's fourteen. I'd have to get permission from her parents.'

She'd argued at first, then seen the futility of it. I'd asked her to look after Buster instead, deciding it was better not to take him if we wanted to remain low-key, and we'd promised to fill her in when we returned.

Part of me is pleased to leave Farrah behind, to spend some time alone with Simon. Another part of me is terrified.

'This is it.' We stop at a comically small car that is a bright, shiny blue.

'Seriously?' I raise my eyebrows at Simon. 'I hope we don't have to go incognito.'

'I know. Blue was all they had, and I do like small cars. I'm not much of a driver. I'm spectacularly bad at parallel parking, so the smaller the better.' He presses a button on his keys and the car beeps. I walk around to the passenger side, squeezing past a giant black Range Rover.

'Spectacularly bad? I don't know all that many men, but I'm pretty sure you're in the minority admitting that.'

'Probably.' He grins as he slides into the driver's seat. 'Only a very manly man would be brave enough to admit it, though, wouldn't you say?'

'Sure,' I agree, smiling.

Despite Simon's lack of confidence in his driving skills, he seems OK at it. He's slow and cautious, and that's not so different from Bert. The radio is tuned to a classical FM station, the type I always skipped past as a child, declaring it boring or ancient. The song that's playing as we merge into the traffic is low and mellow.

The hotel is in Chatswood, which means crossing Sydney Harbour. I manage to navigate us through the Harbour Tunnel and onto the highway without Simon needing to make too many sudden lane changes.

'Did I see some bird books at your place? And binoculars?' Simon asks, making conversation.

'Yes, I like bird-watching. But I'm not a – what do you call them – twitchers? I'm not a twitcher. There's just something about birds, you know? And it's something I can do from my apartment.'

'I saw a Powerful Owl on the night Slouchy Ricky Gervais was killed,' I continue after a pause. I glance at him. 'I googled owls afterwards. In North America an owl is considered a bad omen. A sign of death, apparently.'

'Really?' He glances across at me. 'You don't believe that, though, do you?'

I sigh. 'No, probably not. It's just weird, don't you reckon?'

'Other people, no doubt, say owls represent wisdom or knowledge or something. Didn't Minerva have an owl . . .? Perhaps it was a good sign.'

I don't respond.

He changes tack. 'Do you seriously think your dad had something to do with that man's death, Rory? Shouldn't you tell the police?'

'Maybe.' I peer out the window, cars zooming past us even on the inside. 'When they interviewed me about it I got the

impression that they thought I was crazy. If Lucinda doesn't believe me – why would they?'

Simon is silent as he indicates, then changes lanes.

'Things like that – murders – never seem to happen in Auckland. At least not where I lived. It sounds ghoulish to admit this, but someone being murdered across the street makes me feel like I'm living in a real city. Did you know him?'

'Not to talk to, obviously. I feel I knew him, a little. From watching them all.'

'The Dossers?'

'Yes.'

'Like you watch the birds.'

'Kind of.'

It hits me again that the homeless men have more in common with the birds than I do.

*

The music halts and the announcer begins talking in a monotone. I peer out the window and meet the gaze of a child watching me from a bus. Seconds later she looks away, restlessly pointing at cars and buildings and chattering to her mother, who's glued to her phone, nodding to her daughter without turning her head.

'It was my fault,' I say in a low voice. 'That man's death. I had bad thoughts. Not about him, about Buster. That's why he died. Because of me.'

On the bus, the child is now staring at an iPad, her mouth slack.

'I understand that it feels like that. That's the OCD talking. But it's not your fault, Rory.' Simon's voice is gentle. 'Your thoughts can't actually hurt someone.'

‘Yes, objectively you’re right. Of course, I know that. Yet I also know – I *know* – that it *was* my fault.’ I give a snort of mirthless laughter. ‘Anyway, it might have been my dad. Does that make it my fault?’

‘No,’ Simon says firmly. ‘What would your father’s motivation have been? Why would he kill a random homeless man?’

I shrug. ‘He’s a bad person. Besides, when the homeless man lives right outside my apartment, then it’s not random, is it?’

*

The hotel is near a shopping centre, so Simon parks in the multi-storey car park attached to it instead of attempting a spectacularly terrible parallel park.

The idea of walking through a mall full of people and smells and noises and bright lights fills me with apprehension, but there are fire stairs leading to the street we can use instead.

We sit in the car for a moment as I psyche myself up. When I go to open the door, Simon places his hand on my forearm. I can’t remember the last time a man touched me, and I hold the feeling deep in my chest to remember later.

‘Rory, wait a sec.’ His sandy eyebrows are drawn together, his eyes on mine. ‘I want to tell you something first. You know how I said my sister had depression? Well, the depression was just a part of it. Ruth had ADHD and anxiety too. She really struggled with it. I want you to know I really do understand what you’re going through.’

Simon looks like he might continue, then stops.

‘Thank you,’ I say.

He smiles at me. ‘No problem. I just . . . I get that life isn’t always easy. Sometimes it sucks.’

A laugh – almost a sob – escapes me. ‘I hope this isn’t meant to cheer me up.’

‘It’s not. It’s just to let you know that we all have shit in our lives. All of us.’ The corner of his mouth lifts. ‘Misery loves company, hey?’

I nod, a lump in my throat.

‘OK. Let’s go find your father.’

*

‘How are you going?’ Simon asks as we pause on a busy footpath in front of a shoe store, its walls lined with hundreds of single sneakers, rap music blaring.

‘I’m fine.’ My jaw is clenched. The air smells of waffles and perfume, and people jostle past.

‘Only a block to go. Hold my arm.’

I have an overpowering urge to return to the car, but I shake it off, putting my hand on Simon’s forearm. I half close my eyes and count back from 505 by nines. Simon’s arm is warm under my hand and he speaks in a low tone, telling me what we’re passing as we go. It helps.

‘Here we are.’

As we enter the hotel, I open my eyes again. It feels like watching the video footage, except from a slightly higher angle. The small lobby is all shiny surfaces, the smell is of hand sanitiser. Simon leads me to the tall front desk where a tiny dark-haired woman in a navy uniform peeks over the top, tapping on a keyboard that’s out of sight.

‘Can I help you?’ She smiles distractedly, not taking her eyes from the screen.

‘I hope so.’ Simon returns her smile and is rewarded with her full attention. ‘I have a question about one of your guests.’

‘I’m afraid we can’t divulge details about our guests,’ she says, her smile fading.

‘His name is Justin Bailey,’ I say, then add, ‘or maybe Eddie Reynolds.’

‘Again, I’m sorry. I can’t tell you about our guests.’

You could reach over the counter and grab her by her stupid throat, the voice says. *See if that jogs her memory.*

‘We should go,’ I murmur as sweat blooms across my chest.

I tap my foot on the floor, beating a rhythm that echoes the classical piece from earlier. *Tap, tap. Tap, tap. Tap.* It is loud on the hard floor. Simon glances at me, then tries again. ‘Perhaps they left a message for my friend? Have you got any messages for Rory Campbell?’

‘I can check.’ The receptionist walks behind a wall and reappears with a small plastic container. She flicks through the loose papers in it. ‘Rory Campbell, did you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘No, I’m sorry, there’s nothing here.’

‘What about Rory Reynolds?’ I ask. Simon’s brows draw together, and I explain, ‘I started using Mum’s maiden name when I moved to Sydney.’

‘No, there’s nothing for Rory Reynolds either.’

‘OK. Thanks for your help.’ Simon is still polite. He takes my arm, and I stop tapping as we move towards another door.

‘Let’s try the bar. Wasn’t he in the hotel bar in your video?’

I smell the stale beer before Simon pushes open the frosted glass door. Inside it’s five degrees cooler than the lobby, and horse-racing commentary blasts from TV speakers. I’m surprised by how busy it is, given the time of day; there are men sitting at the bar, and an older couple in a booth at the back, beers in hands, not speaking. The barman is glued to a horse race, obviously a major one as it’s showing on several screens.

Simon leads me to the bar.

‘What can I get you?’ the barman asks without moving his head. He looks to be in his mid-twenties with a wispy moustache. He wears all black, his hair a short hipster mullet, spiky on top.

‘We’re not drinking today – just want to ask a couple of questions about someone who was in here a few weeks back.’

‘It was a Monday, I think,’ I add, though I know it definitely was.

I scroll to the screenshot I took from my computer. It’s not great quality, though it’s clear enough.

‘This is him,’ I say.

The barman watches the horse race intently for a few more seconds then makes a disgusted motion as the winning horse crosses the finish line. He then examines the picture of my father.

‘Yeah.’ He frowns. ‘Maybe. Yes. I remember him. He was a big guy, real strong looking. We had a conversation about fishing. He gave me some advice about bait.’

I feel like I’ve been punched in the gut. My father went fishing most weekends; said he liked the peace and quiet but what he actually meant was that he liked drinking beer without us around to pester him. My face must show my shock as the barman looks from Simon to me.

‘Did something happen to him?’

I can’t speak, so Simon answers. ‘No, not that we know of. Was there anything else he said that you remember? Did he say where he’s from? Was he staying at this hotel?’

He ruminates on it. ‘I’m not sure if he was staying here, though I had the feeling he was. I’m pretty sure he paid cash. He was from out of town, I know that.’

‘Oh?’

‘He said he was in Sydney to meet up with family. It sounded as if he’d been apart from them for a long time. Like

something had happened – a family disagreement was my guess. It was the same way with my sister – we always fought over stupid stuff, you know? – and then a year ago she got breast cancer, and we patched up our differences.’ He smiles. ‘Now I babysit her kids.’

He picks up a towel and starts polishing a glass. ‘Your guy seemed hyped up, you know? Excited.’ He frowns. ‘That’s right, I remember now. He told me he was here to surprise his sister.’

A small gasp escapes me.

‘Wild horses couldn’t keep him away from her, he said.’

12.14 pm

Saturday, 21st January

‘What do you think he meant? What does he want from you?’

I stew on the barman’s words for two days before telling Lucinda about the trip to the hotel. I have to admit that I was relieved to hear Dad was back to see Lucinda, not me. But given he’d been across the street from my apartment, I knew I couldn’t assume I wasn’t also his target.

We’re sitting at the rear of Lucinda’s vast Turrumurra home at a huge dining table on the covered deck, a space that’s almost as large as my entire apartment. On one side is a built-in barbecue and sink; on the other is the landscaped pool and expanse of lawn. Lucinda built the home five years ago, and it’s designed to appear old and gracious but comes complete with all the mod-cons.

Lucinda is drinking white wine while I have Diet Coke, Buster curled into a fluffy ball on the chair beside me. Today she’s wearing a linen pants suit and oversized sunglasses with the two mirrored Cs of the Chanel logo on the side. The table is laden with salads and sides, all prepared by Alex. It’s far too much food for the three of us and I wonder if he’s nervous.

I shift in my seat, glancing regularly at the hedges at the rear of the property. Lucinda’s security is even better than the Panorama’s, so I should be relaxed, but I find it hard to feel safe here. Perhaps that’s why I haven’t visited her for almost a year. There’s something unsettling about the house, or maybe it’s the suburb. I’m more aware of other people when I’m here

– somehow far more so than I am in my own apartment, where the neighbours are right on the other side of a wall.

But with the exception of the grunting from 302, my apartment is surprisingly private. Here, despite the nearest house being almost fifty metres away, the clear air brings the sound of neighbours playing tennis, and splashes and squeals from an unseen pool. I feel that someone I don't know might 'pop in' at any time.

The thought puts me on edge.

Alex has taken a tray of barbecued kebabs inside the house and will reappear any minute. It's not the best time to bring up our little adventure, but Lucinda needs to know, and I'd prefer to do it while Alex isn't around.

'You went to the hotel? What makes you think it was Eddie the barman talked to, Rory?' Lucinda sounds exasperated and a little bemused. 'I told you I found out that Justin Bailey was real. It's Justin Bailey he spoke to, not Eddie.'

'Look, I know what you said. It's true the barman didn't know the guy's name. And the hotel staff wouldn't tell me anything. But it *must* be him, Luce! I mean, he said he had a surprise for his sister. A "surprise"?' I scoff. 'Maybe he wants something. Money? He can't mean anything good, that's for sure.'

I *know* it's Dad. He always hated being left out.

When Theo was in kindergarten his team made the soccer grand final. Dad was supposed to take him, but the night before he'd stayed late after his shift at the pub to have beers with a couple of mates and slept in. When Mum tried to wake him she was met with grunts and moans. She wore tracks up and down the hallway, checking her watch and peering into the bedroom, before finally bundling us into the car and driving to the soccer fields.

Theo bounded over to his friends and Mum watched the game from the car, while I sat on the back seat and immersed

myself in a sticker book.

Soon after halftime, Dad thumped on the windscreen so hard we both jumped. He continued past, the look he gave Mum promising retribution when they were alone. He joined the group of parents on the sidelines, slapping the fathers' backs, and calling out to a startled Theo with a big smile pasted on his face. My sticker book lost its allure and Mum cowered in the front seat until the game finished.

Theo's team won. After the photos and some more back-slapping, Dad held Theo's hand and returned to the car, turfing Mum out of the driver's seat with icy politeness. Theo and I were treated to fifty-cent ice creams from the McDonald's drive-through, but mine was tainted with a bad feeling, and most of it dripped onto my tracksuit so that I was sticky for the rest of the day.

That afternoon Theo and I hid in the backyard to avoid the yelling, and later when Mum made dinner she moved with care, wincing as she served up our sausages and chips.

If Dad was alive, and he'd somehow found out we sold the Bowra Creek house, there's no doubt he'd want his share.

I hated to think what he'd do to get it.

*

'You're not thinking straight, Rory,' Lucinda says with an edge in her tone, and I bristle. 'Don't you trust me? I told you it wasn't him and you went over there anyway.'

I soften, realising that beneath her anger she's hurt by my betrayal.

'You know I worry about you. Why did you leave the apartment without telling me?'

'I needed answers, Luce. Farrah said —'

'Farrah? Your new friend, Farrah? Isn't she fourteen? She's a *child*, Rory. I hope you think I know better than a teenage girl.'

‘Yes, of course. But —’

I’m saved as Alex reappears, a platter of seafood in one hand, a bowl of sauce in the other. ‘Lunch is served, ladies,’ he says, setting them in the centre of the table with a flourish. He looks from Lucinda’s closed expression to my determined one. ‘Is everything alright? Did I miss something?’

‘Nothing,’ Lucinda says shortly, then forces a smile. ‘This looks amazing, babe. Thank you so much.’

Lucinda’s latest boyfriend is not what I expected. He’s a lot younger than the men she usually dates and better looking, with wavy dark hair and broad shoulders. He’s a school counsellor at one of the local private schools, with a preppy Ralph Lauren shirt and chinos that scream North Shore money. It takes me half an hour or so to work out who he reminds me of – Clark Kent. He’s also an excellent cook, already serving up butterflied prawns and scallops on the half shell as an entrée.

‘What’s the sauce?’ Lucinda asks, pointing at the bowl.

‘Herbed yoghurt – some parsley and mint, a little lemon juice.’ Alex plays it down but Lucinda moans as she tastes a swordfish kebab. I avert my eyes. In the backyard several corellas land on the grass and waddle around, pecking for food. Buster lifts his head and growls at them.

Lucinda addresses me in a slightly over-cheerful tone. ‘I can’t believe I’ve finally found one who can cook as well as you, Rory,’ she says, then puts her hand on Alex’s arm. ‘How’d I get so lucky, babe?’

I’m not enjoying Lucinda’s recent and persistent use of the word ‘babe’ in reference to Alex. She’s wearing different makeup too, and I suspect she’s attended one of those department store makeup counters where they do your face with their entire product line. Granted, she looks younger, but I liked the Lucinda she was before.

I help myself to salad. ‘This is amazing, Alex,’ Lucinda says. ‘Without you and Rory cooking for me, I’d exist on

Macca's and pizza and be ten kilos heavier.'

Alex laughs. He leans over and kisses Lucinda on the cheek and she almost purrs. I've never seen her like this with a guy before.

'You, my love, can do anything you put your mind to. You know I believe in you. If you don't cook it's because you choose not to. Nothing more, nothing less.' He raises an eyebrow.

Lucinda laughs. 'You're right, as usual.' She addresses me. 'Alex is keen on "the power within". Manifesting.' He nods, smiling. 'He's not totally convinced me yet.'

'I will,' Alex says. 'I'll make a believer out of her, Rory, mark my words. It'll change your life, Lucinda.' He looks at me. 'Yours too if you let it, Rory.'

I frown. I don't know Alex well enough for this conversation.

'Well, you've certainly *manifested* us a wonderful meal,' Lucinda says teasingly, trying to distract us all from my obvious discomfort.

They laugh. I watch the corellas rise and flap up, screeching. Buster jumps off the chair and yaps at them from the edge of the deck. My mind returns to my father. Farrah and Simon and I have spent hours on my sofa over the past two days, trying to figure out what Dad might have meant with those words to the barman. I can't help feeling pissed off that Lucinda has no ideas – and that she's annoyed with *me*.

'So, Rory, you write reports for your aunt?' Alex asks. 'Do you enjoy it?' He puts a forkful of salad in his mouth.

I don't know how much Lucinda has told him. 'Well, not in the way Lucinda likes being a PI. I needed a job and she gave me one. But I've grown to enjoy it, I suppose.'

'Rory's very clever, babe. She's creating an app for the business that I think we could sell to other PI firms.' Lucinda smiles at me. 'I've put out some feelers and I think there

would be quite a bit of interest. Jeremy at Holbrook's was particularly keen.'

I stare at her. 'I thought this was just a private app, Luce? Selling it is a whole different ballgame. Lots more work, testing, updates . . . It'd be a full-time job.'

'I know, I know. It's just an idea at the moment. Something to consider.' She waves a wooden kebab skewer in the air. 'Think about it, won't you?'

Alex sets his fork down. 'Well, I think it sounds incredible. You must be very talented, Rory.'

He smiles at me and I reach for another kebab. He's charming, I'll give him that. I dart a glance at Lucinda. She's focused on me, but her smile now looks forced.

'Excuse me,' I say, pushing my chair back. Buster has settled down at the edge of the deck, apparently watching out for the return of the corellas. 'I need to go to the bathroom.'

*

I sit with my head in my hands, wishing I was back in my apartment. Long Socks has been back to his normal self – sweeping, reading. Not watching me. Right now, I'd give anything to get my binoculars out, check that he and the other Dossers are alright, then watch for birds. I stand up and flush the toilet.

Tap the sink handle three times, wash my hands. Tap the sink handle three times, wash my hands again. The hand towel has a stain, so I find a new one in the drawer.

'Another hour or so, then you can go,' I whisper to myself in the mirror.

Tap the sink handle three times, wash my hands . . .

After fifteen minutes, I make my way back to the kitchen, finding Alex alone at the benchtop, a fresh bottle of wine in his hands. He smiles at me as he gives the top a sharp twist to open it.

My return smile is a little shaky.

‘Are you alright, Rory? Is something bothering you?’

‘No, I’m fine.’

‘You sure you don’t want a glass of wine?’

‘No thanks.’ I start walking towards the glass doors leading to the deck. They’re shut to keep it cool inside.

Alex tilts his head and watches me. Before I reach the door, he speaks. ‘Rory?’

I screw my eyes up and stop, turning to him with a smile.

‘Can I tell you something?’

‘Sure.’

He walks around the benchtop to get closer to me. I can smell his aftershave. The expensive scent is familiar, but I can’t place it. I feel dizzy, fight the urge to step back. Despite the air-con I break into a sweat.

‘Lucinda told me you have OCD.’ His voice is so soft I almost lean in – almost. ‘I wanted to let you know that I’m somebody you can talk to. I’m a trained counsellor.’ He smiles. ‘A great listener too.’

Lucinda told him about me? About *that* part of me?

She’s never done that before. Bert knows, as do the security guys at the Panorama, and I can accept there’s a need for that. But *Alex*? Lucinda’s boyfriend of just a couple of months? Some idiot who thinks he can control the world with the power of his mind? Anger at Lucinda wars with my uneasiness with Alex’s closeness. His eyes are soft, and his gaze is too intimate.

It should be my decision to tell people. Not Lucinda’s.

‘Thank you, Alex.’ My voice is tight.

He steps back and I move around him, my breath sharp in my ears.

‘Tell Lucinda I’ll be out in a sec,’ he says from behind me, his voice breezy. My skin crawls. ‘I’m making a coulis for the cheesecake.’

Left, right, left. Breathe. Left, right, left. Breathe.

I slide open the glass door and burst out into the summer humidity, almost tripping over Buster. Lucinda is on her haunches, rubbing his ears. She stands up and meets my eyes. Her skin seems flushed under her tan. Was she watching us?

‘Alex is making a coulis,’ I say, trying for a smile.

‘OK,’ she says. She smiles back and pushes her hair behind her ears. She didn’t see it. I’m pretty sure.

I slip past her, taking my seat. Lucinda waits a beat then joins me. We sip our drinks and make small talk, neither willing to return to our earlier argument.

Five minutes later Alex emerges, carrying a cheesecake on a platter. ‘Dessert is served!’ he announces.

My eyes flick over to my aunt. She’s looking at her boyfriend with over-bright eyes, her jaw set.

Is she *jealous*?

*

When I finally climb into the back of Bert’s car my nerves are frazzled.

Lucinda had seemed her normal self, if a little stiff, when she farewelled me at the front door, Alex’s arm slung proprietorially around her shoulders. When he leaned in to kiss me goodbye on the cheek, I lunged backwards and dashed to the car, unable to meet Lucinda’s eyes.

How could she have told him?

And the look Alex gave me in the kitchen. So intimate. I shiver. He’d better not be *manifesting* anything about me. The leather is cool against my back, my stomach full, the mix of seafood and cheesecake making me feel queasy. I press a hand to Buster’s side, drawing comfort from his steady breathing.

The houses flash past, gradually diminishing in size and extravagance as we approach the highway.

‘You right, Rory?’

Bert watches me in the rear-view mirror as we wait for the traffic lights to allow us back onto the main road.

‘Fine, Bert. Thank you. Just a bit tired.’

He grunts. The radio is off and the blinker ticks loudly in the silence.

‘What do you think of Lucinda’s new guy?’

‘He seems fine,’ I say automatically. Bert doesn’t respond. ‘Why?’

‘Oh nothing. I’m not sure he measures up to Lucinda’s standards, that’s all. A bit full of himself.’ There’s a note of disdain in his voice. ‘Fancy clothes. Expensive food. Did he cook lobster or something else la-di-da?’

‘Swordfish. And prawns and scallops. It was very good.’ I’m not sure why I feel the need to defend him.

Bert grunts again. ‘You know she pays for all that? Despite all that new age crap he goes on with. Spiritual garbage.’ He blows out his lips in disgust. I kind of agree with Bert on this one. ‘He lets her pay for *everything*.’ His eyes once more meet mine in the mirror, then the cars in front start moving and he follows them onto the highway. ‘She gives him money to go shopping for clothes too.’

I’m surprised at this. Does that make Lucinda his, what, sugar-mummy? She’s only been seeing him a few months – surely she wouldn’t be funding his lifestyle already. I know he shares a house with a friend in Lindfield, though I don’t know if he owns or rents. Perhaps he’s not as wealthy as he seems.

Lucinda *is* generous. That’s all it is. I say as much to Bert.

‘Maybe. But taking money from a woman isn’t something any self-respecting man would do.’

I don't say that in my limited experience – books I've read, and the internet – men are as likely to want something for nothing as any woman. 'If he was any sort of a real man he wouldn't accept her cash.' He's driving faster now, too close to the hatchback in front of us.

'I guess,' I say, trying to remain objective.

Bert changes lanes without warning. My hands grip Buster's fur more tightly and he lifts his head to look at me, his gaze reproachful.

'*He* drives her around sometimes now. Did you know she's bought a fancy new sports car? A Mercedes. It's red. Said she wanted "something fun to zip around town in".' He says the words in an almost mocking tone. 'But I haven't seen her drive it yet, only him.' Bert hesitates, then adds, 'And she hasn't sailed in weeks.'

Lucinda loves sailing. She took it up when we moved to Sydney. She told me that she enjoyed the rush of wind in her face as she raced across the harbour, the physicality needed to haul in the boom, the agility required to move around the deck. The quick-thinking nature of the sport and the inherent danger of the ocean reminded her of being a cop.

Lucinda enjoys all the adrenaline sports. She skis every year, usually Whistler or Aspen. And I know she bungee-jumped several times on her last trip to New Zealand. I think she enjoys the social aspects of sailing too, just like she enjoys mingling with golfing high-flyers on the nineteenth hole after a game, or drinking Bollinger with media moguls at polo matches.

'It's probably just the first flush of new love,' I say. 'I'm sure she'll be back out on the water soon.'

Bert doesn't answer. I glimpse the side of his face as he steers the car down into the Harbour Tunnel. His jaw is set. But then his shoulders slump and he slows, the lights casting an unearthly yellow glow over his tanned skin.

It hits me then.

Bert is jealous.

He is in love with Lucinda. He always has been.

It is so obvious I want to slap my forehead. For someone who prides herself on being an excellent judge of people, how could I be so obtuse?

I turn to stare at the blank wall of the tunnel.

If something like this managed to slip under my radar, what else might have?

1.29 pm

Monday, 23rd January

Two days later Bert is his usual taciturn self as he picks me up after my session with Dr Shaw.

He doesn't mention Alex, but he does present me with an extra-large coffee. Perhaps it's his way of saying, *Let's never talk about this again, Rory*. The summer weather has become wearying, with the humidity suggesting a storm is building. I climb into the air-conditioned car gratefully, watching Sydneysiders sweat as they negotiate the windless streets.

As we leave North Sydney a group of girls of about Farrah's age, wearing bikinis with towels slung around their shoulders, make for the station. Barefoot, laughing, they all wear those bottoms that cut right up their butt cheeks, unconcerned that they are almost naked while surrounded by businesspeople and tourists. I haven't worn a swimsuit since before . . . I don't think I even own one anymore.

My phone buzzes. Lucinda.

'Hi. How was Dr Shaw?'

'Yeah. Fine. Good.'

This is the first time we've spoken since the lunch at her place and there is still a weird vibe between us.

'I'm glad.' She pauses. 'So, Rory. What'd you think of Alex? Truly?'

'He's great, Lucinda.' I compensate for my uncertainty about Alex by being over-cheerful. 'And he's a brilliant cook.'

Thank him again for lunch, won't you?

'Sure. Look, I'm sorry if he came off as intense. He can do that sometimes. It's just his passion. He's actually a really smart guy.'

'I can see that. It's all good.'

She hesitates again. 'About the hotel . . . the barman . . . your dad. You aren't planning on doing anything stupid like that again, are you, Rory?'

Heat rips through me. 'Like what, Luce? Taking charge of my own life? God forbid. Look, I've got to go, we're here.' I jab at the phone, ending the call.

We pull into the drop-off area outside the Panorama. I farewell Bert and open the door. 'Rory, you haven't forgotten have you?' he asks.

I scrunch up my face. 'Oh shit. It's grooming day, isn't it?'

Once a month Bert takes Buster to a salon the next suburb over to get trimmed and washed. The place costs a bomb but Buster comes back smelling amazing. It takes a couple of hours so Bert drops him off, has lunch, then delivers him back home. 'I'll go get him. Back in a sec.'

I enter the building, my step faltering at the sight of Blayde at the front desk.

'Hey, Rory.'

He's seated behind the counter facing the computer. This is the first time I've seen Blayde working on his own. His face is flushed and there's a small cut above his right eyebrow with a Steri-Strip over the top. On the desk in front of him is a protein shake, an oversized water bottle, and two phones. He sees me looking and slides both phones into the desk drawer, then stands and stretches, his biceps flexing under his work shirt, which is tight across his chest.

Blayde's physique is the sort that takes a lot of work, though I don't find his type of thickset, muscular body attractive. Quite the opposite. He lowers his arms, looking at

me as though expecting admiration. As I continue past he addresses me in a too-casual tone.

‘Have a good session?’

I halt. *Session? What does he know?*

‘Yes, thank you,’ I say warily.

‘You’re lucky.’

I go to walk on, but he continues talking and I’m forced to wait.

‘To have a driver who drops you right at the door. I’m on a bus and then a train to get here from Penrith.’

I don’t respond, but he goes on anyway. ‘Living with my mum at the moment. It takes bloody hours. Lookin’ to find a place of my own, but. Man, I could handle living somewhere like this, eh?’

He grins, then gestures to my watch. ‘Nice watch. The latest Apple?’ I nod. ‘I’ve got a Garmin. Not new, but it’s great for training.’

He lifts his wrist to show me his fitness watch. He examines me for a second longer then opens his mouth again, so I butt in. ‘Sorry Blayde. I’ve got to run upstairs and get Buster. He’s getting groomed today.’

‘Oh, right. Even the dogs round here get fancy treatment, eh?’

I don’t answer, just walk as quickly as I can to the lift and press the button. Thankfully one is waiting.

Inside, I tap each mirror three times until we reach my floor. I wonder what Ron and Ian have told Blayde about me. Too much, if he knows about Dr Shaw. Dr Shaw had just been telling me I need to accept the bad that comes along with the good of living in the Panorama if I’m going to stay here and be happy.

Blayde belongs in the first camp.

I fetch Buster and his car restraint and lead him downstairs. Blayde looks up as we appear. ‘Ah, the little guy!’ he says. I ignore him again and take Buster out to the car. As I open the back door Bert puts his phone away. He watches, slightly frowning, as I attach Buster’s collar to the car restraint and press the other end into the seatbelt buckle. Buster stares at me reproachfully. He doesn’t like grooming, or going in the car without me, and he seems to know what’s coming.

‘Thanks Bert. See you in a couple of hours.’

Bert gives a curt nod and starts the car. I watch as he merges into the traffic, then I return inside. This time Blayde pretends to be engrossed in the computer screen as I make my way over to the lift, but I feel his eyes on my back as I wait, my skin crawling.

I *tap, tap, walk, tap, tap, walk* around the lift as it rises, unable to shake the feeling that something is very wrong.

*

I’ve just had a minor breakthrough, solving a problem I’ve been having with Lucinda’s app that’s been frustrating me for days and I’m making myself a hot chocolate as a reward when she calls. After arriving home I’d folded a small pile of paper cranes, then written up a report, tamping my uneasiness down.

I look at the screen, remembering how I spoke to Lucinda earlier that day and, though I’m still angry, I know I’m at least partly responsible for our argument, so I take a deep breath and answer, prepared to be friends again.

‘Rory.’ The way she says my name makes my heart sink. ‘Something has happened. It’s bad. Bert was attacked outside the grooming salon.’

‘*What?* Is he —?’

‘He’s fine. He wasn’t hurt, thank God. He’d just picked up Buster when a man with a knife approached him.’ She pauses. ‘But the man took Buster.’

My chest is tight. I can’t speak.

‘I’ve spoken to the police. Apparently this has happened before. Thieves are targeting the grooming places for purebred dogs and selling them off.’

‘I need to get over there.’ My voice cracks.

‘Buster’s long-gone, Rory. I’m so sorry. I’ll come over and tell you everything. I’ll be there in —’

I end the call and press more buttons with clumsy fingers. ‘Come on, Farrah,’ I urge, as the call goes to voicemail. ‘Farrah, call me please. It’s urgent.’ I leave my door open and scurry across to Simon’s apartment.

I press the button, then bang on the door. He appears seconds later.

‘Rory? What is it?’ Simon’s hair is dishevelled and he’s unshaved. He’s in stained trackpants and an old university t-shirt. From inside I hear music – early INXS.

‘It’s Buster. He’s been stolen . . .’ I can’t finish.

‘Hey,’ Simon says, holding my gaze. ‘Come in.’ I shake my head and step backwards. ‘Let’s go back to yours then. I’ll grab my keys.’ He returns inside for a few seconds, then follows me to my doorway. I babble as we walk, telling him what Lucinda told me.

‘A dog-snatcher?’

‘That’s what Lucinda said. Oh God. Dad’s taken him, hasn’t he?’

‘We don’t know that, Rory.’

My phone buzzes. It’s Farrah.

‘Rory? I’m getting groceries with Mum. What’s happened?’

‘Buster is missing.’ I picture my dog’s liquid black eyes, his tufty ears that prick up when I call his name. I struggle to get the words out.

‘Ah, shit. No, Mum, we don’t need cornflakes,’ she calls out in an aside. ‘I’ll be back soon. I’ll come straight over. Is Simon with you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. We’ll find him, Rory. Don’t panic.’

*

Lucinda arrives, insisting I take both Panadol and Nurofen, which I do without demurring. My limbs feel heavy, like I’m walking through water.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

She introduces herself to Simon, who then ducks home and changes into jeans and a clean t-shirt, returning in record time. He sits beside me on the sofa. I ask Lucinda a million questions about what happened to Bert and Buster and she answers patiently, though she isn’t able to tell me much more. Bert is at home. She says he wasn’t harmed, he’s just nursing a bruised ego.

‘He’s so sorry about Buster, Rory. He wished he’d fought back, but he said the man was very professional. He came and went so fast Bert said he hardly had time to react.’

I imagine Buster in the arms of a stranger. Someone with a knife. What would they do to him?’

‘It wasn’t my father?’ I manage.

‘What? No. Bert said the guy was small, kind of rat-faced. Definitely not Eddie.’

My intercom buzzes and I jump up, a flare of hope inside. ‘I’ll get it!’ Lucinda says, returning a minute later. ‘It’s Alex. He’s downstairs. I told him to park in the car park and to use my fob to come up.’ When she sees my face she looks hurt. ‘He asked if he could come. I hope that’s alright?’

‘Of course,’ I say, trying not to sound annoyed. ‘That’s very nice of him.’

‘How long ’til Farrah gets back?’ Simon asks, sensing something between us.

‘Not long. She texted me earlier.’

Lucinda walks to the front door and Simon and I sit in near silence until we hear Alex’s ‘Hello!’

They come in together.

When Alex sees me he looks genuinely upset. ‘Rory, I’m so sorry. When Lucinda told me what happened I had to come.’

‘Thank you.’ Great, now I feel bad for not wanting him here. ‘I appreciate that.’

Lucinda introduces Alex to Simon and they shake hands. I’m struck by the difference between them. Alex, so poised, so confident, with his coordinated outfit and expensive aftershave. And yet Simon is the one who I watch, the one I can’t look away from.

*

When Farrah arrives I’m still sitting on the sofa. Simon is making small talk with Alex about the current cricket tour of England while Lucinda pulls out mugs for tea. The low voices of the men and the rumbling of the kettle should probably be calming, but I’m on edge. There are too many people in my apartment. My fingers itch to fold paper cranes.

I’m hunched over on the sofa, counting in my head when Lucinda lets her in. She introduces Alex and herself to my new friend. Farrah says hi and then hugs me, her hair smelling of vanilla shampoo. She draws away and takes in my face.

‘Oh, Rory!’ Her own face is flushed. ‘I told Mum about Buster and she let me come to visit, as long as I don’t annoy you, she said. I told her of course I wouldn’t annoy you. I can’t believe he’s gone!’ She lets out a sob. ‘I bought this. I thought it might help.’ She holds up a tub of chocolate ice cream, then squeezes her eyes shut. ‘Sorry, that was stupid of me. Ice cream can’t help with this.’

Farrah goes over to the kitchen and puts the tub in the freezer. I follow, going through everything again. Afterwards, we all hover awkwardly around the bench.

‘Should I order pizza?’ Farrah asks, looking at the others as though she needs to be doing *something*.

I beg them not to, the thought of hot cheese making me feel ill. Farrah searches the kitchen and finds my sourdough loaf. She toasts uneven slices, serving them with butter and Vegemite. I retreat to the window as the others eat.

‘Should we talk to the police again?’ Simon asks Lucinda.

‘There’s no need. Bert and I spoke to them, so did Patrice, the owner of the grooming salon. There’s not much else we can do, I’m afraid.’

‘We could call the pound?’ Simon suggests.

‘Great idea.’ Lucinda nods. ‘You never know. Maybe Buster will show up.’

‘What about his microchip?’ I ask. ‘Can’t the police use that to find him?’

‘I asked them that.’ Lucinda sighs. ‘The microchip isn’t a tracker, so the police will only be notified if he turns up at a vet clinic or the pound and they check it. The thieves could always remove it too.’

I suppress a shiver at the thought of someone slicing into Buster to remove his chip. ‘Before you ask, I called our vet and had them give the police the number. Now it’s just a waiting game, I’m afraid.’

The lull in the conversation tells me how little hope any of us have.

‘It’s not fair. Poor Buster.’ Farrah sounds almost as despondent as I feel.

‘We’ll find him, Farrah,’ Simon says, then turns to me. ‘Someone must have seen something. I’ll go to the groomer tomorrow.’

I smile at him gratefully, but something feels wrong. The coincidence of it. Yes, Buster was a pure-bred bichon frise, but he wasn't a puppy. Would he be an obvious target for dog thieves?

Or is this something else entirely?

I clear my throat. 'I don't mean to be rude, but I'd like to be alone now, if that's alright?'

Simon and Farrah look at one another, while Lucinda takes a step towards me. Alex puts a restraining hand on her shoulder.

'Are you sure, Rory? I can stay the night if you want? Sleep on the sofa.'

'No, I'll be fine. I just want to be alone,' I repeat.

Though these are my favourite people in the world, Buster is all I can think about. He's been my companion for six years now. He's my best friend.

Lucinda lingers after the others leave, sending Alex down to the car. 'You hang tight, Rory. We'll get through this. Stay safe. Lock your door. Use the catch. OK?'

She pats me on the arm and leaves.

*

I double-lock the door and do laps of the apartment, counting backwards by sevens from a ridiculously large number that I know still won't be big enough to help me calm down. After a while I stop to put kibble in Buster's food bowl as if that might lure him out of his hiding place.

Where are you, Buster?

I pause at the window, looking over at the Dossers. It's fully dark now, and I fetch my new night-vision binoculars and train them on each man I can see, one by one. The green tones make Sad School Teacher – Gerry – appear even more maudlin than usual. Skinny Santa sits alone in the gutter. I linger a while on Long Socks, but his skinny shape on the

cardboard doesn't move. The binoculars continue right, past the next Dossier, then another. They are trained on the edge of the camp now, almost at the train line.

A large shape fills the screen. A man. A big man. He's wearing a cap, but I'm sure it's him.

My father. He's staring at the building.

At me. Again.

My heart thudding, I dart to the bench for my phone, then go back to the window.

He's gone.

Fuck.

I lower the phone and take my binoculars onto the balcony. I peer through them again. I can't see him. The Dossers are all where they were a minute earlier. I point the binoculars towards the entrances and exits to the car park. No one. I look up and down the street, even directly below, but whoever it was, they're gone now.

I stand at the balcony taking ragged breaths, letting the cool air wash over me.

Stay safe. That's what Lucinda said. Dr Shaw agrees that I'm safest in my apartment. But Buster is gone and I don't feel safe. I scour the night sky, willing the Powerful Owl to appear, hoping for a sign. There's nothing but stars. My eyes find Orion, look to it for guidance.

I know what Lucinda would say.

Stay inside.

I'm sensible. The door is locked and latched. No one can come in. Certainly not my father, if he did take Buster. And yet I don't feel safe in my own home anymore.

Perhaps it's finally time to venture outside.

*

Once I decide I need to visit the Dossers, I switch off the lights and sit watching them for an hour.

Other than Bully Boy staggering over to urinate on the grass beside his patch, there's no movement. It looks quiet over there, almost peaceful.

Do it, says the voice. Go.

This time, I listen to it.

I change into black jeans, a navy hoodie and black sneakers. Examining myself in the mirror, I feel more than a bit ridiculous. My blonde hair glows like a lightbulb so I gather it into a ponytail and add an old navy-blue cap. Better. In a khaki backpack from the back of my closet I place my night-vision binoculars, and after some hesitation, a small kitchen knife. I tell myself I won't need it, though I feel better with it in there.

I leave the apartment before I can change my mind, eyeing Buster's usual place on the sofa with a pang of sadness.

I take the stairs. It's quiet at this time of night and my shoes squeak on the concrete.

Ron starts when he sees me, no doubt because of my bank-robber's outfit.

'Rory. I heard what happened. It's terrible.'

'Thanks, Ron. I'm going over to Dossers,' I say.

'What?' His eyebrows raise comically high.

'I thought I saw something earlier and I need to check it out.'

'What did you see, Rory?' Ron stands up. There's a small stain on the hem of his polo shirt. It looks like blood but is probably tomato sauce. 'It's not safe for you to go over there. Not at this time of night. Perhaps I could go instead?'

'No. I'm tired of people doing things for me, Ron. I need to do this myself.'

‘Hold on then . . . Emmanuel might be able to call in and cover for me. I’ll come with you. Just give me a —’ I cut him off as he reaches for his phone.

‘No. I’m going now.’

‘Rory, I’m really not sure . . . You’re upset. I know that. But —’

‘I’m twenty-six years old, Ron. I can do this.’

He comes out from behind the desk as I bolt to the exit. He’s torn. He wants to follow me but isn’t supposed to leave the desk unattended, especially at night.

I walk through the revolving door.

Outside, I pause. This is different from walking to Bert’s car. I am properly alone. Free. My skin tingles. But it’s not with fear.

No, it’s anticipation.

The darkness proves to be a blessing. There are few cars and fewer people around. The sky is clear, the stars familiar. They’re guiding me, watching over me. I find Orion’s Belt. The hunter. I pull my shoulders back. That’s me. A hunter. Like Orion. Like the Powerful Owl.

There are many different myths and traditions about Orion’s Belt. My favourite says it represents strength; that if you go outside and stand and look up at it, you’ll see a vision of yourself in a better light.

Well, I’m finally outside.

I smile, sucking in a lungful of air before crossing the almost empty road. There are no lights in the camp and the piles of detritus loom larger than they appear from my apartment. Everything looks strange. Familiar, and yet the angles are all wrong. I’ve never seen Dossers up close and from ground level before.

I turn around and peer up at my apartment. It’s dark. I’ve left my bedroom light on, and the living room is dimly lit. I’d

be clearly visible in there – something I’ve always known, I guess, but standing here makes it real. My father would certainly be able to recognise me. I take in the rest of the building. Both Simon’s and Farrah’s apartments are in darkness. Others have their blinds closed, while in several, televisions give off coloured, flickering light. In the lobby, Ron is on the phone, alternately nodding and shaking his head. He’s not happy.

I continue up the verge to the car park. My feet know where I’m headed. Long Socks. Though I’ve never spoken to any of the Dossers, I know it’s him I need to talk to first. I wonder what he’ll be like, if he’ll be able to help me. I keep my eyes peeled for my father, though I’m not actually expecting to see him. If he’s here, he’ll be hidden.

My footsteps are quiet as I cross the grass, and I tread gingerly when I reach the concrete. The air smells sweet and sour, like rotting garbage and urine. Long Socks’s cage is up ahead.

I walk towards the chain link fence and stop a metre or so away. Long Socks is stretched out on top of a threadbare woollen blanket, the kind Mum used to lay over our legs on cold nights. I remember the texture of that blanket, heavy and scratchy.

His chest rises and falls. Up close he is almost skeletally thin. A strange sense of déjà vu washes over me. As if we are old friends reunited, or he’s a celebrity I’ve seen on TV and am now meeting in real life. I realise there are things in his cage I can’t see from my apartment. In a hidden corner there’s an upturned cardboard box that acts as a table, a half-empty bottle of Tabasco sauce on it, along with a small pile of paperbacks, plastic cutlery in a takeaway coffee cup perched on top.

I step forward and grasp the wire with both hands, wishing I’d asked Ron if he knew Long Socks’s real name. I can’t very well call him Long Socks.

‘Hello?’

His eyes flash open. They are pale blue and as alert as if he's been awake the whole time.

'What do you want?' His voice rasps. His skin is yellow-toned, and he shuffles backwards to sit up against the brick wall, then lifts a hand to rub his chin. His shirt looks several sizes too large, his arms like sticks poking out from it.

'My name is Rory. I live in the Panorama across the road.' I jerk my head towards the building behind me. 'I wanted to ask you a few questions, if that's alright.'

He doesn't respond.

'What's your name?'

He waits for a long time, and just when I think he's not going to answer, he says, 'Harold.'

'Hi Harold. Harry?'

'Harold.'

'Harold, I was wondering if you've seen a big man over here watching the building? Tall, and broad, with short hair?'

His eyes narrow. 'I know you. You're on the third floor.' He regards me as if I'm an animal escaped from a zoo. 'You look older up close.' I flush, glad for the darkness. 'You live next to the man who brings a different woman home every weekend.' He makes a tut-tut sound. 'Wouldn't have happened in my day. Brazen, he is. Doesn't care who's looking when he goes at it. Against the window, one time. Putting on a show.'

'You're the only one in the building with a dog,' he continues. 'The only one. The real fancy lady on level eight has a cat, and a pair of young things on four have a cage with a budgerigar in it. A pretty yellow and green one.'

His eyes soften. 'I like budgerigars. Clever birds. But you – you've got that stupid fluffy dog.'

I bristle. 'His name is Buster. He's gone missing. That's why I'm here. I think the man who's been watching me might have taken my dog.'

‘Someone’s been watching you, have they?’ His lip curls. ‘You watch us, though, hey? I see you. With your telescope and binoculars.’ He tilts his head. ‘Watching a bunch of losers. Don’t you have anything better to do?’

‘I —’ I start, but there’s nothing I can say to that.

‘I’ve seen a big man here, yes. He’s been hanging around for about two weeks now. Not every day, mind. Just a few times I’ve seen him.’

My blood turns to ice. ‘Did you see him today? Did he have a dog?’

He scowls. ‘No dog. Definitely not your little thing.’ He pauses, then continues. ‘He smokes. And he knows better than to bother me. Which is more than most of the other no-hopers around here.’ He picks at a scab on his elbow with a dirty fingernail, gives a sly smile. ‘Don’t you like being watched, missy?’

Suddenly, I am angry. I can’t believe I fretted over this man, worried for his life, for his health. I’ve cooked him meals, for fuck’s sake.

‘Why do you live here?’ I ask.

His smile disappears. ‘It’s my home.’

‘You don’t have a family? A wife? Children?’

He grunts. ‘I left all that behind years ago. The day my youngest kid turned eighteen.’ He scratches red welts on his forearm, probably infected mosquito bites. ‘I haven’t seen them since.’

‘But . . . why?’

‘I worked my arse off for nearly forty years. What did I have to show for it? Fuck all. Same company. Day in, day out. I hated that fucking job. Bookkeeper,’ he adds as I open my mouth to ask. It’s like he wants to get it off his chest.

‘Controlled other people’s money. Never had enough of my own. Not according to my wife, anyway. So, I did my duty.

Got all three kids to adulthood. Then I was out of there. I'm happier living on the streets than I ever was in Castle-fucking-Hill.'

He bends over and grabs a Coke bottle from near the bed and raises it in a toast.

'I drink what I want. I eat what I want. I read all day. And anything else I do is my own business.' Nearby, one of the other Dossers cries out in his sleep and I flinch. 'I don't need Marjorie or her fucking bridge nights and holidays at fucking Noosa. She loved stupid dogs too. We had two of those little poodle-crosses. Couldn't stand their yapping.' He points at me. 'I definitely don't miss them.'

'What about your kids? Do you miss them?'

'No.' He is curt and lifts his chin as if daring me to prove him wrong.

For all that I've watched him, I realise I don't know Long Socks – Harold – at all.

'Were you friends with the man who was murdered the night before New Year's Eve?'

'Friends!' He snorts. 'With Joe? Why? Were you watching? You see what happened?' He stands up, moving fast. In a flash he's at the wire. Up close his eyes are watery, with sleep in the corners. His face is grimy and he reeks, a sour body odour. I step backwards, my heart racing.

'No. I didn't see anything. I wondered if you did.'

'I didn't see a thing. The guy deserved it though.' His tone is vicious.

'Why?'

'He was stupid. Stupider than your dog, even. Got himself mixed up in some shit he shouldn't.'

'What sort of shit?'

He shrugs evasively. 'I wouldn't know. But he should have minded his own business. That's how you survive on the

streets. That,' he grins, 'and a little bit of cunning.'

Long Socks lets go of the wire. He turns his back to me, talking over his shoulder.

'But you'd know all about that, darlin', wouldn't ya? You're sly as a bloody fox.'

*

Harold's cackle hounds me as I hightail it back to the Panorama.

Outside feels less friendly now, the night darker. Eyes are trained on me, I can sense them.

I step onto the road, Harold's words swimming around my head. I leap back at the blare of the horn from an oncoming truck, its headlights blinding. My heart batters against my ribcage as I stand in the gutter, the driver yelling something I can't hear over the roar of the engine.

Ron has come outside and waits for me, the door revolving behind him. 'Are you OK, Rory?' He jangles the wad of keys in his hands, his usually neat grey hair ruffled.

'I'm fine,' I say in a brusque voice, striding past him and inside. He follows. Safe again, I breathe in the familiar smell of the Panorama. Vanilla air freshener and expensive cleaning products. It couldn't be more different from the Dossers' camp.

'I called your aunt,' Ron says as I make for the lift. I stop and turn back. He has the grace to look embarrassed. 'She said to tell you she'll come over first thing in the morning.'

'I told you I'd be fine, Ron.'

'I know, I know. But I couldn't do nothing. What if something had happened to you?' I couldn't tell if Ron was concerned about me or about his job.

'I'm sick of people watching out for me,' I snap. I can see the irony but continue anyway. 'I'm not a child anymore.'

‘I know.’ He raises his hands and the keys clank together. ‘I’m sorry.’ Ron looks so worried.

I sigh. ‘It’s fine, Ron. I’ll see her tomorrow, I guess.’

I enter the lift but suddenly the idea of going back to my apartment without Buster is intolerable. I press ‘11’.

Please be alright, Buster. Please.

I say the words over and over until the lift reaches the roof. I hurry out as soon as it opens, then scrabble with my fob to open the vestibule door. I whisper Buster’s name as though somehow he might be up here, waiting for me. But the rooftop is empty.

This is your fault, the voice hisses. You said you’d throw him off the roof!

Grey clouds are visible in the black sky, hanging over the Opera House. It smells like rain. I catch a glimpse of the rear of a late train as it disappears into the tunnel. Peering straight down, I see cars following one another along the road, a snaking trail that disappears into another tunnel. A man – I recognise him as Leo Rankin, out for his regular weeknight run – exits the Panorama and starts jogging, his reflective vest like a beacon in the dark as he reaches the Domain. He’s doll-sized from this height. I imagine what it would be like to fall from here, how long you would feel scared for before it was all over. The thought makes me light-headed.

My head is fuzzy. Full. My knuckles shine white on the balustrade.

I look at the Dossers’ camp, which is undercover and almost invisible in the dark.

A few fat drops of rain spatter on my arms and I turn my head. The Harbour Bridge has vanished in a sea of grey haze. The rain is almost here.

Where are you, Buster?

I hope he is somewhere warm and dry. I hold in a sob.

The rain hits, hard and cold, and I stand and let it wash over me.

*

In my apartment I change from my wet clothes into pyjamas then start checking the locks on my windows and closing the blinds. I picture the way the footpath looked from the roof. So far below. Almost inviting. I keep my gaze away from the Dossers, resisting the urge to spy on Harold with my night-vision binoculars. I don't want to see him looking back at me.

The thought of him across the road isn't as comforting as it once was.

*

With a pang I throw away the food I'd put in Buster's bowl, then sit in his spot on the sofa, his favourite toy dinosaur in my lap. The dinosaur is dressed as Santa – my Christmas gift for him – and has several small holes in it already. It's only a matter of time before Buster begins pulling the stuffing out of it. I swallow over the lump in my throat.

If he comes back.

He *will* be back. I have to believe it. I rise and walk over to my desk, open my laptop and examine the bookmarks I've saved at the top of the browser. I hover over a tab labelled 'Buster', skipping past the first few bookmarks in the extensive list, which are sites for dog food and worming tablets. I click on the fifth bookmark.

A page appears, the title reading 'The Best Pet Trackers and GPS Collars'. I've saved several links to pet trackers in this list, having researched them ages ago but resisted the urge to purchase any. I didn't want to give in to my compulsions, so I told myself I didn't need them, that Buster was safe in my apartment.

Of course, now he's gone and I'm kicking myself for being such a trusting idiot. I should have bought a tracker the day I got him. If Buster had a tracker on when he went missing, I'd have been able to find him.

I spend some time rereading the articles, comparing the products. Some trackers have additional functionality, acting like doggy Fitbits, counting your pet's steps and even helping you decide if the animal gets enough food and sleep. One tracker even says it has algorithms to help determine if your pet is licking, scratching, drinking or sleeping too frequently. Another spruiks the fact that it can tell you if the ambient temperature around your pet is too hot or too cold.

I'm not interested in any of that. I ignore all the trackers that skew towards calorie-counting and decide on the one with the most accurate and powerful GPS system I can find. It can pinpoint an animal's current position in real time, updating every two to three seconds, and is one of the few that also allows the user to see where the animal has been, offering a map that is extraordinarily detailed. The battery-life of this tracker is another selling point in its favour – it lasts five days – and the tags are water-resistant.

Like most GPS tracking systems, it has an app I can download, and though it costs a small fortune upfront and then every month via a subscription service, I don't care. Lucinda gives me a generous allowance and I spend only a fraction of it, mostly on food and books. This will be worth every cent. To be prepared, I order three extra trackers. They are small and sturdy, easily attached to a dog collar.

I've missed my chance to save Buster this time, but if – *when* – he comes back, there'll be no chance he'll ever go missing again. I save the system to my cart and hit *Pay Now*, spending extra for express delivery.

*

By the time I finish it's one in the morning and I'm beat. I complete my checks and climb into bed about two, taking Buster's dinosaur with me.

I lay there wondering how Long Socks – I can't get used to thinking of him as Harold – can hate dogs so much. Not only dogs. People. *Everything*. He'd been so unpleasant. Long Socks wasn't the elderly gentleman I'd expected – he was an

offensive old shit. It wasn't much of a comfort to know I'd been right about him – about his job, the fact that he had a wife. Though he certainly hadn't spiralled into homelessness because he'd been grieving. Quite the opposite. He was someone who wanted more control over his life, and who would go as far as becoming homeless to get it. As I pluck a ball of fluff from the dinosaur's holey stomach with my fingernails, rolling it between my fingers, I realise something.

Long Socks is me.

Controlling. Alone. Friendless.

The only difference is that I have a roof over my head.

8.31 am

Tuesday, 24th January

I hear Lucinda's key in the lock as I'm drinking tea at my desk.

She marches into the room and dumps her bag on the kitchen bench. Her face is tight with fury.

'Rory. What the fuck were you thinking going over to Dossers?!'

'I thought I saw something.'

'Your father?'

'Yes.'

'So, did you find him?'

'No.' I can't keep the sulky note from my voice. Like I'm a teenager.

'We've been over this! You could have been killed. Someone was murdered over there just a few weeks ago and they haven't caught whoever did it!' She drops onto the sofa and I note the bags under her eyes. 'I was so worried.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh Rory,' Lucinda says. She sounds as though she's at the end of her rope. 'Perhaps you should go back to hospital for a while. Just until you get a little better.'

'What? Are you serious? I'm not going back there!'

It's been eight years since my last stay in hospital. A flood of memories from that time hits me like a tidal wave. The dread of those measured footfalls as they approached my room, the screams and crying of the other patients, the smell of disinfectant and flowers. I see black spots behind my eyes and stumble to the kitchen bench, leaning on it. I've worked hard to stay out of that place, and there's no way in hell I'm going back.

'It helped you last time.'

'It nearly killed me, Lucinda,' I rasp.

'Don't be melodramatic, Rory. You're not acting rationally.'

'Rationally? Someone has been in my home. Buster has been stolen. Of course I'm not rational. I'm a mess!'

'You're putting yourself at risk. You're ignoring my advice. Not to mention this obsession with your father returning. It's not him, Rory.' She's emphatic. 'It can't be.'

'Well, who was in my apartment then? And who took Buster?'

'Buster was stolen by thieves – opportunists. I don't know who was in your apartment – yet. If anyone was here at all. But you can be assured we'll keep it secure now. You're safe in here, Rory.'

'Fuck being safe, Lucinda. Someone has come into my home.' I pause. 'I'm going to go back to Bowra Creek. Tomorrow.'

'What? Why?'

'I can't do nothing. I may not be able to find Buster, but I can try to find Dad. I'll start there. Talk to his old friends. Find out where he might have gone.'

She hesitates, and when she speaks it's in a placating voice. 'Rory, honey. I don't think that's possible.'

'Why?'

‘You’re not capable of going all that way, talking to those people – putting yourself out there – like that. Out in the real world. How do you think it would affect your OCD? Going back to the place where your trauma happened? Not to mention it’s what, a seven-hour – eight-hour – drive? You can’t do it, Rory. I’m sorry.’

I walk into the kitchen and fill a glass with water. My hand is shaking. I take a sip. Outside it’s a perfect summer day. Blue skies, fluffy clouds way up high. I should be out there, enjoying the sunshine. As usual I’m inside.

Inside, looking out at the world.

Heat surges behind my eyeballs. Lucinda is right. How would I get to Bowra Creek? Who would I talk to? And more to the point, who am I kidding? This is me, Rory Campbell. I can’t walk around the rooftop of my building without counting how many laps I’ve done, or worse – far worse – almost being overwhelmed with the impulse to throw my dog over the edge.

The glass slips from my fingers and hits the stone benchtop, shattering. I stare at the pieces, then – I don’t know why – I pick up the largest shard. There’s a sharp pain as it punctures the flesh of my index finger. I let it fall, putting my finger to my mouth and sucking at the bead of blood before it can drip onto the benchtop. The metallic taste makes me feel sick.

‘Rory?’

Lucinda has moved to the other side of the bench and watches me, her expression pinched.

‘You’re right, Luce,’ I say in a tiny voice. ‘I can’t do it. I’ll stay here.’

*

Lucinda doesn’t stay much longer.

She sweeps up the fragments of glass with my dustpan and brush while I grab my first aid kit from the bathroom cabinet and find a Band-Aid. As I wrap it around the tip of my finger

in a fashion I hope will stay in place for more than five minutes, she tells me that the next strata meeting is in three weeks. Hopefully, she says, the security cameras will be fixed or replaced soon after that.

Three weeks?

I don't say anything, but after she's gone I sit back at my computer. Apparently if I want something done about the security cameras around here I'll have to do it myself.

This time I hover over the tab that reads 'Security'. From the long list I choose a link that reads 'Wifi Security Cameras.' If I'm going to put up my own cameras they need to be wireless, otherwise I'll need an electrician and won't be able to avoid seeking permission from the strata committee. I'm aware that I'm technically not allowed to put cameras wherever I want in the building – there are laws about that sort of thing – but if the Panorama won't look out for me, I'm prepared to take matters into my own hands.

There are dozens of cameras to sift through. The first ones are wall-mounted – meant for people to see, like the ones we already have in the building. Not what I'm looking for.

What I want are spy cameras. I check the list again and choose a website that proudly proclaims it sells 'everything for the modern spy' and scroll through the products. So many everyday items can have cameras hidden inside them. There are fake reusable coffee cups, fake pens and car keys, real clocks and alarm clocks, portable speakers and even sunglasses. The website sells a heap of other stuff too. Bug detectors, listening devices, drones, appliances that can change your voice or hide your IP address.

What I want is something simpler. I need a hidden camera aimed directly at my front door – there are no security cameras in the hallways, just in the lift, the lobby, and the car park and loading docks. I need something that offers motion detection as well as great quality footage for both night and day.

A number fit that brief, so I narrow them down to the cameras with the best quality footage, then buy several. First off, I get one to put in the planter box outside the lift. It's the perfect spot to cover my front door. One option would be to buy a new planter with a built-in camera but repotting the peace lily into something different might be noticed. Instead, I find a tall, slim portable camera that I am sure will be camouflaged among the hanging leaves.

I read some of the hundreds of reviews. Most agree it is reliable and easy to install, though the short five-star review posted by 'Barb C' titled, 'Caught Red-Handed!' gives me a moment's pause. 'This camera exceeded my expectations. Caught my now-ex in bed with my neighbour. Although hurt by his behaviour, I'm glad I found out before the wedding.'

Am I prepared for what I might find out?

I look towards my front door, imagining my father knocking on it, or worse, slipping a key into the lock and stealing into my apartment again. My skin prickles.

I'm ready. Like Barb C, I need to know.

I buy that camera and several others, thinking perhaps I'll find a use for them later. Two wall clocks, an alarm clock, a pen and a fake smoke detector. Again, I pay a premium for express delivery.

I close my laptop, pleased to have taken some action.

I run my plastered finger over my phone, wondering if I should tell Lucinda what I've done. Or Simon or Farrah. But I don't. Lucinda will berate me for taking matters into my own hands. Farrah will be gleeful, Simon worried.

No. I push the phone aside.

I'll keep this to myself.

*

My cat hits the floor with a thud. 'Suzie!' I cry. Blood seeps from her mouth.

There is red behind my eyes. I run at my father, teeth bared, scratching at his face. 'You fucking prick!'

His curled lip is the last thing I see as his fist strikes my jaw and I fall backwards, my head smacking on the table as I pass out.

I wake to the sound of my mother moaning. I force my eyes open. I see Suzie, the blood congealed, a single blow fly buzzing around her head. But then my ginger cat morphs into beautiful, fluffy Buster, the blood obscenely dark on his white fur. And then he's Suzie again.

And now Theo is beside Suzie on the floor, his back to the fridge. His eyes are terrifyingly empty. Blood leaks from a cut on his forehead and drips over his nose – which looks broken – down into his mouth and over his chin. He slumps to one side, his eyes closing as my mother makes a sound like a wild animal. My father is gone.

'You've killed him,' Mum whispers. She kneels, her back blocking my view of Theo's bloodied face. My last sight of him is those blank eyes.

Dead.

9.05 am

Wednesday, 25th January

I'm on the sofa, hugging the photo of Theo and me.

Last night's dream was shockingly vivid. My head is leaden and stuffy. Maybe I'm getting the flu.

I hold the photo up and examine it, running a thumb over Theo's grinning face as if I'm wiping blood from it. He's gone. And now Buster is too.

In the picture, Theo's smile is wide and open. I don't remember him smiling like that as he got older. He was always so contained, so worried. Worried about Mum, probably. Her issues, Dad's treatment of her – and of us. He never confided in me, but I could see it in the way he hovered at home instead of going to shoot baskets with his friends. The way he stayed up watching footy with Dad, when I knew how much he hated him by then.

But if he hated Dad, then Theo adored Mum.

Her eccentricities – her mental illness – never bothered him. Not like they did me.

I touch the photo again. The thing I never understood was how Dad could do that to Theo. I get him killing Suzie – he always hated cats, and he was a vicious prick. But Theo was his favourite. Not so much when he was a little kid, but once he started working out. *A chip off the old block*, I'd heard him tell a mate once. *Bench pressing 120 kilograms. Don't tell him*

but that's more than I could at his age. His admiration for Theo seemed inverse to Theo's for him.

I sit the photo on the coffee table and head to the bathroom for drugs. I swallow two each of Panadol and Nurofen, washing them down with cold tea. That's more than usual, and if I had something stronger in the apartment – OxyContin, pethidine, morphine – I have no doubt I'd take them, too, despite my usual rules.

On my way back to the sofa, there's a knock on the door. I tiptoe over to the peephole, but before I can look through it I hear Simon's voice, then Farrah's. I unlock the door. Farrah holds a wad of papers in one hand, her skin splotchy. Simon looks ruffled, but when he smiles at me I feel a tiny bit better.

'Come in.' I lead them to the living room.

'I've made these,' Farrah says as we hover awkwardly in the middle of the room. 'Posters. To get Buster back.' I take the piece of paper she offers me. At the top in a large font is the word 'MISSING'. In the centre there's a gorgeous photo of Buster. He's sitting with one paw lifted to 'shake'. At the sight of his serious little face the breath is sucked out of me.

'I took that the other day when you were in the bathroom.' She gives a sad smile. 'He wanted a Twistie.'

At the bottom it reads, 'If found, please contact Simon,' with a phone number and the offer of a \$500 reward. I look from one to the other.

'I'll pay the reward,' I say.

Farrah glances at Simon. 'Of course. If that's what you want.'

I hand her the poster back. 'Thank you for doing this.'

'No problem. Mum's going to drive me over to the grooming salon and we'll put them up in nearby cafes. Someone will have seen something.'

'Can I have some? I'll go later too,' Simon says.

Farrah smiles at him.

Part of me wants to tell them that it's a waste of time, but it's good of them to try to help. I sit and the others follow suit, Farrah putting the pile of papers on the dining table first.

'Do you want to talk to the police yourself, Rory?' Simon asks. 'I know Lucinda and Bert have already seen them, but I'm sure they'll talk to you.'

I shake my head. 'No. They won't do anything. It's too late, anyway. Buster is gone. I won't see him again.'

'Don't say that!' Farrah says, her voice wavering. 'We'll find him, won't we, Simon?'

A look passes across his face, then he banishes it. 'Of course,' he says, but it's clear he doesn't believe it.

Farrah considers us both. 'Well, *I'm* not giving up. And neither should you, Rory! I know you're scared and worried for Buster. Just don't give up. Simon and I will put up the posters but you have to do something too.'

'Like what, Farrah?' I snap at her. 'What can I do? It's hopeless.'

Farrah stands up and starts pacing back and forth in the small space. 'I don't know. Something. Anything. If it was me, I'd do whatever it took.' She turns to me and claps her hands together. 'You could find your father. Track him down. See if he has anything to do with this.'

'That's what I wanted to do. I told Lucinda yesterday I wanted to go back to Bowra Creek to find him, but she pointed out that I was incapable of that. Besides, he's dangerous.'

She throws her hands in the air. 'Uh, duh, Rory. There's this little thing called the internet. Perhaps you've heard of it? You're meant to be the tech-head here.' Her tone is sharp. 'Search for your father online. And what about his parents, or other siblings? Didn't you tell me he has brothers and sisters? Perhaps one of them has heard from him. Just *do something*.'

I stare at her, opening and closing my mouth like a fish.

She blows out her cheeks. ‘Anyway, whatever. I’m going to hang the posters.’ She marches over to the pile of papers and picks them up, leaving a wad for Simon. ‘Let me know what you decide,’ she says, then heads down the hall without waiting for a response. The door slams.

‘Well, she’s a force to be reckoned with, isn’t she,’ Simon says in a dry tone. ‘I wouldn’t want to get on her bad side.’

I don’t respond.

‘Rory?’

I sigh. ‘Farrah is right. I can’t give up. Did I tell you about when I got Buster? Lucinda bought him for me. It was almost six years ago. I’d moved out of her house and into the Panorama a year earlier. She needed space and I wanted a place of my own, so she bought this apartment and I moved in. I’d been having a rough time getting settled and then one day she shows up with this tiny fluffball of a puppy.’ I smile at the memory.

‘Man, he was cute. Things changed for me almost instantly. I mean, Buster didn’t make me “better”, but he calmed me. He grounded me. When it came right down to it, he was a reason for me to live.’ I hesitate, then almost whisper the next words. ‘Sometimes the only reason.’

I swallow hard, then continue. ‘He was my best friend. My companion.’ I wrap my arms across my body. ‘He’s why I’m alive today.’

Simon is silent for a few seconds, then squeezes my hand and lets it go. ‘Shit – well now we really have to get him back.’ He clears his throat. ‘What do you want to do?’

I stand up and walk to the balcony doors. It’s a fine morning, warm and sunny, the kind Sydney does so well. On days like this I usually sit out there with a cup of tea, Buster on the chair by my side. We watch the joggers in the Domain, the women in skirt-suits and sneakers, mothers pushing prams. On those days I feel like I’m actually a part of the city.

Down at the Dossers I see Sad School Teacher sitting on the grass, his face to the sun. He appears to be smiling. Long Socks is asleep in his cage.

I turn back to Simon. 'I'll do what Farrah suggested, see what I can find online. I mean, I've googled Mum and Dad before, but I've never really been interested in Dad's siblings. Farrah might be right. Perhaps one of them will know where to find him.' I start pacing. 'I know Lucinda and Dad have three other brothers and a sister.' I try to recall what I know about them, realise it isn't much.

'I haven't seen them in years. Not since Mum's funeral.' From the corner of my eye I see Simon shoot me a sharp look, but I can't get into Mum's death with him now. 'Dad was the oldest, then Brian, Angela, Steven and one more before Lucinda . . .' I scrunch up my face. 'Tim! He was in jail, last time I heard. Robbed a servo. He didn't come to the funeral.'

I go into my bedroom and return with my laptop. 'Steven was my favourite. He visited once or twice when I was a kid. He used to give me and Theo lollipops.' I shake my head at Simon's raised eyebrows. 'That sounds creepier than it actually was. Also, he did that magic trick with a coin, you know, the one where it disappears and they pull it from behind your ear?'

I plonk myself beside Simon and google Steven Reynolds. There are thousands of hits. I try Facebook and it's the same. None of them are obviously the man I remember. Simon makes tea while I search different permutations of Steven's name, then try it alongside 'Bowra Creek' and 'builder', since I think that was his occupation.

Nothing.

I sip the tea. 'Well, that was useless. I'll try Angela next. She was a bit bossy but she was the closest of Dad's siblings to my mother.'

Facebook soon tells me Angela died from breast cancer four years earlier. I examine the photos on her page, which is

filled with tributes about what a wonderful mother and friend she was. I'm struck by her physical similarities to Lucinda, though Angela was bigger-boned. She appeared to be very sociable, judging by the number of selfies taken with friends at various restaurants in Melbourne, where she'd lived at the time of her death.

It sounds terrible, but I find it difficult to care too much about Angela's death, since I can hardly remember her, though I do feel bad for her daughter, Louise – my cousin – who was obviously close to her mother, judging by her Facebook comments. I remember Louise giving me a makeover the one time she visited with her parents when I was around eleven. She'd been nice.

Given Tim's criminal past, I try Brian next. Almost immediately, I find him. My scalp prickles. He looks like my dad, but bald and a little slimmer.

'Got him.' My voice cracks.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

According to Facebook, Brian is a computer programmer, married late, with two teenage children. His posts are lovely, but they totally creep me out. It's like seeing what my father would have been like if he'd been a good father and husband. I scroll down, see Brian riding on a steam train with his son on his lap, cycling with his family in what looks like Tuscany, building sandcastles at the beach, his kids laughing. He has such a strong resemblance to Dad. It's weird. Unsettling.

'Are you alright, Rory?'

'Yes, he just looks so much like my father.'

I pause on an old photo of Brian with his newborn daughter in his arms, a rapturous smile on his face as he gazes down at her. I clear my throat. 'I'll message him.' I type out a short note, not going into details, only telling Brian who I am and that I'd love to catch up to ask him a few questions about my father.

'OK. Sent.'

Simon slaps his knees with his palms. ‘Great. I’ll make more tea?’

‘Thank you,’ I say, and he stands up.

While the kettle boils I find Brian on LinkedIn. There’s more about his work. He specialises in cyber security, helping companies keep their systems safe from hackers. He looks smart and well respected. He doesn’t mention going to Bowra Creek High School, but I’m not surprised – that’s not exactly something you’d advertise to prospective employers. I’m reading about his work history when Simon reappears with a mug of hot tea. I check my messages.

‘Oh.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s Brian. He’s replied already.’ I hesitate, then open the message and speed-read it. ‘He wants to meet me.’ A thrill runs through me. ‘He says he hasn’t seen Eddie or Lucinda for years but would be happy to chat about the past. He works from home – he’s in Enmore – and since it’s a public holiday tomorrow he can meet with me then if I want.’

I look at Simon, who wears a slightly concerned expression. ‘Tomorrow. What do you think?’

‘It’s up to you, Rory. I can drive you. I’m free tomorrow.’

‘Really? That would be great.’ I tap out a message, telling Brian I’ll see him about 3 pm, then putting my computer on the coffee table. ‘I do feel better knowing that I’m doing something.’

Simon leans over, picking up the photo of Theo and me. ‘You haven’t talked about your brother much. What’s he like?’

‘Theo?’ I can’t keep the bitterness from my voice. ‘I used to think Theo was great. My big little brother. My protector. But he left me.’

I run my fingers over the watch.

‘He’s dead.’

1.38 pm

Thursday, 26th January

I texted Farrah this morning, just the word ‘sorry’.

She’s a kid who – rightly – expects more from me. But I don’t know if I can be that person. I’m afraid I’ll let her down.

I decide to wait ’til I get back to tell Farrah about my meeting with Brian. Perhaps by then I’ll have a plan of attack, somewhere to start my search for my father and Buster.

I haven’t told Lucinda about the meeting I’ve set up with her brother either. She had already suggested I take a couple of days off work, so at least I don’t need to make up an excuse. I don’t like going behind her back, but I’m sure she’d disapprove. Try to ground me or something.

At two I lock the apartment and go downstairs to the lobby. Simon needed fuel, so he’s arranged to bring the car to the front door of the Panorama afterwards. My phone map says it should take less than half an hour to get to Brian’s house, but we want to give ourselves plenty of time, and in Simon’s words, ‘factor in twenty minutes for parking’.

Blayde is behind the desk, hunched over something I can’t see. He glances up. The cut on his forehead hasn’t healed yet. ‘What’s up, Rory?’ He slips something into the top drawer then returns his unnerving gaze to me. ‘Sorry about your dog. I hope nothing else has gone missing? No break-ins?’

‘No. All good.’ My voice is icy.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘Just going out.’

He pauses, then scrounges in a drawer, withdrawing a packet of chewing gum. He sticks some in his mouth. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll keep a special eye on your apartment.’

I want to snap at him to stay away, but he chews the gum, his face studiously neutral. I spot Simon’s car pulling up and leave without responding. Outside it’s humid, the air still. I open the passenger door almost before the car has come to a complete stop.

‘What do you think of Blayde?’ I ask as I climb in.

‘I can’t say he’s my favourite person, but I try not to judge people when I haven’t known them long because I’m so often wrong.’ Simon shrugs. ‘Possibly he’s incompetent, though.’

‘Yes, maybe that’s all it is. Let’s go.’

*

In the car, we barely speak. Simon is concentrating on the unfamiliar streets, and I’m nervous. The car’s smooth-talking GPS lady is the only noise until my phone buzzes. An unknown number. I let it go to voicemail.

‘This is it.’

Simon double-parks in a narrow street lined with renovated terrace houses and tall trees. Brian’s house is a three-storey terrace painted in two-tone grey, with black lacework verandahs and several leadlight windows. Black and white checkerboard tiles lead to a red front door. It’s gorgeous. Worth a small fortune. There must be a lot of money in cyber security.

‘Oh shit. A car’s coming.’ Simon glances in the rear-view mirror. ‘Perhaps you should jump out and wait here? I’ll find a park and come back. Or is that too much?’

My eye flicks to the house, the tidy footpath. The street is deserted. ‘No, it’s fine. You go practise your parallel parking.’ I manage a smile. ‘We’re a bit early, but I’ll go and introduce myself to my uncle. I think I can do that on my own.’

I grab my handbag and open the door, then lean back into the window from outside. I try not to let Simon see how nervous I am. ‘Thanks. See you soon.’

‘Good luck. I’ll be as quick as I can.’

He drives off, an impatient tradie in a ute behind him.

I spin around and take in Brian’s house, which looks more imposing now that I’m alone. I glance up, seeing a curtain fall back into place out of the corner of my eye. I feel a prickle of concern.

Before I can change my mind I open the gate and walk up to the front door. I press the old-fashioned doorbell, hear it echo through the house. Sweat beads on my upper lip. I start counting down from 500 in threes. I’m at 476 when I hear footsteps. Moments later the door opens and a man appears.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

*

Brian could be my father. Just slimmer, taller, and bald.

‘Rory! You look exactly the same. Perhaps a little better than the last time I saw you.’

He means Mum’s funeral.

Brian wears boardshorts and a yellow t-shirt and his feet are bare. ‘Come in. I didn’t realise how hot it was today. I’ve got the air-con cranked in here.’

He opens the door wider and motions me into the cool house, then shuts the door behind me. I follow him down a hallway with immaculate timber floors, emerald-green walls, and an eclectic art collection. ‘I’m working out the back in the kitchen. Let’s sit out there and I’ll put the kettle on.’

The hallway opens up to a sizeable addition to the terrace. It’s modern, with a black and white kitchen and a vast expanse of window at the rear, a small turquoise pool and lush gardens on display. There’s a huge timber dining table with papers and two laptops open on one end of it. The walls are decorated

gallery style with family photos and framed children's drawings. It's such a comfortable space, despite the obvious money spent on it, that I feel immediately at home.

'My wife's out with friends and the kids are visiting their grandparents. Carol's parents, obviously,' he clarifies with a wry smile, 'so it's just us today. Tea? Or coffee?' He waves a hand at the wall of appliances. One of them is a coffee machine.

'Tea is great, thanks.'

'Like your mum,' he says, smiling. 'She was always drinking tea.'

'She was.' I haven't thought of that in years, but he's right. She used to leave half-drunk cups around the house when she was tidying up the place. 'Why did you say "Carol's parents, obviously"?''

'Oh, because . . .' His brow furrows. 'I thought you knew . . . My parents – your grandparents – are both dead. They died a few years back. For Dad it was heart disease, for Mum, a stroke.' He's very matter of fact. 'You didn't know?'

I shake my head. Lucinda never spoke about her parents.

'I guess you didn't have much to do with them over the years?'

'No. I only met them once or twice.' In my memory, they are overweight and unfriendly. Mum never took us to see them and Dad didn't visit them often – not that I can recall anyway.

'I don't want to sound like a bastard, but they weren't great people.' He shrugs. 'I can't say I miss them. But that's life, sometimes, hey?'

I nod agreement and Brian bustles around the kitchen. He puts the kettle on and removes a large blue teapot from a cupboard, along with a couple of mismatched mugs.

'How do you take it?'

'Just milk.'

The bell rings. Brian stops pouring and looks at me. ‘Oh, that will be Simon,’ I say. ‘He’s a friend – he drove me here.’

‘I’ll let him in.’ Brian leaves me alone for a minute. My fingers itch to snoop, riffle through his papers, search the laptops. Instead, I check the voicemail message on my phone. My stomach clenches at the smooth voice.

‘Hi Rory. It’s Alex. I got your number from Lucinda’s phone. Look, I wanted to touch base so you have my number. I know you must be feeling pretty alone right now, with Buster missing, and as you know I have counselling experience so if you need someone to talk to, please reach out.’ A pause. ‘Right, well, don’t be a stranger, Rory.’

I turn the phone off. Why would Alex call me? Did Lucinda ask him to?

As male voices come from the front of the house, a small black cat, not much more than a kitten, slinks in from a side door that’s been left ajar. It scrutinises me with intense yellow eyes that remind me of the Powerful Owl, then lopes over to the armchair in the corner. The animal jumps gracefully onto the chair, curls into a ball and closes its eyes, enjoying the sunlight. I hear laughter, and soon after Brian appears, Simon close behind.

‘Ah,’ says Brian. ‘I see you’ve met Jinx. She’s our newest baby.’

Simon catches my eye and grins. ‘I did it! I parked! Parallel parked. In a small space too. That’s a good little car, handles well. I’m not much of a driver,’ he adds for Brian’s benefit.

An amused Brian offers Simon tea and at last we sit at the empty end of the table, mugs in front of us.

‘So, Rory, you wanted to talk about Eddie and Lucinda? As I said in my email, I haven’t seen either of them since I left Bowra Creek and moved to Sydney. I couldn’t wait to get out of that town. Thank God I got a scholarship for uni.’ He

grimaces, as though even contemplating Bowra Creek is too much.

‘After that I did a stint as a teacher for ten years, out past Dubbo. Part of me loved it – it’s where I met Carol. She taught English and History in the same school.’ His eyes light up, and I envy his obvious contentment.

‘Oh, I forgot, I did see Lucinda briefly at your mum’s funeral, but we barely spoke. It wasn’t long after that I retrained and moved into cyber security. I love it. It’s kind of like legal hacking.’ He picks up his tea and takes a sip.

‘What does your company do?’ I ask.

‘We do it all.’ He grins. ‘Most businesses are woefully underprepared for the possibility of a cyber-attack. We protect a company’s networks, apps, data, cloud stuff. You name it. But not just that, we help them revamp their policies and systems. It’s a huge job.’

‘I’m creating an app for Lucinda and I was reading up on SQL injections recently.’ I shake my head. ‘I need to protect the data in-app – it’s pretty confusing.’

‘It is. But if you’re researching it, you’re doing the right thing.’ Brian gives me an approving look. ‘That’s hardcore stuff, Rory. If you need a hand, give me a call. I have a no-charge policy for nieces.’ I smile and he continues. ‘I saw that Lucinda’s in the private sector now. I’ve come across her company through work. People I know, know her, that sort of thing. Security’s a pretty tight-knit community.’ He half smiles. ‘I never felt the need to get back in touch though. We’re not that sort of a family.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, just that we weren’t close. To be honest I think all of us kids were all pretty happy to go our separate ways as soon as we were old enough.’

He stands up and walks to the fridge, hunting around in there until he finds an open packet of Tim Tams, then returns

to the table and sets them between the three of us. I'm struck by his lack of pretension – it reminds me of Lucinda.

‘Though actually, I’ve been half expecting Luce to get in touch with me for years. The kind of work I do could be valuable to her.’ He bites the end of a Tim Tam, chewing quickly before continuing. ‘I thought she might want to work together.’

‘You’d do that?’ Simon asks.

‘Sure. We might not be a close family, but Lucinda’s smart and we work in similar fields. It might be mutually beneficial. I wouldn’t be against it.’

‘Her business is doing really well,’ I say.

‘Well, that’s wonderful. Have you seen her recently?’

‘Yes, we have dinner every week. She was my guardian after Mum died and we’re still close.’

‘Oh yes. I remember now.’

‘I work for her, too, writing surveillance reports.’ I tell him about Lucinda’s fancy North Shore house and new boyfriend.

‘I’m glad she’s found someone.’ He pauses. ‘And I’m so pleased you’re doing well. Seriously, Rory, it’s wonderful. After what happened with Theo, and then your mother . . . I’m happy for you. I’ve thought about you often over the years, you know.’

He sips his tea and I shift in my seat, then move the conversation back to the purpose of my visit.

‘Brian, you’re sure you haven’t seen Dad lately? Heard from him at all?’

‘No. Not since I left town . . .’

‘It’s just . . . I’m sure I saw him a couple of weeks ago. On surveillance footage from work. In Sydney. He didn’t get in touch with you?’

‘No. Wow.’ I must seem like I don’t believe him because he adds, ‘Truly. I’d tell you, Rory. After what he did.’

I think he’s telling the truth. ‘Could he be living on the streets?’

His eyebrows raise. ‘Shit. I don’t know. He’s certainly got the, what do they call it – street smarts – for it. And the fists.’ He flashes me a look. ‘I guess I wouldn’t be that surprised if he was.’

I glance at Simon, who’s been quiet. His lips are pressed together, his gaze on the cat in the corner. I catch Brian’s eye.

‘Did Eddie do something, Rory?’ asks Brian.

‘I’m not sure. Someone was in my apartment. And my dog was stolen.’

‘And you think it might have been Eddie?’ I shrug. ‘That is a worry.’ He sets his mug on the table. ‘I could put some feelers out for you if you really want to find him? I’ve got several good police contacts.’

I sit up straighter. ‘Seriously? That would be amazing.’

‘No problem.’

Simon clears his throat. ‘What was Eddie like as a child, Brian?’

Brian leans back. He taps his hands on the edge of the table. ‘Why do you want to know? It’s all so long ago. It’s got nothing to do with what’s happening now, surely? Can’t we just let the past stay in the past . . .?’ His posture is rigid, and for the first time today he seems uneasy.

I set my elbows on the table and clasp my hands together. ‘Sometimes we have to remember the past to move forward, Brian. I’m alright. I can take it.’

What a load of crap, the voice sniggers. You have nightmares about the past.

He hesitates a moment longer, then exhales, as if resigned. ‘Eddie was a bad egg, even as a kid. He was smart,

charismatic – and a bully. He could charm the pants off a person and he knew exactly what to say to get what he wanted. But – and you know this, Rory – he was a different person behind closed doors.’ He holds my gaze. ‘Ruthless. Mean. Controlling.’

A memory flashes of a time when Dad, Theo and I were waiting in the car for Mum to go to a barbecue with one of Dad’s old school friends. We’d been sitting for fifteen minutes, my father drinking from a bottle of beer, and telling us what he and his friend had gotten up to when they were our age – mean things, including throwing another kid’s school bag from the second floor onto the head of the biggest nerd in school – which we found fascinating, in a nervous kind of way.

He took a slug of beer and I asked how much longer Mum would take. Dad looked at me in the rear-view mirror. ‘I don’t know, Rory. A while probably.’ Then he smiled and added, ‘One day, you’ll be like your mum, you know. Scared and sad and stuck in the house. You’re just the same as her. Mark my words.’ Dad finished his beer and bellowed for Mum, who came scurrying outside, a bowl of potato salad in her hands.

I snap back to the present as Brian continues. ‘But Eddie could work hard if he wanted to. He got the job at the tavern while he was still at high school, worked there for years and made himself indispensable to old Dennis, the owner. Eventually made manager. He was well known in town. Well respected.’ He hesitates. ‘Most people couldn’t see through him.’

‘What about Lucinda?’ Simon asks. ‘What was she like as a child?’

‘Oh, Luce was a sweetheart. Shy. Timid.’

I can’t imagine the tough Lucinda I know as a timid child.

‘The baby of the family. Man, she copped a lot from us though. I remember one time Steve and Tim locked her in the shed at the bottom of the garden. It was full of spiders and other crawly things. Pitch black inside. Poor Lucinda

screamed and screamed. I let her out, but she'd been stuck in there for an hour. Gives me the shivers thinking about it. She was so pale when I opened the door.'

A pang of pity for Lucinda runs through me. She's always been terrified of spiders. They're one of the few things she's scared of, even now.

'Lucinda was always at the bottom of the pecking order,' he continues, 'and we weren't a kind family. I remember at dinner once Eddie reached across her to get the salt and Lucinda just cowered from him. We gave her hell for that, trying to make her flinch for days afterwards. It's no wonder she joined the police force. She wanted to claw back some power, I guess.'

'Did it work?'

'Oh yes. She did well in the police. She was even involved in Tim's arrest. Did she tell you that?'

I shake my head.

'Our parents were livid. Went on and on about her being too big for her boots. They thought she'd made a pact with the devil when she joined the force.' He chuckles. 'Mind you, Tim's arrest surprised no one, not even Mum and Dad. He'd been a petty crim for years. The only real surprise was that he hadn't been caught earlier.' Brian rolls his eyes and smiles sadly at me. 'I'm not painting a very positive picture of our family for you, am I, Rory?'

I half smile. 'I didn't know about Tim, but from what Lucinda's told me over the years, I have a pretty good idea about what the family was like.'

'I honestly am pleased she did so well for herself. Most PIs have been struggling over the past few years, you know. People like me are taking their jobs. Bloody computers, hey? The same few PI companies are all fighting for fewer surveillance jobs.'

Something furry brushes my leg and I almost jump up, then look down and see Jinx. She rubs her teeth against my

shin and purrs loudly.

‘You’ve done well for yourself too, Brian.’ I wave a hand to take in the house.

‘Yeah, getting out of Bowra Creek was the best thing I ever did. Getting away from my toxic family. I’ve made a new one. A better one.’ He regards me seriously. ‘I’ll see if I can help you find Eddie. I’ll do some online digging and contact my police mates. I’ll give you my number. Call me if you need any more information, OK? And be careful, Rory. When your dad couldn’t control things – people – that’s when he’d lose it. If I was you, I’d leave the Reynolds’s far behind. Make a new life for yourself.’

Brian is right. I want to have a normal life. I want to let my father go. Of course, whether I’ll actually ever be able to do it is another matter.

Just then the cat bites me on the ankle, scrabbling at my bare skin with sharp claws. I yank my leg away, peering down to see beads of blood forming.

But first things first. First, I have to find him.

*

Simon and I walk back to the car in silence.

It feels hotter out here now that we’ve grown used to the air conditioning. We’d stayed and talked to Brian for a while longer. After I managed to get past his resemblance to my father I could see how much he was like Lucinda, too. Both of them held their mug the same way – using two hands – and when Brian sneezed he did it several times in quick succession, like Lucinda does.

I hear voices and falter. It’s a couple across the road laughing as they walk their dog. I glance at Simon and he smiles reassuringly.

‘Brian’s great,’ Simon says. I think he’s trying to distract me.

‘Yeah. He is. I don’t remember him well, but he seems lovely.’ I wish we’d had more to do with Brian when I was little. Perhaps things might have ended up differently if Dad had a brother to confide in, to pull him up on his bullshit and his behaviour. Maybe.

We reach the main street with its assortment of restaurants, bottle shops and takeaway places and stop on a corner, waiting as a pack of Lycra-clad cyclists speed around it in fits and spurts. My stomach is clenched and I’m concentrating on keeping my breathing slow and calm. I hear a lawnmower and heavier traffic in the distance.

I don’t like being exposed like this.

Sweat drips down my lower back, makes my hair damp. Simon clears his throat softly and I look at him. His brow is wrinkled, but his eyes are sympathetic.

‘What did your dad do back then, Rory?’ Simon asks in a quiet, careful voice. He hesitates. ‘Do you think he’ll hurt you?’

I picture my bleeding cat. My brother’s body on the kitchen floor.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

My heart races. I spot a gap in the cyclists and dash across the road, leaving Simon behind. I stop in front of an upmarket restaurant, sucking in air. Several tables have been set up on the footpath, only one occupied by a couple eating a late lunch. As I watch, the man cuts into his steak, blood pooling onto his white plate, red and watery.

My head feels light. Before I can fall, Simon is at my side, grasping my elbow. He draws me into the shade of a nearby office awning and waits until I meet his eyes.

‘I don’t want to talk about what happened, Simon,’ I say, my voice cracking. ‘I can’t. But, yes, I think my father is capable of almost anything.’

He dips his head to show he understands and we walk on. He keeps hold of my hand, and though my heart is still beating fast, I don't pull away. For a while we are silent, then Simon speaks in a voice so quiet I have to lean in to hear him.

'Family, hey? It's something else.' He squeezes my hand. 'Ruth was the most important person in my life. Even though she was a few years older than me, I always felt like her big brother. I looked out for her.' His gaze is blank and I can see he is focused on the past. 'We come from a family of high achievers. Both my parents are doctors. And Ruth was academically brilliant.' He shakes his head. 'Her mind . . . she was close to being a genius. But with it came . . . I don't know. Ruth *felt* too much, I think. Everything was close to the surface with her. The doctors put her on drugs as a teenager and they helped her ADHD, her anxiety. She got into medical school easily. Did three years, top of her class every time. But then in fourth year, something happened.'

'This was a year before I started. She stopped studying; she didn't go to class. Finally, she dropped out of uni altogether. I don't know if it was her mental health, or her new boyfriend.' A cloud passes behind his eyes. 'Her boyfriend, he wasn't a nice guy.' His jaw tightens. 'He was a bad guy, actually. He introduced her to hard drugs, to heavy partying. She moved in with him soon after they met and we hardly saw her after that.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry.' He shrugs. 'It was a long time ago.'

Simon clears his throat. 'How about we get a couple of Rosina's pizzas tonight, Rory?' He says it casually, though I sense a measure of nervousness underneath, which surprises me. Simon's the most naturally confident person I've ever met. 'You could come and check out my apartment? I haven't eaten Will's entire Haigh's chocolate stash yet. I could probably spare you a few squares.'

'So generous of you,' I respond, a flutter in my stomach. 'You don't have a performance?'

‘Not today. Tomorrow I have a full day of rehearsals because on Saturday we’re doing a special lunchtime concert. Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto.’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

He laughs. ‘Well, it’s a big thing for a clarinetist.’

He regards me hopefully, but I’m frozen.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

Simon has done nothing to suggest he’s anything other than a great guy. So why can’t I let him in? I drop his hand and am rewarded by an ache in my chest.

‘I’m sorry, Simon. I can’t.’

I focus on the concrete beneath my feet. A long couple of seconds pass before he responds.

‘Of course. No problem.’ He sounds his normal self. I look up and he’s smiling gently at me.

Laughter floats back from ahead and I glance over. It’s the couple with the dog. They walk side by side, pressed close, their arms around one another’s waists. Such a normal scene. My throat is thick.

I want to shove them, elbow them out of the way. Take away their ease, their happiness.

‘Come on,’ I mumble, speeding up. ‘Let’s get back to the Panorama.’

8.00 am

Friday, 27th January

I'm surprised by the doorbell when it rings at 8 am the next morning, and then I remember.

Shit.

Amal.

Somehow, for the first time ever, I forgot he was coming.

I'm still in pyjamas, having totally given up on my routine. I haven't exercised in days. Last night for dinner I listlessly cooked and ate a packet of two-minute noodles I found in the cupboard that were probably out of date. Everything feels too hard. But now Amal is right outside, so I throw on a dressing gown and open the door.

'Hi Rory. Is everything alright?' he asks, looking concerned. 'You didn't confirm your order yesterday, but I thought I'd bring along your usual things in case you forgot. Anything you don't want I'll return, no charge.' Amal takes in my dressing gown and his eyebrows raise a little. I grasp the edges of it and tug them tighter around me.

'Oh Amal, thank you. Yesterday was a write-off. I totally forgot about my order. It's so lovely of you to do this. Come in.' I stand back and let him pass.

'No problem.' In the kitchen Amal starts to unload the bags. 'Where's the little guy?' He looks around for Buster, who normally follows him in, play-biting his ankles and attacking the trolley wheels.

I tell him that Buster was stolen while at the groomers. I can't bear to go into the details again. 'Oh, shit, Rory. That sucks.' He looks suitably devastated. 'Is there anything I can do?'

I shake my head. 'No. There's still a chance he'll be found.'

'Of course he will. I've heard about people stealing pure-bred dogs. But he's been microchipped, hey? The police will find him for sure.' He sees I'm upset and changes the subject. 'Anyway, I've brought sourdough, milk, eggs. There's a few extras from Mum, some more tomatoes —'

A rapping comes from the front door and Amal pauses. 'Sorry, that's my neighbour,' I say, recognising Farrah's knock. 'I'll be back in a second.'

In the hallway Farrah stands with her head bowed. She's drawn her hair back into a severe bun and she wears a black t-shirt and denim shorts with a tote bag slung over her shoulder. Piled up in her arms are several boxes and parcels. She's trying hard to look contrite.

'Rory, I'm sorry about the other day. I shouldn't have said those things. I know you're worried about Buster and I know how much you want him back and I shouldn't have stormed out like that. I'm a hothead, that's what Mum says.' She takes a breath and looks like she might continue, but instead bites her lip. 'Can you forgive me?'

'Of course, Farrah.' I almost tear up. 'Anyway, you were right. I was being a mopey idiot. Come in.'

She straightens up and smiles. 'Oh, thank God for that. I was worried you'd hate me.' She bounds inside, balancing the boxes precariously, looking me up and down. 'You get up late today? No early aerobics?'

'Not today.'

Farrah reaches the living area and stops when she sees Amal, who's emptying the final grocery bag. I see him as she

must, a rebellious-looking youth in an old basketball shirt, his cursive *Nadine* tattoo flexing as his bicep moves.

‘Uh, hello . . .’

‘Amal, this is Farrah. She lives in the building. Farrah, this is Amal, he delivers my groceries.’

‘Nice to meet you, Farrah.’

‘Likewise, Amal. Wow, delivery right to the door – past it, even – right to the kitchen bench! And you unpack too.’

‘All part of the service.’ He grins, then leans towards her. ‘Actually, I don’t do this for all my customers. Rory is a special case.’ He looks at me. ‘We’re friends, hey Rory?’

I nod and give a weak smile.

‘Ah, I see!’

I don’t look at Farrah but I sense her amusement at my discomfort.

‘All done.’ Amal says goodbye to Farrah as he turns the trolley around. ‘If you need anything else let me know, Rory. Mum’s got me working over the weekend and I’d be happy to drop another bag or two over here if there’s something you especially want.’ He pauses. ‘And if you need help finding Buster, I’m your man.’

‘Thanks, Amal.’ I don’t look at Farrah as I show him out. When I walk back into the living room she’s grinning.

‘Wow. Another guy making puppy dog eyes at you. For someone who doesn’t get out much you sure manage to get a decent amount of male attention. It seems you’re flavour of the month.’ Farrah’s tone is teasing.

I think of Alex, and the message he left on my phone. ‘Oh, shut up,’ I grumble, knowing my face is red. ‘Anyway, what are you doing here? Are we supposed to be having a “maths lesson”?’ I make air quotes with my fingers and then start putting away the groceries.

‘No. It’s about something else.’ Farrah comes over to the bench. She puts down all the boxes. ‘Oh, these are all for you, by the way,’ she says, waving at them. ‘What’d you get? The top one says something about pets but I can’t see any labels on the other parcels.’ Her eyes widen. ‘Oh, did you buy treats for Buster before he went missing?’

The dog tracker tags are in one box, the unmarked parcels are the spy cameras.

‘Yes. It’s stuff for Buster,’ I say, a half-truth.

She sits on the stool opposite and I slide the boxes aside. ‘I’ve brought something else too, Rory.’ Her eyes sparkle and she wriggles with excitement. ‘You’ll never guess what it is.’

‘You’d better tell me then.’

She reaches into the tote bag and pulls something out. ‘It’s this!’ She shows me a phone. It’s similar to an iPhone, but a cheaper brand, new looking.

‘It’s a phone.’

Farrah leans forward and gives a throaty laugh. ‘It’s Blayde’s phone.’ She looks at me expectantly, knowing how I feel about Blayde.

My belly tightens. ‘What?’ I whisper, dumping the phone onto the bench as though it might bite me.

‘I took it. He was on duty this morning when Mum and I went out for a walk. She’s been making me get up early to go for walks. It’s this health kick she’s on, we go all the way around the Botanic Gardens.’ She starts to go into detail then stops herself.

‘Anyway, we came back and we were standing right near reception and it was busy with all the other old people who go out walking at the crack of dawn. The Liepeis were there, and the Walshes and then Mrs Thompson – the fit one from level five – arrived too. Anyway, Mr Liepei said he was going to have a spa later and he wanted Blayde to check the temperature, which he said had been too hot recently and so

Blayde left with him and everyone else was talking and I got bored, so I walked away a little and I saw Blayde had left the top drawer open at the front desk. There were three phones in there, so I took one.'

The corners of her mouth stretch down in an exaggerated fashion. 'I couldn't help it. It was calling to me, Rory!'

'Oh, shit, Farrah. You stole his phone?'

'There were three there. I took the one that looked the oldest.'

'Why would you do that?'

'I don't know. I just did.' She's almost bursting with excitement. 'I didn't think he'd notice one was missing and I thought maybe we could see if anything is on it. It was kind of hidden under some papers, the corner of it sticking out. I'm sure he won't even know it's gone.'

'Shit,' I say again. My mind is racing. 'They have a security camera in the lobby, Farrah. He could rewind it and see you taking the phone.'

She pales. 'Fuck. I didn't think of that.'

'We have to put it back.'

She nods, deflating like a punctured balloon. 'Yes. OK. I'm sorry, Rory.'

We assess the phone on the bench as though it's a bomb. 'Was there anything on it?' I ask.

'I don't know,' Farrah says, looking a little shamefaced. 'It's password protected so I couldn't get in.'

I pick up the phone and press the button on the bottom. The home screen – a light blue colour, not a photo or anything that could link it to Blayde – appears. I put it back down.

'It's been, what? An hour or so since you took it?' I ask. She inclines her head in agreement. 'We'll have to hope he hasn't noticed it's missing yet. We have to return it,' I say again. 'Now.'

I picture going down there and facing Blayde. Distracting him somehow. My throat tightens.

Farrah pulls her shoulders back. ‘Not we. *Me*. I took it. I’ll return it.’

‘Farrah —’

‘No, I mean it. I’ll do it.’

‘You can’t do this alone. You’re fourteen.’

‘Hey, don’t underestimate us fourteen-year-olds. I managed to steal it, didn’t I?’

I snort.

‘Let me try. If it’s too hard I’ll come back and we’ll do it together.’

I want to say, *No, I’ll do it, I’m the adult*. But I’m scared. I give a short nod.

Farrah puts the phone back in the tote bag and leaves. I finally get dressed, then bite my nails for the fifteen minutes she’s gone. I’m peering through the peephole when the lift opens and I wrench the door open before she can knock.

‘Yes?’

She grins. ‘I did it.’ I lean a hand against the wall, my legs weak. ‘I started telling him this long story about the ferry race I watched down at the harbour yesterday for Australia Day and his eyes glazed over. He got fidgety after like, five minutes. Tried to hint for me to leave. But I kept on talking until he excused himself to go to the bathroom. He even asked if I could watch the desk while he was in there. Very unprofessional.’

She shakes her head, grinning.

‘So I shoved it back and then bolted when he came back from the loo. I’ve never seen a man so happy to see the back of me. Except perhaps Mr Howlett, my science teacher. He can’t stand my chatter, either.’

‘God, Farrah. You scared me.’

‘Sorry.’

‘You don’t know anything about Blayde.’ I sound as severe as a schoolteacher myself. ‘And most people don’t take too kindly to having their stuff stolen, you know. It’s a habit you should try to break.’

‘I know. I don’t know why I do it.’ She shuffles on the spot. ‘Look, I’d better go. Mum’s taking me to get a haircut, or as she says, to “pay someone to tame the wild beast”.’

‘OK. Please don’t do anything so silly again, Farrah.’

‘I won’t.’

‘And don’t get a mullet.’

She grins. ‘I can’t promise anything.’

As I start to shut the door, she stops me, her expression grave again. ‘Rory. Why do you think Blayde has three phones?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I say, ‘but I can’t think of any reason that isn’t dodgy as hell.’

*

After Farrah leaves I open the parcels, starting with the pet tracker.

I’m surprised at how easy it is to use. The tags are lightweight, each one a different colour with a plastic clip that fastens around the dog’s or cat’s collar. I charge the first tag while I download the app onto my phone and familiarise myself with the features. Once the first tag is charged I replace it with another, then put the first in my pocket and walk figure eights and laps of the apartment. I’m amazed at how accurately it shows my path on the app and how I can look back along the path to see where I was at any given time. I’m very happy with the pet tracking system.

Next, I open the boxes with the spy cameras in them. Most of what I’ve bought I don’t currently have a use for, so I put

those cameras aside. The slim one I'd planned to hide amongst the peace lily leaves is the perfect size, so I sync it with another downloaded app and ensure it is fully charged. I turn it on and aim it at my kitchen, press 'record', then a few minutes later I watch footage of myself unpacking the dishwasher. It's as clear as I'd hoped.

I take the camera and my phone and walk down the hallway to the front door. When I'm sure no one is outside in the corridor I dart across to place the camera in the peace lily, then retreat inside. Onscreen, I see half of my front door and a large expanse of the flocked wallpaper, so I duck back outside and adjust it, moving the camera a little to the left.

I check again.

Perfect.

I stare closely at the pot plant. The camera is well hidden. Unless you were searching for it, you'd never know it was there.

As a final test, I close the app and wait five minutes until the camera turns itself off. I leave my phone on the table then walk into the kitchen and remove the liner filled with rubbish from my bin. I tie it off and go out into the hallway, throwing the rubbish down the garbage chute then returning to my front door, using my key to unlock it before entering.

On the table I can see my phone's home screen is lit up. A notification tells me the camera has been activated. I sit at the kitchen table and open the app. I replay the footage, watching myself appear onscreen, move out of sight, then return thirty seconds later.

The picture is clear.

If anyone comes to my door, I'll be ready.

12.19 pm

Saturday, 28th January

My phone buzzes with a notification from my spy camera as Farrah knocks on the door. I see onscreen that she's holding a foil-covered plate. I flip the phone over and leave it on the table as I rise to let her in.

'I brought you lunch!' she announces when I open the door. 'Mum's pastitsio. Even when she's on a diet she doesn't mess with the pastitsio recipe, so it's good, not "healthy". Want some?'

'Sure. Thank you.'

She comes through into the living room, her eyes drawn to the pile of paper cranes on the coffee table. I'd made them early this morning, after I woke up to the absence of Buster.

'What's all this?' she asks.

'Paper cranes,' I admit. 'Folding them helps me empty my mind.'

'They're beautiful,' she says, walking over and picking one up. 'So tiny.'

'Yeah, I'm pretty good at them now,' I say, failing to keep the bitterness from my voice. I start pushing the cranes into a drawer, but Farrah picks one up and examines it.

'Can I keep it?'

I shrug and she puts it in her tote bag. 'Let's eat!'

We're halfway through – and it is as good as promised – when Lucinda knocks then uses her key to enter.

‘Does she always let herself in?’ Farrah asks, frowning, as my phone buzzes. The camera has been working well. This morning I watched Simon walk past on his way to the lifts, and an hour later Mike took out his rubbish.

I don't answer Farrah as my aunt is already here. She's wearing her linen pants ensemble and holds a plastic bag in one hand. She stops in her tracks when she sees Farrah and me at the kitchen table. ‘Hi Rory. Farrah. It looks like I'm too late. I brought sushi.’

I put down my fork. ‘Oh, wow, thanks Luce. Yeah, sorry, we've had leftovers.’

‘Sushi would have been awesome. More for you, I guess,’ Farrah says. ‘Want some pastitsio? Mum made it.’

Lucinda walks over to the kitchen and puts the sushi on the bench. ‘Thanks Farrah, but I'll have the sushi.’ She addresses me. ‘I'll leave the rest for your dinner.’ She puts some in the fridge and sits at the table with a sashimi box. ‘What are you two up to?’

I shrug. ‘Not much.’

‘I was about to ask Rory if she'd like to come outside for a walk with me. It's such a lovely day.’ Farrah looks at me questioningly. ‘I think she's up to it.’

‘I'm not.’ I respond before Lucinda can. ‘Sorry, Farrah, not today.’

‘Maybe you just need to try.’

‘I have tried. I was out on Thursday with Simon.’

‘You were?’ Lucinda pauses with her chopsticks in the air. ‘You went out?’

Shit. I haven't told her about Brian yet.

‘Simon and I went to Enmore. We met with Brian – your brother Brian.’

Her head jerks back. ‘You did?’

‘I hoped he might know where to find Dad.’

‘You’ve been busy.’ I can’t tell if Lucinda is annoyed or admiring.

‘I have to find Dad.’

She adds a chunk of bright green wasabi to a piece of raw tuna as she asks, ‘Did Brian know anything about Eddie?’

‘No.’

Lucinda chews the tuna, then puts her chopsticks down. She doesn’t ask how Brian is but I tell her anyway. ‘He’s doing well. He’s successful and seems happy. He asked after you.’

‘Really?’ Lucinda opens her mouth and I think she might ask me more about her brother, but then she closes it and concentrates on her sashimi.

‘I think it’s great that you went out,’ Farrah chimes in. She’s finished her food and pushes her plate away. ‘Soon we’ll be going over to the shops together, buying matching crop tops and low-rise jeans,’ she jokes. ‘Ooh – you can take me up to the Cross for a cocktail.’

I can’t help but smile. ‘I don’t think so, Farrah.’

‘With some makeup I’d pass for eighteen, don’t you think, Lucinda?’

‘Oh definitely,’ Lucinda agrees, her voice dry. She turns to me. ‘Do you think going to see Brian was the best idea, Rory? What if you’d had an episode?’

‘An episode?’ Farrah frowns, looking between us. My phone buzzes. I look at the screen. A missed call from an unfamiliar number.

‘Rory?’ Farrah asks.

I put the phone down.

‘She passed out a few times when she was younger,’ Lucinda says, not taking her eyes from me.

‘That was because of my triggers.’

‘You still have those triggers, Rory,’ Lucinda points out.

‘Triggers, schmiggers. Just take me with you when you go out,’ Farrah says. ‘My cousin, Elena, she was always fainting. Low blood pressure. I’d lay her on her back, raise her feet, loosen her clothes. I’m a natural carer. I’d be a great paramedic. I’m very calm under pressure.’

I’m grateful to Farrah for lightening the mood. ‘It’s one of your many skills.’

‘Yes! Totally. You know it, Rory.’

‘It was fine, Luce. Simon took me.’ I push my plate aside. ‘You know what else Brian said, Lucinda?’ She raises an eyebrow. ‘He said you were a sweetheart. He called you “shy”.’

‘Right.’

‘No, he did. And he told me how your brothers locked you in the shed.’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Yeah, they were complete and utter dicks. But I survived.’

My phone buzzes again. It’s the same number. Alex. I slip it into my pocket.

‘Someone calling you?’ Lucinda asks, seeing my face.

‘Just telemarketers, probably.’

‘Well, I’m off,’ Farrah says, taking our plates to the kitchen. ‘Mum and I are seeing a movie. Some arty one, unfortunately, but maybe that means there’ll be a bit of nudity.’ She grins. ‘Then home for a thrilling Saturday night of watching paint dry.’

I quickly wash her mother’s plate and dry it.

‘Think about what I said Rory, won’t you? We *could* go for a walk, you know. I really believe that. Just like I believe Buster will be home soon.’

‘Yes,’ Lucinda chimes in. ‘We’ll find Buster, I’m sure of it. Your life will be back to normal in no time.’

‘Better than normal,’ Farrah says, as I hand her the plate. ‘I foresee that you will be spending this Christmas on a disco harbour cruise. Or on holiday in Chile!’ She smiles at my aunt, looking so young and innocent. ‘I’m very stubborn, Lucinda. I will get your niece outside, one way or another. Once I get something in my head, I don’t let it go.’

‘I can see that.’ Again, Lucinda speaks dryly. I see Farrah to the door. When I return Lucinda is putting her sushi container in the recycling bin.

‘The optimism of youth, hey Luce?’

Lucinda smiles. ‘The young are admirably hopeful. Look, I’d better go. Bert has texted to say he’s here. He’s meeting friends at the yacht club later and I’m seeing Alex. Oh, Alex says hi, by the way.’

Should I mention Alex’s call? Or now, calls, plural?

Maybe not. I remember the way Lucinda looked at me on the day of the barbecue. The suspicion in her eyes. Better not.

As Lucinda waits for the lift I watch the peace lily, pleased to see the camera is invisible. No flashing light, no lens poking out from the greenery.

After she’s gone, I check my phone, which had buzzed several more times. Yep. Alex.

You should tell Lucinda he’s hitting on you, the voice says. She’ll dump the prick then.

He’s not hitting on me, I tell the voice, though I’m not sure if that’s true. My experience with men is so limited, I don’t know what to think. Is he merely being nice? He said he wanted to help me.

I latch the door so it can't be opened from the outside, spend ten minutes linking to the spy camera over the wi-fi on my laptop so I can check it from there, then I switch my phone off. I'll worry about Alex later.

*

'Rory!'

That night I'm sitting on my bed researching the feeding habits of the Powerful Owl when I hear Ron's yell. My computer dings as he pounds on my door. It's after nine.

'Ron. What is it?' He's puffing hard. 'Why didn't you call?'

He puts his hands on his knees and wheezes. 'It's Farrah . . . I know you two are friends. I wanted to let you know she's gone to hospital.'

My blood turns to ice in my veins.

'What? What happened?'

'They found her unconscious on the roof. Looks like she's hit her head. I'm not sure of all the details. The ambulance left a couple of minutes ago. I've been trying to call you. The lift's busy handling the police and paramedics so I used the stairs.'

Oh God. What the fuck?

'I turned my phone off,' I say, feeling numb. I go back inside and fetch it, noticing as I do the blue lights at the front of the building.

The police.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I switch my phone on as I return to Ron, who's still breathing heavily. He needs to cut down on the Monte Carlos or take the stairs more often.

'Did she fall?'

'We don't know what happened. Her parents went with her to hospital. I guess the police will talk to her when she regains

consciousness.’

‘I have to go see her.’ I duck around Ron and knock on Simon’s door. He walked past my camera on his way home from the Opera House an hour ago, the backpack he always takes to work slung over one shoulder, so I know he’s home. ‘Simon!’

He emerges, still dressed in black pants and a white shirt from his performance earlier that day, his tie removed. ‘Farrah’s been hurt.’ I explain what happened.

‘Shit,’ Simon says, shaking his head. ‘The poor kid.’

‘She didn’t look good,’ says Ron with a tremor in his voice. I’d forgotten he was there. My head spins, my legs are weak. Simon holds out his hand and I grasp it like a lifeline.

‘What hospital is she in?’ Simon asks.

Ron gives us the details and address. I go to check the route on my phone and see I have eight more missed calls. I frown, turning to face Simon. ‘Will you take me there?’

‘Of course. Let’s go.’

*

The smell is what I remember most. That institutional smell. Cleaning products and horrible food. I have almost as visceral a reaction to the smell of the hospital as I do to cigarette smoke or chlorine.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

I falter as the lift from the overpriced car park arrives in the lobby, but Simon’s presence at my elbow and my worry about Farrah propel me forward.

We stand in line at the information desk behind a white-haired old lady who is so pale and fragile I fear she might be in shock.

Simon looks at me sideways. ‘Are you OK, Rory? Can you do this?’ he asks in a quiet voice.

I want to vomit. I want to go home.

You should. The voice is nasty. *You can't help her.*

‘Yes. I have to. This is my fault.’

‘It’s not – You think it was your father?’

‘Yes. Of course it was.’

Finally the old lady is led away by an orderly. Her blank gaze would normally make me ache for her, but tonight my mind is filled with Farrah.

‘I’m sorry, but visiting hours are over for today,’ says the matter-of-fact middle-aged woman on duty. Her mouth is pinched, her lipstick faded so that only her dark lip liner remains visible. ‘You’ll have to come back at ten tomorrow.’

‘Please,’ I say, my voice breaking on the word. ‘A friend of ours – a child – came here in an ambulance earlier. She was unconscious. I need to know if she’s alright.’

The woman’s demeanour softens. ‘You won’t be able to see her tonight, but I can make a call to ICU. What’s her name?’

I tell her what I know and she writes it on a notepad, moving to a phone near the back wall to make some calls, speaking so quietly I can’t hear her. Several minutes later she returns.

‘OK.’ She gives me a tired smile. ‘Young Farrah is out of ICU already, and is on her way to the wards, which is a very good sign. She’ll be ready for visitors tomorrow. Come back between ten and two and someone will give you her room details.’

As we return to the car park I check the missed calls on my phone. One was from Farrah, two were from Ron. The other five were from Alex.

Something flutters around inside my chest. Why does he keep calling me?

I remember how close he stood that day at the barbecue.
His whispered words. Is he just worried about me, or is it more
than that?

And does Lucinda know he's calling me?

With trembling fingers, I block his number.

10.21 am

Sunday, 29th January

Farrah's been allocated a bed on a ward, a different woman tells me the next morning. She gives us directions. We take a lift then traverse several long, poorly signposted hallways, getting lost twice.

Finally, a kind-hearted nurse leads us to a private room identical to every other one on the ward. Farrah's parents are seated on either side of her bed.

'Rory!' Farrah exclaims, a shadow of her normal self. She looks even younger than fourteen in her white gown in the hospital bed. Her head is bandaged, her frizzy hair sticking out the bottom of it. 'I'm so glad you came.'

Farrah's mother walks around to greet me. She's in her early forties, with short dark hair and lively eyes. She gives me a worried smile then draws me into a hug.

'Rory, hi. I'm Thea Fotos. And this is John.' Farrah's dad nods a serious smile my way but doesn't speak or move. He has frizzy hair like his daughter, collar-length and receding at the front. With his thick glasses he looks every inch the anthropologist he is.

'It's lovely to meet you,' Mrs Fotos continues. 'Farrah told me you and she had become friends. "Friends with a maths tutor," I said, "whatever will happen next!"' She looks into my eyes and I realise she knows more than Farrah gives her credit for.

‘Mum! Leave her alone.’ Farrah’s right eye looks swollen, her skin sallow. Mr Fotos puts a hand on his daughter’s arm as if worried she might dissolve before his eyes. He is at least ten years older than his wife and appears to be feeling it today. Simon introduces himself, and Mr Fotos reluctantly leaves his daughter’s bedside to shake his hand.

I move to take his place. ‘How are you?’ I ask while Simon talks to Mr and Mrs Fotos.

‘I’m doing alright. Better now they’ve given me drugs.’ She grins. ‘I’m all spacey and that headache has gone.’

‘Yes, the doctors said she was very lucky,’ Mrs Fotos says, overhearing her daughter. ‘She has a concussion, but it could have been much worse.’

‘What happened?’

‘I went up to the roof last night to get some air. I was looking at the Opera House when someone grabbed me from behind. They put a hand over my mouth. I freaked out and started wriggling like crazy and the guy stumbled. I fell and that’s the last thing I remember. Apparently I hit my head on the concrete.’

She reaches a hand towards her head but doesn’t touch it. ‘I don’t remember anything after that. It bled but the cut wasn’t too bad. They were worried that I might have a brain bleed or bruising or something. I’ve had some tests and scans and I’ll have to have a couple more before they let me go. And there’s a huge lump under the bandage. It’s like something out of a comic book!’ She grins. It seems nothing can keep Farrah down for long.

‘Do they know who it was?’

Mrs Fotos shakes her head. ‘The police are coming soon to take a statement. They think she was lying on the ground for twenty minutes or more before Mrs Waters found her.’ Her voice catches. ‘Thank God she had visitors and went up there to show them the view. If she hadn’t arrived when she did . . .’

‘It’s OK, Mum. I’m alright,’ Farrah says. ‘Can I talk to Rory alone for a minute?’

Mrs Fotos looks at me, then nods. ‘Just for a minute, alright? Then you need to rest. Shall we get coffee?’ she suggests to Simon and her husband. ‘There’s a machine in a room at the end of the hall, or so the nurses tell me.’

They leave, Mr Fotos somewhat reluctantly, and I move closer to Farrah. Before I can speak, Farrah starts talking, words tumbling from her mouth.

‘Rory, that’s not the whole story. I haven’t told Mum and Dad what happened yet. I wasn’t sure I should.’ Her eyes go wide. ‘Someone texted me and told me to meet them on the roof. They said they had Buster.’

The breath sucks out of me and I fall onto the plastic seat by the bed. ‘Buster?’

‘Yes. I didn’t know what to do. I rang you but it went to voicemail, and I couldn’t bear the thought of someone hurting Buster, so I went up there.’

‘Oh God, Farrah. How did they even get your number?’

‘I joined a few Facebook pages for missing dogs. There’s one page that just lists pedigree dogs that were stolen when they were being groomed!’ She gives me a sheepish look. ‘I wanted to help. To be involved. I’m sorry. It was stupid.’

I groan, pressing my face into my hands. ‘This is all because of me. You were almost killed because of me.’

‘It isn’t your fault, Rory.’ She hesitates, and something flashes behind her eyes. ‘It must be your dad, right?’

‘It has to be. You didn’t get a good look at him?’

‘No.’ She pauses. ‘He was big. Strong. I could feel that. He had callused hands. They were rough on my mouth.’ She shivers. ‘He grabbed me, then whispered in my ear, “Stay away from Rory. This is your first and last warning.” That’s when I jerked away and he stumbled.’

Tears spring to her eyes. ‘I’m sorry, Rory. I really thought I might get Buster back. But it was stupid to do what they said. I should have seen straight away it was a ruse. But why? Why would your dad involve me?’

‘I don’t know. And you’re not stupid, Farrah. It was very brave of you to go up there.’

I can’t tell her that I do in fact think it was extremely stupid, and that I am angry with her for putting herself at risk. ‘I’m glad you weren’t hurt worse than you were.’

‘I’ll have to tell the police what happened,’ Farrah continued. ‘They’ll see the message on my phone. And anyway, maybe it will help them catch your father.’

I sigh. ‘Of course. Yes, tell them the truth. Anyway, it’s probably for the best. If my dad’s attacking my friends, we need to involve the police.’ I scrub a hand over my face. ‘I should have done it earlier, then we wouldn’t be in this mess.’

‘What does your father want, Rory?’

‘I don’t know,’ I tell her. Farrah is too young, too lovely, to understand the vindictiveness of someone like my dad.

She nods, her eyes drifting shut. ‘Oh, one other thing.’

‘Yes?’

‘There was a smell.’ Her words are slurred. ‘The guy smelled like cigarettes. Cigarettes and mint.’

*

I’m wiping over my benchtops, contemplating cleaning the oven when I see the police arrive on my camera. Raco gesticulates as she talks, and Brooks smiles at her. I walk down the hallway and listen through the door.

‘. . . the old woman’s holding out on me, Jim! I know there’s something else in it, but she won’t share the recipe.’

‘Sounds like she doesn’t want you to make lasagne as good as hers.’

Raco snorts. ‘Tell me about it. There’s something missing from mine. A kind of lightness, something to do with the texture . . . I don’t know. Bloody nonnas!’

Brooks laughs. I open the door and they stop and look at me.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Campbell. We were just talking about Raco’s attempts to reproduce her grandmother’s much-loved lasagne,’ Brooks tells me.

‘I heard.’ I look at Raco. ‘Where’s your grandmother from, Detective?’

She looks surprised. ‘Bankstown.’

‘No. I mean, where in Italy?’

‘Oh. Somewhere near Naples, I think.’

‘Have you tried using ricotta cheese instead of béchamel sauce? Or adding it to the béchamel?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘It’s quite common in Southern Italy. Some recipes use boiled eggs too, but I think you’d notice that.’ I turn to Brooks. ‘Come in.’

As we pass the console table I glance at the small pile of bills sitting there. After returning from visiting Farrah at the hospital this morning, I slipped my small knife beneath them.

The cameras give me some measure of safety but I don’t intend to be without a weapon if someone comes for me.

‘Can I get you tea or coffee?’

‘No, thank you.’

Brooks walks over to the dining table and sits in the same seat he took the last time he was in my home, which seems an age ago now. Buster had rested so happily at his feet. My throat tightens. I sit down opposite. Raco remains standing.

‘Ricotta in the lasagne, hey? I’ll try that, Miss Campbell.’ She gives me a small smile.

‘Firstly,’ Brooks says, ‘I’d like to apologise for upsetting you last time we were here.’

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘I’m sorry too.’ I’m embarrassed to remember my outburst.

‘Today, we’re here to talk to you about Miss Fotos,’ Brooks says. ‘About the head injury she sustained on the roof last night. What can you tell us about the incident?’

‘Not much. I was in my apartment. I didn’t know anything had happened until Ron came and told me sometime after nine.’ I scratch at a mark on the timber tabletop with a fingernail. ‘I don’t know if Farrah told you that I believe it was my father who attacked her?’

‘She mentioned that, yes,’ Brooks says, sounding concerned. ‘Miss Fotos showed us the text she received telling her to go to the roof to get your dog back. Our tech guys have been looking into it, but it appears that the message was sent from a burner phone. And we’ve looked at the Facebook accounts Miss Fotos mentioned joining, the ones about missing dogs. We’ve found nothing suspicious there either. So we’re back to square one.’ He hesitates. ‘What motivation would your father have for hurting Miss Fotos, Miss Campbell?’

‘None, or so you’d think. But I know it was because she’s my friend. A warning, I guess. My father’s not a nice man. He used to beat my mother.’ I pause. ‘And once, he did something worse.’

‘Such as?’

I wet my lips. ‘Do I have to go into it?’ I trace circles around the face of my watch with an index finger, then stop when I see Raco watching me.

‘You know about my PTSD, my OCD. How it all started.’ I can’t keep a trace of bitterness from my voice. ‘I can’t see the point of going over it all again. And you must have looked into my father? There would be a record of his behaviour with the police in Bowra Creek, if you haven’t. Dad was never

arrested but my aunt – his sister – worked for the police back then. She knew what he was like. Anyway, you must know what happened to my brother?’

‘We do.’ Brooks is grave.

Raco snaps open a notepad and reads from it. ‘Your father’s name was Edward “Eddie” Reynolds, last known address 54 Henry Street, Bowra Creek. Is that correct?’ She puts the notepad on the table. I nod. ‘We’ll see if we can locate Mr Reynolds.’

‘Miss Fotos is recovering remarkably well, Miss Campbell,’ Brooks says with a smile. ‘She’s been very lucky. The doctors think she’ll be released from hospital tomorrow or Tuesday.’

Raco speaks before I can. ‘Miss Fotos said she called you when she received the text. That you didn’t answer. Is that correct?’

‘Yes. I’d turned my phone off.’

‘Do you often turn your phone off?’

‘No.’ I hesitate. ‘I’d received some calls from . . . someone I didn’t want to talk to. So I turned it off.’ I wring my hands. ‘I wish I hadn’t. Farrah might not be in hospital if I had answered.’

‘You might be in hospital instead, Miss Campbell,’ Brooks says kindly. ‘You weren’t to know. This wasn’t your fault. Even if the man who hurt Miss Fotos was your father, that doesn’t make her injury your fault.’

Sure, says the voice.

‘We were very sorry to hear about your dog,’ Brooks continues. ‘Unfortunately, pedigree dogs have been the target of thieves in recent years. There’s little we can do, but it is possible he might turn up at a vet or rescue centre. We’ll keep you updated if we hear anything.’

Raco changes the subject. ‘We’ve looked at the security footage from the cameras in the building and there’s no

evidence of any strangers, or anyone who could be your father, on them last night. The assailant probably used the fire stairs.’ I recall the echoing steps I’d heard when Buster and I used the stairs and shiver. She raises a single eyebrow. ‘And since there are no cameras on the roof, or on any individual floors at all, we were unable to identify Miss Fotos’s assailant. It appears that the Panorama’s security is heavily reliant on one or two guards, which is unfortunate.’

‘Yes.’ Finally, something Raco and I agree on. ‘It’s proven to be inadequate. And I doubt very much you’ll find anything on the surveillance footage.’ I fill them in on the latest security lapses.

Brooks frowns. ‘We’ve been made aware of those problems and intend to follow them up.’ He tilts his head to look at me. ‘All this must be a terrible shock for you, Miss Campbell. Particularly for someone, as you say, with PTSD. First Joe Hudson’s murder across the street, and now someone being attacked in your own building. I imagine this is where you feel safest.’

‘Yes.’ I answer shortly, then add, ‘We like to think we’re untouchable here in the Panorama.’

‘Why didn’t you tell us that you think your apartment was broken into?’

I frown.

‘Security updated us,’ he explains.

‘Knowing my . . . history, and with the lack of evidence, I didn’t think you would believe me. Was I wrong?’

Raco ignores me and speaks. ‘Miss Fotos said the man smelled of cigarettes. And you said the reason you believed your apartment had been broken into was because it smelled of smoke. Your father was a smoker?’

‘He was.’

‘So are a large number of residents of this building, I imagine. Also, tradies, delivery men. It doesn’t narrow it down

much, does it?’

Part of me wants to tell them about my triggers, let them know that someone was probably smoking in my apartment to get to me. But I don’t. I doubt they’ll believe it.

‘Can anyone verify that you were in your apartment at the time Miss Fotos was injured?’ Raco asks. She walks over to the table and absently rubs her thumb and index finger across a glossy leaf of the Zanzibar gem that sits in the centre of it.

‘I’m sorry?’ Adrenaline surges through me. ‘You think *I* had something to do with this?’

‘It’s just a formality,’ Brooks soothes, but Raco watches me closely. ‘We need to account for your whereabouts, as we do with anyone involved with this case.’

I blink, then focus on Raco. ‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you. The leaves of the Zanzibar gem are poisonous. It’s unlikely to kill you, but it can cause itching and a rash, and if you touch your eyes you might feel a burning sensation.’ She hurriedly drops her hand, rubs it on her pants.

‘The answer to your question is no,’ I tell Brooks in a tight voice. ‘No one can verify that I was here at the time Farrah was attacked.’ I think of the camera outside my door. Would it be helpful to tell them I’ve got a camera outside and can prove I didn’t leave my room?

Possibly. But I want to keep that information to myself for now.

‘I was alone all evening.’

11.35 am

Monday, 30th January

I'm back in the car with Simon. He's taking me to my appointment with Dr Shaw.

Lucinda left a message the previous night. She'd heard about Farrah and wanted to come around but since I still wasn't sure if I should tell her about Alex's calls, I texted her to say I was fine, telling her I'd see her for our usual Monday dinner, and that Simon would drive me to see my psychiatrist.

'She's a good psych, this Dr Shaw?' Simon asks as we enter the Harbour Tunnel.

'Yeah, I think so. I've been thinking recently about trying someone new, but she's been helpful since all this stuff with my dad started.'

'I'm glad. Ruth had so many different psychiatrists over the years, some better than others. The ordinary ones did more harm than good, I thought.'

'I've been lucky. I think Lucinda paid more to get me in with Dr Shaw, oh, years ago now. She's meant to be one of the best.'

I direct Simon off the highway and into North Sydney.

'Parking is hard to come by over here,' I warn him. 'But there's a supermarket car park not too far away. You could wait there if you like?'

'Sounds good. I'll duck in and grab a few things while I'm there.'

‘This is it,’ I say as we approach the stationery store. We’re ten minutes early. ‘I’ll jump out.’ Simon pulls up a little further away than Bert does. I don’t want to sound ungrateful, so I climb out and wave as he leaves, asking him to come back in an hour. I start sweating right away. It’s the kind of humidity that promises rain, though none is forecast. Sydney feels more tropical every year.

I hover at the door, wondering whether I should go in early.

I don’t like being out on the street like this. Out in the open. On the corner an older couple walk a cocker spaniel who prances on the leash like Buster used to, and I blink back tears. Further down the street a heavysset man stands at a bus stop, his cap pulled low. Is he looking at me? My heart thuds. I slip a hand into my bag and touch the knife I slipped in there this morning. I wish now I’d asked Simon to drive around the block a couple of times instead of sending him away.

I turn my back to the man with the cap and press the button. No response. The back of my neck itches and I resist the urge to spin around and check if he has moved. As I raise my finger to jab at the button a second time Dr Shaw’s voice crackles over the intercom.

‘Yes?’

‘Sorry Dr Shaw, I’m a bit early.’

A pause. ‘That’s no problem at all, Rory. Come in.’

The door clicks and I push it open. Dr Shaw is waiting upstairs in the reception area. ‘Nice to see you. Please, come on through.’ I follow her into her office and take my seat.

‘So, where do you want to start today?’

I explain what happened to Farrah and talk about how Buster was stolen, and Dr Shaw asks only an occasional clarifying question.

‘I’m so sorry, Rory. How have you been holding up under all this stress? It’s been an unsettling week, hasn’t it?’

‘You could say that.’

‘Have you talked to the police yet?’

‘Yes. Yesterday.’ I hesitate. ‘They asked me if I had an alibi for when Farrah was attacked.’

‘Oh. That must have been upsetting.’ I mutter something noncommittal.

Her eyes are sharp. ‘They don’t think you had anything to do with this, do they?’

I shake my head. ‘No. I’m pretty sure they don’t.’ I exhale.

She runs me through some relaxation exercises and reiterates that staying at home and being safe should be my number one priority right now.

‘Yes.’ I nod. ‘Dr Shaw, last time I was here you suggested I go back on medication. After all that’s happened, I think I agree with you.’

‘That sounds like a very sensible plan, Rory.’ Dr Shaw walks over to her desk. ‘Perhaps we can try some techniques to help with your intrusive thoughts once we’re satisfied your medication is working properly. How about we start with a relatively low dose of fluoxetine? That worked best last time.’

She finds a set of keys in her handbag and unlocks the top drawer, then rummages around in it, examining several boxes and plastic bottles filled with pills. ‘I could write you a prescription, but I don’t want you to have to handle the stress of going to get it filled. Look, I’m not really meant to do this.’ She hesitates, holding a box up and squinting at the label. ‘But I still have some samples from the pharmaceutical company. How about you take these for now?’

‘That would be great.’ I shift in my seat. ‘I was hoping you could give me something stronger, too. Something to help me sleep. Just until the fluoxetine kicks in.’

She frowns. ‘I do have some benzos here, but I can’t give you too many.’ She rifles through the drawer again. ‘Some lorazepam should help, just a week’s worth.’

‘I’ll be careful. I know the risks.’

Benzos are addictive, not prescribed often for OCD or for long-term use, but they’re far stronger than the fluoxetine. I don’t have any intention of taking any of the pills myself, but what Dr Shaw doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

Dr Shaw sets the boxes on the coffee table in front of me, sits and writes some notes.

‘OK.’ She puts down the pen and looks at her watch. ‘We still have some time, Rory.’ She leans closer to me. ‘There’s something I think it’s important we discuss. Or rather, some *one*. We’ve talked about your fear of your father many times in our sessions, but you don’t often talk about your mother.’ I freeze. ‘Would you like to tell me about her?’

‘My mother?’ I pick up the boxes and stand up. ‘Actually no, I’d really rather not.’

She speaks gently. ‘Your mother’s mental illness wasn’t something she chose, Rory. Just like you haven’t chosen to have OCD.’

‘Thanks for these, Dr Shaw,’ I say, waving the pills before putting them in my bag, nestling them in beside the knife.

I’ve got what I came for.

Ammunition.

*

‘Rory?’

I’m standing on the street outside Dr Shaw’s office when a man calls my name. I assume it’s Simon, thinking that perhaps he’s found a car park and walked to meet me. But it’s not Simon.

It’s Alex.

‘Alex?’ My breath comes faster. ‘What are you doing here? Didn’t the school year start today?’

‘Lucinda hasn’t told you? I’m not going back to school this year. I’ve done some soul-searching and I’m finally doing it. I’m going to write the book I’ve been talking about for the past couple of years. *Making it Happen*.’ He laughs. ‘That’s the title-in-progress. It’s about manifesting and the power of positive thinking. I’ll aim it at young people. They could do with a little more positivity in their lives, don’t you think? The state of the world today . . .’ He shakes his head.

‘And Lucinda knows you’re quitting your job?’

‘Of course. She suggested it. “Don’t put it off,” she said.’ He grins, spreads his arms wide. ‘I manifested this entire scenario, you know. Beautiful girlfriend. Writing my book. Helping kids.’ He shakes his head, then waves his hand in the vague direction of the suburb’s main street.

‘I thought I’d surprise Lucinda with some macarons as a kind of thank you. There’s a great French bakery around the corner, and you know macarons are her favourite. But they’re far too difficult to make! Cheesecake is about my baking limit.’

Alex steps closer. He wears cargo shorts and a short-sleeved white shirt, dark hair swept to one side in a young person’s style that somehow makes him look older. He’s freshly shaven and wearing the same cloying cologne. Alex is a handsome man, there’s no doubt about that, but there’s something contrived about him. Like he’s always on show.

Again, I can’t help but compare him to the slightly messy Simon, who’s not as classically good-looking, but is completely his own man.

‘Have you heard anything more about Buster?’ His brow furrows.

‘No.’

He gives a small shake of his head. ‘I can’t believe someone would take the little guy. It makes me so sad.’ I wonder if I’m judging Alex too harshly. ‘I’ll focus all my energy on getting Buster back, Rory. Don’t you lose faith.’

I don't know how to respond to this, and we are silent for a couple of seconds. 'I'm guessing you were here to see Dr Shaw?' Alex asks.

Has Lucinda told him everything about me?

'Yes,' I answer shortly. 'How did you know?'

'Lucinda mentioned it, I think,' he says, vaguely. He takes another step closer and I fight the urge to step back. 'Rory, I've been worried about you. I've been calling because I think manifesting and positivity could help with your OCD.' His eyebrows come together. 'Mental illness doesn't have to define you, Rory.'

This again? I have one eye out for Simon, but I can't see his blue car.

'Does Lucinda know you've been calling me, Alex?'

'No.' His concern becomes hopeful. 'Actually, I hoped we could talk about Lucinda, too. Perhaps we could go somewhere and have a chat? The patisserie is five minutes away, and you could help me choose the macarons for Luce?'

'No thanks. I'm good. My neighbour, Simon, will be here to pick me up any second.'

'Oh, Bert's not driving you today?' He raises his eyebrows.

'No, not today.'

He leans closer, his eyes over-bright. 'I really hoped we could talk, Rory. Your aunt is amazing, but she's such a private person. I'd love for you to tell me more about her.'

I'm pretty sure Lucinda wouldn't like me secretly talking to Alex about her or anything else. But I remember the girlish look that comes over her when he's around. I groan inwardly.

'OK, sure. But not today.'

'Wonderful.' His face lights up. 'Tomorrow? I'll come to your apartment. Ten am?' I give a reluctant nod. He hesitates then adds in an earnest voice, 'And Rory, remember that *you*

are the most important person in your life. You need to look after *you*. Even Lucinda – God love her – can't tell you what to do.'

'What?'

'Look, Lucinda means well. But you need to listen to your heart.' He leans closer and touches his own chest. 'Follow it.'

Left, right, left. Breathe.

I see Simon's blue car coming along the street and relief floods me. 'That's Simon. Thanks Alex. I have to go.'

'See you tomorrow, Rory. I'll bring macarons.' He winks, then makes a gun with his fingers and points it at me.

He smiles as he pulls the trigger.

I run for the car.

*

That afternoon I'm rattled, both by the encounter with Alex and Dr Shaw's mention of my mother.

I'm at my computer, attempting to work, when a memory pops into my head. Mum and Theo dancing to ABBA's 'Waterloo' one Saturday morning after Mum had finished her Jane Fonda video. Even back then both ABBA and Jane Fonda were old-fashioned, but Mum loved anything kitsch, anything from the '70s and '80s. She used to say she was born in the wrong era.

Dad hadn't made it home from his Friday night pub session, which was becoming common by then, so the house felt lighter – we could all breathe. The aerobics must have given Mum an endorphin rush, as she'd turned on the CD player and grabbed Theo's hands. They'd spun and sung, yelling the lyrics with abandon.

Me, I'd watched, holding myself separate. I must have been Farrah's age. I remember the envy I'd felt, how much I'd wished I could jump in and join them. Instead, something held

me back. When Mum waggled her fingers in invitation, I shook my head and stayed on the sofa with my book.

I hate myself for that.

I type Mum's maiden name, Gillian Campbell, into Google. On the fourth page of results I find something I've never seen before. An old newspaper clipping has been recently added to a regional museum's website. The heading reads 'Clever Girls Beat the Boys at Science', and there's a photo of five girls of about fifteen years of age. The one in the centre holds a large trophy. At first I think this must be a different Gillian Campbell, because it looks nothing like my mother, but then I realise it's her after all.

The trophy in her hands, a beaming smile on her face, her hair in braids – Mum is almost unrecognisable.

She looks so confident and happy. So young.

So free.

I skim the article, which explains that the girls – who attended a prestigious same-sex boarding school – had won a state-wide award for their report on sustainable farming practices.

Williams Anglican Girls' School.

How did I not know my mother had attended such a notable school? Why had she never said? I type the school's name into the search bar and open the website.

Williams Anglican Girls' School is far more modern now, with an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool, stables where girls can house their own horses, and a raft of tennis courts. But there's no doubt even back then it would have been fancy. Expensive too. I knew my grandparents owned their property, but it never occurred to me that they had that kind of cash. Or maybe Mum was on a scholarship? Judging by this photo she might have been clever enough.

I touch her radiant face.

Oh Mum.

There are only a handful of times I remember seeing Mum really, truly happy, like that ‘Waterloo’ dance with Theo. I wish I’d known her like this.

I google my grandparents’ property, Glenfells. It is listed on several real estate websites as having sold eighteen months ago. I open the listing and almost fall off my chair in shock at the price.

Nine-and-a-half million dollars.

Shit.

I look at the sales history. It sold not long after my grandparents died for just over five million dollars. Still a tonne of cash. I scroll through the pictures. I only visited it a few times as a child, but it’s definitely the same place. I recognise the long driveway lined with poplars. The homestead with its three distinctive chimneys.

Mum’s brother had inherited more money than I realised when my grandparents died. Too bad Mum didn’t see any of that cash. With that sort of money she could have taken us and left Dad. Things might have been different. My chest aches at the thought.

I imagine us – all three of us, Mum, Theo and I – dancing to ‘Waterloo’ in a different house, in a different town.

Instead, two of us are dead, and one lives a half-life.

*

‘Alex quit his job, Luce . . .?’

We are eating braised octopus and polenta later that night. Lucinda has brought Portuguese tarts for dessert. I’d thought cooking something fancy might take my mind off things. Instead I’m pushing the food around my plate, unable to enjoy it.

‘How do you know that?’

‘I ran into him outside Dr Shaw’s today.’

‘Really?’ Lucinda gives me a sharp look. ‘He was in North Sydney?’

‘Yeah. He was buying you macarons.’

Her posture relaxes. ‘Oh, from that patisserie around the corner.’

I don’t tell her that he’s coming to see me tomorrow. Or that I checked up on Alex online after Simon dropped me home too. His Facebook account was exactly what I expected. Lots of selfies, lots of self-help quotes, lots of photos of aspirational destinations and sunsets. But I’m surprised by the candid snaps of Lucinda. He’s caught her looking so happy. Other searches confirm that he is pretty much as he seems, an overly earnest self-help aficionado. Though he does seem to have a lot of friends.

‘So, he’s quit for good?’ I prompt her.

‘Yes. Well, technically I think he’s on sabbatical, so he could go back in six months if he wanted to. And it was my suggestion, not his.’ She’s defensive, as if knowing what people will think – that she’s supporting him while he fiddles around with his wishy-washy bullshit.

‘Sure.’

She gets a dreamy look on her face. ‘He’s been over the moon ever since. Just so alive.’ She looks at me. ‘He’s going to love working on his passion project and getting his ideas out there, really standing on his own feet intellectually. Truly, Rory, you don’t know men like I do. They need to feel in control.’

I smile. ‘That sounds like someone else I know.’

‘Touché.’ Lucinda raises an eyebrow. ‘I guess it’s not just men.’ She finishes the last of her octopus and puts her fork down.

‘Do you really believe in manifesting, Luce?’

‘No. Of course not. But Alex does, so I’m happy to be supportive.’ She hesitates, then gives me a shy smile. ‘You

know, I think he might really be the one, Rory.'

I open my mouth to tell her about the calls. About our meeting tomorrow. But I can't do it.

'I wish I believed in manifesting,' I say instead, unable to keep a note of wistfulness from my voice. 'There's so much I'd manifest if I thought it actually worked.'

'Like what?' Lucinda asks quietly.

'Oh, you know.' I wave an arm about. 'Theo would be here. Buster too. We'd be eating this at a restaurant, like normal people.'

Lucinda gives a wry smile. 'That does sound good.'

We start clearing the table. 'Lucinda, can I ask you something? I saw online today that Gran and Gramps's old property sold for over five million dollars after they died.'

'Yeah, I know. What's your question?' she asks as she rinses the plates under the tap.

'Who got the cash?'

'You know this. Miles did. Your uncle.' She turns off the tap. 'It was too bad they disapproved of your Mum marrying into our horrible family, or she'd probably have had half of it.'

'That's what I was wondering.'

'Yeah. They hated Eddie. Vowed he would never get a cent of their money. Even after he seemed to straighten up and became manager at the pub, they didn't trust him. Maybe they guessed how he treated your mum.'

'It was their money, I suppose,' I say. 'They could give it to whoever they wanted.'

'What's brought this on?'

'All this stuff with Dad, it's made me think more about the past.' I add our plates to the dishwasher. 'Actually, maybe I'll call Miles.' I grin. 'Find out how he spent all that money.'

‘Sure. If you want. I have his details in the paperwork at home somewhere, I can find his address and phone number for you.’

‘Thanks Luce.’

‘So,’ she says as I start to wipe down the bench, ‘have you been OK? With Farrah, and everything that’s happened?’

‘Yes. Kind of.’

She scrunches up her face in a commiserating kind of way. ‘It’s rough, I know.’

‘Why do you think whoever grabbed her warned Farrah to stay away from me? I don’t understand.’

She shrugs. ‘Who knows? Sounds like the guy who did this was crazy if you ask me. How’s Farrah taking it? Is she laying low? Resting?’

‘She’ll be out of hospital in the morning. I’ve asked her to come over to watch TV tomorrow night.’

‘Do you think that’s wise?’ Lucinda frowns. ‘Didn’t the man on the rooftop tell her to stay away from you?’

‘I’ve told you, Luce, I’m not going to live like this anymore.’ I think of my knife and pills. The spy cameras. ‘Farrah’s right. I can’t keep giving in to fear. I need to find a way to get better.’

She’s unhappy with that. ‘OK, if you think so. I do believe you are coping well though, Rory. Things will be back to normal soon.’

I smile. Lucinda doesn’t seem to understand that I want more than my old ‘normal’. I want to be free.

*

After dessert she texts Bert and gets ready to leave. While she’s in the bathroom I choose a dog tag – red, that’s Lucinda’s colour – and hide it deep in an unused pocket of her handbag.

I don't trust Alex and I don't trust my father. This way, at least I'll know where Lucinda is.

I'm not playing defensively now.

I'm on the attack.

10.02 am

Tuesday, 31st January

I'm folding paper cranes when Ron lets me know Alex is here. I ask him to send him up.

By the time I've cleared away the cranes and put the kettle on my phone buzzes and there's a knock on my door almost simultaneously.

'Alex,' I say, opening the door.

He's carrying a small box of macarons which he holds out. 'For you.' His smile is wide and it makes me more nervous than I already am.

'Thanks. Come in.'

I busy myself with tea and coffee as Alex makes small talk, which fortunately necessitates little response from me. His aftershave irritates my nose and I concentrate on not sneezing. We sit at the dining table and I nibble politely on a pistachio macaron until Alex gets to the point.

'OK.' He clears his throat after finishing an anecdote about the barista who got his order mixed up that morning. 'I need you to know that I'm serious about Lucinda, Rory. I love her, I really do. But I'm worried about our relationship. Your aunt, she's a closed book. I thought you might know how to get closer to her. How to open the book if you will.' He mimes opening a book with his hands.

I ignore the terrible metaphor. 'I don't know if there's any way to . . .' I try for something useful but come up with

nothing. I shrug. ‘That’s just how Lucinda is, Alex. I do know she really likes you.’

‘I’m glad. I really like her too.’ He hesitates. ‘I’ve studied trauma, Rory and I wonder . . . did something happen to Lucinda when she was younger?’

‘Well, she’s had to take care of me for a long time. It hasn’t been easy for her. *I* haven’t been easy for her.’

It’s your fault, says the voice.

‘She doesn’t talk about her family. Her parents, her siblings, I mean.’ He smiles. ‘Of course, she loves talking about you.’

I can’t help but redden. ‘They weren’t a happy family.’ I am cautious, not wanting to betray Lucinda. ‘I didn’t know them well.’ I give him a potted version of her early life. Poor family. Unruly brothers. Uncaring parents. When I finish, he has tears in his eyes. He gives a sad shake of his head.

‘Poor Lucinda.’

‘She’s turned out pretty well though, don’t you think?’ I’m suddenly worried I’ve said too much.

‘Yes. She’s amazing. I’m a lucky man.’ He leans in, serious. ‘What should I do? How can I break through the barriers Lucinda has put up? I want to connect with her on a deeper level. I mean, I’ve read books about it, I’ve studied it, so I know what I *should* do. But do you have any insights, Rory? As her niece? She adores you.’

I shift in my seat. He’s too close, again. I avert my eyes. ‘Ah. Not really. I would just give her some space. Don’t go too hard too fast, Alex.’

He smiles. ‘I’m not good at standing back.’

No, you aren’t. I bite back the words.

‘But I’ll try.’

*

Farrah has come over to watch *MasterChef*.

Strictly for an hour, her mother said, which is annoying as *MasterChef* always runs late. Mind you, after seeing Alex earlier and with everything else that's been going on it's hard to distract myself with television. After he left I opened the windows to clear the aftershave smell, then dusted each book on the lower shelves of my bookcase one by one until my thoughts had calmed. It's a relief to have Farrah here to distract me.

I've put out antipasto. A tomato and bocconcini salad, some prosciutto on sourdough. Farrah's appetite is back, though she's brought Cheezels and seems to prefer them to what I've laid out. I'm happy to see her with more colour in her face.

I fill Farrah in on Alex's visit and about how much money my grandparents' estate was worth. She asks a gazillion questions, seemingly unfazed by the drama that's been going on lately, which worries me, given that it almost caused her death two days earlier. Farrah is far more resilient than I was at her age.

'Five million dollars! That's like winning the lottery.'

'It would have been nice.' I smile. 'Might have changed our lives.'

'Shit yes!' She puts a Cheezel onto the prosciutto and sourdough and puts the whole lot in her mouth. I make a face. 'What was it like living somewhere so far away from everything? When did you leave?'

'God, you sound like such a Sydney snob right now,' I tease. 'I was seventeen when we left. We rented in Chatswood until Lucinda bought a house in Warrawee. This was before she built her current place, after the PI agency started to do well. And I moved into the Panorama when I was nineteen.' I lower the sound on the TV as the ad break starts. 'Lucinda and I packed up and left about three months after Mum's funeral. She became my guardian, we sold the house, and then just . . .

left. It was too hard being in Bowra Creek. Everyone there knew what had happened.’

‘You never told me about your mother?’ Farrah says it like it’s a question.

‘Are you sure you want to hear it? It’s not a fun story.’

She nods. I take a deep breath.

‘It was my first day back at school after Dad attacked Theo. About a month later. I didn’t want to be there. Theo was dead. Dad was gone. I knew the whole school would be talking about what had happened. Talking about me. I was right – it was a shit day. My friends – Rachael and Maddie – were uncomfortable and awkward. I realised how little they really knew about me and my family. I couldn’t talk to them. I barely made it through the day.’

I look at Farrah, then pick up a piece of sourdough and tear off a small piece of bread, squashing and rolling it between my fingers.

‘When I walked into the house after school, Mum wasn’t there. In most families maybe that wouldn’t mean much, but in ours, it was huge. By then, Mum never left the house. She didn’t even go into the backyard at that point. I called Lucinda – she worked for the police then – and she came straight over. Even though it was too early to have Mum listed as a missing person, Lucinda was as worried as I was. She mobilised the local cops. They searched Bowra Creek for the next two days. On the third day they found her body.’

The program has started again, but I don’t increase the sound. Farrah is watching me, her brow furrowed.

‘She washed up at a beach half an hour away. Her car was parked down a dead-end road nearby. No sign of foul play. Her death was recorded as a suicide.’

On television this week’s winner is being congratulated by the judges. I switch it off.

‘She couldn’t hack it and she left me to deal with everything on my own. So, yeah, Mum was a coward. Thank God I had Lucinda.’ I picture my mother sitting in her favourite chair, staring blankly at the wall, the way she so often did by then. As if everything in her life was too difficult – even me.

‘Oh God, Rory. I’m sorry.’

I shrug. ‘I’m better off without her. As I said, she was a coward.’

‘I’m sure she loved you, Rory.’

‘If she loved me, she wouldn’t have left me.’

We sit in silence. I wonder why I’m able to tell Farrah all this, when I couldn’t talk to Dr Shaw about it.

‘You haven’t had much luck, have you?’ Farrah finally says. ‘And now your dad is back. They could make a movie out of your life.’ She has a Cheezel on each finger of her right hand and sweeps her arm across at head height. ‘They’d call it *OCD Girl: On the Trail of a Killer*.’

I can’t help but laugh. I should have known she wouldn’t stay cowed for too long. ‘If you don’t become a paramedic, you could become a comedian. Or a police detective.’

‘Ha! Maybe I will. Join the police force, I mean. I’d be good at that too. But I want a job that pays me *tonnes* of money. To fund my travels. Hey, maybe I’ll become a PI. Your aunt is rich, isn’t she?’

‘Yeah, she does alright.’ I smile.

Farrah bites the Cheezel off her pinkie finger and crunches it loudly. ‘I wish Mum wasn’t being so overprotective at the moment. She’s making me stay in bed most of the time.’ She sighs. ‘My head is still quite sore, though. And the painkillers I’m on make everything a bit fuzzy. But at least the lump is getting smaller. Want to see it?’

‘God, no!’

She grins. ‘So, what’s happening with Simon? You’re seeing a lot of him.’

I feel my ears burn. ‘Never you mind.’

‘Ooh, too much naughtiness for my youthful ears?’

‘No, nothing like that.’

Just then Mike starts his grunting. He’s louder than usual tonight.

‘What’s that?’ Farrah raises her eyebrows.

‘Oh, that’s the guy in 302. He does weights at the weirdest times and he always makes those noises. It drives me crazy that he doesn’t use the gym – he’s a real grunter.’

Farrah giggles, then bites another Cheezel from her fingers, talking with it in her mouth. ‘He’s not doing exercise, Rory, at least not the sort you mean. He’s doing *it*.’ She emphasises the last word and wiggles her eyebrows. ‘You know, S. E. X.’

‘No, it’s just weights.’

‘Do you ever hear a woman’s voice too?’

‘No.’ I think back. ‘Well, maybe once or twice. I thought he was working out with a friend.’ My face gets hot. I can’t believe a fourteen-year-old girl figured out my neighbour was having sex before I did.

You’re a joke. The voice is scornful.

‘Man, you are funny,’ she says, laughing. Just then her phone buzzes and jumps along the coffee table. She picks it up. ‘It’s Mum. She’s on her way down to get me.’ We gather her stuff. ‘Mum and Dad will seriously never let me out of this building ever again after what happened. I tried telling them that I was actually hurt while *in* the building, not outside, but that didn’t help my case at all.’

‘Before you go, Farrah, I have something for you.’

‘A present?’

‘Not really.’

I put my hand into the pocket of my jeans, withdrawing a green dog tag.

‘I bought four of these. They’re GPS tracking tags for pets. You put them on the collar of your dog or cat and it tells you where they are. I know it’s too late for Buster, but if I get him back he’ll be wearing one of these at all times. Anyway, I want you to take one.’

I feel a bit guilty about the one I put in Lucinda’s bag without her knowledge. I’ve checked it a couple of times today and seen she’s been . . . precisely nowhere. Well, only to work and back again. I don’t plan on telling her about it though, because knowing Lucinda, she’ll throw it away. But I decide to come clean with Farrah.

‘You want to track me?’ She grins.

‘Do you mind? It would make me feel better to know where you are.’

She shrugs. ‘Sure, why not? Mum and Dad have already put some app on my phone that does the same thing, why not you too?’

I smile. ‘Thank you. It will give me peace of mind.’

‘No problem.’ She widens her eyes. ‘I don’t have to put it around my neck, do I? Just joking! I’ll leave it in this tote, I take that everywhere I go. Is that OK?’

‘Yes.’ We walk to the front door. Farrah turns to me, her hand on the door handle.

‘You know, Rory, you can’t control everything. Things will happen. Some good. Some bad. That’s life, baby.’

I shake my head at her. ‘When did you get to be so wise, Farrah Fotos?’

‘Must have been that bump on the head.’

3.33 am

Wednesday, 1st February

Theo's back is against the fridge.

His eyes are empty, red-black blood runs into the corner of his mouth. My father's footsteps are heavy on the lino floor. The door slams.

'You've killed him,' Mum whispers, but he is gone. Her back blocks my view of Theo's bloodied face.

Then she rises and I see him again. This time, he looks me in the eyes and says five words.

'This is all your fault.'

*

I jerk upright, my chest heaving.

Fuck.

*

My nightmare is evolving almost every night. And not in a good way. I reach for Buster, and am crushed all over again to find him gone.

Wide awake, I climb out of bed and pad out to the living area in the dark. Usually after a nightmare I'd go up to the rooftop with Buster. Instead, I move a chair to the telescope and shift into position, the stars bursting into life under my gaze.

A bit after 4 am I sit back and rub my eyes. That's when I see movement at Dossers. It looks like someone is outside Long Socks's cage, right at the far side of it, talking to him through the wire. Long Socks – I can't get used to calling him Harold – stands and edges closer. I lean forward and rotate the telescope towards the two men. It takes a minute to bring them into focus and the shadows make it difficult to see who the second man is. He wears a black hoodie and jeans, his face invisible in the gloom. The men are like ghosts, indistinct and spectral. The figures lean closer to one another, appearing to be deep in conversation.

Who are you?

I stare at the man until my eyes are dry and he blurs into the concrete background.

I'm torn.

Should I watch and see if the man shows his face, or go down there now, try to catch him?

I'm not stupid. I know what happened to Farrah. I know I should stay put, call the police. But by the time they arrive the man will be gone.

In the end my feet decide for me. I hurry into the bedroom and throw on a t-shirt, jeans and ballet flats, coming back to the living area to check the man and Long Socks are still there before racing down the hall. I grab my keys and then the knife from under the pile of bills and slip outside.

Downstairs, Ian is on duty. He's almost dozing in his chair but starts when he sees me emerge from the fire exit. I've slipped the knife into the back pocket of my jeans, the protruding handle hidden by my t-shirt. It feels less natural than it looks on TV.

'Rory?' he mutters. 'What time is it?'

'It's early. I'm going over to Dossers, Ian. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, call Detective Brooks,' I say as I cross the lobby and go outside.

It's another warm night and I'm sweating before I reach the opposite side of the road. My heart races as I make my way to Long Socks's cage. I peer towards the shadowed area where the man was.

He's gone.

Long Socks is on his bed, apparently asleep. His eyes flash open as I approach.

'You,' he says. He yawns.

'Who were you talking to?'

'When?'

'Five minutes ago. There was a man here.'

He doesn't say anything, just stares at me belligerently.

'A man was here,' I insist.

'You're still watching us?' he asks. He grins slyly. 'You're seeing things, girl. There was no one here. I was sleeping 'til you showed up and woke me. Waking an old man, you should be ashamed.'

I change tack. 'Do you know who threatened Farrah on the roof on Saturday night?'

'Who's Farrah?' he asks, but I can tell he knows what I'm talking about. 'As if I know anything that's going on over there.' He says the last word with scorn. 'Bunch of snobs you people are.'

'A young girl was almost killed,' I say in my severest voice.

'Not by me.'

'No one suggested it was you.'

'What's it to me, then?'

'If you know something you need to tell me.'

'I don't need to do anything you say, girl.'

'I hope you don't feel guilty then.'

‘Why would I? Sounds like you’re the one who feels guilty.’ He narrows his eyes. ‘The girl was threatened because of you, wasn’t she?’

He knows something. That’s obvious. But I can tell he won’t talk.

You should slap it out of him, the voice says.

I take in Long Socks’s thin hair, his shirt, grey with grime and flecked with specks that look like blood but that are probably dirt or ancient, dried food. His cheeks are hollow in the shadows. I deflate. He’s an old man. An old, *homeless* man.

What are you becoming, Rory?

I turn on my heel and stride back the way I came, almost tripping over a small pile of empty tin cans and other garbage I hadn’t noticed before. Long Socks calls after me, apparently unable to resist having the last word.

‘You should watch yourself, girlie. Shit’s going on here you don’t want to be involved in. Stay in your fancy apartment, where you belong.’

I scurry off.

In the Panorama, Ian grunts as I come back through the revolving door, but he doesn’t speak. At least he won’t do on me to Lucinda like Ron would – he can’t be bothered.

I take the lift, wanting nothing more than a shower to wash away the entire exchange, but I know it won’t help, because what I want to wash away isn’t tangible, it’s inside of me.

*

I don’t go back to bed.

Agitated, I pace my apartment, trying to piece together my wreck of a life, cursing the homeless man across the street under my breath. I march into the kitchen and put the kettle on, watching as the first train of the day emerges from the tunnel heading for the eastern suburbs.

The train is virtually empty and moves sluggishly, finally slowing to a halt opposite my apartment. After about a minute it lurches forward and starts moving at a snail's pace. As it passes, I count three tradies in hi-vis, a group of four partygoers heading home after a big night out, and a single passenger in the rearmost carriage. She is perched, birdlike, on a seat towards the rear, and has blonde hair like mine. She uses two hands to pull it into a ponytail, and I stiffen.

It's my mother.

I lean forward, my chest tight. But the woman is years younger than my mother would be if she were still alive. I'm seeing things.

The train moves on and I shake off my uneasiness, setting up my telescope again. I spend some time with my eye to the sight. I find Orion, but I can't stay focused. My gaze lingers on star after star, so far away. Some cultures believe that when a person dies, they become a star. That they watch over their loved ones from the sky, to protect them.

I'd like to believe that.

I straighten up, my back aching, and it's then I see it. The Powerful Owl. It's perched on the arch above the train line, silhouetted, its head at a haughty angle, hooked beak suggesting cruelty. Before I can fetch my night-vision binoculars it takes flight, heading towards the Domain, probably to find food. First Orion, the hunter. Now the Powerful Owl searches for prey.

I wish them both luck.

10.01 am

Thursday, 2nd February

Simon texts me the next morning.

Sorry for being MIA the past few days. Damn rehearsals! Can we do a late dinner tonight? I'll shout you Rosina's. You can come to my place.

I text him back. *Dinner sounds great. But let's do it here. I've got food and you should eat a home-cooked meal once in a while. A man can't live on pizza alone. (Well, he can, but he probably shouldn't.)*

Perfect, he responds, and lightness fills me.

As I go to put my phone down, it rings.

Lucinda.

I haven't spoken to Lucinda since our Monday night dinner. To be honest I've been avoiding her. According to her GPS tag, she spent yesterday at home. Part of me wonders if she changed handbags, or worse, found the tag and threw it in the bin.

I accept the call. 'Hi Lucinda, what's up?' I keep my voice light.

'Hi Rory.' She sounds different. Flat. 'I'm at work. How are you going?'

'Fine. Are you alright, Luce?'

'Yes, yes.' She sighs. 'Actually, that's not true. I just broke up with Alex.'

‘Oh.’ I don’t know how to respond. I’m surprised. She was so happy when I last saw her. And Alex had seemed so keen to make it work. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t have to say that, Rory. You never liked him, did you?’ Lucinda asks. She sounds resigned. ‘I could tell.’

‘No, it’s not that.’ The words are awkward. ‘Tell me what happened.’

‘Well, he’s a gold-digger for a start. Bert helpfully pointed that out. Turns out Bert has never been a fan of Alex. I mean, I know I bought things for him, paid for *everything*, but he said he’d pay me back one day, and I mean, I can afford it. But I’ve been an idiot, haven’t I? He’s mooching off me.’

‘Well, what you do with your money is your business . . .’ I murmur.

‘And there was a part of me,’ she continues, ‘that wondered if Alex was more interested in you than me.’

‘What?’ My face gets hot and I’m glad Lucinda’s not here to see it. ‘No, I think he really liked you, Luce.’

‘The way he looked at you at the barbecue . . . He’s been calling you, hasn’t he? Or texting?’

‘Yes, quite a lot.’ My voice is scratchy. ‘Well, he was. I blocked him a few days ago.’ I can’t tell her he came to see me. I hope to God he hasn’t said anything.

‘I thought so! He told me he wanted to help you. He tried to tell me that I’m too protective of you, that I need to let you find your own way. Get out more.’ She gives a snort. ‘Probably an excuse for him to get into your pants.’

‘Lucinda, no! I’m sure —’ But I remember how close Alex stood. The intensity of his gaze. I know so little about men. Is Lucinda right?

‘It’s not your fault, Rory. I can hardly blame him. You’re a beautiful girl. I guess he wasn’t looking for an older woman after all.’ She exhales, then makes her voice light. ‘Anyway, I like my space. Alex wasn’t giving me room to breathe. He

kept digging into my past. Wouldn't leave it alone.' She pauses. 'We spent all yesterday talking it out. Arguing,' she admits. She breathes out heavily again. 'Anyway. It's over now. I've sent him on his way. I gave him that stupid car he loves so much. It'll be worth it, to see the back of him.'

She talks tough, but I can hear the sadness beneath her words.

'I'm really sorry, Lucinda.'

She takes a deep breath. 'If Alex bothers you again, you let me know, alright?'

*

I'm sitting on the sofa eating a sandwich, listening to Tears for Fears while researching how much lorazepam is needed to kill a person when my phone beeps.

I touch the camera notification and feel a fluttering in my stomach.

It's Blayde.

He's standing right outside my apartment. He takes a step to one side and I think maybe he'll continue on, perhaps towards the bins, but he hovers, peering left and right, then puts an ear to the door.

I lower the volume of 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World' until all I can hear is my own laboured breathing.

Blayde turns around and leans his back against the wall outside my apartment. He looks like he'll happily stay there all day.

My pulse thuds in my ears as I rise from the sofa. I slink down the hallway and slip the knife out from under the pile of bills. I hold it out in front of me on the other side of the door from Blayde, feeling simultaneously foolish and better as I watch him through the camera on my phone screen.

He stays there for about ten minutes, scrolling on his phone, then, as suddenly as he arrived, he pushes off from the

wall, presses the button for the lift and is gone.

I let out my breath and lower my trembling hand.

What the fuck is he up to?

*

I lock myself in my bedroom and stare at the camera app as I count backwards from 4302 by nines.

Afterwards, I take a deep breath, examine my knife, then slip it back under the bills on the hall table.

Yes, be ready, the voice says.

*

I open the door to Simon. He's more than half an hour late. Every minute that passed after he was supposed to arrive made me more convinced he was dead. I imagined his battered body over at the Dossers' camp. Typed out text after text and then deleted them. Counted the stars through my telescope until my eyes blurred. By the time I hear his knock I'm exhausted.

He sees my pale face and winces. 'I'm so sorry I'm late.'

'Don't be.' I force a smile. 'It's fine. Come and have something to eat.'

Left, right, left. Breathe.

He's safe.

We sit at the table and Simon eats tomato bruschetta and green salad as if it's his first meal all day while I decompress. He tells me a story about a drama between the first and second violinists that makes me laugh, and then I tell him that Lucinda and Alex broke up. I don't tell him about Blayde. He doesn't know about the cameras.

'Alex was calling me,' I say.

'As in, more than once?' Some tomato slips off his sourdough and splatters on his plate.

'Yes, as in eight, ten times. Then I blocked him. He bailed me up on Monday after I saw Dr Shaw, and then came over to

talk to me about Lucinda on Tuesday.’

‘Shit. Are you OK? You should have told me.’

‘I wasn’t sure if it meant anything.’

‘He shouldn’t be harassing you.’

I shrug. ‘He wasn’t. Not really. Anyway, it’s done now, I guess. He’ll be out of Lucinda’s life – and mine.’

He looks like he’s about to say more, but then seems to realise I want to change the subject. ‘How’s Farrah?’

‘I haven’t seen her today. But she’s on the mend. Last I heard she was still complaining about being a prisoner in her apartment and asking me to smuggle her up some pepperoni pizza.’

‘She’s going to be alright,’ Simon says with a smile.

‘I know. It’s still my fault though.’

‘It’s not your fault, Rory.’

I don’t respond.

‘Rory.’ Simon puts down the slice of bruschetta he’s been eating. ‘I need to talk to you about something.’ He hunches forward.

‘O-K.’ I don’t like the sound of this.

‘Remember I told you Ruth had ADHD and depression?’ I nod. ‘Well, there’s more to it than that.’ He pauses as if deciding how to begin.

‘It was second year of medical school and I had exams coming up. I was struggling. Ruth had quit by then. I hadn’t seen her in six months. I was majorly stressed – I was sure I’d fail. So I bought tablets from this guy I lived with – dex – dextroamphetamine. They keep you awake. Over the exam week I had a couple, and then a couple more. They worked, they kept me awake. I did the exams. Even managed to ace them. Afterwards I went home and slept for twenty-four hours. I was a mess.’ He rubs his face.

‘That should have been the end of it. But Ruth called me while I was passed out. Like I said, I hadn’t heard from her in six months. Apparently, she’d broken up with her boyfriend a few weeks earlier. She went to a party, had too much to drink, and phoned me in need of a ride home. See, I’d always told her that she could call me – anytime, day or night – and I’d come get her. When I didn’t answer she rang her ex.’ He clears his throat.

‘That night he’d done a cocktail of drugs. He should never have been behind the wheel. They both died when his car hit a tree – he was going thirty over the speed limit.’

I hesitate, then reach for Simon’s hand. He lets me hold it, though he averts his gaze as he finishes the story.

‘I stuck with medicine a while longer, but my heart wasn’t in it anymore. I told myself I wasn’t a responsible person and couldn’t be trusted to operate on a patient or diagnose a disease. I bummed around for a while, working in a bar and as a barista, until I found my way back to music.’ He gives a small laugh. ‘At least if I blow a wrong note on my clarinet no one dies.’ He looks me in the eye. ‘And obviously I’ve never done drugs again.’

‘I’m so sorry, Simon.’

‘I still miss her every day, Rory. It took a long time for me to get to where I am now. I had counselling – therapy. Did a lot of soul-searching, as you can imagine. And, eventually, I came through the other side.’ He squeezes my hand. ‘So will you, one day. I absolutely believe that.’

He puts his elbows on the table and rests his head on his hands. A yawn escapes him.

‘Time for bed,’ I say. Simon raises an eyebrow and I quickly add, ‘For you I mean. Alone. In your apartment.’ He grins unselfconsciously and I smile back. I’ve never met someone like Simon before.

I glance at his backpack and bite my lip. Simon’s soul-searching almost makes me tell him about the tag I put in there

while he was in the bathroom, but I don't. I can't, after he's trusted me with something so personal. But I need to know where he is. I can't count stars and picture his bloodied body every time he's out of sight. I need him to be safe.

We walk to the front door.

'Goodnight, Rory,' Simon says. He puts a hand on my lower back and leans down, kissing me gently on the lips. I hold very still, closing my eyes. His lips are warm and he smells like bread and tomatoes. He pulls away and I open my eyes.

'See you tomorrow.'

7.47 am

Friday, 3rd February

Early that morning my phone lights up. It's a text from Amal.

*Running late today. Sorry. Be there at 10 am. That OK?
Have a surprise for you ☺.*

I'm uneasy at the idea of a surprise, but I trust Amal. I text him back with a thumbs up and put my phone aside while I make breakfast, a goat's cheese omelette. As I'm stacking my plate in the dishwasher, I hear my name.

'Rory! Rory!'

I run over and open the balcony door. Outside the humidity is stifling, the sun hidden by high clouds. I peer over the railing.

On the footpath outside the Panorama, Ron is grappling with an agitated Alex.

What the fuck is Alex doing here?

'Rory!' Alex looks up and sees me. 'Can you come down for five minutes? I really need to talk to you.'

I shrink back.

'Let go of me,' Alex says impatiently to Ron. 'Rory, tell him to let me go!'

There are more scuffling noises and I look down again. Blayde has come outside and walks past Ron, gripping Alex by the arm in a way that looks painful even from here. He

leans close to Alex and talks to him for a moment, and Alex's eyes widen.

He wrests himself free, looks up again, and then walks off, squaring his shoulders to look like he's come out of the altercation with some dignity. He walks over to a sporty red car parked in the drop-off zone and gets in, giving me a final pleading look before driving off.

Ron stands in the gutter until Alex is gone, then seems to snap out of it. He walks over to Blayde and shakes the younger man's hand then looks up and sees me. He lifts both hands in a 'can you believe it' gesture, then mimes putting a phone to his ear. Blayde continues to stand there, staring up at me.

I duck back, glancing across the road to Dossers. Long Socks sits on his bed, watching the drama. He catches me looking at him, then deliberately lays down and turns his back to me. I stumble inside, my heart pounding. My phone rings almost immediately.

'Ron? What's going on? Why was Alex here?'

'I don't know, but Lucinda told me that he might come over at some point.' Ron's voice is shaky. 'She was worried he would hassle you after their break-up – it sounded like that was part of why she split up with him. I told him he wasn't welcome here anymore, but then he went out and started yelling for you. What's he want with you, anyway?'

'Lucinda thinks he's got a crush on me.'

'He doesn't have much of a chance behaving like that, does he . . .? And anyway, you're with that nice Simon from 304, aren't you? The musician. He's a lovely young fella.'

'I wouldn't say I'm "with" him,' I mumble. 'We're friends.'

'Hmm.' Ron sounds unconvinced.

'Well, thanks for what you did out there, Ron. And . . . thank Blayde for me, too.'

‘I will. It’s good to have a bit of muscle around here sometimes, isn’t it?’

‘I guess.’

‘Blayde said it was a good warm-up for his boxing session tonight. I’m just glad that we’ll have someone on duty who can protect you when I’m gone.’ There’s a muffled voice in the background. ‘He says to tell you he’ll look after you, Rory.’

A shiver runs through me.

‘He says you can count on it.’

*

I shut the blinds and do a lap of my apartment, testing the locks until I am sure everything is secured.

At least Alex never made it upstairs. Having to talk to him about manifesting and Lucinda – and, God forbid, his feelings for me – is something I can’t handle right now.

My phone vibrates. It’s Brian. I almost let it go to voicemail, but at the last moment steady my breath and pick up.

‘Hi Brian.’

‘Rory, how are you? It was lovely to see you the other day. And to meet Simon. Carol and I were talking and she’d love to have you both over for a barbecue soon. Maybe in a couple of —’

‘Did you find anything about Eddie?’ I interrupt. Brian sounds like he’s up for a chat. He’s not a straight-to-the-point person like his sister.

‘No – nothing,’ he says, sensing my anxiety. ‘My contacts found no evidence he’s in Sydney.’

My shoulders slump. *Paranoid. Making things up again.*

‘But there’s something else,’ he continues. ‘Not about Eddie. Look, one of the guys remembered some station gossip

from, oh, a number of years ago now, back from when he worked in North Sydney . . .’

I sit down on shaky legs and put Brian on the speaker as I check the spy camera app on my laptop. The screen shows the closed front door and nothing else. No Blayde. No Alex.

Switching over to the tracking tags, I see three dots clearly pulsing on the map. Good. All accounted for.

I take a closer look and frown.

One of the tags is not where I’d expect it to be. I zoom in closer, narrowing down the location. I see the suburb and then the street, then zoom closer still, until I can see that the tag is currently beeping away in a shop.

My breath catches in my throat, my hand flies to my chest.

No. Surely not.

‘ . . . so I did some online digging – not strictly legal, but well, it is my job,’ Brian continues. ‘And I found out something relevant to you. Something you really need to know, Rory.’

What possible reason could there be for that particular tag to be in that particular shop?

Fuck.

Brian is still talking, and my brain finally catches up to what he’s been trying to tell me.

‘Are you serious, Brian . . .? There’s no chance it could be anyone else?’

I jerk at the sound of sudden pounding on my front door, the camera app dinging.

‘Rory!’ Amal calls out and I give a shaky laugh.

‘Brian, I’ll have to call you back,’ I say, and hang up. I need some normalcy right now to stop my head from spinning. Yanking open the door, I smile in grateful relief, then stop dead.

It's Amal, but he's not alone.

*

'Rory!' Amal says. He's wearing an enormous grin and waves an arm theatrically at his companion. 'Look who contacted me trying to track you down! It's the surprise I was telling you about.'

I turn to the man with Amal and my smile disappears.

Holy fucking shit.

7.24 am

Monday, 6th February

Hi Lucinda, Simon and I are going back to Bowra Creek to look for Dad. I know you think it's a bad idea, but I have to do this. Leaving at 2. Overnight trip. See you when we get back.

I press send.

*

More than two hours later, it's sunny over the Dossers' camp, though dark grey clouds have gathered beyond the city to the west. A storm is forecast for later in the day and judging by the approaching maelstrom it's going to be a ripper.

With a mug of rapidly cooling tea in my hands, I watch Long Socks, who's lying on his bed with a paperback. Bully Boy and Skinny Santa drink from cans down near Slouchy Ricky Gervais's old patch, as relaxed in their camp chairs as if they were at a picnic.

Slouchy Ricky Gervais's killer is still at large. No one seems to be searching for him. There's no outcry at the failure of the police to catch his murderer, or campaign to avenge him. I suppose a homeless man is no innocent toddler or beautiful teenager. Nothing about his death has captured the public's imagination.

He's a nobody. He *was* a nobody.

On the railway track above the two men, a train surges from the city tunnel. Another train approaches from the east. They'll cross paths directly outside my apartment.

I close my eyes against the sudden vision of the trains crunching into one another, their carriages jack-knifing into the sky and plummeting onto the cars on the road beneath. Passengers tumbling from the sky, cut in two, their limbs bloodied, their faces masks of pain and terror.

I blink and the trains reappear, whole, and pass one another without incident.

No one on board notices the woman at the window, watching them.

You wish they'd crashed, don't you? The voice crows. *Something exciting for you to look at from the safety of your apartment.*

My phone rings. It's Lucinda. Probably calling to try to stop me from going back to Bowra Creek. I answer, making my voice light.

'Hey, what's up, Lucinda? Did you get my message?'

'Rory?'

My aunt's breaths are ragged. Her voice echoes in a way that's strangely familiar. 'Don't be scared, but something's happened.'

*

Outside, lightning flashes across the sky. The storm is closing in. Seconds later a peel of thunder sounds. I hear it through Lucinda's phone at the same time.

'What is it? Are you OK?'

There's a man's voice in the background.

'You were right,' she whispers. 'It's Eddie. He's here.'

A spike of adrenaline pierces my chest.

'I drove over to talk to you. I wanted to apologise about Alex, to check if you were alright. Eddie was in the car park. He's here. In the Panorama.'

It's happening.

‘Rory? Did you hear me?’

‘Yes.’ The word is a whisper.

I take a step, my sneakers crunching. I peer down, surprised to see shards of my mug strewn across the floor. There is a cut on my right calf with a droplet of blood on it. As I watch it forges a red path down my leg.

On the phone, Lucinda’s breaths are fast and shallow.

‘I-I’m telling her. I’m doing what you asked,’ she says to someone in an aside.

‘Lucinda, are you hurt?’

‘No, I’m . . . fine.’ Under her usual calm there’s a tremor. ‘Eddie says to come down to the pool. He wants to talk, he says. To explain. He says he’s not going to hurt you. Don’t call anyone, or he’ll hurt me. Don’t tell *anyone*.’ Her voice raises on the last word.

‘The pool?’ I picture the clear water, the overpowering stench of chlorine. It’s as if I’m there already and I retch.

‘Yes. Please, Rory. Please come.’ There is a sound like a door opening. She speaks quickly. ‘I won’t let him hurt you. Hurry.’

The phone slips from my fingers and clatters onto the benchtop.

He’s here.

*

I shake the brain fog away, pick up my phone, and hurry down the hallway. I pocket my keys, throw on a jumper, then slip the knife into the back pocket of my shorts. Yanking open the front door, I take the fire stairs two at a time to the lobby.

The desk sits empty. Ron should be here. My head whirls as I try to make sense of what’s going on.

‘Ron?’ I stage whisper as I race to the revolving door, urging it to hurry up as it comes to life. Outside, I stand on the

footpath, unsure what I'm doing, what I'm looking for. Several cars rumble past and I want nothing more than to flag them down, to pass on this responsibility to someone else. But I can't.

It's dark now, the storm looming over the Domain like a monster that's crept closer while I was looking away. Several raindrops splatter on my arms and head without any great sense of urgency, as if deciding whether they should bother bucketing down. The coming storm has scared people inside and there are no pedestrians. I am about to run back into the Panorama when I see Long Socks. He stands in his cage, his bony hands wrapped around the wire as he stares at me. None of the other regular Dossers are around. Bully Boy and Skinny Santa have vanished. Probably gone somewhere drier to wait out the storm.

A spiderweb of lightning brightens the sky overhead, followed almost immediately by a deafening crack of thunder. The rain decides to fall. The smell of it hitting the concrete reminds me of the ferocious summer storms we used to get in Bowra Creek. Of playing outside with Theo while the air grew more charged, the sky darker, until at the last minute Mum called us inside for dinner. I'm back in the kitchen, listening to the roar of the downpour on the tin roof as we eat lamb chops and mashed potato around the kitchen table.

I spin around and run back inside, watched by an impassive Long Socks and chased by a loud peal of thunder, the simultaneous lightning like a camera flash over my shoulder. I take the corridor to the car park, then veer off down the narrower hallway towards the pool. There are two frosted glass doors. One for the gym, the other the pool. Hung on the pool door is a sign that reads 'Closed for Cleaning'. I can smell chlorine seeping around the edges of the door, the ammonia scent making me feel sick. It also smells faintly of lollies.

Lucinda's vape.

Lucinda!

Left, right, left. Breathe.

With a trembling hand I remove my keys, fumbling with the security fob then pressing it to the keypad. The door clicks and I lean on it, pushing it open. Humid air, reeking of chlorine, hits me.

I take a breath and step through.

*

I'm in a short, tiled corridor.

The chlorine stings my eyes, its stench overpowering. The smell is like time travelling to my past. Swimming meets, eating sour lollies in the grandstand, the shrill whistle of my coach. Mum in the car, the frosty mornings, wet towels, slippery tiles underfoot.

Theo's bloodied face. Mum's screams.

I break into a cold sweat, my muscles so tight I feel like I might snap in two.

And then I smell something else. Smoke. A few feet away, a lit cigarette has been left on the tiles, its tip glowing red.

Everything rushes back all at once, threatening to drag me down. A vice squeezes my chest, trapping a scream. I can't catch my breath. There is nothing – not counting or tapping or walking – that will help me weather these memories, so I let them in. They wash over me, threatening to dump me like a wave.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

But this time, instead of letting the thoughts lift me up and pummel me back down, I dive into them. Through them. I imagine my body twisting, my arms reaching and pulling, the strong kicks of my legs. The deep silence I only ever felt under water.

I swim.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

Seconds later, I open my eyes. I'm still here.

I'm still breathing.

The vice has eased a fraction and my chest expands, my lungs opening and closing, the breaths coming more freely. I step on the cigarette, grinding it into the tiles, then remove my foot. The cigarette is ash and paper on the ground, nothing more.

I walk on.

I emerge into a long, narrow room where I find myself at the midway point of the pool. There is a huge bank of glass running along the opposite wall. It is opaque with condensation, water beading and dripping as if the glass is weeping. The sky outside is almost as dark as night, rain coming down in sheets. Though the lights have been switched off, security lighting along the interior walls illuminates the room well enough to see.

Outside the glass is a small strip of green bounded by a high hedge. Beyond that, I know, are the backyards of a string of old terrace houses, most of them still unrenovated and invisible from this vantage point.

The pool is twenty metres long, with lane ropes stretched between four lanes, small floats keeping the ropes on top of the water. It's a serious pool, added to the building about thirty years ago by a group of keen swimmers who petitioned the strata committee relentlessly. Along both sides the water is at floor level. When people swim it must flow over the floor, though grill-covered channels along both sides help the water drain away.

To my left, at one end of the pool, are four starting blocks. The wall at that end is blank but for a clock that tells me it is just after 10 am. At the other end are several tables where residents can gather to chat after swimming laps.

There are two people sitting at one of those tables, with takeaway coffees in front of them.

One is Lucinda. But the other one isn't my father.

*

I take in his dark hair, his chin. He lifts his eyes to meet mine. His eyelashes are long, his eyes sharp.

'Theo . . .?'

My brother stands up. He's even bigger than my father was.

'Come and take a seat, Rory,' Lucinda says, her voice calm, nothing like it was on the phone. 'Theo's bought us both coffee.' I see there's a third cup on the table. She takes a sip of hers and waves me over.

'Lucinda?' I don't move. My aunt's appearance reflects her usual controlled demeanour. A neat outfit, her hair in a tight bun, her makeup minimal. 'You said Dad was here. I thought you were in danger.'

'I know. I'm sorry. I needed you to come down here, and I didn't think you would unless I . . . embellished the truth.'

'What's going on?' I turn to my brother. 'Theo?' I blink stupidly, looking from my brother to my aunt. 'Can someone please talk to me?' I ask in a louder voice.

'I'll lock the door so we don't get interrupted,' Lucinda says. She rises and walks past me. I hear a click. 'Come and sit down, Rory,' she says, taking my arm and leading me over to the table. The squeak of my sneakers on the tiles is the only noise other than the drumming of the rain against the glass.

I lower myself shakily into the seat between Lucinda and Theo, my skin prickling. All my senses are in overdrive. My aunt passes me a coffee and I take a sip. It's weak and sweet; exactly how I usually take it.

I can't stop looking at my brother. His skin is weathered, with laugh lines etched near his eyes, but he looks fit and healthy. I clear my throat and address him.

‘It’s you I’ve been seeing, Theo? You were over at Dossers, watching me?’

‘Yes, once.’

I give a short laugh.

‘Fuck. I thought Dad killed you that night.’

‘No, you didn’t.’ He corrects me, matter-of-factly. ‘Don’t you remember coming to visit me in hospital?’

‘No.’

But I do. I remember Roses chocolates, Theo’s favourites. Sitting at his bedside, aching for Suzie, staring for hours at my brother, who looked uncharacteristically helpless with the tube in his nose, the bruises and cuts on his face.

‘After Dad bashed me up, he disappeared,’ he continues in a deeper voice than I remember. ‘He knew he’d gone too far, that he’d get put away for sure. But Mum was terrified he’d be back. So,’ he takes a breath, ‘Mum spoke to Lucinda. She asked her to get me away from Bowra Creek, to “disappear” me.’

They share a complicit look.

‘He’s been living in Queensland, up past Cairns,’ Lucinda continues. ‘You and your mother never spoke about Theo and I think in the shock of it all, you came to believe he was dead. Part of the PTSD, I suppose.’

‘And you never corrected me?’ I ask Lucinda, unable to keep a note of incredulity from my voice. Fury surges through me until I almost shake with it.

‘I thought it best for you to let Theo go, Rory.’

‘And I didn’t know you thought I was dead.’ Theo shoots a look at Lucinda. ‘Plus, I felt guilty for leaving you behind. Lucinda kept me up to date with your life, so I knew you moved to Sydney after Mum died. I felt like a shit for not coming to the funeral. But I was relieved you’d left town, that you were staying hidden from Dad. And Lucinda told me in no

uncertain terms to stay away, that you were fragile.’ He holds my gaze. ‘So I stayed away.’

‘Then,’ Theo continues, ‘on New Year’s Day I saw a girl on the beach who reminded me of you.’ He smiles. ‘She dove so fearlessly under the waves. I realised it had been too long. Far too long. I had to see you.’

‘But you didn’t tell Lucinda?’

‘No.’ He gives Lucinda a rueful smile and she shakes her head at him before sipping her coffee. ‘I knew she’d tell me not to come. I searched for you online but couldn’t find a home address. Then I found you listed as a report writer on Lucinda’s company’s website. I tried a whole bunch of possible email addresses, but I’m not great at that kind of thing, and they all bounced. So I decided to put myself forward as a subject.’

‘*You* were Justin Bailey.’

‘Yes. I hoped you’d see me on the video footage and come to the hotel to find me. I left a message with reception.’

‘But you looked like Dad in the video. Besides, there wasn’t any message.’

‘I’m sorry. I thought you’d realise it was me. I looked straight at the operative – it was pretty obvious he was watching me – and smiled. I thought you’d be pleased to see me again. I certainly didn’t think you’d be scared of me. I guess I just thought you’d rush straight out to find me.’

‘When you showed me the video, I knew it was Theo straight away, of course,’ Lucinda says, picking up the thread of the story. She and Theo are calm, as though they are in friendly competition, and not shaking up the foundations of my life. ‘I went to the hotel and intercepted Theo’s message for you.’ She waggles a finger at him. ‘I called him and told him to go back to Queensland. I told him you didn’t want to see him. But he wasn’t about to give up.’

‘I followed Lucinda from work to your apartment, then watched the building until I saw you in the window.’ Theo

shrugs. 'But I couldn't get past the front desk.'

'And that should have been that,' Lucinda adds. 'But when you texted me this morning to say you were going back to Bowra Creek I knew I had to orchestrate a meeting between the three of us.'

'It's good to see you, Rory.' The corner of Theo's mouth lifts in a wry smile and my breath catches at his similarity to our father.

I don't respond, instead I jump to my feet and walk over to the pool. Lucinda frowns as I dip my sneaker to touch the surface of the water.

'You're handling the smell of chlorine much better than I expected.'

I spin around and steady my voice.

'I coped with the cigarette you left near the door too.' I pause, watching her eyes. Her poker face is in place. I swallow, then speak. 'Luce. Why didn't you tell me about the money?'

'Money?' She sips her coffee, her gaze unnervingly blank. 'What money?'

'I know Mum inherited half of Gran and Gramps's estate. There was the farm, plus other investments. Probably at least three million dollars. I know that you became my guardian so you could get your hands on it. That's the real reason you sent Theo away too, isn't it? So he couldn't claim his share?'

'What on earth are you talking about, Rory?'

'I called Baker and Owens in Bowra Creek. George Baker told me all about it. He was mortified to discover I've been kept in the dark all these years. He admitted he cut a few corners when he set up the guardianship and dealt with Mum's money. He said his favourite Bowra Creek police officer had told him I was too traumatised to deal with lawyers, and that he didn't want to cause me "unnecessary stress".'

‘You called George Baker . . .?’ She’s suddenly angry, slamming her coffee cup onto the table. I flinch. ‘Fine. Yes, your mother received an inheritance after your grandparents died. Gillian didn’t trust Eddie not to blow it all, so she never told him – or anyone. She kept that money a secret for two years. It wasn’t until he disappeared that she came to me for advice. She wanted to make sure you and Theo would get the money one day.’

‘But we didn’t get it! You did!’ I say.

‘I *deserved* that money,’ Lucinda juts out her chin. ‘I worked hard all my life. Harder than Eddie, who gambled his wages away. Or Gillian, who was too scared to get a real job. I came from *nothing*. Do you know how much respect a female police officer receives in a town like Bowra Creek? From other cops, let alone the public? Fuck all! The amount of shit I had to deal with . . .’ She takes another mouthful of coffee as if to fortify herself.

‘Did I feel bad not telling you about it? Sure, at first. In the beginning I told myself I’d use some of the inheritance to set up the PI business, then give you two the money once I’d paid it back. But physical surveillance is on the way out. Now there are drones, spy cameras, tracking devices.’ She laughs, a bitter sound. She waves her hands, the movements sharp. ‘Cyber security, like fucking Brian does, that’s the way of the future. I couldn’t make a decent living from being a PI. But I did make some good investments. It turns out I’m pretty good with money.’

‘Money that wasn’t yours to begin with,’ I say.

‘I told Gillian that if she made me your guardian in her will I’d ensure you were looked after.’ She leans towards us both, her manner suddenly beseeching. ‘And I have looked after you, haven’t I? Rory, I set you up in the apartment – I buy you everything you need. And Theo, you’ve been happy, haven’t you?’ Before we can answer, she continues, her voice now firm. ‘I know what’s best for you both. Your OCD is not my fault, Rory. If you want to blame anyone, blame Eddie for

the trauma. Or your mother, for her genetics. I've just tried to keep you safe and happy.'

'No. You've tried to keep me trapped. You couldn't risk me living a normal life, could you? Finding out about your theft. That's what all this is about, isn't it? The money.'

'If you'd kept to your lane, Rory, things would have been fine. I wouldn't have stopped you having a boyfriend or seeing your little school friend!'

She downs more coffee, her expression hardening.

'But you met with Brian behind my back. You kept insisting that your father was alive. You want to live a "normal" life.' She uses air quotes around the word. 'You're too fucking determined! Chelsea kept telling you to live a small life. You should have listened to her!'

I think about what Brian told me on Friday. Just a throw-away comment from one of his police contacts. That a Dr Chelsea Shaw – the psychiatrist I'd mentioned I was seeing – had been investigated years ago for falsifying a psychiatric evaluation for a worker's compensation claim. She'd have been disbarred, perhaps charged, if the charge stuck. But apparently the whole issue had been dropped when the PI involved in the compensation claim 'misplaced' the evidence. The PI? Lucinda Reynolds.

'You covered for Dr Shaw, then blackmailed her, didn't you?'

'I never stopped her trying to help you! I just had her encourage you to stay at home. To stay safe, Rory.'

I remember Dr Shaw pulling the boxes of pills out of the drawer. *I'm not really meant to do this*, she'd said. I bite down on my anger. I lean closer to Lucinda and speak in a low voice.

'You have Buster, don't you, Lucinda? I saw you.' The red fills my head. The knife in my pocket is hard and sharp and I itch to pull it free. 'I put a GPS tracker in your handbag. You were at a pet shop. That's when I knew it. That's when I was sure. If you have hurt my dog, I will fucking kill you.'

Lucinda looks indignant, then remorseful – and for a second I see the Lucinda I know.

My mentor. My friend.

Then she laughs. ‘You tracked me? I should have given you more credit, Rory.’ I touch the knife with my fingertips. Lucinda sees the movement and smiles. ‘I didn’t know you had it in you.’ She waves a hand, dismissing me. ‘Buster is fine. He’s at Bert’s house. And yes, he’s eating the finest dog food money can buy.’

Bert. I knew it. He’d do anything for Lucinda. I slowly drop my hand to my side.

‘And Farrah? Was that you?’

She reaches out to pick her cup up and almost swipes it off the table, managing to catch it before it falls. Her brow furrows and she stares at her hands like they are unfamiliar.

‘It was,’ she admits. ‘Well, actually, it was Blayde.’

‘Blayde?’

‘Oh yes. I worked out pretty early it had been him in your apartment that first time. The guy’s a creep. After that I had him in my pocket. Using him made it easier to keep tabs on you.’ She looks at me, her gaze bleary. ‘I only told him to shake her up a bit. It was supposed to be a warning. To scare you into staying home. Staying quiet. Like taking Buster. But the stupid child had to fight back. And Blayde’s a bloody idiot. It’s lucky he didn’t kill her, the fool.’

My breath leaves me at the coldness of her words, at how little she cares about Farrah.

‘I should have done it myself.’

I imagine punching her in the face, hear the voice inside my head hiss *Do it*. I clamp my jaw together. ‘Why did you organise this meeting, Lucinda?’ I’m surprised at the steadiness of my voice.

She shakes her head as if trying to clear it. ‘I have a proposition for you.’ She tips the last of the coffee into her mouth, and when she sets the cup down her hand trembles.

‘We should split the money between the three of us.’ She licks her bottom lip and blinks as if trying to focus. ‘No one has to get hurt. No one has to go to prison. Theo’s in, aren’t you, Theo?’

He looks at me for a long moment, then nods.

‘Let’s walk away from this, Rory,’ Lucinda says in a pleading voice.

I look into my aunt’s eyes. For a bittersweet moment I allow myself to imagine us doing that. Maybe I would move near Theo or buy a house on the beach where Buster and I could swim. Could I live with knowing what Lucinda has done, with her getting away with it?

The answer is obvious.

‘I can’t do that, Lucinda. I have to tell the police.’

‘I’m afraid that’s not an option.’

She picks up her handbag from the floor and withdraws a gun.

*

I stare at the weapon. It looks brand new, modern. Not like a gun she’s had in her cupboard for years. She bought this, and recently.

The matte black metal seems to absorb the light around it, the muzzle jerking from side to side. My pulse thuds in my neck. I slowly raise my hands. Theo’s expression is blank.

‘So you’d kill me?’ I whisper to her. ‘Over money?’

Lucinda takes a beat to answer, her eyes flickering away then back to mine. ‘Christ, I don’t want to. I adore you, Rory. You and Theo. You’re *family*.’

She means it. In that moment, Lucinda truly believes she loves us.

‘But I won’t go to jail. If I have to kill you to avoid that, I will. This is your last chance. Should we split the money and all walk out of here together?’ Lucinda is jittery.

Be careful, says the voice.

Now I know. I have the answer I was looking for.

Lucinda might think she loves me, but she won’t hesitate to kill me to keep her position and control of her life.

The room brightens as the sun reappears from behind the clouds. With her free hand, Lucinda pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. In the new light I notice her lipstick has faded. Faint remnants have bled into the lines above her top lip.

Theo stands up. He turns to me, his eyes just like my mother’s. Kind, but sad, too.

‘I’m sorry, Luce,’ I say, looking past my aunt at the clock on the far wall. I nod at Detective Brooks, who’s watching through the spy camera hidden inside it.

Lucinda notices the movement and her brow wrinkles. She grips the gun so tightly her knuckles are white. ‘What have you done, Rory?’ Her voice is garbled, like she’s talking underwater.

‘Oh, perhaps I forgot to tell you that Amal brought Theo over to see me on Friday?’

She starts, looking at Theo. ‘You tricked me? You’ve already talked to Rory? I thought you said you hadn’t been able to get inside.’

‘I lied.’ Theo blinks at Lucinda, as if pained to have betrayed her. ‘I remembered how much Rory loved cooking and I called the smaller grocery stores in the area, suspecting she’d have food delivered.’

‘Amal,’ I say, taking over, ‘the big softie, was thrilled to be involved in a family reunion, so he brought Theo to see me. A

surprise. I knew about your visit to the pet shop by then. After Theo and I reminisced, we made a few calls and wound up going to see Detective Brooks.’

The gun swings between Theo and me.

‘We told him everything. I’d already set up a spy camera outside my door and it didn’t take much to convince Ron to install a few others, including the one on the wall there. Obviously, we kept Blayde – your little helper – in the dark.’

I lean in close, wriggling my hand down into my pocket to pause the audio I’ve been recording on my phone.

‘And I’m afraid Theo spiked your coffee with the lorazepam that Dr Shaw illegally gave me. That’s why you’re probably not feeling too great right about now.’

I don’t say that somehow I knew Lucinda would bring me down to the pool. That I suspected she would use my triggers against me. That deep down, I knew she’d do anything to come out on top.

Even sacrifice me.

I don’t tell her that I asked Simon for help acclimatising to the pool and chlorine smell – that he’d accompanied me on half a dozen trips down here over the weekend. We took it slowly at first. I managed only a few steps through the door on our first attempt. But I was determined, and by the previous evening, I could walk in on my own.

‘I needed to hear it from you, Lucinda. I needed to know if you’d kill me.’

*

Lucinda shoves her chair backwards and tries to stand. She staggers towards the glass, the gun flailing. Fear slices through me. Theo and I are wearing bullet-proof vests, but that might not be enough.

I hear a clatter, then yelling from the hallway. At the same time dark-clad armed figures appear on the other side of the glass. The police. Lucinda’s eyes widen in panic. She blinks at

me. Then, in a heartbeat, her panic becomes sorrow. She lurches towards us. I'm frozen in place but Theo drags me backwards.

'I've got nothing left,' Lucinda cries. 'I sent Alex away because he got too close. I have no money. You hate me.' I see tears on her cheeks and they shock me more than the gun. 'You were always too clever, Rory.' She slurs the words as the lorazepam kicks in. 'I just wish you'd listened to me. I don't want to hurt you.'

She waves the gun unsteadily, then points it directly at me. I stare into the muzzle; at the darkness it promises. I'm gripped by the same dizziness I felt on the rooftop as I peered over at the people so far down below.

But I know now that's not what I want. There's Simon and Farrah and Buster. And Theo, too.

My gaze catches on something behind Lucinda. Outside. Silhouetted against the sun.

Dark wings.

They rise above the heads of the police and flap once, twice, then disappear. The Powerful Owl? I hold my breath, but it's gone, so quickly I'm not sure it was ever there.

'Rory!' Lucinda breathes, and I look at her. Her skin is flushed as she lunges forward. I pull the knife from my shorts and extend it towards her, my hand surprisingly steady. My breath rasps in my ears. Her eyes widen, taking in the knife. I hold her gaze.

'I'm sorry,' she whispers, then, in a sudden movement Lucinda turns the gun around, pressing the muzzle hard against the underside of her chin.

'No!' I say, the word carried away on a sob, the knife clattering to the tiles.

Behind us, police burst through the door as Lucinda pulls the trigger.

*

Voices echo around the room.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

My heart jackhammers in my chest.

Lucinda.

Fresh air wafts over me and I breathe it in as Brooks takes my elbow, his words unheard over the ringing in my ears. Raco jogs past, bulky in black tactical gear. She kneels beside Lucinda, who is on her back, her torso twisted.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

I lift my gaze, see her blood splattered over what's left of the glass wall. Spiderweb cracks cover the bottom half of the glass, while a section of the top has disintegrated. Belatedly, I notice the thousands of fragments littering the tiled floor around and behind Lucinda. The rain has vanished, the sun glittering on the glass like a fallen chandelier.

'Are you hurt?' I hear Brooks now as if from far away, and I shake my head. He calls for a medic anyway. Theo appears at my other side. He is pale and sweating and another medic hovers beside him.

'Rory?' He examines my face, his eyes focused on mine. 'Are you alright?'

I nod, shivering with a sudden cold, keeping my eyes averted from Lucinda.

Police swarm around the pool, talking to one another in loud voices. Brooks gives me a final look and lets go of my arm. He says something to the medic and starts directing the police, ensuring they stay well back from Lucinda. Two forensics people in the same blue coveralls I saw their colleagues wearing the night Slouchy Ricky Gervais was murdered are somehow already here. One carries a large black medical bag. There are more raised voices, and Brooks looks past me. 'It's alright. Let him in.'

I turn around.

Simon, incongruous in a red t-shirt and jeans in the sea of black and blue, appears. He hurries over, glancing at Lucinda's body then turning his attention to me.

'Oh God, Rory. Are you alright?'

I fall against him and Simon holds me as I cry.

*

Brooks motions Simon, Theo and me to follow him into the gym next door while forensics continue to poke and prod at Lucinda's body.

Theo pulls me to him as we walk side by side down the corridor, his body reassuringly warm against my frozen torso. Once in the gym, Raco takes Theo's arm and directs him to the other side of the room. They each lean against a spin bike and she starts to pepper him with questions. I sit on the vinyl seat of a machine loaded up with pulleys and weights and handles, the purpose of which I can't determine. Simon stands at my shoulder. Before Brooks can get a question in, I ask after Ron.

In our plan, Ron was supposed to be at the front desk while all this went down, keeping a lookout for Blayde. When I went downstairs to tell him that Lucinda had decided to meet at the pool and he was missing, I didn't know what to do. Brooks had told us to stay off our phones, counselled us to act as if we were being watched, by either Blayde or Lucinda. I couldn't risk calling the detectives.

'Is Ron alright?' I demand again when Brooks doesn't immediately answer, holding my breath.

'Ye-es.'

'What?' Something is wrong. My heart is in my throat. 'What happened?'

'A couple of uniforms conducting a search of the building found him. Blayde took Ron down to the car park at knifepoint. He was found tied up and beaten in the maintenance room.' He sees my horror. 'Blayde didn't use the

knife on him. Ron's bruised, but it seems he'll be fine. He's been taken to hospital.'

'Why would Blayde do that?'

'We think Lucinda probably told him to keep Ron occupied and this is how he interpreted that directive. The man seems to have a propensity for violence.' He shakes his head as a uniformed officer comes over to interrupt. 'Ron was a lucky man, actually.'

'Lucky?'

'Yes. When you ran outside, Harold Wallace – one of the Dossers – saw you. A couple of minutes earlier Blayde and Ron had disappeared from the lobby, so Harold guessed something was up.'

'Long Socks? I mean, Harold? What does he have to do with anything?'

'Harold's been helping us for years. Recently, he's been keeping an eye on Blayde. We suspected Blayde of murdering Joe Hudson, but we didn't have enough evidence to charge him. Harold saw Blayde talking to Lucinda outside the building. That's partly why we acquiesced to your plan. We suspected she might be more dangerous than the stealing of a dog and embezzlement might suggest.'

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to get my head around this. 'Why would Blayde kill Slouchy Ricky Gervais?'

'Blayde's real name is Kieran Mitchell. Mr Mitchell is a known drug dealer in the inner-city area. He mostly dealt steroids in several local gyms until he was fired. When he started working at the Panorama he apparently decided to branch out into harder drugs. He seemed to believe he could recruit some of the Dossers as dealers. Make himself into some sort of drug kingpin. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Mitchell isn't the sharpest tool in the shed.' Brooks shakes his head.

'Homeless people don't make great drug dealers. We think Hudson used the drugs he'd been meant to sell for Mr

Mitchell, and it set him off. After that, we asked Harold to keep an eye on him for us. Actually, he did too good a job. Mr Mitchell tried to enlist him as a dealer.’

I remember Long Socks talking to the man I had thought was my father. I think of the size of him, his face in shadow.

‘Harold agreed to work with Mr Mitchell, who gave him a burner phone.’ All the phones in the drawer now make sense. ‘We asked Harold to keep an eye on the street today and call us if he saw anything suspicious. When he saw you outside looking panicked, he thought quickly. He called Mr Mitchell and told him the police were on to him. He fled. Harold may have saved Ron’s life.’

Fuck.

Long Socks saved Ron’s life.

‘You didn’t think to tell me any of this?’

‘We couldn’t, Miss Campbell. We are obligated to protect our informants.’

‘Well shit,’ I manage. ‘There’ll definitely be questions asked at the next strata meeting about who was responsible for signing off on Blayde’s job application.’

Brooks smiles briefly. ‘I would imagine so. We were close to arresting him before you came to us with information about your aunt, but I decided to leave him in play until after she contacted you.’

His expression becomes pained. ‘In hindsight, it was a bad decision on my behalf, and one that almost cost Ron his life. I’ll be apologising to him later this afternoon. He should never have been put in that sort of danger.’

‘Is Blayde still missing?’ I ask, while across the room I watch Theo straighten up. He towers over Raco, though the stocky policewoman stares up at him with her usual unimpressed demeanour. She nods at something Theo says and scribbles in her notepad.

‘He is. But I have no doubt he’ll be apprehended shortly.’

Fear stirs in my chest. I don't like to imagine Blayde out there, roaming free.

'Will Long Socks – Harold, I mean – be safe?'

'We'll be watching the Dossers, don't worry. Harold will be fine.' Brooks pauses, then clears his throat. 'Miss Campbell, what happened in the pool area . . . you were almost killed.' Brooks scratches his neck and I see a stress rash has bloomed there. 'I know the plan was signed off on, but using the clock footage and letting you draw Lucinda out was risky. I shouldn't have let you put yourself in danger. I'm sorry.'

His glasses are perched low on his nose, giving him serious old-man vibes.

'Don't be. I knew the dangers. I know – knew – Lucinda better than anyone. Only I could get her to confess to hurting Farrah. Besides, I needed to hear her admit what she'd done.'

I picture again my aunt's body bent and still on the white tiles, the blood mingling with the pool water.

Brooks examines me closely. 'Lucinda seemed somewhat . . . *unsteady* in there towards the end. Unusual for her, I would imagine?'

'Yes, she was.' I look him directly in the eye. 'Very strange, I agree.' We are silent for a long moment before he gives a tiny nod then averts his gaze.

Simon puts a hand on my shoulder. I lean my head against it and close my eyes.

'Can we go, Detective?' he asks. 'I'd like to take Rory back to her apartment for a rest and then to visit Ron in hospital once he's settled in.'

'Certainly. And Miss Campbell?'

'Yes?'

'Thank you.'

*

Brooks hands me Buster and I start crying.

I shush his soft whining and stroke his fur. They found him after paying a visit to Bert's house in Epping. Lucinda was right, he'd been well looked after, but Buster didn't enjoy his trip away from the Panorama. He'd never been away from home before.

Home.

Is the Panorama *my* home anymore? I'm not sure. Maybe it's time to find a new place. Somewhere with a yard for Buster. The thought of living somewhere different scares me, but I know straight away it's what I need.

A new house. Where I can create new memories.

3.21 pm

Tuesday, 7th February

Farrah turns up the next afternoon. She's back at school now and wears a checked skirt and a white shirt, discarding her blue blazer on a chair as soon as she arrives.

She's thrilled to see Buster and sits on the living room floor with him on her lap while I fill her in. It takes a while. From my reunion with Theo right through to Lucinda's death.

'Theo, Simon and I came up with a plan. We couldn't involve you, Farrah, you'd already been targeted once because of me.' Farrah tries to play down her jealousy at being left out, but I can see it in her eyes. 'The three of us went to Brooks and Raco and they helped set up everything. We had to be careful not to let Blayde or Lucinda know.'

'What about Alex?' she asks. 'Did he have any idea what your aunt was up to?'

'No. He wasn't a part of it. Actually, while Theo was here on Friday, Simon came over to tell me that he'd had a call from an unknown number. It was Alex. He'd got Simon's details from your flyer. He'd found white dog hair on Lucinda's black pants and was worried she had something to do with Buster's disappearance. That's why he came to see me.'

I'd called Alex after that. He was heartbroken that Lucinda had dumped him. Apparently he'd told her she needed to encourage me to leave the apartment. Said she was too controlling. I think, in hindsight, Lucinda thought he was

getting too close to the ‘real’ her, so she broke it off. The shame was, Alex really did love her. He wanted to marry her, that’s why he took her to meet his parents. And now she’s dead.

I wish, for both our sakes, we could manifest a different outcome.

‘Oh, man, Rory, I can’t believe your aunt was the bad guy all along. I offered her some of Mum’s pastitsio! In return she almost had us both killed!’

Despite everything, I nearly laugh.

‘I don’t think she meant for Blayde to hurt you. Not really.’ I wonder why I’m defending Lucinda. ‘She wanted him to scare you, that’s all.’

‘Maybe.’ She seems a little put out by that. Buster lays his head on her knee and she continues in a softer voice. ‘How are you going? I know you loved her, despite everything.’

‘I did. I’m not sure how I feel about her anymore.’

‘I can’t get over knowing it was Blayde who grabbed me,’ Farrah continues, bringing the focus back to her. ‘The number of times I said hi to him when he was on the front desk.’

She shivers. ‘I keep feeling the roughness of his hand over my mouth. The smell of cigarettes. Do you think I’ll be like you? Triggered by that for the rest of my life?’

I touch her arm. ‘No. Just keep seeing your psychiatrist. You need to talk about this with someone now so you’re not dealing with it in nine years’ time, alright?’

She nods and smiles, though there are tears in her eyes. Perhaps she’s not quite as resilient as she seems.

‘And who says *I’ll* be triggered by it for the rest of my life, either? I’m not planning on giving Lucinda that satisfaction.’

She nods again. ‘And at least they caught Blayde, right?’

Blayde was found at his mother’s house in Penrith. Hiding in the storage space above the garage, according to Brooks,

who called me late last night. It made it easier to do my checks and get some sleep, knowing he was in custody, and that no one else had been harmed.

There's a knock on the door.

'Simon?' Farrah says, her eyebrow raised. My phone dings – the spy camera is still set up. I don't open the app. Instead, I go to the front door, Buster at my heels. Simon steps inside.

'Hello there,' he says. He draws me close and kisses me, one hand on the small of my back. We've done this more than a few times over the weekend and I'm still enjoying it very much.

'You guys are kissing, aren't you? I can tell. You're too quiet!' Farrah calls out. 'It's a dead giveaway.'

I feel Simon's smile against my lips. We pull apart and I take his hand and lead him into the apartment.

'I knew it,' Farrah crows when she sees us. Buster jumps back onto her lap.

'I ran into the police downstairs,' Simon tells us. 'Brooks told me he talked to Blayde – I mean Kieran.'

I stiffen. 'What did he have to say for himself?'

'Nothing the police didn't already suspect. He confessed to killing Joe Hudson.'

I try to picture Slouchy Ricky Gervais, though it's hard to remember his features. The thought saddens me.

Simon runs a hand through his hair. 'Blayde is bad news. Brooks said there were some stalking and intimidation accusations made by former girlfriends, but the police couldn't make them stick. No one would testify against him. It sounds like he was in your apartment to mess with you. I think Ron had told him about your OCD.'

'What a sick fucker,' Farrah says, lowering her head to Buster's fur.

This time I don't care about her use of profanities.

‘At least they caught him.’

‘Oh, and Raco said to say thanks for the tip about the ricotta.’ Simon raises his eyebrows. ‘She said her nonna was pissed off. Does that mean anything to you?’

I nod, suppressing a smile.

9.21 am

Sunday, 12th February

The sun warms my face. A child squeals and two joggers laugh as they run past, gravel crunching under their feet.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

Hyde Park is busy on a sunny weekend morning, and I'm coping better than I expected being outdoors amongst so many strangers. Some nerves do linger though, and I have the urge to tap a pattern on the arm of the bench. Instead, remembering what my new psychiatrist, Dr Haddad, told me, I pause. I tell myself that I accept I'm feeling anxious and that I have a compulsion. Then I tap the pattern twice, before managing to stop.

I'm gaining control, a little at a time.

The police are investigating Dr Shaw for supplying me with medications without going through the proper channels – including the pills Theo eventually slipped into Lucinda's coffee. The irony isn't lost on me. Bert has been arrested too, though it's unclear just how much he knew about what Lucinda was up to. I know I'll never forgive him for taking Buster like that.

Buster rests on my foot and the weight of him makes me sigh with contentment. He watches a Great Dane tugging his owner along but doesn't bark or try to follow the other animal. He's been a mummy's boy, hardly leaving my side since he was returned to me. I think being out in the big wide world today is strange for him too.

Theo approaches from the direction of the fountain and I wave. He veers my way. I can't totally banish the frisson of fear I feel. He's so like our father. Perhaps, if I'd seen him grow up, it might be different. At least when I look into his eyes I see our mother, too.

That helps.

I can't take too much credit for being out of the building because it's not only Buster who's with me. I glance in the opposite direction and see Farrah on a bench about thirty metres away. She gives me a cheerful wave. I told her she should wait with me but she wanted to give us some privacy.

Theo lowers himself onto the bench.

'Hey, Rory.' His hair is wet and he smells of the sea.

'Hi, Theo.' It feels good to be out in the world and meeting with my brother, like a normal person. I smile. 'I have something for you.' I take his old watch out of my pocket and pass it to him.

He grins and examines it. 'I can't believe you kept this.'

'Yeah, I wear it most days. It reminds me of you. I never told Lucinda I had it.' I run my hands over the worn band. 'Perhaps deep down I didn't trust her even then.'

A pained look passes across his face. After a pause he presses the watch back into my hand. 'You should keep it. I'd like for you to keep thinking of me. Besides, my tastes are a little fancier now,' he teases, flashing his own watch – a silver TAG Heuer with a navy leather band. 'This was the last birthday present Zach ever got me.'

I remember the conversation we'd had that day after Amal left Theo at my apartment, sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea.

Theo had taken a deep breath, then begun to talk.

*

‘The night Dad killed Suzie – and almost killed me – was the last straw,’ he said. ‘I had to get out of Bowra Creek. You remember how twisted my relationship with Dad was by that point? He loved it because I’d started getting really jacked, but he kind of hated me at the same time. When I stood up to him that night I think he finally figured out we were never going to be the father-son gym junkies he wanted us to be.’ He blinked back tears. ‘I thought I could protect you and Mum. Turns out all those hours in the gym didn’t make me invincible.’ He hadn’t been able to keep the self-reproof from his voice.

‘Mum had a second cousin, Nick, who owned a fishing boat north of Cairns. Dad had never met him; he didn’t know he existed. Lucinda and Mum thought I would be safe there.’ He’d rubbed his palm with the thumb of his other hand, deep in memories of the past. ‘Lucinda spoke to Nick and as soon as I was discharged from hospital she organised for me to move to Queensland. And once I healed, I started working on the boat.’

Theo’s face lit up then. ‘Rory, I loved it. Being out on the open sea for days at a time – it was pure magic. I made friends with the crew and worked like a demon – and was exhausted enough to sleep soundly every night. Plus, Nick taught me the ins and outs of the business.’ He’d regarded me carefully. ‘And not only that. I fell in love with a crew member. Zach.’

‘Zach was the most gorgeous, tough, no-nonsense man. He was ten years older than me, but so kind. And funny! Rory, I wish you could have met him.’ He’d smiled a wobbly smile. ‘We never got married. We didn’t need that piece of paper.’

Of all the things I had expected from my brother, it hadn’t been this confession of love.

‘About a year ago he went out for his usual morning run and didn’t come back,’ he’d said. I reached over and touched his sleeve.

‘A heart attack,’ he said, answering my unspoken question. ‘He was still young, but apparently heart disease ran in his

family.’ He’d wrapped his callused hands around his mug as though to leach the warmth from it.

‘I’m so sorry, Theo.’

‘After that, I threw myself into work. Nick made me a partner, taught me the financial side of things. And the business is doing well – we just bought a second boat.’ He’d smiled properly then, lines crinkling the corners of his eyes.

‘It was worth it, Rory. We might not have been together long, but it was so worth it.’ He’d tilted his head at me. ‘I hope you’ll find love like that one day, despite the example Mum and Dad set. Despite all this.’ He’d gestured at my virtual prison. ‘Just remember it’s possible, alright?’

All weekend, as we worked with the police and Simon and Ron to set up our plan to ensnare Lucinda, I’d remembered his words, the happiness on his face when he spoke of Zach.

*

‘Are you heading back to Cairns then?’ I ask now, pulling off my Apple watch and slipping the digital watch on with an easy familiarity.

‘Yes. I’ve left Nick on his own for too long. He’ll be going stir-crazy without me there. The crew need direction or they’ll mutiny.’ He gives me a sideways look. ‘You should come and visit though. Maybe in winter? It’s particularly great up north then. For us it’s mild, for you it’s like a Sydney summer.’

‘That sounds great.’

We watch a bunch of kids play chasey on the lawn, their mothers on rugs under the nearby trees. I breathe it in deeply – that Sydney smell. I’m still not sure if I love it or hate it.

‘Theo, why didn’t Mum leave Bowra Creek when she got the money from Gran and Gramps? She could have just up and gone, snuck out one day while Dad was at work. Taken us and made a life elsewhere. We wouldn’t have had to go through any of this shit.’

He gives a wry grin. ‘Uh, you do remember our mother, don’t you, Rory? She was severely agoraphobic. There’s no way she could have worked up the courage to leave him. Just the thought of it would have been enough to send her to her bedroom for a few days.’

He’s right. But the idea that things could have been different saddens me.

‘I can’t believe Lucinda’s gone,’ I say, my eyes half closed, the sun soporifically warm.

‘No, me either.’

‘She was pretty fucked up, wasn’t she?’

‘She was.’

‘I don’t know if I can ever forgive her for what she did, Theo. She’s the reason I didn’t see you for nine years, the reason I thought you were dead. She kept me locked away from the world – took away any chance I had of being “normal” – and to top it all off, she stole our inheritance.’ I’m shaking with the force of my anger.

‘At least we’ll get that back now. Or what’s left of it, anyway.’ He pauses. ‘Rory, please don’t be too hard on Lucinda.’

A laugh that’s close to being a sob escapes me. My eyes widen when I see his face.

‘You’re serious? I can’t believe you’re defending her. This is a woman who tried to kill us less than a week ago.’

‘I know, I know. But she wasn’t all bad.’

‘What?’

I’m incredulous. Is Theo insane? Lucinda pulled a gun on us. She took Buster, arranged for Blayde to attack Farrah.

Theo takes my hand. It’s like a child’s in his, which is weathered and hardened after years working at sea. The unsettling thought that he could crush it in a single movement

pops into my head, and I almost yank it away but resist the compulsion. He lowers his voice.

‘There’s more to it, Rory.’

A ripple of disquiet runs through me. ‘What are you talking about?’

He exhales, his hand clammy now. A shudder runs through his body.

Left, right, left. Breathe.

‘Tell me.’ My voice comes out harsher than I expect.

‘Sometimes . . . in the year or so before I left, when Dad was drunk . . . he’d stand in the doorway to your room, watching you sleep.’ Theo’s jaw clenches. ‘Once, I saw him stroking your hair. The look in his eyes . . . It’s why I started working out so much. Why I took boxing classes and lifted weights. I wanted to protect you.’ He pauses. ‘From Dad.’

I slide my hand out from under Theo’s and watch the children playing chasey. Their screams are gleeful, almost hysterical, before one child starts crying, stumbling over to his mother, burrowing his head into her shoulder.

I don’t know what to make of Theo’s revelation. There’s a numbness in my chest. Eventually, I clear my throat.

‘I don’t remember that,’ I say in a low voice. I watch the child being rocked on his mother’s lap. After a moment I add, ‘And Lucinda? What does this have to do with her?’

‘I told her.’ Theo’s shoulders slump. ‘The day after Suzie died. She came to see me in hospital after her late shift, berating me for being stupid enough to set Dad off. I snapped. I told her what I’d seen, explained how scared I was.’

He looks away, remembering. ‘She sat in that plastic chair beside my bed for a full fifteen minutes without speaking. It must have been midnight – the nurses had only let her in because she was a cop. I’ll never forget the expression on her face when she finally looked up.’ He waits a beat. ‘She told me she’d take care of it.’

‘She said she’d take care of it?’ I feel horror, then it’s joined by a dark satisfaction that spreads through my veins like cancer.

‘Yes. At the time I didn’t know what she meant. And I still don’t know, not for sure.’ He twists his hands together in his lap. ‘I didn’t hang around Bowra Creek to find out and I’m not proud of that. Leaving you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But Lucinda told me she’d take care of it, and I believed her. She wasn’t a saint, Rory, I’m the first person to admit that. But Lucinda wasn’t all bad either. She did what she thought was best for us. For you.’

‘How do you explain her trying to kill me?’ I shoot back. ‘Trying to kill us both?’

He snorts. ‘Explain? Explain Lucinda? I wouldn’t even try. I know she’d have done just about anything for you. But I think when push came to shove, she wasn’t prepared to give up that money. For her, it was tied to her freedom. To her desperate desire for control.’

I stand up. ‘I’ve got to go.’ I need to be alone, to think.

‘Of course.’ He stands too, wiping his hands on his shorts. He gives a sad smile. ‘I’m on a flight to Cairns this afternoon. Please stay in touch, Rory. I don’t want to lose you again.’

I finally meet Theo’s eyes, seeing the guilt in them. I feel myself soften and put my arms around him. ‘You were only fifteen, Theo. You shouldn’t have had to protect me from something like that. Thank you for trying.’ I feel his body tremble against mine in response.

We pull apart and I watch him walk away. When I spin around I see Farrah watching us. I take Buster’s lead and walk over to her.

‘How’d it go?’ She asks it seriously for once, obviously seeing something in my face.

‘Fine,’ I say. I feel heavy, as if I’ve been swimming in my clothes.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Let’s go home.’

Farrah takes Buster’s lead and I follow. Something makes me turn around and I see she’s left my red paper crane on the seat, like an offering.

*

That night I’m alone.

Simon has a concert. Farrah has a date of all things, with a girl from her fancy school. One of the non-bitches, she’d said, grinning.

My intercom buzzes. Ian tells me Detective Brooks is on his way up to see me.

I’m at the door when he comes out of the lift. He’s unsmiling, holding his glasses in his hand as he cleans them with a handkerchief. He’s pale and doesn’t seem well rested, despite having wrapped up the case.

‘You look like you could use a decent night’s sleep, Detective.’

He gives a wan smile. ‘Still chasing a few loose ends, Miss Campbell.’ He hovers, looking uncertain.

‘What is it?’

He slips his glasses back on and slides the satchel he’s wearing over one shoulder around so he can open it.

‘We found a letter. For you. It seems Lucinda slipped it inside her swimming bag. It was wrapped inside a towel, along with a pair of brand new goggles.’ I can’t help snorting in response. Typical Lucinda, having the last word even after she’s dead. Brooks holds out a piece of paper in a plastic sleeve. ‘I’m sorry, but I had to read it.’

I stare at the paper. It’s typed, which is also typical of Lucinda. Impersonal. Along with the letter is a flattened paper crane, made from a delicate navy paper with gold filigree waves rippling across its surface. Brooks sees my face.

‘That was with the letter.’

Left, right, left. Breathe.

‘I’ll wait out here,’ Brooks says. ‘If you could please bring it out to me when you’re done? I’ll need to keep it for evidence. I’m sorry.’

I walk inside, the plastic brittle in my hand, and sit at the table.

Dear Rory,

If you get this letter, I’m talking to you from beyond the grave. It means that things went wrong down at the pool, which is a real shame. But I think it’s only fair you know everything.

So, here goes.

I killed your father. Perhaps you suspected that? Perhaps not. I think Theo might have figured it out.

As a cop, I knew most of Eddie’s deadbeat friends, so when he went missing I put word out and told them to contact me if they heard anything. None of them were particularly loyal to Eddie, so several of them did get in touch. One of those guys owed me big time, so I had him take Eddie out to this bush cabin miles from Bowra Creek and give him a hiding. I couldn’t convince him to actually kill Eddie – he was too worried I’d bring him in for it. So I went out there later and finished the job. Buried him where no one will ever find him.

I don’t regret it, Rory.

But here’s the thing. This isn’t why I killed him, though it is relevant: Eddie sexually abused me. It started when I was thirteen. He didn’t do it every day, not even every week. I shared a room with Angela, so I was safe when she was around. But Ange didn’t like being at home much, so she often slept over at a friend’s.

I dreaded those nights.

When I was fifteen and Eddie met your mum, well, that was the best day of my life. He moved out, and the abuse stopped. Your mother copped the brunt of his rage after that.

I am sorry for that.

It honestly never occurred to me he might harm you, Rory. That night in hospital, when Theo told me that Eddie had started watching you, I knew I'd been stupid. Blind. I realised I had to do something. I couldn't let him do to you what he did to me. I just couldn't.

As for your mother, I didn't kill her, I swear it. But I was there that day. We met at the lookout at Sandy Point while you were at school. I'd told Gillian we needed to talk. I told her I'd killed Eddie. She deserved to know he was dead and wouldn't hurt anyone anymore. That she was free.

But she still jumped, Rory. I was flabbergasted. Was it because she knew that Theo was safe and that I would look after you? Perhaps her mental illness had too great a hold on her? I had thought that knowing Eddie was dead would give her a reason to live.

My head spins. I keep reading.

I know you think I kept you locked away in the Panorama like a prisoner, but I was protecting you, Rory. Keeping you safe. From the world. From the truth. Because the truth was ugly, and it had already hurt so many people. But when you started digging, I knew it would be the end of me. I'd go to prison if people found out what I'd done, and I couldn't do that. I couldn't go back to being that lost little girl at the bottom of the food chain.

I don't know what has happened between me writing this letter and you reading it. But I do know that I love you, and I hope you know it too.

Lucinda.

PS The crane is for you. I don't think you remember me teaching you to make them – you were only little. When I was a kid I used to lock myself in the bathroom and make them

when things got really bad, and I thought that knowing how to make them might help you too. It's said that if you make a thousand paper cranes the gods will grant you a special wish.

I hope you get your wish, Rory.

Later, Brooks takes the note from me without comment and leaves me alone. With Lucinda's admissions swimming around in my head, I set up the telescope and spend some time examining Orion's Belt.

Buster sleeps at my feet, twitching occasionally.

Finally, I pick up the night-vision binoculars.

I decide I'm going to donate most of the gifts Lucinda has given me to charity. I don't want them. The only thing I want to keep of Lucinda's is the paper crane she made me. I'd had to give it back to Brooks, but he promised he'd return it when he could. I picture her making delicate little cranes as a child in a house where she wasn't safe, where she had no control over her life.

I wish I could recall her teaching me, but the memory isn't there.

Simon's going to drive me to Vinnies tomorrow. It's nice of him, but I don't like relying on him so much. Perhaps I could ask him if he'll teach me how to drive, though I might need an instructor to teach me how to parallel park.

He's been teaching you how to do more than parallel park, though, hasn't he? the voice says, in a more playful tone than I'm used to.

The voice hasn't gone away, but it pops up less often and when it does, it's perhaps a little less vicious.

I pick up the binoculars. *This will be the last time*, I promise myself, as I focus them on one Dosser, and then another. I finish by examining Long Socks, watching him walk to his bed and sit down, his movements stiff. His head bows and I notice how frail he is, his shoulders hunched and narrow.

Just then my eye is caught by a movement above his cage and I raise the binoculars.

A bird has settled on the top of the car park. It's the Powerful Owl, surveying the wasteland of the Dossers' camp with a haughty eye. I regard the dirty concrete, the papers and garbage strewn about, the weeds growing through the cracks, as though seeing it all through the great bird's eyes.

The owl is out of place in the city – I see that now. It doesn't belong here.

It cocks its head and peers towards the Panorama.

Towards me.

'Go,' I tell it in a low murmur, and it lifts off as if it hears me, soaring high and looping back towards Sydney Harbour, and hopefully, somewhere wild.

12.12 pm
Tuesday, 14th February

When I go downstairs, Ron is behind the desk.

His face is a mass of bruises, his arm in a sling. It's just a wrist sprain, he told me when I visited him in hospital. Brooks had been right. Ron was lucky Long Socks warned Blayde off before he had time to do too much damage. Even so, the thought of Blayde laying a hand on my friend makes me want to punch something – ideally, Blayde's head.

‘Nigeria!’ I say by way of greeting.

‘Ah, that would be Abuja, of course.’ I laugh. ‘I’ve been practising in hospital,’ Ron says. He stands, wincing at the effort.

‘Ron! I can’t believe you’re back at work already.’ I walk around behind the desk and hug him carefully.

‘I’m not, really. I called in to say thanks to a few of the residents for the flowers and chocolates everyone sent. I’m getting fat, there were so many!’ He pats his stomach with his good arm and grins. ‘Ian’s gone to the loo. I told him I’d man the desk for a few minutes.’

‘He’s missed you.’

He gives a snort. ‘I bet. Only because he’s been copping it. Angry residents, an emergency strata meeting. A sacked employee. It’s not been much fun for him.’

‘Ian hasn’t had it as bad as you, Ron.’ I stand back. ‘I have to say thanks again. For helping us set up all the cameras

without anyone noticing.’

‘It was a true stealth operation, wasn’t it? Took me back to my Army days. Anyway, it was my pleasure to help.’ His face darkens. ‘I’m still angry at Blayde – Kieran – for deceiving me that way. And I’m angry at myself for being stupid enough to be fooled.’

‘He fooled the strata committee first and foremost. They hired him. That’s not on you.’

‘Ah well, I’m just happy it’s all been sorted and you’re alright, my girl. Plus, I’ve been spending heaps of time with my grandkids this week. Five of them, all under ten, and they are *very* impressed by my stories of catching the bad guy and sending him to prison. Not exactly true, but a good tale. I’m a legend in my own lunchtime.’

He smiles broadly then tilts his head and examines me. ‘You look different.’

‘I had my hair cut this morning.’ I touch it self-consciously. It’s been years since I’ve been to an actual hairdresser.

‘So you did. It looks lovely, my dear.’

I take my leave and go outside. I walk across the road, a container of homemade shortbread in my hand. I remember what I’d felt like coming over here for the first time, late at night. How I wanted to be free. Perhaps I’m still not free, but I’m on my way.

Long Socks stands at the fence, waiting.

‘Harold.’ He eyes me suspiciously. ‘I made these for you. I hope you like shortbread.’ He doesn’t say anything so I hold the container to my chest self-consciously. ‘Detective Brooks tells me you might be moving. He says he’s got you a room in a boarding house, but you don’t know if you want to go.’

‘So?’

‘I think you should.’

‘Oh, you do, do you?’ He’s sarcastic. ‘Well, if you think so I’d better start packing. You’re as bad as Marjorie.’

‘It’s not safe out here, Harold.’

He shrugs, his lower lip stuck out belligerently. ‘I do alright.’

‘I know that.’ I keep my tone even.

‘I’m not an idiot like that Joe fella. I could see your guy,’ he gestures at the Panorama, ‘was hopped up on drugs.’

‘Not everyone is as smart as you, Harold,’ I say, giving in to exasperation.

He gives a sly grin. ‘You got that right.’

I can’t help but laugh. ‘Anyway, thank you for calling Blayde like that, telling him to leave. It was clever. You saved Ron’s life.’

‘Humph.’

‘If you do move to the boarding house, I have something for you I think you’ll like.’ I scroll down my photos until I find what I’m searching for. ‘For now it’s at my apartment, because you need to be living somewhere more stable before you can look after it.’

I face my screen at Long Socks. His eyes widen.

‘For me?’

‘Yes. His name is Socks.’

It’s a green and yellow budgerigar. Simon took Farrah and me to choose it from a breeder yesterday.

‘He’s a lovely fellow, really chatty. I’ve put his cage in the window so that you can make sure I’m looking after him OK. If you want him, I’ll bring him to the boarding house whenever you’re ready.’

Yes, lock him up, like Lucinda locked you up, the voice whispers.

It's not the same. Long Socks is an old man, he needs a home, I protest, but I feel a strange pang of kinship with Lucinda all the same. She is with me in the most unexpected ways, and I'm slowly learning to let the bad in with the good.

Harold peers up, shading his eyes. The cage is just visible. A smile flashes across his face.

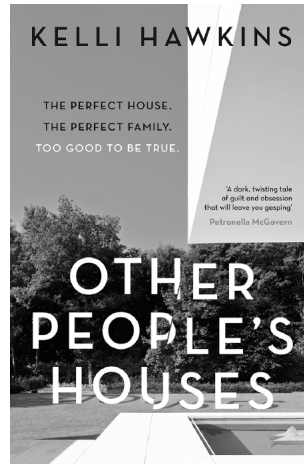
'We'll see.'

'Perhaps your kids will be able to visit you there. Meet Socks.' He grunts, but I think there's a spark in his eyes.

I look up at my apartment as well. A real estate agent is coming tomorrow for a valuation. With money from the apartment, and everything Lucinda left me in her will, I'll be set for life. I don't know what comes next, but I've got all the time in the world to decide.

Meanwhile, Simon and I have a Valentine's Day date tonight.

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KELLI HAWKINS writes novels for adults and children as well as reports for a private investigator. Over the years she's travelled whenever possible and worked all kinds of jobs: she's been a political journalist, a graphic designer, a mystery shopper – even a staple remover. Her debut novel, *Other People's Houses*, was a top 10 bestseller. She lives in Newcastle with her two teenagers.

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