

THE SPACE BETWEEN CATEGORIES:  
A CREATIVE SEARCH FOR ASEXUAL  
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

CATEGORY X

(Creative Piece)

By

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# 1

The Great and Powerful Lestat de Lioncourt wriggles inside his Carry Cage of Doom, savagely pawing at my fingers through a flimsy wire mesh! Any lesser mortal would've been wise to recoil, but me... well... I know how to calm the beast.

They're called kitty nibbles, and they work.

Every. Single. Time.

He regards the nibble coolly, no doubt considering his angle of attack.

I mean, he's a cuddly cat, *really*: a feisty black Ragamuffin, which I think is the most ridiculously appropriate thing in the world. To be fair, though, we *have* only known each other for a few months. Dad gave him to me on my sixteenth birthday as a present. He said his friend's cat gave birth to a massive litter and he agreed to adopt the little guy as a favour, but I knew that was bullshit because dad was allergic to cats. Anyway, my point is that Lestat might have all sorts of problematic personality traits I've yet to discover.

Like impatience, perhaps.

For the first time in our burgeoning relationship, Lestat bats away my peace offering and lets out a long, cantankerous sound synonymous with immense displeasure. I can hardly blame him either, since we're standing on a cold, desolate street in Sydney's inner western suburbs, bathed in the purgatorial glow of a setting sun and chilled to the fucking bone.

We've been looking for somewhere in particular, but the houses here all look the same. Chapped paint, cracked glass, crumbling concrete soaked in the shadows of deciduous trees and their shackled bones stretching skyward, grasping at the surface of the urban wave. The façades, the chimneys, the terraces, the *security bars on almost every fucking window*, it's like a repeating tableau of wall-to-wall decay; a scene from a dystopian adventure novel.

Ignoring Lestat's continued protestations, I look around. Other than the endless cavalcade of coupés and hatchbacks on either side of the street I can't see anything I recognise from the photos she sent me. I *can* make out some of the numbers on the letterboxes, though.

I adjust my glasses and check my phone.

The address I'm looking for, according to the message, is one-fifty-one, Rockford Way, and I'm in front of – come on, Google Maps – one-twelve.

Hm. Guess the driver was off by about half a klick.

Figures.

I balance my tatty old backpack on my shoulders, pick up Lestat's carry cage with one hand and grab my luggage with the other, then set off in the direction my phone tells me one-fifty-one should be.

It doesn't take long for my breath to begin curling back on itself as frost. I should be sweating beneath my polyester jacket, an itchy woollen beanie I've had since I was six, and a pair of heavy-duty mountaineering gloves I originally bought to go camping, but I'm so nervous I'm practically shivering.

What will I find when I get there?

Will she be waiting for me?

Is this even gonna work?

One-fifty-one turns out to be just another panel in the procession, two storeys high and fronted by a tiny yard with an ingress between a raised concrete block and the terrace forming a little mouth with crooked teeth. Its windows are – worryingly – unbarred, and the faded red door, which reminds me of a tongue, is pinned to frames meant for things more elegant. There's no doorbell, so I clumsily park Lestat and my luggage to one side and knock.

And I wait.

And I wait.

Lestat continues to occasionally gurgle on his own tired mewling. I kneel down to look him in his accusatory eye. 'You okay in there, baby boy?' I ask, copping only a vacant stare in return. 'Yeah, I know. You were right. I was just trynna stay positive, okay?'

I turn to the street, searching for signs of humanity. I don't know why. Maybe I think someone with the right experience could help me break in... before robbing me, I guess... but all I can see are the same lifeless scenes repeated *ad nauseum*; a pot plant here, an outdoor setting there, a graffitied bin, a chained bicycle missing its rear spokes. I can hear muffled voices and cars moving in the distance, a door slamming shut, a dog barking. There're people about, I'm sure of it, but as the streetlights begin to flicker and glow, I realise I can't actually see anyone. I mean, that's probably for the best, even if tiny slipstreams of anxiety are beginning to leave goosebumps on my skin...

Was that a window breaking?

I round on the little red door and hurriedly knock again, provoking only silence from within.

Come on, Audrey, this was *supposed* to be the easy part.

You have to be home, you *have* to be.

I lean against the window and try to peek through a set of dusty venetian blinds, but all inside is dark and motionless. Through a gust of icy wind, I give the door a longer, harder knock. I even shout “hello?”, but I get no response other than Lestat’s frustrated growl.

‘Yes, I *know*. Maybe she called.’

And maybe I’m still in Perth, asleep in my bed.

I check my phone for messages, but of course there are none, because of course there wouldn’t be. Instead, I thumb through my contacts until I find the right name, hit the call button, and wait patiently while the phone rings out.

Once.

Twice.

The third time, I leave a polite message, and finally come to terms with an inconvenient truth.

She’s forgotten.

Completely.

‘She’s probably working a double-shift or something,’ I tell myself. ‘We could be here a while.’

Lestat glares at me, thoroughly unimpressed.

‘Well, what else do you want me to do?’ I ask, shrugging. ‘Break the door down?’

He arches his back and tugs at the wire mesh. ‘You can at least warm me up, human,’ he says.

Fair enough, I suppose.

I unbutton my jacket and sit down against the wall, lifting the eager little demon free of his cage. I don’t think he even considers running away as he curls up on my lap, safe and warm inside his big, person-shaped pocket.

I, on the other hand, watch the empty street grow steadily darker in the setting sun.

My phone’s flat when she finally does arrive, weary and dishevelled, like she’s in the middle of something that hasn’t been going her way for a few years now. She’s thin – gaunt, even. It’s hard to see her clearly by the streetlight, but if I remember correctly, her eyes are the same dull green as mine, her hair the same chestnut brown. People used to say I looked like her more than I ever did dad, that the only thing I inherited from him was his glasses, but I haven’t heard that in a while.

As she approaches, I can tell she’s been working all day. Her hair is a scraggly bun, and she’s wearing a dirty uniform designed to look like medical scrubs. I can even make out the gaudy

nametag sewn directly onto the chest: *Hi, my name is Audrey!* followed by a stylised mortar and pestle. Someone's idea of a clever logo for an all-night pharmacy, no doubt.

'Oh my God. Jessica?' she says, squinting at me.

Concocting her excuse. The usual.

I drop a perturbed Lestat back into his cage and declare myself, 'The one and only.'

'Jesus. Jess, I'm so sorry,' she says, rustling through her handbag. She moves like lightning; key in place, door open, porchlight on, bright and sudden enough to make my eyes hurt. 'I thought you were flying in next week. Oh God, I can't believe I completely fuck – uh, messed up the day. I'm so, so sorry –' she pauses – how'd you get here?'

'Taxi.'

She doesn't miss a beat. 'I'll pay you back.'

'It's fine. Don't worry about it.'

'It's so not fine,' she replies, dismissing the objection with a wave of her hand. 'It's my bad, sweetie. I'll pay you back.'

We stare at each other in silence for a moment, Audrey I think measuring the distance between some ancient memory and now, and me wondering why she thinks she has the right to call me "sweetie".

'I'm sorry,' she says again, softly enough for me to know she's not *just* apologising for mixing up her days.

I reach for my luggage as quickly as possible. 'Yeah, well, it's pretty cold out here, so...'

'Right, yes,' agrees Audrey, picking up Lestat's carry cage and resting her face dangerously close to the wire mesh.

'This must be... uh?'

'Lestat.'

'Lestat, that's it. Aw, aren't you just a precious little guy?'

'Feed me human, or feel my wrath,' he counters in the form of a guttural yowl.

'So cute. Go on, I've got him.'

I step over the threshold. 'Where do I –?'

'Oh, first archway on the left, I guess. Light switches to the right. I'm, uh, still waiting on your bed,' she confesses, grimacing apologetically as she follows me in. 'But the couch is pretty comfy.'

'Uh-huh.'

I fumble around in the dark until I find the switch, at which point I flick the lights on...

And immediately wish I hadn't, because as bad as the front of the house was, the interior is... well, it's like... being trapped in a malfunctioning time machine.

The ground floor is split lengthwise by a thick, off-white wall perforated by two doorless archways. The resulting corridor contains a staircase and a mezzanine, as well as the back door at the far end and another closed to view: probably the laundry. On the flipside of the archways, a combined living and kitchen space occupies all I can see. In the living room, a ratty grey couch – what I assume will be my bed for the next few nights – is pressed against the off-white wall surveying a television perched atop a collection of mismatched milk crates. Between them, a low coffee table stained by years of abuse seems remarkably at home. Below the front window – the one I tried to peek through – an ornamental credenza and its forest of knick-knacks and photo frames gathers dust. I see some pictures of Audrey, some of me, and some of people I don't recognise. About halfway between the wall's two archways, a linoleum table heralds the beginning of a small kitchen and dining area. That end of the room is downright *distinct*, complete with yellowed cupboards and faded splashbacks whose colours converge in a vomitus mess of soft, citrusy pastels. Basically imagine a mosaic of old and new, cheap and expensive, tacky and tasteful, in which nothing is ever replaced, just built over. Put it all inside a hollow brick cracked from a century of bad weather and you should be looking at roughly the same thing I am right now.

'Yeah, it's a bit *That 70s Show*, but it's the best I can afford this close to town,' says Audrey. She sets the carry cage down on the floor and opens the wire mesh. Lestat tentatively puts a paw forward, then thinks better of it and retreats back into his box. 'I've got kitty litter in the laundry, and cat food in the pantry. Landlord said its fine as long as we cut his claws.' She smiles and taps a foot against the hardwood floor. 'No scratches.'

Because they'd really ruin that sleek chic ambience.

'I'll keep them short,' I say, smiling back.

Audrey leaves to fetch some civilisation in the form of a bar heater, and I slide my luggage up against the couch so at least *something* I brought with me looks at home.

So, Jess.

This is it.

You think dad's laughing at you right now, wherever he is?

I take off my gloves and beanie and try not to think about it.

'Wanna see your room?' asks Audrey.

The colours upstairs are muted compared to the kitchen, and there're paintings hanging on the walls in the style of little thought bubbles meant to inoffensively soothe. One depicts two glasses of wine coming together, their rainbowed contents spilling to form a love heart in the air. Another features an empty deckchair next to an abandoned surfboard, both yearning for the open sea in the

background. The mezzanine grants access to three rooms narrowed to allow passage, making them not quite as wide as the living room below. The one at the front of the house that hugs its façade and opens onto the outdoor terrace is Audrey's bedroom. It's relatively large, considering the dimensions of the house, and populated almost exclusively by flatpack furniture. A collapsible work desk at the far end stands in for a small office space, probably as a result of my arrival. The middle room turns out to be the house's only bathroom; a miasma of dreamy blue and white tiles trying to make up for the fact that the sink, toilet, and shower bath are all from the fifties and so low to the floor that a toddler could probably climb into them.

The room at the back of the house, and closest to the top of the stairs, is mine. When Audrey opens the door, I'm greeted by a loft-style roof that descends from its apex on my left to the upper frame of a window on my right. Though small, it's already clean and home to an empty flatpack cupboard, a matching chest of drawers, and another collapsible work desk set up underneath the window. The window itself – again unbarred if you don't count a detachable flyscreen – opens to an inspirational view of the backyard, or, more accurately, a rectangular patch of grass surrounded by high brick barriers, a clothesline, a water heater, an old wooden gate, and not much else. Luckily, because of the room's height, I *am* afforded a hint of what lies beyond; a tendrilled labyrinth of patioed gardens, garages, and brambled laneways swimming in the halogenic glow of the train station a few blocks over.

'The bed should be here by Friday,' says Audrey. 'But feel free to make the space yours in the meantime. I mean, it *is* yours now, after all,' she adds with a half-hearted chuckle.

'Okay,' is all I can manage by way of reply.

Audrey looks at me, and we share another moment of silence.

'So... I'm gonna go have a shower,' she eventually says. 'Unless you need the toilet first?'

'I'm good.'

'Alright, well, pillows and blankets are under the stairs. I'll come back down and... we could catch up, maybe? Have some dinner?' Her voice goes up and down while she's speaking, like she's trying to gage my response to each sentence, but I don't give anything away.

I'm smooth like that.

'Sure.'

She smiles again – though there's something perfunctory about it – and then she disappears into her room while I go back downstairs. In the laundry, I find a tray and fill it with kitty litter. There's also a brand-new plastic bowl with a picture of a kitten on it, and three different boxes filled with a dozen pouches of flavoured meat each. I choose pilchards, squeeze it into the bowl, and watch Lestat gallop down the corridor to find his food.



‘Enjoy, buddy. We’re home now,’ I tell him, and – after a long day of mewling and yowling – he finally begins to purr.

With Lestat happy I find the linen closet under the stairs and get to work making the couch “comfy”. It isn’t easy, but I manage, and I’m digging around in my luggage for toiletries when Audrey comes back down in her civvies, a fifty dollar note in hand.

‘For the taxi,’ she says, putting it on the coffee table.

‘Thanks.’

She nods approvingly, then migrates to the kitchen. ‘I, uh, don’t really have much food,’ she says, working her way through the cupboards and probably taking stock of what she might need to buy in the near future. ‘I was planning on doing a big shop before you got here, but obviously, on account me being an idiot again, heh.’ She shrugs at me, lets the thought linger, then opens the fridge.

‘If you need some extra money, we can work something out,’ I tell her.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she says, feigning a laugh. ‘You just caught me off-guard, that’s all. How ‘bout some left over pizza? That’s always good.’ She holds up a damp, cardboard box and grins.

‘What’s on it?’ I ask.

‘Meat lovers,’ she says, checking the contents.

Oh, boy, here we go.

She’s trying.

She *really* is.

‘I’m a vegetarian,’ I tell her.

‘Ah,’ says Audrey. ‘Interesting. How – uh – how long’s that been a thing?’

‘‘Bout a year.’

Audrey nods, tries to sound casual. ‘Great. Cool. No problems with – uh – iron deficiency or anything?’

I don’t move or speak, and Audrey gets the hint.

‘I can... pick the meat off for you,’ she says, before ditching the box anyway. She leans on the benchtop and props her head up with her hands. ‘I’m not doing very well, am I?’ she asks.

‘Not really.’

For a second, I think she might cry, but then she turns those newly bloodshot eyes on me and all I can see is determination.

‘I’m sorry I wasn’t there. At the funeral, I mean. It had nothing to do with you. I want you to know that.’

I sigh. ‘I don’t think we should talk about this right now. I’m pretty tired.’

'I love you, Jess. I know I've got a lot to make up for. I just hope –'

'Look, it doesn't matter, okay? I'm here now, so can we please just, *not*? I *really* don't wanna talk about it.'

Aaand, yep, this is it. This is *the* silence. Everything before it was just practise. This one's thick, like the nothingness of a black hole sucking in everything around it. Fucking palpable.

'Sure,' says Audrey, quietly defeated. 'I'm gonna head to bed.'

'Okay.'

At the archway, she turns and pauses. 'There's a place around the corner that does vegetarian, I think,' she says. 'You can get something delivered if you're hungry, my treat.'

I can feel her staring at me, waiting hopefully for a sign.

Any sign.

I don't give her one.

'Night, Jess,' she says, eventually.

'Night, Audrey,' I say, without looking at her.

I hear the groan of floorboards beneath her feet, the thud of a door closing behind her.

Knowing there's a barrier between us, however thin, is enough to put me at ease.

Perhaps I should've called her "mum".

Then again, I don't think either of us are ready for that yet.

Over the course of the next week, I spend a lot of time preparing for my first day back at school, which gleefully adds to the slow hollowing out of my soul. It's not like there's much to do: Audrey's already signed the papers, I've paid for my uniform, I got a new laptop, I've spoken to my teachers, and I've planned my timetable. I even held off moving so I could join halfway through the year rather than mid-semester. Nobody can say I'm not ready for this, but somehow, it's still some next level shit for me.

In theory, I suspect it might have something to do with the fact that the place I'm going – Stanmore High – is pretty exclusive. My first private school, actually. From what I've been told, it used to be an all-boys Christian college, but over the past decade, the board of directors has embraced some progressive – and apparently controversial – reforms. Unfortunately, lowering tuition fees wasn't one of them, so the place would normally be a no-go for anyone whose parents aren't pulling six-figure salaries. Unless, of course, a loved one unexpectedly dies and leaves you some money.

In practise, though, I suspect I'm just terrified of not fitting in.

I used to be good at it, making friends. I spent an awful lot of time at sleepovers and birthday parties, like most girls my age. Then everyone became a teenager, and everything got harder for no real reason. It was suddenly important to keep track of things like who was wearing what, and who was going out with whom, and to be honest, I just don't have the energy for it. Problem is, you start sitting by yourself at school and soon enough you're sitting by yourself *everywhere*. I learned that pretty quickly.

That's why I'm going to be different this time.

That's why I'm going to make the *effort*.

When the day finally arrives, I wait for Audrey to leave early and then I take *over* that muthafucken BATHROOM! I'm in this dinky little tiled hell for a god damn *hour* perfecting what I think constitutes a good impression, literally plucking parts off myself every time I feel like I've missed the mark by a stray eyelash or a single hair.

I mean, this is worth it, *right?*

When I'm finally happy with that bit of the procedure – or, more accurately, *over it* – I start on the clothes. Do I wear the blazer or the petticoat, the pleated skirt or the slim-fit trousers? Do I have to wear the stupid neckerchief thing, or can I wear the tie? How about nothing around my neck? Are girls supposed to dress differently to boys? The pack didn't come with instructions, just an awfully large price tag. And why does everything have to be red or black?

At one point, I get so anxious I almost hyperventilate, and decide to make myself some hot chocolate. Only after that and two stale marshmallows I find in a kitchen cupboard am I able to settle on the blazer, the pleated skirt, and the neckerchief thing, knowing full well that a clear sky in the middle of winter doesn't necessarily mean a warm day.

With eight o'clock fast approaching, I tie my hair back into an ever-practical ponytail and complete the ensemble with a few self-sourced addendums: frayed sneakers, a plastic hairclip, and black stockings with a tear on the left leg I hope no one notices. Combined with my oversized mountaineering gloves and shoddy old backpack, how could I *not* be a hit?

I have to rush after that. I feed Lestat, grab my laptop, and set off for Stanmore High. Just ten minutes to the station by foot, another ten minutes on the train, and then the school's front gate is one measly block from there.

I'm so focused, I barely notice anything other than the broken turnstile and the guy begging for money at the end of the platform. When the train arrives, I snag a seat by the door and try to keep my knees from bouncing so much. I ignore the chatter, the rattling carriage, the passing glances: I just look out the window and let the urban slideshow slip through my subconscious, every waking thought preoccupied with the potential disasters certain to befall me in short order.

I barely even notice, in fact, when my feet carry me all the way up to Stanmore's front gate, though my attention is captured thereafter. The place is *seriously* imposing, as if someone decided what the neighbourhood actually needs is a collection of castles walled off and gardened like the annex of a prestigious university. I mean, I'm obviously exaggerating, but try telling that to the kids milling around in leather shoes and smart watches, watching YouTube on expensive tablets or stuffing makeup into designer handbags. Some of them even have those little black business suitcases.

Like, *what?*

I can already see the coteries and the cliques, the fraternity of an unknown schoolyard carved into fractured niches: ingroups; outgroups; subcultures; countercultures. The energy of it crackles through the air, foreign and frightening, but somehow familiar.

There's no turning back now, Jess.

You can do this.

Beyond the gate, the path quickly becomes a labyrinth of walkways bordered by manicured hedges. I have to follow signs all the way to the administration office, which sits inside a contemporary set of sleek triangles at odds with the rest of the school's downright medieval aesthetic. Well, early twentieth century aesthetic, at least.

I introduce myself to a woman behind a big, white desk, and she records my details in a computer. Then she hands me a locker key and some arcane directions before sending me off to search for my homegroup on the far side of the courtyard. It's no problem, she tells me, because the building is so old it actually has a clocktower and a cloister, so I can't possibly miss it.

And she's right.

So right, in fact, that I have to take a deep breath before going in, because inside, the corridors are marbled, grandiose, and full of people. There's enough money in the air to make me feel like I'm wasting it just by being here, and I catch myself subconsciously trying to pull my skirt down to cover the tear in my stockings. A cramp in my stomach tells me I'm starting to panic, and a slightly acidic taste on my tongue reminds me that a hot chocolate does not a breakfast make.

Still, the place is unmistakably a school, and that helps me stay somewhat grounded. Lockers line almost every wall, parting only for a door here, a drinking fountain there, and the occasional message board.

I find my locker on the second floor and decide to stow my not-so-flash backpack inside, away from prying eyes. I'm in the process of wondering if I should ditch my hairclip, too, when the bell rings and I realise I don't know where my homegroup class is. Another cramp, another deep breath.

I climb stairs and turn corners, fighting against the now properly flowing mass of people, becoming more and more self-conscious as I convince myself I'll be spending the next few hours darting from door to door, asking for directions like an idiot. Thankfully, I find the *right* door in the nick of time, hidden away at the end of the second-floor mezzanine: a *real* mezzanine, that is, not a raised platform like in Audrey's house. When I reach it, I hesitate: I've escape notice so far – I think – but now, this is it.

I can't hide in here.

I take my final breath.

Then I do what I gotta do.

Which is closing my eyes and vomiting, apparently. I'm giving up little more than bile now, which makes it easy not to make a mess of the cubicle, but still stings the back of my throat and makes my head swim, so...

I lean against the tiles and dry heave a couple of times until I'm sure there's nothing left in my stomach, then I flip the toilet seat down and flush.

And sit.

I grab some toilet paper and wipe the sweat off my face. It's gross, but what else can you do when the smell of your own breath makes you feel sick?

I decide to let it pass before I risk standing up again and take to reading some of the colourful soundbites the girls at Stanmore High have graffitied into public discourse over the years. There are a few motivational poster type lines up there, of course, but I can't help lingering on a less hospitable series of comments.

The first one stands out because it's written in large block letters on the cubicle door, and it assures me without a single wasted word that Jenny is, in fact, a slut. Directly below that – and somewhat ironically – I find a list of what I assume are the various penis sizes Jenny has “experience” with, but their... flowery... presentation leads me to believe they're not entirely accurate.

Moving on, I come across a dirty limerick that cleverly weaves the phone number of someone named Handy Hazza into a rhyming taxonomy of “skills”, ones that she apparently dispenses at night behind the gym for the right amount of money.

I wonder if Jenny and Hazza are friends?

There are a few other soundbites like this, but I quickly lose interest and focus on one encouraging me to join the Marxist Party when I turn eighteen. Pretty standard stuff for a high school restroom, really, but what can I say other than keep it classy, Stanmore. At least the distraction was enough to get me through this little breakdown.

I take what seems like my one thousandth laboured breath for the day and reach for the cubicle door, but stop dead to the sound of a loud bang and the aggravated shuffling of people barging their way into the restroom. Reflexively, I retreat back into the depths of the cubicle – silent, invisible – and listen.

‘She's such a fucking bitch!’ says a voice.

‘I know, I can't believe she spoke to you like that,’ says another.

‘She's a spoilt little brat, Mills, don't worry about it,’ offers a third.

‘Yeah, totally not worth it.’

‘Why's he with her, anyway? She's a freak. They all are.’

The voices split and two of the girls stay by the sinks clicking and zipping things, while the third takes up the cubicle next to me and starts peeing. *Loudly.*

‘Zoe reckons she caught 'em backstage once,’ she says.

‘Caught who?’ asks one of the others.

‘Sam and Mikey.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Whataya think, genius?’

'Zoe says they were doin' Wakakirri tryouts at the start of the year –' *flush* '– reckons she found Sam and Mikey goin' at it like dogs in the old dollhouse set.'

Someone laughs as the three voices reunite and one of them – thankfully – begins washing their hands.

'Zoe's fulla shit.'

'Yeah, she had a thing for Mikey, remember.'

'Didn't he legit carve her name into his arm, though?'

'That was Oli. Like, two years ago.'

'Jesus, Bel, keep up.'

A dryer kicks up over more laughter and I can't quite make out what they're saying, until: 'Well, whatever. Can we go? I don't wanna be late again.'

'Nah, she's pissed me off. I'm goin' for a coffee. Tell Du-blegh I'm sick or something.'

The voice called Bel starts arguing, but they all begin to fade, and just like that, I'm alone in the restroom again, acutely aware of the stale sick clinging to the roof of my mouth. It takes me more than a minute to actually leave the cubicle, and as I wash my face, gargle water, and brush my teeth with a damp finger, I stare at the shape in the mirror and all the effort she put into her appearance this morning.

For a moment, I hate her for it.

'Not the best start, Jess,' I tell myself. 'You can do better.'

I close my eyes.

I shake it off.

I march stoically into the empty corridor, ready for my first ever class at Stanmore High.

I mean, I would be if I hadn't left my backpack, my phone, and my laptop in my locker.

Which is...

Um...

Shit...

'Are you okay?' asks a voice.

Startled, I swing around to see a boy leaning against the wall texting on his phone, a satchel slung over his shoulder. He seems to have tailored his look to be... mildly offensive. His sleeves are rolled up, his tie held loosely around his neck by a lazy Half Windsor. His reddish-brown hair is short, thin, and deliberately – like, as in, *obviously* on purpose – unkempt. His fringe falls low enough to grace his eyebrows, both his ears are punctured by silver rings, and a rough triskelion tattoo patterns his exposed forearm. He'd look kind of tough, I suppose, if he wasn't so generously freckled.

'You look lost,' he says, then instantly darkens. 'Bitch Patrol went that way if that's who you're looking for.' He nods in the opposite direction.

'Uh, no. I'm, uh –'

Oh, God, he's looking at me.

He's looking at me and I'm making a fool of myself.

What is this, some angst-y teen romance drama movie?

No!

Come on, Jess.

You can do this.

'It's my first day.'

For a moment, I expect laughter, but instead the boy just pockets his phone. 'What's your name?' he asks.

'Jessica – Jess.'

'Jason – Jace,' he replies, smiling. 'Well, Jess, looks like you're running kinda late.'

'Yeah, just a tad. I... uh... don't really know where anything is.'

'Did you not do the whole orientation thing?' he asks, raising an eyebrow.

'Oh, I'm not boarding. I live over in Newtown.'

'Ah, okay. Well, I can show you 'round, if you like.'

'I mean, I should probably get to class...'

'Well, you've already missed homegroup. Where are you s'pose to be now?'

'Geography, I think. With Mister Patel.'

Jace chuckles and waves his hand. 'Eh, you won't miss much, but, yeah, I'll take you there. Or fifteen minutes tops and I can show you where *everything* is.'

'Well, I mean, what about you, though?'

'What about me?'

'Aren't you waiting for someone?' I ask, nodding at the entrance to the boys' restroom. 'And don't you need to get to class, too?'

His smile becomes a smirk. 'Nah, I'm good. I've got a free. Just wasting time.'

'Oh.'

'So, whataya say? Feel like a brisk walk? I'll take you straight to Patel's afterwards. Promise.'

Come on, Jess.

*You can do this.*

'Um... yeah, okay. Why not?' I smile, and it feels good. 'I'll have to stop at my locker on the way back, though.'



'Too easy,' says Jace. 'Come on. I've got a feeling you're the kind of person who'll appreciate a good library.'

I think Jace is taking me the long way around. I don't mind too much, though, because the grounds are surprisingly pretty when they're not flooded with people, and they're populated by so much ever-greenery that it's hard to know precisely where you are at any given time. As a plus, he's actually pleasant company, and I'm learning a lot about what it's like to board at the school, something I decided against after Audrey suggested I stay with her.

By the time Jace gets to the topic of friends, I've already seen the gym, the atrium, and the arts hall – a fusion of steel and glass wedged between two brick buildings I suspect appeared around the fifties – and the cafeteria. Only after he's milked the journey for everything it's worth does he finally show me the public access library he teased in the beginning, which I begrudgingly admit I'm smitten with. It's like the library back at my old school, except four storeys high and with, y'know, *books*. My expression must be revealing, because Jace's smirk – which has remained intact since we met in the corridor, mind you – becomes downright smug.

'I had a feeling you'd like this place,' he says, as he leads me past row after row of bursting bookshelves and gold-filigreed leather. 'It was a lot bigger back when I started school, but they're slowly digitising everything, so the top two floors are all computers and study rooms now.'

'I like it here, thanks,' I say, as we pass a dusty shelf stacked with old papers on the second floor. I look up at a once-stylish banner, one that clearly hadn't been changed in a while.

'What's "New Wave"?' I ask, pausing to flip through the broadsheets.

'Oh, I'm pretty sure that's s'posed to be the school magazine,' he replies. 'You, uh, have an interest in collecting newsletters?'

'No, but I do a lot of writing. Like fiction and poetry, and that sort of thing. I've been wanting to try my hand at writing a play for ages, but you know what it's like getting into new genres –'

Jace's eyes are glazing over, I'm sure.

Tone it down, Jess.

'Sorry.'

'Nah, nah. I'm not a words kinda guy, but I get it, just more into photography, myself. What got you into writing, anyhow?'

'Oh, my dad – um – yeah, my dad... he is – was – a writer.'

I expect another question, but Jace just cocks his head to the side. 'Right,' he says, quickly.

'They don't look like magazines,' I point out, quickly changing the subject.

'Yeah, it's s'posed to be run by the students, so no one really gives a shit about it. I think it was set up a while ago as part of a program thing with Sydney U, or something.'

Hm. Interesting.

'Well, you're quite well informed about it for someone who's not a words guy,' I point out.

Jace shrugs. 'Meh. My sister used to write for it a couple years back. When they actually took contributions, I mean. Whoever runs it now does just enough to keep it running. Probably for credit. Why, you lookin' to be an *artiste*, or something?'

'Maybe. That a joke to you?'

He cracks what I think is a genuine smile. 'No, *ma chérie*, I'm an *artiste extraordinaire*. I've got a *process* and *everything*.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. In fact, as a writer, you should appreciate this. I like to *sketch* things –' he taps his satchel like a smart-arse '– I start in the moment and then finish them from memory to make sure I get the *story* right. And y'know what they say, a picture's worth a thousand words, so my word count's usually pretty high.'

Yeah, okay.

I laugh at that one.

'What about *you*?' he asks. 'Got a process of your own?'

'Well, I don't know if I'd call it a process, but I kinda like to verbalise ideas before I write anything down, so lately I've been talking to my cat about them.'

Jace snorts. 'Your cat, huh?'

Oh.

Shit.

Shit, fuck. FUCK!

*Why* would I tell him that?

'Um, yeah, I –' it's hard to think when you can feel yourself turning red '– it's not like I think he's actually *talking*. It's like your sketches, just part of my process,' I say, trying my best to sound cavalier.

He laughs. 'It's okay. I've got a dog I ask for dating advice.'

Oh my God.

'Look, if you're gonna be a dick –'

'Sorry, sorry. Couldn't help it. But if you'd like, I can make it up to you. I can ask a few people about the magazine and the program thingy.'

'Thanks, but I can just ask around myself.'

Yeah, coz the very thought of asking for directions this morning didn't have any repercussions *at all*.

Thankfully, he doesn't give up straight away. Instead, he glances at my shoes, then at the plastic hairclip I still haven't done anything about. 'No offence, but it's pretty obvious you're not from around here.'

I nod. 'Perth, actually.'

'Public school?'

'Mhm.'

'Well, you'd be surprised how competitive Stanmore pedigrees can get, even over something as trivial as a fucking newsletter,' he says. 'Let me save ya some grief.'

'Oh, well, in that case, go ahead. You didn't tell me you were a hero.'

He laughs. 'Yeah, being an Avenger is one hell of a burden, I gotta admit,' he says before checking his phone. 'And on that note, we should probably get going. What did you say you've got first up?'

'Geography. But I gotta go to my locker first.'

'Right, that's back in the main building. Come on, we'll cut through the Square.'

So, off we head, leaving *New Wave* behind.

Thanks to Jace's expert guidance, I now know that – other than the oval – the Square is the largest open space in the school. It surrounds a repurposed church, the only building that looks older than the cloister where most of the classrooms are. As we pass beneath the shadow of its ancient belfry, cast by a rare moment of sunlight, Jace breaks the silence with a question.

'So, I'm curious,' he starts, causing my chest to tighten inexplicably. 'What's your last name? If you don't mind me asking.'

Oh. How random. And not at all difficult.

I relax.

'It's Roe.'

'As in, row a boat, or a row of chairs, or –?'

'Well, those are homonyms but, no, it's Roe with an "e".' I explain.

'Right, right,' he says, nodding sagely. We arrive at the cloister and enter its marbled innards once again. 'Like fish eggs, huh?' he posits.

'Uh, yeah... caviar,' I begrudgingly confirm.

'Right.' He smirks, barely concealing the laughter on his lips.

Despite – or maybe *to spite* – myself, I smirk back.

'Hey, look, I gotta go,' he says, suddenly.

'I thought you had a free?'

'I do, but... yeah... Anyway, what number did you say your locker was?'

'2B 113.'

'Okay, go down this corridor and go up the stairs on the right. Turn right at the top. Your locker should be somewhere on the left before the mezzanine. Then cross the mezzanine and keep going down the corridor. Geography is on the right. Patel's a bit old school, still plays golf with Langley – the principal – on Saturdays, but he's okay. Wait 'til you meet Harry, though. You'll love Harry.'

'Who's Harry?'

'Dubois. French teacher. You're taking French, right?'

'Yeah, pretty sure.'

'Not a mistake,' says Jace, winking.

'Cool. Well, thanks for showing me 'round, I guess.'

'No worries,' he replies, cheerily. He goes to leave but turns back before he hits the door.

'Oh, and don't worry about looking out of place,' he says. 'You're classier than most of the people here, easy.'

The comment takes me by surprise, and I'm left standing in the corridor gawking awkwardly at Jace instead of mounting my expedition upwards.

Did he...? Did he just *flirt* with me? Has he been flirting with me this whole time?

How do I know? What do I do?

Should I say something back?

I think I should say something back.

I search the recesses of my mind, but the voice is well and truly gone and has no advice to offer, so, 'Uh, thanks again,' is what I say.

'Don't mention it, Miss Caviar,' replies Jace. He bows dramatically, grins again, and disappears from view.

Ah, a nickname.

How splendid.

By the time my bed arrives – an *extra* week late because someone at the depot got the delivery schedule mixed up – I have to confess I’m starting to feel at home. Most of my belongings are comfortably stored in my room – or the bathroom cupboard – and my desk is littered with the pointless stationery of the aspiring writer. There’s just something about being surrounded by pens and pencils, I think.

Writing’s a habit I got from dad: he used to write all the time after work and would even read his work to me before bed; if it was appropriate, of course. He tried really hard to get some of it published, but I don’t think anyone ever picked it up. That doesn’t matter, though, because the magic of it kinda stuck anyway. I do short stories, mostly. Just little adventures involving me or people or know or people I’ve met. I don’t know if I’ll ever try to get anything published, but I really do love putting words on a page. The only problem is finding enough time to do it.

Anyway, moving on. I’ve decorated the walls with some posters, because there’s just something about paper clinging to 3M hooks that makes a room feel like an extension of the Self, y’know? I’ve hung at least half a dozen, but there’s only one that really matters: a blown-up print of a walking trail woven between gumtrees by a river. The camera is aimed – rather badly – at a set of three distinct footprints made by three distinctly shoeless right-feet, two of which currently reside together in Sydney’s inner western suburbs.

My reminder of better times.

Speaking of which, the bed turns out to be another flatpack masterpiece. I want to build it myself, but Audrey happens to be home and the peacemaker in me suggests I let her help, so we end up sitting on the floor with its skeleton between us. I crank up some innocuous pop music, which still sounds a little distressing through my crummy laptop speakers, and the conversation stays politely utilitarian while we focus on translating the instruction manual. In fact, things feel like they’re going quite well. That is until Audrey realises one of the footprints on the wall belong to her, however.

‘Have we been there before?’ she asks, nodding at the posters as I press a dowel into a dismembered backboard. I pretend to be engrossed with it because I’m not sure I want to answer, but then that doesn’t really help to mend anything, does it? In the two weeks I’ve been here, we’ve been low-key avoiding anything other than small talk, but I guess there’s got to be a first time sooner or later.

I decide to opt in.

‘That’s out by Collie,’ I tell her. ‘Minninup. We went camping there once.’

Audrey smiles. 'Oh, yeah. That's right,' she says. 'You wanted to carve your name into a tree, but you thought you'd hurt it, so we left our footprints in the mud.'

'Yeah.'

'I think I remember taking the photo,' she adds, absently tightening the screws in the sideboard she's working on.

'Dad got it blown up for my eighth birthday.'

Audrey laughs. 'Jeez, was it that long ago? Must've been the last time we got together for a family trip.'

'I'm pretty sure it was.'

Her smile fades as she lets go of the sideboard and I attach our two sections, completing the outer bedframe. We move on to the metal slats and the conversation slides back towards casual. We even make a few jokes and laugh together, but there's a shadow lingering over it, like we're walking on eggshells, or something.

'How're you finding school, by the way?' asks Audrey as we start the arduous task of endlessly tightening brackets.

'Yeah, not too bad. I'm getting along with all my teachers, and I've even made a friend.'

'Oh? Do tell.'

'Well, his name's Jason –'

'His?' says Audrey almost immediately, because of course she does. It makes me realise what I've done, and my breath catches in my throat. God, *why* don't I ever think before I open my mouth? It has to be pathological, seriously.

'Yeah.'

Audrey stares at me, apparently unsatisfied by this response. 'What's *he* like?' she asks after a while.

I shrug. 'I dunno? Alright, I guess.'

'But he *likes* you, right?'

'I dunno. I mean, he talks to me.'

For a second, Audrey actually frowns, but then something changes, and she decides to grin broadly. 'That's wonderful, baby,' she says. 'I'm so happy for you.'

I feel myself turning red. I don't know why, but her tone makes my skin crawl. It's like there's something I don't know, something she's using to make fun of me.

'*Why* is that wonderful?' I ask, my voice beginning to rise.

'Oh, no, I just meant – well, I know you were having trouble at school is all, and I know what that feels like, so...' she shrugs. 'It's good you're getting along with someone. And a boy, no less.'

She throws me another smile, like her last line should mean something special, but I'm too busy focusing my attention on not leaping over the bedframe to storm out of the room.

'You and dad were still talking, then,' I conclude aloud, carefully putting down my screwdriver so I can't accidentally STAB SOMETHING with it. I'm sure Audrey realises she's made a mistake, too, because she stops what she's doing to look at me.

'Well, yeah, of course. I mean, just because your dad and I didn't work out, doesn't mean I stopped loving you.'

Snap.

'Oh, right. See, I was just a little confused because after you left, we didn't really talk much anymore, so it's interesting hearing you mention my "trouble at school" like you knew all about it.'

Silence.

'Like, maybe it would've been nice to have a mum I could talk to about that stuff?'

Silence.

'Like, instead of one who ignored me and moved *across the country*, y'know?'

Audrey's mouth becomes taut. I've struck a nerve. 'I'm sorry, Jess,' she whispers, pitifully. 'I didn't mean to ignore you, talking just became... hard. Besides, I asked you what you wanted, and you told me you wanted all the fighting to stop, remember?'

'I was *nine* and you and dad were at each other's throats. What did you think I was gonna say?'

By now, we're standing like a couple of gunslingers in a showdown. The bedframe's almost complete and the music's still pumping, but it somehow fades into the background and all I can see is Audrey and her stupid face.

'That's not fair, Jess,' it says.

'Was it fair when you abandoned me?'

'I didn't *abandon* you. I wouldn't do that.'

'Oh, sorry, I must've misinterpreted. You just left and didn't come back. How's that? Sound any better?'

'That's not what happened at *all*,' she retorts. 'Yes, I went about it the wrong way, but I was... confused... and it was harder back then. I had things I needed to sort out. Besides, you were on *his* side. I guess you don't remember those little poems he used to make you write, the ones begging me not to leave.'

'I remember,' I say, gritting my teeth, but I don't say anything else. There's too much heat in my chest.

'You hate me. I get it. I made the mistake. But *she* was there for me in a way your father never was.'

I can feel myself begin to shake with rage. 'Don't even begin to *think* you can use *her* as an excuse!' I practically spit. 'And don't talk like it's the nineteen-God-damn-fifties! You made your fucking choice, and you did it in 2009, when you walked out on me!'

Audrey glares, her face slowly turning as red as I'm sure mine already is. 'I didn't walk out on anyone.'

'So, it's dad's fault you cheated on him, is it? Is that what you're going with?'

She sighs, which infuriates me even more. 'Why d'you think your father asked me to be the trustee for your inheritance?' she asks.

I shrug. 'Because you're technically my mother and he wanted us to reconnect?'

'No, but that *is* why I said yes. Years ago, after I'd apparently "abandoned" you. Let me put it this way: did he even ask you if that's what you wanted?'

He hadn't, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

'Come on, Jess. He could've asked your uncle and auntie. You were always much closer with them than me. Why would he make you come all this way just to rehash some old fights?'

'What are you trying to say? That he did it to hurt me for some reason?'

'No, Jess, he did it to hurt *me*. He was always your favourite, and that's fine. I know I'm not the maternal type. But when we started falling apart, he made sure you were on his side, and his side *only*.'

I'm so angry, I feel like I'm about to cry. I look down at Audrey's feet, then quickly trace her form all the way to the top of her forehead. I think I'm looking for signs she's lying, but all I really want to do is punch her in the face. I'm so close to lashing out as we size each other up that I might actually do it; I might actually punch her.

'Take that back,' I say, through gritted teeth,

Audrey just looks at me, sighs. 'God, I really don't need this,' she says, suddenly shaking her head. 'I never even wanted to be a mum in the first place.'

'Holy *shit*. Well, I'm *sorry* I'm such an inconvenience, I guess?'

Audrey looks at me, then rolls her eyes.

'Y'know what? I don't really care why dad did what he did, and I'm glad I'm here to make your life miserable. You're a bitch. You fucking deserve it.'

'Okay, whatever. You think about what you wanna do, coz maybe this isn't gonna work.'



'Yeah, you're right, and that's probably my fault, too. I mean, it's only been, what, four years since I even *saw* you? Two since our last *phone call*? But hey, what's two years of silence between mother and daughter, huh? Better than this shitshow, at least.'

I move towards her as I shout, coming to rest only when I can feel her breath on me.

'It's not like *you* didn't go through the trauma of someone you love disappearing for weeks on end. It's not like *you* didn't have to put up with constant excuses when all you wanted to do was spend time with her, right?' I realise I'm half a head taller than her, but that doesn't stop me from leaning in. 'I mean, I'm pretty sure *I* called *you* first after dad died, but that's not a big deal since you'd actually been talking to him about me the whole God damn time! *You* didn't even show up for the *fucking funeral*, so please, tell me how I can try harder to make *you* feel better about all this, so *I* can tell *you* how to *fuck right off*.'

Before I realise it's coming, she slaps me.

*Hard.*

We stand there, face-to-face beside the almost-finished bed, pain seared into my cheek. I hold myself still, but Audrey deflates, the gravity of the strike sapping the life from her almost instantly.

'I'm sorry,' she says, stepping back. 'I shouldn't've, I—' she stops herself. 'If you wanna leave, go ahead, I won't stop you. I'll release as much of the money as you want, for whatever bullshit you make up.' There's a quiver in her voice, but she holds it together and even manages to put quiet resolve behind it. As she turns to leave, she pauses at the door. 'Before you condemn me, though, maybe you should ask yourself why your dad never told you we were still talking, either. Maybe you'll realise not everything's about *you*, but I doubt it.'

She turns her back on me.

I hear her bedroom door slam shut, and all the anger rushes out of me.

Leave, she says.

Where would I go?

It was dad's sister and her husband who put me up after dad died, and as much as I didn't want to admit it, Audrey was right: I was much closer to them than I ever was with her. If I asked them to take me back, I had no doubt I could be in Perth inside of a week.

But why?

I don't care what Audrey thinks, what's left between dad and me is here, in Sydney.

In Stanmore.

It was his high school *alma mater*, after all. A place he remembered fondly. We moved to Perth to be closer to his family, sure, but Sydney is where dad thrived.

It's where I'll thrive, too.

I know it.

*I know it.*

I look down at the bedframe and its metal slats; the first truly cooperative effort Audrey and I have managed in nearly a decade.

My phone's right there on the bedside table. It'd be truly nothing to make a few calls. I could do it so easily, and Audrey would become nothing more than a name I email when I need access to my trust fund.

Instead, though, I finish fixing the slats, pop the mattress on top, and lay with my head against the wall, staring at a line of gum trees and some muddy footprints in a place I'll probably never see again.

'Well, here I am,' I tell myself.

## 4

Jace was right about one thing; I *do* love Harry. Or, I should say, *Monsieur* Dubois.

Most of the teachers at Stanmore look like politicians: Miss Jurrah, the Year 12 coordinator, likes formal knee-length A-lines with aboriginal artwork over the chest, even when it's freezing outside; Mister Langley, the principal, wears what I'm pretty sure is the *same* three-piece suit every day; and I've never seen Mister Patel, the geography teacher, without his white overcoat, though to be fair, it's usually stained with *something* colourful. They also have sensible haircuts and mannerisms befitting a feudal court.

Basically, they're all very *proper*.

Harry, on the other hand, has spiky, bleached-blond hair and likes to wear *denim*. It doesn't seem to matter where or how, either, just so long as it looks like he spent the morning altering another pair of jeans.

Basically, he's very *improper*.

'Jessica Roe?' he began the first time I walked into French class. 'What do you prefer? Jessica, Jess, Jessie? Something else entirely?'

'Um, Jess,' I remember stammering, thinking it was some kind of trick question.

'Jess it is. You can call me Mister, *Monsieur*, Dubois, or just plain Harry, if you like. Please have a seat. I've got some catch up worksheets for you.'

He smiled brightly through this whole exchange, and I knew then and there – despite the *clearly* audible sniggers from elsewhere in the classroom – that French was going to be my favourite lesson.

On the flip side, I could feel myself picking up some old habits again. Apart from Jace, I didn't really speak to anyone, and this had the familiar knock-on effect of getting me ignored by most people most of the time. Which I think is fine, really, because I'm like, *jazzed* to have my usual routine back.

Totally.

*Absolutely.*

I mean, things with Audrey are pretty tense after our fight, so it's *great* that I can just be invisible and do my thing while I'm at school. Or after school. Or before school. I definitely thank God the library's public access, because I like being able to do homework there until it closes every single day. Anything, really, to avoid going home and dealing with Audrey.

So, it's great.

Honestly.

I'm doing dad proud, I'm sure.

Anyway...

On one particularly gloomy Tuesday, I'm looking for a spare table in the cafeteria big enough to support both my food and my laptop when I hear a friendly voice.

'Oi, Caviar!' it shouts.

I peer over the sea of students and see Jace – as expected – waving me down. As I approach, I realise he's sitting at a table with three other people and, judging by the look on his face, I get the distinct impression he's about to introduce us all.

Mild panic thus ensues.

'Guys, this is Jess,' he says, beaming.

Two of the pack are girls, and they're discussing something over a phone. The first is someone I've seen before in class but never spoken to, and she's leaning back in her chair with annoyingly effortless poise. Her blonde hair is styled – choppy lob, I think it's called – and she acknowledges me primarily by flicking it out of her eyes.

'Jess, this is Sam...' explains Jace.

'Hey,' she says.

'Hi,' I reply.

The second is also someone I've seen before, but this time I'm certain I've also heard her name. She's bespectacled like me and freckled like Jace, which, when combined with the school's pleated maroon dress and the procession of homemade bracelets adorning her wrists, makes her look utterly bohemian. Her auburn-coloured hair – just a few shades darker than Jace's – is platted, and she actually throws me a smile.

'... my evil twin sister, Hannah, in case you couldn't tell...'

'Nice to meet you,' she says, and I realise I know her from Miss Jurrah's English Literature class.

'Same,' I reply.

The third of the pack is a boy whom I don't recognise at all. He's largely built, with short, curly brown hair, shorts, and a pair of black thongs that don't look in the slightest like something the school board would be happy to see him wearing. He's rolling a basketball around on his knees in a way that looks surprisingly cool, but he stops to nod in my direction.

'... and Sam's boyfriend, Mikey.'

The boy nods at me. 'This the chick you been simping for?' he asks, cracking Jace's smile in two.

'Fuck you,' replies Jace, flipping him off.

'Nah, I'm good,' counters Mikey.

'Aw, don't be jealous, Jacey,' says Sam, slipping her phone into her handbag. 'You couldn't keep up with him, anyway.'

'Bitch, please. I could keep anyone goin' longer than your pitiful five-minute record,' says Jace. 'You should see the mess we leave in the dorms.'

'Oh, I have, and that shit *stains*.'

'Fucking *gross*, Sam,' interjects Hannah.

Cool, cool. This is a conversation I want to have right before lunch.

'You all board, then?' I ask, keen to change the subject.

'Yeah, Sam and Hannah are roommates,' clarifies Jace, 'and so are me and Bag 'O' Dicks here,' he adds, pointing at Mikey.

'You're off-campus?' asks Sam.

'Yeah, I live with Aud – my mum, over in Newtown.'

'Really? Must be nice,' says Mikey.

I shrug. 'Not so much. We don't get along.'

They all swap furtive glances.

'Still, probably better than dealing with all the shit that goes on here,' suggests Mikey.

'And you guys are twins?' I ask, turning to Jace and Hannah. 'That explains a lot.'

'Yep, but don't be fooled, she's *definitely* the evil one,' answers Jace. 'Anyway,' he says, ushering me onto a spare seat and sliding his ever-present satchel off the table so I can put my tray down. 'Remember how I was gonna ask about the magazine for you?'

'Yeah, like, weeks ago.'

'Well, here you go,' he announces, sweeping his arm up and over Hannah's head. 'Don't say I never did nothin' for ya.'

'Uh, okay...'

He frowns. 'Hannah's our resident expert on all matters *New Wave* and L-E-P. She'll help you out,' he affirms, his grin once again firmly in place. Hannah herself augments the conversation with a coy wave.

'Oh, cool. Thanks,' I say, offering them both a genuine smile. 'Sorry, what exactly is the L-E-P?'

They look at each other and we all lean in conspiratorially. Apparently, this is fascinating stuff. 'It's the Literary Excellence Program,' explains Hannah.

'Like I said, it's a program Sydney University runs outta Stanmore,' adds Jace.

'The idea is that writers can get extra credit towards an arts degree scholarship at Sydney U by doing extra-curriculars,' continues Hannah. 'You can negotiate with the coordinator to do a creative project, but the courses on offer are usually pretty competitive, so there's only a few things worth doing.'

'They wanna know you're a good investment,' translates Mikey, deigning to participate, however slightly.

'Basically, yeah. The scholarship covers tuition, living expenses, and a bunch of startup costs if you do industry placement, so they set up *New Wave* coz it's like, a demonstration of business skills as well as writing ability.'

'Fair enough.'

'You interested in that stuff?' asks Sam.

'Her dad's a writer,' answers Jace, before I can.

'Following the family tradition then?' concludes Hannah, smirking.

'Plenty of that 'round here, don't worry,' adds Mikey, letting go of a thoroughly unimpressed sigh.

'I don't think she realises who the student editor is, though, Han,' says Jace.

We all swap furtive glances again.

'Is that important?' I ask.

'Let me put it this way,' begins Hannah. 'I used to write articles for *New Wave* when I was younger. Nothing much, but y'know, I've wanted to be a journalist since I was five, so last year I made a go of it to earn LEP credit. Until –'

'Milly scored the editorship,' supplies Mikey.

'Who's Milly?'

Jace rolls his eyes. At first, I think he's annoyed by my seemingly endless lack of knowledge, but I quickly realise his ire is focused elsewhere. 'Are you saying that you've been here for how many weeks now and you *don't* know who Milly Yorke is?'

I shrug.

Again.

'Should I?'

'It's understandable, really. Milly Yorke doesn't *do* socials,' says Hannah, faking an aristocratic accent.

'Yeah. Milly Yorke doesn't even *do* classes,' continues Sam.

'And don't forget, Milly Yorke doesn't *need* curfews,' says Mikey.

'Let's be honest, Milly Yorke's a grade-A bitch you *don't* wanna know anyway,' concludes Jace, and the four of them manage a collective giggle.

'She's from old, old money,' explains Hannah. 'Her dad's a director of some international company, her mum's a Dean at Sydney U, and they're all golf-course chummy with the faculty here.'

'*Alumni*, all of 'em,' says Mikey.

'Ergo, she can do whatever she fucking wants,' adds Jace.

'And what she fucking wants right now is as much extra-curricular credit as she can get,' says Sam.

'*Including*,' interjects Hannah, 'the school magazine, which she cut down to the absolute *bare* minimum she could just for the credit.'

'Ah,' I eloquently declare, the problem finally manifest.

Still, this LEP sounds exactly like what I need right now. Dad never did manage to make a living as a writer, but it's always what he wanted. The best he could do after Stanmore was to study mechanics at TAFE, something his parents considered rather beneath his potential, as he put it. Still, it scored him a couple of well-paying gigs in the Pilbara, and eventually he and Audrey – then a waitress whom he originally met at one of his parents' many functions – decided to follow his sister's example and move as far away from Sydney as they could: to Perth.

Through the hard work and the FIFO swings, the breakdown of his marriage and the raising of – well – *me*, the only thing he ever said he regretted is that he didn't give writing more of a real chance. Well, maybe he still can.

Maybe I can.

Surely this Milly can't be *that* unreasonable?

'But if she's got so much going on and she's not really interested in it, then wouldn't she be happy for someone to take over editorship? Even, like, a co-editor, or something?'

All four of them laugh.

'The chances of Milly Yorke handing over *any* responsibilities of value are nil,' says Hannah. 'Trust me. I've tried.'

'Isn't she the reason you don't write for it anymore?' asks Jace.

'Yep,' replies Hannah. 'Not worth the fucking effort.'

'Well, I mean, who's the coordinator?' I ask. 'Miss Jurrah?'

Hannah shakes her head. 'Dubois took it over this year.'

'Oh, Harry? He's pretty cool. Could he help?'

'Not if he wants to keep his job,' says Mikey.

‘They won’t kick a student like Milly off a project like *New Wave* at a school like Stanmore,’ says Hannah, lowering her voice. ‘Nah, listen, you’ll need to talk to Dubois anyway for admission into the program, but I think that’s in March, so you’ll have to wait ‘til next year, anyway. There’s no harm in trying to soften Milly up early, though. Pretty sure she’s here today, actually.’

The smirk on her face settles on the resoundingly devious, and I suddenly suspect I’m walking into a trap.

‘I... should probably wait,’ I counter. ‘Y’know, talk to Harry first.’

‘I dunno,’ says Sam, twisting her head to stare at a table on the other side of the cafeteria occupied by a handful of girls. ‘You’re still gonna need her okay, and she might not show up again for the rest of the year.’

‘Yeah, she might disappear like she did a little while ago. Nobody saw her for months,’ claims Jace.

‘Just so you know, I’d usually tell you if they were fucking with you,’ says Mikey, tapping his basketball impatiently. ‘But in this case, you might not get another chance.’

‘But what’s the point if she won’t budge?’

Hannah shrugs. ‘At least she’ll know you exist. Besides, she might be in a good mood.’

The grins surrounding me suggest otherwise, and yet I apparently decide meeting Milly is a matter of necessity rather than choice.

‘Yeah, okay,’ I hear myself say as I turn to follow Sam’s gaze. ‘Which one is she?’

‘The girl with the long, black hair,’ replies Sam.

‘What should I say?’

‘Just be direct,’ says Hannah. ‘And if she *does* go for it, drop my name in, too.’

I’m sure I hear them all giggling again, but before I know it, I’m on my feet and walking across the cafeteria, my breath catching with every step.

Why, exactly, am I doing this? Is it some poor attempt at breaking a habit, or am I just trying to impress Jace’s friends?

Or is it both?

Unfortunately, I don’t have time to dwell on my thoughts, because I arrive at the table way sooner than I anticipate. How many steps was that? Like, four?

Everyone stops talking as I approach, but nobody makes eye contact with me except the girl with long black hair. She does so from behind a set of fake eye lashes and cheeks flushed with a subtle layer of rouge that, for some reason, seems to make her vaguely sparkle. Its way more intimidating than I ever imagined it could be.

‘Uh, hi,’ I say. ‘Milly?’



'Mhm,' replies my blue-eyed target, lifting her head to acknowledge my presence. 'And you are?'

Fuck.

I recognise that voice.

It's the girl from the restroom, the one who wanted a coffee.

Greeeeaat.

Well. I'm in it now. Might as well press on.

'My name's Jess. I was just wondering if I could talk to you about the school magazine?'

There's an awkward silence in which nobody moves or says anything. It's like they're waiting on permission to act, but even when Milly eventually says, 'Sure, whatever,' the tension doesn't really break. It more sort of... sizzles... and the girl next to me – Bel, maybe? – shuffles over slowly so I can join the group.

'Thanks,' I say, cautiously taking my place.

'You're new, aren't you?' asks Milly.

'Yeah, just moved here from Perth.'

'Is that where you got those shitty sneakers from?' asks Bel to a chorus line of laughter.

I feel myself turning bright red and see Milly smiling.

I clear my throat and decide to ignore Bel. 'So, I haven't spoken to Mister Dubois yet, but –'

'Who?'

'Mister Dubois. Y'know, French class?'

'Right, yeah. Du-blegh.'

'I'm interested in the LEP –'

'The –?'

'The L-E-P. Literary Excellence Program.'

'Oh, okay.'

'And apparently the best thing I can do is get involved in the school magazine.'

'Oh, really?'

'Yeah, and you're, like, the student editor, or so I'm told.' I try to smile, but I don't think my mouth does anything: I'm too busy watching Milly's eyes narrow. 'So, I was just wondering if – uh –'

'If you could what?' she interjects.

'Uh – well, I was kinda wondering what I *could* do, y'know, to help. Like, contribute, or something. For the credit.'

Milly stares at me for a moment, and I'm sure she's gonna say something nasty, but she ends up doing something else: she simply shrugs. 'Sure. Write a short story or something. I'll put it in.'

Hm. That's okay. I guess.

But if Hannah's right, then I really need to be involved on, like, a managerial level to gain a wider range of experience related to editing and publishing to prove that I'm worth the course conveners' investment. All of this comes out as, 'Uh...'

Milly leans into the table. 'What?'

'Well, thanks and all, but I was kinda hoping to be a bit more involved than that, coz, y'know, the courses on offer are pretty competitive, and –'

'Yeah, I'll be honest,' says Milly, cutting me off. 'I've got a lotta shit to do, and the magazine's kinda low priority for me, so this conversation isn't gonna go anywhere. If you wanna put something in, that's fine, but apart from that, I really don't need someone coming on board and upping my workload, so –'

'But if I just contribute something it might not be enough –'

'Then write a few puff pieces for the school board or whatever,' she says, her voice oddly calm. 'Trust me, they don't care. You'll get your credit.'

'Don't you get good grades?' asks Bel. 'Won't that be enough? Or are you retarded?'

I feel heat prickle through my hands and press against my forehead. I'm not even sure why I bother to answer her, but I do. 'My grades are fine, but that's not the point.'

'Look,' continues Milly, 'the magazine's a joke. It's there so the school looks good. Do yourself a favour and don't worry about it. Write a couple of nice things about how great Stanmore is and move on, okay?'

Okay, yeah, I'm a little angry by this stage, but losing my cool right now would be silly, so I do the only thing I can do, really, and nod.

Milly just keeps looking at me expectantly. 'Okay?' she repeats.

'Okay,' I repeat.

She smiles, apparently satisfied. 'Great. It was nice meeting you,' she says, smirking.

Now, fuck off.

I retreat all the way back to my co-conspirators, whom, if they weren't in the school cafeteria, would probably all be rolling on the floor laughing right now.

'How'd you go, Caviar?' asks Jace, fighting back the most hideous grin I've ever seen.

'You in with the cool kids, huh?' jokes Hannah.

I sink into my chair and, despite feeling more embarrassed and exhausted than I have in a while, manage to smile. 'They're not the friendliest people I've ever met,' I say.

My co-conspirators laugh again, but this time, I laugh with them.

And why not?

It *was* kinda funny.

For now, at least.

'You're alright, Jess,' says Sam. 'Guys, we should *totally* invite her to the party. What you reckon?'

Party?

'Yeah, you should totally come!' says Jace, patting me on the back. 'Whataya think, Mikey? Is that okay?'

'Doesn't bother me. I'll just tell Cole she's your plus-one,' says Mikey, grinning.

Plus-one?

'Yeah, whatever. I mean, if you wanna go, Caviar?'

Shit.

Is this good or bad?

I don't even know, but I have to say something.

Do I wanna go?

Where is it?

What's involved?

I'm *so* not ready for this.

'Can you even have parties on campus?' I blurt out, apparently desperate to delay answering.

Sam laughs. 'Nah, it's at Bondi. Mikey's older brother has a place out there. It's his party.'

'And it's next weekend, not this one,' adds Mikey. 'So, you've got time to think it over.'

'What kind of party is it?' I ask, to snorts and chuckles.

'Ever smoked pot before?' asks Hannah.

Pot, huh?

I mean, I *googled* it once.

Does that count?

'I, uh —'

'Aw, come on Hannah,' says Jace, jumping in. 'You're scaring her.'

'Virgin, eh?' says Sam, her eyes wide with what I can only describe as mischief. 'That settles it, you're so coming.'

I open my mouth to tell them that I'd better not, that I'm still trying to catch up with my lessons, that I can't think what I'd tell Audrey, and that I have too many other things to do, but I only manage to say, 'Yeah. Should be fun.'

*Esprit de corps* and all that, I guess.

At least I've made some new friends.

So, why can't I stop wondering what the hell I've just gotten myself into?

I don't tell Audrey where I'm going, and she doesn't ask. When I say goodbye, she's busy watching the election – of all things – so we keep it simple. I tell her I have my phone; she tells me to have fun and stay safe. She makes a joke about underage drinking and smiles. I don't confess to feeling a little guilty, but neither of us dwells on it. I say I'll call if I need to, and I leave.

In the middle of the street, a posh, white sedan with red P-plates attached to the windows idles. I stifle a rush of nervous energy as I double check my handbag for the spare house key. I must forget to move, though, because a moment later the back door opens and Jace's head appears.

'Come on, Caviar!' he says. 'Haven't got all night.'

I poke my head inside the car, all warm smiles and friendly greetings. Mikey's driving, Sam's up front, and Jace and Hannah are in the back. I squeeze in beside them.

The first thing I notice is that everything *feels* expensive. The seats, for example, are *actually* leather. Not the fake stuff. *Actual* leather. And there are screens in the headrests. And phone jacks in the door handles. And a soft, electronic voice explaining where Mikey should go as he finishes enunciating what I assume must be Cole's address.

And it's not just the car, either. Everyone's wearing something smart and upmarket: Jace and Mikey are both in dress shirts; Sam's showing off a wonderfully red, knee-high dress; and Hannah... well... Hannah's a little more casual in denim shorts and a tank top, but they don't look cheap. In fact, I'd bet Lestat's kitty nibbles the labels have names on them littered with silent letters and presumptuous diacritics, like Khaite or Chloé.

Meanwhile, here I am rocking the twenty-dollar versions from Kmart.

So, what I do is my absolute best to look bored with it all, because this is normal for these guys, and it should be normal for me, too. I mean, dad was never hard up for money – his job paid well, and he kept us afloat no worries – but his idea of luxury was a vase of fake flowers from IKEA. The rest, he put away. And that was fine when I was a kid, but not keeping up with this sort of thing now isn't going to win me any favours. If I *want* friends, I have to adjust.

And I must be doing a good job, too, because Jace frowns at me. 'You okay?' he asks.

'Me? Yeah, cool. All good, all good,' I rattle off, clicking my seatbelt into place.

It takes Mikey approximately half a second to shift the car into gear, and away we go at quite a speed.

'So, you live here, huh?' asks Sam, casually doomscrolling on her phone as if we're not all about to become a leather-bound fireball.

'I do, yes,' I reply.

'I think it's nice,' says Hannah. 'Got an old rustic charm to it.'

'Full of hipsters and wannabes, you mean?' snorts Sam, and a ripple of laughter engulfs the car.

'Roads are fuckin' tight enough,' says Mikey, and he finally slows to avoid clipping a four-wheel drive. By some stroke of luck, we make it and turn east onto a much more comfortably sized street.

For a while, the conversation revolves around events I'm not involved in and people I don't know, so I sink contentedly against the door and watch the lights of the city gently sail past as we make our way towards Bondi. Inevitably, though, I hear my name, and reluctantly force myself away from the cool embrace of the window.

'So, Jess,' begins Hannah, 'why don't you board at Stanmore?'

'Yeah, no offence, but your place is *kind* of a dump,' says Mikey, prompting Sam to punch his arm. 'Ow! What? I said, "no offence".'

'I can't afford to live at the school,' I reply, matter-of-factly.

'But you're paying tuition?' presses Hannah.

'Yeah. I mean, that's pretty much all I can budget for, though.'

'That's a shame,' says Hannah.

'Why's that?' I ask.

'Well, Jace reckons you're pretty smart, and I thought it'd be nice to have someone with half a brain to study with for once.'

'We could still do that!' I announce, with *waaay* too much enthusiasm. 'I don't mind staying after school. I mean, I already do most days anyway.'

'Oh yeah, I bet you'd be a *riot* in the dorms, Jess,' says Sam.

Sarcastically.

I think.

'Don't listen to her. She's a lost cause. Some of us actually *like* learning,' says Jace, proudly, even if it elicits a derisive snort from the front of the car.

'Well, she can let loose at Cole's, then,' replies Sam.

'Yeah, sure, go ahead and trash the place,' adds Mikey, with only a hint of sarcasm. 'I'm sure Cole won't mind *at all*.'

'Fuckin'-A!' says Jace, as the conversation turns away from me – thankfully – and morphs into reminiscences of yesteryear's greatest parties. I sit back and try to relax, but I know I'm not off to a great start, and that nervous energy just keeps coming back.

All the way to Bondi.

Cole's house is so far removed from the suburban dystopia of Audrey's neighbourhood that, for a brief moment, I think we're lost. It's not that the place is a mansion or anything: *au contraire*, compared to some of its contemporaries, it's downright modest. Still, there's no piecemeal stratification here: it's all or nothing, baby.

Jace raps his hands against the window, his excitement palpable, but he manages to wait for Mikey to finish parking before unbuckling his seatbelt. The place is two storeys high and *busy*, its balcony full of young people drinking, laughing, and doing mildly stupid things like trying to tip beer on each other's heads.

From somewhere on the other side of the fence, I can smell meat cooking on a barbeque and hear the quintessential explosions of bodies diving into water. There's music playing loudly enough to carry down the street, but none of it seems overly rowdy, even though someone I don't know – and well into his twenties, by the look of him – is already throwing up on the lawn.

'Aeee,'s'up GUYS?' he says as we pass by, his head wobbling dangerously.

We make it to the front door – which is guarded by a man too preoccupied bobbing to the club anthem to notice us – and head inside where there are people *everywhere*. Like, more than I realised could fit inside a house. The floor is covered in rubbish, the lounge room has been converted into a dance floor, and there seems to be an extraordinarily high number of blow-up beach balls and pool noodles per guest. I have to admit, it's all strangely exciting and overwhelming at the same time, especially since I've never *been* to a house party that involved anything more than pizza, movies, and a sneaky six-pack.

'I'm gonna go see who's here,' shouts Sam, darting off before anyone else can say anything.

'Yeah, imma see if I can scope out Cole,' announces Mikey, who follows suit. Jace itches to follow them but stops himself and looks at me.

'You gonna be okay if we catch up in a bit?' he asks.

'Um –' I eloquently reply, anxiety suddenly spiking.

*Please don't leave me alone* is what I *want* to say, but for some reason, nothing comes out.

Hannah sidles up beside me and locks her arm with mine. 'Don't worry, I'll look after her,' she tells him, smiling.

'Cool. I'll come back with something special,' declares Jace, smirking like a magician about to perform a trick before he, too, disappears.

'Huh?' I say, turning to Hannah.

'He means weed,' she explains, rolling her eyes and leaning in so she doesn't have to yell. 'Come on, I'll show you 'round.'

Hannah takes me on a brief tour of the house and introduces me to no less than a dozen people, some of whom I recognise from school, some of whom I don't. They all talk to me like I'm an old friend, bitching about a teacher I've never met or asking if I was at the beach last year when such-and-such were hooking up in the public toilet. At least half of them have trouble standing still.

About ten minutes into the party, we find Sam with a fluorescent bottle in her hand, trapped somewhere between conversation and dancing, surrounded by people who all seem to be taking a very strong interest in her red dress. With admirable ease, she breaks with the group when she sees us, painting a smile with her lips.

'Here,' she says, gleefully handing both Hannah and me a bottle of whatever it is she's drinking.

Vodka Cruisers. Classic.

'They're twist tops,' she declares, happily. 'Where's my boyfriend? And the other one?'

'They went to find Cole,' replies Hannah, miming the presence of a cigarette between her fingers.

'Oh, right, shit,' says Sam, laughing. 'Don't drink too much, Jess.'

She winks, and I suddenly get the impression I'm just along for the ride on this one.

We mosey on out to the slightly quieter back porch, where, after a brief conversation about sleeping arrangements for the night, Hannah twists open her Cruiser and takes a swig. I automatically follow suit – even though I've never had one to myself before – and find it doesn't taste half-bad. Before I know it, I've downed half the bottle.

'Whataya think of the place?' asks Sam.

'Yeah, nice. Shame you can't see Bondi Beach from here, though,' I say.

'I so know what you mean,' replies Sam, smiling.

'Does Cole actually own it?'

Sam and Hannah laugh.

I notice I make them laugh a lot.

'Yes and no,' answers Sam, eventually. 'Cole's a bouncer at Club Nine, so he can't really afford shit. This is their dad's place. Or, one of 'em, anyway.'

'He gave it to Cole to avoid losing it in the divorce,' adds Hannah. 'So, Cole gets to do pretty much what he wants with it.'

'Right, right,' I say, trying to sound savvy, but apparently failing, judging by the smarmy look on Sam's face.

'Go on. Say it,' she snaps.

'Say what?'



'You think we're a buncha spoilt rich kids, don't ya?'

'Well, no. Though, to be fair, I don't know anyone who could just give me a house, sooo –'

'Sure, but *someone* still paid for you to go to a private school, right?'

'Aw, come on, Sam,' interrupts Hannah. 'Be nice. It's a party.'

She smiles at both of us.

Sam smiles at me.

Not in the same way, though.

'Yeah, you're right, Hannah,' she says. 'Sorry, Jess, I didn't mean to be rude,' she takes a sip of her Cruiser. 'So. Who'd you rather fuck, Jace or Mister Dubois?'

I nearly spit out my drink. I don't answer, because I don't know what to say. 'Jesus, Sam,' says Hannah, but Sam just stares at me.

'Come on, don't be shy just coz his sister's standing next to you. She doesn't care, really.'

'Uh –'

'I mean, Jace *is* pretty toned, but I'd totally go down on Dubois. He's got that "good boy" charm –' Sam suddenly staggers forward, cut off by a beaming Mikey who appears behind her, arms clasped around her waist. He kisses her on the cheek, then looks at Hannah and me. 'Getting along out here?' he asks.

'Oh, for sure,' says Sam, as bubbly as ever.

Then Jace saunters out with what appears to be an older, much larger, version of Mikey and I start to think maybe I'm already drunk.

'Hey all,' the older Mikey says.

'Cole, Jess. Jess, Cole,' says Jace.

'Oh, right,' I say, desperate not to give Sam an opening. 'Nice to meet you.' I stick out my hand – for some reason – and he shakes it.

'Likewise,' he says, grinning. 'Don't drink too much.'

He winks.

What's with the all the winking?

'Oh, that's great, I'll stop immediately,' I say, downing the rest of my Cruiser with ease. Cole and Jace both laugh but Mikey is busy distracting Sam by whispering in her ear, so I don't get to gauge how funny either of them think I am, and Hannah just smiles unhelpfully.

Cole turns to Jace and hands him a brown paper bag and a small wooden pipe, says something I don't quite catch, then heads back inside.

'Thanks man,' shouts Jace. 'Well, who wants to do a little philosophising in the garden?'

'Oh, hell yes!' roars Sam, once again animated.

'For sure,' adds Mikey.

'Ugh. You're such a *dork*,' says Hannah.

We form a ritualistic pentagon near the pool, with Jace, Mikey, Sam, Hannah, and I completing the satanic pattern with some deckchairs. We chat for a bit first. Sam and Mikey get into a thing about a new pair of earrings she wore but he didn't notice, while Hannah and Jace discuss the questionable quality of some movie torrents he downloaded a few days ago. I do more listening than speaking, but even with the sound of the party still blaring in the background, I'm finally able to relax. I sink into the chair and let the rhythm of the conversation envelop me, and I hardly even notice when Jace begins fiddling with the bag Cole gave him.

Still, a sensation kicks in – the herald of impending peer pressure – and I watch as he carefully stuffs the pipe with green ruffage and buds. He packs the pipe tightly, then lights it with a dull, blue cigarette lighter. Rather than suck on the thing himself, he hands it to Mikey, who takes the inaugural drag for him. Usually, I'd be more anxious right now, considering I've never actually smoked before, but either I've accepted that this is to be a night of firsts, or the alcohol is doing its job, I guess.

Mikey blows a cloud of smoke into the night sky, leans back in his deckchair – mellow personified – and passes the pipe to Sam, merry-go-round style.

'Hey, Jess,' he says, casually. 'Why does Jace call you Caviar all the time?'

I'm kinda intensely watching the slow but steady procession of the pipe, so the question catches me off-guard.

'What's that?'

'Why does this dickhead here call you Caviar all the time?'

'Oh. My last name's Roe. Like – like fish eggs. He thinks it's funny,' I reply, smirking at Jace.

Jace sighs. 'Well, genius is often underappreciated,' he quips.

Mikey giggles – a strange sound coming from him – while Sam watches her own smoke cloud coalesce and then fragment before passing the pipe to Hannah. 'I don't get it,' she says.

Hannah leans forward to take her drag. It might technically be long and slow, but it's still fast enough for my nerves to break through the alcohol.

Am I actually about to do this?

Isn't it illegal?

What if I choke?

There's a conversation going on between Jace and Sam. I think he's trying to explain the joke, but I'm too busy dissecting Hannah's technique to take anything else in. She hands me the pipe and I almost panic.

Shit.

How do I do this?

I think the whole pentagon's looking at me. I mean, Mikey and Sam are kind of idly playing with each other's feet, but Hannah and Jace *are* staring directly at me.

Gotta do something.

I look at the buds slowly burning away in the bowl. Just look at them. Not doing anything. For a while. Maybe if I wait long enough, they'll burn away completely?

'Take your time,' says Sam, now apparently also paying attention.

Fuck.

I put the pipe in my mouth, holding it like they hold tobacco pipes in the movies, and prepare to draw smoke, but Jace stops me. 'The carb,' he says. He wraps his hand around mine and guides my thumb over a small hole near the bowl.

'Oh, right,' I say. 'Uh, been a while, I guess.'

He withdraws his fingers slowly, his touch lingering.

I put the pipe back.

I draw on it like I think I'm supposed to...

... And almost drop the damn thing.

Everyone laughs as I cough most of the smoke back out, hunching over and lurching with every spasm in my deckchair. I even manage to turn some other nearby heads. I feel like I'm transforming into a bright shade of red, and the look of amusement on Jace's face confirms it.

'A *long* while, huh?' he says, taking it from me and relighting the fading buds.

Hannah pats me on the back while Sam and Mikey struggle to stop laughing. As I calm down, she hands me the rest of her Cruiser. 'This might be more your pace,' she says.

I polish it off; anything to get the smoke out of my throat.

I might've been caught in a lie, but I seem to have been adequately amusing for the night, so the five of us just sit there and laugh and talk. We talk about school and about Sydney. We talk about how boring the latest fads are, and about how "hot" Cole is compared to some of the girls at Stanmore, which was confusing until I stopped trying to follow the conversation logically.

The pipe does its rounds, and I take a few more unsuccessful drags. I do it right on my third try, though, with Jace's help, of course, and things start to get a little... cosy. Jace shuffles his deckchair over to mine and even though he doesn't touch me, he leans in real, real close. I don't

think he's been smoking anything, though, so I'm not sure how to react. Anyway, he starts telling me a really funny story, and I'm laughing so hard I can't think of anything else, so I just bury my head in his chest and giggle like an idiot until he finishes the story.

I think it was a story.

I lean back and notice he's all blurry now, so I clean my glasses off and ask him to stop being indistinct, but he doesn't, so I call him a stubborn prick, as well.

'Wait, wait, wait,' says Sam, suddenly stirring from whatever reverie had her gazing at the great black nothing above us. 'I just remembered something. Jess, are you, like, you're, going to Stanmore by choice, right?'

I look around. Oh, she's asking me.

Did I say something?

I must've.

I'm so *calm* right now, I feel like the ink in the sky.

'Yeah, why?'

'We were talking about that over an hour ago,' states Jace, in a remarkably cogent and definitive kinda way.

'Nah, nah, nah. It's – bitch, nobody goes to Stanmore by *choice*, okay?' continues Sam. 'I had to fight my parents not to send me to an all-girls school. Stanmore was the fuckin' *compromise*.' She opens her hands, indicating that the rest of the group should now support her appraisal of the situation with their own anecdotes, which they do.

'Third generation student,' says Mikey. 'Dad's an athlete –'

'Pretty famous one, too,' interjects Sam.

'Really? Would I know him?' I ask.

'Robert Walsh?' replies Mikey.

I shake my head, disappointed with myself.

'Footballer,' whispers Jace. 'East coast, big drug scandal.'

'Ooooh. Nup, sorry. Never heard of him.'

'Anyway,' continues Mikey, to a round of giggling. 'I'm kinda like, his last hope for a trophy son. Mum left years ago, then Cole fucked up his sports scholarship, so here I am. Get the best, do the best: fly or die.'

'Is that why they held you back in primary school?' pokes Jace.

'Fuck oooff, ay?' replies Mikey, grinning ruefully.

Jace nods at Hannah. 'Our folks think it's a steppingstone to Oxford for us. Hannah and I are supposed to be their Grand Achievers. Their Renaissance, if you will.'

I snort back laughter.

'Yeah,' interjects Hannah. 'Jace is daddy's little finance protégé, and I'm a surrogate for mum's failed dreams.'

'For *what?*' I ask.

'She runs a lotta self-help classes. Y'know, where they talk about chakras and moon cycles and bullshit. She wants me to start a publishing house with her, I think. To help her sell books.'

'Hence running the school magazine, which Han will never admit she *didn't wanna do,*' supplies Sam.

'Well, not at *first,*' corrects Hannah. 'But I dunno. I ended up liking journalism.'

'Is that why you like photography, too?' I ask Jace.

Jace shrugs. 'Nah, that's sorta my own thing.'

'I didn't realise Stanmore was so bad,' I continue.

Hannah shrugs. 'It's still pretty prestigious. We're hardly the crème of the crop, but even we'll be guaranteed something decent afterwards.' Then she flicks from gloomy to curious. 'Is that why you chose it, to get a good job?'

'To be honest, I think I just wanted to connect with dad again.'

'What you mean?' asks Mikey.

Oops. I may have said too much, there.

So, why do I keep talking?

'Oh, he went to Stanmore. When he was a kid. Obviously.'

'And you, what, moved all the way over from Perth just to live with your mum and go to the same school he did? By choice?' probes Sam.

'You sure he wasn't just sick of you?' jokes Hannah.

'Well, maybe. I mean, he, uh, he died. In a car accident. So, yeah. It definitely *was* my choice. Just not really one I wanted to make.'

Did I?

Did I just...?

Ugh.

For a moment, everyone stays silent. It's hard for me to tell – what with being stoned and possibly a little drunk – but I think it's that kind of moment you get when someone explains something you thought was funny, but the explanation makes it not really funny anymore, just awkward.

'Well, you made a good choice, then,' says Jace, eventually.

‘Yeah. Maybe we can stage a *coup d’état* and take over the magazine?’ says Hannah, lowering her voice to a sinister whisper before giggling herself into mild convulsions.

‘Let’s not talk about Milly and newsletters and shit,’ says Sam, abruptly, lending weight to her demand with a gagging sound. ‘You still owe me an answer, Jess.’

‘Why, did you ask me something?’

She smiles at me like she has a dozen times already, but this one brings a wave of nausea with it. ‘Whom would you rather fuck? Jace? Or Mister Dubois?’

‘Ohhh, that’s a good one!’ says Mikey, while I try not to blush.

‘I agree,’ says Jace, turning back to me, his usual grin now firmly in place. ‘I mean, for me, it’s Harry all the way.’

‘Oh, me too,’ offers Sam. ‘No offence Jace, but he always makes me think of Paris and *Jardin des Tuileries* in spring. God, if I could just break into an arts college over there –’ she rolls her head back provocatively, then rounds on me again ‘– but right now, I’d like to hear from you, Jess,’ she says.

Holy shit. My stomach wraps itself into a knot, and I struggle to speak. ‘I, uh – I haven’t really thought about it.’

‘No kidding, that’s the point of asking the question, dingus,’ says Sam. ‘Tell ya what, I’ll add another option: how ‘bout Hannah?’

‘Ugh, Sam, don’t be such a fucking cow,’ groans Hannah, kicking Sam in the shin, but she, too, seems to have caught the grin. ‘Don’t listen to her, Jess. You should probs tell us your type, though, for future reference.’

‘Yeah, c’mon, Jess,’ says Jace.

‘We don’t care which way you swing, y’know. In fact, the more variety, the better,’ adds Mikey, enthusiastically.

I don’t feel so good.

Is it possible to sober up this quick after smoking weed?

Why are they asking me these questions?

What am I supposed to say?

That I don’t know?

That I’m sixteen, in the middle of puberty, and I don’t know?

Is that, like, normal?

Or am I just confused because I feel like I’m gonna be sick?

I sit there in silence, looking from face to face, all of them boring a hole in me while my stomach churns and my chest tightens. I feel so dumb, and all I can think to do is will myself into fading away.

But that doesn't work, so I flail and grab at the easiest answer of the three.

'Uh, Jace. Yeah.'

'Yeah, boiii!' says Mikey, to a strangely deep, long laugh from Sam. 'You in now!'

He says something else, but I *know* I'm turning green now, and his voice gets muffled by a ringing in my ears.

I feel Jace sit up and put his arm around me. 'The wedding's in October, and you're all invited!' he shouts.

'Uh, Jace, I think she's gonna pop,' says someone else, and all I can think is, *shit, they're right.*

I get up, run in whatever direction it is I happen to pick, and vomit up the flavour of smoky vodka and stomach acid, all over a tiny innocent little palm tree.

Poor little palm tree.

I think I start to cry. I feel a hand on my back as I kneel down through a smaller heave that brings stars to my eyes and less fortune to the garden. I'm swimming in laughter and music, and the only thing I know for sure is that Jace is there, holding my hair back.

What a champ.

'Ugh, I only had... two drinks,' I'm eventually able to mumble.

Jace hands me a towel from... somewhere... and I wipe my face. He chuckles, but it's friendly. 'Well, first time for everything, I guess. Come on, I'll take you home.'

I stand up and tremble, but regain my balance in time to hear Mikey shout from the pool, 'One of us! One of us!' He lets out a Tarzan-like war cry, then all I hear is a splash and the sound of Sam and Hannah squealing in unison.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' says Jace, smiling broadly. 'Getting involved with us.'

I open my mouth to say, 'Me too,' but nothing comes out.

Instead, I think about what to write in the card I'm going to send to that poor little palm tree.

On the way home, Jace lets me wind the window down. The chill of the night wakes me up and chases away everything but the lingering taste of smoke and vodka. Still, it's bad enough for me to need the radio, and I mess around with the buttons until the LCD lights up.

I hear the end of a song followed by a voice I don't recognise – just another reminder of how far I am from the familiar – which announces a victory for conservative Australians after a shocker of a double dissolution. I'm surprised I can even understand what the voice is actually talking about, but as soon as I do, I feel compelled rather strongly to start talking over the top of it.

'Guess Audrey won't be happy,' I say, purely for the sake of saying it.

'That your mum?'

'Hm?'

'Audrey? Your mum?'

'Oh. Yeah. Yeah.'

I shuffle down, somehow embarrassed for bringing her up.

'I hope everyone likes me,' I hear myself mutter.

Jace laughs. 'They do, trust me. I mean, Sam's a bit full on, but she's like that with everyone.'

We pull up at a red light, and in the absence of motion, I regain enough awareness to feel slightly guilty. 'Hey, sorry for taking you away from the party.'

He shrugs. 'They'll be going 'til the morning, anyway.'

'So, can you all drive?'

He smirks. 'Technically? No. Mikey's on his P1s, so he's good, but Sam doesn't turn seventeen 'til October, so she's on her Ls. Hannah and I turned seventeen in June, but we're both on our Ls, too. Guess we're just lazy.'

'Wait, so you could, like, get pulled over and be charged for driving without a licence right now?'

'Yep.'

'Then why are you –?'

'Well, someone had to. Plus, I'm the only one who's not stoned. You could always give me Audrey's number instead. She could come pick you up.'

I snort back laughter. 'Fuck you.' But it does make me think. 'I should probably get my Ls, though.' I could use the freedom.

'Meh. No rush in a place like Sydney.'

We lapse into silence as we pass what I think is Centennial Park, immersed in the sound of the engine, the wind, and the radio. It's fine for a while, until I notice Jace glancing at me.

'What?' I ask.

'Nothin,' he replies, shaking his head.

I stare at him, but he keeps his gaze fixed pointedly at the road. Okaaay. I lean my head against the window frame and go back to peering out. Until...



'I was just, uh –'

'What?'

'I was just wondering if maybe...?'

'Maybe, what?'

'If maybe you'd like to, y'know...?'

'Jace, I appreciate the ride and all, but it's *really* hard for me to concentrate right now, so if you –'

'Do you wanna go out sometime?' he asks, quickly.

Huh.

Wasn't expecting that.

Now, it could be the weed, or it could be the alcohol, but I'm not entirely sure what he means, or how I should feel. Is he asking me out as a friend, or is this a dating thing? Can I really not tell anymore?

'What, like, just you and me?' I counter, eloquently.

'Yeah.'

'For, like, lunch?'

'Or dinner.'

'Or a movie?'

'Or a movie.'

'Could we study? I'm still catching up on some assignments.'

Hmm, interesting choice, Jess.

'Uh, if you want to, I guess. Or I could, y'know, take you to the art gallery, or something?'

'The art gallery?'

He smiles at me. I decide to like it when he smiles at me.

'Well, I mean, you liked the library. I just figured you'd like the art gallery, too. Wouldn't you?'

Yes. He is correct. I *would* like the art gallery. Even more so, I reason, when Jace is also present.

'Sure,' I say, rolling my head the other way so I can look at him. 'That'd be fun.'

'Really? Great!' he says, adorably thrilled.

Shit.

I think I just said yes to a date.

I watch him talk by the light of the dashboard.

I don't really know what he says, because I'm busy feeling happy, and scared, and anxious all at the same time, but I watch him anyway.

I want to ask him a question.

I want to ask him what, exactly, I've just agreed to.

I don't think that's a normal thing to ask.

But I think maybe it should be.

## 6

A mug lands on the desk in front of me, steam gently caressing the air above it.

I've been working hard for a couple of weeks on trying to get some creative writing in during my spare time – not that I've been getting very far – but this particular mug has all the hallmarks of a conversation opener, so I tell the Lestat, who had heretofore been curled up in my lap offering only paltry prompts of little value, to enjoy the afternoon sun in *silence*.

'English breakfast, one sugar, if I've remembered correctly. I took a guess and used almond milk, though. I hope that's okay?' asks Audrey, sitting on my bed.

Ah, hot drinks: the olive branches of our time. I can do nothing but close my laptop and sip from this, the symbolic vessel of reconciliation.

Damn!

I have to give her credit for getting it right, though.

'Thanks,' I tell her.

'I was, uh, hoping we might be able to have a little chat,' she confesses, sheepishly. 'But if you're busy studying –'

'No, no. It's okay,' I reply, pushing my laptop definitively aside. 'I was about to finish up, anyway.'

Honestly, I've been keen to have this conversation. Since the... *incident*... Audrey and I have developed a set of unspoken rules. If I'm downstairs, she's upstairs. If she's asleep, I use headphones. If we need to eat together, we do it in silence. When we *are* talking, things are usually perfunctory, and when they're not, well...

Sometimes it's my fault, sometimes it's hers, but coordinating this stuff isn't easy and the house feels more like a quarantine zone than somewhere I live. And, yeah, okay, all things considered, I may have been a *tad* aggressive that day. There are certainly things I can apologise for. But she fucking hit me, and that's why this was *always* gonna be her move to make.

Besides, it's been months and Lestat's getting tired of all the hostility.

He told me in no uncertain terms.

'I want to apologise,' says Audrey. 'Properly, I mean. And not just for hitting you... that day... but for everything. You're right. I – I did leave you. There's no getting around it, and... it was a mistake. The things I was going through and the things that happened between me and your father aren't an excuse. I shouldn't have cut you out like I did, and for that, I'm sorry.'

I can feel a lump form in my throat. Part of me wants to shout at her – to *never* let it go – but I try my best to push that part aside and instead I meet her gaze as kindly as I can manage.

'I know that doesn't fix anything. At least, not really.'

'No, it doesn't,' I say. 'But for what it's worth, I'm sorry, too. I... get why you and dad didn't work, and I *think* I get why you decided I should stay with him —'

Audrey starts to speak, but I already know what she's going to say, so I continue.

'— and yes, I know it had nothing to do with me, but it still hurt. It hurt *a lot*. Even —'

I can't do it. I can't hold her gaze. My head sinks for a moment as the words I've set out to say form on my lips, and I'm staring at linoleum as I say them.

'— even if it *was* the right thing to do.'

She stares into a distance I can't see, long and hard. Eventually, she nods. 'Do you think this is something we can actually fix?' she asks.

Hm.

Good question.

I sip my tea. She crosses one leg over the other and we stare across the void of my bedroom.

'I *think*,' I begin, 'this might work better if we just accept that there are a few things we can't actually *be* anymore.'

She nods. 'Okay.'

'Of course, there are still things we *can* be,' I admit. 'I'm just not sure what those are yet.'

'Well, I *think*,' begins Audrey, 'that that's okay, as long as we can maybe work out what those things are together.'

'I agree.'

Audrey smiles. It's genuine, but I can't bring myself to return it. Not yet.

'See?' she says. 'We've made progress already.'

'A long way to go, though.'

'Oh, no doubt. I *was* going to go to the funeral, by the way. Just so you know. I was set on it for days, even packed a bag.'

'So, why didn't you?'

'Well, I had this idea that you and I would just sit down and talk, like old friends, or something. That everything would just be fine. Then I thought about everything I put you through. The fact that I hadn't spoken to you in years. I swear, I cried for hours. It was so hard, especially with all that bad blood. I mean, I couldn't put you through that nightmare, Jess. I just couldn't. I thought it'd be best to just give you the money as you needed it.' She pauses. 'I never even expected to see you.'

For some reason, this doesn't make me angry. In fact, it almost makes me laugh. And I must give something away, because Audrey frowns at me.

'What's so funny?' she asks.

I shake my head. 'Oh, nothing, you just – you shoulda seen Uncle Ronnie when he found out. He started sweating, he was so mad.'

Audrey's frown instantly vanishes. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah, and I have to admit, I half suggested giving you a call just to see if he'd actually *faint*.'

'Did he?'

'Nah, but he was pretty close to falling over.'

Audrey laughs, and so do I.

Then, she sighs. 'We all should've seen it coming.'

'I suppose I can't blame you for not making the funeral,' I say. 'I would've sat down with you, though. Maybe not like old friends, but... something...'

'Well, we're sitting down now, aren't we?' says Audrey, back to a smile. 'I meant what I said, too, about the money,' she continues. 'I'm not going to hold anything back unless you ask me to, even if you storm out and never want to see me again.'

'I appreciate that.' I look down at the drink she's made for me, at the smooth, unbroken surface that belies the heat below, and I cup my hand around it until the heat makes my skin ache.

'So, where do we go from here?' I ask.

Audrey gives the distance another piercing stare. 'How 'bout, for now, we just talk some more?' she says.

My eyes once again meet hers, but this time there's a flickering of familiarity behind them, a comforting sensation, however fleeting. Whatever it is, it's enough for now. I carefully swirl my tea, let the flavour settle, and take another sip.

'I think I can do that,' I tell her.

Having friends is complicated.

For starters, time goes a hell of a lot faster because so much of it is spent going from person to person and thing to thing. Don't get me wrong, I thoroughly enjoy having more to do, I was just shocked to look up one afternoon and realise it'd actually been quite pleasant and sunny for the past month or so, and that it was time for Mikey's cricket tryouts.

In what was clearly a familiar ritual to the others, I was invited to sprawl lazily across the oval's premiere bleachers at least three times a week – part study group, part cheer squad – to watch as the most athletically gifted boys in school competed with one another for a spot near a crease to smack a little red ball as hard as they could manage. Of course, I accepted every single time, even though in practise the five of us met up a lot more than that, anyway – whether during lunch, a free period, or after school – just to do our own thing or work on our own little projects.

Hannah and I, for example, share a collective fear of exams, so we tend to bury our heads in homework. Subjects like maths and geography usually reduce one of us to tears, but when we get to French or English Literature, it's like we've gone on holiday together in Europe. We get along so well that we often breeze through the work and waste time bickering over silly things, like what colour we think a language might be.

I have to give Sam and Jace credit, too. Even though neither of them are overly concerned about grades, they aren't any less dedicated to their own pursuits. When she isn't cheering Mikey on, Sam spends most of her time watching music videos on YouTube. It turns out she's an aspiring choreographer and, for extra credit, helps design dances and set pieces for Wakakirri. When she's got her phone out singing along to something, that usually means she's dissecting routines to see what makes them tick, and her focus is nothing less than amazing when something catches her imagination.

As the weeks sail by, I also begin to familiarise myself with Jace's *hundreds* of sketches that he *constantly* carries around – the *oeuvre* of an *artiste extraordinaire* – and adds to whenever he gets bored. I have to admit, he's pretty good. According to Hannah, drawing is the last thing in the world Jace's dad wants him to do for a living, so when he was twelve, he went and gave himself a triskelion tattoo.

Why? Well, 'You gotta follow your passion, right?'

He was apparently suspended for three weeks over that little stunt, but they didn't force him to get the thing removed. Point made, I guess.

Anyway, that's the good stuff; the stuff I was missing. But there's still the *other* stuff; the *hard* stuff. The cliques. The gossip. The romances. The rivalries. Stanmore's like an episode of *Pretty Little Liars* on steroids, and it doesn't take long for me to realise just how ubiquitous it is. Like, did you know that Sam and Milly have a history? Or that Milly and Mikey used to be an item? Or that Jace once hooked up with Zoe on a dare? It used to be that I'd just laugh along when people started talking about sex and dating or whatever. It never grossed me out or made me feel uncomfortable or anything, I just didn't have the motivation to engage with it. Besides, nobody seemed to care when I didn't contribute; they just started ignoring me. I told myself it would be different in Sydney, and you know what?

I made the effort.

I played the game.

And it *is* different, because now they're talking about *me*.

Well, me *and* Jace, to be precise.

So *now*, I can't escape it.

No matter how hard I try.

The thing is, though... now that I'm at the epicentre... I kinda *like* it.

The attention, I mean.

Seriously.

It's intoxicating.

I mean, I don't know if we're officially "dating", but Jace and I hang out almost every weekend, and people seem to notice. Sometimes we study at the library, sometimes we hang around Newtown, sometimes we go into the city. One day we spend in Circular Quay watching buskers, another we spend in the maritime museum in Darling Harbour. Of course, we visit the art gallery like he said we would, and we spend hours just debating a strangely captivating Romaine Brooks exhibit, artist versus writer. I have a wonderful time, but I don't think too much of it: I mean, we're enjoying one another's company, what's so gossipy about that? Others must, though, because people I've never spoken to before start asking me if Jace is my boyfriend.

It happens so often that I eventually just started saying "yes", and that's when things start changing. Like, for the first time in my life, randoms start adding me on Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat. They talk to me; they like the things I post; they invite me to things I'd never have been invited to before. Sometimes, they claim to know Jace. Sometimes they invite us out *as a couple*. Sometimes, Jace never even comes up. Of course, it doesn't come for free. People *love* to ask me how intimate we are. They wanna know if we hold hands, if we kiss, if we have sex. Sam's the worst, but Hannah's not too far behind, and they're just the *start*.

Those adds on Snapchat? Yeah, half of them come with requests for nudes.

Ever seen your name in a bathroom stall? I have now. Right next to Jenny's and Hazza's.

Then there are all the *important opinions* people feel the need to share. It doesn't take me long to hear the theory that I'm Jace's "poor girl" project. Rumour even has it that he took me home for dinner dressed in a hessian bag just to piss his dad off. Jace seems to relish every moment of it. He doesn't go around spreading rumours, but he doesn't correct anyone, either.

In fact, he plays off the mystique.

Like, *why*?

Is *this* popularity?

Is this being *normal*?

And yet...

I keep doing it.

I keep playing the game.

I can't just like the attention, then.

I must love it.

I must *crave* it.

One particularly mild Saturday afternoon shortly after the start of fourth term, I get a random message from Sam inviting me to an early Halloween sleepover at her place, just me, her, and Hannah. Turns out her parents are in Little Italy for some sort of conference, and for Sam, that means she gets out of boarding to look after the house for the weekend. At least, that's what she tells me.

Anyway, I'd usually say no, because what I really want to do is practise my French given that exams are fast approaching and I'm still months behind the rest of the class, but I have obligations now, so when the day comes, I say goodbye to Audrey again – though this time I tell her where I'm going – and catch the bus to one of Sydney's more leafy northern suburbs.

When I arrive at the right address, I think I've made a mistake, because the place looks more understated than Audrey's. Then Sam answers the door and I find out why.

*Si tu as besoin de moi, je serai au château.*

It's three-storeys high and, like the homes surrounding it, built into a hill overlooking a marina, so the garage and entry are at street level while the rest of the place tapers downward towards the ocean. Its façade is two balconies rendered with a white Mediterranean-style finish, framed by stylised brick veneer and tinted glass windows. I get to use one of several spare bedrooms – because apparently there's a cleaner who comes twice a week to clean the house, so her parents



will never know – and Sam doesn't hesitate to show me where every single amenity is, just in case the urge to use one strikes me. There's a pool and a spa, of course, as well as a levelled garden, and a wine cellar stocked with just about everything a teenager and her friends might want sample. Just to be clear: *I have access to a wine cellar*. So, sure, it's not *technically* a *château*, but it *is* the biggest house I've ever been invited to party in.

The tour ends in the lounge room, with me on a horrible mink fur couch overlooking a fake Greek terrace and drinking what Sam tells me is a Shiraz.

Then a Merlot.

Then a Cabernet.

At which point I decide wine tastes mostly like out-of-date vinegar and having access to a wine cellar isn't that cool after all, and I while away the rest of the remaining sunlight playing with the sound system and intermittently dancing with someone whose idea of a Halloween costume is a pair of fishnet stockings, mismatched eyeliner, and a bunny rabbit oodie.

That's Hannah, by the way; Sam opted for a far more traditional gothic vibe that looks like it took all day to perfect. Or maybe that's because my own efforts – summarised best by admitting to having actually *bought* the set of plastic fairy wings on my back – simply pale in comparison.

But it doesn't matter. Because I have friends. And I'm having fun. And I'm still enjoying myself thoroughly, even after the sun is long gone and the conversation inevitably turns to Jace and me yet again.

'No, I haven't spoken to him lately,' I lie.

'What, you don't know how to use a phone?' asks Sam as she swipes through some icons on a tablet. The music, pumping forth from many unseen speakers, changes from rock and roll to some gawdy pop. Nice.

'Well, yeah, but I've been busy. Why do you wanna know anyway?'

'No reason. Just wondering what he's planning this year.'

'For what?'

Sam shrugs. 'Y'know. His annual fuck around and find out.'

'Sam, what the hell are you on about?'

'Hanny? Your bro playing nice this year?' asks Sam, ignoring me.

Hannah looks up from the deck of tarot cards she's been playing with for the last half an hour and throws her hands in the air. 'Don't ask me,' she says. 'Mum and dad are still talking to him, so I don't think he's been expelled.'

'Can someone please tell me what I've missed?'

'A lot, apparently,' says Hannah, returning to her cards.

'Jace has a habit of pulling pranks when he's bored,' explains Sam, rolling her head against the back of the couch and grinning wryly. 'And Hannah doesn't approve of her brother's antics, do ya Han?'

'No, he's a fucking pain in the arse. Mum and dad always come down on me for his bullshit, like I'm supposed to look after him because I'm ten minutes older or something.'

Sam turns to me. 'His stunt last year was actually pretty cool,' she says. 'I think you'd have liked it if you were here.'

'Why, what he do?'

'He spray-painted a mural on the old church,' supplies Hannah.

'The one at school? In the Square?'

'Yeah.'

'It was impressive,' says Sam. 'He spent all night avoiding security only to sign it by name.'

'Genius,' adds Hannah.

'Really? What was it of?'

'Jesus wishing everyone a happy Ramadan,' answers Hannah, sharply. 'And the school board didn't think it was cool. The only reason they didn't expel him – and *me* – is because dad wrangled some corporate donation thing.'

I shake my head, but inside I'm laughing.

Sam, on the other hand, doesn't bother hiding it. She thinks it's hilarious.

'So, was he *trying* to get expelled?' I ask.

Hannah shrugs. 'He's *your* boyfriend.'

'He's *your* brother.'

'Yeah, and that doesn't get me wet,' says Hannah, cracking Sam up even more.

I start sweating. 'Pfft, whatever,' I retort.

Sam rolls her eyes. 'Oh, come *on*, Jess. Your innocent virgin act isn't fooling anyone, y'know.'

'Seriously! He's never told me any of this. And what's that supposed to mean, anyway? Like, what makes you think I'm a virgin?'

'Nah, she's right, Jess,' says Hannah. 'No one's buying it. Even Jace thinks it's a bit weird.'

'Think's *what's* weird? Can somebody actually tell me what the fuck we're even talking about here?'

I dramatically collapse face-first into the couch, hoping that if I can't at least ameliorate the conversation, perhaps I won't have to listen to it.

'The whole "purity" thing. He's afraid he's gonna have to wait 'til marriage 'til he gets some, isn't he, Han?' says Sam.

'And he's said that, has he?' I ask, flipping over.

'Not in so many words,' confesses Hannah. 'But he *has* said that you can be a bit distant, and that you don't really like to be affectionate. Especially in public.'

For some reason, I feel the need to defend myself. 'Well, I mean, yeah? Nobody really wants to see people making out to a Jackson Pollock, do they?'

'Sure, but he makes it sound like you never talk about doing *anything*. Like, you just wanna hold hands like you're twelve or something.'

I'm getting angry. I know I am. I can feel the heat prickling against my skin. 'Well, not that it's any of your business, Hannah, but if you really *must* know, we talk about sex stuff all the time,' I argue. 'I just, y'know, want my first time to be... right... I guess. Is that a bad thing?'

'Hey, power to you,' says Hannah. 'I'm just being a good sister-in-law.'

But it's not enough.

I have to go further.

I have to prove myself.

'It's not like everything has to be about sex *all the time*. There's more to life, y'know.'

'Sure,' says Sam. 'If you've never *had* sex.'

'And that's a load of crap, too. Relationships are about trust and friendship more than anything else.'

Hannah frowns but doesn't look away from her tarot cards. 'I don't think I could sleep with someone I was friends with,' she says.

'What about you and Mikey?' I ask, turning to Sam.

'Nah, I wouldn't call that friendship. More like a mutual distrust of others.'

'Okay, great. So, why even bother?'

'For the sex,' says Sam, as if the answer was obvious.

I sigh. 'Fine. Whatever. I mean, it's not true, anyway. I don't even know why Jace would say that after he sent me a —'

Shit.

Shut up, Jess.

'Sent you a what?' asks Sam.

Don't do it, Jess.

Don't go down that road.

'A bunch of flowers,' I say, smiling awkwardly. 'He sent me a bunch of flowers.'

'Ohhh, no, no, no,' says Hannah, finally throwing down the rest of her cards and abandoning them. 'That's not what you were gonna say, you can't back out now.'

'Spill!' demands Sam.

*Shit.*

'Look, it was nothing, okay, it was just –'

'What?' they bark, in unison.

'It – I – we just – it was just a conversation, okay? Just a little crude, but that's what couples are supposed to talk about, right?'

'A little crude, huh?'

'What did he *send*, Jess?'

I look from Sam to Hannah, their eyes now fixed relentlessly on me. I feel claustrophobic. I feel judged. Even the music recedes into the background, a fuzzy noise against a high-pitched whirring in my head.

I can't escape.

I can't *not* tell them.

'He sent me a... y'know... a dick pic,' I mumble.

Shock, gasps, and Sam bursts into laughter again. 'Oh my God!' she shouts. 'Why are we just hearing about this *now*?'

'I don't think I *wanna* be hearing about this now,' says Hannah, groaning.

'Did he ask, or did he just send it?'

'Um, no, he asked. Kind of.'

'Okay, that's it, I think we should stop here,' suggests Hannah.

I can't help but agree, so I just sit quietly for a moment, then ask for another drink.

'Oh no,' says Sam. 'You don't drop something like that and then just move on. You mentioned it. You *have* to show us. Hannah, tell her I'm right.'

Hannah sighs. 'For the record, I'm not involved in this conversation anymore and I don't wanna see anything. But yes. She's right. It's the law.'

I stare at Sam, and she stares back, unyielding in every way. I try to laugh, but I'm also frightened, so it comes with a knot in my throat that transforms it into a weird snort.

I shouldn't have told them.

I *so* shouldn't have told them.

Ugh.

'To be honest, I'm surprised it took this long,' continues Hannah. 'You've been dating for what, two months? That's a record for Jace.'

'Guys, it's really not a big deal. I mean, it's *normal*,' I plead, even though I know it's useless.

Sam scoffs. 'Well, yeah, but that's not the *point*,' she says.

She's really warmed to me since the party.

I can tell.

'Come on. Give me your phone,' she demands, holding out her hand and scowling.

I have no choice.

I hand it over and watch as she starts scrolling through my messages.

When I breathe in, it feels like the *room* inhales.

Suddenly, Sam's eyes flick up and a grin forms on her face.

'Yup,' she declares. 'That's a dick pic.'

'Fucking – ugh!' says Hannah, standing and shaking herself vividly as Sam just fucking smiles.

'He's actually a decent size. Wanna see, Han Han?'

'Uh, *no*, and fuck you. Ugh, *so* gross. Where's my drink? I need a drink.'

'So, come on,' presses Sam. 'Did you ask for it or not?'

'Not *really*,' I begin, quietly, that insidious need to defend myself resurfacing. 'We were just talking and then he's all like, "Hey, can I send you something naughty?" I mean, I said "yes", but I didn't know he was gonna send *that*.'

'I dunno, Jess,' says Sam, continuing to scroll. 'Some of these messages – they're pretty raunchy.'

'Well, yeah, it was an *intimate* conversation –' I regain the presence of mind to snatch the phone back '– but I wasn't fishing for a dick pic, was I?'

'Fuck me, Jess, do you even know how a guy's brain works?' asks Hannah, still trying to work out which half-empty glass belongs to her.

'Well, y'know, I try not to make assumptions about people –'

'Oh, fuck off. Tell me what you think of Milly, then we'll talk about the inherent "goodness" of people,' says Sam.

'Ugh. This is the most depressing night of my life,' continues Hannah, finally sucking down something alcoholic. 'No offence, Jess. If he's gonna do it, I'm glad it's with you, but seeing my friends pass around a photo of my brother's cock isn't exactly what I'd call a good night.'

'That makes two of us,' I add, much to Sam's chagrin.

'Fucking prudes, man,' she declares. 'Sex happens. Get over it. We're just *sharing*. Hey, wanna know what Mikey says every time he cums?'

'Not really.'

'How 'bout Hannah's adventures behind the gym?'

'Wait. *You're* Hazza?' I ask, turning to Hannah.

Oh God.

Now I'm doing it, too, and the look of exasperation on Hannah's face is palpable. 'It was one fucking handjob, the first thing I'd ever done,' she says, 'and the guy –'

'Brad Summers.'

'– was a prick about it because he couldn't get hard.'

'Which I was happy to point out to his face *after* he started telling people Hannah was giving handies for cash,' declares Sam, proudly.

'Yeah, so he started spreading shit about you and Mikey goin' at it behind the stage props to get you kicked outta drama.'

'Which didn't work, coz Zoe took it up and everyone knows she's a thirsty little bitch who wants Mikey anyway.'

'Sam, according to you, *everyone's* a thirsty little bitch who wants Mikey.'

'Well, not Brad. Y'know, they pulled him outta school over rumours he'd been goin' steady with Eugene Avilov, right? How's *that* for a twist?'

'Jesus, who fucking cares?' I hear myself say out loud.

Sam and Hannah turn on me.

'Rude,' says Hannah, after a moment of silence during which Sam looks at me, her grin slowly reforming.

'You know what, Han?' she says. 'I think Jess's right. Who cares about that shit? It's all ancient history, and besides, I'd *much* rather know how she's going to reply to Jace.'

'*Going* to reply?' I repeat.

'Yeah. I mean, that dick pic's three days old. Surely, you didn't leave him hanging?'

'Yeah, Jess,' adds Hannah, falling in line with Sam's little game. 'You didn't just ghost my brother, did you?'

'Well, no. I didn't *ghost* him. I just haven't – I just don't know – I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to reply *with*.'

'So, you're saying that your boyfriend – and let's not pussyfoot around the fact that he *is* your boyfriend – sent you a dick pic *three days ago*, and you haven't replied *at all*? Oh, baby,' coos Sam, sprawling seductively over the arm of the couch. 'You *know* what you gotta do, right?'

'No. What?'

'You owe him *something*,' explains Sam.

'Even if you tell him to fuck off,' adds Hannah.

'Don't tell him to fuck off, though. You guys make a good couple, and Hannah likes you, even if she acts like she doesn't.'

'It's true,' confirms Hannah, taking up a seat on my other side. 'I won't admit things like that.'

'You *gotta* send him a pic.'

'Of what, though?' I ask, but I already know the answer, and I can already feel myself turning red.

Sam shrugs. 'How lucky do you want him to be?' she counters, taking obvious pleasure in her act of torture. 'You got the power girl, it's all up to you. Come on, you can do it in my room!' She grabs me by the arm and leads me downstairs. When we get to her door, she stands next to it like a security guard and cheerfully ushers me inside.

A familiar pressure in my chest makes it hard to speak, but I still manage a minor protest. 'Sam, I'm not sure I wanna do this.'

'*Relax*,' she says, casually. 'You like him, right?'

'Well, yeah.'

'Then you're not doing anything wrong. It's *normal*, like you said.'

I let out a half-hearted sigh.

'Jess, you're *sixteen*. You're not a kid anymore. You enjoyed getting high at Cole's party, yeah?'

I nod, even though I don't know what that has to do with anything. 'Mostly.'

'Well, it's like that. You're just having fun. Let yourself go, for God's sake. You might just get laid sooner than you think.'

'But what should I –?'

Sam groans and shrugs simultaneously. 'Just do whatever comes naturally. Lift your top up or something, I dunno. It's a tease, don't overthink it. And don't forget to *send* it, either. I'll be checking.' She pushes me in and closes the door behind me, but I can hear her giggling all the way back up the stairs. I'm still not sure what I should do, so I take a moment to look around her room.

The first thing I notice is that everything's neat, tidy, and surprisingly sparse, as if the room was recently reorganised. There are expensive knick-knacks on almost every shelf, but they all look like art to me – miniature sculptures and dioramas – and only a few things stand out, like a giant, velvet heart that *had* to be a prop for Wakakirri. Otherwise, the place looks almost clinical. Combined with the oversized window, which overlooks the levelled garden, pool, and spa, the whole thing resembles an expensive, modern apartment or a fresh room in some luxury resort.

It's clear Sam almost never sleeps here.

I wonder why her parents make her board at Stanmore when they live so close?

The thought trails away, though, and I'm left remembering why I'm in Sam's room to begin with.

I turn to her bureau and its enormous vanity mirror.

I examine myself from the left, then from the right.

I'm not taking my pants off – I'm just *not* – but I'm wearing a fairly loose tank top and no bra. I guess it wouldn't be hard to just pull it aside and show myself off a little bit.

I'm only sending it to Jace.

*My boyfriend.*

*Normal.*

So, why do my fingers go numb when I roll the tank top up to my neck?

Stay calm, Jess.

I use one hand to keep the tank top in place and the other to unlock my phone. My hand is shaking, but I manage to strike a few poses to see what works on the camera. I even smile provocatively, though the thought of what I intend to do with the reflection of my exposed chest makes me uneasy.

Eventually, I compromise, and I snap the picture.

I stare at it for what feels like minutes.

Then I send it.

Done.

Easy.

*Normal.*

I open the door to find Hannah and Sam at the bottom of the stairs sharing a mischievous smirk.

'Did ya do it?' asks Sam, excitedly.

'I did,' I reply. And then something odd happens. Maybe it's the edge of anticipation in Sam's voice, or maybe I'm just getting the hang of this teenage friendship thing, but for whatever reason, I feel... good. 'I even sent it with a little devil face,' I tell them, smugly.

'Oh, *great*. I'm gonna be hearing about this for *weeks*,' says Hannah, shaking her head.

But she's still smirking.

Sam clears her throat. 'Well, Hannah and I had a little chat while we were waiting, and we decided – because, I mean, you are so *clearly* a virgin – that this *kinda* constitutes popping your cherry. Since Jace isn't here to help with that, we've, uh, come up with an alternative solution.'

Hannah stands up and wraps her arm around me. 'Have you ever had your ears pierced?' she asks.



'Uh, no.'

'This might hurt a bit, then,' she says, holding up a rather large, hollow needle.

'Seems like a strange thing to keep in a house, to be honest,' I say.

Sam smiles. 'Don't worry. I've got a pair of sapphire earrings that'll look *stunning* on you. So, you in?'

'Uhhh, I'd really rather not.'

'Aw, come *on*, Jess. It'll only hurt for a second. Besides, it's my birthday today, and *you* owe me a present.'

Shit.

Is *that* the reason she's having this sleepover?

Why wouldn't she say something?

Why wouldn't she have a party?

I mean, this is Sam! I'm pretty sure, that's like, her thing.

I run through every recent conversation I can remember with Sam, Hannah, Jace, Mikey, and a bunch of other people. I think through classrooms, social media posts, phone calls, and bathroom scrawl. I can't find a single mention of a birthday. Or a party.

But there was one comment...

Yeah, Jace *did* say Sam was turning seventeen in October.

Fucking hell.

The next words out of my mouth are almost reflexive at this point.

'Sure,' I say. 'How bad can it be?'

Having friends is *very* complicated.

A few nights later, I wake up to the sound of pebbles hitting my window.

It's a warm night, but the best Audrey's place has by way of air conditioning is a standing fan, so I'm already feeling sticky and annoyed. Nevertheless, I grab my glasses, get out of bed, and unhook the latch thinking a curious bird might be trying to get through the flyscreen.

I might be a little groggy from, but it takes me less than a second to spot the shadowy silhouette against the old wooden gate. I lean back, almost falling over my office chair but more than ready to call Audrey for help, when the silhouette gently calls my name.

'Jess, it's me,' it hisses through its teeth, loudly enough for me to hear. 'Jason.'

I stand perfectly still for a moment, then manage a disparaging groan, for whatever little good it'll do me.

'You know you can just message me, right?' I hiss back.

'Yeah, I know, but I wanted to see you.'

'*Obviously*. Jace, it's like, two in the morning. Exams are a thing, and some of us actually care about our grades, y'know. Why are you even out past curfew, anyway? Shouldn't you be at Stanmore?'

'Aw, come on. I just wanna go for a drive. Besides, I got you a present.'

A present?

I sigh. 'Okay, fine, give me a minute.'

Lestat, who had been happy sprawling over the foot of the bed until I got up, watches me go through my cupboard by the dim light of my bedside lamp. Because of the heat, I opt for a pair of jeans and one of my thinner sleeved shirts. I do a quick ear check to make sure they're not bleeding – a frequent occurrence since Sam and Hannah took certain *liberties* – and pocket my phone. I slip my sneakers on, quiet as can be, but as I tie my shoelaces, I hear a creak come from the landing. Lestat sits bolt upright, the best damn living statue I've ever seen, and I inhale to help me keep my balance.

The moment Lestat relaxes is the moment I breathe again.

'Be careful out there, human,' he says. 'The other one is not an... adequate... subordinate.'

'I'll be fine,' I say, patting him goodbye. He wags his tail to demonstrate how much he still disapproves, but he doesn't otherwise object when I pick him up and shuffle him gently onto the landing, just in case he needs to use the tray.

I close my bedroom door and then quietly pop the flyscreen out of the window, resting it against the roof of the laundry. As if I'd been planning it for months, I squeeze out of the house –

leaving the window open a fraction so it doesn't lock – and shimmy across the roof. As I climb down the water heater, Jace doesn't waste any time launching himself at me. When my feet touch the grass, I'm already giggling through his overpowered hug. We shush each other as we head for the gate, imagining ourselves secret agents as we slip into the laneway beyond.

It's there we find a car I've never seen before.

'It's dad's,' says Jace, proudly.

'He let you borrow it?'

Jace snorts. 'He doesn't even know it's gone.'

'Okaaay.'

'Don't worry, I'll return it,' he says, opening the passenger side door for me – the consummate gentleman, apparently – before hopping into the driver's seat himself.

'So, where are we going?' I ask, clicking in my seatbelt.

'I know a little spot over the harbour where you can get a really nice view of the bridge.'

'A make-out spot, y'mean?'

'Not necessarily,' he counters, even though he's already smirking. 'I still have to give you your present, in any case.'

'Y'know Christmas is still a way off, right?'

'What's this got to do with Christmas?' he asks, rhetorically.

He turns the key and off we go, racing towards the CBD and chatting about anything and everything as the city's maw gradually envelops us. I watch the steel and glass become denser and taller, and then I realise – around about the moment we pass Sydney University's main campus – that I've never actually seen the city this way before. Early in the morning, I mean. It feels different, and I'm not sure why. I can see the skyscrapers from my bedroom. I've seen them from car windows and train stations. I've been there during the day, navigating the people and the noise. But being in the middle of it when it's so empty is like being in a dream.

The sound of Jace's voice breaks through. 'Have you been across the bridge yet?' he asks.

'No. I haven't,' I tell him.

He smiles, but doesn't say anything, just lets me take it in as we pass beneath the hulking shafts of metal and concrete that make up the grand old arch. The steampunk morass it creates is eerily beautiful, a grid of sparkling lights played against the muted industrial tone of the early twentieth century. Red, green, white, yellow, grey. Lots of grey.

'You should see it when they do a light show,' says Jace. 'Or fireworks.'

I'm sure he's smiling, but I'm too busy wondering how something that would literally not exist without humanity can look at once so beautiful and so utterly dead to check.

I suddenly have an idea for a story.

Jace pulls up in a small carpark on the north side of the harbour, a place called Blues Point. Before us, the harbour lies still, the light of the city – which seems to stretch away into the distance on either side – reflected back into the sky with surprising clarity: the bridge; the Opera House; the tiny little speck I think is Fort Dennison, all replicated with ethereal clarity in the harbour's glass-like water. If it weren't for the dull thrum of cars and the occasional ferry passing by, I'd almost be able to forget I was surrounded by five million people.

'Pretty, innit?' says Jace.

'It certainly is.'

We sit in silence for a while, looking out, listening to the radio, watching the lights shimmer.

I wonder what labyrinthine thoughts are going on inside Jace's head.

I wonder if they're anything like mine.

I place my hand on his and feel his soft skin and delicate knuckles tense against my palm as we lock our fingers together.

'So,' I begin. 'What's up?'

'Whataya mean?'

I turn the radio down. 'Come on, Jace. You show up at two in the morning in your dad's car, you break dorm curfew, and for what? To give me an early Christmas present?'

He shrugs. 'I'm a nice guy,' he says.

'Not so much, according to Sam and Hannah.'

He pulls his hand away from mine and raises an eyebrow. 'Really? Why? What did they say?'

'They seem to think you fancy yourself a bit of a bad boy.' I nod at his triskelion.

He looks down at the tattoo himself and scoffs. 'A bad boy? Yeah, right, I'm the Devil, baby. Freedom of expression is Satanic, don't ya know?'

I roll my eyes. 'Please. You're smarter than that.'

'Well, okay, ya got me. I dunno what you want me to say, though. Do I like screwing with posers? Hell yeah. Do I think I'm some kinda gangsta? Pfft, fuck off. I draw pictures, I don't shoot people.'

'That's not what I mean.'

'Then what *do* –?'

'I'm not some kind of prank, am I?' I interject, before I can stop myself.

'What?'

'You're not with me as a bit to get expelled or piss off your dad, are you?'

'Oh, come on. *You're* smarter than that, Jess.'

He takes my hand again, but something stops me from reciprocating. He must feel it, too, because he sighs emphatically. 'Christ, what did those two harpies *say* to you?'

I look directly at him this time. For effect. 'I know about the Jesus mural,' I declare.

I can't help it.

The words make me grin.

Jace bursts into laughter. 'They told you 'bout that, huh?'

I nod.

'God, yeah, okay, I'm guilty. But the board was *totally* asking for it. Did either of 'em tell you that Langley was trynna get a kid kicked outta school last year coz his family's Muslim?'

'No.'

'Well, he was. And yes, I might've enjoyed being a smart-arse about it, but that little piece of art was *activism*, not a prank. I mean, I even signed it off so the kid wouldn't be blamed for it.' Jace throws up his hands. 'Yes, it was still a stupid thing to do for *me*, so if you want me to be sorry about *that* part of it, then I'm sorry. But I won't apologise for anything else. I mean, this is gonna sound cliché as shit, but sometimes I just feel like no one's listening, y'know? And when ya do say something, everyone gets bent outta shape. Like everyone just keeps looking at you with disappointment no matter what you do. Haven't you ever had that?'

I think for a moment. 'Sometimes. I mean, it's a bit different for me, but I think I get it.'

'Do you?'

I sigh. 'I dunno. I don't feel like people are disappointed in me, but I guess I kinda feel like I have to prove myself all the time. And I don't know why. Like, dad set up this trust fund for me, right? But then he made Audrey the trustee. Audrey left when I was a *kid*. I never wanted to see her again, and dad *knew* that. It's like... it's like he thought he knew better. Like he just *had* to make me understand that. And now I feel like I've gotta prove to him I was worth it, or something.'

Nobody says anything for a moment.

Then Jace says something peculiar.

'Y'know, Mikey *hates* sport.'

'Huh?'

'Oh, yeah. *Hates* it. But athletics is part of the family brand, so his old man's always pushing him to compete. Just you wait, though. He snaps every year.'

'So, what *does* he like?'

'He's a hardcore nerd.'

'Really? Mikey?'

'Yep. We used to play games together when we were younger. It's how we became friends. Ever heard of *Dark Souls*?'

I shake my head.

'Oh, man, Mikey was *obsessed* with that shit. They're these hack'n'slash action games, right, but they're, like, *really* hard. Like, designed to trick you into dying all the time hard.'

'Sounds frustrating.'

'So frustrating! But that's kinda the point. You learn the tricks and you get better, then you beat the game one boss at a time. The rush is awesome. Mikey put, like, five hundred hours into the first game, but his dad got all pissy coz he was spending too much time in front of the TV, so he stopped playing as much.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'Is his dad naturally an asshole?'

Jace smirks. 'More or less. To be fair, though, it was a rough time for Mikey. Don't tell him I told you this, but the drug scandal – the one that was going on at his dad's club – that's *why* his mum left. It was all over the news. Plus, Cole was getting into trouble a lot with the cops, and if there's one thing footballers hate, it's bad publicity that won't go away. So, Mikey's dad decided to clean up his image. Got himself traded to a new club, got Cole out of the house by giving him his own, and made Mikey the poster boy for the new, "happy" family Walsh.'

I lean back in my chair.

Is that kind of like how my dad made sure I'd have to live with Audrey after he died?

'That explains a few things,' I say.

'Get the best, do the best,' adds Jace, reciting Mikey's slogan from the party.

'So. Mikey and video games, huh? Never woulda thought.'

'People don't. He's really good with computers, too. He even codes. I think he wants to put his own game together to apply to a tech college someday.'

I'm not sure who does it, but someone squeezes the other's hand, and we stare at each other fleetingly. Jace is the first to let go. He twists himself around and pulls something out from under a blanket. It's the present.

'Anyway, I lied. Merry Early Christmas,' he says, handing me a box covered in little Santa Clauses and a thick, red ribbon.

'Thank you,' I reply, tugging at the ribbon.

Inside, I find a book with a buckram hardcover and gold filigree on the pages, the kind you find in those speciality bookstores tucked away like bargain basements: the ones that smell like paper put through a busy typewriter in an Appalachian cabin.

And mothballs, obviously.

*'The Life and Works of Romaine Brooks: An Interpretive Biography,'* I read aloud.

'Yeah, you seemed to really connect with some of her stuff,' explains Jace. 'And y'know, you wanna be a writer, so...'

I flick through the pages. I see, briefly, the sum of Brooks's existence, her world rendered canon by a serif typeface, her life told through recreations of her paintings and fictionalised encounters.

A legacy in ink.

'Thank you,' I say again. 'It's beautiful.'

He smiles. 'You're welcome.'

I lean over and kiss him. Not with particular force or urgency, but just the desire to have his body against mine for a moment. He leans into it, of course, and before I know it, his hands are on my chest and tracing the curve of my thighs. I let him explore for a moment, because I know it's something couples are supposed to do – especially after trading photos like we did – but it doesn't do much for me. In fact, it ends up making me feel uncomfortable, so I pull away.

'You're *very* welcome,' he finishes.

'I don't have anything for you yet, though.'

Jace clears his throat. 'Well, um, I was kinda thinking...'

'Yeah?'

'I mean, Christmas is always family, right? But I was hoping maybe you'd be free for New Year's?'

'I think so. Why's that?'

'Well, I dunno if anyone's told you yet, but Cole's going up to the Gold Coast for a few weeks. He's letting Mikey and Sam use the house *aaand* Mikey's said you and I can stay over, too. Y'know. If you want.'

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what Jace has on his mind, and I feel my heart leap half an inch in excitement. At least, I think it's excitement. After all, we *are* young and we *are* in love, aren't we?

'Really? They're gonna let us tag along?' I ask.

'Well, maybe not for the whole time –' he laughs – 'and they'd be a few conditions.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'Like?'

'Like, we'd have to... share a room... probably...' His voice almost cracks as he tiptoes around the proposition.

I can hear myself breathing.

He's waiting for an answer.

'Well, in that case, I can hardly wait,' I say, perhaps a little too keenly.

Too keenly?

How *should* I react, then?

Should I be like, "nah, I don't wanna take our relationship any further than the occasional necking"?

That's silly, isn't it?

Besides, I don't think it would go down too well.

'Have I ever told you how fucking awesome you are?' says Jace, beaming. 'Be ready, though. Bondi's mad at New Year's. Beach is gonna be paaacked. Uh, what about Audrey?'

'Ah. She'll probably be working. I'll ask when I can and get back to you.'

His smile fades.

But only slightly.

'Cool! I mean, I suppose it's a date, then?' he says.

'I suppose it is.'

I can't help but smile along with him, even if there's a knot in my throat the size of an orange. Why does the idea of my *boyfriend* seeing me naked – a guy *who's already fucking seen me without a top on anyway* – scare the hell outta me?

Is it just normal first-time jitters?

My mind does that thing minds sometimes do to put space between you and your impending trauma. In this case, it recalls that New Year's is still about two months away and proceeds to recite a "to do" list that I need to complete before I even get there.

Finalise curriculum for next year.

Pass exams.

Celebrate Christmas.

Try not to die of heart failure.

Consummate relationship.

*Don't worry, it's your first time, it's natural to be nervous about it.*

Oh God, I need a distraction...

I turn to Jace.

'So, um, got any plans to spray-paint Jesus wishing everyone a happy Kwanzaa, too?'



With the end of the semester looming, Hannah and I develop a full proof study plan. It consists of two steps: first, be awake, and second, be studying.

To be fair, neither of us had ever experienced a proper exam before, and this is the first year in which every grade counts towards your Australian Tertiary Admission Rank. It's not the *only* number they use for uni admissions, but it's definitely the most important, and I swear I could feel the teachers loving every second of panic spreading through their more studious cohorts.

I'd be overwhelmed, I think, if it wasn't for the oddly grounding presence of Sam and Jace, both of whom are intent on continuing their tradition of not really giving a shit. I don't know if their apathy is just contagious, or if I'm subconsciously using them as examples of how low I *couldn't* fail by simply rocking up, but whenever they're around, I'm reminded that grades aren't the only thing in life worth worrying about.

Then, of course, there's Mikey, who also doesn't seem to care much about his exams, but whose otherwise calm demeanour is becoming more and more fractious by the day. I swear, he's spending more time on the oval and in the gym than in class, but I guess that's the trade-offs of the varsity scholarship. To compensate, the bleachers become like a set piece in a television series for us. We meet there every day, we have our most meaningful *and* our most banal conversations there, and the scrawls on the undersides are *almost* as informative as the ones in the girls' toilets.

It's even where we make our most important decisions.

One hot afternoon in late November – like, seriously, the apocalypse-is-actually-a-thing – Hannah takes the opportunity to lay next year's syllabus booklets out like an information conga line. We lean back on the bleacher above and survey our options, and I realise I simply haven't the will to resist the onslaught of Hannah's perspicacity. Maybe I've been resisting the desire to start that "to do" list for fear of where I'll end up at the end of it, or maybe the thought of debating with Hannah just frightens me all on its own. But this is something I'll eventually have to do regardless, and thus, we get into it just as Mikey's cricket game starts: arguing and pontificating over some of most important aspects of our immediate futures drenched in our own sweat.

By the ninth pamphlet – its pages crinkling with humidity and the salt from my own, clammy palms – I'm reminded that most of my summer is going to be filled with searching for ways to squeeze extra credit out of the faculty, and that 2017 is gonna be one hell of a year. I'll have to work hard and fast. It could be the slow, insidious onset of heatstroke, but as I listen to Hannah detail the complex web of progression she's mapped out for her older self, I've never been more certain that I,

too, want to control the direction of my life. I *want*, for example, to get into Sydney U. I *want* to do a Bachelor of Arts. And I *want* to be a writer.

I *have* to do better.

I *can't* let dad's money go to waste.

So, that means I *have* to make an impression, and there's nothing in this syllabus that would make a better one than resurrecting the school magazine. Plus, I know it's practical, because I've even been doing some research and asking the more artistically inclined students what they think of Milly and her version of *New Wave*. The response has been unanimous so far: everyone would like to see *New Wave* mean something again. The support *is* there, I just don't know how to play the politics. It'd be great if all that mattered in creative writing was the creative writing, but I suppose that's not how the world works.

I look up at Hannah – busy texting on her phone – and wonder if she's ever thought the same thing. I remember her joke at the party, about staging a *coup d'état*. Perhaps we could start by making LinkedIn accounts...

'GO MIKEY!' shouts Sam, her voice cutting through my reverie. A white figure on a distant pitch smacks a little red ball with a flat-fronted bat and makes a run for the far wicket. Sam fist-pumps the air and lets out a few more cheers.

'I thought he was gonna have a break this summer?' says Hannah, pocketing her phone.

Sam sighs. 'His dad said no,' she says, a strangely subtle air of sadness about her. I glance at Jace, who catches my gaze on the sly.

'Ugh, what a prick,' says Hannah, shaking her head.

'Total prick,' agrees Sam.

Jace goes back to his sketching, and I flip back to my topic selections for next year.

English, obviously.

French, absolutely.

What else?

Information processes and technology? Maybe. It's a modern world, after all.

Mathematics? Not really my thing.

How about creative life skills? What even is that?

Does it even cover creative writing, or is that English studies?

'What'd you pick in the science stream?' asks Hannah.

'Uh –' I quickly scan my list. 'I just went with geography again,' I tell her. 'But we could do something else, if you want. I'm not fussed.'

Hannah glances at some of the booklets. There are university logos, program details, progression trees, and career advice columns everywhere, collected, I realise, from almost every major educational institution in Sydney, not just Stanmore.

‘Well, I wanna do something that could help with business management. I think there’s a VET course I could do.’

‘When you open your publishing house, make sure you stick mum at reception. She’ll *love* that,’ says Jace.

‘Har har,’ snaps Hannah, in return. ‘Go be useless somewhere else.’

Jace stares at his sister for a moment, then, as if he’d been waiting for the invitation, closes his scrapbook and slides it into his satchel. ‘Yeah, I think I’m gonna go find some ice cream. You wanna come, baby?’

‘Sorry, I’ve kinda been putting this off for a while and I gotta get it done,’ I say.

‘Fair enough.’ He leans down and kisses me on the cheek before climbing over the bleachers and disappearing behind the gym.

‘Isn’t VET, like, work placement?’ asks Sam, without turning away from the cricket game.

‘Yeah,’ answers Hannah.

‘So, why would you wanna do that, then?’

‘We *are* gonna need jobs eventually, Sam,’ I say.

‘Pfft.’

Hannah and I smile at each other, but I can’t help sighing with the unintentional weight of that little truth. God, how can I make dad proud if I can’t even get into a decent uni?

‘What’s wrong?’ asks Hannah.

Before I can answer, Sam suddenly stands upright, her voice bellowing across the oval. ‘BAD CALL!’ she shouts. ‘That was a high bouncer, idiot!’

I don’t know what she’s talking about, but I look over to see a figure I assume is Mikey arguing with the umpire and slamming the top of his bat into the pitch.

I hear ya, buddy.

‘Han,’ I begin, turning back to Hannah. ‘Are you still thinking about enrolling in the L-E-P?’

She shrugs. ‘I mean, I’d like to, but what’s the point? We’d need to do something like *New Wave*, but Milly doesn’t care about the magazine. I mean, she’s not even *enrolled* in the L-E-P, she’s just doin’ it for the credit.’

‘What if we could come up with a way to... discourage... her participation?’

Hannah looks at me and frowns. ‘Discourage her participation?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, I’m telling you it won’t happen without a teacher or the board backing us, and that isn’t gonna happen.’

I laugh. ‘Come on, Han. Don’t you even wanna try on principle? I mean, don’t you think it’s a little unfair that the L-E-P is exclusive to Stanmore in the first place? It’s a U-D-B-E-C. It should be available to *every* student in the state, and Milly’s just, I don’t know, sitting on it. Like she owns it.’

‘Whatever you’re planning, you can count me in,’ declares Sam, sitting down again. ‘Not for credit, though. I just wanna fuck with Milly.’

Hannah scoffs. ‘You guys *do* know you’re students at one of the most expensive private schools in the country, right?’ she asks, rhetorically.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Sam smirks. ‘Yeah, Han. What’s that s’posed to mean?’

‘Ugh. All I *mean*,’ counters Hannah, impatiently, ‘is that I don’t think making the moral case is gonna get us very far with the faculty at Stanmore.’

Sam laughs. ‘She’s got a point, there, Jess. You might have to go a bit more cutthroat if you wanna pull this off.’

‘We need an argument we can sell to Langley, or the board, but all they care about is money, and I doubt any of us could convince our parents to make a donation. Or another one.’

‘Thanks, Jace,’ I add.

‘To be fair, they care about their rep, too,’ ponders Sam. ‘I mean, the school’s gotta look good to keep selling spots, right? It’s not just the grade point average. It’s the whole deal you get for sending your kids to live here.’

Hannah and I look at each other, but before anyone can unpack Sam’s surprisingly insightful observation, the sound of an enthusiastic howzat catches our attention, and we turn to watch Mikey jog from the pitch after an apparent leg-before-wicket violation.

‘Fuckin’ joke!’ he shouts as he approaches the bleachers. He takes off his helmet and throws it on the ground, sweat dripping down his face and staining his uniform. He’s almost trembling, red in the face. Sam hands him a bottle of water and he drains at least half of it before handing it back. ‘Don’t worry, babe. It was a stupid call, it doesn’t matter,’ she says, switching seamlessly from conspirator to caretaker.

‘Yes, it fuckin’ *does*! If I don’t make a team next year, I won’t be eligible for the scholarship. You *know* that.’

‘Come on, Mikey, you’re the best one out there –’

'That fucking asshole! He's gunning for me.' Mikey grits his teeth so hard I think his jaw's about to crack. It's a little scary, to be honest, and I can feel my heart beat a little faster. I glance at Hannah, who's doing her best to ignore the scene entirely.

'You shouldn't worry –'

'Don't,' snaps Mikey, looking directly at Sam. 'Just. Don't.'

He turns and marches away from the bleachers.

After a moment of nobody saying anything, Sam picks up her bag and retrieves Mikey's helmet. She slams it down against the front bench so hard it makes me jump. The visor swings loose, and Sam smiles wearily. 'I'll tell him he broke it later,' she says, implying we ought to do the same. 'Seeya, chickees.'

Strangely enough, it gives me an idea.

'Ugh. It's too fuckin' hot today,' is her answer.

'Come on,' I say, standing up.

'Where are we going?'

'To find Harry.'

Hannah smirks. 'You got a plan, huh?'

'A downright hostile takeover,' I tell her. 'And I could do with some air-conditioning right about now.'

Thankfully, we find *Monsieur* Dubious alone in his usual classroom, encased in a tomb of sweet, cold air, marking a stack of end-of-year assignments. We make sure the coast is clear before we sidle in as inconspicuously as possible.

Despite having his nose to the desk, Harry notices us almost immediately.

'Need something, girls?' he asks without looking up.

I clear my throat as Hannah presumptively closes the door.

'Yes, can we, um, talk to you privately, sir?' I ask.

He's in a Hawaiian shirt and Karki shorts today.

It's very off-putting.

'*Sir?*' he chides. 'You realise you've been here long enough for me not to excuse that degree of formality, don't you *Miss Roe*?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then, you also realise that nothing short of being kicked off a plane should be so dramatic as to warrant the use of the term "sir", right?'

'Uh. Yes. Sir.' I just can't help myself, apparently.

Harry raises an eyebrow, but smiles. 'Alright. Take a seat and tell me what's up.' He motions to the two nearest student desks and stands to lean on his own, arms crossed as if in anticipation of some devastating new reality. Hannah and I awkwardly conform, silently imploring the other to speak first even though I'm the one who just moments ago wildly articulated the plan as if I'd stumbled upon a flawless piece of reasoning.

'Well, girls? Someone needs to say something for this conversation to happen.'

'We – uh – we understand you handle the L-E-P program for Stanmore, sir,' I say, quickly.

'I do.'

'Ah, okay. Cool. That's good because we're both keen to, uh –' what was I thinking? '– we were wondering if there would be, uh –' this *so* isn't my thing '– an opportunity to get more involved in, um, school activities that might, uh –'

'We wanna apply for it, sir,' says Hannah, cutting me off. 'Next year, of course, when applications open.'

'Oh. Oh, well, that's good to hear. I mean, you're a *bit* early, and it's hardly the sort of thing that warrants the use of the term "sir", but I would, of course, be happy to negotiate projects with you both. Are you planning on submitting something together?'

Hannah looks at me.

We didn't discuss how to handle this particular question.

'Well, that's the, uh, that's the thing, sir,' I begin. 'We know that the only *real* way to be a candidate is, y'know, um, through school board sanctioned projects, like *New Wave*.'

'With all due respect, sir,' says Hannah, playing along beautifully and drip feeding me with confidence. 'I think everyone in this room knows that an article or even a novella doesn't mean much without the board's explicit endorsement and, at the very least, a finalised publishing deal.'

Harry slowly nods. 'Not entirely inaccurate. So, if that's the case, then have either of you spoken to Miss Yorke? I believe she's the current student editor.'

'Yes. I did,' I say.

'And?'

'Sir, Milly's got no interest in letting us do anything of value,' supplies Hannah. 'She'll agree to slap our names on as contributors, but even so, the magazine's little more than a newsletter right now. Sydney U's not gonna care much, and Milly doesn't care enough to put any effort in.'

'She's just in it for the ribbon, sir,' I argue, not wanting to be totally outdone. 'She's not lining up a career in journalism or anything.'

Harry taps his chin thoughtfully. 'Mhm, mhm. Well, I can't exactly disagree with you there, either. The problem is there's not much I can do about it. As much as I'd like to see the magazine

thrive as it has in previous years, I will *not* simply strip a student of their extra-curriculars. Not without some serious misconduct taking place beforehand.'

Hannah looks at me, her eyes wide with expectation.

Okay, this is it.

My turn.

My big moment.

Sink or swim, Jess.

'Well, we were sort of hoping, sir, that you might – uh – consider sponsoring a push to upgrade the *New Wave* platform.' My voice cracks ever so slightly, but I let the words hang in the air and, eventually, Harry leans back on his desk in thought. For a second, I think he might scowl at us and turn us away, but then he settles on a vaguely jilted grin.

'Go on,' he says.

'Well, everyone knows the L-E-P's meant to funnel well-connected rich kids into the university's R-H-D catchment for scholarship purposes.'

Harry's gaze narrows. 'Careful now,' he says.

'Sorry, sir, but it's true, isn't it?' I counter. 'We know you've got quotas to fill, and we also know Sydney U puts any candidate you oversee through the ringer. We asked around. I bet you've been copping flak from the board for the magazine's lack of quality all year, too.'

Woah. Where the fuck did that come from?

Still, Harry's grin hasn't faded. In fact, it may have even sharpened. 'Excuse me, Miss Roe, but are you attempting to strongarm me into helping you?' he asks.

'No, sir,' I reply, not missing a beat. 'I'm simply making a mutually beneficial *suggestion*.'

Another moment passes.

Then Harry nods. 'Okay, say I'm listening; what exactly *are* you suggesting?'

'That we take *New Wave* online, sir. Make it public and interactive, so students can contribute electronically to every issue and parents and potential employers can access the work whenever they need it. With a bit of backing from the school board, we could do things like writing competitions and *actual* student journalism. Honestly, I think we could up engagement without a problem: there's already enough support in the student body for it and it'll be good for everyone's publication count. The students *want* this, sir.'

'Uh, with the school board acting as ultimate moderator, of course,' completes Hannah.

Harry regards us with what I can only call bemused caution. 'Well,' he begins, at length. 'It *sounds* like a good idea. A lot of extra work, though. You'd still need to put out at least three major

issues for the year, even *if* you manage to establish an online platform. And, if I'm honest, I don't see Milly agreeing to any of it. You could well be shouting into the wind at this point, girls.'

'Look, sir, it's no secret Milly got stuck with editor because of the pressure she's under at home,' says Hannah. 'She didn't want it when she got it and I'm sure she doesn't want it now. She's probably lined up for Oxford or Harvard with or without the magazine, anyway. I mean, how much does Milly already have *besides* the magazine? Head of the SRC? Student Ambassador? Head Girls' Prefect? Valedictorian? She can afford to lose *something* –'

'Our point is, sir, that we think she'll probably let the magazine go willingly if the school board itself wants what we're proposing. And that might just be enough to open up a few opportunities for those who need them.'

Harry circles back behind his desk and sits down.

I dunno what that means.

I hope it's good.

'Okay, let me reiterate your proposal. You want me to take this "modernisation" concept to the school board and pass it off as my own –'

Hannah and I both nod furiously.

'– so, I can get them onside with a sort of... comprehensive platform update? One that will bring the magazine back towards the literary arts, but also take it broadly public –'

Hannah and I continue to nod.

'– in the hope that it'll open up additional opportunities for students and, what, be too much work for Milly to keep to herself? Is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Hopefully.'

'And I assume you two would then put your names forward for a co-editorship, or something like that, so you can both get credit towards an L-E-P scholarship?'

'Something like that, sir,' I say.

'And you're both sure you can handle this? The school board will wanna see results immediately if they agree to sink more money into it, and then you'll have to do it again for July and October. Three releases is the minimum, but if you get a website going, they'll expect interim work, too. You understand the level of commitment you'd need to maintain to keep your LEP credits in place?'

'We do,' Hannah and I declare in unison.



‘Mhm, and how do you plan to handle the publishing side of things? You understand that students are also responsible for copy editing, presentation, and distribution, right? If you go online, you’ll need to maintain a website, as well.’

And now, for the *coup de grâce*.

Which is amazing, really, because I totally didn’t expect to get this far.

*Please let this work.*

‘We’ve got a team lined up, sir,’ I lie. ‘Hannah’s brother, Jason, has already expressed an interest in helping out with the artwork, Michael Walsh has the technical skills to get *New Wave* on the web, and Samantha Talbot-Jones said she can emcee for all the socials.’

Hannah stares at me and I think I can see admiration on her face.

Am I smiling?

I think I’m smiling.

Holy shit.

Harry steeples his fingers. ‘Interesting,’ he says.

Ohhh, he suddenly looks serious.

He’s gonna tell us “no”.

He’s gonna tell us not to bother him again.

I can feel it.

‘Alright,’ he says, slowly.

OH MY GOD.

‘But! But!’ continues Harry before either Hannah or I can make a sound. ‘I can’t make any promises. I can try to leverage the L-E-P, but the school board might not even agree. And even if the board *does* go for it, there’s still the issue of Milly. She might decide she doesn’t *want* to give up the magazine, and if that happens, there’s nothing I can do, understand? The faculty *won’t* force a student to give up extra-curriculars without good reason, especially a student as well-connected as Milly. She has to step down herself, so if I find out there’s been any coercion or bullying, neither of you will even be *considered* for the magazine *or* the L-E-P, am I clear?’

‘Crystal.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘In the meantime, I want costings, timelines, and risk-assessments. Hell, I want a full-on business-case that I can take to the board. You’ve got the holidays to get it done and the connections, no doubt, to make sure it’s up to a professional standard. Consider it the first part of the project.’

‘Thank you.’

'Thank you, sir.'

'Stop calling me "sir", for God's sake. You'd think this is the God damn army or something. Also, to be clear, *if* Milly doesn't step down, it'll be my pleasure to assist you both in finding some other way to impress Sydney U. You both seem to want this pretty badly, and I can respect that, so if this little scheme doesn't work, I'm sure we can find you another avenue. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'Understood.'

Harry's grin broadens. 'You realise you probably just got Milly more extra credit, though, right?'

'I think people already give her too much,' I counter.

Harry almost chuckles. 'Maybe. But people have a lot of reasons for doing what they do, Miss Roe. I'm not saying Milly's right, not even saying she doesn't deserve a little kick up the arse, pardon my French, but – listen – my first permanent teaching role was at a youth centre in Paramatta. A lot of the kids out there were from broken homes, if they even had one. Lotta hate, lotta anger. Their idea of a negotiation was to come at you with a cricket bat. All they knew is they wanted something, and violence was just a tool to get it with. You probably think you went about this all cleverly and better than that, but don't think for a second that what you just did is any different. You used a different tool, is all.'

Harry picks up a pen and resumes writing in silence, while Hannah and I just sit there, gawking.

Did we just get told off?

Should we go?

I don't know.

I'm very confused.

'Go on, get out of here,' he says, finally. As we stand, he looks up at us one more time. 'But do me a favour, will you both?'

'Yeah.'

'Sure.'

'Don't talk to me for a little while.'

As school draws to a close for the year, it's impossible *not* to be wired – even for students like Milly and Mikey who *can't* fail – because the pressure to perform is so intense that the things we think we know just casually slip away, and the leaps of logic that served us well in class suddenly feel ridiculous and childish.

We have to be sure, now.

We have to know the answers inside *and* out.

So, laptop screens turn our eyes red, and we soak our sleep-deprived brains in caffeinated energy drinks. We use the dormitories to escape the heat, nestled away, as they are, inside a well-airconditioned monolith of polished cedar and ornate hardwood.

Before now, I'd only ever been into the dorms once or twice with Hannah or Sam, but now I feel like I'm living and breathing the space, and to be honest, it's a little distracting. For starters, I'm amazed by the sheer volume of amenities the boarders get. I mean, the common rooms are almost as big as Audrey's whole house, complete with couches, kitchenettes, desks, televisions, and vending machines. The rooms themselves are pretty expansive, too. Most are built to accommodate two people, but everyone gets their own bed, desk, closet, and computer, with room left over to sit and think, bounce a basketball around, or generally make enough noise to get a Prefect's attention.

Even though the boys and girls are separated – they have to leave one side of the dormitories to get to the other, and showers and toilets are hard gender restricted – mingling during the day is fine, so the five of us plant ourselves in Sam and Hannah's dorm and build a little campus there. Because everyone is still technically a minor, everyone except me has to follow curfew, so I end up smuggling supplies in daily. The vending machines stock vegetarian options, but even I'm too far gone to rely solely on things like tomato salad sandwiches, so every night, I slip another round of twenties into my bag and hope there're no muggers waiting for me at the train station. In the morning, I deliver chips, chocolate, pastries, and soft drink before I start taking orders for the next day. It becomes way too familiar way too quickly, but then again, so do the exams.

Despite our burgeoning sugar addictions, though, we all make it through alive, and school finally secedes to summer holidays. Initially, Sam, Hannah, and I spend the hot, sunny days together in town with Jace and Mikey occasionally in tow, but when family demands start taking over for them, I find myself alone. Hannah and I stay in constant contact to work on our proposal for *New Wave*, but the others become distant figments, personified mostly by the messages and emojis I occasionally exchange with them. Even Jace transforms into a voice at the other end of the phone rather than someone I get to spend time with, and while that wouldn't otherwise bother me, it just

seems to intensify my apprehension about New Year's. It's not so much missing my fingers knotted through his or the pleasure of a cheeky kiss when we say goodbye but dreading what I know I'm *supposed* to do with him, a fear made inconceivably worse by the fact that we can't really see each other until after Christmas. I start feeling like our relationship is losing momentum, as if all the excitement has been replaced by thoughts about what might go wrong.

What if we've forgotten how to talk?

What if I do something wrong?

What if I'm too nervous?

What if he thinks I'm ugly?

What if I don't want to *do* anything?

Maybe I'm overreacting, but I even catch myself wishing Audrey would just forbid me from going back to Cole's. When I ask her if I can spend New Year's there, I'm nervous as hell, but she just smiles and says it's fine.

I mean, is it, though? Shouldn't she at least have lectured me about safety? A casual party is one thing, but this is New Year's. At Bondi. And I'm *staying the night*.

To keep my mind from getting too bogged down, I go out of my way to help out around the house. I cook dinner, I wash dishes, I do laundry, I mow the lawn. I even set about cleaning the hard-to-reach nooks that haven't been touched in *years*, like the wall behind the fridge and the grout in the shower.

At night, I'm sociable and watch television if Audrey's home, but otherwise I curl up with Lestat and listen to his myriad criticisms while I write. I also spend some time reading about Romaine Brooks and her long but difficult life. Hers is definitely *not* a feel-good biography, and in fact, some of the stories are truly tragic. That's why I appreciate the book so much, though: it's the kind of present you'd buy someone because you *know* them, not because it's a safe bet.

It makes me miss Jace and softens the anticipation.

Before I know it, though, the Christmas tree goes up – a scrappy little fiberoptic number meticulously decorated with baubles designed for nosy cats to play with – and the air becomes thick with the smell of Blu Tack and tinsel. I thought it would be pretty subdued this year, what with Audrey and me still finding our niche, but no, Audrey gets into the spirit – not to mention the eggnog – and, after a few meaningless objections, we end up devoting an entire weekend to Christmas shopping.

When the big day finally arrives, I'm distracted and irritable, but I still send messages to everyone: my uncle and auntie back in Perth, Sam, Hannah, Mikey, Jace, and a few others. I send and receive dozens more over Facebook, but I guess that just comes with having an active social life.

I get dressed before Audrey even wakes up, so I have time to stash her presents under the tree right next to mine. I'm tempted to skip the queue and open them then and there, but I'm adulting quite well despite myself lately and I reconsider it.

Instead, I put the kettle on, and the sound of boiling water lures a zombified Audrey from her lair, rubbing her eyes and yawning like I'm sure I did countless times when I was younger.

'Merry Christmas,' she mumbles, smiling weakly.

'Merry Christmas,' I echo. 'Coffee?'

'Thanks, sweetie,' she says, nodding slowly.

We talk for a little while, sipping our hot drinks and enjoying a traditional Christmas breakfast of assorted berry fruits doused in honey, syrup, and, in Audrey's case, cream. Lestat joins us, digging his claw into my legs as he stretches, probably to let me know how intolerable it is that his servants are eating *before* him and summarily compelling me to do my duty.

I return to find Audrey eyeing off her two parcels and plunk myself down on the couch – my enthusiasm still consumed by my fast-approaching *recontre romantique* – and tell myself to be happy.

'Here, this one first,' says Audrey, handing me a fairly sizeable parcel. 'Be gentle, I'm still trying to work out what you like.'

'No pressure,' I say, carefully tearing it open to find myself staring at a box with what looks like a picture of a very dumpy bedside lamp on it.

A dumpy bedside lamp with a built-in speaker.

'Ohhh, it's one of those Sonos lamp thingies,' I say, which genuinely lifts my mood a bit, because I didn't realise how much I wanted one until I was holding it. 'Cool.'

'Yeah,' confirms Audrey, smiling. 'You install the app on your laptop, and you can play your music through it, or listen to the radio, or set alarms, or y'know, just use it as a light. I thought it'd be better than your laptop speakers.'

I smile back, and I mean it. 'It's great. Thanks.'

I put the speaker lamp to one side and with newfound motivation, assume control of the Christmas tree area. I take a second to pick strategically – better build up some suspense with this one – and decide to go cheeky first.

'Here you go,' I say, passing her a very *book* shaped object.

She raises an eyebrow and tears the front away.

A vegetarian cookbook – with a picture of vegetarian pizza on the cover, no less – coz that's how it's done.

‘Ahhh, ha ha, I see what you did there,’ she says, reacting perfectly. ‘Very funny. I guess I’m cooking tonight?’

I laugh. ‘Sorry, I saw it and I couldn’t help myself. But here –’ I quickly grab the smaller parcel – ‘you have to open this before I open my other one.’

‘Wait a minute, that’s not how it works,’ she says, eyeing me with suspicion.

‘Trust me,’ I add. ‘It’s a two-parter.’

Slowly, she opens the smaller parcel.

I have to admit, it’s great watching her demeanour change from suspicious, to surprised, to joyful.

‘Jess. It’s... it’s wonderful!’ she declares as she flips over a framed photo of us – her and me – that dad took the same day we made the footprints in the mud at Minnipup. I’m about seven years old, and she’s teaching me how to swim.

‘Dad saved a few other photos from that day. I thought you might like this one. For your collection, or whatever.’ I nod at the credenza and the other photos there. ‘I know things are still a bit messy between us, but I guess I just wanted you to know that however we turn out, I *do* still have good memories.’

‘Oh, Jess,’ she says, tearing up. She leans forward and hugs me tightly. ‘Sorry,’ she murmurs, pulling away and wiping her eyes. We sit in silence for a minute or so, her staring at the photo and me staring at her. ‘Well, your other present won’t hold a candle to this,’ she says, eventually.

‘Pfft, the last one already made my day,’ I tell her, laughing. She lets me pluck the final parcel from the tree and give a cursory examination. It’s something small, flexible, and light.

‘Hmm, what do we have here?’

Once again, I unwrap the gift carefully, prolonging the moment for as long as possible. When I finally see what it is, though, I genuinely don’t know how to react.

‘Oh... *The Road Users Handbook*. Cool. Is there – uh – a car to go with it, maybe?’

I’m being facetious, of course. Mostly.

Audrey chuckles. ‘Whataya think I’m made of money? I didn’t know you were gonna one-up me so completely, but I figured if you’re going to uni in a couple of years, you’re probably gonna need to be able to drive yourself around. I thought I could start teaching you now so we could spend some time together.’ She frowns. ‘I guess a car *would’ve* said that a bit more dramatically than the handbook, though.’

I smile. ‘That’s... actually really thoughtful of you. And it has been on my mind. Thank you.’

We hug again, but this time she leans in afterwards.

‘You also won’t need to sneak out of the house at night to see your boyfriend,’ she says, laughing.

She means this as a joke.

I know she does, because she’s laughing.

But I don’t laugh.

I don’t think it’s funny at all.

‘You... You know about that?’ I ask.

Audrey shrugs. ‘Well, yeah. The walls are paper thin. Plus, Lestat doesn’t sleep with me unless you’re out, so...’

That little bastard.

I’ll have to deal with him later, though, because right now, something strange is happening inside me. I should be terrified – or at least wracked with guilt – about the fact that Audrey knew I’d snuck out of the house, *has* known for a couple of months, but I’m not. Instead, all I can feel is tension, and the same rising heat I felt before the funeral argument.

‘And... you know I have a boyfriend?’

‘Yeah. Jason, isn’t it? You know, you should really invite him over some time so I can meet him.’

‘And... you’re not angry?’

‘Well, I was a little disappointed, of course, but you’ll be seventeen in April. I’m sure you’re more than capable of making your own decisions.’

She smiles at this. Like that makes it okay.

It fucks me right off.

‘You’re supposed to be angry,’ I say.

Audrey’s smile fades. ‘What?’

‘You’re supposed to be angry. You’re supposed to care about me. Why aren’t you angry?’

‘Jessica, I *do* care about you.’

‘I sneak out of my room at two in the morning to go driving around Sydney with a boy you’ve *never* met, and all you can say is that you’re “a little disappointed”? I did something dangerous, and I broke your trust. That’s not caring about me, Audrey.’

Her expression becomes strained. ‘I don’t understand. Are you saying you *want* me to be angry with you?’ she asks.

‘Well, why wouldn’t you be? I’m your vulnerable teenage daughter, but I can just disappear into the fucking night with a stranger and you’re just “a little disappointed”?’

‘I know you,’ counters Audrey. ‘If you didn’t feel safe, you wouldn’t have gone.’

‘Oh, so you know that, but you’re still trying to work out what to buy me for Christmas? Did you even think about ringing me to make sure I was okay? Did you message? Did you call the police? You know you’re letting me go to a New Year’s Eve party at Bondi with this guy, right?’

‘Well, like I said, maybe you should considered introducing us.’

The heat is everywhere now, not just my chest, and I can feel tears welling behind my glasses. I don’t know I’m so mad about this, but I just *am*. This isn’t right. This isn’t how this is supposed to go.

‘That – that’s not the point!’ I shout. ‘I’m your *daughter*. You’re supposed to be my *mother*!’

‘Jess, what do you *want* from me? *You’re* the one who made it clear we couldn’t be the same as we were before! *You’re* the one who’s made it so I have to walk on eggshells in my own home! I can’t even speak to you half the time without copping attitude!’

God damn it, fuck this shit!

I open my mouth to speak, but I’m so angry, nothing comes out.

‘How exactly *should* I treat my estranged, almost adult daughter, hm?’ she continues. ‘One who’s basically been forced to rely on you against her will? Come on, I wanna know. Tell me what to do, Jess. Tell me how to be a good mother again!’

‘Argh, you sanctimonious bitch!’ I snap.

‘Yeah, take a look in the mirror, sweetheart.’ Audrey’s eyes meet mine with violent intensity. ‘Ever since you got here, you’ve kept me at arm’s length, and yeah, maybe I deserve it, coz maybe I’m a fuck up. But even *I* knew we’d be doing this on *your* terms, I knew that if you wanted to go out, I would just have to *trust* you, because I’m the one who broke things in the first place. That means it’s up to *me* to make the sacrifices. So, you don’t tell me anything, and I don’t push. It’s hard, but I don’t push. And that *seems* to be working, and we *seem* to be making progress, which is great, coz guess what, Jess? It’s really fucking *hard* to keep my nose out of my own daughter’s life, so at least the relationship is getting better. Oh, wait a minute, no it’s not, because here you are, ruining our first Christmas together in *years*, because you suddenly realised that doing things your way *doesn’t fucking work!*’

‘Bullshit, fucking bullshit!’ is what I initially fight back with, but then I add *The Road Users Handbook* as a projectile weapon. ‘You can’t wait to get rid of me! Doesn’t matter how: kidnapped, murdered, or shoved off to uni with an old car. It’s all the fucking same, coz you just want me gone! You *hate* that dad forced me to come here, you *hate* that he *made* you responsible for me again, and now you’re blaming me for it! Well, guess what, Audrey, *you* left *me*, and I don’t have to *ever* forgive you for that!’

‘Then don’t,’ says Audrey, flatly. ‘I don’t care anymore.’



'Great, Audrey, great. Well, if I'm the one ruining your homelife, then maybe I'll save you the fucking trouble and just leave. How's that sound?'

Audrey scoffs. 'I'm so sick of this crap. You're a spoilt little daddy's girl going to a God damn prep school, and you suddenly think you know about life.'

'Better than a forty-two-year-old dyke who thinks she's worth a shit!'

There's no scoffing this time, and even though there are tears streaming down my face and I'm out of breath from shouting, I know someone's said something they shouldn't have.

It was probably me.

I feel my expression soften apologetically, if only for a moment.

'Get out,' says Audrey, quietly.

'Gladly,' I counter.

And I do.

Oh, what a time to have friends.

After several frantic phone calls, Jace convinces Mikey to let me stay at Cole's place while it's empty. He offers to get the key from Mikey early and to meet me at Circular Quay, as long as I can wait until he and Hannah figure out a way for him to quietly escape the family banquet. Given I've no intention of returning to Audrey's for the rest of the year, I enthusiastically tell him I'll wait, and I spend the rest of Christmas Day watching ships travel up and down the harbour from the steps of the Opera House.

Thankfully, he shows up just before the sun goes down, and I've never been happier to see him. I even thank him by way of a long, romantic kiss: the kind you see on TV.

Unfortunately, he explains, he can't stay long. Hannah's already blowing up his phone because their parents are getting suspicious, so he buys me a couple of bao buns and helps me figure out the best bus route to Bondi. After about half an hour, he promises to round everyone up and have them at Cole's as soon as possible.

I tell him I love him for the first time.

He tells me the same, then he's gone.

I arrive at the house alone and decide it feels a lot bigger when it's not full of people. The house has four bedrooms, three bathrooms – two upstairs and one downstairs – two living rooms, a games room, an office, a garage space converted into a home gym, a kitchen, a pool, and two balconies. It's still modest compared to *Château de la Sam*, but it does make me wonder what sort of house Mikey's dad *didn't* give his older brother, and what Mikey himself might be in line to get when he leaves school. Compared to dad's life insurance – with the obvious downside of dad having to be *dead* first – I imagine it'd feel to *me* like inheriting the Duchy of Cornwall.

Since the argument with Audrey was pretty intense, I didn't have time to bring anything with me except the clothes I was wearing, my phone, and my spare key. I even left that traitorous little monster behind, which I'm sure will have to be rectified as soon as I'm less enraged. In the meantime, though, I have to make do with what I can find in the house. It's surprisingly well-stocked, as if Cole had taken great care to leave the place in top notch shape for his little brother and his friends, though precisely why he'd do that, I have no idea.

Anyway, my first task is to pick a bedroom.

Of course, I go with the upstairs master bedroom, because I can. It's got a four-poster, queen-size bed, a walk-in robe, an *en suite*, a set of very regal looking curtains, one of those small, fake chandeliers, and glass doors that open onto one of the balconies.

Next, I have a shower.

I have to make certain sacrifices clothes-wise, but I manage to find a comfy shirt – two sizes too big – and some boxer shorts – presumably Cole’s – that I liberate from the walk-in robe.

Then, I search for food.

I go downstairs and investigate the fridge. It doesn’t have a lot for a vegetarian, but the freezer is full of those premade Healthy Choice meals, plenty of which have no meat.

I grab one at random and heat it up.

Finally, I sashay over to the couch and switch on a giant, wall-mounted LCD.

I use it to watch comedy sketches on Netflix for the rest of the night, and I only cry once.

Singles life ain’t too bad, I guess.

Over the next few days, everyone arrives for New Year’s as planned, and everyone helps me settle in properly. Sam and Mikey take my spare key and stake out one-fifty-one Rockford Way until Audrey goes to work, at which point they let themselves in and pack my stuff for me. They come back with my essentials – including some underwear, thank God – though Mikey insists they had to leave Lestat because he wasn’t sure if Cole would appreciate a cat wandering around his place.

It hurts, but I can’t really argue.

Anyway, Jace and Hannah are just as helpful and give me a proper tour of the house before showing me down to the beachfront where we grab fish and chips for dinner. Jace wasn’t kidding about how busy Bondi would be, either: people are literally *everywhere*. Cole’s house may be a few blocks back from the beach, but the hot weather means the streets are full of bikini and short-clad nomads. Trying to walk to and from a little corner store for food means dodging kids, dogs, cricketers, joggers, cyclists, and all manner of distracted tourists, many of whom take to travelling in large groups that occupy entire sidewalks.

But we make it back in one piece, and I have to admit, it feels like everyone’s just bursting with those happy festival vibes. We all relax and settle down around the table to eat, a surrogate family unit composed of hormonal teenagers doing better than the family units they all came from. With the sympathy set to full, Hannah even manages to entice Jace, Mikey, and Sam into pledging their unconditional support for our *New Wave* vision, at one point leveraging a fillet of fish like a judge’s gavel to make her point. It was heartwarming, but to be honest, I was still mostly preoccupied with the whole running away from home thing, so even if they’d all said no, I probably wouldn’t have cared too much.

Afterwards, Jace asks very nicely if he can share the master bedroom with me. He promises to be very respectful – no “funny business” – and doesn’t even react when Sam bursts out laughing

at his attempted “etiquette”. I think it’s sweet, but it’s also not hard to notice his growing excitement. Still, how could I possibly turn him down after everything he’s done for me? He listened to me vent, he listened to me cry, and then he organised somewhere for me to stay.

And on Christmas, too.

I’m lucky to have a boyfriend who’ll put his own life on hold to help me out.

I’m also lucky to have friends who’ll come together like this for one another.

I’ve met people who’d kill for both.

So why, then, does it feel like I’ve fallen into a cage?

The next few days are probably the best I’ve had since moving to Sydney, despite my apprehension about what might happen on New Year’s Eve. Initially, I was nervous about sharing a bed with Jace, and I thought I was going to ruin everything by being nasty about it, but on the first night, Jace sticks to his side without fail. Granted, on the second night he rolls over and cuddles me and I *almost* bolt, but then I hear him snoring gently. In fact, the rhythm of his breathing actually makes me feel safe and puts me to sleep.

It’s also nice not having thin walls. Sam and Mikey unpack their stuff in one of the upstairs bedrooms and Hannah unpacks hers in the downstairs guest room, but no matter what any of them get up to, all I can hear from the master bedroom is the occasional dull thud or distant creak. On one hand, I like my newfound privacy; on the other, I won’t be able to use it as an excuse to get out of whatever Jace has in mind for *the night*.

During the day, we spend our time doing whatever the hell we want. The boys set up Cole’s Xbox in the lounge room and get into the habit of playing video games with enough snacks to feed a small army. Hannah and I join in occasionally, too, though Sam couldn’t care less and often leaves to go down to the beach. I don’t pluck up the courage to join her, opting instead to float in the pool most afternoons, trying not to think about the sweat and heat and listening to the roar of water pressing against my eardrums. Sometimes I’m counting down the hours to New Year’s, and sometimes I’m just watching the clouds.

Hannah, on the other hand, deals with the heat by occupying the airconditioned office, and starts churning out the costings and risk-assessments *Monsieur* Dubois wanted us to provide on her laptop. To avoid any accusations of laziness, I *do* help for an hour or so, but I’ve just got too much on my mind to concentrate on it for any longer than that, and she doesn’t seem to mind taking point.

On the day before New Year’s Eve, Jace and Mikey manage to get away with buying a bottle of gin without being asked for ID. The five of us sit around getting thoroughly drunk, chatting and chilling to music, bobbing in the pool a sunbathing in the deckchairs. For me, none of it is a good

idea. Instead of masking the anxiety, the alcohol just amplifies it, transforms it into dread. I start mentally asking myself questions like, is this what love is *supposed* to feel like?

Is everyone this dramatic about their first time?

It probably doesn't help that the gin turns Jace into some kind of clingy octopus, his hands all over me whenever I go inside to get another drink or go to the toilet, his face leaning into me, kissing me, pressing against me. I mean, I'd probably enjoy it if it wasn't for the fact that I know he's building up for tomorrow night. I want to tell him to stop, to just let us be us, but every time I do, I end up telling him to wait.

Wait for what, though?

I should like it when he holds me.

I should like it when he kisses me.

I should like it because I love him.

I'm just nervous.

I'm just nervous.

I'm just nervous.

Ugh, why is this so *hard*?

What the fuck is wrong with me?

There's meant to be fireworks on New Year's Eve, so we all decide to go to the beach in the afternoon. Now, usually, that wouldn't bother me. I'd just put on something casual and head on down. But I know what I'm coming back to this time, so this has to be romantic; this has to be special.

There's a trick to it, I hear Sam's voice tell me in the back of my head.

I should've written it down, for fuck's sake.

More like a fucking checklist.

Let's see.

Shower. Shampoo and condition. Twice.

Shave everywhere. *Everywhere*. Use a new razor and lathering gel to avoid rash and keep the skin moist. Go slow, it'll take a while.

That's okay. Smooth is sexy. Smooth is nice.

Afterwards, moisturise. Twice.

Remember, inner thigh and under boobs.

That's important.

Dry and clip hair into ponytail.

Sunscreen the body, but not the face.

Get dressed.

In preparation, buy a two-piece bikini. Buy a top with small straps and a bow sinch to show off cleavage. Buy a bottom that hugs the curves and has lace ties on either side. Make sure they match. Make sure they make you look even *sexier*.

Don't spend less than a hundred dollars.

On the face, use tinted primer with SPF. Don't overdo the foundation or the bronzer, keep the appearance light. Use the stick concealer under the eyes and brush it in. Don't use a setting powder. Work fast, this shit sets hard because it's waterproof.

Pick the lighter lipstick because a natural look suits the beach.

Don't bother with fake nails or lashes, they come off easy in salty water.

Rely on natural charm instead.

Stand in front of mirror feeling uncomfortable and exposed.

Rummage through belongings and hope to God Sam and Hannah brought you alternatives.

Find an emergency shirt and plain old cargo shorts. Slip them on over the bikini, and smile.

Feel a bit better.

Apologise to Sam later.

With the bullshit out of the way, regain control of all faculties and relax.

Go downstairs.

Act like an actual person.

Remember that this is *normal*.

Jace is dressed like me – shorts and shirt – while Hannah's opted for one of those tankini dresses. Mikey, meanwhile, has gone all in on impersonating a *Jersey Shore* episode. When Sam emerges from the downstairs bathroom and sees me boarded up like a fallout shelter, she gives me a look that could either be disappointment that I disregarded her advice, or admiration for the supposed long game I *must* be playing with Jace's hormones. Either way, she quickly gets distracted by her own boyfriend's questionable life choices, and I manage to escape her judgement.

For now.

In the meantime, I feel the beat of the evening kick off, like something familiar in my memory, though I've never danced to anything like it before. We hit the beach in the busy evening and fight the crowd to stake a claim in the golden Bondi sand while the chaos of school holidays rages on around us. To be fair, I'm at ease – sort of – at this point. I realise I've been out more often in the past five months than the last two years combined.

Happy with my progress, the beat moves on.

I spend half an hour on a beach towel, watching the others swim. I don't know if it's the heat, the festive atmosphere, or the way Jace looks at me whenever his head surfaces, but by the time Sam comes back to convince me to go in, she doesn't even need to. I lose my shirt and the cargo shorts. The breeze makes my flesh tingle, but not because it's cold.

I swap places with Sam, and Jace and Mikey cheer me on as I join them. I dive in, embrace the rush of the lukewarm ocean, and open my eyes under the first wave just to feel them sting.

It's a wonderful sensation.

Yes, I tell the beat. Let's *do* this!

I surface and find Jace. Without hesitation, I kiss him, then drag him backwards and watch him grin as we both go under again.

I'm happy and lost in this part of the music.

I forget about school and *New Wave*.

I forget about dad's death and all my troubles back in Perth.

I even forget about Audrey and our fight.

I *almost* forget about the night's expected coda, but the beat doesn't stop, it just keeps moving forward.

The five of us spend the whole evening there on the beach. We swim and sunbathe, walk up and down the shore, wait in line at the fish and chip shop. Things change when the sun begins to set in earnest, though. Sam hands me one of the house keys, and she, Mikey, and Hannah disappear with a bunch of people I've never seen before. Jace tells me they're friends from down south, wraps his arms around my waist, and asks if I'd rather go with them or watch the fireworks from a secret place only he knows about.

I tell him the truth. 'I'd rather stay with you,' I say, skipping a breath or two, but the beat continues on, relentless.

He leads me into the northern curve of the bay and onto a promontory, a cut in the darkness of the Pacific Ocean that lets us look back at the beach and the city beyond. People sit here on grassy knolls, drinking in the red and yellow miasma of the sun as its final light bounces off the buildings and a few stray clouds lingering in the sky.

I think we're going to stop here, on the grass, but Jace asks me to trust him, and we continue walking until we've cleared a row of expensive houses. We emerge in a small car park at the rocky tip of the promontory, where Jace leads me down a flight of steps and across weathered rocks with waves gently lapping at their roots. In less than a moment, he pulls me into a sheltered nook beneath the carpark, no doubt wrought by generations of erosion. There are a few other people

snuggled away down here – couples, I guess – gazing at the bay, which, from this angle, looks like a massive boomerang skipping across the water.

‘Most people sit on the grass to see the fireworks,’ says Jace, ‘but this is *way* better.’ He sits down and shuffles back into the arc of the nook and I do the same. It’s surprisingly comfortable. He puts his arm around me, and his touch makes my stomach flutter, like a stupid cliché. I rest my head against his shoulder, and we talk, and we touch, and we wait while the beat slows, favouring a melodramatic pulse over something quick or angsty.

It isn’t long before the sound of an explosion and a burst of colour tear across the bay, followed by another, and another.

This is it.

The last quiet requiem before the coda.

I watch the colours play across Jace’s silhouette and revel in how close we are, how much better this moment is for us being together, and I just don’t understand how sex could make that any more passionate. Thinking about someone being inside my body that way makes me feel weird, edgy. I try to push the thought away, but Sam’s voice comes creeping back in.

Jess, relax. *Everyone’s* nervous the first time.

That’s why they call it popping your cherry.

Don’t fight it.

It’s *natural*.

I don’t remember her ever saying these things to me, and yet they manifest so seamlessly in her voice, her cadence.

I look at Jace again, but this time he’s looking back at me.

I don’t know who suggested heading back to the house first, but I do know I check to make sure my ears aren’t bleeding.



I don't want to think about it anymore.

If that was supposed to be the penultimate expression of love, then love isn't something worth pursuing.

Jace manages to stick around well into January, despite constantly reminding everyone that his parents think he's enrolled in a summer program through the art gallery. Hannah bites the bullet and heads home a few days after New Year's, which means I spend every waking moment trying to make sure I'm near either Sam or Mikey. The catch is, of course, that they're a couple, too, so they're often looking for an excuse to ditch *me*.

It takes a professional *debutante* to manufacture enough excuses to keep us all together most of the time, and I quickly feel like I've used up my yearly allocation of social energy in diplomatic manoeuvres alone. One evening, Jace insists on pressing me up against a wall and sliding his hand down my pants. I'm so uncomfortable that when he asks if we can have some fun later, I almost burst into tears.

But what can I say?

What can I do?

I use my period as an out for a week, but even Jace can count days, so I tell him again and again that I'd rather not, that I'd rather "savour" what we did and just enjoy everyone's company.

But he keeps pushing.

And pushing.

And pushing.

One night, I go poking around in the storage cupboards and find a bunch of boardgames. I convince everyone that we should order pizza and play *Cranium* all night. Afterwards, I tell him I'm too tired to have sex.

*That's* how desperate I am.

If I tell him I didn't enjoy it, if I tell him I'm not attracted to him, does that mean I don't love him? Does that mean I've been wrong all this time? That I've been leading him on?

What kind of person would that make me?

During the second week of January, I decide I'm sick of bouncing back and forth between Jace's advances and Sam and Mikey's romantic escapades, so I convince Hannah to come back and stay again for a few nights.

She's like a breath of fresh air, and I'm ashamed to admit I cling to her like a groupie at a rock concert. Turns out I suddenly have a lot of energy to put into *New Wave* now, so for several

days straight we put our heads together and finalise our proposal for the magazine, which, by the third day, makes Jace, Sam, and Mikey bored enough to venture out on their own for a while. With them gone, I suggest Hannah and I take a break out by the pool, fully intending to lay all my troubles down on her.

Poor girl.

'So, how you guys been getting on?' she asks, stretching out on a deckchair.

I do the same next to her, and take a moment to think about how deep I actually want this conversation to go. Even, then, I'm not sure, so I just shrug. 'Yeah. Good,' I tell her.

'Oh, cool,' she replies, smiling. She turns on her side, letting silence settle between us again. Except I don't want the silence to settle...

'Why do you ask?'

'No reason. Just your messages made it sound like you weren't having the best time, is all.'

I laugh. 'Oh, no, no. All good, all good.'

Jess.

What are you *doing*?

Just *talk* to her. You have to talk to *someone*.

'Hey, uh, Han?'

'Yeah?'

'Um, can I ask you something personal?'

Hannah shuffles onto her other side so she's facing me, and holds her head in the palm of her hand.

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'Is it something you'd rather ask Sam?'

'Nah, I can't talk to Sam right now. She's been *way* to hyper the past couple weeks, like, just... ugh.' I suck down some air. For emphasis.

Hannah giggles. 'Yeah, but I mean, is this something you should be asking Sam considering you've just spent New Year's Eve with my *twin brother*?'

'Oh. Well, I guess *maybe*. But I *want* to ask you, okay? I didn't think there were so many rules about what I can and can't ask a friend, jeez.'

'Okay, okay. What is it?'

I sigh. 'Well, uh... Jace and I... well, Jace and I kinda had sex –'

'Yeah, y'see, this is definitely something you should be asking Sam.'

'No, listen, please, this is serious! I mean it.'

Hannah rolls her eyes at me and lets out a sigh far more exasperated than mine was. 'Fine. What is it?'

For some reason, I can't hold her gaze, and I end up staring at my own feet while I try to explain how I'm feeling. 'We had sex for the first time on New Year's.'

'And?'

'Well, I just – I didn't – it wasn't that great.'

'So?'

'Well, I was wondering, y'know, what your first time was like.'

Hannah raps her fingers against the arm of her deckchair, clearly uncomfortable at this line of questioning. Part of me wants to stop, of course; the same part that understands why Hannah does, too. Unfortunately, the part of me that needs to keep going is stronger.

'Look,' says Hannah, 'you should be talking to Sam about this, she knows more about it than I do, honestly.'

'Han, I *can't* talk to Sam right now. I've tried. All she wants to do is compare notes. She thinks it's the funniest thing in the world. She won't *listen* to me.'

Hannah moves so that she's sitting on the side of the deckchair, her attention now completely on me. 'Okay, what's the problem? Did he – did he do something wrong? Did he hurt you? Is that what you're talking about?' she asks, more than a little aggressively.

'No, no! I mean, it did hurt a bit, but that's normal, right?'

'Yeah. I think so.'

'Besides, it's not that. What we did was fine, I guess. I just... didn't really like it.'

Hannah raises an eyebrow. 'So, you mean, you don't like *him*, or –?'

'That's what I'm trying to figure out. Han, New Year's Eve was great. It was the most fun I've had in ages, but when Jace and I got back, I just – I don't know, I just couldn't *see* him that way. Is that what your first time was like? Was it hard to, y'know, get excited, or whatever?'

Hannah regards me with a concerned frown.

'Jess I –' she pauses, '– I dunno what to tell you.' She leans towards me and lowers her voice for some reason. 'My first and *only* time was behind the gym with Brad Summers, and he turned out to be gay, remember? I've never even *had* sex like that.'

'It's not about the sex, though, Han. It's like I just didn't *feel* it, and now I *can't*.'

'Whataya mean?'

'Well, it doesn't feel the same when Jace touches me now. It's like – it's like before he'd just hold my hand, or hug me, or kiss me, because he liked doing *those* things, and I liked that. A lot. But now he's just – I dunno – it's like every time he touches me, he's trying to turn me on, y'know? Like

he's doin' it, so we've gotta have sex again. But I don't want to, Han. I *really* don't want to. What does that mean?'

Hannah shakes her head. 'I – I don't know. Do you think there's still a spark between you? How do you feel about him now, while he's not here?'

I roll my shoulders back uncomfortably. 'Well, I miss him. But is that enough? Should I even be with him if it's not? I don't wanna lead him on, Han.'

For a moment, Hannah wears the same aura of concentration I've only seen her roll out for serious intellectual study. 'Jess, look. Relax. You were nervous, and first times can be rough. You probably just had high expectations and it wasn't that good because you didn't know what you were doing, and now you're worrying yourself about next time. All I can say is, don't beat yourself up because it wasn't like the movies, or whatever, okay?'

I lean back in my deckchair and gaze at the sky.

Yeah.

Don't beat yourself up, Jess.

Give it time.

You were just nervous.

Say it again.

You were just nervous.

You.

Were.

Just.

Nervous.

'Okay,' I say, slowly.

'Sooo,' says Hannah, sighing and repossessing her deckchair. 'You sorted out somewhere to stay, yet?'

'Nah. Jace keeps tryin' to convince me to get into a sharehouse, but I think he just wants somewhere to hang that isn't a Stanmore dorm or, y'know, your place.'

Hannah laughs. 'Yeah, don't do that. At least not 'til you know which uni you're going to. Plus, you'd probably have to get a job, right, since you're on a fixed income? And can you even drive a car yet?'

Crap.

I didn't think of *any* of that.

I pick my phone up off the pool-side deck.

Seven missed calls and nineteen missed messages from Audrey, first one on Christmas Day.

There's a real possibility she's called the police by now.

I groan with the reality of my situation setting in.

'I think I might have to make a phone call,' I confess.

The first monthly meeting of the *New Wave Gang* – name pending review – takes place a week after school starts, and to be honest, I think we’re all mildly surprised about it.

Hannah and I set up in the boy’s dorm this time – there’s something in Milly’s smile when she hands over the magazine data that looks suspiciously like a murder plot, so we decide to avoid the girls’ dorm for a while – and Sam’s the first to arrive, all too glad to have an excuse to ditch her new social studies class. Mikey follows soon after, helping himself to some nacho cheese Doritos and a diet coke, and Jace is last, but only because he found an old whiteboard and decided to wheel it over and *up* several flights of stairs for the Gang’s benefit. Despite the logistical challenge, it quickly proves to be the most useful addition to our little gathering, and we spend the afternoon using it to hammer away at flow charts, mind maps, checklists, and, of course, snacks.

It may only be the beginning of the year, but having a project to focus on already makes me feel better about coming to Stanmore. I feel like I’m finally starting to make dad proud, which makes me feel better about everything else, too, like talking things out with Audrey or enjoying what I have with Jace without freaking out over every little detail. Even Langley’s judgemental scowl that he delivers flawlessly while *Monsieur* Dubois explains all the school board’s expectations to us doesn’t faze me at all.

Who *cares* what they think?

I have a purpose now, and my creative writing drought is *over*.

I get so into it, I don’t even notice when the sun starts to graze the horizon.

‘So, we’re agreed, then,’ says Hannah, scribbling down another set of numbers. ‘Let’s just recap roles. And can we *please* pay attention this time? I’m sick of repeating myself.’

Groans. I don’t blame them. In fact, I think one came from me, though it’s not because of Hannah’s studiousness. Jace is insisting on wrapping his arms around me whenever he can, and right now, he’s sitting behind me in a bean bag, his fingers locked tightly around my stomach. It used to make me feel safe; now it makes me feel trapped. But I’m learning not to catastrophise. There’s nothing he can do here and now in front of our friends, so I make the effort and shuffle back into the bean bag.

I know I still love him. I just don’t know how to express it properly yet.

But I’ll get there.

‘Ready?’ asks Hannah. ‘Sam?’

‘Mhm, yep, yep,’ replies Sam, quickly pocketing her phone.

‘Okay. As Langley *helpfully* informed us, we’ve got some leeway on the initial size of the issue because nobody knows what to expect workload wise, but the school board wants to see results straight away, so –’

‘Harry said they were *super* excited to see students showing initiative for a change,’ I add, smirking.

‘– Sam and Jess, you guys work together in sourcing. You’ll get the creative contributions lined up and run the poetry slam with *Monsieur* Dubois and Miss Jurrah. I’ve already been chatting with some of the other clubs, and most of them are already onboard. There’s a lot of interest in doing performance pieces for the website, which would make the board *very* happy.’

‘Oh yeah, forgot to mention,’ interjects Sam. ‘I’m gonna do a Wakakirri vlog post for each issue, too, like a year-long journey kinda thing. Should up engagement on the site.’

‘Awesome, thanks Sam,’ says Hannah, then aiming her marker at another corner of the whiteboard. ‘Jace, you’re on art. Are you okay with handling both platforms?’

‘Yeah, no worries. I mean, what else am I gonna do? Study?’ He lets out a half-hearted chuckle. ‘Do we have a theme for the first issue, by the way? Might help keep things focused.’

‘Hmm, not a bad suggestion, actually. Any ideas?’

‘Dunno, you’re the editor,’ says Jace.

Hannah clicks her tongue a few times. ‘Well, it’s the first revamped issue, so how about “New Beginnings”, or something?’

‘Eh. Bit *passé*,’ he replies.

‘How ‘bout “Plugging In”?’ I propose. ‘Coz of the new web platform.’

‘Like a sci-fi thing?’ asks Sam.

‘I don’t think Sydney U would take that seriously, though,’ says Hannah.

‘I know,’ interjects Mikey. ““Transformations Through Art”. Looking at how people express themselves through their artistic creations to render themselves anew.’

We all stop and stare at Mikey, who uses the opportunity to pointedly tear open his now-empty bag of Doritos to get at the precious cheese powder within.

‘Yeah, sure, sounds good,’ says Jace. ‘Quick question, though: where the fuck did that come from?’

Mikey shrugs, licking his lips. ‘Dad’s thinking about writing a memoir. That was one of the themes his PR guy suggested.’

‘I like it,’ says Hannah.

‘Me too,’ I add.

‘Works for me,’ says Sam.

‘Ok, so if we go with that for a theme: Mikey, are you good to handle the backend stuff for the new website? I dunno what the school’s willing to do for us, but we need a real-time contribution option, a moderated forum –’

‘Hannah. Chill. I’ve got this.’

‘Sorry, I know your schedule can be –’

‘It’s all good. I already had a chat with the IT guys, and I’ve got a pretty clear idea of what they use and they can do for us. Just so you know now, though, they’re gonna set up moderation tools for you *and* Harry, so nothing’ll get through unless you *both* approve it.’

‘Wow.’ Hannah pauses. That’s how you know she means it. ‘Uh, thanks, Mikey. That’s impressive.’

‘No need. I’d rather be doing anything than just playing with balls this year.’

Sam laughs and the others crack smiles.

‘What about you, Han?’ asks Jace.

‘Well, once Sam and Jess start feeding me submissions and the site goes live, I’ll handle all the proofing. Copy shouldn’t be too hard to produce. Mum’s gonna help me get it right,’ she says through a defeated sigh. ‘But we should be able to loosen up after the first issue’s done. For now, though, we’ll just have to be hyper-focused.’

‘Cool! I hope you two know what you’re doing,’ says Sam, grinning wryly.

‘Oh, we *got* this,’ I declare, proudly. ‘And thanks again everyone for helping out. Harry pretty much said if we can “wow” the board with this, the L-E-P won’t be a problem.’

‘Which, by the way, he’s encouraged you all to apply for as well,’ adds Hannah.

‘Thanks, but I think I’ll give that one a miss,’ says Mikey.

‘Yeah, don’t think I’d do well trynna write a novel,’ says Sam, giggling.

‘We’re just happy to help, I think,’ says Jace. I look at him and he smiles.

I smile back.

My pocket vibrates.

It’s a phone call from Audrey.

‘Oop, gotta take this,’ I say, stepping out into the corridor.

So, Audrey didn’t end up calling the police, but she was very specific about her expectations should I come back home. There are rules we’re both supposed to follow now, and keeping the other informed of our whereabouts is one of them.

‘Hi Audrey. Sorry, I know I’m late, I just got caught up with the magazine.’

‘That’s okay. Are you still at school?’

‘Yeah, yeah, about to leave, though.’



I peer through a nearby window. Sun's still *technically* up – thank you corporate sponsored daylight savings – so I'm within bounds for a weeknight.

'No worries. I'm just ringing to let you know I've been called in, so I won't be home when you get here. There's some leftover lasagne in the fridge for dinner if you want it.'

'Thanks, Audrey.'

'Just –' she stops herself, her voice checked and cool.

She cried when I rang her. She might've been angry enough to let me go at the time, especially after what I said to her, but I don't think she actually wanted me to go, just as I think she knows my real problem isn't with her. But then, of course, she had to deal with not knowing anything other than I was staying with a "friend" for *weeks*.

In any case, we decided – together – that we needed to move away from being roommates and towards something akin to guardian and ward: something with scaffolding, at least. I opened up about a few things, told her about the magazine and how Hannah and I planned to take over as its student editors from Milly this year. I told her about the L-E-P and how I wanted to make a go of writing. She promised to be more communicative and a bit more involved, part of which involved checking in with me whenever a valid reason presented itself. Like when I'm about to be late.

'– be careful coming home, okay, Jess?' she finishes.

I glance at the time. It's eight o'clock.

'I will. I'll message when I get there.'

'Thanks.'

'Seeya.'

'Bye.'

Back inside the room, I announce my need to call it a night, and like a Broadway musical, everyone pulls out their phones.

'Oh, shit it *is* late,' says Mikey, smirking. 'I was supposed to be at practise this evening. You guys better get back to your room, too. Don't wanna get caught over here after curfew.'

'Aw, man, the cafeteria's probably closed,' adds Jace, clearly regretting not getting to the chips before Mikey finished them off. 'I'll have to buy a fucking apple from the vending machine or something.'

'Uh, Jess?' says Sam, looking at something on her screen.

'Yeah?'

'Did you take the train this morning?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Accident on Inner West, near Liberty. Trains are down, babe.'

I sigh. 'Seriously? Audrey's on night shift, too. Fuck, what am I gonna do?'

Sam and Hannah look at each other.

'We could hide you under the bed?' suggests Sam, helpfully. 'Prefects don't *usually* check the rooms.'

'Unless you piss them off over something like, say, a magazine? The last thing you need right now is *another* strike on your record,' says Mikey, shooting Sam a weirdly aggressive glance. Sam opens her mouth, presumably to argue, but she says nothing and just goes back to her phone.

'I can take you home,' adds Mikey, quickly turning to me. 'I'm closest to eighteen, I'm sure I can get away with being late for curfew.'

'Nah, I'll do it,' says Jace. 'It'll be fun. Uh, if you're okay with me borrowing your car?'

Mikey sighs, looks like he's going to argue, but then must think better of it. 'Alright, but no joyriding, okay?' he agrees, handing over a set of keys.

Hannah looks at me. 'Dad found out he took the car last year,' she whispers.

'What? How?'

'Bridge toll,' supplies Jace, grinning. 'Automatic camera.'

'Ah.'

'And what about security?' continues Hannah. 'You ain't in no playoffs this year, Jace.'

He shrugs. 'I'll just stay with Jess,' he says, looking at me. 'I mean – if that's alright with you?'

I look at him.

He looks back.

Did he really just –?

Did he have to just –?

Oh God.

What if he wants to stay in my room?

What if he wants to sleep with me?

What if he wants *sex*?

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I mean, I appreciate the ride, but Jace hasn't ever been inside Audrey's house, and I realise I like it that way after New Year's Eve.

Because it's my room.

In my sanctuary.

In my home.

I don't think I'm ready for this.

I don't think I want it.

I feel cold.

I feel sweat.

Say no.

Say no.

Say no.

'Um, uh, yeah. Yeah. I – I guess.'

Nice.

Well done.

Fucking idiot.

Sam and Mikey look at each other. 'Ooooh,' they collectively coo.

'Isn't it Valentine's Day tomorrow, Sam?' asks Mikey.

'You know it is!' replies Sam, smacking him on the arm.

'Well, I think *someone's* getting lucky.'

'Yeah, and it ain't me!' she complains. 'Make sure he cleans up properly this time, Jess. We had to burn those fucking sheets at Cole's place.'

'Uh, Sam! Fucking *gross*,' says Hannah, sharing a sentiment reinforced by my own groan.

'Yeah, grow the fuck up, Sam,' says Jace, though he doesn't seem to mind reciprocating when she – chuckling as she and Mikey leave the room – flips the rest of us off. 'Come on, Jess, I'll take you home. AND I CAN SLEEP ON THE COUCH IF IT'S OF CONCERN,' he shouts, loudly and slowly, ensuring everyone in the room – and probably the dorm – can appreciate his chivalry.

It doesn't take us long to arrive at one-fifty-one Rockford Way and the inevitable declaration of, 'Well, this is it.'

Jace follows me inside as I flick on the lights and reveal the embarrassing *tour de force* that is Audrey's house. 'Cosy,' he says, poking his head into the lounge room. 'And interesting.'

'Yeah, I think it's been renovated a few times over the... decades.'

Ugh.

I don't know why this bothers me so much.

It shouldn't, but it does.

An impatient mewing greets us, followed by a predatory clicking of talons against the warbling timber floor.

'You're late, human, and the other subordinate did not feed me properly. I demand recompense!'

I kneel and let Lestat climb onto my shoulder.

'Aw, my hungry baby boy. Did she forget to give you some yummy fish, did she? Aw.'

Yeah, I know. But I left him with Audrey, so he deserves some extra love.

Plus, anything that sends me in a direction other than the bedroom is good right now.

Jace follows me to the laundry and watches me squeeze food into Lestat's bowl. 'What's his name?' he asks, scratching him behind the ear.

'He's my little monster. I call him Lestat.'

'Lestat?'

'Yeah, y'know. From Anne Rice? *Interview with the Vampire?*'

'Never seen it.'

'Read it, y'mean. Lestat's kinda the bad guy. But I think he's just misunderstood.'

Jace smiles. 'That's so you.'

'That's so *Lestat*,' I counter.

We go into the kitchen where I throw my bag on the table and begin my search for the Legendary Leftover Lasagne. It doesn't look particularly appetising, though, and I'm not really hungry. I really am just going through the motions.

'Want anything to eat?' I ask.

'No thanks,' he says, leaning against the bench top. 'So, how do you guys afford this place, if you don't mind me asking?'

'The landlord is a friend of Audrey's.' Jace doesn't say anything, so of course, I feel the need to defend myself. 'I know it's not flash or anything –'

'Oh, no, I didn't mean it that way. I just – I forget sometimes that you're...'

'Poor?'

'Oh, God, no.'

'It's okay, we're only poor compared to you guys, not the rest of the world.'

Jace smirks. 'Ouch. But fair. Hey, I know you don't get along with your mum, and I'm sorry your dad's gone, but I am kinda glad you got the opportunity to do what you wanna do.'

'Yeah. Me too. Thanks.'

We share a glance and a nod, and that's about all I can take.

I have to change the subject.

'So, should I make up the couch for you?'

Jace frowns. 'Oh. Um, sure, I guess,' he says, as I try to ignore his pained expression. I move quickly towards the corridor – heading for the linen closet – but he stops me before I can escape.

'Don't you at least wanna *show* me your room?'

I close my eyes.

But I don't let him see.

'Oh, yeah. Of course,' I say, spinning on my heel. 'Follow me.'

We head upstairs and I lead Jace into my bedroom with all the officious formality of a door-to-door saleswoman. He smiles and listens politely while I describe the stories behind all of my belongings, from my poster of Minnipup to the lame little bumper stickers I've taken to slapping on my desk. Talking at him about my life is cathartic, like it's something I've been waiting to do, perhaps, but I just can't escape the creeping desire to shove him onto the mezzanine and close the door behind him.

'So, is this where all the magic happens?' he says, finally interrupting me by rapping his fingers on the table and poring over a few of my knick-knacks.

'Yep. Lestat usually takes his place at the end of the bed. Or on the laptop itself.'

'Has he been particularly chatty lately?' asks Jace as he paces the room.

'Yeah, I like talking to him. I mean, he's an arse, but he's a pretty insightful arse.'

I laugh, awkwardly.

'Ha, you have a true *artiste's* process, then.'

'I guess. He thinks I'm crazy, though, keeps telling me to aim for a real job.'

On cue, Lestat struts into the room and rubs his head against my leg before finding a spot on the floor to lick his paws on, leaving Jace to stare at me.

'That's a joke,' I add, quickly. 'Lestat's perfectly happy with me as a servant and would probably complain if I got a job.'

Jace laughs and sits down on the bed. 'I love you, Jess,' he says.

'I love you too,' I reply, reflexively.

He bites his lip. 'Hey, y'know, it'll be Valentine's Day in a few hours,' he says, his demeanour softening even more.

And there it is: the trigger.

I know what's he's gunning for.

A knot tightens in the pit of my stomach.

I lean on my desk and look at him. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I was just wondering, if, uh —'

Say something, Jess.

SAY SOMETHING NOW!

But what?

What do I say?

What do I do?

I don't want him to leave.

I don't want to break up.

'Uh, look, Jace.' Oh, shit! I'm gonna do this. Can't we just... not do sex? Ugh, how do people *do* this? 'I, um, I had a great time on New Year's, but I – I –'

Oh, man.

His face twists into a frown.

He shuffles uneasily on my bed.

Fuck, what do I say?

WHAT DO I SAY?

And then I remember.

'I don't have any condoms!' I declare, loudly enough that if Audrey *was* home, she would *also* be aware of my contraceptive inadequacy. It's also true, so I have to consciously remember not to smile.

'Oh, really?' he says. 'Is that all?' He grins, an expression part relief, part disappointment.

'Jeez, I thought you were about to break up with me or something there.'

'Oh, no, no, no!' I try to giggle reassuringly.

'Damn, I didn't bring any either,' he says, finally breaking the tension.

For now.

'Ah, it's for the best,' I say, waving the thought aside. 'I mean, even if we did, with all this stuff going on right now, I'd rather not. Y'know, I need to get into a space where I'm respecting Audrey and she doesn't even know you're here *now*, so... Also this magazine stuff is pretty stressful. I kinda, really just need you to be patient with me. Please?'

I'm babbling, I know, but I can hardly help myself.

'No, um, yeah, no, I mean, sure. I – I get it,' he says, dryly. 'I can wait. So, uh, do you wanna – ?'

'I'm gonna have a shower and go to bed,' I say, *way* too quickly.

'Yeah, yeah, right. Should I –?'

'There're blankets in the linen closet downstairs.'

'Oh, you don't wanna –?'

'Sorry, I'm just – I'm really, really tired. I mean, thanks – thank you – for bringing me home. And for helping out so much today, but I just, I –'

'Nah, nah. It's cool,' he says, standing up. He smiles, but it's laboured, almost like he doesn't believe in it. 'As long as we're okay?'

'Oh, yeah. Of course. Absolutely. It's just me, I gotta get this year right, y'know?'

Sure, Jess.

I buy it.

'Yeah,' he says. He walks over and kisses me, and for a moment, at least, I kiss him back.

Then he pulls away and I clear my throat. I want to say something, to keep him near me, to ask him to hold me, maybe? I don't know, but nevertheless, his name escapes from my mouth.

'Jace?'

'Yeah?'

Uh, shit, what was I gonna say?

'Um, Audrey usually gets home from night shifts at about six. Do you think --?'

'Don't worry. She won't see me,' he says, curtly cutting me off and leaving. I hear his steps descend the stairs, and despite feeling like an absolute *bitch*, all I can do is thank God as they move slowly away.

I am home.

I am safe.

I turn to see Lestat's accusatory glare from the bed.

Was I really that harsh?

'Fuck off,' I whisper, and so he does, trotting away in Jace's wake.

He's right, though.

I don't think your boyfriend is supposed to make you feel this... confused.

I need to work this out, whatever it is.

When Hannah and I first discussed the workload for the magazine, we thought we'd be fielding a dozen or so submissions of creative writing, maybe a handful of poems from the slam, and a couple of opinion pieces for the premier issue.

What we *get* is a student body mobilised for a culture war.

By that, I mean the three strategically placed social media posts we made calling for contributions went fucking *viral*. I mean, sure, we kinda sold it as an extra-credit opportunity, but within a week, my inbox is flooded with about fifty articles and short stories, and once Mikey gets the site up and running, we get pieces coming in from *all over the damn place*.

With just six weeks until the deadline for the first reissue and the sheer amount of interest it generates, Sam and I have to rush to get the poetry slam organised with *Monsieur* Dubois and Miss Jurrah. I want to have it after school in the drama centre to take advantage of those precious acoustics, but the place is already booked out for the next two weeks due to Wakakirri tryouts, so Harry has to negotiate with the school to get us the cafeteria for an evening. This actually works out well, though, because he manages to convince Langley to organise food for the attendees, which means the "attending" crowd balloons to about twice the number Sam and I were anticipating.

When the night in question arrives, the cafeteria is packed with a couple hundred people, including families and guests from outside the school. Even with Sam as emcee, Jace had to rub circles on my back while Hannah passed me paper bags from the serving trays to hyperventilate into before I could even see clearly. The fact that it's quickly declared a resounding success is completely beside the point, because it really isn't because of me: Sam is in her element, most of the parents are wildly supportive, and Miss Jurrah helps some of the indigenous students do a sort of performance piece that – rumour has it – a member of the school board now wants to use for an outreach program.

In fact, once it's all over, the only regret I have is knowing it'll probably be bigger when we do it again in June.

Not *everyone* is happy about it, though.

I get a message.

I don't know who it's from, exactly, but I can hazard a guess.

*Sluts like you, it says, get trashed eventually.*

I suppose it was naïve to imagine there wouldn't be consequences for disturbing Lady Yorke's precious little world, but still, it gets to me, and I spend a whole afternoon trying to channel the stress into my own short story for the magazine. Ironically, doing the magazine means I'm too



busy reading other people's writing to do much of my own, but even Lestat keeps quiet that day, no matter how many scenarios I put forth for their consideration.

In the end, I decide to take the message to Hannah, and she just pulls out her phone to show me her own.

*Watch your back, Hazza.*

I suggest we tell Harry what we think might be going on, but Hannah just laughs. 'There's no point,' she says. 'Even if Milly worked out it was us who pushed the whole thing in the first place, she wouldn't send the messages herself. That's not her style. I mean, she might not even know. It could just be Bel or the other one, what's-her-name, taking the initiative.'

So, we don't say anything, and the messages keep on coming. I try to ignore them and get back to fielding contributions, but it isn't easy, and it isn't as fun. Ultimately, though, I keep it together, and by the end of March, everything falls into place.

Mikey's website works flawlessly. Jace delivers some top-notch cover art in the form of a figure transforming into paint supplies and musical notes. He also does a few sketches for the centrepiece stories. Finally, Sam delivers exactly what she promised: the first in a series of comedic mockumentaries about the conceptual process behind this year's Wakakirri performance. She even keeps it relatively clean.

Honestly, we couldn't have hoped for a better opening to the reimagined magazine, and when we submit the proofs to Harry, he's as thrilled with the amount of work we've done as we are. He approves them all with only some minor tweaks, and they go live just after the first print run at the beginning of April.

To cap it all off, my seventeenth birthday arrives just as Easter break begins, so we all get together and take a ferry across to Luna Park.

Everything's going great.

Until I realise I have absolutely no excuses left to give.

There's something between us the day I confide in Sam. Maybe it's the groan I catch myself off guard with – I mean, I *was* going for a sigh – or maybe it's Sam's bloodshot eyes and unusually dour cadence that makes me open up. Either way, we find ourselves alone in the library, pondering the collapse of modernism in performance art.

It's the first time in a while I've actually seen Sam try to study, and I feel guilty for not sharing whatever verve has piqued her interest in this particular assignment.

'Sup, babe?' she asks, laconically. She shifts a book from her side of the table to mine and then sinks down into her chair, a weirdly absent expression clinging to her face. It's a look she's been

wearing with increasing frequency this year, and Jace seems to think it means she and Mikey are fighting.

But that's not a topic I feel comfortable bringing up right now.

'Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to –'

'No, please, for the love of *God*, I need a distraction.'

'It's nothing. Really.'

'Don't. Lie. To me. *Jessie*,' she says, smirking. 'I've known you long enough to tell when you wanna say something. You're not subtle about it, y'know.'

Really? I thought I was.

'Well, how do you know I'm not just thinking about boy bands and postmodern sentimentality?'

'Oh, come on. Give me a *little* credit.'

I smile.

What's the point of lying?

If I've learned anything about having friends in the past six months, it's that your business is their business. Start shutting down and they start shutting you out, and that's something I really don't need right now.

'Fair enough, but don't say I didn't warn you.'

She slides an elbow forward on the table and leans into it so that her eyes – deliberately wide with curiosity – are looking up at me, begging me to begin.

How... manipulative.

'Sam. It's just not working,' I announce.

'What's not working?'

'Jace and me. It's not working.'

'Whataya mean?'

'I just – I can't seem to, y'know, make it feel like it felt before.'

'Before what?'

I sigh. 'New Year's Eve.'

'What happened on New Year's Eve?'

I raise an eyebrow. There's nobody else at the table, but there're plenty of students that might be able to hear, so I lower my voice. 'We had sex.'

'Yeeeeeaaah. Duh. And? Wasn't that the whole point?'

'I dunno. Was it? Ever since then, I just can't seem to think of him like... *that*.'

'Like what?'

'Y'know. Sexy. I just... don't.'

'I don't get what you –' Sam suddenly becomes terse – wait a minute. Jess. New Year's Eve was, like, months ago.'

'Yeah, I *know*. It was my first time and Hannah said I was probably just nervous, so I thought my feelings would've changed by now. But they haven't, and I'm getting worried.'

Sam lifts her head so she's looking at me dead on, attention officially captured. 'Are you telling me you and Jace haven't done *anything* since New Year's Eve?'

'Well, I mean, we've gone to the movies a couple of times –'

'No, like, have you made a mess on the back seat of a car lately?'

'Ugh, Sam, no. I mean, we've like, touched a little. And kissed. But nothing like that.'

Sam's nose narrows in a remarkably accusatory way.

Ugh, why does she always do this?

'What about that night he drove you home? Valentine's Day. Did you do anything then?'

'No. He slept on the couch.'

'He *what*?'

'He slept on the couch. Then I – I may have asked him to leave.'

Sam rolls her head back. '*He slept on the couch*,' she echoes. '*And then you kicked him out*. Okay, sooo, what's the problem, you wanna break up with him?'

'What? No! Are you even listening to me?'

'You *don't* wanna break up with him, but you *don't* wanna have sex with him, is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Gotta say, there's some mixed signals in there, Jess.'

'Tell me about it. I've used just about every excuse I can think of to say "no". Homework, school, family stuff, periods. Last thing I used was the magazine, but I guess that's no good now. I swear to God, Sam, if he pouts at me one more fucking time –'

'Whataya mean?'

I sigh. 'Well, okay, I had to do *something*, didn't I? Otherwise, *he'd* break up with *me*.'

'Fucking knew you were making shit up,' says Sam, smirking again. 'So, what happened? Wait, wait, let me guess: Luna Park? Hall of Mirrors? Woulda made a nice birthday present.'

'No. This was a couple days later.'

Sam sinks back in her chair, somewhat deflated.

'Anyway, I – he – we wanted to celebrate completing the first issue, so I... y'know...'

'No, I don't,' says Sam, reenergised by the opportunity to be obtuse. 'Please explain it to me.'

'I – I kinda went down on him for a bit, okay? I thought maybe I'd find it exciting, like it'd get me going, or whatever, but it didn't. It *really* fucking didn't.'

Sam chuckles. 'Did he at least return the favour?'

'Yes,' I snap. 'And that was equally brief and unpleasant. It was just – ugh. I hated it. But that look he gave me when I wanted to stop... Sam, it was like saying "no" to a puppy.' I sigh. 'I'm *over* it. I just can't *do* these things with him.'

Sam's face turns quizzical, like she doesn't understand the problem. 'Well, Jess, I hate to state the obvious, but if you can't take a blowjob from your boyfriend, then you're probably not attracted to him.'

'But I am. I mean – I *am*. I definitely am. I like being around him. I like dating him. I like making out with him. Or I used to. I just – I can't see him as someone I want to do *more* with.' I realise my voice is creeping higher, but I can't seem to lower it anymore.

Sam shrugs. 'Dunno what to tell ya, Jess. Maybe you're just meant to be really good friends. Speaking of which, why am I just finding out about this now if you've already asked Hannah about it?'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think it was necessary to inform the whole group every time I fail at sex.'

Sam shakes her head, somehow communicating her disappointment quite profoundly.

'Look, if it's not working anymore, the best thing you could do is break up with him and move on.'

'But I don't *want* to break up with him, Sam. It's not *him*. There's something wrong with *me*.'

'Jess,' she begins, 'you're overthinking it. You might *like* Jace, but if there's no spark, then it probably just isn't meant to be. That's not your fault.'

'No, Sam, you're not getting it. I like *everything* about our relationship, okay? Or almost everything. But every time we touch *now*, it's like, it *has* to be sexual. Even if Jace doesn't mean it that way, he makes a joke, or winks, or says or does something that changes it, that *makes* it about sex. It wasn't like that before. It's like what we had before doesn't matter, and it hurts, because he's really nice, and funny, and cares about me, and I care about him, and we have the best pointless conversations *ever*.'

Sam rolls her eyes. 'Yeah, trust me, we know.'

'He's like, my best friend. And honestly, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with being intimate in that way? Why does everything have to be about getting inside other people's bodies?'

'Welcome to being a woman,' says Sam, laughing.

Something shrinks inside me.

It was bad enough when Hannah convinced me to gloss over these feelings, but Sam's tone makes me feel like an idiot.

'It isn't funny, Sam! I don't know what to do! Jace's starting to hate me, and I can't blame him. I want to be close, but every time we are, that's how I feel. I *want* to make it work.'

'Okay, okay, calm down,' says Sam, totally not nailing an impression of a compassionate sensei. 'Look, maybe it's just hormones or whatever. Maybe Jace just didn't hit the right spots first time 'round. Maybe that's *all it was*, and you're just subconsciously scared it won't measure up again. I mean, have you tried talking to him about it?'

'What would I say, though? "Don't touch me"? What kind of relationship is that?'

'Well, the way I see it, you've got two options. The first is to be honest with him, which I think we both know probably ends with a breakup.'

'Sam, I don't wanna –'

'Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm just sayin'.'

I sigh. 'So, what's option two?'

Sam becomes downright mischievous. 'Well, we gotta find a way to kickstart that libido of yours, babe,' she says. 'You won't be scared if you know how good it can feel when it's done right.'

I don't really think about what this might entail, but I immediately jump on board anyway because it sounds like a fix, and a fix is what I want. 'Yeah. Yeah, okay. How, though?'

'Listen,' she says. 'I'm gonna do something real nice for ya, okay? It'll be *my* birthday present to *you*. And I mean, it's *probably* the least I can do after the whole ear-piercing thing.'

'How expedient of you.'

'I don't know what that means, but I *will* need a couple more days, all right?'

'Are you serious?'

'Don't fight me on this, Jess. It'll be for your own good. Trust me, I'm here to help.' She declares this with what is now a broad smile plastered across her face – one that suggests she's finally found the project she's been looking for – and stands up.

It's a little disconcerting.

'Okay,' I reply, against my better judgement. 'I trust you.'

'Good.' Sam checks her phone. 'What do I have this afternoon?'

'English lit. With me.'

She hesitates, rechecks her phone, then makes an executive decision. 'Tell Miss Jurrah I'm sick,' she says.

'With what?'

'I dunno, rickets or something. I'll see you... probably Thursday.' Sam winks, and I barely have time to say, 'Uh, okay?' before she's gone, dashing down the aisles like a cat chasing a mouse.

I watch her disappear and wonder if she might be on to something. The thought doesn't last long, though, because I suddenly develop a very bad feeling about *everything*.

Then again, if anyone can "awaken" my sexuality, I'm guessing it's Sam.

Which makes it the right thing to do.

Right?

*Répondez s'il vous plaît.*

Thursday arrives and Sam hits me up after geography, messages me – in no uncertain terms – to come to the girls' dorms.

The directive fills me with apprehension, but whatever she's got planned can't possibly be a worse strategy than what I'm currently doing, so I ignore the butterflies in my stomach and head to my locker. When I open my backpack to switch out my workbooks, however, I find the ones inside damp with ink from a leaking pen.

Sigh.

This is gonna be an operation.

Carefully, I rescue the books and ditch the pen, my fingers slick with ink.

The books are actually mostly fine. The backpack, on the other hand...

That's gonna need some attention.

I automatically reach for my phone to tell Sam I'll be late, but I don't wanna get ink all over the screen. She'll just have to wait.

I take my backpack by the strap to keep it steady and make for the nearest bathroom: funnily enough, the same one I introduced myself to on my first day at Stanmore. It hasn't changed much in the last six months, except that my name's been added to the Wall of Fame.

Anyway, there's nobody else about, so I make my way inside and set to work on cleaning up the mess. I rest the backpack against the wall below the sink and tear as much paper towel out of the dispenser as I can fit in my fist, using it to try and soak up any stains burrowing their way into the fabric.

I hear it after a few uninterrupted and thoroughly pointless minutes of scrubbing: a barely audible sniff emanating from one of the cubicles, followed by an equally timid whimper.

I stop where I am, dumping the dark blue morass of tissue in the sink and spinning on my heel to glance at each of the cubicles in turn.

All the doors are resting close to closed, but none of them are locked.

I hear it again.

'Um, is everything... okay... over there?' I ask.

No response.

My instinct is to leave – if someone's having a moment, I should probably just let them work through it in private – but there's something about the sound that makes me hesitate.

I kneel down and see a set of feet in the cubicle furthest from the door: again, the same one I introduced myself to on my first day at Stanmore.

I approach, slowly: the last thing I want to do is burst in on someone going to the toilet.

But that's not what I see as I gently push open the door.

Instead, I see Milly sitting on the closed toilet lid, her face red and streaked by tears. Her fingers are curled around a length of toilet paper she's transformed into an almost perfect sphere, and her hair is so firmly matted against the wall of the cubicle where her head's been resting that it looks like she's peeling off a giant cobweb. She's been at this for a while.

She looks directly at me.

She doesn't say a word.

'Milly?'

She just sniffs.

'Are you – are you okay?' Even as I say it, I know it's a stupid question.

But what the hell else am I gonna ask?

I step into the cubicle and she immediately recoils.

'Don't touch me!' she snaps, raising her free hand as if trying to fend me off. 'Don't touch me! *Don't!*'

I instinctively raise my own. 'Okay! Okay. I'm not touching you.'

She exhales slowly and I realise her breathing is otherwise alarmingly shallow. I wonder if she might be having a heart attack or something, and I start to panic. I take half a step back.

'Maybe I should go get Mister Patel,' I suggest, as calmly as I can manage.

'No! Don't! Please. Please.'

'Milly, you don't look so good. I think you might need someone.' I continue to edge away from the cubicle, and the door creeps back towards the lock. 'It'll just take a minute, real quick, promise –'

'NO!' she shouts, with enough force to stop me dead. 'Please don't go.'

Um.

Okay.

She stares at me with surprising intensity, and I have to admit, I'm more than just a tad frightened.

'Okay,' I whisper. Without anywhere else to sit, I slide down against the side of the cubicle and press my back against the door, keeping it open. Neither of us say anything. Milly focuses on a space I can't see, her breathing ragged and interspersed with the occasional sob. I focus very pointedly on the floor tiles, trying not to fidget or look too nervous. We stay like this for what feels



like ten minutes, living the miracle of nobody else needing the bathroom in an overpopulated school during class changeover.

After a while, though, I hear Milly clear her throat, and I turn to see her looking at me again.

'It was pretty clever how you got me off the magazine,' she croaks.

Shit.

'I – I dunno what you're talking about,' I stammer.

'Liar,' she murmurs. She sniffs and wipes her nose with the toilet paper spit ball. 'I'm gonna get you back for it, though. Gonna hurt you real bad.'

I frown. 'Why?'

'Coz it's what I gotta do,' she says, shrugging through another stifled snob. She blows her nose and wipes up a stray rope of snot that comes out. I don't comment on it, even though what she just said makes me a little angry.

'So, those messages about me being a slut were just a warmup, then?'

'Oh, that's Bel,' replies Milly, waving it away as if it doesn't matter. 'She's an idiot. I'll tell her to knock it off.'

'Gee, thanks,' I snap. 'Y'know, if you'd just been a little more friendly to start with, I wouldn't have had to go 'round you to get on the magazine in the first place. I was perfectly happy to be co-editor, and Hannah wasn't even interested originally.'

We let a moment of silence win out.

'People don't know what it's like,' says Milly, at length.

'What what's like?'

'Feeling broken.'

I feel myself relax ever so slightly.

'Whataya mean?' I ask.

'Have you ever been pushed so hard to be perfect that the slightest, tiniest little mistake suddenly becomes the end of the world?'

I think.

'Maybe,' I say.

Milly scoffs. 'Doubt it.'

'Well, at least I'm not a judgemental, vindictive piece of shit,' I counter. 'Besides, what're you even talking about? You're like, the most popular girl in school. Everyone's always tryin' to be your friend, even when you do fuck up, which, trust me, is *a lot*.'

Milly's lips tighten. 'You think I'm popular, huh? You think people follow me 'round coz they *like* me? Don't be dumb, Jess. People follow me 'round coz they wanna be seen with me, coz of what being seen with me can do for them, and they *hate* me for that.'

'Yes, but you make it so easy when you're dishing out love letters like "gonna hurt you real bad".'

'Yeah, yeah, it's all a big joke to you. Well, I'm not like you, Miss Nobody. Nobody gives a shit about you. You can just do what you want, and nobody cares, but I have to fight for every scrap of approval I can get. I can't fuckin' *sneeze* without getting critiqued by a board of directors. Not you, though. Nobody's judging you. Nobody's hurting you. Nobody's –' she stops, and for a moment her expression is cold; dead, almost. I'm suddenly curious and consider asking her what she was going to say, but then she shakes her head, and the moment passes. 'You've just got no idea,' she finishes.

Which ticks me off some more.

'You think you're the only one dealing with that bullshit?' I spit, callously. 'What about Mikey? His life is nothing *but* pressure to perform. Jace and Hannah: their parents already have their careers mapped out for them; did you know that? And Sam pretty much has to schedule a meeting with her mum and dad just to *see* them.'

Milly doesn't say anything, so I keep talking.

'And what do you know about me, anyway? I've been out of my comfort zone for the last six months because all I wanted was a few friends and now I'm having to constantly go to parties, and do stupid things, and deal with stupid questions and snarky comments coz people think I'm some silly little poor girl who doesn't know any better, and I've got people like you trynna tell me how I don't know anything about life when, in actual fact, you can all go and get fucked, coz we all have shitty lives, and we're all dealing with the same sort of crap, and that's really no fucking reason to be hating on each other all the fucking time.'

I stand up – perhaps a bit more dramatically than I intended – and turn on her.

'Why can't we all just be happy and helpful and stop trynna compete for who's got it worse? *Fuck.*'

Before I can help myself, I've already made my way back to the sink, and I'm in the middle of throwing out the paper towels I'd stocked up when I hear Milly shuffling out of the cubicle behind me.

She sniffs one last time. 'If you tell anyone about this, Jess, I swear –'

'Yeah, yeah,' I cut her off, throwing my backpack over my shoulder. 'Bel will shank me after class or whatever. Don't worry. I don't think anybody would care, anyway. You're not actually as important as you think you are,' I tell her.

I feel her watching me leave, but I don't look back at her.

'You're late,' declares Sam, grinning wickedly as she opens the dormitory door.

'Yeah, well, I had to clean a few things up,' I counter, still a little agitated.

Nevertheless, Sam ushers me in, and I collapse into the bean bag – freshly scrubbed backpack and all – a crumpled heap of spent adrenaline.

'So, are you ready for your present?'

My present?

Oh yeah! The reason I was coming up here in the first place.

'Sure,' I mumble.

I shuffle up and slip my backpack off in time to watch Sam fish a brown paper bag out of her top drawer. She hands it to me and takes an anticipatory seat on her bed. In fact, she crosses her legs, claps her hands together, and stares at me.

'Go on,' she says, eagerly.

I tear the tape off the top, stick my hand inside, and pull out a long, plastic box.

I look at it.

I look at Sam.

'Don't thank me 'til *after* you've used it,' she says, beaming.

I don't say anything because I don't know what to say, so Sam decides to help me out.

'It's a vibrator,' she declares, happily.

'Yeah, I can see that. How did you, uh?'

Sam giggles and dives back into her top drawer. This time she produces her purse, and from that, a proof of age card that I can't help noticing puts her at almost nineteen years old. She holds it up proudly.

'Pretty cool, huh?'

'Is that... is that a *fake* ID?'

'It is.'

'Isn't that, like, something they do in the movies? And isn't it illegal?'

'Pfft, it's not like I'm fourteen. It's just a little head-start is all.'

'Wait, did you get that so you could get this?'

'Nah, I've been waiting on this for a while. Was gonna use it as a test run, but –' she sighs wistfully – they didn't even ask me for ID.'

'So, you didn't have to show it to me, then?'

Sam looks at me, slightly exasperated. 'Jess, I spent five hundred bucks on this thing, like I *wasn't* gonna show you. Hey, have you ever been in a sex shop?'

'No.'

'It's fucking hilarious, I'll have to take you.'

'That's okay.'

'Aw, come on. Have a little fun with me.'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

Sam pouts.

'Well, whatever, that little miracle stick right there's your answer, anyway,' she says.

'To what, exactly?'

'Your problem.'

'I don't get it.'

'Look, you love Jace, right?'

'Right.'

'And you wanna be with him, right?'

'Right.'

'But there's no spark? No rush? No —' she makes a sound, like a half-grunted moan — 'when you see him? Like, you wanna bend over and let him take you right then and there?'

'Um... not quite... no.'

'But there should be.'

She's not asking.

'I... guess so.'

'Then the problem is your sex drive, and that little toy's what'll help you jump start it.'

I look at it again.

I look at Sam again.

It doesn't exactly look arousing.

'I dunno, Sam. I mean, it's not that I don't appreciate the thought, I just —'

'Listen, listen, look,' she says, grabbing the box and working off the sticky squares holding it together with her fingernails, eventually freeing the toy. She giggles as she holds it out in front of me, a whole six inches of *faux* fleshy pinkness with columns of little baubles running just under the surface from base to head.

'It comes with multiple rotation settings, a vibrating tip —' she points at a protrusion near the base, a lump shaped like a bunny's head, complete with ears — 'and rabbit for that extra little kick, but I'll let you figure out how to use that one.'

'Sam –'

'Jess,' she whines back. 'Just. Trust me. Okay? Wait 'til you've got the house to yourself, or something, then think about it.' She puts the toy back into its box while she says this, and hands it back to me, still grinning, of course. 'It's *worth* it.'

'I don't know, it sounds like a lotta hassle. I'm starting to think the whole thing –'

'For fuck's sake,' she snaps, standing up. For a split second her expression hardens, and I get the distinct impression she wants to throw something at me, but then her face becomes a well of pity and she kneels down instead, so we're eye to eye. 'You've been trying to get horny for months,' she says. 'You *need* this, girl. Your relationship *needs* this. Besides, this ain't the fifties, y'know, women are *allowed* to enjoy their bodies.'

'Sam –'

'Don't give me that, Jess. *Come on!* You wanna miss out forever?'

I sigh. I'm not gonna win this.

'Is it really *that* good?'

'Uh, duh. Why do you think everyone does it? Sometimes a spark just needs a little extra heat, y'know?'

For the last time, I look at it.

For the last time, I look at Sam.

'Okay. Fine. I'll try it. But I'm not making any promises. This is already a little... weird.'

'Yeah, we *should* be swapping notes right about now, but here we are still in practise mode.'

I smile, like I'm supposed to. I think Sam actually, genuinely wants me to be happy, but I'm just not sure she's going about it the right way. But hey, at least she's trying.

'You're so fucked up,' I tell her.

Sam laughs. 'Nah, I'm normal. You're the one who needs help, babe.'

With Audrey's hectic work schedule, it isn't long before I find myself in an empty house and a ton of existential terror. Sam's gift – still wrapped in the brown paper bag and stowed safely under my bed – takes the place of the Telltale Heart, and while I sit there at my desk trying to write material for the next issue of *New Wave*, I'm convinced I can hear the thumping of the bunny ears vibrating against the floorboards.

Truthfully, I've been thinking about the stupid thing for days, mentally bouncing between disinterest, disgust, and intrigue. I can't seem to land anywhere in particular, but I know one thing: I *have* to give this a try, if only to save myself from a life of living like this. I've been stringing Jace on for months, getting close, pulling away, apologising, making excuses. It's so fucking exhausting, and someone's gonna break.

So why is this so hard?

Why can't I just *do* it, like everyone else?

I tap my pen against the pages of my notebook, to a short, hand-written story I'm playing with about the sensations of life after sex. It was the first story I've actually managed to get going this year – despite having many ideas – and there's something visceral about handwriting it that appeals to me. It's a shame I keep getting caught up on the subject matter.

The heat. The smells. The sweat.

The need to clean up sticky fluids.

The feeling of tying off a rubber sack and throwing it on the floor to dispose of later.

The subsequent checks. The exhaustion. The aches.

The shifting expectations: doing it once means doing it again.

Withholding it means pain.

Anything else is just a tease.

I reread my last few paragraphs.

I hear the words.

I feel the memories.

Did I really hate the experience that much?

Why am I even writing this? It's not like Harry's gonna let me put in the magazine anyway.

Ah. Fuck it.

I need to know.

I close my notebook.

I reach under my bed and grab the brown paper bag.

I pull out the vibrator, take it out of the box, lay it carefully on the bed, and look at it.

Yep.

That's one lumpy stick of rubber.

Okay.

What do I need to do?

Make sure the doors are locked, obviously.

Check.

Make sure the windows are closed.

Check.

Put Lestat in the laundry.

Check.

I start to feel fuzzy and warm, but I'm not sure if that's because I'm aroused at the idea of what I'm about to do or because I think I'm just being... kinda naughty? I don't know.

Forget it, move on.

Okay. Now.

Where should I do it?

Hmm. Most of the house is too exposed and doing it in the lounge room or the kitchen would just be... weird. Even my room feels too open, and on my bed? Eh. Maybe not.

A lock.

I need a lock.

The bathroom.

On the toilet?

Ugh, nah.

On a towel?

Isn't that, like, a total betrayal of Audrey's trust?

Well, that leaves the shower.

The shower makes sense.

Being naked might even be good, right?

And everything can stay clean.

Yes. Good. I guess I'm having a shower.

I grab the vibrator and take it with me into the bathroom, where I close and lock the door.

More than once.

Okay.

Relax, Jess.

Sure, doing it with Jace wasn't *great*, but it's not like it didn't feel *nice*, right? Some of the time. You're just going to do that again, but this time, you'll get it right, and it'll be amazing, just like everyone says it is.

There's nothing wrong with you.

You've just gotta get to know your own body.

You just need practise.

Right. Okay.

I leave my glasses by the sink.

I let my hair out.

When I take off my clothes, I try to do it slowly. Sensually. I pay attention to how the fabric feels against my skin. I run my fingertips across my chest, my legs, my thighs. I try imagining things, like people standing around watching, but that just makes me feel self-conscious to the point I can't even look at myself in the mirror. That doesn't feel right, so I try to turn my touch into Jace's, to mimic the way he explored my curves on New Year's Eve before he – leaving films of sweat cling to your flesh, keep the sheets sticky in a warm, summer breeze.

Ugh. Not good.

Try something else.

A lover. A perfect lover. A man or a woman? Either? Both? Is it a romance? Is it a one-night stand?

What do I want?

Do I even *know*?

Maybe I should watch some porn?

Maybe I should see what the possibilities are?

No.

Fuck it.

I'm wasting time.

I turn the taps and listen to a rumble I've grown accustomed to since moving in. It's the sound of pipes rattling against walls, of metal cylinders barely able to cope with the pressure within them. That's what I'm supposed to feel, barely contained. That's what they say happens, that's the release. Remember that while you wait for the water to heat up, Jess.

When the steam starts fogging up the mirror, I grab the vibrator.

The water's hot.

It burns a little bit.

Does that help?



I lean my head back, let my hair soak, then wipe my eyes.

Okay.

Here we go.

I turn the vibrator on.

I squat – awkwardly – and press the tip of the vibrator against myself. Its movement sends shudders through my body, not entirely unpleasant, but also not really that exciting. More... peculiar... than anything. It doesn't feel like Jace. When he was inside of me, it hurt at first. Then it just felt like something was inside of me, like a mild tension. Then I got used to it, and it felt okay. Even a little good. I mean, it was never good enough to make up for the awkwardness, but it's not like I was in constant pain or anything.

This, though... this feels aggressive.

But I need to keep going, so I push it in.

Meaningless tremors.

Some big, some small.

Some pleasing, some painful.

I let myself go through a couple of waves while a knot in my stomach tightens; constricting, holding me hostage.

Is this it?

Is this the spark I didn't feel?

The pressure is pleasure, I tell myself.

Focus on that.

Pressure is pleasure.

Pleasure like steam.

Body like pipes.

The tremors are me, I suppose, rattling against the wall of the release.

*It's okay.*

Slowly, the surges fill me.

Patiently, I wait for them to explode.

It feels like it takes forever, but when it finally begins to happen, I almost fall forward. The spasm rocks me one way and then the other until the knot feels so tight it almost hurts. Then, all at once, the muscles in my abdomen clench and release, and melt away into nothing, or at least, that's what it feels like. For a split second, I think I understand. Then I pull the vibrator free, and just as suddenly as it began, the sensation is over, reduced to a lingering heaviness between my thighs and

a shortness of breath. After all that time and effort, a dying flame, a fleeting spark, gone, replaced by...

Is that relief?

Relief that it's over?

Is that right?

I don't think that's right.

I flick the vibrator off and roll it away, collapsing back against the wall.

Was that really *it*?

Was that the elusive orgasm that was supposed to "awaken" my sexuality?

Because that was barely worth my time. I mean, yeah, it felt good, and it beats doing sit ups for exercise, I guess, but if I was given the choice between that and reading a book...

I feel no compulsion to touch myself, no compulsion to press on and have another one.

There's nothing, nothing but that stupid fucking stickiness and the sensation of being uncomfortably open. In fact, it was only marginally better than New Year's Eve, and I think that's because I didn't have to deal with another sweaty body stacked on top of mine.

Is this all there is to it?

Is this the grand prize?

The penultimate expression of love?

If it is, it's fucking *lame*.

What the hell, Sam?

Where's my awakening?

Where's my fucking revelation?

FUCK!

Surely, there's something else, right? Everyone goes on about sex like there's nothing better. Maybe masturbation is like that, though? Maybe it's unsatisfying in that way by definition because you're not sharing yourself with someone?

Right?

RIGHT?

I look down at my body, soaking in the shower.

I look at the vibrator.

I try to imagine Jace bringing me to the edge and tipping me over like it did, to see if that can bring back the spark, but the thought just makes me cover my face and groan.

Why?

WHY AM I BROKEN?

And what am I going to do about Jace?

How can I be with him, with *anyone*, knowing I'll never want to touch them like that, or *be* touched by them like that, like I'm supposed to?

It can't last.

I know it can't.

I bring my knees to my chin, hug myself as tightly as I can manage, and cry my eyes out.

Time passes.

School gets hard.

The magazine gets hard.

Socialising gets hard.

Audrey and I argue a few more times.

Jace and I don't even bother.

I keep dreading the inevitable as I reach for excuse after excuse, and I get to watch Jace's expressions change from hopeful but understanding to confused and hurt.

I want to tell him everything, but I don't know how.

I don't know what words to use.

How do you tell someone you want to be with them – like a partner, a soul mate – but they're not allowed to desire you, to touch you? To *feel* you?

How do you tell them you just don't see them that way? That you might not see *anyone* that way?

I circle the conversation so many times, I lose count, but every time I chicken out, I know I'm taking one step closer to the end.

And the moment comes sooner than I think.

On the night it happens, we're back at Blues Point in Jace's car, the Sydney Harbour Bridge casting a collage of rainbow coloured light over the water. It's beautiful, but eerie: fingers of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, all stretching across blackened glass, all fading into the oblivion of a starless sky reflected flawlessly by its surface.

In a couple of weeks, I'll have lived in Sydney for a year: I've seen the harbour swell to bursting with summer storms, disappear beneath fog so thick you can barely see your hand in front of your face, and carved up into salty cornrows by a thousand yachts racing to the mouth and back. The harbour's almost never still, so when it is, you notice. You notice because you think it's unnatural. A reverential silence, perhaps, or an omen of some kind. You think whatever's behind it might reach out and grab you, might pull you under, but that's all bullshit. Human psyche stuff. There's no Upside Down, here. It's just another way for the harbour to be.

I watch the breeze pluck some red and brown leaves from a nearby deciduous tree – itself little more than the same frightened skeleton I saw in the trees outside Audrey's last winter – and wonder just how deeply our objection to stillness runs, even when we're aware of how silly it is.

Like now, we'd usually be listening to the radio. Once upon a time, we'd probably be making out, too. But we don't. And we aren't. We're sitting quietly, waiting for the other to broach the conversation we both know is overdue, neither of us wanting to be the one that starts it.

It can't go on forever, though, so I pick something pleasantly benign to begin with.

'The bridge looks pretty,' I say.

'Yeah. I think it looks political, too.'

Maybe, not so benign?

'What, like your mural?' I counter.

'*Touché*,' he replies.

'Wouldn't it have been your first time voting?' I ask, trying to prevent another silence from taking hold. 'If the referendum actually happened, I mean.'

'Technically, I guess,' says Jace, his voice deeply apathetic.

'Which way would you have gone?'

'Obviously "yes". Can't think of a better way to piss mum and dad off than to support the gays.'

'You... you don't believe that do you?'

He shrugs. 'Either way...' he says.

Either way...

The rebel. The prankster. Always looking to cross the line, but never by enough to get lost on the other side. Always an exit plan; always a way home.

'I mean, I don't know why they don't just pass it, or whatever,' he says, right on cue. 'Just let people marry who they want. It's not rocket science.'

We look out at the colours, a hopeful tribute to an unmade decision. Should gay people have the same rights as straight people? What a fucking question to *still* be fucking asking.

After a while, Jace sighs. 'Look, Jess, I was gonna wait to say this, but I'm tired of guessing, so, screw it.' He pauses and my heart stops beating. 'What's going on between us?'

For some reason, I play dumb. 'Whataya mean?' I ask.

He doesn't buy it.

'Come on, Jess. I mean, I know you've got the magazine, and school's full on and everything, but you can't seriously think I haven't noticed how distant you've been all year.'

'But, I haven't though.'

Oh yeah, good comeback, Jess. *Real* convincing.

‘Please don’t. Y’know, I was having such a good time with you. New Year’s Eve was so great, but lately – lately it’s like, we’re not *us*. We never talk, we never relax when we go out. Hell, we never even hold hands anymore. We never –’

‘What? Make out? Have sex?’

‘Well, I mean –’

‘That *is* what you mean, though, right? Because that’s *always* what you mean.’

Jace shakes his head. ‘See, this is what I’m talking about. What’s *with* you? You’re acting like I’m always trynna fuck you, or something.’

‘Well, pretty much.’

‘What? What kinda bullshit is that?’

‘Jace, I –’ I stop and sigh. ‘You sure you wanna do this?’ I ask, part of me hoping he’ll just nope out of the whole damn process.

‘Yeah, I *really* do,’ he declares, emphatically bursting my bubble.

Ugh. Just do it, Jess. The best you can.

‘Fine,’ I snap. ‘We don’t hold hands anymore coz every time we do, you try to turn it into kissing, and every time we kiss, you try to turn it into touching, and every time we touch, you try to get me to have sex. *I don’t want to have sex with you, Jace,*’ I say, before I even realise I have. ‘I don’t *like* having sex with you.’

Jace sits back in his chair, mouth literally agape.

Shit.

That was... not good.

‘Nothing personal,’ I add, quickly, as if I’m not pouring petrol on the fire. ‘I love you.’

‘*Not fucking personal?*’ he echoes. ‘Seriously? You just tell me you’re not attracted to me – basically – but you’re what, happy stringing me along anyway because you “love me”, and you think that’s not fucking personal?’

I don’t reply.

Because he has a point.

‘You think this is a healthy relationship, Jess?’

‘Well, not with how you’re talking to me right now, no.’

‘Please enlighten me. How *should* I be talking to you right now? How *should* I be talking to my girlfriend who just made it clear that, for months now, she hasn’t been able to stand the sight of me? I mean, what the fuck are we even *doing*, Jess?’

I knew this was coming. I knew I was letting things go on for too long. Ever since my breakdown in the shower, I've been imagining this moment, planning my words. Yet the moment Jace asks me this directly, I realise I've got absolutely no answer for him.

'I don't know, okay? I just *don't* know. I love you. I love being around you. I love your stupid little jokes and your beautiful sketches. I love that you do your best to piss your dad off, and I love that you defaced school property to do it *and* get a positive message across. I love the fact that you'll talk to me for hours about nothing at all. I love that we can go and see any movie or any show or just do whatever. I love *you*. But I just... I dunno, Jace. I just don't *see* you that way.'

'So, you're saying you like everything about me, except actually seeing me? Or touching me?'

'I just don't feel that sort of connection with you.'

Or anybody, for that matter.

'Well, then how can you say you love me?'

I don't know.

But I can only repeat myself.

'Look, ever since New Year's Eve, I feel like there's always been pressure to do more stuff, like no matter what we do, it's all just leading up to another "go".'

'Well, *yeah*, I'm touching you because *I love you*, and *I wanna touch you*. Y'know, like a normal person? I don't get how I'm pressuring you. It's not like I'm demanding sex. Every time you've said "no", I've said "okay". But I mean, if you love me, you should *want* to do stuff with me. That's why it's called being intimate. It's what you're *supposed* to want when you're with someone.'

I sigh, exasperated. 'This doesn't have anything to do with being intimate, Jace.'

His body sags as he sinks further into his chair. He's getting sulky again, and I instantly get the urge to kiss him, to reach out, to slide my hand into his jeans and touch his thigh. Not because I want to, but because I know it'll make him happy.

And this is why I hate this shit.

'Then what is it about? Because, as I recall, you *used* to kiss me plenty. You *used* to want to hold my hand. Hell, *you're* the one who gave me a blowjob I didn't even ask for.'

'I did that because you were doing *exactly* what you're doing now, not because I *wanted* to.'

'Yeah? And what am I doing now?'

'Having a fucking tantrum!'

'Jesus, are you serious?' He slams his hand against the console hard enough for me to jump. 'Are you fucking serious! God damn it, Jess, what do you *want* from me? I'm not trying to make you do anything but *talk* to me right now!' He sits up straight to make the point. 'And even if you think

I'm having a tantrum, how else am I supposed to fucking react when my girlfriend doesn't want to touch me and won't even be honest about *why*? Is it that I'm not your type? Is it that I'm not good enough for you? Coz, I gotta tell ya, I'm starting to feel like a social experiment over here.'

'God, Jace. Look, I don't know how to explain the way I feel about you, okay? I told you the truth. I love you, but I'm just not attracted to you that way. I've tried to tell you I'm not that interested in sex, but you never let it go. You always have to push. I can't do it anymore. You obviously need things I just can't give you.'

Jace stares at me, crestfallen.

'There's something wrong with you, Jess.'

I feel the rush of a pit opening up in my stomach, still real, still a possibility.

I was right.

I *am* broken.

'Like, this is fucked up. This is – I've done nothing but support you and do things the way you want them done, and you've basically been leading me on for months. Are you seeing someone else? Is that what this is about?'

I shake my head. 'No, Jace. That's the last thing I wanna do. I know this sounds stupid, but it's not you, okay? It's me. I just don't know how to feel that way. I've tried. I've tried so hard.'

The admission of guilt – right or wrong – seems to calm Jace down a bit. He sighs and turns his gaze towards the stagnant harbour.

'Why did you sleep with me on New Year's Eve, then? I asked you *three* times on the way back to Cole's place, and you said "yes" every fucking time.'

'It's not as simple as that. You were my first. Before, I *thought* I wanted to, but after... I'm pretty sure I'm just not into it. Like, at all. I thought it was just nerves, but it didn't go away.'

He scoffs. 'I mean, if that's the case, why couldn't you just be honest about it?'

I knew he'd blame me.

I can't say I disagree.

It's meaningless, though.

A tactic.

Pouting isn't working for him, so I guess he needs another way to feel like he's in control.

I get it.

Still hurts like hell.

'I was, Jace. I kept telling you I didn't want to, but you just wouldn't listen.'

'No, Jess. You kept giving me excuses. There's a difference.'

We lapse into silence again, but it's short-lived.



'I dunno, Jess. Maybe we could've worked something out. But not now. Not like this,' he says.

He's transforming things, making it all my fault, making it all about him.

And why shouldn't he?

In the end, he's right: I'm the one who's been stringing him along.

I don't know what to say.

Should I argue with him?

Should I let it go?

Why fight for something I know can't work anyway?

'Y'know, I was thinking the other day that you and Audrey have never properly met. Was gonna invite you 'round for dinner. But I think this would've been an awkward conversation to have at the table.'

Despite myself, I smile at him.

He scoffs again, but I see his lips try to smile back. 'Yeah. No offence, but I think I'll pass.'

'Jace, don't you think it's *possible* that some friendships can be just as intimate as romantic relationships?'

He shrugs. 'Maybe. But I dunno, a friendship is still just a friendship. Unless it's, like, friends with benefits,' he says. I suppose he has a point. I suppose that's why his lips tighten again before he goes on. 'Are you saying you want to break up because you'd rather be friends? Is that where all this is coming from?'

I wanna say, "I was hoping we could find a way to work around it", but all that comes out is, 'I guess so.'

At least I'm not in denial.

Jace leans back in his chair, lost, no doubt, in the water's mesmerising shimmer. I don't know what else to say, so I just say I'm sorry – sorry for being broken, sorry for not being normal - and we sit still for a few minutes, bathing in the night's darkness.

'Maybe – maybe you're just a late bloomer, or something?' he calmly suggests after a while, the fight mostly pulled from him.

'Maybe. All I know is that I've tried, and nothing's worked. It's like I'm missing out on something special. Like everyone knows something I don't.'

Another sigh. 'Look,' begins Jace, matter-of-factly. 'We can stay friends, I guess. If that's what you want. If this is what you say it is, then I'd be a real asshole to just burn everything down.'

Wow, compromise. I'm impressed.

‘Plus, I wanna keep working on the magazine,’ he continues. ‘And I think the group we’ve got going on with Sam, Han, and Mikey is pretty good. But I won’t lie, this is some hard shit to take in. I wanna believe you when you say it’s you, but I just can’t help thinking it’s gotta be me. Coz who doesn’t want sex, right? I guess it’s like realising you’re gay, or something, but... yeah. I just don’t know if I can do “us” again.’

‘No, that’s kinda fair, I suppose.’ I didn’t even consider what breaking up with Jace might do to the group, even though I’m sure none of them would side with me. I shouldn’t, but I suddenly feel like a very, very bad person.

Suddenly, Jace laughs. ‘Why’s it always the girl who wants to stay friends?’

It’s my turn to shrug. ‘Because we’re nicer?’

‘Yeah, sure, I buy that.’ He rolls his eyes.

‘Y’know, we haven’t even finished school yet,’ I say. ‘I’m not saying we weren’t serious or anything, just that there’s plenty of time for things to change.’

‘Yeah. Sure.’ He throws me one more, weak smile before he hits the ignition button and the car jumps to life. ‘Well, I guess I should take you home, then.’

He slips the car into reverse, but I can’t help myself. I wrap my hand over his.

‘Jace. Are you okay?’

‘I’ll be fine,’ he says, his face somehow narrowing as he looks down at me. ‘It’s *you* I’m worried about, Caviar.’

Jace and I work out our niche relatively quickly, and even though no joint or formal explanations are proffered to the group, I think everyone catches on to the new reality pretty quick. Questions are few, commiserations brief, and then we all just sort of move on... mostly.

In any case, the second issue of *New Wave* takes centre stage in all our mounting schoolwork, so when I make the proposal for the theme, Hannah can do nothing but agree: “Perseverance”, or *petit à petit l’oiseau fait son nid*, as *Monsieur Dubois* puts it when we clear it with him.

I try to take it all in stride and focus on catching up in *all* my topics, regardless of whether they’d sound good on an L-E-P application or not. If my experiences over the past year have taught me anything, it’s that things can change faster than you can anticipate, so, I get stuck into it.

In geography, I bemuse Mister Patel with my newfound love for cartographic detail. In English, I prepare for my next poetry slam by committing to memory the differences between iambic pentameter and dactylic hexameter, though Homer can definitely shove it for introducing the latter to the world.

In French, I commit to speaking the language as often as possible while in class, which is harder than you'd think because of the way negation works in French. Still, every time *Monsieur Dubois* gives me a confused look, I know I'm trying.

I follow all this up with extra study sessions in my free periods for maths and business studies. Last year, I wouldn't have even bothered, but this year, I invite some STEM-inclined buddies to help Sam and me out with our shortcomings. In return, we help them with English and French and get them more involved in the magazine. As the clincher, Sam also agrees to loudly compliment their personalities in front of the other girls in her drama class, as you do.

The post breakup tension just doesn't have time to last, and the group itself is back to its regular rotation between the bleachers and the dorms in no time, the only real difference being the switch to the start of football season for Mikey. Even Hannah, who was pretty cold towards me for a couple of days, brightens back up and seems to let it all go.

By the one-month mark, half the people I know have heard about the breakup, and at least half of *them* decide they don't really care, which suits me just fine. I mean, I get a few whispered condolences – mostly from the poetry slam crowd – and a few jeers – mostly from Milly's little gang – but I'm otherwise treated the same. I get to focus on my ATAR, the L-E-P, and the magazine, and the rest of the world gets to move on without it morphing into the social calamity I was expecting.

Win, win.

Really, the only sticking point is Sam, who ends up spending a lot of her time trying to get me to come with her to parties, most of which aren't hosted by people I know, and more of which Mikey doesn't seem to even know about. Her favourite trick to get me to go is to bring up my Facebook profile, drawing particular attention to the "sad" state of my "single" relationship status. It's annoying enough when we're alone, but on one particularly gloomy afternoon and to a scene of boys covering themselves in mud while trying to kick a ball between some posts, she decides to invite Hannah into the fray.

'See, look. S-I-N-G-L-E,' she says, flashing us her phone. 'And for some reason, I can't get her to go out. Horny guys everywhere and she's happy sitting at home with her cat every weekend. How do you even explain that, huh?'

Hannah's behind me on the bleachers, patiently trying to braid my hair after pointing out how tangled the rain made it that morning, so I don't see her reaction to Sam's phone, but I know she pauses to look. 'To be fair, so am I,' she says. 'Although, yes, it's sad you're not gonna be my sister-in-law.'

'Sister-in-law? Han, I'm barely seventeen.'

'I didn't mean literally,' says Hannah, letting go of the strand she was gripping and starting again.

'Yeah, who needs marriage, am I right?' says Sam, laughing. 'Listen to this chick! Do you even real life, Han? And would you stop braiding her hair like we're in preschool? Fuck.'

Hannah complies, and I feel her let go of my hair. This is what Sam's been like lately, spinning on a dime mid-sentence. Mostly, we just ignore it. I've been putting it down to the pressure of trying to choreograph this year's Wakakirri dances, but I honestly can't recall seeing her watch any music videos this year. Either way, she's almost always full of energy, except when she's not, and then she's just depressed.

'Sorry. It's true, though, Jess. I mean, if you're not interested in other guys, why don't you try patching things up with Jace?' suggests Hannah.

'Is this seriously what you wanna talk about right now?'

'Hey, I'm just saying it'd be nice to know you'll still be around after school finishes. Better than hanging around with Sam, anyway.'

'Hey, fuck you bitch, I'm your world and you know it,' replies Sam, jovial again. 'Besides, I agree with Jess. Men are fucking lame, it's hot lesbian sex or it's nuthin'!'

'And how does Mikey feel about that?' I ask.

'Pfft, he'd probably just be like, "that's so hot, babe" –' she deepens her voice and follows this up with a gurgling sound I *assume* is Mikey orgasming as she says this – "'save some for me, ay?'"

I can't help it; I laugh with them. It's a reflex so natural I barely even notice it anymore. It's like being polite.

'Why can I picture that so clearly?' I ask.

'Coz Jace'd be the same?' offers Sam.

'Nah, Jace'd probably wanna film it for Cannes.'

'Jess, please. I don't need to know what sick games you two played that one time you were actually, y'know, *together*,' says Hannah, struggling not to giggle. 'Anyway, take it from someone who doesn't bother with guys anymore: you can be perfectly happy with an open mind and a good vibrator.'

Sam laughs and winks at me, which makes me tense, but nobody says anything else. In fact, we collectively turn back towards the oval while Hannah surreptitiously continues to braid my hair, adding some of her own handcrafted bands, each somehow carrying more clout than my old plastic hairclip despite being made of practically the same thing.

'Which one's Mikey? I can't tell,' I ask after a while.

'Um, that one,' says Sam, pointing ambiguously at someone near the middle of the field. 'I think. They all look the same when they're covered in mud.'

'I know, right?'

'Wave. See who waves back,' suggests Hannah, snapping a final band into place and letting me lean forward. I reach back to inspect, and I have to say, she's managed to get it pretty tight. It's gonna be a nightmare to get it out in the shower tonight, but whatever.

Sam waits until someone scores a goal, and the players start strolling back to their positions. She waves in the general direction I assume she thinks Mikey's in, but nobody even acknowledges her, let alone returns the wave.

'Wait, what's the day today?' she asks, still waving.

'Tuesday,' replies Hannah.

'Oh, shit.'

'What?'

'Mikey's not playing today.'

I look at Sam's hand, still in the air, still waving. Hannah and I share a concerned glance.

'Great. Now we look like pervs,' she says.

'Put it down, Sam,' I add, grabbing Sam's sleeve.

Sam doesn't seem to notice. Instead, she just slowly turns to look at us both.

'Han, when do you and Jace turn eighteen again?' she asks.

'Uh, July twenty-nine. Why?'

Sam's eyes widen. 'What day is that?'

'I think it's a Saturday. Why?'

'Guys, you know what we absolutely *have* to do?'

'What?' Hannah and I ask in unison.

'We *need* to go clubbing for Han's eighteenth!'

'Oh my God... *yes*,' agrees Hannah, staring at me. 'It's the perfect excuse!'

'What, you mean you haven't been to a single one of Sam's mysterious parties this year?' I ask, perhaps with a bit too much snark.

'Been too busy with the magazine,' explains Hannah, without a hint of irony. 'But we'll have just submitted the proofs for the second issue, so... we'll have time. And if Jace comes along, it'd be a great opportunity for you two to reconnect!'

'Yeah, hey, or maybe get some closure and properly move on?' says Sam.

'Yeah, or that. Whataya think, Jess?' pushes Hannah.

‘Well. I mean, I guess it’s great for you guys and Mikey, but what about me? I’m not eighteen ‘til next year. How would I even get in?’

Sam and Hannah both go silent for a moment, then Sam snaps her fingers. ‘We can go to Club Nine!’ she says.

‘Cole?’ asks Hannah.

‘He won’t care. He knows you’re close enough.’

‘Okay, and what about floor checks?’ I ask, apparently searching for an out.

Sam pauses again, then smiles deviously. ‘I’ll take care of it.’

By the tone of her voice, I know what she’s getting at.

‘Oh, no, no, no. I’m not doing that, Sam.’

‘Aw, *come on!* You don’t have to come *with* me. I’ll just need a decent photo.’

‘What the hell are you guys talking about?’ interjects Hannah.

I sigh. Am I really going to agree to this? Do I even *want* to go clubbing?

Didn’t the poor little fern suffer enough?

‘Sam’s got a fake ID,’ I explain.

‘What? Show me!’ demands Hannah, suddenly animated.

Sam produces it almost at once, and Hannah’s grin says exactly what she thinks of it. ‘So cool,’ she says.

‘Everyone else is covered,’ reasons Sam. ‘I’ll just need to get one for Jess and we’re all set. Easy. We can all catch Ubers. Everyone can get drunk, Mikey and I can sneak off into the bathroom, and you can have a great night making up with Jace or dancing rings around him with other guys, coz, y’know, you’re a freak. It’ll be great! Trust me.’

Trust her, she says.

If this had happened last year, or if Hannah wasn’t so inexplicably keen, I would’ve just said “no”, but these are my friends, and I don’t wanna lose them. Not being blown up on social media after Jace and I split was great, but I don’t wanna go *all* the back to how it was before. Especially not now. The night I smoked pot and threw up on a fern was, honestly, one of the best nights of my life.

‘Fine,’ I say, quietly.

‘YAAAS! WE ARE *ON*, LADIES!’ shouts Sam. ‘Don’t worry, girls, leave everything to me! I’ll set it all up, and make sure Jess and I can get in without getting *anyone* into trouble.’

Hannah raises her hands. ‘You have my complete and utter faith,’ she says.

‘Are you guys sure about this?’ I ask. Just in case.

Oddly enough, it's Hannah who turns to me first. 'It'll be fun, Jess,' she says. 'I only get to turn eighteen once, y'know, and besides, it's like, five weeks away. It's not gonna hurt your grades, and we'll have the second issue done by then.'

'Yeah, but –' yeah okay, I'm reaching now, sue me, '– what do I wear?'

Sam puts a hand on each of my shoulders and looks directly at me. She does it with such intensity, I feel like she's trying to hypnotise me. 'What size are you?' she asks.

'Uh, depends? I'd have to double check.'

'*Do it,*' demands Sam, leaning closer, 'and message me. I've got the *perfect* dress for you. It'll go great with those earrings.' She lets me go and grins broadly at the two of us.

'This is gonna be so fucking lit!' she says.

Actually, we get through the second big poetry slam in no time at all, and we even polish off the proofs for the magazine by the first week of July.

The five of us work over the break like a well-oiled machine, with Jace and I even able to put in some solid evenings drawing up artwork and layouts for some of the submissions together. Everything goes so smoothly between us that it feels almost exactly like it did before New Year's Eve: two close, intimate friends, no pressure and no expectations, just spending time together, enjoying one another's company. I even catch myself wondering – ironically as we discuss the lettering of the theme word "Perseverance" – if we did the right thing by breaking up.

We haven't even argued since that night in the car.

Why can I do *everything* with him, everything except *that*?

It's enough to send my mind reeling into new territory in the seemingly vain search for answers, territory that I've dared not to tread since before I was a teenager.

It happens late one night. I'm sitting up with Audrey – who's come off a double shift – and I'm picking at some Chinese takeaway when a question materialises in my consciousness: a question I've wanted to ask her for a long, long time.

As I mull over the particulars of it, a snow pea becomes my victim, and the chopsticks my weapon. It practically splinters within my violent embrace. Its death is meaningless, as I'm immediately distracted by the smell of the food itself, a seemingly perfect companion to the kitchen's seventies vibes: the mingling of *pastiche* colours and sweet and sour aromas. It was nice of Audrey to pay for the food, though, even if it was more out of pity than anything else. Maybe that's why the question rises, unbidden, after just a *souçon* of probing.

She finishes a mouthful of noodles and wipes her chin with a napkin before setting her own chopsticks down and staring at me.

'Come on, Jess. Talk to me. Talking about it is the best thing you can do.'

I've already told her about my breakup with Jace, and apologised – surprisingly – for never introducing her to him properly. Perhaps I should've have expected anything less.

I sigh. 'Yeah... I know.'

'Please. We promised each other we would.'

'Uh huh.'

'I can retroactively disapprove of him, if it helps.'

'Nah, that's okay.'



I know she's staring at me, even if I'm not looking at her. I know her face is etched with concern. But I'm too busy wrapping noodles around broccoli.

I haven't cried, y'know. Not once. Even when I told Audrey about it, the worst compunction I had was to bury my head in a pillow and sleep for a few days.

I mean, working up the courage to end the relationship wasn't easy, but shouldn't I be sadder now that's it over? And shouldn't we hate each other for it?

Isn't that normal?

*Am I normal?*

What the fuck *is* normal, anyway?

I drop my chopsticks.

'Audrey, how did you know when you were attracted to Kimmie?'

Wow. I did it. Just like that. That's the first time I've said that name in years.

Doesn't sting as much as it used to.

Guess I'm getting better at this.

Audrey almost drops her glass of water.

'Pardon me?'

'Kimmie. How'd you *know*? And how'd you know dad wasn't right for you in... that way?'

I know I'm pushing some boundaries here. A few months ago, if I'd said any of this, I would've had to stop myself from gagging. But right now, all I feel is a genuine curiosity. The anger, the disgust I'd always harboured against Audrey for leaving dad – for leaving me – is, for a moment, at least, forgotten.

This is something I *need* to know.

'Jess, are you, um, are you sure you want to talk about this? Because I'm not sure I want to,' says Audrey, still trying to set the glass down neatly.

'Please. I'm not trying to pick a fight. I just – I *really* need to know.' A rush of heat presses against my face and I look at her – finally – and feel something connect that wasn't there before.

'Um. Sure. Okay,' she says, sighing and leaning back in her chair. 'Um, well. I guess I *didn't* know, at first. I met Kim at work when I was at the supermarket. You might not remember, but she actually came around as a friend a few times. She actually played with you.' Audrey offers up a brief smile. 'Anyway, she moved on from the job pretty quick, but we stayed in touch. She was just... someone I wanted to be around. I never thought it would go beyond that.'

'So, what happened?'

'Well, as I'm sure you know, your dad and I started fighting a lot. It was about money, at first. He wanted me to stop working, so I could look after you when he was on swing, and we

wouldn't need to pay for childcare. But I didn't want to rely on him financially like that. That led to us fighting over you and your future. And then we started fighting over really stupid things, like friends and –' she clears her throat '– sex. Little problems becoming big problems, y'know? Sometimes, I'd go to Kim's. Sometimes, he'd go be the one to leave.'

'Yeah, I think I remember that.'

'Yeah, well, I dunno when things changed between Kim and me. But one night your father accused me of cheating on him. He was so sure. So *angry*.' Audrey chuckles to herself, a bittersweet sound. 'He thought Kim was my *alibi*. Up 'til that night, she'd just been a shoulder to cry on. Mostly.'

'So, is that when you realised you were attracted to...?'

'Women? No. It was before that. I knew before that. I just didn't understand how, or why.' She looks at me, her gaze more focussed than ever before. 'I *never* cheated on your father, Jess, not until *he* pushed me away. But I knew something wasn't working *way* before I did *anything* with Kim.'

'But then, *how* did you know? What happened that made you go, "I can't be with this man – a man – anymore"?''

Audrey frowns. 'Realising I was gay wasn't some big, sudden epiphany, Jess. I know that's how people like to *think* it happens, but it's not like that at *all*. At least, it wasn't for me. It was more like... solving a puzzle I'd been working on for years. When the pieces finally all fit, I saw the picture whole and I *understood* it, but I always *knew* it was supposed to look like that. I mean, how else would I go about putting it all together in the first place? I know I made a lot of mistakes. I know I did wrong by you. But Kimmie was the one I had to be with then, and I can't – I *won't* – apologise for who I am.'

'Does that still go for her, too? Even after she broke up with you?'

'Absolutely. I didn't go quietly, either. I accused her of leading me on, of breaking up my marriage, and whatever else. But that was just me trying to cover up my own guilty conscience. In the end, she had her own puzzles to finish, just like the rest of us.'

'Where do you think she is now?'

Audrey shrugs. 'Probably taking core samples in the arctic circle somewhere.'

'Why didn't you go with her?'

Audrey frowns at me deeper this time, clearly disappointed. 'Come on, Jess. You know how I am in the cold. Plus, I know Sydney's a stretch, but if I was living in Greenland right now, what chance would I ever have of seeing you again?'

I smile. I wasn't expecting that.

'So cringey,' I say.

She smiles back, a fleeting gesture that we both revel in.

'Jess, be honest with me. Are you asking me this because you think it might be related to why you and Jace broke up?' she asks.

I think about it.

I don't answer.

'Whatever he said to you, Jess – *fuck* him, okay? The only person you owe anything to by default is *you*.'

'It's... not really that simple. But thank you. I'll remember that.' I push my plate away. 'I'm not really hungry. Think I'll go to bed, if that's okay?'

Audrey nods. 'Of course,' she says.

I take my plate to the sink and scrape the leftovers into the bin before slowly making my way upstairs.

A minute later, I hear the sound of the television coming to life.

It promises anyone who'll listen a more potent sex life if they buy a two-hundred-dollar bottle of erotic perfume.

What a time to be alive.

I don't buy a perfume.

I do something much more drastic, and make a medical appointment.

I use my old Medicare card – the one with dad's name on it – and find a bulk-billing clinic on the other side of town so I don't have to use any trust money and Audrey never needs to know.

The receptionist doesn't even ask why I'm alone. She takes one quick look, flicks through the forms I've signed and nods, and tells me to take a seat. I slip David J. Roe and his daughter, Jessica L. Roe, back into the void and sigh, resigning myself to doing what most people do in waiting rooms: trying to forget my own problems by guessing everyone else's.

Ugh.

I can't believe I'm doing this.

But then again, I spent twenty minutes crying in the shower after having an orgasm, so...

I wonder if anyone's trying to guess what my problem is. There's an older woman looking over at me now, studying me. If I stood up and told her what was wrong with me, would she tell me I'm just a girl, that I just need to wait, that I'm still growing up?

I suppose it'd be true, but that doesn't mean it explains anything.

After all, isn't this when I'm supposed to be enjoying sex the most?

Luckily, I don't have to think about it for much longer, because a slim woman with long black hair appears at the receptionist's desk and calls my name. I feel anxious – heavy – like the weight of

being here is too much, like it isn't fair, but I say hello anyway, because inquiring minds just gotta know, right?

She introduces herself as Doctor Mae and leads me into a semi-sterile room designed to look a little friendlier than a typical consulting room. There are paintings on the walls, a thicker curtain around the bed, a warmly coloured bookshelf, and a pot plant by the door. Doctor Mae offers me a seat and I wait while she types a few words into the computer. When she's ready, she looks at me, knots her fingers together and gives me the most casually welcoming smile I've ever seen.

'So, Jessica, how can I help you?' she asks, and I realise I'm not sure what to say.

'Well,' I begin, cautiously. 'I, uh, I kinda wanted to talk to someone about, um... sex.'

Doctor Mae nods and quickly types a few more words into the computer. 'Sure,' she replies. 'What's on your mind?'

I must stutter... something... because the next thing I know, Doctor Mae tells me to take my time.

It's okay, Jess. Breathe. You've spent almost a year living with your estranged mother, going to a new school, making a new set of friends, and dealing with your first real relationship. You know what a challenge is, and this? This is nothing.

'I have a problem with it. With having sex, I mean.'

'Okay. Can you elaborate for me? Is it a physical problem? Do you experience pain when you have sex?'

'Um, well, no, not really. I've only had it once, and yeah, it was a little uncomfortable, but that's not what I mean. I just didn't really... enjoy it? I dunno.'

Doctor Mae raises an eyebrow. 'Well, it's not unusual to have average or even disappointing sexual encounters, especially if both parties are relatively new to the experience. But that doesn't mean there's necessarily a problem.'

'Oh, yeah, no, I get that. It's more than that, though. I've been trying to... get aroused... y'see, since – since I had sex, and I just can't seem to... y'know... *do* it.'

She stares at me, choosing her words carefully. 'Do you mean you can't achieve orgasm, or you can't get aroused at all, or –?'

'No, I've had an – an orgasm.' I clear my throat. It's weird how hard it is to say these things out loud. What am I, eight? 'And I can *sort of* get aroused, but it feels more like... doing homework... than anything else. If that makes sense?'

'I see. And this is a problem for you, I'm guessing?'

'Well, yeah. My boyfriend and I broke up because I just couldn't do it.'

Doctor Mae swivels in her chair, but cocks her head to one side, like she's reading a script off the screen. 'Alright. I need to ask you some very personal questions now, okay?' she says. 'Anything you tell me is completely confidential, of course. Do you consent to me asking you these questions?'

Jeez, if the rest of the interrogation involves more sensitive questions than what I've already answered, I shudder to think what they might include...

'Um. Sure.'

'Have you tried self-stimulation?'

'Yes.'

'And how did that go?'

'I mean, it felt good, but... I dunno, it just didn't *do* anything for me.'

'Okay. I know you're still young, but have you tried any aphrodisiacs?'

'Whataya mean?'

'Things like hormone medications, over-the-counter supplements, or natural alternatives. I hear ginseng is popular. I've also spoken to a few girls your age who've taken flibanserin. That's like Viagra for women.'

'God no.'

'Good,' says Doctor Mae, smiling. 'Things like that can cause problems for girls still going through puberty. Do you watch porn or use aids when you masturbate, by the way?'

'No. Well, I mean, yeah. I used a vibrator once. And I've tried watching porn, but I don't find it arousing. I just end up laughing at it.'

'Perfectly understandable. So, was this boyfriend you mentioned your only sexual partner?'

'Yes.'

At this point, Doctor Mae pauses and leans back in her chair. 'Are you having any issues menstruating? Pain, irregularity, things like that?' She asks, her pace slowing.

'No,' I reply.

'Have you experienced any discomfort urinating? Or discomfort in general, perhaps, like a persistent cold or fatigue?'

'Not that I can think of.'

'Good, good. Are you taking any other drugs? Prescription? Alcohol? Illicit? Don't worry, you won't get in trouble.'

'I, uh... smoked weed last year. That made me sick. And... I have a drink every now and again.'

'Regularly?'

'Oh, not even. Maybe a few at a party every couple of months.'

'Hm. Well, judging by your answers so far, I don't think we're looking at a physical problem,' explains Doctor Mae after a brief pause. She stops to type, and then to read from the hidden computer screen. When she finishes, she rests her head in her palm and taps her chin. I guess the polite questions are spent, now.

'Would you describe yourself as heterosexual? Are you attracted to boys, I mean?'

'Uh, well, I haven't really thought about it. But yes, I guess so.'

Is that true, though?

How would I know?

What *does* my puzzle even look like?

'Can you think of anything that might be causing you emotional distress right now?'

'What, like, depression?'

'Maybe. Do you think you're depressed?'

'No. Not depressed. Stressed, but not depressed.'

'Why do you feel stressed?'

I sigh. I can't help but feel like I'm only in one half of the room right now: the half with the paintings, and the bookshelf, and the plant. I know there's a pathologist smoking in the shadows by the gurney, waiting for the psychologist to slip up, waiting for the biological proof of error.

Still, I s'pose I'll never get anywhere if I don't face this shit down.

'Well, my dad passed away last year, and I had to move in with my... mother.'

'You hesitated there. You don't get along with your mum?'

'Not really. I mean, we've been doing better this year, but things can still get tense. I just prefer to call her Audrey.'

'Is that why you're here alone today?'

I pause. 'Yeah, but not because we fought recently or anything. We just prefer to keep out of each other's way when it matters.'

'Uh-huh. So, what about friends? School? Work?'

'Yeah, I started last year at Stanmore High and had to make new friends. I was never really popular back home in Perth, but I managed to hit it off with a bunch of people here. It's been like a whole new world for me.'

'Stanmore High's a Catholic boarding school, right?'

'Yeah.'

'My nephew graduated from there a few years back. I hear it can be pretty competitive.'

I almost laugh. 'That's an understatement,' I say.

'There must be a lot of pressure to do well, then. Does this problem you're having now make things harder?'

'Lately, yeah. I've been doing a lot of extracurricular stuff to make sure I get good grades, y'know? But staying focused with this thing going on is... tricky.'

Doctor Mae lets a silence hang in the air for a few seconds, and I get the impression she's sizing me up for something. 'I help girls your age all the time, Jessica, but they're generally not as open as you're being, so I'm going to ask you something you may find distasteful, okay?'

'Uh, okay. If it helps.'

'How was your relationship with your father before he passed?'

'Really good. Most of the time. Why?'

'Can you tell me about it?'

'Well, sure. He was a writer. Well, I mean, he *wanted* to be a writer, but he was actually an engineer. I don't think he ever got anything published.'

'How did he make ends meet?'

'He worked FIFO for a mining company. Y'know, going to and from site.'

'Was that hard on the family?'

'Oh, yeah. Audrey told me they used to fight over it. She went back to work full-time at a supermarket pretty soon after I was born, I think, but I guess he didn't like that...'

Which is true... now that I'm thinking about it...

'Which was stupid, because he made decent money anyway,' I hear myself say. 'I mean, he was on enough to put extra money into his super every month. For me...'

I stop.

Am I explaining or defending, here?

Why haven't I thought about this before?

Like, *really* thought about it?

I knew – even when I was a kid and still angry at Audrey for leaving – that their divorce wasn't one-sided. I knew that dad wasn't perfect, and I knew the poems he used to make me write for Audrey were to make her feel sad. I *knew* that.

So why am I just now realising what a horrible thing that was for him to do?

Yeah, he stayed in touch with her for my sake, but I don't ever remember him having another girlfriend after Audrey left. And he never stopped talking her down, either...

Could dad... could he have done it on purpose?

Could he have been so vindictive, so unstable as to throw his life away, just to get back at his estranged wife? Nobody ever told me the details of the car accident that took him from me. I never even thought to ask...

Doctor Mae gives me a prompt. 'What was he like? As a person?'

'He – he was kind. He was outgoing. He liked hiking, and taking photos, and writing things down. He was sorta traditional, too. Maybe that's why he had trouble relying on Audrey? I dunno. I remember when they were still together, he used to take us to church, but he had a real dry sense of humour about it. Like, he'd make jokes about how Jesus only taught the world two decent things: how to love thy neighbour and how to make a timber credenza.'

Doctor Mae and I share a smile, and then the interrogation continues. 'Are you religious, too?' she asks.

I shake my head. 'Not really, no.'

'But you chose to go to a Catholic school?'

'Yeah, because it was dad's school. He grew up over here. It was – it was his school,' I reply, tersely.

'Right. So, it didn't bother him that you weren't religious?'

'Well... he never said anything if it did. After he and Audrey split, he let me make up my own mind about God.'

'Sorry, did your parents split up recently?'

'Seven years ago.'

'Ah, right. So, you would've been about nine or ten. Why did you stay with your father, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Audrey's the one who left, and I was old enough to know that. Part of me wanted to go with her, but I think it sort of suited us all for me to stay with dad.'

'Okay. Do you know *why* Audrey left?'

'Yeah. She left for another woman.'

Doctor Mae's expression shifts. Concerned? Curious? A mix of both, maybe? 'That must've hurt you and your dad,' she says.

I shrug. 'It did. I don't blame myself for it, if that's what you're getting at.'

Doctor Mae grins. 'Oh, I'm sure a girl like you probably has some very grounded perspectives about this sort of thing. Do you think it was hard for your father, though, if he did, as you say, lean towards a more traditional worldview?'



'Maybe. Sometimes. We still got along great. I mean, was it awkward getting him to buy my tampons for the first time? Sure. But dad always did his best. He looked after me, he took me camping, he encouraged me to learn, encouraged me to write –'

'Ah, so, you're an aspiring writer like your father was?' I watch my gaze fall to the floor, my eyes suddenly unable to meet Doctor Mae's.

'Yeah, I guess so. Is that a problem, though? I mean, my parents split up years ago, that's not why I'm here.'

Doctor Mae raps her fingers against her desk and stares at me, her expression unreadable. She takes a *really* long time to say anything, and when she does, I really wish she hadn't.

'I'm so sorry to have to ask this, Jessica, but did your father ever... touch you in a way... or... do anything with you... that made you feel... uncomfortable?'

What?

'What?'

'Did he ever put his hands on you or... ask you to do anything that maybe... upset you or... made you feel unsafe?'

'No! No way. Never. Why would you even ask me that?'

'I'm sorry, I have to ask. I have to be sure –'

'I mean, he could be an asshole sometimes. And he could be controlling. Even manipulative. But he never did *anything* like that. Ever.'

Doctor Mae offers a remorseful nod. 'I'm sorry, Jessica. I never meant to imply anything, but I still had to ask. Look, it's not unusual for stress to suppress a person's sex drive. If your relationship with your father was mostly positive, then it's possible his passing away and everything you've had to deal with since then has simply made it difficult for you to express your sexuality.'

Maybe it's because she just accused my father of molesting me, or maybe it's because I'm done being told the same thing over and over again, but either way, I object. 'No. No, that's not it.' I say, shaking my head. 'You're not listening. It's not that I don't have a sex drive. It's that I don't – I *can't* – see people that way. I'm just not *attracted* to anyone, and that makes me *feel* like I'm broken.'

'You weren't ever attracted to your boyfriend?'

'I *thought* I was. And yeah, there were times when I thought "oh, he's so cute, oh, he's so sexy, I wanna touch him, I wanna go out with him", but when I think about Jace now, all I can think about is this pressure to have sex, to *be* sexual, and I just... I can't be *bothered*. I'm not *attracted* to him that way. We're friends, now, though, and I feel like I'm falling for him all over again. It's so confusing.'

Doctor Mae narrows her gaze. 'Jessica, have you ever done anything with anyone else?'

'What do you mean?'

'What do the kids say these days? Um, did you ever make out or fool around with someone before --?'

'Jace.'

'-- Jace?'

'Well, um --' I wrack my brain, trawl my memories, but only one event comes to mind... and even I know that doesn't count '-- I kissed a boy on the cheek for a play when I was in primary school.'

'Not quite what I'm looking for. Have you ever passed notes in class, or played Spin the Bottle at a party? That sort of thing?'

Huh? Who the fuck plays Spin the Bottle these days? I mean, 'No.'

'Ever taken a provocative selfie?'

'Yes! Uh, once.'

For Jace.

I'll leave that bit out...

'Have you ever just sat around with friends talking about sex or boys or masturbation or anything like that?'

'Not really. I... wasn't really interested when I was younger and now -- I mean, I *do*, but only because, well, that's what I *have* to do to be popular.'

A wave of shame rushes over me, even before the last word leaves my mouth.

It's Doctor Mae's turn to sigh and sigh she does. Not impatiently. More like pensively, if there's a difference. 'Okay,' she begins. 'You might be a late bloomer, but if you've had sexual impulses in the past, that might not be the case. You're only seventeen, though, so I think anything could be possible at this stage. It's *possible* you're asexual, but as to the cause of that, I can't be sure.'

'What's asexual?'

'Oh, it simply means that you don't experience sexual attraction,' she explains. 'This is causing you distress, though, so it's a problem. At a minimum, just to rule out things like hormone imbalances or STDs, I'll order some bloodwork done, and I'd also like to give you a referral to see a psychologist.'

'A psychologist?'

Doctor Mae somehow resumes the precise position that she did at the beginning of our conversation, leaning forward in her chair, hands knotted tightly, a welcoming smile once again

plastered across her face. 'Regardless of how the blood results come back, Jessica, I think your father's death and all these subsequent stressors you've been describing may have impacted your sexual health, and I think it would help for you to talk to someone.'

'But I don't *want* to see a psychologist,' I say, hotly. 'I only feel like I'm broken because everyone keeps telling me I'm missing out on something. I wouldn't even be here if my ex didn't freak out about it.'

'That's fine, Jessica, but I'll still write a referral. It'll be good for six months, and if you change your mind, it'll be there. I'll make sure it's at a bulk billed practice, so you can use your Medicare card, okay? There might be a gap, though, so you might still have to pay some money. In the meantime, if there's anyone in your life you feel like you can talk to about this, I suggest you do. It may help.'

I don't say anything, so Doctor Mae stands up and turns her back on me, reaching into one of the medical cabinets nestled up against her desk.

'You're not scared of needles, are you?' she says, already preparing one.

You need to speak, Jess.

'As long as you don't pierce my ears with it,' I mutter.

Doctor Mae moves her chair beside mine, instructs me to roll up my sleeve, and begins swabbing my arm.

'Hold still,' she says, and I feel the jab almost immediately.

'So, is asexuality like, a disease or something, coz I thought you said it probably wasn't physical?' I ask, distracting myself as my blood starts pooling in the syringe.

'It's not *necessarily* physical,' she says. 'Some people consider it a sexuality in and of itself, but, in my opinion, a healthy sex life is something most people want, and something I think everyone *should* have. Pleasure is, after all, essential to a happy life. Trust me, I've been working here a long time, and every single person I've met who didn't want or couldn't have sex were suffering from some kind of trouble, or they were too young to know what sex is in the first place.'

After a moment or two, I feel the needle leave, and Doctor Mae presses down on my arm. 'Done,' she says.

I roll my sleeve back down and fight against the dull ache already clawing its way towards my hand while she does whatever it is she needs to do to store my blood.

'So, are you saying it's an emotional block, or something?'

'Very possibly. What you need to ask yourself, and something I suggest you bring up with the psychologist, is do you really think it's something you want to live with?'

'I... guess I don't know. I just don't like feeling broken,' I say.

'Jessica, even if this is all the result of a hormone imbalance, you're *not* broken,' says Doctor Mae, forcefully. She returns to her trusty computer and begins typing away. 'Yes, sometimes our bodies do things we don't like,' she continues. 'But that's normal. That's *everybody*. I know it feels like you're missing out on something important right now, but trust me, we'll get to the bottom of it.' She hits a button, and the printer whirs into existence, spitting out three full pages before she can even finish smiling at me again. She staples the pages together and hands them to me. 'Reception will be in touch once we get your results, but take the referral anyway, just in case you change your mind. Please.'

I take the forms.

I take the referral.

I thank Doctor Mae, of course, for the consultation, but as I get up and leave the room, I can't help feeling more confused than when I arrived. If I'm not broken, why did she take my blood and tell me to see a psychologist? Doesn't the act of trying to "fix" me imply that I'm not "functioning" properly in the first place? Isn't that what it *literally* means to be broken? And even if Doctor Mae's right and I *am* perfectly normal, then why the hell am I having to justify myself to her, to Jace, to Hannah, to Sam, to *anyone* who thinks it's weird I don't like sex? Am I losing it because I lack a sex drive, or because all the stories and poems and movies and music say I'll be alone if I don't find someone to share my genitals with?

Outside the clinic, I neatly fold the referral into my handbag and start the long walk back to the train station. Will I need it? I don't know. Even if my bloodwork comes back fine, Doctor Mae seems convinced there's a problem. The only thing I can really say is that I got tested, but right now, I'm not even sure that's a good thing.

Still, as I make my way through the crowded streets of Sydney's CBD, a quiet voice in the back of my head starts talking. It doesn't belong to Doctor Mae, or anyone else I know, but I listen to it so intently I almost walk into a busy intersection.

Don't stop being you, Jess.

You got through your parents' divorce.

You got through your father's death.

You got through your first breakup.

You'll get through this.

Besides, you've got a word now, even *if* Doctor Mae tried to walk it back.

"Asexual".

Why don't you start there?

The first thing I do after I get my results from Doctor Mae is ring Jace.

I don't know why.

I must be projecting, though, because the conversation becomes politely menial, which only happens when one of us is dancing around something. We might've moved on from the breakup – we might even be in a better place than we were when I first arrived at Stanmore – but it's obvious we've added a few no-go zones to our *repertoire*, and I think discussing what was said in the car that night is one of them. Still, I feel like I need to have this little chat at least once, so I decide to begin gently. With Sam's clubbing proposal.

'Has Hannah told you about Sam's plan for your birthday, yet?' is my subtle opener.

'Oh, yeah,' he replies, brightening slightly. 'Is she really getting you a fake ID?'

'Apparently. And she's already got one for herself.'

'Serious?'

'Yep. She's been showing it off.'

I hear him chuckle. 'Where the fuck she get it?'

'I dunno. One of your mates from down south, maybe?'

'Yeah, actually. I might know someone who knows someone from down there.'

'Honestly, though, I'm a little worried about her. She's been so random lately. Are her and Mikey okay?'

'I think so. He hasn't said anything to me. Pretty sure he wasn't joking about his dad writing a memoir, though, so maybe he's busy dealing with extra family shit.'

Yeesh.

I'm really starting to appreciate not having Audrey looking over my shoulder all the time.

'Fair enough. Anyway, you coming with us, then?'

'To Club Nine? Absolutely! I wouldn't miss an opportunity like that to get shiftfaced on my eighteenth.' He laughs. 'Especially coz, y'know, dunno where we're all gonna be next year.'

'Yeah. Yeah. I know what you mean.' I pause and the line crackles a little. 'Actually, Jace. I, uh, I wanted to tell you something.'

'Yeah?'

I guess there's no other way to say it, so I just say it. 'I got myself tested.'

'For what?'

'Y'know. For the – the thing I can't do.'

'Oh. Right. What was the result?'

'Physically, I'm all clear,' I tell him.

In truth, Doctor Mae recited phrases and numbers, dumbed down – I'm sure – but nevertheless impossible for me to *properly* grasp. I just kept nodding my head and strategically injected the word "mhm" whenever I thought it was appropriate. In the end, though, two things were clear: first, that being vegetarianism *doesn't* automatically result in an iron deficiency, and two, that there is absolutely, completely, definitely *nothing* wrong with me.

'You're a perfectly healthy seventeen-year-old girl,' were her exact words.

So, I reasoned, if I'm "perfectly normal", shouldn't there be others like me?

And there were, apparently.

I'd already found them on the internet in the days after Doctor Mae first said the word "asexual" to me.

I asked her about it again.

'Look,' she told me, 'I *strongly* suggest you see a specialist before adopting things like abstinence or asexuality. I know you're young, but sex is part of a healthy and balanced lifestyle, and as long as you practise it safely, it can be very life-affirming. I'm concerned that if your impediment is psychological, it may lead to depression.'

For the first few minutes of her saying things like this, I actually started to agree. I mean, she's a doctor, after all. She *must* be right.

Right?

I sat there and thought about it, trying to imagine why my relationship with Jace was all love and no sex, and trying to imagine the consequences of never having sex with anyone again. I have to confess: it didn't look all that bad. No more pressure. No more games. No more doing stuff I don't wanna do just to please someone else. I tried to guess how the psychologist would tell me I'm mistaken. I even punched the number into my phone afterwards and held my thumb over the "call" button.

Will she tell me I'm too cynical?

Will she tell me I might be gay?

How would I know if I've yet to experience attraction like that?

Isn't that an important part of who I am?

Why else would this whole gay marriage argument be such a big deal if it wasn't?

Does love even make a difference, or is it all about that primal rush?

Whose curves do you like best?

What kind of genitals do you prefer to play with?

SHE MUST KNOW!

Will she tell me I'm traumatised? Dad never did anything like that to me. I know Mae was searching for it, but she was wrong. I loved my dad. I'm realising he may not have always been a good person – he could be intolerant, controlling, sarcastic – but, when it came to me, he always did his best.

Will she tell me I've got a "fear" of intimacy? At *seventeen*? What will she say about my intimate moments with Jace, all of which were ruined by sex? Will she tell me that my friendships with Sam and Hannah are all somehow less important than the people I've shared my body with?

Those were the thoughts I had to contend with, the thoughts that kept me in me in the dark. But I won't tell Jace this.

I won't tell him how my thumb slipped away again, or how I let the phone lock itself back up.

Instead, I'll tell him how I began my search for my truth – my *experience* – and I'll hope with all hope that he can understand why I didn't mean to hurt him. Perhaps I shouldn't feel guilty about what happened, but what can I say?

I'm still human.

I guess I just want him to know that, too.

'Have you ever heard of something called asexuality?' I ask.

He pauses, and the phone clicks as he shuffles around.

'Asexuality? Isn't that, like, how plants reproduce, or something?' he says.

Good start.

'No, dickhead. Well, yes, *some* plants, but I'm talking about asexuality in *people*.'

'Then no. Why? What is it?'

'It's something the doctor said might be possible. I've been doing research on it lately.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah. Like, did you know that about one percent of the world's population experiences none or very little sexual attraction to anyone or anything?'

It feels odd throwing facts through the phone like I'm on a remote episode of *Trivial Pursuit*, but it's what I do because it's the only way I can think to explain what I'm talking about to someone like Jace.

'I... did not know that,' he says, his tone belying his disinterest with every monochromatic syllable.

'Yeah, it's true. There have been more and more studies on it since the early 2000s.'

'Okay. If you say so.'

'You can look it up yourself if you don't believe me.'

'Nah, nah. I believe you.'

'Then what's wrong?'

'It's just – like, *why*, though?'

'Whataya mean?'

'Well, you're telling me one percent don't want sex. Okay. But *why* don't they want sex?'

'Does – does that matter?'

'Yeah. It kinda does. It's weird. There's gotta be a reason for it.'

'Does there really need to be a reason? Or do you just need a reason?'

He sighs. 'I dunno, Jess, why don't *you* tell me *again* why you don't find me attractive?'

'Jace... that's not really the point.'

'Really, then what is?'

I can hear him getting annoyed, but I press on regardless. I need him to hear what I have to say. I might not be sure about all the details, but I know I'm closer to *my* truth than I've ever been since I first realised dating gossip was one of the most boring things in the world to me.

'The point is there are hundreds of possible reasons, and most of them don't really matter, because what I'm trying to say is that I think I might *be* asexual.'

Silence. Keep talking, Jess.

'I think this whole thing between you and me was just... bad luck... because I *didn't know*. I thought I was like everyone else. But this makes sense to me, Jace. The things I'm reading about asexuality online – the stories, the forums, the vlogs – yeah, it feels *right* to me.'

I think I hear him chewing on something. I definitely hear him shuffle about again. 'Look, Jess, I don't really know what you want me to say,' he says. 'I already said it's fine. I just wish you coulda been honest with me, y'know? You don't need excuses anymore.'

Ugh, he's not getting it. How can I make him understand?

'It isn't you, Jace. I was –' ugh '– it's like I was... putting a puzzle together –' oh, dear God, I'm quoting my mother '– and I can finally see this picture, this picture I knew I was trying to make but didn't know *how* to make, and now it's coming together. Now it makes *sense* to me.'

Silence.

'Okay, but couldn't you have looked at the picture on the box before you started?'

Well, shit.

I have to move this along, otherwise we'll just start arguing again.

'Jace, I'm just trying to say I'm sorry –'

'– but it wasn't your fault, yeah, yeah, I get it.'

'No, that's not what –'



'Listen, Jess. We've always made good friends and I'm kinda glad we're back to that again, but I think if we want to stay that way, we should probably stop talking about this stuff.'

I sigh this time. 'Yeah. Yeah, sure.'

Silence. Worst one yet.

'Hey, look,' he begins. 'Let's have a good time at the club, though, yeah?'

'Oh, I'm intending to,' I reply, feigning enthusiasm.

'Good, good. Me too. Should be a fun night.'

'Yeah.'

'Alright, I gotta go. I'll seeya at school, okay?'

'Yeah, seeya.'

The phone beeps.

The screen darkens.

Why do I even try?

I have to move on.

This is my journey now, not his.

I'll go to the club. I'll drink, I'll dance. I'll see if I can find sexy, feel sexy. If I need help, I'm sure Sam will be *more* than happy to point it out. I just have to remember not to roll my eyes at her.

Jace is irrelevant.

They'll be hundreds of people. Hundreds.

If none of them give me that "spark", I'll know.

If sex can't find a way to succeed in a hyped-up, ritualistic mating ground, then where on Earth *can* it succeed?

The second issue of *New Wave* is released a week before Jace and Hannah's birthday to a public commendation and merit certificates handed to the five of us at assembly by Langley and a member of the school board. It's a massive moment for all of us: for me and Hannah, it meant material advancement towards the completion of the L-E-P; for Mikey, proof-positive of academic extra-curriculars in the eyes of his father; for Sam and Jace, another check on two widely variable, but highly creative *résumés*. All good things, really, considering the school year is now firmly in its second semester, and even better when Sam points out a seething Milly from the stage.

Anyway, despite our success, we all agree that we should make the third and final issue something special that we can *really* show off: a swansong with a focus on hard-hitting journalism rather than creative philosophy. We take the planning of it in turns – usually working on ideas and mockups by night and organising social stuff by day – and switching back to curriculum topics when others take over.

After only a few days, though, the pressure builds up, and Hannah starts working like she's on notice. She snaps at almost every idea she doesn't like, or every time someone mentions Club Nine, and I find myself constantly reminding her that *she* was one of the two main proponents for the whole clubbing thing, so maybe she should just chill out a little bit. For someone who previously maintained an A minus average with ease, she sure picks a good time to go full career mode.

Nevertheless, we get through the week, and before I know it, Sam, Hannah, and I are back in the girls' dorm, laying down the final preparations for the weekend.

'You guys ready for this?' asks Sam, her eyes practically bulging with excitement.

'I dunno. Guess that depends on whether the selfie I sent you was any good.' I laugh, doing my best to go all-in.

'Sorry, babe, it was pretty shit. But this guy works wonders! You shoulda seen the picture I gave him. So baked.' Sam shakes her head while she rummages through her handbag. Between the three of us, she seems to have been the only one who put any effort into this meeting, which isn't surprising since she "called" it. I glance at Hannah who drops me a *very* subtle scowl. I don't think she approves. What a strange role-reversal.

'Look. At. This,' says Sam, dramatically flashing what appears to be a proof of age card with none other than my own officious looking face staring back at us.

It's a little creepy, to be honest.

I pluck it gently from Sam's quivering fingers to inspect the details. Do I really look like that?

*Really?*

'How much did you pay for it?' asks Hannah, crossing her arms and rocking back and forth in her chair.

'Pfft, like money's a problem when you've got credit cards. Am I right, trust fund kiddies?'

I get the vague impression that Sam was talking to me, which pulls me away from my plastic mirror. 'Well, actually, I'm kinda on a strict allowance, because Audrey's still the trustee. And y'know, fuck you for bringing it up.'

'I just mean you shouldn't worry about how much I'm paying. I'm happy to do it for my lovelies, and it's not like the people footing the bill are, y'know, gonna notice *at all*.'

Hannah shrugs. 'Well, excuse us for caring about your potential criminal record. Should I also point out that you've been so wired lately you're hardly sleeping? Or is that a bit too much compassion?'

'Y'know what, Han? I'm getting a bit sick of this attitude of yours. Maybe you should just give Club Nine a miss, huh?'

At this, Hannah stands up, looking like she's ready for a fight, and I realise I'm the only thing standing in their way. I raise my arms and try to calm the room, because I... kinda need this weekend to go smoothly.

'Calm down Xena, fuck,' I say. 'It's just Sam being Sam.'

Sam and Hannah eye each other for a moment, then Sam grins in a way that can only mean trouble.

'Don't worry, Jess,' she says. 'Hannah's just jealous because she's already seen it.'

'Seen what?'

Hannah sighs and sits back down while Sam opens the cupboard and pulls out a shallow, white box, suspiciously sized to house a carefully folded piece of clothing.

'THE DRESS!' announces Sam, removing the lid and lifting up the aforementioned garment. I hear Hannah tsk, but I know she's looking over my shoulder.

It's black.

Knee-length, with a sequined sinch and exposed straps.

It's sleek, sophisticated, *chic*.

Totally designed to show off hips and tits.

I love it all, except for that last bit, which gives me flashes of Bondi Beach on New Year's Eve.

'Nice,' I say, enthusiastically. 'Is that what you're wearing?'

'Me? Babe, this is what *you're* wearing. This is *the* dress. The one that goes with the earrings.'

What?

No way!

'You can't be serious?' I ask. 'You're letting *me* wear it?'

Sam rolls her eyes. 'I'm *giving* it to you, dumb-arse.'

Even though the fact that it's designed to show off skin makes me a little anxious, I have a proper girly moment. I squeal, and collapse into Sam for a hug.

Yes, I know.

But I can't help it, okay?

Sam laughs. 'You're welcome. You have to be careful, though, it's a six-hundred-dollar dress.'

'Fuck me, six hundred – I mean, uh, yeah, of course. Thank you, Sam. It's beautiful.'

I watch her box the dress back up, and then gleefully pass it to me.

'Y'know, Jess, you don't *have* to come if you don't want to. I know this probably isn't your thing,' says Hannah.

'Don't tell her that!' shouts Sam. 'She's one of us now. She has to do as she's told. Besides, who doesn't wanna ruin an ex-boyfriend's birthday by hooking up with other guys, huh?'

I turn to Hannah, expecting her to look something like an angry tomato, but she just offers a nonchalant shrug. 'Hey, I might not wanna hear all the details, but I'm sure it was at *least* sixty percent his fault you two broke up.'

'Thank you, Hannah,' agrees Sam, effectively resolving their previous disagreement, I guess.

'Though, it *is* pretty fucked up when you think about it.'

'Oh, totally.'

'Guys –'

'I mean, who'd wanna go out clubbing with someone they just dumped? Even if it's with a bunch of friends?'

'I know! Crazy, right?'

'Guys –'

'You'd have to be one cold bitch.'

'The iceberg of cold bitches.'

'The Elsa of cold bitches.'

'No, the *two-scoop* gelato of cold bitches.'

'Guys!'

Giggles.

'Thanks for the feedback, but, *for your information*, Jace and I have already discussed the whole thing.'

'Like a couple of mature teenagers?'

'In heat.'

'We're good, okay?'

'Sure.'

'Sure.'

'It might be a little awkward at first, but we don't wanna end up with all that high school TV drama bullshit. It's good. We're fine.'

'Oh, yeah.'

'Totally.'

'Sooo, what if you catch him making out with some slut in the alley? No offense, Hannah.'

'None taken, Sam.'

I sigh. 'Can we just maybe go through the plan, please? This is the first time ever I'm gonna try sneaking into a place with a fake ID and I wanna make sure we're all on the same page about how to successfully break the law here, y'know?'

'Okay, *fine*,' says Sam, not at all amused that I'm refusing to take the bait. 'Mikey's confirmed that Cole's working security tomorrow night, so when we get to Club Nine, we'll have to meet him out back. We might have to wait a bit, but that's cool, just wear a scarf, or something. Once we're inside, we'll only need the IDs if we get spot-checked.'

'Or if you wanna drink,' adds Hannah.

'Or that. Now, I'm pretty sure we're all planning on having a good time, so I've booked two Ubers. One for me and Mikey, and one for you three. When we're ready to go home, I'll use the app to book some more. It all goes on my card, nobody else has to know.'

'Where are we all gonna go afterwards?'

'My parents are going to a fundraiser –' she thinks '*– somewhere* up in Queensland, so my place is free.'

'What about the cleaners?' asks Hannah.

'Weekend off.'

'Cool, cool. Jace and I already told mum and dad we're going to yours, anyway.'

'Easy. And Mikey's dad doesn't have to know, so all good there, too,' adds Sam.

'You guys couldn't come back to Stanmore?'

Hannah shrugs. 'Mikey, Jace and I can, technically, since we'll all be eighteen.' She smiles. 'But then parents might find out, and I don't think even Jace wants to stir that pot this close to *possibly* being sent to summer school. Plus, who'd wanna leave Sammy on her wittle wonesome?'

'Thanks, babes,' says Sam, blowing Hannah a kiss. 'You can still do whatever, though, Jess. I'd love you to come with us, but since you and your mum are sorta independents anyways, I guess you could always just go home.'

'I'll see how I feel, but I dunno, you guys scare me sometimes.'

Sam stands up again and laughs as she pushes me back onto Hannah's bed. 'See?' she says. 'I told you she was one of us. Smart-arse punk.' She holds up her hand for a high-five, and to my absolute shock, Hannah smacks it.

'This is gonna be the best eighteenth ever,' she says, a rare smirk playing across her face. 'I fucking *love* you guys!' she adds, before the two of them dogpile me.

It's Friday night, and I'm standing on Audrey's porch, waiting for the Uber to arrive. It's a familiar scene: a claustrophobic suburban street, its rustic charm once again amplified by autumn's earthly tones, playing host to a kind of anthropological stasis. The omnipresent hum of car engines and muffled voices hangs in the air, always at a distance but seemingly never too far away; a reminder of that *faux* isolation you can feel drowning in a sea of brick-and-mortar walls. It's cold, of course, so I'm wearing a jacket over the dress Sam gave me. I figure it'll be hot in the club, so I can take it off there, but until then, I look more like a well-dressed real-estate agent than someone about to head to a club with her friends.

Still, I took Sam's advice. I'm wearing her earrings, a bracelet I borrowed from Audrey, and an expensive hairclip I managed to scab from Hannah. No more plastic fantastic for me! I've got high heels on, and I'm wearing yet another YouTube-based collection of makeup accessories. I've even been practising my form. In short, I'm more ready than I've ever been to do this dating thing. I feel sexy and confident in a way I never have before. Not in Perth. Not at the pot party. Not on New Year's Eve. Never.

I'm still fighting the urge to go back inside, just like I have every other time I've gone out, but it's different now. More... complicated. I think that's because there's more than one splash of guilt mixed in this time: apart from the whole sexuality thing, I also told Audrey I was going to a chaperoned dinner for Hannah and Jace's eighteenth, which contravenes our agreement to be open and honest with each other.

I felt bad doing it, but I couldn't tell her the truth, because that would've gotten *everyone* in trouble. I'm not sure she believed me, either, because she made an atypically long and morose speech about being *careful*, told me not to smoke or drink or take drugs, and reminded me to keep her on speed dial, just in case.

I said speed dial doesn't exist anymore.

She said it was just a figure of speech.

Heh.

But I have to go.

I *have* to.

When the Uber finally pulls up, I'm greeted by the familiar sight of brand-name clothes and the scent of liberally applied perfume. Of course, it's mixed with the smell of the Uber this time, which is mostly a mix of sweat and air freshener. I almost feel like I'm slumming it when the driver

waves me in. Jace is in chinos and a button-up shirt with a tie. Hannah looks spectacular in a flowing floral dress and about a hundred pieces of her trademark homemade jewellery.

This time I feel right at home, though, and I think the others agree.

‘Damn, Jess,’ says Hannah, opening the back door for me. ‘You look gorgeous.’

‘Thanks!’ I reply, climbing in beside her. ‘So do you!’

‘Hey Caviar,’ says Jace, turning to look at me.

‘Happy eighteenth, guys!’ I say cheerfully as I click in my seatbelt in and the driver pulls away from the curb. ‘I hope you don’t mind, but I kinda didn’t get you presents.’

Hannah laughs. ‘All good,’ she says. ‘I just can’t believe it’s been almost a year since we all went to Cole’s for that party.’

‘Yeah, don’t go chuckin’ up on the foliage again,’ says Jace, delivering his trademark grin. ‘They’ll kick us all out if you do.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ I counter. ‘As long as nobody passes me a pipe.’

There’s a moment of silence between the three of us, and for a second, I’m worried the night’s gonna be filled with tension. But then Jace laughs and goes on to explain that he was innocent the whole time, and it was my own fault I drank before smoking. Hannah backs him up, and we collapse into the safety of our memories together.

It’s friendly.

It’s fun.

It’s a good start to the night.

The driver turns off at an enormous neon Coca-Cola billboard, and we slowly crawl down a leafy, densely packed street surrounded by Victorian-era tenancies and laneways. We’re not in the CBD, but Kings Cross, Sydney’s “Golden Mile”. It’s a place I haven’t visited since moving to Sydney, and it’s already not one I’m too keen on revisiting, given just how many people are walking around.

Seriously, Bondi’s got nothing on this sardine tin of a street. Remember how I was talking about the gentle hum of muffled voices before? Yeah, this is probably where they were all coming from. Even inside the car, the din is basically a roar of white noise, a chorus of a thousand voices all shouting, screaming, laughing. The smell of tobacco and alcohol lick their way into the car, replacing the crisp, chilly air with a sickly-sweet warmth strong enough to make me take my jacket off. There’s food in there, too. Half-cooked meat, burgers and kebabs, pizza. Coffee? Something burnt.

Eventually, the driver spots an opportunity to get us out of the car. He pulls up at a mall, refusing to take us any further, and Jace tells the man it’s paid for in the app.

With that, we step out into the crowd.



Hannah tells me to stick close – and I don't argue – as she and Jace try to remember where Club Nine actually is. We muscle our way past shops, restaurants, pubs, hotels, clubs, strip joints, two tattoo parlours, and a sex dungeon before we've turned a corner. I can't really do more than follow as we dodge oncoming groups of people and lines snaking their way onto the footpath: in fact, I keep my eyes fixed on Hannah's dress and just shadow that, even though I'm pretty sure this is all new for her and Jace as well.

After about ten minutes, we end up in a dank looking back alley, one with murals painted on the brickwork and awnings above the doors.

'Um, pretty sure we're gonna get murdered if we stay down here,' I say.

'Nah, it's fine. Come on,' replies Jace, smiling.

He takes the lead and Hannah falls in beside me as we follow the twisting path. As we round the first building, it's clear Jace was right because we bump into a line at least thirty people long. I barely have time to register the coloured lights, muted music, and tacky neon lettering of Club Nine's marquee, before a shape barrels into me, a woman in what is basically a sequined blue body suit transformed into a hugging torpedo.

'You MADE IT!' she says, wrapping her arms around my neck before latching onto Hannah and, finally, Jace. 'Happy birthday you freaky arse twins!'

'Hey Sam,' we all reply, in turn.

'How's the night been?' asks Jace.

'Boring as fuck, mate,' says a man in a white t-shirt and rolled up sleeves. 'Took your sweet time, huh?'

'Fuck off, dickbag. Just coz your Uber knew the way,' snaps Jace, to which Mikey very casually presents his middle finger before they laugh at each other.

Guys are so weird sometimes...

'So, is your bro on or what? I don't fancy waitin' 'round for hours to get in,' says Jace.

'Yeah, he messaged me 'bout half an hour ago. He's on break in ten. He'll let us in the back.'

'There's a "back" to this place?' I ask.

Mikey laughs. 'Yeah, Jess, this is the front, believe it or not. You got your ID, by the way?'

I extricate my purse – carefully – from within my jacket and show him Sam's present. He looks at it with a kind of tired bemusement before handing it back.

'Alright. Cole won't care but keep it on you just in case.' As I slip the card back into my purse, I notice Mikey eyeing me up and down. 'Nice dress, by the way. Where'd you get it, if you don't mind me asking?'

'It's one of mine. You like it? I think it suits her,' replies Sam, giggling incessantly.

To this, Mikey sighs and shakes his head. 'Fuck's sake, babe,' he says, loudly enough for us all to hear, then turns away, leaving me a little... confused.

'Uh, what's his problem?' I ask.

Sam laughs. 'He just hates sneaky stuff like this. Afraid it's gonna hurt his reputation if he gets caught.' She goes quiet for a moment and concentrates on wriggling her fingers, as if to keep them warm.

I reach out to touch her, but she pulls away. 'Are you okay, Sam?'

'Hm? Yeah, sorry, just cold. Come on, Cole's gonna meet us 'round back.'

Hannah and I share a troubled glance, and then we all follow the blue torpedo.

Cole ushers us in like a bunch of undercover spies, grunting a contrite "hello" before practically pushing us through a delivery bay and into a corridor where the music gets very loud, very quickly.

'Oh my God, this is so exciting,' says Hannah, shaking my arm. Despite my apprehension, all I can do is agree with her.

'Who's playing tonight?' asks Jace.

'Sassafras,' replies Cole, a word that means absolutely nothing to me, but still makes me grin.

'Fuckin' banger,' adds Mikey.

We stop by a curtain, another corridor, and the bathrooms. There are people here queuing for the toilet, some of them leaning against the pockmarked and stylistically graffitied walls, others making out and grinding on each another like obsessed chipmunks. There's a sweaty heaviness in the air, much like there was in the street, except without any breeze to soften its blow.

In here, it's already sticking to me.

Darkly coloured strobe lights flash periodically through the curtain, but Cole parks us under the bright fluorescent lights of the corridor and shouts instructions at us over the noise.

'Keep your IDs on you. Don't drink anything you didn't see someone pour for you. Don't get involved in a fight. Don't take drugs.'

Aw, he's like a dad.

A dad built like a rugby player, sure, but a dad, nonetheless.

He turns to me, Sam, and Hannah. 'Girls, I'm on the floor tonight but I'll hang near the bar. If *anyone* makes you uncomfortable, don't hesitate to come get me.'

'Yes, sir!' snaps Sam.

'I fucking mean it! If you get my arse fired tonight, Sam, I swear to God, I'm blaming it on Mikey.'

We move to let someone through, but I still notice Mikey rolling his eyes.

‘Hannah, keep your idiot brother in check for me, please,’ continues Cole.

‘No guarantees.’

‘Well, at least let me know if he does something stupid. Jess,’ he says, turning to me, ‘please don’t throw up on anything, tonight, okay?’

‘You remember that?’ I ask, as I feel my face turn red. Hopefully, he doesn’t notice.

‘*Everyone* remembers that,’ he says, smiling. ‘But this place is pretty strict, so I won’t be able to cover for you this time. Alright, go on, but let me know when you’re heading home. Mikey! Hold up, wanna talk to you.’

Giddy with excitement, Sam, Hannah, Jace, and I leave Cole and Mikey to their conversation and push our way through the curtain.

The first thing I notice is that I can *feel* the music vibrating through my body. The DJ – presumably Sassafras, or whatever his name is – stands on a platform at one end of a low atrium, surrounded by scaffolding and massive fuck-off speakers. In the centre of the room, strobe lights project dark shades of colour across a crowd gyrating wildly with the beat. I’m sure some people are actually dancing, but from the curtain, it just looks like one giant silhouette of heads and arms: a single, gelatinous entity lost in a trance. Around the periphery of the dance floor, booths upholstered in red leather and dim, prohibition-style lighting host smaller groups of people drinking, chatting, and – again – making out. Right beside us is the bar, a kaleidoscope of coloured bottles and liquids backed by strategically installed LED lights.

I have to admit, it *is* rather exciting, even if I’d usually prefer my books. When I consider the alternative to be lamenting over the sad tale of Romaine Brooks with a hot cup of tea, I mentally pick the louder option, for once. I grip my jacket and purse tightly, though.

I feel a hand on my shoulders and realise Mikey is at my side, leaning over to bring Sam in as well.

‘Let’s find a booth,’ he says. ‘That way someone can always be with the stuff. We can take it turns. Sound good?’

‘Sounds good to me,’ I say.

Sam nods.

Mikey repeats the message to Jace and Hannah, and we float as a group around the edges of the dance floor until we find our unicorn. We pile up our handbags at the back of the booth and sidle in one by one except Sam and Hannah, who disappear to buy a round of drinks.

They come back with vodka, gin, and great, big grins, *especially* Sam.

‘Easy,’ she mouths, passing me one.

We all raise a toast to the twins and wish them a happy birthday. Not that we really need to: everyone seems to be relaxed, and to me, it feels very much like it did before New Year's Eve. Jace even gives me a hug like he used to, free of expectations. We talk, we laugh, we drink a round. Then another. And some of us, another. I pass on the third one, though.

I'm not *frond* of that particular memory.

Heh.

The night doesn't really begin until about half an hour in, when Jace sets his third glass on the table.

'So,' he says, 'who's got first watch?'

'I'll do it,' I volunteer. 'As long as someone stays with me, though.'

'I'm with ya,' offers Sam. 'I mean, I've got a boyfriend anyway, so I guess I shouldn't come on *too strong*.'

'Har har,' says Mikey.

'Don't worry Sam, Mikey's always wanted to take me on the dance floor, anyway,' chimes in Jace, smirking.

'Pfft, I'm outta your league, bro. I'd totally be up for moshing at the DJ table, though. Sass fuckin' kills.'

'I'm there!' Jace turns to me. 'Uh, that cool with you Jess?'

It's a simple question, but it cuts right through the buzz of the alcohol and reminds me why I wanted to be here tonight. It's like a line of code, a trigger switch, and I'm instantly scoping out the room, even while I'm trying to answer.

'Well, I mean, you don't need to ask that really, do you?' I argue, which is very, very true.

Jace shrugs. 'I guess not,' he says, landing somewhere between wistful and pleased. 'Mikey?'

'Let's do it, motherfucker!'

And in a very masculine-y kind of way, the two of them get up, practically fist-pump, and disappear onto the dance floor.

Hannah, meanwhile, seems to be eyeing every sweaty body in the room that doesn't belong to someone she already knows. 'Well, since I *don't* have a boyfriend, I guess I should probably get my freak on and go hunting, huh?' she says, looking anywhere but us while she says it.

Sam and I laugh. 'Go wild,' I tell her.

'Just make sure you come back to relieve us soon!' adds Sam.

Hannah promises us she will and shuffles out of the booth, leaving me and Sam alone with the handbags.

'I hope you plan on following your own advice,' she says, turning to me.

'Huh?'

'Well, y'know? Jace doesn't have to ask for your permission, and you don't have to ask for his, right? You know that, right?'

'Yeah, yeah, I know.'

'Don't even think about him, Jess. He knew what he might see coming out. You see something you like, you go for it, yeah?'

'Yeah okay, Sam, have another drink, jeez.'

'Good idea. You want one?'

I hesitate.

For a fraction of a second.

'Sure.'

While Sam and I sit drinking and shouting conversation at one another, I use any and all opportunities to scour the room for hot guys. We've actually got a pretty good vantage: slightly elevated, close to the bar, central location relative to the crowd. Sam catches on and begins pointing out all sorts of shapes and sizes, from men about our age who look like they replaced school with a gym, to ones who look like their kids could get in. Sam goes through them calmly, methodically, sometimes describing in great detail what might be appealing about having sex with them and asking me if I agree. To be honest, I find some of the things she says to me creepy, but telling her that only makes her giggle.

'There, what about him?' she says, nodding at a man in the crowd. 'He's probably early twenties. Pretty cut. Can you imagine *that* lifting you up and fucking you against the wall?'

I sigh but take a long look anyway. He's dancing with another woman, if that even matters. He's got short, slick hair, but Sam's not wrong: he clearly works out. His jeans and shirt wrap tightly around his body, bulging in all the right places, I suppose. I try to imagine him holding me – lifting me up, as Sam suggests – but the scene just looks funny in my head, and I smile.

Sam picks up on it. 'Good?'

'Oh, well. I dunno. Maybe. What about the chick he's with?'

'What, thinking of trying out for the other team?'

'No, I mean, do you think he might be too into *her* to notice *me*?'

Sam laughs loudly. 'We're in a club, babe,' she argues. 'Everyone's here for the same thing.' I look again, but I just can't make it work in my head. 'You might as well be asking me how I want my steak cooked.'

Sam shrugs. 'You're just nervous. Once you get out there, you'll feel it. Speaking of which...'

Hannah comes slinking back to the table, a man suspiciously close to the one Sam and I were ogling attached to her arm.

‘About fuckin’ time,’ says Sam. ‘We’re bored shitless over here.’

‘Guys, this is James,’ announces Hannah. ‘He builds things.’

‘Heyyy,’ slurs the man. ‘Are you all turning eighteen today, or is it just this lovely lady?’

Greeeeaat.

‘I’m sure you’ve got a lot in common,’ says Sam. ‘Which I’m sure you’ll discover here in the booth.’

‘Yeah, yeah, alright,’ snaps Hannah. She turns to James and makes a sickeningly sweet face. ‘Wanna have a drink with me?’ she asks.

James just sort of smugly gurgles “yes” and then wobbles his way precariously towards the bar while Hannah gets comfortable.

‘Awesome, have fun, Han,’ says Sam. She grabs me by the arm, practically dragging me out of the booth, and picks up her handbag along the way. ‘Come on, I need to pee,’ she snaps, which, oddly enough, reminds me that I need to go, too.

We have to wait in line, but eventually we get in. We even get two free stalls next to each other, which makes it both great and awkward. Trust me, there’s nothing as uniquely unsettling as peeing with your friend and carrying on a casual conversation at the same time.

‘You know what your problem is, babe?’

‘What’s that, sweetie?’

‘You’re just too damn nice. Yep. You gotta look out for yourself, y’know. You can’t go through life being the things other people tell ya to be, y’know?’

‘What, like a clubber?’

‘Ohhh, snap,’ she laughs so hard she coughs a few times. ‘I mean, there’re plenty of guys, Jess, they don’t all have to be The One, y’know? Just pick what you like and go with it.’

‘That’s not really it, though,’ I say, flushing. I step out of the stall and wash my hands, then wait. There’s a rustle from Sam’s stall, the sound of someone going through a handbag. I wait a little longer, when suddenly I hear a muttered, ‘Oh, fuck,’ break the... well... *relative* silence.

‘You okay in there, Sam?’

‘What? Yeah, good, good. Just, y’know. Usual stuff.’

She flushes and joins me by the sinks, and I lower my voice as more women come in.

'It's not that I'm looking for The One, or anything. I mean, yeah, I think that guy you pointed out last was pretty hot, but I dunno. I broke up with Jace coz I was sick of the pressure, and I just don't think I can be bothered going through all of it again.'

'Uggghhh, Jess, Jess,' says Sam, grabbing me by the shoulders and staring me in the face. Rather closely, I might add. She grins. 'Look, Jess. Look. You *need* to stop being *inside* yourself so much, y'know? You analyse this shit *way* too much. It's not like you're building a bridge here, a kiss can just be a fucking kiss, *God*. You don't have to do anything you don't wanna do.'

I raise an eyebrow. Even for Sam, that was... a little dramatic. 'Sam, are you okay?'

'What? Yeah, yeah.' She seems to realise she's channelling her inner thespian and lets me go. 'Sorry. I just mean, look, you... own... your body, yeah?'

'Yeeaaaah?'

'So, even if you don't wanna... y'know –' she clumsily makes the universal hand signal for vaginal sex – 'do the thing, that's *fine*, but you still gotta connect with people, y'know? It's healthy. Stop listening to the voices telling you what you're supposed to be, and do it your way for once, okay? I mean, they don't know you half as well as you know yourself, right?'

Wow. I'm genuinely shocked to hear Sam say something like that.

And y'know what?

She's right.

It might be the alcohol helping her make her point, but damn it, she's still making it.

I feel like hugging her, but some of the other women in the room are looking at us and I realise perhaps it's time to move out of the way.

'Wanna dance?' I ask, and Sam's face lights up.

'I so *do* wanna do that. Let's go!' she says, once again dragging me by the arm.

Strangely, Hannah and James aren't sucking on each other's faces when Sam throws her handbag at them. Instead, they're deep in conversation, but Sam doesn't let me stop to question their adherence to inhibition. She pulls me out into the crowd, not quite the centre or at the front of the stage where Jace and Mikey are probably moshing away with all the other bodies, but somewhere near the back, where people can move.

We start together, close enough to feel the heat coming off one another's bodies. Sam leads for a while, but as I let the music in and embrace the visceral closeness of everything – not to mention the lingering haze of the alcohol – I seem to take charge. I push her forward, and back. We shake our shoulders and our chests, pout our lips like bratty supermodels, and generally make ourselves look like idiots, but it's fun, and I'm sweating, and I may have to take my glasses off to

wipe them soon, but I don't care. I even join in on the singing thing, where the DJ shouts something over the microphone and the crowd shouts it back. It takes me a couple of rounds to work out the words, but when it clicks, it's an intoxicatingly fun experience.

At some point, I spin away from Sam and end up leaning into a guy probably a few years older than me. My instinct is to pull away, but then I think about what Sam said.

Forget the pressure.

Don't do anything I don't want to, and if he tries to make me, I've got four friends and Cole to fall back on.

Stop listening to the voices telling me what I'm supposed to be.

Do it my way.

The man gives me a cheeky smile and I'm in, moving with him on the dance floor like we've been doing it for years. I do this with multiple people, men and women. I let their hands hold my arms, my hips, my back, and mine do the same. I feel the rush of a new touch each and every time, because I know even if it comes from someone wanting more, I don't have to give it to them.

Without realising it, I come face to face with the man Sam pointed out from the booth.

Now that I can see him up close, I'd say he'd be early twenties. His shirt has a logo on it I didn't notice from across the room. "Sydney U". I point to it and shout in his ear, 'Do you go to Sydney University?'

He nods.

'Pub crawl,' I think he shouts back. 'But we liked it here too much.'

'What do you study?'

'Anthropology.'

He smiles. I smile back.

'Wanna dance?' I ask.

But we already are.

I don't know how it started, but before I know it, I'm back on the other side of the curtain, my body pressed up against the side of the corridor under the fluorescent lights, Mister Anthropology's lips locked on mine. People pass us by without so much as an absent glance, just another couple hooking up at a club. There's heat passing between us – excitement – something I never felt with Jace.

Why?

Why didn't I feel this?

Is it because Jace was... more of a romance? I don't mean, like, "take me out to a fancy restaurant as a surprise and get the staff to serenade me" romance, I just mean a relaxed kind of



love. It was comfortable, easy: or at least it was before New Year's Eve. I enjoyed the touching, the holding hands, the kissing, because they helped me connect with him on that level, and they didn't mean anything else until they turned into his idea foreplay.

This is different, though. This is wild. A little scary, even though Mister Anthropology is actually being kind of gentle and not trying to drag me off. Still, I'm safe enough. I've only drunk enough to be a little tipsy, and I've got at least five bodyguards here if he tries anything. I don't have to give this stranger anything I don't want.

It's empowering.

It's the spark.

The pit in my stomach.

The rush of air through a void.

The silence before a storm.

The drum roll before the bass drop.

This *has* to be it.

Is there a sexual quality to it?

Yes, definitely.

But also, no, not really.

It's both.

It's many things.

I don't know who this man is, but I'm enjoying his desire for me, and I don't have to give myself up to get it. I feel his hand creeping towards my chest, and I have no problem pulling it away. He sticks his tongue down my throat, and I have no problem pushing it back out. He presses up against me, and I push him back with a hand on his chest.

I shake my head, and he just smiles and kisses my neck.

I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensation, his breath, his touch. I grip his arm, the thin layer of sweat over his bicep, the things that held no interest for me with Jace now elements of an enthralling act.

One thoroughly under my control.

I'm not saying I would do this with anyone.

I'm not even saying it's a safe thing to do.

But as the music from the atrium swells, I realise that here and now with Mister Anthropology, at least, it's okay.

I'm not broken.

I can connect.

I can love.

And sex isn't even *necessary*.

I fall into what I know will be my final kiss with Mister Anthropology as the music slowly fades, and I open my eyes intending to take in his own blissful malaise.

Instead, I catch sight of Jace's death stare as he comes marching out of the men's bathroom. My heart catches in my throat, and I try to shrink. It doesn't work, though, unless my goal was to get Mister Anthropology to notice.

'What's wrong?' I hear him ask as a new beat picks up in the background. He turns around in time to size Jace up, but the rage etched into Jace's expression stops him. I mean, Mister Anthropology could probably lay him flat, but in that moment, Jace looks like the kind of person who'd pull a knife on us both for shits and giggles.

'Hey fuckwit,' he says, 'you know she's underage, right?'

Mister Anthropology hesitates, then let's me go. 'Fuck,' he snaps, throwing his hands up and disappearing behind the curtain. Gone forever, probably, just like the excitement I felt only moments ago, replaced by my own simmering anger.

'What the *fuck*?' I spit.

'Yeah, that's what I'd like to know,' Jace spits back, with a venomous edge more powerful than anything he delivered during the breakup.

'What do you mean?'

'Aren't you supposed to be "asexual"?' he asks, providing the most aggressive air quotes I've ever seen. 'Isn't that *why* you broke up with me?'

Oh, no you fucking *don't*, not after I've had my win.

'Yeah, that's right. We *broke up*, so what gives you the *fucking* right to get in my face?'

'Are you fucking serious? Am I a fucking *joke* to you?'

'Yeah, y'know what, you *are* a fuckin' joke! We *broke up*, Jace! I don't need your permission to hook up with someone!'

For some reason, I glance around. The people who were watching me and Mister Anthropology make out are still watching, but some of them are smirking now. Probably thinking a whore got caught in the act.

'Yeah, sure, except, y'know, we broke up coz *you* didn't wanna be intimate with *anyone*, and *you* kept accusing me of wanting nothing but sex, and then here you are face fucking some knob in a club a few weeks later! Pull your head outta your arse, Jess, and take a look at how fucked up that is!'

'Holy *shit*. No, actually. We broke up because you wanted more from me than I could give you, and because you *didn't fucking listen to me* when I tried to tell you that!'

Jace laughs bitterly. 'Oh, the High and Fucking Mighty Miss Roe, right on cue because I'm calling her out. You spent *four fucking months* keeping your mouth shut, trying not to touch me, kicking me outta your fucking house coz you didn't want me around. Then you go and make up this asexuality bullshit when really, you're just a stuck-up bitch.'

He gets right up close as he says this, swiping his fingers through the air to point at me, and I can't help myself.

I try to push him away.

I hit the resistance in his body.

*He* steps back.

It has nothing to do with me.

I suddenly feel *very* unsafe, but the adrenaline's flowing and I can't think of anything else to do. So, I keep yelling. If I try something else, I'll probably burst into tears and sink to the ground.

'Me stuck-up? Have you *seen* yourself lately?'

'What? What's wrong with me? Go on, tell me. Tell me again so everyone can hear!'

'Jace, you carry yourself like some fifties fucking greaser, for God's sake. You think you're tough shit looking down at everyone, judging them all the time, pulling stupid pranks like the mural and sneakin' out at night. You blame your parents for everything wrong in your life, but really, you'd be hard up without mummy and daddy looking after you, paying your way.'

'Oh, fuck this shit. You think just coz you hate your mum and your dad couldn't man up that you're better than me? Look at you! You're a fucking dog, Jess! Jesus, I can't believe I bought *any* of your bullshit. I s'pose you'll get your soap box lined up, write a story about me now for the magazine, or something? Don't worry, just blame your fucking cat. Everyone'll think that's cute.'

'You don't get to do this!' I shout, battling with my own voice to keep it solid. 'I tried. I *fucking* tried, and the second I found a word that might *possibly* help me explain what I'm going through, you don't believe me. Fuck, I even got *tested* because I thought I was fucked up! But no, it's you, and people like you! Your fucked up! Condescending prick! You were worried about me? Well, consider your conscience cleared, arsehole!'

He looks at me for a second without speaking, then rolls his eyes. 'Figures I'd end up with another cheating slut.'

God fucking damn it. I'm crying. Fucking, FUCK! I just hope he's too out of it to notice.

'Fuck you, Jace,' I croak, choking back the tears. 'What else was I supposed to say, huh? That I didn't wanna spend another night with you coz I couldn't stand the thought of you touching me? How would that've made you feel?'

'Would've been better than this!'

'Bullshit. You stomped your feet every other time I didn't wanna suck you off or let you finger me. Don't pretend you were a fucking white knight about *any* of it!'

'Well, yeah, coz, y'know, you're supposed to be intimate with your fucking *girlfriend!*' he shouts.

All I can do is shake my head and try to keep my flushed, damp fucking cheeks in as much shadow as possible. 'You're the centre of your own precious little universe, Jace. You don't have a clue what it's like, trying to figure out if there's something wrong inside, let alone what to say to the person you're supposed to be able to tell *anything.*'

Jace just stares at me. Then he smirks, just like the people watching. 'Nah, bullshit. You're just a dick tease, a frigid bitch looking for someone to sponge off. How's the trust fund coming, by the way? Your dad still got any dignity left, or did you spend it all on miniskirts and dildos?'

He says these words, the biggest shit-eating grin plastered on his face, and the fight just leaves my body. For some reason, the image of Milly crying on the toilet in the school bathroom shoots into my brain, and I imagine her looking at me as I'm looking at Jace now.

I want to find a soft, safe place to curl up and fall asleep in. To stay that way forever. I look at him, at the eyes that I once found so much comfort in, and realise that, more than anything, I'm disappointed in myself.

'What do *you* know?' I ask.

I need to go home.

I need to go home *now*.

I turn to leave through the curtain. My goal is to grab my handbag, avoid Hannah, find Sam or even Mikey, and cry my eyes out on a willing shoulder for the entire Uber ride home.

I don't make it half a step before Hannah barges through.

'Sam's collapsed,' she says.

If I was with my dad, he'd probably tell me that hospital corridors are the closest you can get to what Hell's *really* gonna be like. Forget fire and brimstone, that's playing your hand before the game's even begun. The smart money bets on the *promise* of pain and misery. That'll break you faster than the real thing. I don't know if he'd be right, but fuck, I wish his voice would go away sometimes.

Audrey looks over at me.

Wearily, I think.

She's not angry.

Well, maybe a little.

She came straight from work, didn't hesitate. In fact, she's still wearing her fake scrubs, already had to tell two people she isn't a nurse.

She was the only one we could call.

The only one who'd come.

So, after the ambulance left with Sam, she drove the rest of us to the hospital.

She hardly said a word.

In the waiting room, Jace and Hannah sit a row of chairs over, whispering quietly.

Their parents haven't arrived yet.

Neither has Sam's. They were apparently halfway to Brisbane when Hannah finally worked up the courage to ring them.

As for Mikey's dad, well...

To his credit, Mikey made the phone call shortly after we arrived. Fifteen minutes later, a man I didn't know wearing a blue polo shirt with a logo on it I didn't recognise asked me where Mikey was. Mikey told me that he was a friend, a person who "handled this sort of thing" for the family, because of his dad's association with some sporting clubs.

In the waiting room of a hospital, I learn that the reason nobody was invited to Mikey's eighteenth birthday earlier in the year is because he flew to California to spend it with his dad and step mum. It turns out that Mikey goes to a boarding school in Australia because it's good for his dad's image, even though the rest of the family – bar Cole – lives in the US.

I never really thought about it.

I never even asked.

Great way to spread the love, though, while we sit there for hours waiting to find out if Sam's still alive.

People ask us questions.

They do it again and again and again.

Different people. Doctors, nurses.

What was she drinking?

What was she eating?

Does she have any allergies?

Does she have any health problems?

Is she pregnant?

What drugs did she take?

None of us really know the answers.

We know she was drinking vodka, and we found blue tablets in her handbag.

We don't know what they are.

She never told us.

After a while, I get to see Jace and Hannah's parents for the first time. Their father is a veritable mountain of uncompromising tradition in human form, complete with walrus beardstache and white widow's peak. He kinda reminds me of my dad, but more intense. Their mother is slender – delicate even – and immediately obvious as the source of the twins' reddish hair and freckles.

They barely acknowledge me or Audrey, but that's okay, because I'd rather not be the target of their disappointment. I might hate Jace right now, but the tension between him and his parents is palpable as they – with obvious but quiet fury – glare both him and Hannah into a corner.

I push the thought from my mind and just concentrate on waiting, so much so that I don't realise it's morning when the doctor finally comes out to talk to Mikey and the man in the blue polo shirt. They whisper quietly for a few minutes, then for a few minutes more after the doctor leaves. When the man in the blue polo shirt stops to make a phone call, Mikey turns to us, the very definition of grim.

Shit. It's bad. I can tell it's bad.

Hannah stands. 'Well?'

Mikey takes a deep breath.

'She's unconscious,' he says. 'But stable.'

It's about seven o'clock when two more people arrive in the waiting room, another man and another woman, both dressed and groomed like they'd just come from a diplomatic conference. The man looks a lot like Sam. Same hair, but manicured; same mannerisms, but considered. The woman is short, but not what I'd call delicate. Not even close. In fact, even though she doesn't remind me of

Sam physically, she nevertheless seems to dominate the room like Sam so often does. They embrace the Lauckes – old friends, no doubt, probably of the Walshes, too – and ask hurriedly about Sam.

These, then, are her parents. The entrepreneurs. The fundraisers. The owners of that ridiculous house overlooking a marina.

Jesus. It all figures. An intergenerational clique.

I see the man reluctantly shake Mikey's hand as he explains what happened.

I hear the woman sigh with relief when she learns that Sam is unconscious, but stable.

It's all very polite, all very much what I'd call typical if you ignore the fact that Audrey and I remain disconnected from the rest of the group.

So, it's strange watching it morph slowly into something else.

First, the "kids" – actually adults – shuffle until they're all together. They line up like soldiers ready for inspection while their parents talk, almost as if they know what's coming. These are the same people who sat next to a pool smoking dope, collectively putting their parents on notice. A talented artist who painted a message of religious conciliation for his own amusement on his school property. An up-and-coming sport's star with a varsity scholarship in his pocket and the programming skills to never be out of work. A ruthless negotiator who pried a dead magazine from the hands of Milly Yorke by blackmailing her supervisor. These are the same people who now hang their heads in shame as their parents do the inevitable and round on them, chastising, shaming.

It's fucking brutal.

Expulsion.

Psychologists.

Jace's license.

Hannah's involvement with the magazine.

Mikey's whole future.

The threats come thick and fast, and they hit like a road train.

Hannah's dad even berates her for wearing her homemade jewellery, telling her *very* loudly that she looks like a tramp.

Like, seriously?

I have to admit, seeing Jace squirm is kinda fun, though, until they start asking how Sam even got *into* the club, being under eighteen. That's when things get even worse. The word "sue" comes up, but nobody seems keen on teasing out that accusation. Someone's going to have to do it, though. They keep pushing, wanting to know. Then Cole's name makes an appearance, and they go ballistic.

The man in the polo shirt does his best to keep the peace, but he doesn't know what happened, so Sam's parents threaten to tear us all down – including Cole, who basically saved Sam's life by rolling her into a recovery position and calling an ambulance – until they know who's *really* to blame.

Ugh. Someone has to tell the truth.

Sorry babes.

'Sam organised fake IDs,' I say, standing to attention.

They turn to look at me as one, the four of them seeing me as if for the first time.

As do my friends.

'Excuse me?' asks Sam's mum.

'Sam did it. She set them up. Got one for me and her, so we could get in.'

Silence ensues, and I know I've just become *the* target.

'Is this a joke?' says the woman.

'No? It's the truth,' I reply, slightly confused.

'Who the fuck do you think you are?' she snaps.

I feel Audrey stand up behind me, place her hand on my shoulder. 'She's my daughter, and from what I understand, she helped save yours, so I'd appreciate it if you showed her some respect,' she says.

Sam's mum rounds on Audrey like she'd just been slapped, venom practically dripping from her teeth. 'I'd consider it if she wasn't wearing *my fucking dress*.'

Oh. *Fuck*.

God damn it, Sam.

God *fucking* damn it.

'*And my earrings*.'

The woman takes a step towards me, and I back up instinctively. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do.

'I – uh – I didn't – I didn't know –' I stammer.

That's it, Jess! That'll show her!

'Didn't know what? That you stole my God damn clothes?'

'Sam gave them to me!'

'Bullshit, you're a fucking little thief!' The woman reaches for me and grabs my jacket, pulling me towards her. Before I know what's happening, though, Audrey's between us, her arms outstretched, and the woman is stumbling backwards. She catches herself before she falls, which is convenient because her husband doesn't even bother to move.



'Touch her again, and I'll knock your teeth out! I don't give a shit who you are!' shouts Audrey, drawing the attention of an orderly.

He strolls over to the group, almost casually, and stands between us.

'Am I going to have to call the police?' he asks, impatiently.

'That little bitch has my jewellery!' replies the woman, which seems to compel Jace and Hannah's father to turn to the orderly and apologise profusely.

While that's being "handled" – as I gather these things often are for people like the Lauckes, Walshes, and Talbot-Joneses – Sam's father looks at his wife and sighs derisively. 'Evelyn, please stop being foolish,' he says. 'It's obvious the girl didn't know they were yours. She'll return them later, won't you, dear?'

It takes me a second to realise he's talking to me.

'Y – yes, of course,' I manage.

'See?' he continues. 'Now, let's go and see our daughter before the gentleman rightly kicks us out of his waiting room.'

The orderly takes one final look at the situation and then says, without a hint of hesitation, 'Once more, and I'll have you removed. I don't care who you are, either,' before returning to the kiosk.

Sam's mother straightens herself up and turns away from me, a wave of contempt rolling over us in her wake. Begrudgingly, she and her husband follow Mikey, who mouths a very subtle "thank you" at me as he leads them down the corridor and out of sight.

Audrey doesn't move until they disappear.

'Sorry,' says Jace and Hannah's mother, unexpectedly. 'They're trying to expand the firm and she's probably been dealing with angry backers all week. You know how it is.'

I glance at the 24/7 emblazoned on Audrey's uniform as she herself stares at the woman. 'Not really, no,' she says.

Gold.

Absolute fucking gold.

'Come on,' says Mister Laucke, doing his best not to sound as stuck up as his friend, but not doing a particularly good job. 'Let's go.'

The woman opens her mouth to say goodbye, but reconsiders, and the two of them saunter out of the waiting room with Jace and Hannah in tow.

Audrey lets out an exhausted sigh and collapses back into a seat.

'Thanks,' I tell her.

'No problem,' she says, then realises she's supposed to be mad. 'I can't believe you, Jess. I thought we had a deal, and then you go and do *this*? Why?'

'I'm sorry,' is my meek response. Honestly, I've got nothing left at this point.

'How am I supposed to trust you if you won't trust me?'

'I don't know. I was stupid.'

Audrey scratches her head.

'I'm gonna have to punish you. Like a grounding, or something.'

'Can you make it for the rest of the year?'

Audrey frowns. 'Only if you argue. I'm trying to discipline you, work with me here.'

'I appreciate the effort.'

She sighs and puts a hand on my shoulder. 'You wanna stay?' she asks.

I look at her. 'Yes,' I say, but then, 'No. Her folks are here now, and I... kinda want to get out of these clothes.'

'Alright,' replies Audrey, and sticks out her hand. 'Help me up.'

I do.

'So much for sleep, huh?' she says, joining me on the vertical plane.

'Yeah. I wasn't planning on it, anyway.'

Audrey smiles. 'Well, I'm about to pass out. How 'bout as part of the punishment I finally start teaching you how to drive? Then you can be my chauffeur.'

Despite myself, I smile, too. 'Sounds fair. I'll book an appointment next week.'

'Great. Can you do my taxes, too? Sounds like a fair trade for not being angry about all this.'

'Don't push it,' I suggest, kindly.

Spring is starting to show by the time I work up the courage to knock on the glazed double-doors of the Talbot-Jones residence, the *Château de la Sam*, and attract the attention of a small, Asian woman wearing dark track pants and a stained green shirt. She stands on the threshold and stares at me and I, being the social dynamo that I am, simply say, 'Hi.'

'Yes? What you want?' she asks, in broken English.

'Is, um, Mister or Missus Talbot-Jones at home?'

'They not see anyone right now. Goodbye, okay?' And with that, she starts closing the doors.

'No, no, they're expecting me,' I lie. I step forward and hold up a Woolworths branded tote bag. 'I, uh, have some clothes. And jewellery. To return.'

The woman stops and somehow expresses her disapproval with the most poignant frown I've ever seen. Maybe because she's a stranger to me.

'You Samantha's friend?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'Wait, please.'

She closes the doors and leaves me waiting for quite a while, long enough, in fact, to remind me of that hilarious time Audrey left me standing on her porch for several hours.

Then the doors open again, and I'm looking at the same Missus Talbot – or Missus Jones, whichever end of the name belongs to her – I met at the hospital. Like, down to the same black business blazer and neatly curled hair bun she was wearing when she tried to tear her dress off my body. It figures that a look of restrained violence seems to flow freely from her.

Still, I should probably say *something*.

'Hi Missus, uh...?'

'Jones,' says the woman, crossing her arms.

'Right –' I clear my throat '– um, sorry about the misunderstanding. About the clothes and, uh, stuff, I mean.' I hold up the tote bag and hope to God she doesn't make a big deal out of my lack of packing skills.

She eyes it like a skittish animal trying to work out if the seeds in my hand are actually food or just a trick. She must decide it's the former, because she takes it.

Slowly.

'Thank you,' she says, without even looking inside the bag. 'I... apologise for my behaviour at the hospital. I'm sure you can appreciate that it was a... stressful night... for us.'

'Oh, yeah, totally get it. It's cool. I mean, I'm sorry for, y'know, wearing your things without your, um, your permission. I swear, I didn't know.'

'It's okay,' says Missus Jones, opting to make this perfectly clear by standing in the doorway and letting the awkward silence carry on for too long.

'Um, so, I was wondering if I could maybe, see Sam? Just for a bit.'

Way too long.

'I'd prefer it if you didn't.'

'But she hasn't answered my calls or —'

'No, she hasn't.'

Okaaay.

I do my best to look forlorn.

'Please, Missus Jones? I nearly lost my best friend, I just want to talk to her again. Just for bit.'

Missus Jones takes a deep breath and rolls her eyes. 'Alright. Fine. But please don't be too long. Sam's... fragile right now.'

'I'll make it quick,' I say.

'See that you do.' Missus Jones finally steps aside. 'Shall I assume you know where her room is?' I nod sheepishly and head downstairs as quickly as I can manage.

I reach Sam's room, and find her sitting at her desk, playing a game on her computer. I've gotta say, the place looks absolutely no different by daylight than it did the night she pierced my ears. I knock, despite the door being open, and Sam turns her tired eyes upon me. She's all pale skin and grey bruises, wrapped up in pyjamas and a dressing gown, despite the room being pleasantly warm. She looks older. Kinda jaded. Still, her smile *almost* says it all.

'Jess! Gimme a sec,' she says, turning back to the computer. You'd think she'd be playing something with bright colours, but no, it's *Call of Duty* on multiplayer. I guess Mikey's influence runs deep.

It doesn't last, though, because a moment after my distraction of an arrival, the screen blackens and throws up a bunch of scores.

'Aw, fuck. We almost had it,' she says. She sounds genuinely sad, but as I sit down on her bed, she spins her chair around and I can see her smile's still there.

That's something at least.

'How've you been?' she asks.

'Yeah, good. Good to see ya, too. I was getting worried when you weren't answering my messages.'

'Yeah, sorry 'bout that. Mum and dad kinda lost their shit for a while there. I'm surprised mum let you in, to be honest.'

'Well, I had to bring her stuff back.'

'Oh... right.' Silence. 'How's school?'

So, we're doing casual. Okay. I can handle that. 'Um, yeah, not bad, all things considered. Miss you, though.'

'I bet you do,' she says, laughing. 'Just so you know, I never meant to leave you alone with those crazy twins.'

'Heh, it's okay.'

'Is everyone still hanging out together, though? I mean, you and Hannah got the magazine, but, ah, I woulda thought you guys might be, y'know, falling apart without me.'

My turn to laugh. 'Yeah, well, not far off,' I say, which elicits a concerned frown from Sam. 'Jace and I... we had a fight.' I explain. 'At the club, actually, right before... y'know.'

'Yeah, Mikey mentioned that.'

'We're not friends anymore.'

Sam's smile fades. 'Shit, I'm sorry, Jess. What happened?'

I sigh. 'It doesn't really matter, Sam, I mean, I came to see how you're doing, anyway. I haven't seen you in weeks.'

'I know,' she says.

'When are you coming back to school?' I ask.

Sam doesn't say anything for a while. Instead, she looks down at her feet, or, more accurately, fuzzy slippers covered in bunnies. I look around the room, almost as spotless as I remember, except for the fact there are now clothes on the floor. Even the enormous heart is still there. It doesn't take me long to figure out she's not going to reply, so I point at it to move the conversation forward.

'What is this thing, anyway? It looks so out-of-place.'

It's a dumb question. I already know it's prop. Still, after what she just put me through with the whole dressing me up in stolen clothes and pushing me into a relationship with someone who turned out to be an asshole, I think she can afford to answer a few nosy nothings.

'Oh, that's just something I made years ago for Wakakirri,' she says.

'You *made* it?'

'Yeah. It was my first year at Stanmore. I made the prop and got to choreograph the part of the dance it was used for. First time I choreographed anything.'

'Did you win?'

'No. Didn't know what I was doing. Bel and Zoe got angry coz they thought I ruined the whole performance.' She laughs.

'So, why do you keep it?'

Sam shrugs. 'Coz I like it, I guess.' She stares at it for a moment, then turns to me. 'Hey, Jess. I'm – uh – I'm sorry,' she says, quietly.

'For what?'

'For the club. For the drugs. For the dress. I told mum you didn't know the dress was hers. I don't think she believed me.'

'She was angry. Yes. But it's all good, I think. Listen, Sam, what's going on with you? You can talk to me.'

I realise I'm being a little aggressive, that Sam's eyes are slowly turning red, and that she's probably struggling not to cry. I also don't seem to care.

'I'm not going back to school, Jess,' she croaks. 'Mum and dad have organised for me to finish the year at home.'

Obviously. Fucking obviously.

Strange. Hearing her be honest actually makes me mad at her.

I sigh. 'Why'd you do it, Sam?'

She looks at me through tears.

'Do you have any idea what you put us through?' I push. 'You nearly *died*. And it's not just that. I had to tell them about the fake IDs, Sam, otherwise your parents would've sued Cole, and us, probably. They would've at least got everyone kicked off the magazine, maybe outta school. It would've been a clusterfuck. I could've lost everything – we could've lost everything. Do you know how much that hurts? Do you?'

She must have an inkling, because her face collapses into her hands and she slides onto the floor, sobbing gently as she goes. I don't move to join her, but I feel heat stick to the back of my throat.

'I'm sorry,' she says, between every breath. 'I'm sorry.'

I let her go for a minute.

'I know you're sorry,' I eventually mutter, 'and you should be. I mean, what about Mikey? Your folks wanted his scholarship shredded, y'know. They pretty much blamed him for the whole thing for a little bit. Have you said sorry to him?'

She picks her head up and looks at me. 'You haven't seen him since the hospital?' she asks.

'No.'

She wipes the snot from her nose with the sleeve of her dressing gown. 'We broke up,' she says. 'He said he'd had enough.'

'He... broke up with you?'

'Yeah,' she says, sniffing quietly. 'I'm surprised he didn't tell you.'

'He hasn't been around, which is probably a good thing because if he'd mentioned it, I'd be duty bound to punch him in the nose.' I reply.

I think Sam laughs. She smiles, at least. It's bitter, but it's a smile. My mind is busy working through some grand realisation, though, so I'm not really sure what to make of it. I take another look at the room. It's full of expensive knick-knacks just like before, things like miniature sculptures and dioramas: things Sam has never expressed an interest in. I realise everything – except perhaps the velvet heart – is a trophy, an expression of sophistication, of status. There are no posters on the walls, no photos. There's nothing else Sam might've made herself, nothing older than a few years, and nothing personal like my poster of Minnipup. It's a curated space: one made *for* her, but not *by* her; one made for someone who doesn't really exist.

So, when this realisation hits, it's like watching a montage.

The times I caught Sam with bloodshot eyes.

The times her and Mikey would snap at each other.

The wild suggestions she'd make.

New Year's Eve.

The stealing.

The drugs.

It all suddenly makes sense, and I realise I'm not angry at Sam for what she did: I'm angry at myself for not realising she was in pain.

'I hate my life,' she says, staring at me. No more tears. Just facts now.

Man, what the fuck am I supposed to say to that? I dig deep, see what I can find.

'Me too,' rises to the surface.

I kneel down and hug her.

She hugs me back.

'I went to see a doctor last month,' I say.

'What? Why?' asks Sam, drying her face.

Good question.

Why am I bringing this up?

I should offer her a tissue. But I don't have a tissue.

Maybe I'll just keep talking.

'Honestly? Because of Jace. And Hannah. And you, I guess.'

Sam frowns. 'Really?'

'Yeah. Remember that day in the library when you decided you were gonna buy me a vibrator?'

'Yeah! You used the bunny, right?'

'Yes, Sam. I used the bunny. But it didn't really do anything for me. *Nothing* was doing it for me. I felt like I was broken, and that's why Jace and I broke up.'

She raises an eyebrow. 'Seriously? Nothing? You used it properly, right?'

Okay. Time to make this official, I guess.

'Sam, listen. I've been looking this stuff up, and I'm pretty sure I'm asexual.'

Sam does a very good job of looking confused. 'What does that mean?' she asks.

'It can mean a lot of different things. The main one, though, is that I'm just not really attracted to people. Sexually, I mean.'

'Oh. Okay. So, is that what you argued with Jace about? At the club?'

'Yes. And no, actually.' And for some reason, I can't bring myself to meet her gaze. 'I, uh, may have been making out with someone, and he saw us.'

'But, didn't you just say -?'

'Yeah, but it wasn't like that. I didn't wanna sleep with the guy. I just wanted to share something. A moment, I don't know. I mean, yeah, he was probably thinking it would lead to more, but that's not what it was about for me. All I needed was a connection. Something physical, yes, but... Sam, I don't think you need to be doing these things just to get people's attention. If you can't get it any other way, then perhaps -' I pause '- perhaps they're not the people you should want attention from.'

Jeez.

That's some good advice.

I should listen to myself some time.

Sam sniffs. 'Well,' she says, 'look at you. Doin' it your own way.' She offers a cautious smile. 'So, guess I was actually being a pretty shitty friend most of the time, then, huh?'

I try not to be honest, but I have to be. 'Well, that makes two of us. I knew you were in trouble, Sam. I just didn't care. I'm sorry.'

There it is.

Sam must think so, too, because next thing I know, she takes her hand in mine and we just sit there, motionless for a few seconds. 'Me too,' she says. 'So, what did the doctor say?' she asks pulling away again.



'She thinks I've got emotional problems, but all my other tests say I'm perfectly normal, so...'

'Ha. What a bitch.'

I grin. 'Total bitch.'

'You're good, Jess. Take it from someone who almost accidentally killed themselves, there's nothing wrong with you.'

'Thanks, Sam.'

'No worries.' She rolls her eyes, slowly. 'They're sending me to see a doctor, too. I'm kinda scared of what he'll say.'

I sigh. 'Well, I don't think there's anything wrong with asking for help. I mean, once your mum calms down a little bit, call me anytime, but until then, maybe just talking to someone else will help.'

'Yeah. Maybe,' says Sam, her voice trailing off.

'I've got a referral to see a psychologist that's good for another few months. I can't say if she's any good, but all you'd have to do to find out is tell her your name's Jessica Roe.'

This makes her smile again.

We talk for a while after that. About everything. About nothing. I don't think we touch on Sam's overdose, my sexuality, Jace, or Mikey again. Instead, we talk about things like school and the beach, video games and books. We talk for so long her mum eventually comes to kick me out.

It's funny, after everything that's happened to me over the last year, I'm still surprised when things change so quickly. Or maybe nothing really does change, we just see it differently. I think – I *hope* – I'll always make the effort for Sam, because I know the Sam who struggles to pay attention at school, who would steal her mum's clothes, who would buy fake IDs and pop pills in a club just to get noticed isn't the only Sam there is.

There's also the Sam who loves to dance, the Sam who helps out with the magazine, who goes so far as to buy someone a vibrator because she thinks it'll help them "find" themselves. Okay, that last one still sounds weird, but you get what I mean. I wonder if that's how people see me, or if telling people I'm asexual will just turn me into some kind of label to them.

I don't know what's going to happen to Sam, but as Missus Jones dutifully returns my upmarket tote bag and ushers me out of the house, I realise she'll probably never change.

I only hope she'll make the same effort for me.

With Sam no longer at Stanmore, and Hannah unlikely to be getting a new roommate for the rest of the year, we convert their dorm into a kind of studio for working on the final issue of *New Wave*, tentatively dubbed “Conversation Starters”. The theme is Hannah’s idea, and she pitches it as referring to both the journalism slant and the fact that next year the magazine will need to transition to new editors, but I can’t help feeling there’s something else behind it.

To say that things get *a lot* harder is an understatement. With Sam and Jace out of the picture – and Mikey barely willing to make an appearance – Hannah and I do our best to divide their workloads evenly, but combined with our usual curriculum, it’s just too much too fast. It doesn’t take long for the cracks to show, and the atmosphere between Hannah and me – already strained by my argument with Jace – becomes unmistakably tense.

Combined with the fallout from Club Nine and the once-again looming end-of-year exams, it’s enough to bring back a whole lotta anxiety I thought I’d already beaten. In fact, sometimes I feel like I’ve just arrived at Stanmore, and that I’m standing at the gate again, gathering up the courage to go inside.

Maybe I’m just naturally suspicious, but my mind keeps wandering back to Jace, to what he might be saying about me; to how much people might be listening to him. I tell myself it can’t possibly be worse than anything Bel did when she was cyberstalking us, but then again, how can I know that? I see Jace from time to time, usually in the classroom or hanging out with people not me, Mikey, Sam, or Hannah, but we never speak anymore, and it hurts more than it should.

I made some mistakes, yes. I get why seeing me with a guy in the club was confusing. Painful, even. But I spent months trying to negotiate my feelings, and all he could do was think about himself. He made me feel like I was broken just when I thought I was starting to make sense.

So, why do I want to apologise, to tell him he was right, to make it all my fault? I hate knowing that he hates me, and I shouldn’t care, because I ultimately didn’t do anything wrong.

God, why does this have to be so hard?

*Again?*

WHY DO I FEEL LIKE THIS?

To try to forget about it and all and just focus on my future.

Because this is it: this is the big one.

Even with a L-E-P application in the bag, I’ve still gotta prove I’m worth the investment, otherwise Sydney U might look somewhere else. I’ve gotta make sure I can look after myself, too, because if nothing else, I’m gonna need to get a job soon. Dad’s money won’t last much longer than

a year into uni – even *if* Audrey lets me stay with her – unless I can get that scholarship. I’m gonna have to learn how to be self-sufficient if I wanna strike out properly on my own, so the first thing I do in that regard is finally take up those driving lessons.

I know: what could possibly be worse for our relationship than my terrible driving combined with Audrey’s terrible mothering smack bang in the middle of Australia’s busiest city? Probably not much. I mean, she ends up swearing a lot, and so do I. She tenses every time I try to change gears or make the breaks groan. I sweat a lot and spend more time than either of us are comfortable with wiping the condensation off my glasses at traffic lights. Nevertheless, we go nearly every evening – well, every evening Audrey’s off work – and every weekend, and y’know what? We actually start to bond.

We even go for a daytrip to a park along Georges River when Audrey somehow manages to score an entire Saturday off, and I have to say, it doesn’t turn out half bad. We do all the cheesy things you’re supposed to do: make sandwiches and tea; argue about what flavour chips to bring; and raid the linen cupboard for any old blanket that doesn’t smell like cat fur. We even buy a wicker picnic basket. Then we sit and chat for hours on a grassy knoll by the river, surrounded by the sound of tourists and running water and the smell of the flowers coming out for Spring.

I tell her about my plans, and we go through some of the options I might have with the rest of dad’s money. She admits she’s worried about me after our arguments and my experiences at school – *and* at Club Nine – so I reassure her I’m still focused on my education and my career.

She asks me if I have a backup if writing doesn’t go anywhere.

I concede that I don’t, and we sit there mulling over the career paths she thought she might follow at my age.

It’s the most adult conversation we’ve ever had. Nobody shouts, nobody storms off, and nobody gets slapped.

It’s surreal.

After we’re done talking about my future, we go for a walk.

For the first time ever, Audrey asks if it’s okay to ask about something, and that something is Jace.

I tell her the truth about what happened, that we tried to make it work, that we tried to be friends, that I made some mistakes, and that he was an asshole, all of which together meant that we couldn’t stand the sight of each other anymore.

Audrey didn’t judge and she doesn’t pry, just asks if I’m happy. I don’t really answer, and I stop short of telling her about the things I’ve been looking up online. The articles, the websites, the LGBTQI groups that support asexuality and the LGBTQI groups that think it’s a joke. I don’t know why

I can't say anything to her. Audrey probably knows more about being on the outside of this particular "normal" than anyone else I know. Still, something inside me tells me it's not quite the same: that she's *always* been part of something I'm increasingly convinced I'm not, despite the pain her coming out all the years ago caused.

Maybe I haven't been as fair to her as I thought.

Maybe I hate growing up.

I decide then and there that it's something I'll share with her, eventually.

Just not yet.

After everything that's happened, though, it's only a short reprieve. In the meantime, I seem to go above and beyond to erase the differences between me and the collective that is Stanmore. I spend money on new shoes, I replace my backpack with a satchel, and my old plastic hairclip is gone, permanently replaced with professionally non-coloured hair ties, much to Lestat's pleasure. I wear my uniform without complaint. The maroon blazer, the pleated skirt, the stupid neckerchief. All of it. I even do up the buttons right to the neck. I wear black stockings on cold days, and when I arrive, I make an effort to carry myself with dignity, even if I'm freezing.

Am I selling out?

I don't know.

When I remember what I said to Sam, I feel like I am.

But it's hard to know exactly what I want these days.

I also dive into lining up my university topics, which is a whole new can of worms. Enrolment opens soon, and I want to be on top of things, so I go asking my teachers for advice. It's strangely comforting, the fact that I've only known them all for a year or so yet I can already talk to them like old friends. Well, most of them, anyway.

But, the calm doesn't last, and Jace's first "swing" comes in the latter half of September. I'm between lessons, like dozens of others, when I stop to switch some books around in my locker. I punch in my code, open the door, and watch in horror as about a thousand individually wrapped condoms pour out onto the floor.

I don't know how.

I don't know why.

All I know is the corridor is filled with a gathering crowd of people, all laughing, all snapping photos on their phones, all pointing at me. Unsurprisingly, Bel – Milly's on-again-off-again thug and her offsider, whats-her-name, materialise from somewhere nearby and saunter up to me.

'Ouch. Who'd you burn, sweetie?' she says, grinning ruefully as she points to a message painted in red on the inside of the door.

“Dicktease”.

Then a boy comes up to me. I recognise him from class. I know his name. He’s one of Jace’s friends.

‘Dayum. Heard you were cold, but if you’re this desperate, can should give me a ride,’ he says. ‘I’ll show you what a *real* man can do.’

He cackles.

He might as well be spitting on me.

All I can do is turn my back on him, on Bel and the other one, but it feels like there are dozens of faces, all of them surrounding me, and I can’t see anything.

I can’t even breathe.

So, I walk away.

Quickly and quietly.

I leave my locker open, the condoms strewn across the floor for someone else to clean up.

I find an empty bathroom, lock myself in a stall, and sit patiently, waiting for the tears to come.

But they don’t.

Jace was the only other person who knew the combination to my locker. I’m sure he’s already circulating nicknames for me. I’m sure this will go down as one of those defining moments of my teenage life. The heat of the anger – the pain of betrayal – it’s all there, just like you’d expect. I remember all the things I did to make Jace happy. Then I remember his reaction when I could finally articulate how I felt, and all I want to do is break down like Milly did that day.

Right here.

Right now.

But the tears don’t come.

Not this time.

Jace’s second “swing” comes only a week later, when Hannah and I are sitting in our “studio” talking about the magazine and university. It’s a rare moment: us talking about things out of necessity but straying back into the friendly world of post-school intentions without it devolving into grunts and silence. I’d hoped beyond hope that my connection with her would stay strong, that no matter what Jace told her, she wouldn’t abandon me, or at least wouldn’t pick a side. Out of all of us, Hannah had always been the most grounded.

The most *reasonable*.

Surely, I thought, my friendship with her was safe?

And it seemed that way – it really did – until one not-so-innocuous little question reveals exactly what I’m up against.

‘Hey, I’ve been thinking,’ she says, tapping her chin.

I’m on the floor, my legs crossed to keep my laptop steady. The screen is filled, yet again, with university courses and electronic application forms. This time, though, a spreadsheet keeps track of all my preferred topics, and the semesters in which they’re being offered next year. Hannah’s sitting at what was technically Sam’s old desk, her pen – until a moment ago – dancing idly over what I assume to be list of topical preferences.

She’s clearly not thinking about that anymore, though.

‘What’s up?’ I ask.

‘Don’t take this the wrong way or anything, but have you maybe thought about stepping back from the last issue?’

I save my work and slowly close the laptop, but Hannah isn’t looking at me.

‘Why?’ I ask, quietly.

‘Well, I just know how busy you’ve been. Since the club, I mean. I’m just wondering if your heart’s still in it, y’know? I understand, of course. I’m not suggesting we take your name off it, or anything.’

‘My heart’s in it. I’m just a little distracted by the fact that we’re in final semester. I really need to get a good ATAR, y’know?’

Hannah finally turns, a conceit laden with exasperation. She looks plain, tired. She hasn’t worn any of her homemade bracelets since her dad called her a tramp at the hospital. She looks so much older without them.

‘C’mon, Jess. I know you’ve got a lot to deal with, like my idiot brother and his idiot pranks, for starters.’

I hadn’t actually told Hannah about the condoms. But after five working days, why wouldn’t she know? This is Stanmore, after all.

‘You heard about that, huh?’

‘Yeah. Don’t worry, I already told him off for being a jerk. Anyway, my point is, I’m happy to finish the magazine myself. I think we’ve done enough prep, and I mean, you’ve probably already got a spot at Sydney U. You don’t have to waste any more time on *New Wave*.’

I pick up my satchel and stow my laptop. The second she started sounding like Milly is the second I knew this was probably gonna end with me walking out the door, so I might as well be prepared to make it dramatic.

‘What’s going on, Hannah?’

'Whataya mean?'

'Don't play dumb with me. I know you better than that.'

Hannah frowns. 'Look, Jess, I'm in this for the business stuff, okay? You've had some good ideas for the magazine, sure, but I was really hoping to sort of make the last issue mine. Especially with the journalism bit we're pushing.'

'What? Do you think I can't write an article?'

'It's not that. It's just – the L-E-P's mostly for creative streams, y'know? For me, I gotta really prove I can run a publication if I'm gonna get in, too.'

'Han, we've been in this together all year and you've *more* than proven you can run a publication. I mean, it might've been my idea to get Milly kicked, but *you're* the one who sold it to Harry, remember?'

Hannah sighs. 'Look, all I'm saying is that your style's good, but it's too... artsy. The last two issues have got good stuff in them, but they're all over the place. They don't stick to the themes, not really, and there's no real student journalism in them. If I'm gonna get into a professional course, I gotta prove I can put together something a bit more saleable.'

'What, you mean like Milly's newsletter?'

Hannah rolls her eyes. 'No, Jess, not like a newsletter. I just – ugh. You're such a baby, sometimes. Grow up, okay?' she mumbles.

Oh yeah. Let's do this.

'Y'know, I'm getting *real* sick of people telling me to grow up. What? You think you're so well-adjusted or that your problems are harder than mine? I'm at Stanmore coz my dad died. How 'bout you?'

I stand up and go to swing my satchel over my shoulder, ready to march out in a spectacularly angry fashion the second it feels poignant enough.

'Did you ever stop to think that maybe the reason you and your mum argue all the time is because you're a psycho?' says Hannah, calmly.

'Did you ever stop to think that turning on your best friend because your brother's a prick might be a bit of a dog move?'

Hannah scoffs. 'Maybe I always knew you were a bitch,' she says.

'I'm a bitch? Why do you *really* want me off the magazine, Han? What exactly *has* Jace told you about our breakup?'

'That's got nothing to do with it.'

'What did he tell you?'

Hannah leans back in her chair and glares at me. She seems to weigh up her options for a moment, then says exactly what I think she's going to say.

'Honestly, Jess, what were you expecting? What even *is* asexuality, anyway? You could've just told him you weren't interested. I mean, I'd still give you shit for leading Jace on, but at least I'd *understand*.'

'My fucking God. You're unbelievable.'

Hannah scowls. 'I've only ever done right by you. Y'know, Jace was too scared to ask you out? I had to convince him it was a good idea, even after he *accidentally* invited you to that party.'

'Well, I didn't ask you to do that, did I?'

'You didn't need to, coz I'm a nice person. You're the one who treats everyone and everything like a joke.'

I have to be honest. That comment makes my eyes water. Luckily, it makes me too angry.

It's a familiar feeling.

'Oh, *wow*, Hannah. You're actually a pretty nasty piece of work, aren't you?'

'What does that make you, then?'

'Y'know what pisses me off the most?' She doesn't answer, so I start counting out names on my fingers. 'Out of you, Sam, Jace, and Mikey, I thought *you* would be the most understanding, considering what happened to you after the whole Brad Summers thing.'

'That's totally *not* the same,' she counters.

'Bullshit it's not! Why did you *think* Jace put hundreds of condoms in my locker, Han? Because of the meta-commentary?'

'*Maybe* it was his response to all that flirting you *didn't* do, how 'bout *that*? Or, maybe, he just wanted to remind you 'bout those times that you actually, y'know, *put out*? LOL! So asexual! Oh, no, even better –' she stands up and snaps her fingers sarcastically – '*maybe it was because of that time he caught you face fucking a guy in Club Nine just a couple weeks after telling him you weren't into that sort of thing?*'

I eye the door. Maybe I should do what she wants and just leave, give her the last issue and walk away? I've got school and uni to think about, and it'd be easier – so much easier – not to fight this stupid little battle. When I don't move, I surprise even myself.

'So, what are you saying? That I deserved it?'

Hannah pulls back for a moment. 'No, I'm not saying that,' she argues. 'I'm just saying there was a reason for it, is all.'

I sigh. 'You wanna know what Jace said to me when I was trying to explain to him what asexuality is?'



Hannah shrugs. 'Not really.'

'He said "if you say so". And that was it.'

'So?'

'So? Hannah, I went to a doctor and got myself tested because our relationship falling apart made me feel like shit. I *loved* your brother, but when I tried to explain how... *broken*... I felt, he couldn't have cared less.'

'Well, aren't you?' counters Hannah. 'Broken, I mean?'

'No, Han. There's not a *single thing* wrong with me.'

'Right, well, that's called celibacy, Jess. Look it up. It's something nuns do. By choice. But yeah, keep comparing yourself to Mother Teresa, I'm sure I'll buy it eventually.'

I just look at her.

Honestly, the anger fades away fast, and I replace it with mild disappointment.

If someone like Sam can just shrug and accept me for who I am, but Hannah can't, then...

I realise she won't ever see it my way. I realise I'm wasting my breath trying. The world is built for her in a way it isn't for me.

'Maybe you're the one who needs to "grow up", Hannah.' I sling my satchel over my shoulder, just as I promised myself I would, and head for the door. 'I'll come back later, when you've calmed down a bit. This magazine isn't gonna put itself together.'

I can feel her staring daggers at me, but you know what?

She can shove 'em.

I swing the door wide, just to make the point that anyone could hear what I say next. 'Oh, and if you try to get me kicked off the magazine,' I snap, 'I'm sure Langley would just *love* to know who was behind the whole condom prank!'

It's a bit of a hollow threat, sure, but I deliver it with such conviction that I think Hannah believes I'll do it. In any case, there's only one way to follow it up.

I slam the door behind me.

*Emphatically.*

September bleeds into October, and everything once again becomes an obsessive battle for grades. With no group to share the bleachers with anymore, I have to find a new way to deal with the pressure. Luckily for me, Sam's parents book her a decent psychologist who *strongly* suggests they avoid isolating her entirely, so we manage to convince them to let us study together after school as long as it's at their house. While that means I have to take the bus up north every other day, the *château* definitely beats Stanmore at this time of year.

Besides, Sam is making an effort this time, though she doesn't have much of an option. The amount of work her tutor has amassed in her room is both impressive and a little scary: with her drama classes out of the equation, Sam tells me her folks want her to pass every subject she's got left with honours rather than just competence. It's a big ultimatum, but Sam's nothing if not compliant these days.

Mostly.

'Is it just me or are we getting nowhere on this?' she wonders aloud one particularly maths-laden afternoon.

'You're not wrong,' I agree. Still my worst subject, by the way. 'But I guess you kinda owe your parents something, huh?'

'Pfft. Honestly, I owe myself,' replies Sam, suddenly smiling. She's sitting on the floor – as she often does now – with her legs crossed. I often catch her wearing a determined expression, though, and she looks *way* better than she did only a month ago.

Still, I have to ask.

Like I do every week.

'How you doin' anyway, Sam?'

She scoffs. 'Not great,' she says. 'But that's why mum lets you come over, dummy. She thinks you're my smartest, bestest friend.'

'You didn't tell her I'm your *only* friend?'

We stare at each other.

And we laugh.

The thing about Sam is that no matter how hard I try to tiptoe around sensitive things, she just brings them up anyway, so by the time there's a call from upstairs announcing the imminent serving of dinner, we're being pretty open and honest with each other again, just like we are almost every other time I visit. I ask her about her parents, about the stealing and the drugs, and about how she plans to move on with her life. Most of the conversations we've already had, but when Sam

asks what's been going on at school, I realise I haven't told her about the condom prank and Hannah's follow-up "request" for me to leave the magazine yet.

To my relief, she shakes her head with what seems to be genuine disappointment. 'Always knew they were cunts,' she declares. 'And I never liked that stupid nickname he gave you, either.'

'What, "Caviar"?'

'Yeah. So dumb. I think it was meant to be sarcastic, or something. Pretty mean, actually. Like, "look at this poor chick who thinks she's got money" kinda thing.'

'Yeah, well, I'm starting to get that now.'

'I always thought you were more of a deer, anyway.'

'A deer?'

'Yeah, y'know, like a European roe. At least, that's how I remembered your name, originally.'

'I didn't even know that was an animal,' I confess. 'But I like it more than fish eggs, that's for sure.'

'See? I'm not just a pretty blonde,' says Sam, smirking.

I smile, too. It's good to see her like this.

'So, if Hannah thinks you screwed Jace over, how the hell are you two still working together on the magazine?'

'Oh, she's not happy about it,' I reply, with rueful glee. 'We usually spend a couple hours a week in the dorm. We hardly speak, it's like sitting in an icebox. But I mean, fuck her, right? I was even thinking of doing a big article about LGBTQI rights and pushing it through with Harry whether she likes it or not. There's no way she could refuse to publish it, and it'd *really* piss her off.'

Sam raises an eyebrow. 'Sounds like you tryna piss off the whole board, to be honest.'

'Well, maybe. But it's topical, isn't it? They're finally doing a postal survey, y'know. I might not be able to vote, but I can still make it look like a bunch of old, white bigots support gay marriage.'

Sam chuckles. 'Don't take this the wrong way, but you sound an awful lot like Jace.'

Oof, that hurts.

But it's kinda true...

Damn, I've got no options, here.

I *have* to pout.

'Mean,' I grumble.

'Sorry. If it helps, I now hate them both, 'specially Han. I mean, she likes people to think she's some kinda hipster, but she was always the one complaining about Jace's pranks making things harder for her. At least my parents are just like, "whatever, raise yourself".'

She laughs again, and even though it still sounds cheery to me, there's an undercurrent of bitterness creeping back in.

'Well, if you ever get sick of 'em and don't mind slumming it, I'd be happy to share board with you at Sydney U,' I say. 'But if you ever offer to dress me again, I'm so calling the cops.'

Sam grins. 'Fair enough. Oh, hey, I meant to ask, are you going to the formal?'

'Ah –' Shit. I'd forgotten about it.

Sam doesn't miss a beat. 'You forgot about it, didn't you?' she says.

'Little bit,' I confess. I wouldn't have planned on it, anyway. I'm not really in the mood to see most of the people who'll be there, and I've got the feeling there'll be a *lot* of self-congratulations before the eighteen-plusses turn it into a massive piss up.

Yet...

I can see it in Sam's eyes.

Her parents won't let her go without me. I'd bet the rest of my trust fund on it.

And she needs it, too.

She's not about to ask

She's about to beg.

'You should go,' she says, cautiously. 'I'd *really* like it if you did.'

I take a deep breath. 'Yeah. Yeah, sure. I'll go.'

Sam grins. If she had a tail, it'd be wagging right now.

'*Sick*,' she says. In the good way.

'Turns out I *am* just a good time to you, huh?'

The grin widens. 'You? A good time? That's a laugh. Seriously, though, thanks Jess. I'm trying. I really am. But it's hard. Club Nine wasn't the first time I've... y'know... taken stuff. But I've been doing sums for the past two fucking hours, that's gotta count for something, right?'

'I think it does.'

Sam's grin relaxes back into a friendly smile. 'Thanks.'

'Yeah, well, consider yourself lucky. I could probably find some other girl to sweep me off my feet.'

I give her a wink.

She gives me a punch in the arm.

For a while, I actually think I'm getting away with it. Things go well with me and Sam, I start to get a handle on all my schoolwork, there isn't a hint of another vindictive prank from Jace, and my

relationship with Audrey improves to the point she lets me drive us all the way to Mona Vale to see some friends of hers and *nobody* yells along the way.

As Halloween approaches, Sam gets a couple of last-minute grades good enough to convince her mum to let us to go to the formal together – with some caveats, of course – and the final poetry slam finishes off with a frightening display of emotion from Miss Jurrah, who delivers a teary thank you to everyone who participated over the course of the year. In a rare moment of reconciliation, she even convinces Jace, Hannah, Mikey and me to get up on stage together while many of the student participants shuffle by to thank us for giving them the opportunity to get a decent publishing credit under their belt. All of us do our duty without looking at one another for more than a few collective seconds, but we manage to pull it off, and I think most of the crowd goes away thinking that we were at least professional, if not friends.

The final issue of *New Wave* begins taking shape shortly thereafter, and I stick with it, even *if* working with Hannah is like trying to pull splinters. I even follow through on my thought bubble and write such a killer article in defence of gay marriage that I'm honestly impressed with myself, and so is Harry, who promises me he'll back my play no matter what the board says.

I had no reason to suspect Jace had another shot in store for me, which is why when I'm sitting alone in the cafeteria eating my lunch one day and Milly sits down across from me, shit-eating grin firmly in place, my heart sinks into the floor.

'Hi, Jess,' she says, her tone sickly sweet. 'How's your exam prep coming along? Looking forward to studying at big 'ol Sydney U?'

Initially, I just look her up and down, not intending to say anything, but then I remind myself that Milly doesn't *do* petty. If she's about to lay something down, it's probably in my interests to hear it.

*Gonna hurt you real bad...*

I put my cucumber sandwich aside. 'Just so y'know,' I say, turning to her with a level of calm surprising even me. 'The kids at my old school woulda eaten you alive.'

'Oh, good thing we're not out in the 'hood then, huh?' she says. 'Honestly, though, I'm hoping this conversation can remain civil. That's a skill few people possess, I'm sure you agree.'

'Is that why Bel and Zoe aren't here?'

'Right on the money.'

'Ah, see, I thought maybe you didn't want me to spill the beans about your little panic attacks. I don't think your little minions would be able to follow your every direction if they knew just how much of a nervous wreck you are.'

'Actually, Caviar, I left them out of this as a favour to you,' she counters, flatly.

Uh oh.

She's never called me "Caviar" before. *That's* a message in and of itself.

Shit.

'Whataya want, Milly?' I ask, suddenly unsettled.

'Now, now, no need to be so tense. I'm sure you're well prepared to *ride out* some of that end-of-year stress.'

She grins again, but unlike last year, her bullshit just makes me roll my eyes.

'Yeah, yeah, I've seen how sassy you *aren't*, Mills, so you don't really scare me with your tough girl act anymore.'

'Fine,' she says, still grinning. 'I'll get the point. I went to the last poetry slam you put on, and I gotta say, you guys did a good job this year. Much better than I ever did, I'll admit. In fact, I think you all did such a good job, that I just had to stop for a little chat with your mate Hannah and that delightful ex of yours, what's-his-name. Jack? Jeffrey?' She makes a show of trying to "remember" Jace's name. 'Oh, and for the record, I thought that condom gag was gross, by the way.'

'I thought you were getting to the point?'

'Fair enough. I just wanted to apologise first,' she says, pulling out her phone and absently tapping away on the screen.

'For what?'

'Well, I know it wasn't your fault,' she continues. 'You didn't do anything wrong. Not really. I mean, maybe you should've thought about it a bit first, but —'

'Milly. What the fuck are you talking about?'

She looks up at me with an expression so genuinely compassionate, it's unnerving. 'I get it. Guys. They're all the same, right? I mean, "asexuality": that's some weird shit you made up you to get him off your back, but I *get* it. Thing is, though, you really *do* need to be more careful when you send people pics with your face in it, y'know?'

I look at her.

She looks at me.

She hands me the phone.

I look at the screen.

And see the topless photo I sent to Jace last year, my face clear as day in Sam's bureau mirror.

'What the fuck?' I try to croak, but all that comes out is a cough and half a cry.

'Yeah, it's sad,' says Milly, leaving just enough of a pause. 'It really is the kind of photo the police like to hear about, because y'know, it's *technically* child porn. I don't think you'd be arrested

for it, of course. You were pressured into it. But if it got around in a place like Stanmore, it could easily get you expelled, or, at the very least, cost you a place in those precious extra-curriculars. Like the L-E-P, for example.'

The fear. The anxiety. The confusion.

It all comes rushing back.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words form.

My throat is dry.

My heart is pounding in my chest.

My head is beginning to hurt.

All I can do is think.

Think two simple words.

Fucking.

*Bitch.*

'Hey, did you know my mum works at Sydney U? Imagine the effect something like this could have on, say, trying to enrol there! *Especially* if it got out that the girl in the photo went and got shitfaced on cocaine with her friends at a club where a famous footballer's son just *happens* to work as a bouncer. Gosh, underage sex and drugs at a prestigious Sydney Christian college.' She clicks her tongue. 'I suppose if it was just one or the other, you *might* be able to weasel out it, but *both*? That really *would* be a scandal, Jess.'

I can't even...

I just stare at the photo.

The sense of betrayal is utterly overwhelming, like Jace reached in and opened a black hole inside of me, and it's sucking away everything I have left.

I go red, I can feel it.

'Why would he -?'

'What, why would the guy you *led on* for six months hold on to photos like this? I don't know, to beat off to, maybe? Or are you asking me why he would hand them over to someone like me?'

'But... Jace - How could he do this?'

'*How?*' Milly actually laughs, any compassion she may have had long gone. 'Bitch, you were not-banging an eshay wannabe. Do the maths. If it makes you feel any better, Jace thought he was pretty clever giving me this photo for some stupid revenge kick, but he forgot that sending it to me timestamped his name into the fucking metadata. If you want me to, I'll print it out and get Bel to

stick it on every locker in school. He'll be a registered sex offender faster than his dad can sue the school. Honestly, Jess, he's not that bright. You coulda done better.'

She takes her phone back and leans on the table while I just stare at her, dumbly.

'Jess? Are you still there?' she asks, waving a hand in front of my face.

It's enough to snap me out of it.

'You unbelievable –' I whisper.

'Hey, I told you I was gonna get you, remember?'

'But... *why*? I didn't do *anything* like this to you.'

'No, that's true. You didn't go this far. But you did take something away from me, even *after* I offered to give you what you wanted.'

'A credit wasn't enough –'

'A credit was *plenty* for someone like you.' She sighs. 'You still don't get what it's like to have to prove yourself all the time, do you? You made a clever play, and I respect that, but the problem is you had nothing to back yourself up with, because you *are* nothing. You're garbage, Caviar, a drop out whose daddy had to die before she could buy a decent pair of shoes. You come at me like that with nothing in your corner, then it's time to learn some fucking humility, don't you think?'

Try as I might, I just can't hold her gaze, and end up staring at the table, my mind running through every possible outcome I can think of on short notice.

What can I do?

How can I fight this?

I can't just ignore it.

If I do, I'll be at the centre of some ridiculous, overblown sex scandal, even if I *do* take it to Audrey or Langley or, I don't know, a fucking lawyer.

Milly will make sure of it, because that's all she needs to do.

I know exactly what will happen.

I know exactly what the consequences will be.

Jesus, all I wanted to fucking do was write. Sydney U was the pipe dream, sure, but all it was ever really about was sharing stories.

For dad – no.

For *me*.

This was something that was gonna be mine.

Mine *alone*.

And it's meaningless now.

Nobody would listen, nobody would care.



This is *so* fucking unfair.

'What do you want?' I ask with the gravitas of a cartoon mouse. Probably because I can already guess the answer.

'Well, Jess, I know you've been gunning pretty hard for the L-E-P, so, I want you to withdraw your application.'

'Are you *serious*?'

'Absolutely, Jessica. So, either you can withdraw yourself, or I'll *make* you withdraw carrying a whole lot more baggage.'

I sigh. 'Fine. What about the magazine?' I ask.

'Oh, I don't care about that. You can keep it. Although... yes, actually, I want credit as co-editor on the last issue.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'Co-editor?'

'Yeah. Just a credit, though, because honestly, Jess, I think a credit *is* plenty, y'know?'

Yep, sounds about right.

All I can do is nod.

'Good girl,' says Milly, standing up. 'Oh, and by the way, I hope you're coming to the formal. I'm putting a lot of effort into organising it, and it'll be everyone's last chance to get together before the end of school.'

She pats me on the shoulder and squeezes it tight.

'And I'd just *love* to see you there,' she says.

The hardest part of realising that Milly won isn't coming to terms with the fact that Jace betrayed my trust, or the fact I now have to go on knowing there's a nude of me out there that might surface at any moment. No, it's backtracking on every major success I've had this year. It's telling Mister Dubois that I'm giving up after convincing him to risk his job. It's telling Audrey that I wasted dad's money after giving her more than a year of grief. It's accepting the fact that the future I was banking on can no longer be.

God, how could I let this happen?

How could I have been so *stupid*?

*None* of this is fair, and all I can do is take it one, painful step at a time, because any way I spin it, I've made a mess, and now I have to clean it up. That's the only way I can look at this without it becoming the defining failure of my young adult life.

I decide to argue Hannah down first.

Her face when I tell her I want to give Milly a co-editor credit is priceless, though not completely devoid of reason. I don't know how involved she got with Jace's little scheme, but it doesn't take her long to connect the dots.

She agrees as long as I pull my article on gay marriage: she doesn't wanna upset the board on the eve of her big triumph.

I can't really argue, so my next stop is to see Harry.

Waiting for the other students to shuffle out of his French class while I imagine every conceivable mixture of anger and disappointment I might be about to confront feels like waiting on Death Row. Then, when it *is* just me and him, I forget to meander to the front of the class altogether. I just stay in my seat, staring forlornly at my workbook until a shadow appears across my desk.

'Jess? Can I help you find the door so I can go to lunch?' he asks, looking down at me.

'I... sorry, I just need to talk to you,' I reply, slowly.

I like to think he offers me an expression of concern, but I don't look up to check.

'What's wrong?' he asks.

'It's about the article. And the L-E-P.'

'Ah, well, I've just finished going over some fresh edits, in fact.' Harry returns to his desk and pulls out the stapled hard copy of my piece. Even from my desk, I can see penned scrawl accompanying the words. I already know he's read it, of course, because he told me so. But knowing that he *really* read it is kinda comforting.

Small moments, now.

He grabs a chair and slides it up to the table, then sits down across from me.

He clears his throat. 'I haven't submitted it to the board for approval yet, so I'm happy to go through it with you now.'

I hear myself gulp. 'No, it's not that,' I say.

'Oh?'

I don't say anything.

Silence fills the room.

Harry puts the essay on the table and taps his chin. 'Jess, are you okay?'

I shake my head. 'I... I have to withdraw the article,' I confess, choking back a tear or two.

'What? Why?'

'And I have to withdraw from the L-E-P.'

Harry leans back in his chair and sighs. He looks at me for a long time. 'Jess, what's going on?' he asks, his voice unusually forceful. 'This doesn't sound like the girl who muscled her way onto the school magazine and turned it into a powerhouse publication *at all*.'

'And Milly needs a co-editorship credit,' I finish, wincing.

I look at Harry, at his pained frowned, at an annoyed tongue impatiently poking on the inside of his cheek. 'Jess, I heard about that locker prank last month,' he says. 'I don't know what's going on here, but if Milly's somehow involved... I'll go in front of Langley and tell him it was her, you have my word.'

'No. It – it wasn't her.'

'Jess, I –'

For some reason, the fact that he won't let it go annoys me more than it perhaps should, and I cut him off sharply. 'There's nothing you can say to change my mind, *Monsieur* Dubois, and I'm not gonna tell you anything.'

Harry opens his mouth to argue, then changes his mind.

Then we're back to staring.

I'm not entirely sure what to say.

Is he waiting for an apology?

Am I?

Eventually, Harry picks up the stapled pages of my article and regards them coldly. I don't mean in a detached way, just... kinda calculating. 'Well, if that's your decision, of course,' he concedes. 'Can I ask you something, though?'

I shrug. 'Whatever.'

'You had your heart set on an L-E-P scholarship for most of the year. Now, I'm sure you'll get the grades you need to get into uni, but without the L-E-P, there's no scholarship. What are you planning to do, exactly?'

I say the only thing I can think to. 'I dunno. Work at a pharmacy, maybe?'

'Jess,' he sighs again. 'Why did you write this article?'

I guess I shoot him a quizzical expression, because he holds it up as if I don't know what he's talking about.

'Because I wanted to?'

'Yes, but *why*? What *drove* you to put all these thoughts down on paper? Are LGBTQI rights just something you're passionate about? Or is there something personal behind them?'

I consider my answer. I settle on, 'Both.'

'That's good, because this is an impressive piece of writing by someone who *knows* who she is and what matters to *her*. Are these things you've shared with anyone else?'

'Some people. Not everyone.'

Harry nods, then slides the article across the table towards me.

'Is that because you feel like you need to hide who you are?'

I pause. 'Maybe,' I confess.

'What part of France do you think I'm from?'

Huh?

I shrug again. It's a surprisingly succinct motion, y'know.

'Um, Paris?' I guess.

Harry smiles. 'Most people say that. Or Toulouse.'

'Okay.'

'Would it surprise you to learn that I've never stepped foot in France?'

'No.'

Wait.

'Never?'

'Never.'

'But your last name –'

'Interesting, isn't it? My best guess, after a fair bit of research, is that an Englishman took it to smooth over a business deal about two hundred odd years ago. I suppose it just stuck.'

'Huh. But why does that matter, anyway?'

'Well, the only reason I studied French was because of my name. I actually majored in geography. I even applied for the role here, but Harvey – sorry, Mister Patel – got it over me because

the board liked the idea of someone with a French name teaching French at their school. I guess they think that makes it more authentic.'

'Huh. Why are you telling me this?'

Harry sighs. 'You have the gift of expression, Jess, and take it from me, that's a *rare* thing.' I pick up the hardcopy of my article and Harry looks at me. 'Whatever this piece of you represents, don't throw it out. You owe yourself better than that. Just remember that no *one* thing defines you, or anyone.'

I slide the article into my satchel and look back across the void at my newly non-French teacher. 'Thanks,' I tell him.

'Don't thank me 'til you pass your exam,' he says. 'Just promise me you won't give up on yourself.'

'As long as you promise you'll keep trying to get that geography role,' I counter.

'Done.'

I hold my hand out and he shakes it.

It's a strange thing to do, but it feels right.

We smile and turn to go to our respective lunch breaks, but one last thing stops me as I reach the classroom door.

'Hey, sir?'

'Mm?'

'Why do you always wear denim? All the other teachers around here wear suits.'

Harry frowns, as if the answer is obvious. 'I bet you wouldn't have asked me that last year,' he says. 'Try to enjoy the rest of your time, here, Miss Roe. Things don't get any easier.'

When I get home, I do something I haven't done in years: I sit in front of the television and watch an afternoon run of kid's cartoons. My conversation with Harry was uplifting in a way, but I knew I wasn't going to get over everything *that* easy. That's not how emotion works.

So, I get into my pyjamas, wrap myself up in a blanket, and spoon feed myself sorbet from a tub I've been eyeing off in the freezer for a few weeks. It isn't long before I'm a mass of red pain, dripping salty tears into a disgruntled furball who takes up residence in my lap. I hold Lestat tight for hours, through every inexplicable outburst, every pained regression into helplessness brought on by some innocuous trigger, some unbidden memory, until he finally has enough and twaddles off towards the laundry. As I sit there alone, searching *Netflix* for more reruns of my childhood, I suddenly realise it isn't just Milly and her stupid fucking face that's gotten to me.

It's dad dying and leaving me with a family I didn't want.

It's arguing incessantly with Audrey over meaningless things I can't seem to let go.

It's giving into peer pressure and changing who I am.

It's feeling broken and betrayed at every possible turn.

It's friends turning their backs on me because it's easier to label than to listen.

And y'know what hurts the most?

It's trying so hard to cope, and *still* ending up on the couch, watching cartoons like a child.

Which I am.

A kid. At high school.

Dealing with high school drama.

It's easy to forget.

Or maybe it's that I don't wanna remember.

But if this is what it's like now, how the fuck am I gonna survive adulthood?

What's the point of trying if I *know* I can't do it?

I circle this drain again, and again, and again.

I don't even notice when it gets dark outside, or the sound of Audrey's car pulling up in the street. I *do* hear the door open, but I don't move. Instead, I simply glance in Audrey's direction as she pokes her head cautiously into the living room. She's run ragged from yet another double shift serving sick customers and stocking dusty shelves, and I don't wanna disturb her, so I don't say hello.

But she doesn't go away.

She just stands there, looking at me.

'Jess?' she eventually says. 'Are you okay?'

It takes me a moment, but I manage to sputter back, 'Yeah, I'm fine,' right before I burst into tears again.

I can't help it.

There I was, no more tears, all no-shit-tough-chick, and Audrey makes me cry with a simple question. 'I mean "no",' I mutter, desperately trying to get my face dry.

Why won't it get dry?

'Oh, sweetie.' Audrey swoops down like a mother hen and wraps me up in her arms. I'm slightly ashamed to say it, but for the first time since I moved in, I simply... let it happen. I cry into her shoulder, and she says nothing, does nothing.

Just lets me cry.

It doesn't last forever, though. Eventually, I have to say something.

At least Audrey has the decency to hand me the tissue box without judgement.

'Do you wanna talk about it?' she asks.

No, I don't.

But I have to.

For my own sake.

'I – I can't do this anymore,' I say.

'Do what, sweetie?'

'Everything. I'm just so over *everything*.'

'Oh, Jess.'

I look up at her. 'I have to tell you something,' I confess.

'Of course, anything.'

I hesitate. What do I wanna say?

I thought I knew, but now... not so much...

I mean, I wanna tell her *everything*.

Jace. Milly. Hannah. Mikey. Sam. The magazine. The doctor. The club. The photo.

I want to tell her what it's been like finding out I might be something called asexual in a world that insists I need to be sexual, but I don't want her to *not* get it. I just can't handle the disbelief, the concern, the questions. Not right now.

'I – I don't want you to be disappointed,' I say, eventually.

'I'm sure I won't be.'

'I – I have to withdraw. From the L-E-P,' I declare, with all the authority I can muster. I *guess* I planned to say that at some point. It's not what the voice in the back of my head *wanted* to say, though.

'What?' asks Audrey, doing her best – and failing – to sound neutral. 'But you've spent so long working towards it.'

'I – I can't really explain.'

Yeah, I don't blame Audrey for frowning, either.

'It's stupid. High school drama,' I say, but I don't think she buys it.

She shakes her head. 'Jess, the money's *yours*. You can do what you want with it. If you don't wanna go to university, that's fine. If you wanna leave Sydney and run a travelling flea circus, that's fine. But please, just tell me *why* you don't wanna do this anymore. It was so important to you.'

I look at her.

She looks at me.

We sit in silence, guilt gnawing away at the back of my neck. She *has* made a real effort over the past year, done more than I was expecting, in fact. Stood up for me when it counts. We're not

quite there yet, but we're closer than we've been in years, and it's mostly been Audrey getting us there. I mean, *I'm* the one who went back on the agreement. Maybe it's time for me to put something into the relationship, too?

'Come on. We promised each other we'd do better than this,' she says, as if reading my mind.

Damn it, she's right.

I crack.

'Do you remember me telling you about a girl named Milly?' I ask.

'Vaguely. Isn't she the one who was working on the magazine before you?'

I shrug with the same casual exuberance as someone trying to brush off a lie. 'Yeah. I may have... misrepresented... what happened a bit. Hannah and I... we kinda got her kicked off as editor.'

Audrey's eyes widen with shock and – I'm pretty sure – disappointment.

'It's not like we didn't ask first!' I pipe up immediately. 'It's just that... she's got *so* much, y'know? She's like, all the things a student can be. I'm pretty sure she's got awards for getting awards. *And* she's got at least a dozen extra-curriculars, mostly thanks to her family. I mean, she doesn't even go to class half the time.'

'Okay,' says Audrey, flatly. 'I get it. What's that got to do with the L-E-P, though?'

'Well, it's a full scholarship. They even do industry placement and business startup costs sometimes as part of it, so I *had* to be involved in something like *New Wave*. But Milly wouldn't let us help.'

'Right. That still doesn't answer my question, though.'

That's because I'm still trying to work out how to avoid it.

'Milly's mum is Dean of Social Sciences at Sydney U,' I cryptically state.

'Okay.'

'Milly's got – she's threatening to tell her – what happened, I mean. And to get the school board to cut me off. I just don't wanna deal with that, y'know? I don't think it's worth it.'

Audrey's gaze narrows, like she's spotted something I haven't told her about, but she rolls with it anyway. 'Oh, honey. Do you want me to talk to – what's his name? – Langley? He might understand if we –'

'No, no. I don't think that'll help,' I say quickly.

Ugh. You suck at this, Jess.

Try being more honest.

'There's... more. But I'd really rather not talk about it.'



Audrey narrowed gaze becomes almost accusatorily. 'Does it have something to do with that *boy?*' she asks.

'It - it doesn't matter anymore.'

Audrey clicks her tongue impatiently and, after a moment of frustrated mumbling, throws her hands up in the air. 'Okay, okay. What's done is done. I don't need to know the finer details. What about the future, though? What does this mean, Jess?'

'Honestly? I haven't even thought about it, yet.'

Audrey offers a series of thoughtful sounds and gestures, but none of them smack of exasperation; more like preparation. 'Well, how 'bout we both get cleaned up,' she suggests, at length. 'I'll feed Lestat and make us some tea, and then we work out exactly how I can help?'

I actually laugh.

Just a little bit.

I'm not sure it comes out right, because Audrey shoots me a worried glance.

But she doesn't have to worry.

It's a moment of happiness.

'I think I'd like that,' I tell her. 'I think I'd like it a lot.'

Sam sees me judging her line-up of chewed pencil nubs and somehow manages to flip me the most cavalier nod I've ever seen, like she's saying, "yeah, whatchya gonna do 'bout it?" without a single word.

'You try dealing with going cold turkey *and* family therapy at the same time,' she says, instead.

'Yeah, but pencils?' I counter.

She shrugs. 'I ran out of gum.' She smiles and goes back to scrolling through webpages.

Sam is in a strange place with her therapy. Apparently, she let rip a few weeks back and basically accused her parents of narcissistic negligence. Exactly where she learnt those terms, I didn't ask, but that's not what I'm at *Château de la Sam* to find out, anyway.

Today is a special occasion, because today I have a plan. One that doesn't involve the L-E-P, or Sydney University, or Milly and her family, or *New Wave*, or Jace, or Hannah, or Mikey. Today, I know what I'm going to do after I graduate from school, and today, I've decided to ask Sam if she'd like to do it with me. Sure, we're together under the guise of another study session – what with those pesky exams coming up fast – but today, I'm being *sneaky*.

'Okay, so, you reckon this – what's it called –?'

'– Flagstaff University –'

'– Flagstaff University has a better creative arts college than Sydney U?'

'Well, I don't know if it's *better*, but, when you weigh up the advantages and disadvantages, I'd say Flagstaff comes out on top.'

'Ah, but you're forgetting: Flagstaff isn't even a sandstone university, which to *my* parents, means it might as well be a public school out at some fucking redneck farming village.'

'True, but you haven't heard the full story. See, Audrey and I pulled Flagstaff off the Wakakirri website, because it turns out they're a sponsor. Their performing arts department is big news, and it has a very particular doctoral cotutelle program set up with some prestigious European names. Like, y'know, *Université PSL*. In Paris.'

I watch her eyes widen.

I knew she'd like that.

I can tell she's already starting to scheme.

Ahhh, it's glorious!

'A doctoral program, huh?' she says. 'What about your writing, though?'

'Oh, well, I can do that anywhere. To be honest, I'm not planning as far ahead as a PhD. I might not even bother. But I at least want to study writing. Properly, I mean.'

'What if I mention this to my parents and they still don't like it?'

'Well, and just hear me out on this, I don't think that's gonna matter. You're already eighteen. I'll be eighteen in April. So, even if they *do* cut you off financially, they can't actually *stop* you.'

'Yeah, but Jess... money?'

'I've crunched some numbers. I'll have enough left in my trust fund to cover accommodation for the two of us for... nine, maybe ten months if we go *really* down market. But, I mean, if we both look for jobs while we study, then that's *almost* a year's buffer to get settled and find work. We'd just need enough to cover food and bills, then it's two years for undergrad, one year for honours, then we can reassess. At the very least, you can head off to Paris and join some celebrated theatre troop there under the cotutelle or something.'

Sam throws me a sly smile.

'You'd do that for me?'

'What?'

'Give up part of your trust fund?'

'Well, I'll be honest. I'm *really* hoping that your parents will be reasonable, but yeah, if it comes to that. Why not?'

Still smiling, she suddenly lunges at me, and delivers an almost crippling bear hug.

'I'm gonna throw the *biggest* tantrum in front of the therapist tomorrow, big enough to make this look like the only way I'll get better! Thank you, Jess. I owe you so much.'

'Hey, that's okay. I'll be getting what I want, too, y'know. Two pay checks go further than one.'

Sam leans back. 'What about the courses? I'm sure the creative writing stuff is there for you, but what about me, what am I gonna do?'

'Like I said, Flagstaff sponsors Wakakirri, so they've got a whole performing arts department. What you pick is up to you, though, I guess.'

'Yeah, yeah, true. I better have a look. Ha! I can't wait to tell everyone.'

She smiles, but I must glance at her oddly, because it quickly vanishes.

I've told her about Milly's blackmail, y'see.

She was none too pleased.

'Jess,' she begins. 'You're not planning on doing something stupid, are you?'

'No, I'm not planning on doing something *stupid*,' I snap, sitting on the side of her bed. 'I thought about it, to be honest, but I can't think of any way it'll end well for me, even if I do manage to get Milly and Jace kicked outta school.'

'Good. Leave dumb shit like that to me.'

I laugh, but she looks at me bleakly. 'I'm sorry. That whole thing was my fault.'

I shrug. 'You might've pushed me into it, but I could've just told you to fuck off. Besides, I'm sure it won't be the last time I do something stupid.'

'Have you thought about coming out on Facebook or something?'

'Why would I do that?'

Sam inspects the air for a moment. 'Plausible deniability?' she offers.

'Pfft. Nah. I mean, most people'd probably laugh, anyway. And there's more to it than just standing up in front of people and saying, "this is me". I don't wanna make it the *only* thing I am.'

Sam nods. 'Yeah. And it's none of their fucking business, am I right?' she adds, grinning.

She's being cavalier, sure, but she's not wrong.

'Look. Maybe Jace and Hannah and Milly never do anything with that photo. Maybe they just sit on it, lose it, forget it, whatever. Or maybe one day Jace gets dumped again, and he decides to post it on social media anyway. Maybe it happens tomorrow, or when I'm twenty, or when I'm forty. It doesn't matter. Shit, I could just do it *for* them and they'd get in as much trouble as me, but if Stanmore's taught me anything, it's that reputation fucking *sticks*.' I lock my gaze with Sam's. I know she understands what I mean. That's been her world all her life, after all. It's the next part I'm not sure she'll get. 'I came to Stanmore for the wrong reasons. I was doing what I thought dad wanted me to do, not what *I* wanted to do.'

'But you still wanna be a writer, yeah?'

'Yeah. I do. But not to make him happy or proud or whatever. Not anymore.'

'Doin' it for money and fame, now?' says Sam, snickering.

'They *would* be helpful, but no. Not that either. I don't have to be rich and famous to say the things I want to say.'

Sam sits down next to me and takes my hand in hers.

'Well, when we're both broke and disowned, I just want you to know –' she leans in close, so close her fringe caresses my glasses '– I'm *totally* blaming you.'

I can't help myself.

I throw her hand away and burst into laughter.

'Oh yeah, whatever, bitch! I hope you like cats, coz I'm giving Lestat the second bed!'

And that's pretty much how the planning for the rest of our lives continued for the next two hours.

"Conversation Starters" indeed.

I stare at the cover of the final issue intently for a few minutes: an optical illusion style silhouette of a man's face, words tumbling into a white morass of nothing. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet. It actually doesn't look half bad, and I wonder where Hannah got the idea from.

Did Jace come back for one last opus?

There aren't many physical copies – since most of the magazine's traffic is online – but the display where I first saw Milly's newsletter in the library is full, nevertheless. The kids who volunteered to take over the magazine next year were all for cutting out the physical copy altogether, but Hannah and Principal Langley didn't like that so much.

Didn't bother me, though.

In fact, I rather like the idea of the thing being completely nebulous; always changing.

Kinda like me.

Kinda like *everyone*.

Sam and I spend the last couple of weeks of semester cramming for exams. Whenever and wherever we can meet up – with permission, of course – we turn to studying. For me, it's relatively easy, a repeat of the experience I had last year: staying up late, sneaking food around, filtering out the distractions, firing off pop quizzes at the end of a long night.

For Sam, it's a little trickier. She's not in the best place, still fighting occasionally with her parents, still trying to make up for the shit she's done. The psychologist makes her keep charts and journals: tools to escape the thrills she found in drugs and kleptomania. They don't always work, though, and sometimes we have to stop so she can cry for a while.

I don't leave, even when she tells me to.

When exams finally do hit, I keep my head down, and my brain focused. It's strange. Last year, doing well in my exams seemed like everything to me. This year, I don't feel like I have to excel to keep my world in order, and I don't even have the L-E-P in my pocket anymore.

Still, that doesn't mean I don't try. English, French, geography, maths: I go through all of them with a meticulous mental comb, and while I come out the other side knowing I got some of it wrong, I'm confident I get enough of it right. Sam, too, whose parents arranged for her to take supervised exams at home, admits they're proud of her efforts, and we're allowed to celebrate together with dinner at an expensive restaurant.

That's, uh, me, her, and, of course, her parents, both of whom insist on tagging along. Sam tries to get me to make a good impression, to use the old "buttering them up" strategy before the inevitable conversation about Flagstaff, so I do my best, even if I still think they're trying to turn their daughter's mental health into a minimum viable product.

It takes me three days to get everything right once enrolments open up. I put my name and preferences down across Sydney's educational scene, with Sydney U conspicuously absent, but when I finish the form and hit that "submit" button for the final time, all I feel is calm.

Just... calm.

I get off at the train station – as I’ve done hundreds of times now – and promptly arrive at Stanmore High’s front gate – as I’ve done hundreds of times now. I’m feeling good. Well, as good as I possibly can about a high school formal. I’m lucky to be treading familiar ground, I guess. I thought Milly, of all people, would have insisted on booking some big venue in the middle of the city. But no, the school board apparently likes to keep a close eye on proceedings; that, *and* they usually spend the evening meeting privately with some of their more... integrated... patrons.

I don’t care. It’s a win for me.

For the first time since moving to Sydney, I didn’t have an advisory committee telling me what I need to wear, so I bought one of those infinity wrap dresses – the kind you can wear in different ways – in a dark, *dark* purple, because y’know, it’s about time I wore something *me*. I even picked up some cheap, gaudy jewellery in the form of an amethyst ring, a silver bracelet, and a necklace with a love heart pendant to go along with it. Colour, colour, colour. Also, I don’t bother with high heels or anything that explicitly says “class”. In fact, I decide to wear my infamous sneakers one last time. It’s subtle, but I think it says everything I want it to.

The school’s gate is decorated with Chinese lanterns that stretch into the campus, lighting the way, I presume, to the Square. I watch cars arrive to drop people off, some I know, some I don’t. Those I recognise, I greet warmly, and I usually get the same in return. Nobody sticks around for too long: in fact, a lot of them get dragged off by their parents – yes, a lot of people arrive with their parents in tow – as if they’re the entry fee to be presented at some exclusive club. It figures, too, since there are security guards at the gate making sure people don’t stand around for too long without good reason.

I think they’re supposed to make everyone feel safe, but the longer *I* wait, the more nervous I get, and the more nervous I get, the more I worry one of *them* might show up.

Milly, Hannah, or Jace, I mean.

Who’ll be first?

I’m sure I’ll have spotted all of them before the night is over, and I’m sure at least one of them will take some time to gloat, but still... waiting for Sam is *hard*.

Thankfully, only a few more minutes pass before I hear a familiar voice.

‘Jess!’ it shouts, as its owner tries to avoid catching her dress in the car door behind her.

‘Sam!’

We’re so excited to see each other, we run into a kind of awkward hug that probably looks more like a drunken nosedive. She’s at least two inches taller than me – heels to my sneakers – and

my nose almost ends up in her chin with my glasses on the pavement. Before we can say anything else, though, her dad waves at me from the car – engine still running – to lean into the passenger window.

‘Thanks for helping Sam, and for keeping an eye on her tonight,’ he says, curtly. He hands me a piece of paper. ‘Our emergency number is on there. If anything happens, please call us immediately. Otherwise, I’ll be back to pick you girls up at ten.’

‘Oh, you don’t have to do that, Mister Talbot. I can take the train –’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ he says, sharply. ‘The least I can do is give you a lift home. Here at ten.’ He... *tries*... to smile. And... *sort of*... makes it work. But it looks odd to me. Nevertheless, I nod courteously and back away before he drives off, leaving Sam and me in each other’s care. I’m surprised he isn’t coming to the formal himself, but prior engagements and all that...

The first thing Sam does is wrap her arm through mine, so I do the same.

‘My lady,’ I say, making her giggle.

‘Well, I guess that means you’ll have to lead when we dance,’ she replies as we pass through the gate and make our way towards the Square, following the lanterns like we’d be lost without them.

‘I didn’t think they’d *be* dancing.’

‘Oh, there’ll be dancing. Is it the choice of venue that throws you?’

‘Yeah, I mean, who has a school formal *at the school*? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose?’

Sam laughs. ‘Consider it your last Stanmore experience,’ she says, with a wicked grin on her face. ‘Get ready to watch the biggest, sleaziest arse-kissing event EVER, in which the spoilt brats who’ve come of age get to prance in front of the judges and maybe be part of the lucky few who get to go on to bigger and better things.’

I chuckle with her. ‘I’m sure it’s not all that bad.’

She looks at me, eyes wide with the friendliest dose of disappointment I’ve ever seen. ‘It’s almost as if you don’t know how special you are, Jessie dear.’ She drops her voice to a forceful whisper. ‘Look around at all these overdressed douchebags. Most of ‘em are entitled pricks, like me. They think they’re pretty cool, but actually, they’re scared shitless right now.’

‘Oh?’

‘Totally. Y’see, you *chose* to come to Stanmore, and you’re *choosing* to leave it. People like Milly and me, well, we’re too *scared* to walk away. But that’s the problem, see, coz now we’re done with school and we gotta make something of ourselves. We gotta *achieve things*. Have *plans*. Use those *connections* our mummies and daddies set up for us.’

‘Ah, and what happens if you can’t?’



'*Exactly,*' supplies Sam. 'Then we might have to come up with our own little plan and hope to God we can convince them it's a good idea or risk losing *everything.*'

Wait a minute.

'Does that mean –?'

Sam lifts a finger to her lips, like I'm ruining a secret. 'They're open to the Paris thing, but I haven't entirely sold them on Flagstaff yet. Almost, though. Just gotta get the psych to back me. You might be stuck with me for a little bit longer, Miss Roe.'

And with that, we both arrive in the Square, grinning like idiots.

The Square is, I have to admit, impressively transformed. If Milly's future family-approved career choices ever fall through, she could always make a living as an emcee. The tables and chairs have been shunted aside, replaced by one of those prefab festival dancefloors, a stage, and rows of tables decorated with wedding-esque flower arrangements and colourful cloths. Light trails run from temporary scaffolding near the stage to the nearby buildings and trees, giving the whole place a kind of folksy dos-a-dos vibe. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, considering the nearest façade belongs to an old church, but everyone seems to be enjoying it. The warm evening air is full of chatter and the smell of food – no doubt from the village of catering vans parked off to one side – and the whole thing just feels delightfully casual.

To a point, I mean. I can't ignore the congregation of suits I recognise as teachers and board members, most of whom seem to be firing barely concealed complaints at an irate Langley, and there are *way* more parents here than I would've thought tolerable for *any* school event.

Sam and I find a spare table to settle down on, and we look over the professionally bound brochures Milly's "team" have prepared for the occasion. She's got the entire night mapped, from the moment *hors d'oeuvres* are served, to her valedictorian speech, to the commencement of music – in precisely that order. I would have expected nothing less, and I take just as much pleasure from mocking her with Sam as I thought I would.

Old habits, I suppose.

As more people rock up, I start to scan the crowd, to keep my eyes open for faces I don't want to see. For a while, it's all good. I get plenty of compliments on my dress – despite going for an angle clearly different from most – and nearly everyone I talk to has nothing but pleasant conversation to give.

It happens, of course, as soon as Sam leaves to catch up with her Wakakirri crowd, sometime after the first round of *hors d'oeuvres* arrive on the tables, but before anyone has formally

taken to the stage. I hear the voice, and I'm not sure whether I'm angry or grateful it's not who I expected to see first.

'Hey,' says Hannah.

She's wearing a green dress, one of those figure-hugging numbers with a slit down one leg. She's once again devoid of her usual collection of bracelets, and her auburn hair is brushed straight. She looks utterly unlike the person I met when I started at Stanmore.

'Oh. Hi.'

'I thought you could use some company.'

'Hm.' I kick the nearby seat out for her.

I'll let her say her piece.

I'll let it amuse me.

Hannah sits down, then looks down at the ground, then back up.

'Look, I wanted to make sure you knew I had nothing to do with Jace sending that photo to Milly. I think he's an absolute wank for doing it and... I know he regrets it.'

'Oh, well, that makes it okay, then. Thanks.'

Hannah sighs.

I don't care.

'For what it's worth, I'm sorry,' she says.

'Yeah, it's not worth much, though, is it?'

'No, I guess not.' She lowers her head again and nobody says anything for a few seconds.

'Anyway, Jace isn't coming tonight,' she announces, at length. 'Just thought you'd like to know so you can enjoy your night a bit more.'

She smiles, but it's fake, so I don't bother returning it, and she gets up to leave. For a second, I'm convinced I'm gonna let her go, but then I decide I have something to say. I stop her, and she sits back down.

'Y'know, I felt like an absolute bitch the whole time Jace and I were breaking up. I was convinced it was all my fault, that it was *me* withholding something from *him*. And then when I finally worked out what was making me feel like that, when I finally found a way to explain what was going on inside me, he accused me of making it all up because he couldn't handle seeing me with someone else. And that was *after* we'd been apart for *months*.'

Hannah doesn't say anything, so I keep talking.

'Y'know, I *wish* I'd known I wasn't like him. I *wish* I could've explained it better. Maybe then there wouldn't be revenge porn of me sitting on Milly's phone right now. That was hard – still is

hard, not gonna lie – but y’know what hurt me the most out of everything? It was the moment one of my two best friends turned around and actually *defended* the prick.’

God, listen to me.

I can’t *wait* to get out of here.

And neither, it seems, can Hannah.

‘Jess, whataya want from me? Jace only had one relationship before you, and she cheated on him. He lost his virginity to you. He was depressed for weeks after you broke up with him. I had to argue to get him to go to the club with us. I thought you guys could at least give it one more try, but no, you were just out to rub it in his face with whoever the hell you wanted. I mean, what did you *think* would happen?’

I lean back.

I realise the moment she throws the word “virginity” at me that there was no point arguing with her.

She’ll *never* get it.

And besides, she’s not *entirely* wrong.

I say the only thing I can, and I say it flatly.

‘Fuck off, Hannah.’

Hannah shakes her head, clicks her tongue at me, and finally stands up.

‘Good luck, Jess,’ she says, and disappears into the nearby crowd.

I get a strong feeling I’m never going to see her again after tonight.

It’s strange.

I was expecting to see Jace at some point.

I mean, I’m glad he won’t get another opportunity to hurt me, but... I dunno. It’s almost like I was expecting some kind of showdown, that maybe he’d rock up drunk and make a scene, and then I’d reveal what he and Milly did, and everyone would be understanding and turn on them, and I’d start dancing to *Footloose* or something.

But now I know he won’t.

Something inside me wants to give these people what’s coming to them, but real life doesn’t work like that, does it? I should be happy, but all I have are mixed feelings.

‘I saw Hannah,’ says Sam, appearing beside me. ‘You okay?’ she asks, placing a hand on my shoulder.

‘Oh, yeah, I s’pose,’ I tell her, honestly.

‘Okay, well, don’t be mad, but I brought someone over.’

I look up at her, only to see Mikey in a three-piece suit step into my view.

'Hi,' he says, sheepishly. By his standards, I mean. 'Do you mind if I sit with you?'

I must roll my eyes, because Sam offers her opinion before I do.

'I know what you're thinking, Jess, but hear me out. I didn't want to mention it, but Mikey and I have been chatting for a couple of weeks now, and we're not back together or anything, but —'

They look at each other, and I expect my heart to sink, but it doesn't.

In fact, I feel almost nothing.

'Sam, if that's what you want, it's fine,' I tell her, distinctly over it.

She grins broadly, and the two of them join me at the table to an awkward moment of silence.

It starts to get to me, so I open with, 'Dad's marketing team not here?'

Oof. I instantly regret saying it. I mean, if Sam's not holding a grudge, then what reason do I have to hold one.

Mikey fidgets, but answers anyway. 'Um, no. On my own tonight.'

'Uh, sorry, Mikey. It's just Hannah and all that... so, um, have you decided what you're gonna be doing after Stanmore?'

'I, uh, actually got into Harvard on a varsity scholarship. Offers aren't 'til the end of the year, but... dad's already organised it.'

'Oh —' why am I surprised? '— congratulations, then, I guess.'

'Thanks.'

'What does that mean for you guys, then?'

'Jess, come on,' says Sam. 'You think I'd ditch you now?'

I shrug. 'I've had worse.'

Mikey lets out a cautious laugh. 'We're legit not back together or anything. We just decided we'd rather say goodbye as friends.'

'Yeah, and besides,' adds Sam, smiling. 'Mikey's dad has already said he can come back to Sydney for holidays, and Cole's offered to put him up when he does! We'll still have the house for parties, Jess! Come on! How good's that?'

Old habits indeed.

'Well, as long as we study first,' I say, returning her smile.

'Absolutely! I promise. See Mikey, told you I'd reformed,' proselytises Sam.

I want to shake my head, but I don't.

Whatever Sam's gonna do, she's gonna do. I don't think it was any other way.

‘I want you to know,’ says Mikey, turning to me. ‘I know what Jace did. I told him it was a dog move, but he didn’t listen. If you wanna go to the cops, I’ve got your back.’

Okay, that buys him a *little* credit.

‘Thanks, Mikey. I don’t think I will, but it’s nice to know I can.’

I grant him a smile, and he seems to relax enough to start catching up with us properly.

It’s actually a nice little wholesome moment among all the charades going on around us.

The rest of the night passes surprisingly smoothly. We eat, we chat, we say our farewells and wish good luck to the students and teachers we’ve grown to know over our time at Stanmore. I corner both Mister Patel and Miss Jurrah at one point, thanking them for taking the time to help me when I needed it.

My favourite conversation, of course, is with Harry, who regales me with tales of his adventures as a primary school temp so many years ago and his run-ins with angry teenagers in Paramatta. Eventually, we settle on my *temporarily* abandoned article, and what I intend to do with it if I make it to Flagstaff. I tell him I want to learn how to explore narrative, how to challenge it, how to make it mine, and then I want to finish the story I started with the article, maybe personalise it a bit more. Change its focus. My personal adventure. My journey of discovery.

As far as I know, there aren’t a whole lot of asexual protagonists out there.

Maybe I could turn it into a book, or something?

Whatever happens, though, Harry tells me he was proud to be there at the idea’s inception, and he hopes I go on to share it with many more people.

After a while, everyone is ushered back to their seats and the speeches begin.

As emcee, Milly kicks it off. It’s weird seeing her dressed so differently, like the budding career-minded socialite I know she already is. It suits her, if I’m honest.

Once her introductions are done, we get to hear from lots of “important” people. Langley. Some of the teachers. Members of the school board. A few of the wealthier, more involved parents. Then the students take their turn. Mostly, it’s self-congratulations, a chance for them to showcase their achievements for an audience of predominantly well-connected *alumni*. Every now and again, though, a classmate takes to the stage to praise others: their friends and family, their mentors, their support networks. To my surprise, I get three direct mentions, mostly lauding my work for the magazine and for organising the poetry slams that proved way more popular than I ever thought they would.

I gotta say, it's nice to be acknowledged – even if I had to endure Hannah and Jace receiving their fair share of credit as well – and when the speeches come to a close over a slideshow of the year, I can't help but smile.

Afterwards comes Milly's valedictorian speech.

If I could bring myself to care more, maybe I'd dwell on the things she said, but I can't be bothered right now. Maybe I'll write it all down and put it in my book, but then that would make it exactly as shallow, long-winded, and self-aggrandising as Milly herself.

If it was to be a night of small victories, then I'd at least revel in that.

Luckily, Milly spared no expense getting a decent DJ, and even I took to the dance floor with flair, Sam in my arms, my worries, my future, *and* my past, all forgotten for just a few more care-free hours.

Thanks, Mills.

I'll change your name in the manuscript.

I promise.

Mister Talbot keeps his word and drops me home at about ten thirty. When I open the door, I'm greeted by Lestat, who rubs his face on my leg. I scratch his ears and he struts away, pleased with himself.

In the living room, I find Audrey where I left her, her eyes glued to the television, to images of maps and news anchors talking politics. She hardly even notices when I collapse onto the couch next to her, sighing heavily with the relief of taking the weight off my feet. I take my sneakers off and throw them under the coffee table, but there's no sign of life from the woman next to me.

'Um, hello?'

'Oh, hi sweetie,' she says, turning to me and smiling quickly. That's when I realise her eyes are red, and I spot the used tissues on the cushion next to her.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

'Oh, yeah. Sorry. I'm good. How was your night?'

'Really? Because it looks like you've been crying.'

Audrey's eyes dart between me and the tissues.

'Well, yeah, a little. But it's okay. It's a good crying.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'Why?'

She sniffs and nods at the television. 'We did it,' she says. 'It's happening.'

'What is?'

'Gay marriage. They decided to honour the results of the survey. It passed. They're gonna do it. They're gonna make it legal. Finally.'

I sit upright. 'Seriously?' I ask.

She smiles at me, takes my hand, and squeezes it.

'Wow. I'd forgotten all about it,' I confess, squeezing back. 'Congratulations. That's major.'

Audrey laughs. 'It's not just me, sweetie. It's a win for everybody.'

I sit quietly for a time, the sound of the television scratching at my mind while it wanders back across the past year of my life.

I watch idly as a Prime Minister I wouldn't know from a bar of soap speaks about change, about progress, about treating one another with respect and humility.

Yeah. For everybody.

I mean, it's a win, there's no doubt about it.

But then why does the thought of turning to Audrey – my mother – right now, and telling her who I think I am still scare the hell outta me?

Now would be the perfect moment to connect with her.

Surely.

I must be holding on too tight, because after a while Audrey smiles at me. 'I'm okay, Jess, really. I'll probably head to bed soon, anyway. You don't have to sit up with me.'

'Oh, I – no, I know.'

I'm not sure what else to say, so I get up slowly and walk towards the stairs. Then, as I reach the archway, Audrey speaks again.

'You didn't tell me how your night was?' she says, turning to look at me.

'Oh. Good. Yeah. Really good. Listen, I, um, I have some... things... to talk to you about. Um, about Flagstaff, I mean. But I'm kinda tired, so, can we talk tomorrow?'

I realise that this will be something I have to endure my entire life.

There will *always* be people I feel the need to come out to, and there will *always* be people I choose to keep on the outside.

Some of them will understand.

Many of them won't.

For me, though, and for people like Audrey, it will never end.

But at least we smile together.

As one.

*Finally.*

'Sure, sweetie. I'll see you in the morning.'

'Yeah. Yeah, you will.'

'Goodnight, Jess,' she says, turning back to her triumph; the sound of cheers; a vision of her truth.

No.

I'm wrong.

There *is* something there for me.

But this moment belongs to her, really.

There will probably come a time when I'll feel it like that, too, but that time isn't today. For now, there's only one thing I can think to do to let her know how sorry I am, and how much I really do care for her, even if she doesn't notice.

'Goodnight, mum,' I say, and follow the sound of Lestat's impatient purrs all the way to bed.



THE END