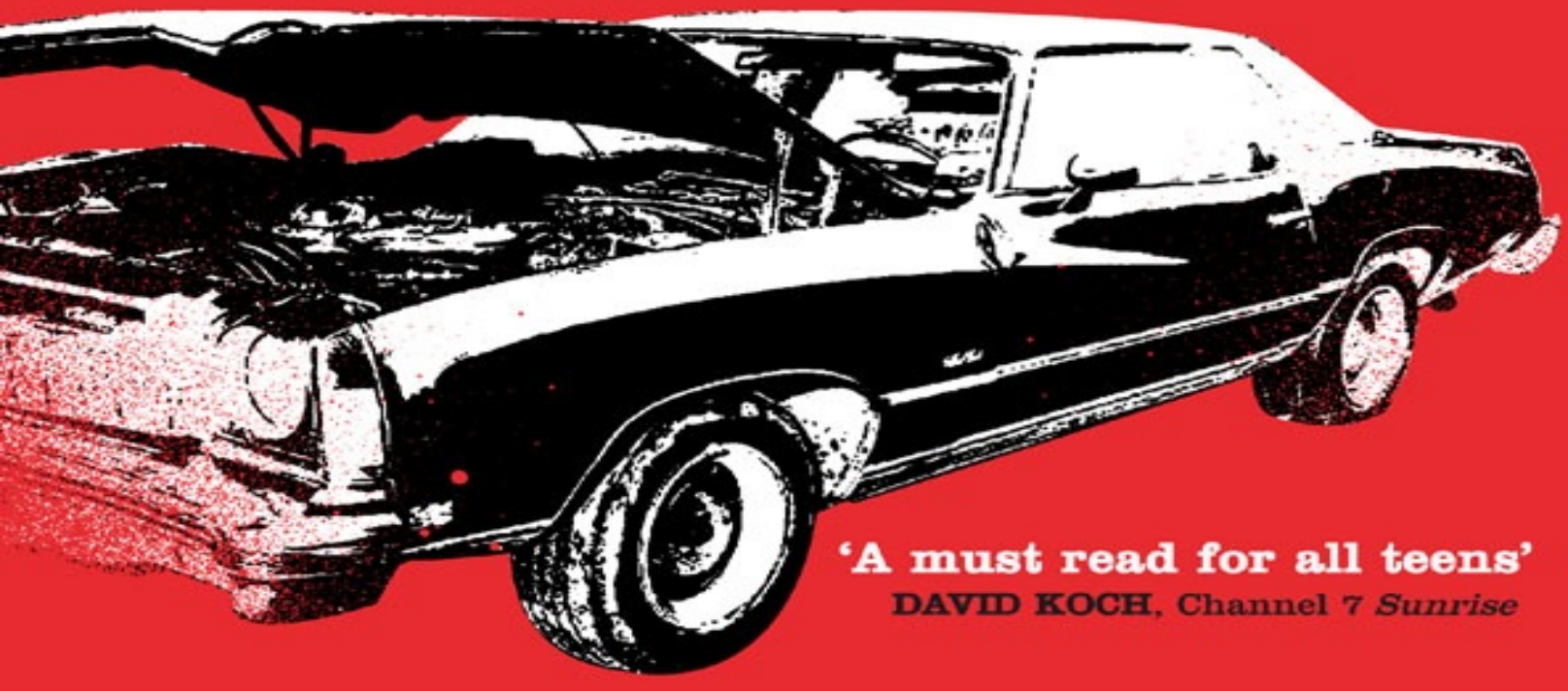


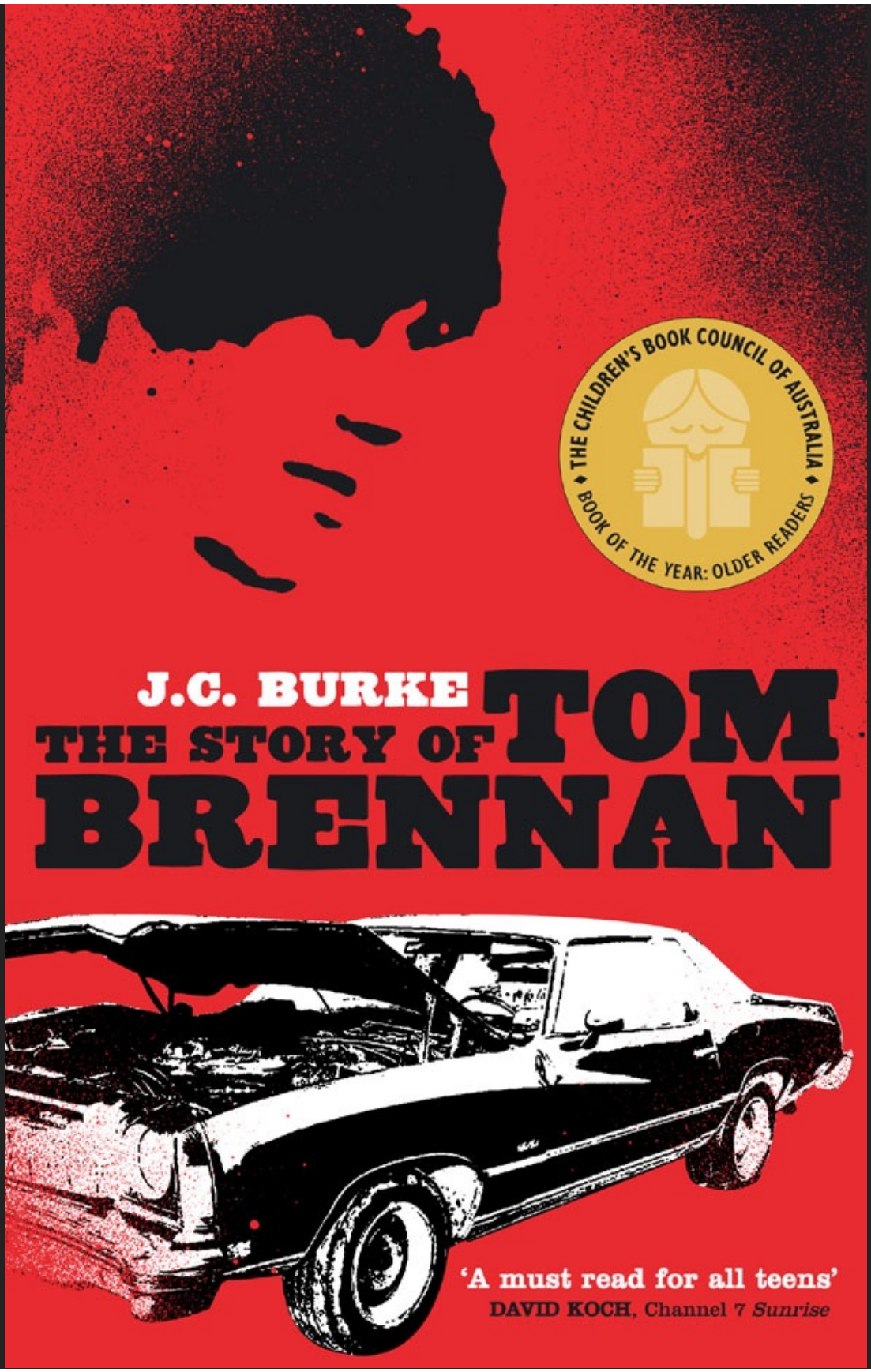
THE CHILDREN'S BOOK COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
BOOK OF THE YEAR: OLDER READERS

J.C. BURKE

# THE STORY OF TOM BRENNAN



'A must read for all teens'
DAVID KOCH, Channel 7 *Sunrise*


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*For my son, Nicholas*

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# THE STORY OF TOM BRENNAN

**J.C. BURKE**



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

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# PROLOGUE

At 4.30 am on Friday the 23rd of January, my father, Joseph Brennan, closed the front door of our home for the last time. Then gently, as we now had to be, he led my mother step by step to the car and helped her into the back seat. My sister Kylie and I followed, carrying the left-over bags and suitcases. No one spoke. Only the sounds of our feet shuffling along the concrete and my groan as I dumped the last of our belongings into the boot broke the near-dawn's silence.

I waited by the bonnet for Dad to slip the handbrake off and give me the signal. I pushed our Ford Falcon station wagon out of the garage, past the ugly words that told us we were no longer wanted, and along the street.

When we reached the crest of 'Daniel's Whine' – named after my brother, who hated climbing hills – I jumped in the front seat and Dad lifted his foot off the brake. Down, down we glided in silence.

The silhouettes of houses slipped past before I could catch them and remember the people we were leaving behind. In a couple of hours they would wake and find us gone, far away, so as not to remind them of their pain and what our family now meant to this town.

My name is Tom Brennan and this is my story.

# ONE

'Who's going to say grace?' announced my grandmother, a self-appointed messenger of God.

It wasn't really a question. She'd already decided I was the one as she was glaring in my direction.

'Thank you, Tom.' She smiled. 'That would be lovely.'

Thanking God was about the furthest thing from my mind but choice, your standard, everyday human right, was something that didn't exist in my grandmother's house. She probably considered it 'indulgent', one of her favourite words.

I began. 'In the name of the . . .'

She interrupted before my finger had even reached my forehead.

'I'm sorry, Tom.' She shook her head. 'I don't think everyone's ready for grace. Kylie, where's your mother?'

My younger sister looked at Gran as if she'd really lost it this time. Sure, Dad, Kylie and I have had the last twenty-one weeks to adjust, but Mum's condition was hardly subtle. Since Daniel had gone, Mum hadn't eaten at the table once. Gran was in for a rude shock if she thought it'd be any different at her place.

'Theresa!' Gran called.

The rest of us sat there in silence, watching Gran pretend there was nothing wrong.

'Theresa!' she called louder. 'We're not starting lunch without you. Come on, girly, don't be so indulgent. Life goes on. Be thankful for your food.'

Too tired to argue, Mum shuffled in, taking the same place at a table she'd sat

around for the first twenty-two years of her life, a table we now had to join whether we liked it or not.

'Thank you, Tom.'

'Huh?'

'Grace,' she reminded.

'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' I wanted to get it over with quick, but no such luck. Gran's eyes were glued to mine, her lips big and stretched as she silently mouthed the words with me like I was a kid in the school play about to forget my lines.

'Thank you for the food we are about to receive,' I said. 'And, and . . . thank you, for . . .?'

*Australia*, she mouthed.

'Australia?'

She nodded as her lips continued, *On this special Australia Day*.

'On this special Australia Day . . .?' I frowned. Again she nodded. 'And . . .?'

She mouthed the next words wide and clear. I understood them straight away. But I closed my eyes, shutting her out, and fought the lump that was rising in my throat. 'And God *bless* Daniel,' I said as loud as I could manage.

'And God bless Daniel,' my family echoed – except my grandmother. She made sure her words were heard over ours.

'And God forgive Daniel,' she boomed.

I didn't want to open my eyes and see my mother's face, nor watch the Adam's apple in my father's throat bob up and down in his struggle for control. I wanted to be back home having a barbie. Having our normal Australia Day. Our Brennan Australia Day, the way we always did.

If I kept my eyes closed, I could see everyone sitting around our backyard – except Aunty Kath and Mum, they'd be in the kitchen buttering rolls and making salads. Me, Daniel, my cousin Fin and sometimes Kylie would start our game of cricket in the backyard while listening to the Adelaide Test on the radio. I could

almost hear Kerry O'Keefe's classic laugh.

Dad was the barbie man. He'd cook the steaks, have a beer and field. After a few wines Mum'd stir him, saying it's the only time he could do three things at once.

Later Matt, Snorter, Luke, Owen and whoever else was around would turn up and our cricket game would become the sledging, raucous match that made everybody love Australia Day at the Brennan's.

But we weren't home. We were here. Here in my grandmother's dark, stuffy dining room, her gallery of saints watching us. This was now our reality. Matt, Snorter, Luke and Owen were a thing of the past.

I looked over at Kylie. She was staring with horror at the thing that sat in the middle of the table – the thing that was our lunch. It was meant to be roast pork but it looked more like a charred slab of cow's shit. I wasn't hungry anyway.

Uncle Brendan stood up and leant over the carving tray, a big knife in his hand. He tried to slice through the roast but the knife got stuck. Over and over he twisted and turned it while the lump of meat sat there not feeling a thing. I watched it, thinking, you can stop feeling pain after a while. You shut down and it can't get in. Maybe I was more like that sorry piece of pork than I realised.

'Sit down, son, you're hacking it to pieces! Joe,' Gran directed, 'take over from Brendan and carve the dinner.'

I hated the way Gran called lunch 'dinner'. When we were kids, Daniel and I reckoned it was her way of trying to trick us into bed early.

Uncle Brendan passed Dad the carving knife. 'All yours, Joe.'

Uncle Brendan was okay. I don't know how he managed to put up with Gran. At least he lived in a separate cabin at the other end of the property, but in my books even that was too close. In fact, just living in Coghill was too close. If I was Brendan, I would've left this dump quick smart. *Nothing* could keep me here.

It was about thirty-five degrees outside so it had to be at least forty degrees inside. As Gran chucked big spoonfuls of steamy mashed potato onto each plate, I felt the sweat slide down my back into my shorts and trickle down my crack. The backs of my legs were wet, hot and stuck to the seat. In fact all of me was

stuck, stuck in a place I didn't want to be – but that made me think of Daniel and where he was and I knew he would give anything to be here, even at Gran's.

'Hello?' A man's voice echoed down the hallway.

Gran jumped up and was off.

'I hope I'm not interrupting anything, Carmel?' whispered the voice now outside the dining room.

'Perfect timing, Father Vincent,' I heard Gran whisper back. There was more, but I couldn't make out what they said. I'd have a good guess it was something about us new arrivals.

'Father Vincent, come in,' Gran said loudly this time. 'Come and say hello to Theresa and her family. They arrived two days ago.'

A priest with a ginger beard popped his head around the doorway.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch,' he said.

We're not going to fall for that, I wanted to say. Everyone knew the parish priest only dropped in at mealtimes, it's a given. Plus he'd probably come over for a big stickybeak. See what people like us look like.

He was top to toe in the compulsory black with a white collar. If I was hot, he must've been dying. Perhaps he was offering up his discomfort for some poor soul like my brother. I'm sure Gran had everyone praying for Daniel.

'Father, you remember my daughter, Theresa,' Gran said, giving us the eyeball to stand up.

'It's been a long time,' he said, taking Mum's hand. 'You'll be living here?'

Mum mumbled something I didn't catch because her head was hung so low. I wanted to tell her she could look at him, that she hadn't done anything wrong. But that was the thing, it was like she had done something wrong. Like we all had.

'Now, Father, you're going to join us, aren't you?' Gran was already loading a plate up with food.

As Father Vincent pulled in his chair next to me, my head started to babble,

*Don't talk to me. Don't talk to me*, but it was too late. I braced myself.

'So you must be Tom?'

I tried to swallow but my spit got stuck somewhere in the back of my throat. 'You're going into Year Eleven, is that right?'

I nodded.

'He's doing Year Eleven again,' Gran reminded. 'On account of the . . . the interruptions.'

'And Kylie?' As he turned to my sister I managed a gulp. 'It is Kylie, isn't it? You're going into Year . . .?'

'Nine,' Kylie sneered. 'Year Nine – Father. What else would you like to know?'

'Kylie's not repeating.' Gran ignored her. 'She managed to keep up with her school work. Didn't you?'

'Didn't really have a choice,' she scowled back at Gran. 'Did I?'

'So, um, Tom?' He was back to me. My breath clamped in my chest. 'You'll be joining St Benedict's rugby team, no doubt?'

I felt my shoulders rise in a shrug. I couldn't go there.

'Oh, Tom!' Gran scoffed. 'Of course he'll be playing, Father. And you know Joe's helping coach. It's going to be a fresh start for them all.'

'We're lucky to have you on the team, Joe,' said Father Vincent. I stared at my hands, dreading every word that came out of this man's mouth. 'Was it the last three Wattle Shields you led St John's to?'

'Two,' Dad quickly corrected. 'We, um, missed out last year.'

'Yes, yes, of course, of course,' Father stammered. 'I'm sorry. How stupid of me.'

I counted nine seconds of awkward silence.

'So tell me, Joe, have you met Michael Harvey, our coach at St Benedict's?'

'Yeah, top bloke.'

'He's a good coach.'

'I'm looking forward to working with him.'

'Really dedicated.'

'So I've heard.'

I could tell the old man had gone into automatic pilot, just answering the questions that were thrown at him.

'Did you know he turned down a job in Sydney.'

'Is that right, Father?'

'He wanted to stay on at Bennie's,' Father Vincent explained. 'They have a couple of good players this year.'

'Really.'

'There are some big, strong forwards and a very fast lad out wide,' he continued. 'And he's pretty happy about having Tom on the team.' The priest turned to me. 'You know it's been a while since Bennie's had a half-back with your speed and pass.' I peeled the nails off my thumbs. Everyone knew Bennie's couldn't catch a cold. 'Maybe you can teach the boys a thing or two. Michael Harvey was pretty impressed when he saw you play at a district match last July . . .'

As he crapped on, the words 'last July' sniggered in my head. I could hardly remember last July. That felt like someone else's life. Sometimes I had to remind myself that I did have that life once, that once we were a good family that everyone liked.

Father Vincent squeezed my shoulder and I felt myself flinch. I didn't want his sympathy. What I wanted was for him to get out of my face. I hadn't decided if I was playing rugby this year. In fact, I hadn't decided if I was playing ever again. I didn't know if I could without my brother. Things just weren't that simple anymore.

'Hey, remember the game of touch footy this arvo, Tom,' said Uncle Brendan. 'You're coming, aren't you? There'll be plenty of guys from Bennie's, give you a chance to meet them before school goes back tomorrow.'

I kept peeling away at my nails, feeling their eyes on me, waiting, hoping it'd be the thing to make me smile. One less person to worry about.

'It'll be good,' Brendan continued. 'Been a while since you've had a run around, eh? We need to build you up. You're looking a bit scrawny.'

'Yeah, what do you reckon, Tommy? It could be fun.'

The hope in Dad's voice crushed me every time. I'd do anything so as not to hear it.

'Maybe,' I croaked. I felt the walls collapse with relief.

'Great!' said Dad. 'What time's it start, Brendan?'

'Six. Starts to cool down about then.'

'Kylie and me'll come and watch. Won't we, Kyles?'

'Are you making all my decisions for me now, Dad?' Kylie rolled her eyeballs. She wasn't quite ready to be outed.

'I might even come too,' added Gran.

Great, a bloody family outing.

'It's just a game of touch, Gran,' Kylie said carefully.

'Oh, it's more than a game of touch, Kyles,' Uncle Brendan laughed. 'It's the Australia Day north versus south of the river match, and south of the river has Jonny Tulake.'

'Too right,' Father Vincent agreed, spraying out a bit of mash that stuck to his white collar. 'Jonny Tulake's the town's Jonah Lomu.'

Brendan started laughing louder.

'Hard worker, that Jonny,' added Gran. 'And what about you, Theresa, you're coming to watch, of course.' Suddenly there was silence. Mum's bent head revealed grey roots bleeding into her dark hair. 'Come on, girly, look at me when I speak to you. We're all hurting. It's not helping anyone being like this.'

Mum looked up, her blue eyes grey and dull. Gran opened her mouth to speak but Mum turned and looked at me. For a second I think she smiled.

Then she stood up, her chair groaning across the floorboards, and shuffled out of the room, her food untouched.

'Mum, just let it go,' Brendan said as he led his sister out of the dining room.

'Well, it's not helping anyone,' Gran muttered.

'Mum! Leave it.'

But Gran couldn't. 'God knows, Father Vincent, I pray to Saint Jude every day to make her situation more, more – tolerable. But I can't help her if she won't help herself. We're all in this together. She's not the only one. And Daniel, well, Daniel!'

She moved around us, snatching our plates, crashing them on top of each other, knives and forks flying. Kylie and Dad dived under the chairs, picking up cutlery and bits of burnt crackling that were falling to the floor. I sat there staring at the lump of meat still sitting on the table.

'Let me help you, Carmel,' Father Vincent said, trying to relieve her of some plates.

'Help me! I'll tell you how you can help me,' Gran hissed. 'Pray for them, Father Vincent, pray for them – and while you're there, pray for the soul of their son Daniel.'

She strode out of the dining room. We heard the cutlery and plates crash into the kitchen sink. Father Vincent stood there rubbing his beard. Kylie still sat on the floor, her arms wrapped around her knees, and with great care and concentration Dad started to fold the napkins over and over again.

# TWO

If someone put a gun to my head, forcing me to say one good thing about the touch footy game, all I could come up with was that it'd be good to get out of this house for a while. Brendan was right, it'd been ages since I'd had a run around. These days my energy was zapped. All I felt like doing was slobbing around and being left alone.

I lay on the bed waiting in my 'new' room. I named it 'the cave' 'cause it was so brown and dark. At least it was cool in here. It used to be Uncle Brendan's bedroom and was downstairs in the old part of the house. There was nowhere to plug in the PS2 except the lounge room, and that was usually occupied by one of Gran's prayer groups, so my entertainment was staring at the brown walls, the grubby, shit-coloured walls that only my grandmother's house would have. And just in case I got lonely she'd kindly provided a friend to stare back at me.

Above the bed hung a gigantic picture of Saint Cecilia playing the organ surrounded by angels strumming ukeleles. A poster of Pammy in the red cossie and ug boots, like the one back home in Snorter's room, would've been my choice. Even Uncle Brendan's old one of A Flock of Seagulls was better, but like I said, choice didn't exist here. So it was Saint Cecilia for me.

Gran's house was full of saints. Kylie was in Mum's old room with Saint Rose of Lima who just stood there staring into space. Daniel used to say Saint Rose was in Mum's room because she was the prettiest of all the saints. Mum'd give him a slap and call him 'cheeky chops'. Daniel was always sucking up to Mum and she loved it.

The oldies were in Gran and Pa's room. Gran moved into the spare room after Pa died, but the picture of Saint Jane still hung in there. Gran used to tell Daniel and me we should marry a girl like Saint Jane. When we'd ask Gran why she'd answer, 'Because,' – she always whispered when she talked about the saints – 'Because she was the perfect wife.'

That picture still gave me the spooks. Saint Jane kneeling on the stone floor, a serious look on her face. I don't reckon it'd be fun being with her.

I looked up. Kylie was standing at the door.

'Dad and Uncle Brendan said it's time to get ready.'

'So.'

'Thanks for getting me into this.'

'I didn't,' I said.

'Yeah, well, it's alright for you, Tom, you're going to be playing.' Her hands sat on her hips. 'And me? I'm going to have to stand there and watch with The Grandmother. She'll probably want to talk too.'

'She coming?'

'You heard her.'

'Mum?'

'No, idiot,' Kylie spat. 'She's gone back to bed, of course.'

I started to unravel my socks: my old green and white St John's footy socks. Kylie flopped down next to me.

'Maybe that's what I'll do,' she sighed. 'Just go to my room and refuse to come out. This sucks, Tom.'

'You said it.'

'It's so unfair.'

'Yep.'

'And how *bad* was lunch! Did The Grandmother go off or what?' Kylie threw her hands over her face. 'Wonder what Father Ginger thought. He's probably up to the fifth decade of the rosary.'

'Praying for us?'

'Duh! Daniel, most likely.'

'You know, at lunch I started thinking, if we feel bad about being stuck here,

imagine how bad Daniel —'

'Tell someone who cares, Tom.' And she got up and walked out of the room. What was the point in saying anything to her, or anyone for that matter?

I sat there playing with my socks, trying to shut down the bad thoughts that always surfaced and suffocated any hope I had of getting my life back. I tried to think about running on a footy field, smelling the grass, hearing the crowd, feeling the ball in my hands, all the things I used to love. But then I spotted the name in my socks: the label, sewn in with Mum's neat stitch. 'Daniel Brennan' was all it said.

There was no hope. There was nothing.

'Tom?'

Uncle Brendan was standing at the door.

'Huh?'

'You ready?'

'Er, just about.'

'You okay, Tom?'

'Yep.'

'We'll wait in the ute. And Tom?'

'Yeah, Uncle Brendan?'

'Let's drop the "uncle" bit. I'm not forty till next year.'

'Sorry.'

'Tom? You sure . . .'

'I'm ready.' I pushed past him and out the door.

I didn't want to start talking. I had nothing to say to Brendan. I needed my energy, and more than that I needed my guard. I was about to come face to face with people who possibly knew more about me than I'd ever know about them. That was the thing that terrified me, the thing I thought about most on the long drive to Coghill. Did they know about us? And if they did, how would it be any

different here?

As I passed the oldies' room I caught a glimpse of Mum's hair spread out on a pillow. The rest of her was a lump under the sheet.

'I'm off to the touch game,' I said.

She didn't answer.

Shame about dual-cabin utes. It meant we could all squash in together, then spill out the other end like one happy family. What a joke that was. Kylie was sandwiched in between Gran and me. She sat there staring straight ahead. She was well pissed-off.

Dad and Brendan crapped on about some tractor they had to fix tomorrow. They were using words like 'dry brakes' and 'forty-eight engine' something or other. Dad knew this stuff because he grew up on a farm. Dad had worked as a mechanic for the Mumbilli local council and coached the first fifteen at St John's, while Mum shared the job of running the canteen. Us Brennans nearly ran the school, in fact the town. But none of that mattered now.

The main street of Coghill, Federation Street, had just about every fast-food joint you could imagine. Today it looked like the town's population of 38,833 ugly people were busy stuffing their faces in Burger King. That and the two-storey cinema were Coghill's major drawcards, that's what kind of a tragic town this was. Mumbilli only had a Kentucky Fried, but it was a top one.

'Hey, Shorty,' Brendan called to a tall guy standing by the bin. He was concentrating real hard, delicately picking the lettuce off his burger.

'Oi, Shorty,' Brendan called again, as the guy wandered over to the ute. 'You can't run with a full gut, Shorty,' Brendan complained. 'We need those long legs.'

'Energy food, mate,' he grunted.

'Why are you picking the lettuce off?'

'Hate salad.'

Kylie let a laugh escape.

'Shorty, this is my brother-in-law, Joe Brennan. This is Peter McGregor.'

'G'day, Peter.' Dad shook hands with him through the window.

'Only me mum calls me Peter.' He leant his long, poxy face into the back seat of the cabin. 'You coming to watch the game, Mrs Healey?'

Gran nodded.

'Looks like there's a few of youse coming to watch.'

Gran nodded again.

Brendan came to the rescue. 'And this is Kylie and Tom, my niece and nephew.'

For a second I thought it'd pass, but a flicker of recognition sparked in his eyes. 'Are you Tom Brennan as in the young rugby fella?'

I held my breath.

'You were the five-eight in the district comp, eh?'

'No, no,' I heard myself stutter. 'Half-back.'

'Yeah. I read about you,' he started. 'Youngest ever in the Wattle Shield premiership. When was it, last year?'

'Year before last,' I mumbled.

'Yeah, I remember.'

For a second I thought about jumping out of the car and running. Shorty's eyes were still on me; it was only a matter of his brain clicking over a few more times. Maybe he'd heard what had happened to us in Mumbilli. News travels fast in the bush.

'So you say you're the half-back?' he frowned. 'I could've sworn you were . . .'

'No,' I gulped and shook my head.

'You're from Mumbilli way, aren't you?'

I nodded again waiting for the ute to explode with the dreaded words.

'Eh, Brendan?' Here goes, I thought. 'You never told me this fella was your nephew, mate.'

Brendan raised his arms with a shrug.

'I reckon he's been keeping you under wraps.' Shorty was pointing to Brendan, a dumb grin on his dial. 'You didn't want us to know you scored the crook genes? Healey talent instead of the mighty Brennan talent, hey? Oh, oh, no offence intended, Mrs H, just a joke, you know.'

He pulled his head in, hit the roof of the ute and walked back towards Burger King chuckling to himself. I let my breath go and rubbed my palms on my shorts.

Saturday the 27th of August had been sudden death for St John's first fifteen. If we won the match against Booralee High we were in the Wattle Shield premiership for the third year in a row. If we lost, it was all over.

'Sudden death. Sudden death, fellas,' our captain, Luke, kept saying as he paced the change room. It was a prophecy we would read the wrong way.

We were all as nervous as hell sitting on the bench waiting for Dad to give us his final words. No one was talking. The only sound was the tapping of football boots on the concrete floor.

'This is it, boys,' Dad said calmly. 'I know you can do it. Just concentrate for the full eighty and stick to the game plan. Matt, line-out throws have to be straight. Daniel, when Tommy gives you the ball, kick the crap out of it. That's where you come in, Fin.' Dad turned to our cousin. 'Put pressure on the back three, Fin. We need your pace to run down every kick. We want to play it in their quarter for the first twenty, wait for them to make the mistakes. Bide your time. The gaps'll come.' Then quietly he said to Daniel, 'Don't push it, son. Concentrate. Keep a level head.'

We stuck to the game plan and won, but it was close: 18–16. Fin scored the final try to even the scores, and then with composure and grace only he was capable of, Fin drilled the ball to conversion and victory. 'Yes!' he yelled and fell to his knees.

He was mobbed. We all went crazy, hugging and jumping all over each other. Some of the fellas lifted Fin on to their shoulders. I remember Fin grinning and laughing, holding his fist in the air and shouting, 'Boom-a-lacka, boom-a-lacka, green and white.' Soon the whole crowd was chanting with him.

I also remember Daniel sitting on the oval watching him.

Booralee High hadn't lost a game all season. They'd been hungry for the shield that'd been ours for so long. Deep down, we'd been sure we'd lose the sudden-death match and be out of the comp. We'd even thrown in to hire out the old Mumbilli scout hall for the night to celebrate the end of season. It'd been a while since St John's had been under that kind of pressure. All we'd known was winning, but somehow this season our play hadn't been as smooth. As a team we were struggling; not even the old man's guidance could set us straight.

So most of us thought it'd be our last game, and as it turned out it was for some of us. Just not the way we'd imagined. But I know anyone in the team, our school or the town of Mumbilli would've traded the Wattle Shield in exchange for what happened that night.

That was the last time I touched a footy. Now, almost five months later, here I was in Coghill about to play.

I used to love a game of tip, we played all the time back home. But the things I'd once lived for now meant nothing to me. Just the thought of it left a big hole in my guts.

Even the scene was familiar: utes parked around the oval, cricket blaring from car radios; but it offered me no comfort.

The family unloaded out of the ute and I hung back, retying my laces.

Brendan leant into the cabin. 'You okay?' He seemed a bit tense. 'I know this must feel weird, Tommy. They're good guys, promise.'

'It's cool,' I lied.

Walking across the oval took forever; I counted my steps as they bounced off the grass. There'd been no shortage of rain in this town. How is it nearly six hours south-east can make such a difference? Mumbilli was hard and dry, and most of us had forgotten the thick smell of rain before it fell. The folk of Coghill hadn't. They'd been indulged with a perfect rainfall, giving them healthy harvests and well-fed stock. Coghill was spoilt, and it made me hate it all the more.

The blokes stood around stretching and taking the piss. Every joke, every laugh, every slap on the back reminded me I was an outsider. Brendan introduced me to about twenty guys whose names I had no hope of

remembering, some of whom would be in my year when I turned up at Bennie's tomorrow.

'G'day, g'day,' I kept saying, feeling like a prize jerk.

Suddenly they started chanting, 'Jonny, Jonny.'

A grin lit up Brendan's face. So this was Jonny Tulake. He worked in the family business with Brendan.

No wonder the priest called him the town's 'Jonah'. This bloke was a giant, and a tough-looking one. He had a number one haircut on the sides and a number four on top. His feet must've been at least size fourteen and he had a big, square jaw. His face was so clean-shaven and smooth you almost wanted to reach out and touch it; but no way, I'm not like that.

Ignoring the others, he came over to me and reached out an enormous hand. His voice was crisp and clear as he shook my piddling five-fingered excuse.

'You must be Tom?' He smiled, his white teeth glowing.

'Yeah.' Firm handshake. No fingers broken.

'How are you finding Coghill?'

I shrugged.

'Give it time.' He nodded his big head, and before looking up he quietly said, 'How's your mum going?'

'Okay,' I swallowed.

He knew.

Brendan came over. 'So you've met?'

'Just then,' Jonny said. 'Has he met everyone? The fellas from his year?'

'All done,' Brendan replied, making me feel like some kind of social experiment.

I wandered off and found Dad sharing a beer with a man who must have been Michael Harvey, the firsts' coach at St Benedict's.

'Hey, Tom,' the old man waved me over. 'Tom, this is Michael Harvey.'

Now I realised I had seen him before at a district game, but only from a distance. Up close, he looked younger and his nose kind of leant towards the left side of his face, no doubt compliments of a scrum.

'Great to meet you at last, Tom.' He kept shaking my hand, just about dislocating my shoulder. 'Welcome to Coghill, mate. You're going to love playing for St Bennie's. We're going to have a great year. Hey?'

I tried to smile but it didn't come out right. I was like one of those drum-playing rabbits you see on TV commercials. Except they'd forgotten to put the supercharged batteries in me so I was on the downhill slide. I could feel the exhaustion creeping into the back of my neck. I hadn't even got near a ball and already I felt like doing the bolt back to the cave.

I spotted Kylie sitting on the fence, her arms folded. She saw me and glared back. The Grandmother had some bloke carrying a chair to where Kylie was, and now she was getting him to wipe it down with one of her hankies. You could see her lecturing and giving instructions. The whole time her man-slave nodded, Kylie looked the other way, pretending it wasn't happening. She was getting to be the master of that.

'Okay, let's get started,' Michael Harvey called.

Everyone wandered over to where Harvey stood. I couldn't see Brendan so I followed Jonny.

'Remember the rules.' Michael juggled the ball as he spoke. 'No playing the ball and no running off the mark. Understood?'

They answered with a few grunts.

'Let's go, boys. North of the river to my left, south to my right,' he directed.

Players ranging from about sixteen to thirty-odd shuffled into two groups.

'Marcus, what are you doing on the south side?'

'Come on, Sir.' A stocky guy with a head that looked like a pit bull stepped out of our group, the south side. He was a Year Twelve I'd had the intro to earlier. 'I've only been living on the north side four months.'

'Doesn't matter,' answered Harvey. 'Them's the rules.'

'But Sir, my heart's in the south.'

'And your dick's in the north,' one of them muttered. They all started laughing like it was the biggest joke ever. 'Marcus, the numbers are uneven. There are eleven players on the south and nine on the north.'

'So?'

'So, you live in Hartley Road now which is on the north side of the river, therefore you play on that team.'

'What about him, Sir?' The prick pointed at me. 'Why can't he play north side?'

'He's playing for Brendan,' said a guy called Rory. 'And Brendan's from south of the river.'

'He lives here now, Marcus.' Jonny spoke softly. 'So do what Coach says.'

For a couple of seconds there was silence. Then Marcus walked over to the other team.

'Okay.' Michael blew the whistle.

'He can be a wanker,' Rory told me. 'Don't worry about him. He's harmless.'

But there was something I seemed to have missed. 'Jonny, where's Brendan? I thought he was playing.'

'No,' Jonny shook his big head. 'We needed even numbers.'

'Oh? I, um . . .'

'Come on,' he smiled. 'You'll be right.'

A tall, wiry guy from the north side kicked off. Up and under, the ball went high, hoping one of us'd drop it. No such luck, thanks to Jonny who caught and passed to Rory in one movement. Rory took off, and before I knew it I was alongside him, running hard. I couldn't help it. It felt so natural.

Rory passed me the ball, a sparkle in his eyes. 'Go you good thing,' he laughed.

I held the ball, remembering how it became an extension of my hands, a part of me. Twenty metres till the try-line.

My breath echoed through my head, loud and fast, as my legs charged down

the field. It was all in a split second yet it was the most freedom I'd felt in months. No pain, no bad thoughts. Maybe I could just keep running.

From the corner of my eye I spotted the wanker, Marcus, trying to catch me. My body switched into automatic. I propped off my left foot and came back inside. He should've expected it but he was still busy sulking, not thinking. He couldn't change direction quick enough. I left him clutching at thin air. 1–0, thank you.

Jonny, Rory and I carved them up. We were quite a trio – cut-outs, flick passes, scissors and soft hands were the flavour of the day. We ran the north side ragged, they were puffing and spitting after eating dust for an hour. We were too good. Final score, 12–3.

Everyone shook my hand, saying things like 'good game mate' and 'you've played before'. I went along with it, shaking hands and slapping backs too, but in the pit of my guts I could feel the emptiness returning.

'We blitzed 'em,' said Rory.

'Yeah.'

'See you tomorrow, eh?'

Tomorrow? I felt my heart slip to the ground. That was the thing I couldn't quite get my head around – there would be a tomorrow, and a day after that, and a day after that. The world went on regardless of how I felt.

# THREE

The next morning, Dad dropped Kylie and me at the side entrance to our new school. I think he knew how she'd react if he dropped her at the front gate, he'd read that well ahead.

The morning had been tense. I kicked a ball around to settle my nerves while Kylie spent hours in the bathroom. At first I thought she might've been throwing up but she was doing stuff to her hair. What, I couldn't tell you. It looked like she'd stuck her head in a fan then dipped it into a cement mixer. When she got in the car she stank. There was so much gunk in her hair, I thought I was going to suffocate with the fumes. For a joke I started doing choking noises, and did I cop an earful.

It started with just a 'Piss off, Tom,' which wasn't enough to stop me. It grew to a 'Tommm,' through clenched teeth, 'I said – pissss offfff.'

Kylie had a habit of clenching her teeth when she was mad. It cracked Daniel and me up. We called it her 'need to do a crap' face. So naturally I had to get my money's worth out of that. Then I went back to the coughing and choking, louder this time, holding onto my neck, making my face go purple. It was the most fun I'd had in ages. But then I got the serve, got the 'Fuck off, you dickhead! I hate you! I hate you, I hate all of you.'

Dad kept driving. He wasn't one to lose it, but he had a thing about swearing, especially girls. Daniel's girlfriend, the one before Claire, was prone to a bit of a rough mouth. It really got up Dad's nose, which was another reason Dad adored Claire so much. She never swore. According to the old man, her breeding was too good for that.

Kylie must have been thinking the same. 'Sorry, Dad,' she said.

'It's not nice hearing you speak like that, Kylie.'

'I said I was sorry.'

And that's when Dad pulled up at the side entrance to our new school: St Benedict's Catholic College, Coghill. Like I said, he read that well ahead. No grand entrances for the Brennans. Slip in the back door unnoticed was the name of the game these days.

'Kylie, and you too, Tom,' he began. 'I know this is hard for you guys, it's hard for everyone. Look at your grandmother, she's seventy-eight and had to make room for four more people in her home. But this is the way it is, and as a family we have to stick together.'

Dad was looking at Kylie. Kylie was picking her nails.

'This is the challenge God has given us.'

'God?' Kylie mocked. 'God? You're already sounding like Gran. Get over it, Dad.'

She struggled out of the car, pulled her uniform down and tried to run her fingers through her hair. Then she walked off without a goodbye. She didn't even look back. That was the thing about my sister, she'd become tough. It was like I hardly knew her anymore.

Dad opened his mouth, then closed it.

'Bye,' I said.

'Well, good luck, son,' he answered. 'Check on your sister at lunch, will you?'

I looked back before going through the gate, instantly wishing I hadn't. Dad was leant over the steering wheel, his head in his hands.

St Benedict's, or Bennie's as those in the know called it, didn't look that different to St John's, except twice the number of buildings and a lot more grass. It was built in the same grey besser block with verandahs running across the second level. There was a lot of concrete, rows of silver benches pasted in bird's shit and fat kids hanging outside the canteen eating finger buns with pink icing.

I followed the signs to the office; no way was I going to ask for directions. Kylie was already there, finding out what classroom to go to. She ignored me as she picked up her bag, which was right next to my foot, and she ignored me as she threw it over her shoulder, just about knocking me out.

As she strode out the office doors I noticed her bag had hitched her uniform up, revealing blue and red undies fighting the beginnings of a wedgie. It was not the best way to start a new school.

'Kylie,' I whispered. 'Kylie. Oi.'

She kept walking. I followed.

'Kylie,' I said a bit louder. 'Kyles. Your, your undies are . . .'

She spun around and I prepared myself. But she was crying, or maybe it's that she was trying not to. She yanked her uniform down.

'Kyles . . . you okay?'

For a second she pressed her lips together. 'I have to go,' she said quickly.

I understood where she was coming from. It's like, don't ask me now. Don't ask me to let go of my breath because I don't have the energy to clean up the mess. It's just easier to keep holding it.

Back at the office, I was given hasty directions to the Year Eleven block and the name of my 'home room' teacher, Harvey the footy coach, who yesterday seemed like a reasonable bloke. The old man'd told me last night that Harvey knew about the accident and Daniel and stuff. I didn't feel comfortable about it, but Dad said the teachers had to know what happened to us back home. What could I do? As long as he left me alone and didn't try any after-school chats, I'd be happy.

I'd changed schools once before, when I left primary school to start Year Seven at St John's. It was no big deal 'cause everyone else did too. In our town the choice was either Mumbilli High or St John's Marist College. It came down to two simple factors – money and religion. Catholics with an income opted for St John's, Catholics on benefits and all the others were left with Mumbilli High or 'Billi High' as everyone called it.

Everyone was seated when I walked in, so it must've been the way I mumbled quickly at the door that made Harvey get the intros over with so fast.

'Class, this is a new student, Tom Brennan. Remember to say g'day and help him out.' He told me to take the desk across from Rory, and that was it.

'G'day.' Rory nodded as I took my seat.

The room was small and stuffy and my desk was in the middle. I could have a good sticky at those in the front and only wonder what the lot behind were like. Apart from Rory, there were a couple of other faces I recognised from the game.

It's hard to sneak a perve at the chicks when you're the new boy. I'd have to wait for a more inconspicuous time, that's what Daniel'd tell me to do. He'd say, 'You don't want to go cutting someone else's lunch.' And he'd be right. Besides, chicks were the last thing on my mind.

The night Dad told us we were moving to Coghill, I made a deal with myself: I'd stay for two years till Year Twelve was over, max. After that I hadn't decided. Not back to Mumbilli; the Billi would always be home but two years wasn't long enough. I didn't know how long was long enough. Maybe after Daniel had done his time we could all go back. Maybe not.

The bus on the way home was packed. There were kids from St Bennie's, St Xavier's, Coghill High and Montana, the hippie bush school. The bus stank. There was no air, just a cocktail of body odours and bad breath mixed in with the odd fart.

The blokes were being prize wankers, mucking around and showing off, and the chicks that weren't part of that were deep in conversation. Finally there was something good about being the new kid; my inconspicuous moment had arrived.

Two seats ahead sat a couple of girls from my class. The girl near the window was perched up on her knees, chatting to the one next to her. The buttonholes on her shirt were popping. If I leant over slightly I could see a bit of black bra through the hole.

Standing up at the front of the bus was a group of girls from Coghill High. One was real sexy. Her skirt was sitting low on her hips and she'd tied her shirt up so you could see her tanned, smooth belly. Daniel would've liked her, and he would have got her too. He got whoever he wanted, and when he was sick of them he'd move onto the next. Except with Claire, that was the only time he stuffed up, and did we all pay for that!

Daniel and Claire had been having a bad patch. Actually, it was Daniel having the bad patch and Claire having to cop it. It was the standard Daniel scenario:

black moods that went on and on, rages over nothing, followed by long periods of sulking. There were times I thought the oldies were scared of him or didn't know how to deal with him. So he just got away with it.

When he got like that with girlfriends, it usually meant he'd had enough of them; it was his way of pissing them off without having to tell them. But Claire was different. She didn't put up with the grief, and she didn't walk, and I don't reckon Daniel knew how to handle it. He was used to calling the shots.

However, the real difference was that Daniel really liked Claire. He knew he was onto a good thing. Claire was pretty, smart, funny and had a certain way she carried herself. Maybe that was what made Daniel so insecure.

All the fellas fancied Claire, but it was Fin, our cousin, one of his best mates, who got up Daniel's nose the most when he was around her. It didn't make sense, Daniel getting like that. Fin worshipped Daniel. He always had.

If Daniel'd been able to look at it with a level head he would've seen that maybe it was Claire who liked Fin, not the other way around. But then maybe Daniel did see that, and maybe that's the exact thing he couldn't handle.

You see, Fin was changing, growing, and somehow that altered things between Daniel and him. There was a confidence about Fin he hadn't had before, especially in those last couple of weeks. Not that he was in your face. He wasn't like that. It was like Fin walked taller, and people began to notice him.

Fin had filled out, which meant he was strong and fast. Now he was the one to watch on the field, not Daniel and me, and no wonder. Come Friday night, Daniel and Luke would hit the piss and prowl around all night in the car. Most of the time Daniel was tired, hung over and bad tempered. He was doing zero work for Year Twelve but he didn't seem to give a stuff. And as always, he couldn't be told.

So the Brennan brothers started to look ordinary on the field. Daniel began to fumble the ball. Passes he usually swallowed, he'd spill. It was as though his instinct had vanished.

It was Fin who secured our place in the Wattle Shield with one of his famous sprints down the field. They were earning him a reputation, not just with the blokes but the chicks too. Why wouldn't Claire be one of them, especially when Daniel treated her the way he did?

So many hours, days, weeks I'd spent staring at my bedroom ceiling thinking about all of that. Dissecting it into little pieces, trying to pinpoint exactly when things started to change. Maybe it'd been happening for a while and I didn't see it. Or did it all just change that night at the sudden-death party in the old Mumbilli hall? Not that it made any difference now, but sometimes I needed to understand how that night got so out of hand.

I know parties can get that way. Someone gets too pissed, gets aggro. Usually you can shut 'em up and get on with it, but Daniel was more than just pissed and aggro that night. The way his eyes burned darkness and hate, and the way his top lip curled and spat obscenities that shocked and wounded. Daniel crossed a line that night, a line I didn't know my brother was capable of crossing.

Yet in the days that followed that terrible night, the whisper around town grew louder.

'Daniel Brennan was an accident waiting to happen. Daniel Brennan was an accident waiting to happen. **An accident waiting to happen. An accident waiting to happen.**'

So how come the township of Mumbilli saw it coming and we didn't?

Gran's place was the furthest out of town, which meant Kylie and I were last on the bus. Then it was about a ten-minute walk to the house.

Kylie kept moaning, 'How hot is it?'

'So?' I said to her.

'So what?' she snapped.

'Did you – get through it?'

'Through what?'

'Derr,' I pulled my spastic face. 'Your first day at your new school.'

'It sucked. Anything else you want to know?'

'I don't know why I bother even talking to you,' I said.

'You don't.'

'No wonder.'

'You talk about – easy stuff, like "how was school",' she mimicked.

My steps slowed.

'You don't ever want to talk about the – the stuff I want to talk to about.'

I lagged behind.

'Do you? No.'

My voice starting singing in my head, *da da da da*.

She kept on. 'But if you're actually interested, my home-room teacher is a creep called Mr Reid. "With an e, i," he kept saying. Like I got it the first time, Sir.' She stopped and turned around. 'So who's yours?'

'Harvey.'

'The footy coach?' She shot me a look. 'Oh well, you'll be right, then.'

'Huh?' I started kicking a stone along the road, this time just in front of her.

'I said, you'll be right, then.'

I shrugged.

'Yep,' she continued. 'You'll be absolutely fine, Tom. No doubt about that. Couldn't have worked out better for you.'

'What do you mean by that?'

She ran in front of me. Her eyes were burning. 'What do you reckon I mean?'

'Well, I'm asking you, aren't I?'

'It's just typical.'

'What's typical?'

'Football.' Her mouth twisted as she said the word. 'Football's always saved you. Saved you and Daniel. Made life easier.'

'Saved us?' I spat. 'Saved us?'

As brother and sister I knew we weren't supposed to do this, turn our anger on each other when neither of us could help what'd happened. But no matter how

hard you tried, it got a hold of you before you had a chance to get a hold on it.

Before my brain had a chance to register, my feet stopped and the words exploded. 'Football! Saved me and Daniel? You wonder why I don't speak to you? You're sick in the head! Haven't you noticed I'm here too? I'm stuck in this shit-hole too?' The anger scalded my insides as it bubbled and spewed up my throat. 'And what about Daniel? Hey, Kylie, what about Daniel? When he got to that courtroom, football didn't save him. Don't you remember Judge Williams's words? I do, I remember every single one. "Being a team player, you should have known better." Hey, Kylie? Don't you remember those words too? Don't you? Don't you?'

Kylie stood there, her mouth open. Tears rolled down her cheeks, washing the grime and sweat off her skin, leaving their tracks as evidence of our cruel attack.

She started to run. I didn't follow. Instead I sat down on the side of the road, put my head between my knees and concentrated on breathing slowly. In – out, in – out.

That's why there was no point talking about it, 'cause there was nothing in it to gain. All it did was make you feel lousy and hateful. And there was no point asking why, either. Why me, why us? I'd done that over and over and never got an answer. It was better just to let it lie.

The night it happened, I didn't get to the scout hall till after 8.30. I couldn't drag Snorter and Matt off the play station. They'd finally reached level six on 'Rams and Revheads' and there was no way they were going anywhere in a hurry. Especially Snorter, when he had the comfort of his couch and heater, the lazy prick.

'It's too cold,' Snorter whined. 'That old hall's a hole. Not even the scouts use it anymore.'

'Shut up, you wimp,' I said.

'Anyway, I don't know if my old lady'll want me taking the Statesman down that bush track. Just say it gets bogged?'

'Snorter, it hasn't rained for six months.'

'Yeah, well, why are you guys having this stupid "sudden death" party when you're still in it? They say footballers are thick. There's another bloody week to

go!'

Matt came back from the dunny. 'How did we know we were going to be so brilliant?'

'Yeah! How did we know?' I grabbed Matt. We locked together in a scrum and started shouting and stamping, 'Boom-a-lacka, boom-a-lacka, green and white. Chick-a-lacka, chick-a-lacka, we will fight . . .'

'Shut up!' Snorter threw the hand controller at us. 'It's Fin who won the game for youse all.'

By the time we got to the hall Daniel and Luke were well pissed. Not that that was unusual for a weekend. They were wrestling each other, falling all over the place and generally being dickheads. Daniel could get playful when he'd had a bit. His problem was knowing when to stop. He kept hugging me, ruffling my hair and telling everyone who'd known us all our lives that I was his brother. 'Hey, this is Tommy, my little brother.'

If only he'd stayed in that mood.

I finally managed to give him the slip. His hugs and headlocks were getting a bit rough and Luke was getting in on the act too. I went around the back of the hall, outside, where there was a bonfire and a bit of peace from the racket inside.

Snorter was boring everyone senseless with his trail bike's brake problem, how much it was going to cost him and how anyone who'd ever used the bike should throw something in the kitty.

Sheridan and Nicole, two girls from my year, were screeching songs from *The Mikado*, the musical we'd done the year before. Nicole had been one of the three little maids and was still lapping up the stardom. There was a rumour going around she'd won a singing scholarship at a school in Sydney.

'When are they gonna get over it!' Matt complained. 'Someone do 'em a favour and shut 'em up.'

'They sound like pissed cockatoos,' I said.

'Don't insult the cockatoos, mate.'

'Three little maaaiiids from schooooooool!' They finished with an ear-shattering scream. 'Thank you,' Nicole said with a bow. 'Thank you, thank you.

You're all beautiful.'

'Nicole's pissed as,' Matt said.

'Yeah, she looks it,' I said.

'Oi.' Matt gave us a nudge. 'Over there, look, it's Miss Priss. She doesn't look happy.'

We watched Claire walking out of the hall towards the bush. She stopped at one of the trees and leant her body against its trunk, her head bobbing up and down and her fists thumping along the trunk.

'She crying?' I said.

'Dunno,' answered Matt. 'You better go and see what your dickhead brother's done.'

I started walking towards her. She must've heard me 'cause she looked up, then quickly turned away. But it was too late for me to stop.

'Hey,' I said.

For a second she kept her back to me, then gradually she turned around. She wasn't crying but her face looked pale. She smiled, but it was quick and half-baked, not like her usual smile where her face glowed and she looked right into you.

'Hi, Tom,' she nodded. 'Good about the win.'

'Yeah.'

'You must be pleased?'

'Yeah.'

She gave the nervous smile again. 'So, next week the big one.'

Silence.

'You okay, Claire?'

'Um?' She stuck her hands in her pockets. 'Not sure.' She was being very un-Claire. 'Um, Dan and I have, um . . . broken up.' She said it so quietly I could hardly hear her.

'Huh?'

'We've, well, it really . . .' She took her hands out of her pockets and started to twist her long fingers around and around her wrists. 'It was me that broke it off. I mean, you know things have – changed. But I don't think he gets it. Have you seen him? He's really drunk.'

'Yeah.'

'*Really* drunk.'

'Where is he now?'

'I think he went back inside, it only happened a few minutes ago. I needed some air. I mean, I was trying to tell him that it wasn't working out anymore – for me, that is. I should've left it for later. Tonight probably wasn't the right night. Tomorrow, yeah, tomorrow would've been better, when he's not pissed. He goes off when he's had too much. He's been so full-on lately. But you know Daniel, it's all or nothing. Isn't it?' Claire was raving in a breathy little voice I'd never heard before. 'He's just, I don't know, he scares me sometimes, Tom. He just, well, he gets this look and it freaks me out.'

In the distance I could see Fin watching us, but when he saw me he turned around and walked back into the hall.

Claire was still talking. 'If he doesn't get his own way he kind of snaps. Yeah, he snaps.' She kept nodding. 'That's it. That's what he does. And I don't know how to deal with him when he gets like that.'

Of course I knew better than her what she was talking about.

'It's not your fault, Claire.'

'I didn't mean to hurt him, Tom. It just, you know, happened.' Claire stared at the ground, grinding her toe into the dirt. 'Dan doesn't understand that if you don't treat someone right then . . .'

'Claire, no one could blame you.'

'So you don't hate me?'

'Hate you?'

She looked right into my eyes. 'Daniel says he's going to – kill him.'

'Who? Huh?'

And then we heard the shouting and Matt was outside on the stairs yelling, 'Where's Tom? Someone find Tom.'

Claire and I ran into the hall. 'Fight. Fight,' people were chanting.

I could hear Daniel yelling as I elbowed my way through the crowd.

'Fuck you! Fuck you!' he kept screaming.

Claire slipped on the beer-sodden floor. Someone helped her up. I recognised the back of Fin's head inside the circle that was closing in around my brother's voice. I pushed my way to Fin so he could help me, tell me what Daniel was going on about. And that's when I got the real shock. It was Fin Daniel was yelling at.

'What's going on, Fin?'

'He's off his face.'

'Fuck you!' Daniel jeered. Foamy spit had pooled in the corners of his mouth. Luke and Owen, one of the forwards, were standing close by. I couldn't work it out. We'd just made the final, won the biggest game of our lives. We were mates. A team. We were family.

'What's going on?' I yelled again. 'Luke? What's, what's . . .'

But Luke didn't answer. He just stood there swaying and looking blank.

'You're a weasel, Fin.' Spit was flying from Daniel's mouth. 'Finbar the weasel.'

'Shut up Daniel, you're pissed.'

'I'm not too pissed to smell you, Finbar.'

'What are you going on about?' And as I said it I realised. This was what Claire had tried to tell me. 'Daniel?'

'Oh, fuck you, Tom. This is between Fin and me. Finbar the weasel. Get your brown nose out of our business.'

'Daniel.' I heard my voice shake. 'Get out of *his* face.'

'Oh, little Tom,' he taunted. 'You going to stick up for Finny? You think maybe Finny'll save you some?' Snarling, he beckoned me over like he did when we were kids and he wanted to fight. 'That's what you two got in common, Tommy. You couldn't buy yourselves a root.'

'Leave him, Tom,' Fin sneered. 'He's a loser, mate.'

Daniel lunged towards Fin but Owen caught him by the shoulders and held him back. They stumbled into the circle that had packed tightly around us. Daniel found his footing and pushed Owen's hands off him.

I saw Claire standing there, tears spilling down her cheeks. She threw her hands over her mouth and I turned to see Daniel take another step towards Fin. This time no one stopped him. Fin didn't move. The room was silent except for the echo of Daniel's breathing, hard and fast.

Their noses almost touched but Daniel whispered loud enough for us all to hear. 'Even if I let you have it, you wouldn't know what to do with it.'

Daniel pushed Fin out of his way, slamming his shoulders through the circle. The crowd scattered to let him through. I followed, forcing my way to the front of the hall.

'Daniel!' I called. 'Daniel!'

He ignored me as he stumbled along the dirt track, kicking anything in his way and screaming things that made no sense. Just noise and anger.

I caught up to him. 'Why do you have to be such an arsehole?'

'Piss off, Tom,' he yelled.

'No, you piss off.' I pushed him. He turned around, grabbing me by the neck of my jumper, stretching the wool till it was almost over my head.

'You know nothing about it.'

'Yeah?' I wrestled out of my jumper. 'I know stuff.'

Daniel walked on, banging the bonnets of cars that were parked along the track. I followed him. I wasn't going to let him off that easily, let him off like Mum and Dad and Pa always had. I wanted an answer. I wanted to grab his face in my hands and squeeze it until I could feel his jaw snap. Then ask him why,

why he had to ruin everything.

'You did it to yourself,' I screamed. 'You've been treating Claire like a piece of shit and you know it.'

He spun around faster than I was ready for and slammed me against a telegraph pole. He held me there for just a second, long enough for me to see the darkness in his eyes. 'You grovelling little prick,' he spat.

'Let him go!' It was Fin. 'Let him go, Daniel!'

'Come on,' Luke called behind Fin. 'Give it up, Dan. We're having a party, mate. A par-dee.' He took a hip flask of bourbon out of his coat pocket and took a swig. 'We made the final! Third year in a row-ho-ho.'

Daniel took the bottle from Luke and had a long drink. Then he held the bottle out to Fin. 'You want some?'

I held my breath. Fin stood there staring.

'You deaf?' Daniel snarled. 'I said, do you want some? Seeing you like my slops so much.'

We all just stood there. No one said anything.

'You're – the – prick.' I felt my chest heave with each word.

I walked off, leaving them there, wishing, hoping he'd walk further into the black hole he'd dug for himself. 'You've really fucked it up this time!' I yelled behind me. 'You deserve it, Daniel. You deserve everything you get. Everything! You're going down. Down!'

I had to get as far away from him as possible. At that moment I didn't care what he did, I didn't care if I never saw him again. I despised him, and it was burning a hole in my guts.

I could feel my teeth grinding together. I kicked at the dirt and thumped the trunks of the trees as I strode away from the hall, away from the car park. Away from them all. I didn't care if I had to walk all the way home.

The party seemed to be folding anyway. As I got further down the track I could hear everyone loading into their cars. People laughing and yelling, doors slamming, engines starting. The screech of tyres on the dirt with the odd

doughie.

A single file of cars and utes crawled down the kilometre-long dirt road that met up with the highway. I kept my head down, hoping no one'd notice me, but no such luck.

Us Mumbilli folk got a bit excited in a traffic jam. Let alone making the grand final, a family biffo then a traffic jam. Everybody had a bit to say. The wankers stopped to make some smart-arse comment about what'd happened. The busybody do-gooders had to see if everything was okay and if I needed a lift home.

But I wanted to walk. Walk it out of me.

A car slowed up next to me.

'Tom?' It was Claire, piled into a car with her girlfriends. She was crying and held a bunch of tissues to her nose. 'I'm so sorry, Tom. Are you okay?'

'Yeah.'

'Fin said he'd stay with him.'

'What?'

'Dan.' The car was driving away. 'Dan,' she called again. 'Fin said he'd . . .' Her voice disappeared into the traffic.

'Oi!' It was the Statesman.

Matt wound down the window. 'We've been looking for you.'

'Get in,' Snorter said. 'Tell us the real story.'

'I feel like walking.'

'Walking!' Snorter said, stopping the car.

The blokes behind started honking their horns. That and the hip-hop, rap, techno and whatever other rub-bish was blaring from the cars made it impossible to hear what Snorter and Matt were saying.

'What?' I yelled.

'Hurry up,' someone shouted and, 'Pull over, you turkey.'

'Yeah, all right!' Matt gave them the finger as Snorter pulled the Statesman over to the side of the track, letting the cars behind pass.

'Geeze, if they get dust on the Statesman, I'll kill 'em,' Snorter growled.

I leant into the window. 'Has it calmed down?'

'Sort of,' Matt nodded. 'Was that Claire?'

'Yeah. She was with the girls.'

'Wish I was in that car,' Snorter moaned.

I ignored him. 'What about the others?'

'Luke was throwing up. Dan was raving a bit. He's tanked.'

'Was Fin with them?'

'Yeah.'

'God, he's an idiot.'

'I know, but he's the only one that's sober,' Matt said. 'I s'pose he'll take Dan home.'

'If he can drag him away.' Snorter smirked. 'Daniel looked pretty busy with Nicole when I last looked.'

'Nicole?' I wasn't in the mood for Snorter's jokes. 'Geeze, you're sick.'

'True!' Snorter was smirking. 'That dirty brother of yours, he sniffs out an opportunity and she was ready and waiting.'

'She's pissed,' Matt said. 'She was all over him.'

'At least she can't sing when someone's got their tongue down her throat.'

'You're off, Snorter.'

'Come on, Tom, get in.'

'Aw, shit!' Snorter put his head on the steering wheel. 'I'm an idiot.'

'No kidding.'

'No, dickhead, I left my jacket back at the hall.'

'Get it tomorrow.'

'Someone'll nick it. It's my Bathurst 1000 jacket. Got all the signatures.'

'Who'd want it?' Matt scoffed. 'I hate that jacket.'

'I'm going back to get it. You getting in, Tom?'

'Nah.'

'We'll get you on the way back.'

The line of cars had gone. Snorter turned the Statesman around and drove back. I kept walking.

Kylie's school bag lay in the doorway. I kicked it out of the way and looked around: Gran's house was empty. The lights were off and the curtains drawn. It was creepy; our place in Mumbilli was so noisy and open.

The screen door in the kitchen squeaked, then slammed. It was a noise that always reminded me of school holidays here, Daniel and me running in and out of the house playing chasings, or hiding from Kylie. Gran shouting, 'I'll tan your hides if I hear that door slam again.'

Dad appeared in the hall. 'Tom, you're home.' He sounded cheery enough. Perhaps Kylie had kept our fight to herself. 'First day okay?'

I shrugged.

'I'm driving Kylie down to the pool. You want to come too?'

'Nah.' All I wanted to do was crawl back into the cave.

'She's a bit uptight. I think a swim'll help.'

'Where is everyone?' I asked him.

'Let's see. Your Mum's having a lie down at the moment.' I knew he was trying to make out she'd just gone to bed. I gave him the raised eyebrow 'don't bullshit me' look Daniel taught me in Year Seven, and for a second Dad seemed to stumble. 'Um, and, err, who else.' But I didn't want to rattle him. If Dad lost it that'd be the end of all of us. 'Yes, well, your Gran's doing the flowers at the church, and Brendan and Jonny are still working down at the sheds.' Dad followed me to the kitchen. 'So you still haven't told me, how did it go?'

'Okay.' I bit into an apple. 'Got Harvey for home room.'

'Yeah? Brendan'll be pleased about that. Hang on, why don't you go down to the sheds, see Brendan and Jonny?'

'Nah.'

'Go on,' Dad pressed. 'He'll want to know how your day went.'

And there was that tone in Dad's voice again. It whacked me right in the guts every time.

'I'm sure he's dying to hear all about it. Go on.'

'Okay,' I sighed.

'Good, good.' He smiled. 'Well, I'll be off. Kylie's waiting in the car.'

I wandered down the hall in case Mum was awake. The door to her room was open. I stood there. Maybe Dad was telling the truth, maybe she had just gone to bed and was waiting to hear how my first day went. I stepped into the doorway. A thickness in the air hung still and stale.

She didn't see me. How could she under all those covers?

'Yeah, thanks Mum,' I whispered. 'School went okay.'

# FOUR

Gran and Pa's place was four acres called 'Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys'. Of course The Grandmother was responsible for that. Most of Gran's earbashing sessions included a little story about Saint Marguerite, 'A very holy and good woman who taught young people how to look after the home.' How many times had I heard that! When we were kids and we'd drive through the front gate, Daniel'd say, 'Welcome to Saint Marge's Boogie.' Kylie and I'd crack up.

For the last five or six years Saint Marge's Boogie had included 'Healey's Tractor Repairs and Services', Pa's business. After he died he left it to Brendan to run. Now Jonny worked there with him.

We just referred to it as 'the sheds', 'cause three enormous sheds were built down the end of the property. The most awesome tree house and Gran's chook pens used to be there until they were flattened to make room.

Mum reckoned Gran never got over getting rid of the chooks. She never kept chooks again, which was kind of sad 'cause Gran loved her chooks. Most of them either had saints' names or names from the Bible. There was Saint Paul, or Paulie, the rooster. Mary and Bernadette were the hens, and later on she got Cain and Abel. It didn't seem to matter to Gran that the hens had boys' names. When I was a kid I thought that was the weirdest.

I never got told the whole story of why Pa moved the business from the centre of Coghill to home. It was one of the things our family never discussed, and boy, had us Brennans added a big one to that list.

Daniel told me Pa lost the family business betting on the horses. He'd know, 'cause Daniel was the only one Pa ever took to the races. Even as a kid I remember thinking how unfair it was, because our cousin Fin was the one who really loved horses. When he was eleven, Fin knew the name of almost every racehorse, their breeding, who trained them and how many starts they'd had. But

that didn't seem to matter to Pa, he only ever took Daniel. At least Daniel saved the race books for Fin. Sometimes I think he felt bad about it, and that was saying something.

Suddenly I was sucked deeper into that long black tunnel, the memories of Fin and Daniel and how we once were, and the worst thing, the knowing. Knowing more than anything I'd ever know that things would never be the same.

That night, walking home from the scout hall, I'm so positive I didn't hear anything. I remember looking up at the sky, seeing the Southern Cross and the saucepan, and thinking how quiet and still the night had become. It was good to be on my own.

I was nearly at the end of the track when in the distance I could just make out the sound of a car coming my way. I thought it would be Daniel and the others, I'd been wondering when they'd come past. Dreading it.

I hadn't seen Fin come by with anyone else, so he must still be with Daniel. God, Fin spent his life copping it from Daniel then going back for seconds.

The sound of the engine was getting closer. I could hear the groan of the tyres slipping all over the dirt and the horn was blaring. It was sure to be Daniel, pissed and being an idiot. Fin should've driven, but no way would Daniel let anyone touch his car, he was over the top about that.

I contemplated ducking behind a tree. The last thing I needed was my brother in my face again. But slowly I started to realise the sound I could hear wasn't Daniel's horn. It was too clear and even tuned to be his car. It was the Statesman. The precious Statesman! That's when I turned around to see Snorter and Matt howling up the track.

Matt was hanging out the window shouting and waving like crazy.

'Tom! Tom!' He threw the door open and started running towards me. 'Dan's stacked. Fucking stacked,' he was screaming. 'Come on. They're . . . I can't . . . stuck . . . fucking hurry.'

I strode down to the sheds, trying to clear my head and find the exit door to that black tunnel. But I could never find it. I didn't want to go back there but that night was etched into the bones of my skull. What could I do? I hated the past, and yet I hated the present nearly more.

Up ahead I could see Jonny's boots sticking out from under a tractor. You couldn't mistake them.

'That you, Tom?' Jonny's voice echoed from underneath.

'Yeah.'

'How'd your day go?'

'Okay.'

'Yeah?'

'Where's Unc – Brendan?'

'Inside.'

'Do you reckon he'd mind if I checked my emails?'

'Can't see why he would.'

Brendan had built himself a cabin down by the sheds. It doubled as an office and a flat, and the thing that always amazed me was how tidy he kept it. Spick and span.

I tapped on the door. 'Brendan?' I could hear the shower going so I let myself in.

My jaw dropped. This wasn't the place I remembered. Empty bottles and cans of beer littered the table, and the plates looked like they hadn't been touched for weeks. I didn't know whether to stay, or go back out and wait till Brendan was out of the shower.

I'd spent nearly half my life here on school holidays, yet I didn't really know my only uncle. One of the other things our family never discussed, well, never discussed openly, especially in front of Gran, was Brendan and the fact he was gay.

I knew 'cause Daniel and Fin told me, but I think by the time I was about twelve or thirteen I'd figured it out anyway. You never saw Brendan bringing home a girl for Christmas lunch, or ever heard him talk about them.

There's one memory I have of Brendan with a sheila at Pa and Gran's thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. She'd been in the same year as him at Bennie's. I don't

remember her name or whether she was a blonde or a brunette. What I do remember is hearing Mum and Aunty Kath whispering about it in the hallway.

Mum said, 'She seems nice.'

'She's doing us all a big favour,' Aunty Kath replied. 'She's even got her arm around him.'

'But she knows, doesn't she?'

'Tess! Of course she does.'

'Do you think Brendan will ever tell them?'

'Mum and Dad?'

'I mean, surely they'll figure it out one day?'

'I reckon Mum knows,' Aunty Kath answered. 'She doesn't let on. And she'd never ask about it. She probably just does a lot of praying for him.'

'Do you think . . .' I remember Mum starting to giggle and Kath hushing her even though she was laughing too. 'Do you think there's a patron saint for, for . . . gay sons?'

Daniel had known Brendan. They were close. Sometimes I think Brendan told him things, private things about his life. As Daniel got older he mucked around with Brendan heaps, treating me like the toxic little brother, all of nineteen months his junior. Even last Christmas, well, not exactly last Christmas (that Christmas didn't rate a mention), the one before that, I remember wondering why I couldn't hang out with them. Daniel and I always did stuff together, but when we got to Gran's he'd just piss off with Brendan and I'd be stuck at home with Kylie, knowing I was missing out on a good time.

On Brendan's desk was a photo I hadn't seen for ages. It was Mum, Brendan and Aunty Kath fishing by the river when they were kids. Mum was doing the peace sign behind her little sister's head and Brendan was pretending to choke himself. Another picture frame lay face down. I picked it up, not ready for the fist in my guts. Staring at me, their arms wrapped around each other, were Daniel and Mum.

Mum looked so happy. I'd forgotten the way her eyes could smile. She was looking at Daniel, laughing. It was taken just after she'd unwrapped a Christmas

present from him, a pair of pearl stud earrings. Daniel saved up all year for them. I don't think Mum's ever taken them off, and that was thirteen months ago.

The old girl and Daniel were close, real close. It wasn't like she loved him more. It didn't feel like that. It was like she thought he couldn't look after himself, that he'd stuff up if she wasn't there doing it for him. And she'd been right.

Brendan came out with a towel around his waist. 'Tom! G'day.'

I pushed the picture away.

'That's one of my faves,' he said.

'Huh?'

'That photo of Tess and Daniel at Christmas.'

'Oh.'

'I remember Tessa chasing Joe around the house because he wouldn't tell her where he'd hidden her present.'

'Yeah,' I nodded. 'Dad got her an ice-cream maker.'

'Was a good Christmas, that one.'

'Yeah.'

The silence that followed hurt like mad. The thing about this pain was that it was always there, but these encounters sent it peaking before it settled back to a constant dull ache.

'So how was the first day at Bennie's?' Brendan looked at me hard. 'They treat you okay?'

'Yeah.'

'They're good blokes, Tom. Just give it time. You'll find that . . .'

'Hey, Brendan, can I check my emails?' I didn't want the 'time is a healer' talk. 'I'm on hotmail. I can go to the . . .'

'Yeah, course you can! Any time, mate. Make yourself at home.'

'Thanks.'

'Sorry the place is a pigsty. I've just been really busy, you know.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'Just dial straight through, it's on a separate line. I'm going back out, help Jonny finish up.'

It was only a week ago that Kylie and I found out we were leaving Mumbilli. Four lousy days before we shifted. I'd seen Dad packing boxes but I didn't think too much about it. I guess I was so numb, I wasn't really thinking about anything. But it was obvious, of course we had to go. For the third time in a couple of weeks someone had left a message – this time on our garage door – 'NO JUSTICE'.

I don't know who wrote the stuff. The list of suspects was big, but you couldn't be sure of anyone. Some folk seemed okay and some just stared when they passed you, but in the end it got too much, waiting for someone to spit on your face. So I just stopped going to town.

Mostly I was at Matt's place. His parents worked so we had the house to ourselves. School had broken up, Daniel had gone and Mum just stopped getting out of bed. They were weird, those days. It was like they had no beginning or end; one merged into the next and the next and the next.

One night when it was too hot to sleep Kyles and I watched the video of *The Matrix*. Just before the end, Dad walked through the front door and said, 'Kids, we're moving to Coghill.' He said it just like that.

Kylie ran to her room and I sat there with my gob on my knees.

'I'm sorry, Tom, but we can't stay here,' Dad said.

I nodded. 'What about the house?'

'I'm trying to sort that.'

'What about all our stuff?'

'I've made arrangements. I need you and Kylie to pack up your rooms tomorrow.'

'When?'

'Friday. Early.'

'Shit.'

'And Tom, no one is to know. Understand.'

'But what about . . .'

'No one.'

That Thursday night I posted Matt a letter. I'd been at his house all day. It was raining, the first rain in months. Matt, Timbo, Snorter and me had the most excellent game of poker. We pissed ourselves so many times that day. Once I had to run to the loo 'cause I wasn't sure if I was laughing or crying.

So I never got to say goodbye to Matt. He'd been my best mate since grade four – eight years. He was there the night it happened. He was my buddy, the one I could talk to. Probably the only one. Snorter just shut down 'cause it was easier that way, but Matty never gave up on me or the rest of us, and that meant more than anything else.

It was a short letter. It was pretty pathetic but I didn't know what to say and I didn't want to say nothing. It felt wrong pissing off your life and your best mate with just a few sentences. It was like leaving yourself behind, and in a way I suppose I was.

*Matt, we've moved. I couldn't tell you. I only found out the other day. Email me. Good old Daniel's gone and stuffed everything. Dad reckons we had no choice and he's right. Say g'day to Snorter and the boys. This sucks. Tom.*

My fingers trembled and slipped along the keys. Finally I was logging on. I watched the message blink, 'receiving mail', my heart pumping in my throat.

Bing! – there it was.

From – Matt: Subject – What the? Received 24/1/03,10.55 pm.

Tom mate, I'm shocked, we're all shocked. My head's spinning. I keep standing outside your house waiting for you to walk out. What am I going to do with myself Australia Day? Please don't tell me you've moved to Coghill 'cause that'd really suck. We're speechless mate. You're right about Daniel stuffing everything

up – he did that with perfection. I understand why you had to go. It sucks but maybe it'll just be for a few months while things settle down in the Billi.

If you see Fin say g'day to him from us. My old girl heard he's being moved to some rehab place soon. The Billi's still full of rumours. I know this is short but it feels a bit weird at the moment. Say hi to Kyles. My sister says Becky hasn't stopped crying. Take it easy – Matt.

I read it over and over. I wanted to eat the words, make them my sustenance for the emptiness gnawing at my guts.

I hit reply and stared at the box that waited for my words.

Good to hear from you mate. My head's spinning too. I lost the battle about repeating Year Eleven but who cares. I had my first day today and it was the pits. Yes I'm at Coghill, where else. They've sent me to St Benedict's. The tossers who couldn't catch a cold, well I'm one of them now. I reckon it's the only time the family's driven to Gran's without a fight and that's only 'cause no one opened their mouth the whole way. It's like your worst nightmare, no it's worse . . .

I realised the phone was ringing. The answering machine clicked over, speaking in Brendan's voice. I sat there wondering if I should pick it up, but I heard Aunty Kath's voice and was relieved I hadn't.

'Hi, Brendan, it's me.' She sounded tired and a bit shaky. 'I'm just on my way back to the hospital. Fin's pretty down so I thought I'd spend the night with him. Hope Tom and Kyles are settling in okay. Um, what's the plan for the weekend? Let me know. Bye.'

Now Fin's face was stuck in my head and nothing mattered anymore. My grumbling looked so weak up there on the computer screen. I stared at the words I'd written to Matt, feeling ashamed. I couldn't send this. I hit delete and logged off. Maybe tomorrow I could try again.

I hadn't seen Fin in about a month: the day after Boxing Day, to be exact. I wanted to see him but it was just so hard. Each time he'd be a bit thinner, a bit quieter, and his initial look of determination and balls was fading to one of anger and bitterness. Or maybe that was what I saw in Aunty Kath's face. I wasn't sure, I didn't want to look too much at anyone.

December had been hot and the hospital air conditioning was busted that day.

Fin had no sheet over him. His legs had wasted to long pieces of bone wrapped in shiny skin. I couldn't stop staring. These were the legs that had run the length of the field to score the needed try of the season, then kicked the ball through the posts to conversion and victory.

Now they lay there on the bed, useless, and that was something I just couldn't wrap my head around.

'What's happening in the Billi?' Fin had asked me.

'Nothing much.'

'Got to be more than what's happening in here.'

'Snorter wrecked his trail bike jumping that hill behind his place.'

'Again! Stupid wanker.'

'He reckons it's going to cost him nearly a grand to fix this time.'

'Could be worse.'

And that's another reason I didn't like seeing Fin. There was nothing you could say. Every word had another meaning and every story led you back to the same place – here. A spinal unit, mostly full of young men like Snorter, where risk and danger was what pumped their hearts.

Not the case with Fin. Our cousin, the responsible only child of Aunty Kath, took one risk – always the same – and that was trusting my brother Daniel. It was a bad decision.

'Wash your hands for dinner, Thomas.'

Gran was stinking out the kitchen cooking lamb's fry again. There was no way I would ever eat that stuff. A few bowls of cereal was going to be dinner for the fourth night in a row. Not that I minded. I wasn't hungry and nothing tasted good anyway.

I calculated that the roast on Australia Day was the last decent meal she'd served. Now I wished I'd eaten that charred slab of cow's shit.

The others were at Gran's mercy. Maybe that was her master plan: feed 'em up big on arrival then let them choke on lamb's fry until they're starved into

submission. I wouldn't put it past her.

'Thomas, what are you looking for?' I swear Gran had eyes in the back of her perm.

'The Weet-Bix.'

'Finished, mate,' Dad winked.

'What?'

'I don't know why you can't eat the normal dinner like the rest of us.'

'Not hungry,' I muttered.

'At least have some baked beans on toast tonight,' Gran said. 'You can't go all week without protein. Don't they teach you these things at school?'

'Yeah, well, where is everyone?' I muttered.

'Kylie's out for the night,' answered Dad.

'Out? Where?'

'At a friend's.'

'Who?'

'Brianna someone.'

'Brianna Henderson,' Gran corrected. 'Seem like a nice family although I hardly know them. Anglicans,' she whispered. 'But St Benedict's were happy to take Brianna.'

'She doesn't waste any time,' I said.

'She's just trying to make the best of this situation. Isn't she, Joe?'

Dad nodded. He'd undertaken the big job of chewing the lamb's fry.

'I hope you've made some friends this week, Tom.'

I shoved a spoonful of baked beans in my mouth.

'It's important to try and – give it a go. There are lots of nice lads at the school. No point indulging in self-pity.'

I felt like spitting my beans back into the bowl.

'Have you met Simon Whelan yet?' Gran's interrogation continued. 'He's a nice chap.'

I knew about Simon Whelan, he was in my biology class. His face was like a weasel's with little beady eyes that watched the Year Nine girls file out of the lab before we went in. I overheard Rory saying someone caught him sniffing the stools after they'd left. Yeah, Gran, real nice chap.

'What time are you and Theresa leaving in the morning?' she asked Dad.

'Are you going to see Dan?' I said, a bit too loud.

'Yeah,' Dad nodded. 'Just your mother and I.'

'Oh.' Mum who hadn't left her room all week.

'Brendan thought you might like to go with him to Aralen, to see Fin and Kath. Maybe go for a swim afterwards.' Gran looked at Dad as she spoke to me. 'You know he might be moving to the rehab section. The doctors are very pleased with him.'

Dad stared at the gristle on his plate. 'I'll try to get up there next weekend, Carmel.'

'Apparently there's slight movement in his left shoulder.' Gran couldn't help herself. Either she was stupid or enjoyed playing the guilt game. Somehow I reckoned it was the latter. 'He's still very down, well, why wouldn't he be. I think Kath stayed every night with him this week. Terrible, sleeping on those vinyl recliners, especially in this heat.'

I cleared the plates, something I never do, but anything to get away from her. I was afraid of what I might say, and Dad sitting there, letting her go on in that underhanded way of hers, was more than I could hack. At least our home in Mumbilli had given us some kind of sanctuary, some silence for our private guilt.

# FIVE

Saturday in Coghill. Kylie had a reprieve seeing she had her new best friend. She'd ended up staying over at this Brianna Henderson's house and was in no rush to come back.

While Brendan and I were headed three hours northeast, the oldies who'd left at sparrow's fart were driving two hours south-west to see Daniel. They had to be there at 10.30 am: Saturday visiting timeslot. Probably about now they were rolling into the car park with the other families.

'Why are just the oldies seeing Dan?' It was more like a thought out loud.

'Few reasons, mate,' Brendan replied, pulling up outside a house with a yellow stripey sheet hanging in the front window.

'Who lives here?'

'Jonny.'

The engine was still running.

'Is Jonny coming?'

'No. I need you to run in and collect some stuff for Fin,' he told me. 'I'm duckin' up to fill the tank. Be back in five minutes.'

I knocked on the door, waiting for Jonny's big head to appear.

'Hello,' a sleepy voice said.

It was a chick. She was a bit like Jonny, but it was hard to get a really good look as her black hair was tangled all over her face. She tried to force it behind her ears but her fingers got stuck.

'I've got to get it cut.' She giggled in a kind of embarrassed way.

I nodded, not meaning I agreed, but what was I meant to say? Yeah, it looks like a bird's nest.

'You must be Tom? I saw you at school the other day.'

'Yeah?'

'I'm in Year Twelve at Bennie's.'

Again I nodded. I'd just caught eyes with the Bart Simpson heads sprouting out of the slippers she was wearing.

'Classic,' I laughed.

'You like them?' she said lifting a foot.

'Yeah.'

'Anyway, I'm Chrissy.' She smiled, showing the same white teeth as her brother. 'Jonny's sister.'

'G'day. I'm meant to be collecting . . .'

'I know,' she interrupted. 'Stuff for your grandad. I'll just go and get it. You can come in,' she called behind her.

The sitting room was overtaken by an enormous flat-screen TV. Chrissy was rummaging through some bags.

'I think everything's here.'

After the 'grandad' line, I figured it was safer not to question what was in the bags. Instead I went for the TV diversion. 'Flat screen. Cool.'

'Jonny sits there religiously watching every sports show: footy, golf, tennis.'

'You don't like sport?'

'Come on,' she laughed. 'My family's from Tonga. Rugby's second to God.'

Brendan tooted outside.

'Better be off.'

'Bye.' She walked me to the door. 'Hope your grandad's, you know, okay.'

'She thinks it's for Grandad,' I said, shoving the bags into the back seat. 'Whoever that is!'

'Yeah, well, their old lady's a bit complicated,' Brendan replied. 'Not everyone can handle the situation.'

'No kidding,' I mumbled. 'So what's in the bags?' I leant over and pulled a gigantic lamb's wool booty out from the top. 'What do we need this for?'

'It belonged to their father, Peter.'

'Whoa.' I measured the booty next to my shoe. Judging by the size, Jonny obviously took after him.

'He had a stroke, a real bad one,' explained Brendan. 'The whole right side of his body was useless, and then he had another one and that was pretty much it.'

The ute made the loop onto the highway. The sign said Aralen, 289 kilometres, Mumbilli, 670. I felt my guts turn.

'Poor bastard,' Brendan was still talking. 'He couldn't walk, talk, eat. He was such a big strong man.'

'Yeah?' I was only half listening.

'Yeah,' nodded Brendan. 'He died a few years ago now. Got pneumonia in winter and that was it.'

Now I understood why we had his sheepskin stuff. This'd be Fin's first winter. I swallowed hard.

'Look, Tom, I had to spin her a yarn,' Brendan sighed. 'Rose, that's Jonny and Chrissy's old girl, is as religious as my mother. She thinks alcohol is evil. She hassles Jonny for having a beer after work. She believes everything the church says. Let's just say she's zero tolerant, have you heard that phrase before?' Brendan had turned red in the face. 'And anyway, it's not fair to Mum, people like Rose knowing. Mum's too old to cope with this sort of stuff.'

'Jonny knows,' I said.

'Yeah,' nodded Brendan. 'I would've gone mad if I hadn't had anyone to talk to.'

For a while we didn't speak. I wasn't a mind-reader but I reckon Brendan was

having the same thoughts as me. How did we end up here? If only things had been different, turning the clock back, all that type of stuff.

Finally he spoke. 'Apparently Dan's in a bad way.'

'No one tells me anything.'

'Look, I don't know if anyone knows that much. That's why they went on their own today. Find out what's going on. At least it gets your mum out of bed.'

'That's the only thing that does,' I scoffed.

And I didn't want to say any more about it. I switched on the radio and fiddled for a station.

We crossed the Dungog River, the tyres bumping over each ridge. In another hour or so we'd be able to smell salt in the air.

As a kid, this had been the smell of excitement, a reprieve from the scorching inland heat and Gran's nagging. A day mucking around in the ocean – boogie boards, meat pies, ice-blocks, burying each other in the sand – then driving home in the evening, licking the salt from our burnt skin. Pa was slack with the SPF 30, he used to say a bit of sun never hurt anyone. We didn't argue. We'd grab our boogie boards and run.

I must've smiled 'cause Brendan said, 'What are you smirking about?'

'I was thinking about when we used to come and stay in the Christmas holidays and Pa'd take us to the beach.'

'Yeah.' Brendan smiled too.

'We'd always go to Aralen. To Maine's Beach.'

'Dad's favourite, and close to the Aralen TAB,' Brendan added. 'I reckon he did some of his biggest bets at the Aralen TAB, where nobody knew him.'

'He'd make us wait in the car and we'd be busting to get to the beach. Sometimes he'd be ages and we'd be boiling.'

'We've all been there, Tom.'

'One time Daniel got out of the car and went for a walk or something. He was gone a long time and Kylie and I got really scared. We panicked and ran into the

TAB to tell Pa. I still remember Pa saying, "I'll skin that boy alive.'"

'Bet he didn't!'

'He got into a bit of trouble. I remember that 'cause I copped it from him afterwards for dobbing.'

A memory that must've been eight years old surfaced with such clearness it was like watching a home video in my head: Daniel swimming towards me, snarling, 'You dobber.'

'Get lost,' I yelled back.

'No, you get lost, dobber. Dobber, dobber, dobber.' He was getting closer and had that dark look only Daniel got, where his eyes flashed and looked evil and freakish. 'You know what happens to dobbers?'

'Get off.' I started to punch the water but he kept swimming towards me.

'Dobbers get punished,' he shouted, punching back with such force I didn't dare take a breath or I'd cop a mouthful of water. 'I'm going to get you, you dobber.'

He managed to grab my foot. I tried to kick him off but his eleven years had an advantage over my nine. He dragged me towards him and held onto the back of my hair.

'I'm gonna kill you.' And by the look on his face I believed him.

He pushed my head under the water. I struggled under the weight of his hands, and each time I nearly surfaced he'd shove me under again, his grip firmer.

Who knows how long he held me under? A minute, maybe fifteen seconds. What I can remember is the feeling of my head wanting to explode and how silent it was under the water.

The Royal Prince Charles Hospital in Aralen had a better than average spinal unit, and that's where Fin had pretty much been since August last year. Except for intensive care where he'd spent a couple of weeks when things were touch and go.

Dad took me to see Fin the third day after the accident. I found out later they didn't think he was going to make it. I can't recall any conversation. What had just happened to our families was so enormous, so beyond any comprehension,

that all we could do was stand around, stunned and silent, watching Fin and a machine that heaved and clicked with each breath it took for him.

'Hey, Tom!'

And here he was six months later. His hair had grown back and he could breathe for himself. But he'd never be the real Fin, the Fin I knew.

'How's it going, bro?'

'Fin,' I said shoving my hand in my back pocket, stopping the instinct to slap his like we'd always done. 'How are you goin', mate?'

'Not bad. They're talking about moving me to rehab.'

'Yeah, the old man told me.'

'Is he with you?'

'Nah. I came up with Brendan, he's just gone to the dunny.'

'Take a pew, mate.'

On the back of Fin's bed read a sign, 'Finbar O'Neil, C5 incomplete injury.'

I don't know why they just didn't write 'quadraplegic'.

He must've seen me looking. 'You checking out my new mate?'

'Hey?' Next to the sign was one of The Grandmother's holy cards. 'Yeah.' I pointed to the serene face. 'Who's the dude?'

'One of Gran's boyfriends,' grinned Fin. It was a joke we had. Fin got a flogging once when Gran heard him calling Saint Christopher her boyfriend.

'I figured that,' I told him. 'But which one?'

At least we still had Gran's saints to laugh about. It wasn't much but it was something.

'I don't think you've met Saint Osmond.'

'Don't believe I have.' I found myself chuckling. 'What's he the boss of?'

'Osmond, my boy, is the patron saint of paralysis.'

Suddenly it wasn't funny.

I looked around the empty room pretending my head wasn't starting to spin out of control. 'Where are the others?'

'The orderlies've been having a slack day. They wheeled the fellas out into the sun so they can have a smoke, check out the nurses having their lunchbreak. Just 'cause it ain't working doesn't mean you've forgotten.'

'Yeah?' I didn't know how to respond to that either. This was Fin's new world. 'Is Martin still in this room?'

'Marvin,' corrected Fin. 'He went to the rehab unit two weeks ago. You're down on the action, mate.'

'Yeah?'

'Marv's replacement's a real beauty. Lucky for us he can't move or he'd be trying to murder someone.'

I opened my mouth then closed it. I'd run out of comebacks.

Fin filled the silence. 'So, the Brennans moved.'

'Yeah.' I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

'You're a Coghill boy now.' There was something about the way his top lip curled. 'Who would've thought.'

I swallowed hard.

'Sorry, mate.' Fin looked away. 'Didn't mean it to sound harsh. Just got too much time up here.'

'It's okay,' I mumbled.

'Wasn't your fault, mate.'

I shrugged and stared at my feet.

'I was thinking about it last night.' Fin's voice was soft. 'That's all I seem to do at night, think. The nights are so long in this place. I hate them. My head goes off and I can't shut it down. I get real scared.' He stared at the ceiling. 'Do you think about it much?'

My back straightened in the chair.

'Do you?'

'Yeah.' I could hardly make my voice work.

'I mean the actual night? Do you think about that night?'

'The whole fucking mess,' I whispered.

'I couldn't remember much for ages, but lately I've been remembering really stupid little things.'

I didn't want to go there. Not with Fin, not with anyone. But there were rules, that I understood. One of the rules was listening to anything Fin wanted to say. It was part of the deal.

'Sounds weird,' continued Fin, 'but mostly I can see Dan's face. The way he looked that night.'

I nodded.

I wondered how much Fin did know. I'd even prayed a couple of times that there was stuff he'd never remember. The doctors told Aunty Kath he'd lost a fair bit of memory and perhaps'd never get it back. Maybe not for Fin, but for the rest of us, it was better that way.

'I got this picture in my head of Dan swaying and yelling. You know that look he gets?' I could tell by his lips curling down at the edges that this was hard for him. How could it not be, Fin lost everything that night. 'That look he gets when he's angry. Really angry. There's something in his eyes that says, "Fuck all of you."' Fin licked his cracked lips and swallowed. 'I can remember walking out of the hall too. I think I was looking for Claire.' His eyes rolled up to the ceiling. They stayed there a while before he looked down and at me. 'Dan had you up against a telegraph pole, didn't he?'

I nodded.

'Yeah,' Fin whispered.

'"You grovelling little prick."'

'Huh?'

'That's what Dan said to me.' My heart felt like it was being squeezed up my throat. '"You grovelling little prick."'

'I don't remember that, Tom.'

'I do.'

Brendan and Aunty Kath walked into the ward, their arms around each other. Even the Cancer Council sunnies that sat huge on Aunty Kath's face couldn't hide her red nose. Brendan went over to Fin while Aunty Kath wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me tight.

'Tom! It's so good to see you.' You'd describe Aunty Kath as solid; she had the wide frame of Gran, whereas Mum had finer bones.

As Aunty Kath took a step back to inspect me, I noticed the muscles in her arms were big, like a bloke's. Her biceps had to be twice the size of mine. It hit me that it was from all the lifting and rolling of Fin.

'You look too skinny,' she scolded me. 'Aren't they feeding you at Coghill?'

I felt my face go red.

'Mum keeps cooking lamb's fry for them,' piped up Brendan.

'Lamb's fry! Hasn't she got over that phase yet?'

'I offered to cook the other night and she looked at me like I was some sort of moron.'

Brendan and Aunty Kath launched into a dissection of Gran's cooking disasters and the lamb's fry farts Pa used to do. I sat down watching them, wondering how they managed to look so relaxed in a place like this. I felt so tense. All I wanted to do was go back to my room, back to the darkness of the cave.

One of the patients was wheeled back in. You could smell the shit. They drew the curtains around his bed and I heard him groan.

'Let's get you sorted, mate,' one of the orderlies said.

'Fuck off,' he started to scream. 'You arseholes. Get the fuck away from me.'

I didn't want to think what they were doing behind there. I looked over at Fin. He was watching me.

'That's my new neighbour,' he said, his face staring into mine. Then he sighed and looked away. 'Come on, Brendan, I think Tom's had enough.'

'No. No.' I found myself frantically shaking my head. 'I'm okay. I might, um, just go to the dunny.'

The toilets were empty. I turned on the tap and put my head under, drenching my face and hair, tasting the water mixed with my sweat and fear.

I banged my head on the mirror, the dull thud bouncing off the walls. It should've been a happy night. It should've been a great party. There was so much to celebrate. Thanks to Fin we thought we'd escaped sudden death. But we were wrong; instead we'd walked into it.

As Snorter steered the Statesman around that last bend, I was still me, Tom Brennan – Year Eleven, middle child, happy, free, no fuss type of bloke. Didn't think about much except my mates and footy.

But as we turned the corner and the headlights shone on Daniel's blue Falcon up on its side against a tree, the front tyre still spinning, everything I thought I knew about who I was and who the Brennans were changed forever.

I jumped out of the car and started running. The driver's door was open and I could see the silhouette of Daniel stumbling towards the bush, his arms wrapped around his head. The sound of leaves and twigs snapping under his feet echoed through the night sky.

'Daniel,' I screamed. 'Daniel!'

# SIX

By the time we left Fin and Kath at the hospital, Brendan and I couldn't be bothered going for a surf. It was hot enough, but seeing Fin took up every ounce of energy. Even a swim seemed like too much effort. I wanted to go home or to Gran's, wherever home was now, and stare into space. Brendan must've felt the same 'cause the way he looked at me and sighed, 'Do you really want to go for a swim, Tom?' said it all.

So we were back in the car driving. Another great weekend. The gaol run or the hospital run – take your pick.

'How do you reckon he was?' asked Brendan.

'Dunno.'

'Come on, Tom, you must've noticed something. You haven't seen him in a while.'

I wrapped my hand around my jaw. 'He's starting to remember stuff.'

'You mean about the accident?'

'Mostly before, I think.'

'Be weird, loosing a huge chunk out of your memory.'

Be good, I thought.

'He was conscious the whole time, wasn't he?' Brendan asked.

'Pretty much,' I swallowed hard. My hand ran down to my throat and held it tightly.

'He was lucky to have you there, Tom. Even if he doesn't remember.'

I gazed out the window. 'I'm glad he doesn't remember,' I mumbled.

The lady who counselled Matt, Snorter and me said when the memories come back, let them in, look at them, then move on. But I didn't want to let them in. Why would I want to hear or see that stuff again? The fear in Fin's eyes, the empty stare of Luke, the way Nicole looked like she was sleeping. Or what about the sound of Fin whispering, 'I can't feel nothing,' over and over again. The police siren coming down the track, the metal cutters as they hacked away at the car, Daniel sobbing and chucking in the bushes. No thanks, I could do without those memories. Running towards the car. Running into the headlights. Running into the silence of death . . .

'Daniel,' I screamed, throwing myself out of the Statesman before it'd even stopped. 'Daniel!'

I could see the silhouette of Daniel's body running into the bushes like a silver light streaking through the trees.

'Daniel! Stop!'

'Leave him,' Matt yelled, his footsteps fast behind me. 'We've got to get to the others.'

The Statesman burned off.

'Snorter?' I cried.

'He can't get a fucking phone signal.' I heard Matt's voice crack through heavy breath. 'He's trying to ring an ambulance.'

'Shit!'

Running to the car seemed to take forever but when we got there I stopped. What were we going to do?

Matt seemed to know. I followed him as he frantically moved around the mangled wreck, trying to get a look in the cracked and shattered windows.

'Stay there,' he shouted, running around to the side of the car that'd smashed into the ground, the blue metal folded around the tree.

A muffled noise like a cry was coming from inside. I don't know how, I still didn't know if Fin was even in the car, but instantly I knew that sound was him.

'Fin? Fin! Finny, is that you?'

But while my voice called to Fin, my head shrieked for Daniel.

Daniel? Where's Daniel? Why is he running away? Come back. We need you. I need you. You can't leave me here on my own. Come back!

'Fuck!' Matt started to scream. 'Fuck! Fuck! No! No! No!'

The shriek of Matt's discovery rang through the black night's sky.

We held onto each other, our sobs and choking breath not the only sounds to be heard. For louder than us, much louder, was the piercing silence of the dead.

I had never seen a dead person but Luke and Nicole were so still. There was no mistaking it.

'Tom?' The muffled cry again.

'Fin?' Matt and I searched the wreck. 'Fin? Fin?'

It seemed so crazy, but we couldn't see him in the car. The seats, the steering wheel, the windscreen, the bonnet, the doors, the roof – the whole car was crushed into itself, yet the headlights still shined on the ghost gums up ahead. We only had his voice to guide us.

'Here,' he tried to call. 'I'm under here.'

'Fin!'

I could just see the top of Fin's head poking out of what was probably one of the back doors. It was like he was lying on the floor, the seats and metal crushed on top of him. At least down there he couldn't see the others: Nicole, her head resting gently on her shoulder, and Luke sitting quietly, staring into nothingness.

I crouched on the ground so I didn't have to look at them. Gently I touched the top of Fin's head.

'I'm here, Fin,' I choked, frantically trying to swallow my sobs. 'I'm here.'

I ran my hand across his hair, touching the sticky wet blood like jelly on my fingers. 'Oh shit! Shit,' I cried, wiping my hands on my jeans.

'I, I can't feel nothing,' Fin moaned. 'Nothing.'

'Can you feel that?' I placed my palm firmly over the top of his head. 'Can you

feel that, Fin?'

'Kind of,' he whispered.

'It's okay, mate.' I didn't believe those words but I kept saying them 'cause I didn't know what else to say. 'It's okay, Finny. It's okay. Help'll be here soon.'

'Daniel?' His voice was shaking. 'What about the, the . . .?'

'It's okay, Fin,' I wept. I couldn't answer that question. 'It's okay. Everything's okay.'

Somewhere in the bush, hard to say how far away, I could hear the painful sound of groaning, retching sobs. It was Daniel but I couldn't go to him. Part of me wanted to, the other part didn't. I knew I had to stay with Fin, stay with the mess Daniel had made. Yet a voice inside of me was screaming, 'He's alive, he's alive. Daniel's alive.'

Other sounds came in the distance. Sirens. Police, police rescue and ambulances following the Statesman down the track.

'They're coming!' Matt shouted, running towards the noise. 'I can hear them, Tom. They're coming! They're coming!'

It was almost morning by the time they cut Fin out of the car, the metal cutters breaking the laugh of the kooka-burras as dawn shed its light on the damage that had been done.

I sat with Fin nearly the entire time, talking, trying to comfort him, even though the terror I felt inside threatened to choke and steal my words. Every now and then Fin didn't answer, and as panic overtook me the paramedic explained calmly that Fin was drifting in and out of consciousness.

The rescue blokes had cut away enough metal for the paramedics to put in drips and tubes and enough for me to see the fear in Fin's eyes. Nicole and Luke had been taken away but Fin wasn't aware of that, thank God.

Dad had arrived, and in the distance I'd been conscious of him and the police trying to coax Daniel out of the bush. I saw them leave in a police car. I think they said they were going to the hospital.

I wanted to stay with Fin. No one seemed to mind. More police arrived and some of them crouched down on the ground whispering about tyre marks. Some

took Matt and Snorter away. Someone even drove the Statesman. I didn't know if they'd taken the fellas home or to the hospital or where. People were telling me things but they made no sense.

I just sat there with Fin, stroking his hair, watching it happen around me, listening to the paramedics who every now and then would whisper words like 'spinal' and 'injury'.

'It's okay, Fin. It's okay.' I wept over and over. 'It's okay.'

The atmosphere after a weekend of visits hung like a black cloud over Gran's kitchen. At least there was some noise to buffer it, even if it was Gran's voice complaining about the price of lamb and that no one knew how to grow a decent tomato.

'The boys are back,' she announced as we walked in.

'How's Fin doing?'

'Not too bad,' answered Brendan, heading to the fridge.

'Yeah?'

And it was back to tiptoeing and pretending. Brendan didn't want to say how bad Fin really was because it'd upset Dad and it wasn't his fault. But then Dad couldn't tell Brendan, or probably anyone for that matter, what state Daniel was in because the general consensus was that Daniel deserved what he got.

I left them to their game and wandered down the hall. The door to the oldies' room was just open, and through the hinges I could see Mum sitting on the bed probably planning her twenty-fifth attempt at coming back to life.

After she'd seen Daniel, you'd always notice a spring in her step. Well, it was really a plod, but at least she was vertical. Sometimes it lasted a day. Once it lasted two, until she decided it was all too hard, surrendered, and headed back under the covers to the preferred horizontal position.

I stood there waiting for the invitation. I couldn't just barge in yelling, 'Hey, remember me? Tom, the middle one.' Besides, I wasn't even sure she wanted to see me.

She was so different these days, so fragile. She'd been a good mum and it was torture seeing her like this. But I missed her.

She looked over and saw me standing there.

'Tom?'

'Yeah?'

'How – how was your day?'

I stood there, watching her rub her eyes and rake her fingers through hair that looked like it hadn't been brushed in weeks.

'Why are you standing there?' Her voice was husky.

'Dunno.'

'Come in and talk to me.'

I stepped into the doorway. Mum shuffled up the bed.

'Come over here,' she said, patting the mattress. 'I've hardly seen you.'

Yeah, well, it's a bit hard to see anything when you're down the bottom of the bed, I wanted to say, but more than that I wanted to be close to her, to hear her voice, smell her skin, and feel her hand smoothing my hair like when I was a kid.

I climbed onto the bed. She didn't smell like Mum. It was more like an old person smell – stale and still. I breathed through my mouth. She reached out her hand and touched my cheek. Her fingertips were cold on my skin.

'Let me look at you,' she said. 'I miss you.'

'Well . . . I've been here.'

'I know.' Mum closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip. 'I'm, I'm just not doing so well.'

'How's Daniel?'

She sighed, long and heavy. I wished I hadn't mentioned him.

'He's very down,' she swallowed. 'They're thinking of moving him.'

'Where to?'

'Somewhere.' She pressed her cracked lips together. 'Somewhere we can visit him more.'

'They're moving him from Westleigh?'

'Just to a different wing.'

I could smell the tiptoe game a mile off.

'You're saying they want to keep a better eye on him, aren't you?'

She nodded. 'You've always been one step ahead. You and Kylie both have. So what did I do wrong with my firstborn?'

'Mum, don't. It was an accident.'

'Well, so they say. But I just can't help wondering sometimes.'

'Mum.' I reached over and held her hand. She closed her eyes and the tiniest of tears slipped down her face. 'Don't, Mum.'

'Daniel was behind the wheel,' she whispered. 'And he had no right to be.'

She was right. The knowledge made me want to tear my insides out. 'Why?' I choked. 'Why did he have to go and ruin – everything?'

'Please, Tom.' She gripped my wrist firmly and I knew I shouldn't have said those words. 'Don't.' Mum squeezed tighter. 'Don't say that about him.'

Things weren't much better in Kylie's room. The music was bouncing off the walls and Saint Rose of Lima looked like she was about to end up a shattered heap on the floor.

I picked up the CD cover on her desk.

'Audioslave,' Kylie shouted.

She was sitting on the floor staring in the mirror. She leant over and turned the music off.

'I hate my hair,' she said.

'I hate my life.'

'I hate my life too.'

'I said it first.'

'So.'

Kylie moved over to the window and lit a ciggie.

'When did you start smoking?'

'I've been smoking for ages. You just haven't noticed,' she said, blowing perfect white smoke rings out the window. 'You want one?'

'Nah.'

'Footy training?' she smirked.

'Dad'll flip.'

'Dad has already flipped. Anyway I don't care,' she answered, even though she held the ciggie outside. 'Do you think they cared when they dragged us here?'

'Did we have a choice?'

'You know what Becky said?'

'Becky! When did you talk to Becky?'

'Last night.' Kylie stubbed out the ciggie and put the butt in a jar. 'I rang her from Brianna's.'

Kylie opened a drawer, placed the jar of butts inside and shoved a piece of gum in her mouth. 'You want some?'

I shook my head. 'Brianna . . . that's the girl whose place you stayed at last night.'

'Derr, Tom. Genius.' Kylie started brushing her hair. 'Brianna said I can ring from her place any time. She can't believe how Mum and Dad just got up and made us all move. She said she would've . . .'

'Hang on!' I butted in. 'You told Brianna about, about . . .?'

'About everything. Yes.'

And now we weren't playing tiptoe, and I wished we were.

'Shit!' I sat on the bed and put my head in my hands.

'Tom?'

I heard myself groan. 'No!'

'Tom?'

'Why did you have to go and do that, Kylie?'

'Do what?'

'Tell.'

'Look, Tom, some of us need to talk about it.'

'I don't.'

'No, you just go round with a . . . a black cloud hanging over you. I can't just shut down and –'

'You don't even know this girl.'

'So?'

'So – why tell her that stuff?'

'Why not? I mean, hasn't anyone asked you why you've moved here?'

'No!' I suddenly shouted. 'And if they did I wouldn't tell them. It's none of their business. I don't feel the need to blab. All that crap, we did that back home with the counsellor. That was bad enough. How do you know you can trust her, I mean . . .'

'She's my friend, Tom! Remember those things – friends, huh?'

'You don't even know her.'

'Don't start preaching to me, Tom!' She jumped off the bed. 'Just because you're so paranoid. People are going to find out sooner or later.' Our foreheads were almost locked together. 'Don't you get that!' She pulled away and walked to the bedroom door. 'Get out,' she spat. 'I don't want you in here. You're such a downer, and I don't need it!'

The talk at school amongst the blokes was rugby and who'd be selected for the firsts. It was so familiar it was weird. Everything else was different: the town, the school, the faces; and yet the talk was the same. I knew St John's footy trials

were next week too. Matt told me in an email. I still hadn't replied to his first one, there was no point. I didn't have anything worth saying.

'Footy trials coming up,' Rory told me as we walked to English.

Rory was the man with the info. If I was interested in listening to him I'd know everything by now. He was like the Bennie's and Coghill crash-course master. Thanks to him I was getting acquainted with my new classmates.

Simon Whelan was a sick perve. Sally Cross from my home-room class had a tattoo of a butterfly on her arse, which her mother didn't know about. Mrs Spielman our English teacher sold one of her kidneys to pay for her daughter's wedding. And Ben McNally, the quiet kid with the blinking problem from Year Ten, made a bomb threat to the post office last year. It made the front page of the local paper but he never got caught.

'I see your sister's teamed up with Brianna and her lot.'

'Yeah.'

I didn't want to say much. I wasn't sure what this Brianna chick was capable of.

'I saw them hanging around Burger King on Friday night,' Rory said. 'I'd tell her to be careful of those girls.'

'Yeah?'

Mrs Spielman waited at the door as we filed into class.

'How you doing, Mrs Spielman?' Rory said, then whispered, 'See, I told you, she doesn't look well, does she?'

'What do you mean about Brianna and the others?' That was all I wanted to know. Mrs Spielman looked perfectly healthy to me.

'They're just a bit odd.'

'Odd?'

'Troublemakers. Shit-stirrers. You know, too big for themselves.'

I nodded. At least he hadn't included big-mouthed in the list.

'Brianna's mum's from Melbourne. She used to be some hot-shot lawyer.' Rory leant over onto my desk. 'Apparently,' he whispered, 'she wanted to hide one of the Afghanis who worked at the abbatoir in Aralen. You know Aralen?'

I nodded, omitting to tell him I'd spent Saturday there.

'Well, his visa was about to run out and she was going to hide him so he didn't have to go back.'

'Rory!' Mrs Spielman barked. 'Sit up and stop distracting Thomas.'

'She doesn't look well,' Rory muttered under his breath.

At home room, Harvey made an official announcement about the footy trials while I stared out the window.

'There'll be a note going out tomorrow,' he explained. 'Trials for grade teams will commence at 3.30 pm sharp on Tuesday of next week. Training will start two weeks after that.'

'When's the comp start?' Soupe asked.

'We'll have a few friendly games first. I think the Shield officially starts in April after the Easter break.'

'When will the games be, Sir?' asked Jimmy Rogers, according to Rory a freak runner.

'Some after school, some on weekends, Jimmy. The old geographical inconvenience factor will determine that. But we'll know well in advance, I hope. Anyway, off you go. Home time.'

The Shield Harvey had been talking about was the Wattle Shield. I had to fight hard not to get sucked into the black tunnel, so I concentrated on my folder, unclipping the pages, then reclipping them.

Rory was hanging around my desk, talking away, but I wasn't listening. I couldn't, 'cause the darkness was getting closer, choking my breath and squeezing my brain. All I could do was watch my fingers, clipping and unclipping.

Rory tapped my desk. 'So see you there,' he said.

'Yep.'

My heart was pumping overtime. I could feel my forehead and underarms breaking into a sweat. I was going to have big wet patches like we used to stir Snorter about. Before I knew it only Harvey and me were left in the classroom. He had his back to me, writing on the whiteboard. I closed my folder and was about to make my exit when he piped up.

'Have a chat, Tom?'

I opened my mouth to say 'no' but heard myself say, 'Yes, Sir.'

He turned around and leant against the whiteboard. 'How are you finding it?'

'Okay, Sir.'

'It's a big change for you.'

I nodded.

'Tom, I know your family is very close and private and I respect that,' he said. 'But if you want to talk at any . . .'

'I'm fine, Sir.' I didn't want to sound rude but he was right. We were close and we were private. I didn't want him thinking I'd hung back because I wanted to talk to him. I started to back out of the room but he kept on.

'Looks like you've got to know some of the fellas.'

'Yeah.' *Da da da da*.

'Rory's a good bloke. He'll look after you.'

I nodded.

'He plays five-eight too.' Harvey looked at me, waiting for me to say something. But what? Oh, great, Sir, it'll just be like Daniel and me!

It was torture. Being force-fed Gran's lamb's fry would be better. He wasn't going to stop, so I let him talk and I shut down, just managing to nod and grunt enough to keep him off my scent.

'Well, I won't keep you,' he finally said. 'I'm glad you're meeting them.'

'Huh?'

'You know where it is, don't you? Probably been there a thousand times.' I wasn't sure if Harvey was asking me one of those rhetorical questions. 'Just past the southbound servo.'

I must've been looking blank.

'The pool?' He frowned at me. 'Isn't that where you're meeting?'

'Oh? Yeah.' That's what Rory had been telling me at the end of home room. 'The pool. Yeah. Thanks, Sir.'

The pool was a piss-hole, but what else was I going to do? It was a better option than going back to Gran's. She had some prayer group going on till 6 pm.

'G'day,' said the bloke at the turnstiles. I recognised him from the tip game; he'd played for the north side.

'Dollar eighty,' he said. 'Student rate.'

I dug around in my pocket for some change.

'You're Brendan's nephew, aren't you?'

'Yeah.' I kept my head down, sorting through my change on the counter.

'You living here now?'

'Yep.' I was short twenty cents.

He swiped the change off the counter into his palm. 'You living at Saint Marg's?'

'Yeah.'

'Moved from . . .?'

'Mumbilli,' I grunted.

'That's right.'

I looked up. His bloodshot eyes were staring into my face. 'So you reckon I should let you into this pool?'

I opened my mouth.

'Hey? Do ya?'

The sound stuck somewhere in my throat. Here goes, I thought.

'Just jokin', mate,' he chuckled. 'You're only twenty cents short. I'm not going to call the cops.'

'Um, I, er . . .'

'You're sweating like a pig, buddy.' He handed me a token. 'In you go. You look like you could do with a dip.'

'Yeah. Thanks.'

'First time swimming here?'

'Yeah.'

'Don't open your eyes. There's a bit too much chlorine in the pool today.'

'Relax, relax,' a voice was saying in my head, but after that little scare I felt like a lie-down and one of Gran's orange tablets.

'Oi! Tom!' Rory was up on the diving board.

I unbuttoned my school shirt, kicked off my shoes, emptied my pockets and did a running bomb.

Smack! It was icy. It hit the nerve endings like shock therapy, zapping me out of my paranoia. 'Whoa!' I shouted, rising to the surface and shaking my hair, the water spraying around me. I climbed out of the pool and jumped back in. The soles of my feet slammed the water before landing on the cold tiles. I pushed off hard, springing high out of the water, lifting myself into the air, flying just for that second. For once, I felt free. Free and light.

Rory's feet came charging along the edge of the pool. He leapt in. Jimmy followed, bombing hard. Then Soupe bombed Jimmy. Water flew everywhere.

'No running,' one of the lifeguards yelled, but we were too busy splashing and dunking each other.

'Watch out, here comes the human whale,' shouted Rory.

Brad Wiseman was walking towards us. You could almost feel the ground vibrate with each step. He was huge. He had to be over six foot one and I reckon there wouldn't be much change from 115 kilos. He'd been the firsts' prop for the

last three years. Rory reckoned he's repeated that many times he must be almost twenty.

'Arrrr-a-arrr!' he bellowed, thumping his fists on his hairy chest.

'Go the flop, Wiseman,' called Soupe.

'The flop, the flop,' the boys started chanting.

Brad took a few steps back, paused, then ran, throwing himself into the air. Whack! – the biggest bellyflop I have ever witnessed. The water sprayed up and over the edges of the pool. Everyone started clapping and cheering, even me.

Rory swam over to me and mumbled, 'They reckon Wiseman's been shaving since he was nine.'

'Yeah?' I said.

The bloke at the desk was right about his chlorine miscalculation. My eyeballs felt like they'd been rolled in chilli and were sticking out of the sockets on toothpicks.

'Don't rub 'em,' Rory warned.

'They bloody kill.'

'They've been dumping so much chlorine in this pool lately.'

'Why doesn't someone do something about it?'

'I'm planning on it.' Rory stopped at the queue by the shower. It seemed like everyone at the Coghill Pool was lined up, bloodshot eyes staring. We looked like a bunch of aliens from some sci-fi movie. 'Just stand in there and let the water rinse your eyes. It's the only cure.'

A girl waited in front of me. She was tall, her shoulders broad and strong. Her hands reached up over her head as her fingers squeezed the water from her ponytail. I watched as the drops slid down her smooth brown skin, slipping under the tie of her bikini top, down her back and into her bottoms. I felt movement in my shorts, and before I had a chance to think of sledging baby seals, she'd turned and was looking at me.

'Tom? Hi!'

I gulped.

'Chrissy. Jonny's sister.' Her white teeth grinned at me. 'Remember, you came over the . . .?'

'Y-yeah.' I think my face was as red as my eyeballs. 'The Bart Simpson slippers.'

She nodded.

'Hey, Chrissy.'

'Hi, Rory.'

'You guys know each other?'

'Yeah.' She smiled and softly said, 'How's your grandad, Tom?'

'Um?' I felt my jaw suddenly tighten. 'Fine.'

She took her turn in the shower, while I stood there, the black curtain descending down on me.

# SEVEN

The weekends seemed to drag the most.

Saturday, Dad drove Gran up to Aralen to see Fin while Brendan and Mum went to visit Daniel on their own. It suited me 'cause Kylie was at Brianna's and that meant I could leave the cave and have the house to myself.

I played a bit of PS2 but just couldn't get into it. I switched the TV on and off but there was nothing to watch. I went through the fridge 500 times in case there was something I felt like eating. But mostly what I did was pick up and put down the phone.

Finally I flopped onto the couch with the receiver in my hand. I hadn't answered Matt's emails. Too much to say and yet nothing to say. Maybe I wasn't an email sort of bloke.

I pressed the phone. The dial tone buzzed in my ear. I switched it off and pressed the earpiece against my forehead as I tried to think straight. But the thoughts were colliding in my brain like shocks of electricity, too fast for me to really figure what they were, just that they made me feel lousy and confused. My fingers kneaded the skin on my forehead. I wanted to make a decision but I couldn't. 'Just do it, you loser,' I finally heard myself announce.

Matt's number rang and rang. I was about to hang up when a breathless voice answered.

'H-hello?'

I swallowed quickly. 'Mrs O'Rourke?'

'Yes.'

'Um, it's . . .'

'Is that you, Tom?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh, it's so lovely to hear your voice.' It sounded pathetic but I felt like bursting into tears. I didn't. 'How are you, Tom? How's it going? We've been thinking of you.'

'Oh, it's okay. Thanks.'

'Matt's walking in the door now. Matt! It's Tom!' she called. 'We just dropped Louise at school. She's got the Year Eight camp-out tonight at Watto's Creek.'

'Yeah?' My heart began to ache.

'It seems just yesterday I dropped you and Matt off there. You two were so excited.' Mrs O'Rourke sighed. 'Anyway, you want to speak to Matt, not me. I don't want to waste your money. Give my love to Mum and Dad. Hang on, darl.'

'Hey, Tommy!'

'Matt.'

'Thought you'd forgotten me.'

'Nah.'

'Thought maybe your gran had pigeon service.'

'Wouldn't surprise me.'

'Yeah.'

Silence.

'Did you get my messages?'

'Yeah, just, you know, busy and stuff.'

'Did you like the joke about the guy who wanted to be a monk.'

'Err?' I couldn't tell him I hardly read his emails. 'Yeah.'

'Did you tell Brendan?'

'He pissed himself,' I lied.

'So how's it going, Tommy?'

'Oh, you know, fucked.'

'It must be a bit like . . .'

I cut in, 'Footy trials on Tuesday.'

'You'll shit in, mate. A Brennan not playing for St John's, though. You'll feel that, mate. In fact we'll all . . .'

'You had your footy trials?'

'Last Tuesday.'

'Right.'

'Miller's half-back. Whitaker's five-eight.'

'You – captain?'

'Yep.'

'Good man.'

'Owen's going to be second coach.' Matt paused. 'He's still a bit spun and all. They reckon that might help him.'

I pressed my lips together.

'Tom?'

'It's sweet,' I mumbled. I could sense Matt shuffling about in the chair. I didn't want to do this anymore. It was too hard. 'Well, um . . .'

'Peter Macken's coaching.'

Peter Macken was Luke's old man. Suddenly I saw him in my head, sobbing in the courtroom as the judge read out Daniel's sentence. The tears rolled down Dad's cheeks too. So clearly I remember thinking how different the pain was for these two fathers and that I couldn't believe this was happening.

'Have you seen . . . Dan?' Matt asked.

'Not lately.'

'There's another fund-raiser for Fin tonight.'

'Really?'

'At the Billi council hall.'

I swallowed. Saturday night, they'd all be there.

'Tom?'

'Yeah, mate. It's, um, it's good. I saw Fin last weekend.'

'How was he?'

'Same.'

'There was an article about Fin in the *Billi Weekly*.' I heard Matt's hesitation. 'Just, just a little one. It mentioned you guys had moved . . .'

'Oh, look Matt, I gotta go. Gran's, um, waiting for a call. You know.'

'Yeah, mate.'

'Okay.'

It took all my energy just to press the off button. I sat there thinking that must've been one of the stupidest ideas I'd had. What did I really think it was going to do? I curled myself into a little ball, hid my head in my knees and let the darkness suck me deep into its belly.

The noise of the screen door swinging, then banging shut, woke me. I was lying in a pool of sweat. My mouth was dry and my back ached. Someone turned the lights on in the living room and I slapped my hand over my eyes.

'Tom!' It was Dad. 'Been asleep, mate? You okay? I got some T-bones to grill for dinner.'

I wiped the dribble off the side of my chin. 'What time is it?'

'Almost six. I'll put the steaks on.' He walked over to the window. 'It's stuffy in here, mate. You probably just need a bit of fresh air.' His fist thumped along the timber frame. 'These need some WD-40. Fin sends his best. He was hoping you were coming up too. I told him next week for sure you would. Hey?'

I got off the couch and walked to the door. 'You have tea without me, Dad. I

couldn't eat nothing, bit crook in the guts. I think I'll take myself off to bed. Night.'

'Tom?'

'Say good night to Gran.'

I kicked off my shorts and crawled under the sheets. Even in the dark I could see the grime on the walls of my bedroom, or maybe it's that I could feel it pasted and crawling on my skin.

Saturday night and I was where I wanted to be. Alone. Sunday nights were downers for most people. Daniel used to hate them 'cause it meant the end of the weekend. They never used to bother me. Now they do. Not just Sunday nights, but Sunday mornings. Especially Sunday mornings.

Sunday the 28th of August marked the first day of my new life. Even though so much bad stuff was to follow, I still think of that day as the worst. It was one punch after another as each fact and its reality were realised.

Brendan got to our place at about 9.00 and took Mum to the police station. Daniel and Dad were already there. I hadn't been to bed, I hadn't even had a shower – I just didn't have the energy. I'd changed my clothes 'cause Fin's blood was on my jeans and jumper, but still I could smell him on my skin, especially my hands even though I'd washed them a hundred times.

Kylie and I sat at the kitchen table. The only time we spoke was when the phone rang and we begged one another to answer it. Matt came over and sat with us for a while. He'd been at the police station making a statement. He said Snorter was going in that afternoon to make his, and that Snorter was in a bad way.

'What'd you say?' I asked him. 'At the police?'

'Oh, you know, just what happened. That kind of stuff.'

'You mean when we found them?' I felt the panic rise in my throat as my brain pieced together what this was going to mean for Daniel. For our family. 'Did they know about – the fight?'

Matt nodded. 'They seemed to know about everything.'

'Did they say anything about,' I swallowed, 'about Luke and Nicole?'

'My dad saw Luke's father when he took me down.' Matt's voice was soft and his bottom lip trembled uncotrollably, but I desperately had to know it all. 'He said . . . he said . . .'

'What'd he say?' I jumped in. 'Did your dad talk to him?'

'He was pretty cut up. Luke. Fuck.' Matt folded his arms over his head and started to weep. 'His old man was talking about . . . about all kinds of stuff.'

'Like what? Like what sort of . . .'

'Stop it, Tom!' Kylie shouted. I think I'd forgotten she was even there. 'Stop it! Can't you see it's not . . .'

Matt's back and shoulders jerked in rhythm with the loud sobs erupting from his body. 'Oh, oh, he was saying they couldn't take Luke home and bury him. That the police said they had to have one of those coroner's reports.'

Kylie had her arms around his shoulders. The tears were spilling down her face.

Matt kept talking. 'He was saying that Daniel was really drunk and there were skid marks all over the ground and that they . . .'

'They what, Matt? They what? Tell me!'

'That they, that they – should lock him up and throw away the key.'

Daniel was given bail. I don't mean having to pay money bail; this bail had terms and conditions. He couldn't drive, I guess that was obvious, and he had an 8 pm curfew. Basically the cops advised him not to leave the house except when he had to report to them three times a week. The bail was also on the condition that he'd turn up to the local court on Tuesday the 13th of September to enter a plea.

Kylie asked Dad what that meant and I'll never forget Dad's reply. Not just the words but how his voice sounded when he said it.

'It means, Kylie . . .' As Dad spoke I watched his Adam's apple bob up and down as he struggled to control his voice. That was the first time I noticed it, a sight I would grow to dread. The thought of Dad hurting and the possibility that he could drop his bundle at any moment was too much for me to swallow.

'A plea means he has to say,' he gulped it down, 'if he's guilty or not guilty.'

I don't reckon anyone in the house slept that Sunday night. We were exhausted but the understanding of what had happened made it too scary to close your eyes, and waking up was worse.

When I closed my eyes all I could see was Luke and Nicole and the terror in Fin's eyes.

Each phone call or knock at the door was more bad news. Fin was in a critical condition in intensive care. Dad told us the doctors said he'd most likely be paralysed. Daniel cried so hard I thought my head was going to explode. Dad didn't tell us at the time that they didn't expect Fin to live.

Early Monday morning Brendan left our place for Aralen where Fin was. Someone had to be with Kath, and for obvious reasons it wasn't to be any of us.

That Monday was the first of many days of not going to school, and also the day a bloke called Dennis Talbot walked into the kitchen. He was to be Daniel's solicitor.

One of the first things he said was, 'Apparently your son Tom still hasn't made a statement to the police.'

'Yeah.' Dad rubbed his temples as he spoke. 'One of us was going to take him up today.'

That's what I'd been dreading, going up to the cops and telling them what I saw, what I knew. Daniel was my brother. How could I 'fess up to what state I'd left him in at the party? But they knew it all already.

'Tea or coffee, Mr Talbot?' Mum asked, or rather whispered.

'Black coffee with two'd be great.'

'Joe, I'll take Tom up to town.'

'You sure, Tess?'

It was a fifteen-minute walk or three-minute bike ride downhill to the police station, but I had to go with an adult as I wasn't eighteen. To be truthful I wouldn't have gone anywhere on my own. I was shit-scared of opening that door and walking into town. What would I say if I saw someone, and worse still what

would they say to me?

It was late afternoon by the time Mum and I got our acts together to drive to the police station.

'What's going to happen?' I asked. My guts were churning.

'I don't know, love,' she sighed. 'Hopefully Mr Talbot will be able to tell us that soon.'

The clouds were out and a storm was threatening. Not that we'd get much rain, it hardly ever rained in the Billi. Mum wore big black sunnies, and the whole time inside the police station she never took them off, not even when she cried.

On the way home, Mum drove down to the industrial estate. It was dark and all the gates were locked. There wasn't a soul in sight. She pulled the car into one of the driveways, turned off the engine and made me go through it all over again.

'So you're sure it was Daniel who was driving?'

'Mum.'

'Well, none of you were there when it actually happened. I mean, maybe Luke or Fin or . . .'

'Mum! It was Daniel. I – I saw them, remember.'

Mum wrapped her arms around her chest. 'But how could he have driven if he was so . . .' She rocked back and forth in the driver's seat. 'Are you sure?'

'Mum, you heard everything I said to the police.'

'But the fight.'

'Mmm?' I sighed.

'Are you sure Dan started it?'

'He was in a mood. You know all this. Why are you . . .'

'But what about Claire?'

'Mum!' My hands pulled at my hair. 'Stop! Why are you . . .'

'I need to . . . make sure.' She started to cry again. 'And – Fin?'

'Fin?'

'Was . . . was he drunk?'

'Fin hardly ever drinks.' I shut my eyes and stared at the black. 'You know that.'

'Well, what about drugs? Dope and stuff. Maybe he was egging Daniel on to . . .'

'No!' I shouted. All these questions! My head felt like it was going to explode. 'I can't believe you're asking me this!'

'I need to know if there was anyone else who in some way . . .'

I cut her off. 'I know what you're saying. There was no one else. It's the truth.'

Mum gripped the steering wheel. 'God help him,' she whispered.

That week after the accident, our house was chaos. The washing-up hadn't been done for days. The kitchen looked like every cupboard had been emptied into the sink. I don't know who Mum was more pissed off with: Daniel, us, Claire, Fin, herself? But she was mad. Daniel was crying non-stop, saying he didn't deserve to live. The only food in the house was the beef casseroles Matt's mum kept bringing over.

Meanwhile two kids we'd known all our lives, kids whose parents were friends with our parents, were buried in Saint Martha's cemetery. Nicole Munroe, Year Ten, member of the choir, and Luke Macken, Year Twelve, Daniel's best mate, captain of St John's first fifteen and all-round sporting hero, had their funerals in the same church in the same week. Dad and Brendan stood in the back row. We stayed at home listening to the sounds of Daniel chucking in the bathroom. The town of Mumbilli was bleeding.

'To be honest,' Talbot said the day before Daniel's appearance at the local court, 'the only thing we have going for us is the guilty plea.'

Daniel sat at the kitchen table listening. He had chewed his nails until his fingers were red and raw. He didn't say much, he never did around Talbot. In fact, he didn't really talk to any of us except Mum.

'He has good character references,' Mum said for about the twentieth time that day. 'That must count for something.'

'Tess, your family has been well liked and respected in the community. But memories are short, especially the memories of hurt and angry people who need someone to blame.'

I watched my parents link their fingers together on the table. One of the worst things was watching them, seeing the hurt and shame and fear in their faces. The way they'd aged in two weeks. The way they hardly left the house, one of them always at home with Daniel like he was a little child, unable to be left alone.

'So what's good about the guilty plea?' I asked.

'It shows an acceptance of responsibility, an honest character.' Talbot must've been sick of going through this but he was a patient bloke and we needed any reassurance we could get. 'The sentence may be a little shorter. The magistrate will recommend probation and parole reports too, which will be in Daniel's favour.'

'Didn't you say a lot could depend on the judge, whoever we get on the day of sentencing?' This was another thing Mum was clinging to.

'Perhaps,' nodded Talbot. 'McInnes and Williams are usually on the country circuit. McInnes is regarded as more lenient. Williams, well, he's a tough nut. I'll ask Jack a bit more about who else could be sitting.'

'Thanks.' The oldies nodded.

'Who's Jack?' I didn't know this name.

'The barrister. He'll be the one appearing for Daniel in the district court for the sentencing.'

'Oh.' It was a complicated business, and expensive. I'd heard the oldies whispering about money and legal costs. Another worry.

Suddenly Kylie burst into the kitchen, puffing and sweating. Her face was red and blotchy. She'd come from Becky's place.

'They've been saying bad things.'

'Who?' Mum gasped.

'In town. Everyone. They're saying Daniel's going down. That he deserves everything he gets.' She could hardly speak. 'That, that he was so drunk and

aggro that night. That he was smashing bottles and tried to beat Claire up and, and put . . .'

Kylie collapsed onto the chair next to Daniel. Deep loud cries shook her body. Daniel sat there staring. He didn't move.

The hearing at the local court only took twenty minutes, tops, yet every second was awful. Twenty minutes to sum up my brother's destiny seemed wrong to me. Wasn't his life worth more? But that's exactly why he was here, because a life was worth something, and Daniel took two away. Whichever way I turned, my questions only found another one, always worse than the last.

The magistrate's voice boomed through the small courtroom.

'How does your client plead to the charge of Driving in a Dangerous Manner Causing Grievous Bodily Harm under Section 52a?'

Talbot stood up and said 'Guilty, Your Worship.'

There were a few noises in the courtroom. I resisted the urge to look around.

'How does your client plead to the two charges of Driving in a Manner Dangerous Causing Death under Section 52a?'

'Guilty, Your Worship.'

There was a scream. Not loud, more shocked, I think. I kept my eyes on my knees. It was safer that way. There was too much going on behind.

I knew Nicole's and Luke's families were here. I'd seen them as we walked in and held my breath as I thought Dad was going to shake Luke's father's hand. He didn't though. He just kept walking, his arms around Mum's shoulders.

The magistrate crapped on. Once they'd been things I'd never heard of. Now they were words I recognised, even knew a bit about. Coronial something or other. Parole and probation reports. Extending bail. Adjournments for further hearings. The list dragged on.

Then, in his proper English, the magistrate announced, 'The sentencing of the defendant Daniel John Brennan will take place in the district court within seventy-two days of this date the 13th day of September. To be notified in writing. Bail will continue as previously set.'

# EIGHT

On the Tuesday of the Bennie's footy trials, Brendan gave us a lift to school. Kylie sat in the back putting black shit on her eyes. Brendan kept checking her out in the rear-vision mirror, a smirk sitting in his lips.

'You glamming up for someone?'

'No.'

He gave me a nudge. I shifted across in my seat.

'Piss off, Brendan,' Kylie whined.

'Can't your uncle ask you a question?'

'Yeah, right.'

'Well, you're a pretty girl.'

'Brendan!'

'Don't boys like pretty girls?'

'You tell me.' She turned around and leant out the window.

If he knew what was good for him, he'd stop, now.

'So, footy trials this arvo?' Brendan turned to me.

'Yeah.'

'You'll be fine,' he said. 'You should start running with me in the mornings.'

'What?'

'Running in the mornings,' he repeated. 'I've just started again.'

'Dunno,' I shrugged, contemplating whether a 'piss off ' was in order.

'At least think about it,' Brendan said. 'It's good for the mind too, being up early, getting in a bit of exercise.'

My knuckles tapped the inside of the door.

'And you know where I run? Up the you-knowwhere.'

'Up the ascent?'

'Yep.' Brendan nodded. 'Knew that'd get you. Right to the top, I go.'

About a kilometre past Gran's place was not a hill but a mountain, and a steep one. Gran named it 'Ascension Hill'. She reckoned it led all the way to heaven. We just called it 'the ascent'.

When we were kids, Brendan and Pa would take us there for picnics. The old truck Pa called Betsy would jerk and groan up the dirt track, winding its way through the spotted gums, Pa changing to the lowest gear. Almost at the end of the track the truck'd give up. It never made it to the top.

Out we'd all pile, fighting about who'd carry what while Brendan and Pa looked for heavy rocks to lodge behind the back tyres.

'Come on,' Pa would say to us. 'Who's coming up the ascent? I bet fifty cents Daniel can't go up without a belly-ache.'

It was probably only a ten-, fifteen-minute walk but Daniel whined the whole way.

'If it's this hard to get to heaven,' Daniel'd whisper so Pa didn't hear, 'I'd rather go to hell.'

He had a thing about walking uphill. That's the reason we called the hill in our street 'Daniel's Whine'. Walking home from school, Daniel'd reach the bottom of the hill, plonk himself down on the curb and say, 'Get Mum to pick me up, will you, Tom.'

So I'd walk up, most days with Fin, and when I'd get home I'd yell, 'Mum, he's down there,' and she'd go and get him.

But when Daniel got his car, he fell in love with that hill. Luke and him would fly down, Daniel never letting his foot touch the brake.

Brendan pulled up outside Bennie's. 'Start running tomorrow with me. Get fit. I've never seen you so . . . stationary. You're looking bloody awful.'

I shut the door of the car.

'Tom?' Brendan called.

I kept walking.

'So what do you reckon?' Dad asked me on the way home from the footy trials. 'Good turn-out, hey? I bet Harvey was pleased.'

'The field's like a cow paddock.'

'I reckon with a bit of practice Charlie Soupe's line-out throw could be okay.'

'It'll never come close to Matt's.'

'Different sort of player, I guess. Good in the tight stuff.'

'You've only seen him play once.'

'Jimmy Rogers is an outside centre for sure,' Dad nodded. 'He's fast. And that Harrigan's gutsy. Harvey says he's perfect for the open-side breakaway and Tonelli's a real ball player. He keeps his cool, I noticed.'

I couldn't believe Dad's enthusiasm. He had to be putting it on.

'Harvey says you'll definitely play half-back. Good, eh?' The hope in his voice lingered in the front seat like question marks jumping all over the dashboard. 'Hey? That's what you want, isn't it?' He squeezed my shoulder. 'It's a chance, Tommy.'

I looked away.

'And Rory played five-eight last year,' Dad kept on. 'He'll be kept in that position.'

'He can't kick with both feet.'

'Give him time,' Dad answered.

I yawned and wound the window down some more. For me, playing footy would never be the same. Here in Coghill, it would just be something to fill in the time – the endless, endless time.

'Harvey says the strong part of Rory's game is being able to read the play. I think you'll be a good pair. I can see a real partnership developing there.' Had Dad and I been at the same footy trials? 'It'll be good for you, Tommy. Pep you up a bit, you'll see. It's in your blood.'

I watched the sun sinking lower in the sky before disappearing altogether. There was nothing in my blood – nothing. I knew, 'cause I could feel the emptiness pumping away in my veins. 'What do you reckon, son?'

'Dad?'

'Yes?'

'I want to see Daniel this weekend.'

Silence.

'Okay,' he finally answered.

I was exhausted. Gran was fussing around the kitchen as one of her culinary disasters bubbled in the oven.

'Have you taken . . .' Gran looked down at my feet. 'Oh, good boy, you've taken your boots off. The last thing I need is you traipsing dirt all through the house.'

I could feel my legs stiffening up. Brendan was right, I was unfit. I sat at the table and rubbed my calves.

'Dinner's ready,' she called. 'Tom, are you going to have a shower?'

'Later.'

'Dinner!' she called again.

When Mum used to call us for dinner, we sounded like a herd of buffalo charging through the house. Here it was answered with silence.

Gran disappeared down the hall. She came back shaking her head.

'Your father's with your mother. He says he'll eat later.'

Soggy meatloaf was the meal of the evening. Gran cut me an enormous piece. I gulped and watched the steam twist up from the centre like a whirligig.

'There we go.' She pushed the plate to me.

'Where's Kylie?'

'She'll be home soon.' Gran covered the rest of the meatloaf in foil. 'Brendan's picking her up from Brianna's. She's working on some project over there.'

Sure, I thought, swallow the other one. Kylie was up to something. That's probably why she was putting the crap on her eyes and spending ages on her hair. At least Brianna was keeping her trap shut. I still wasn't comfortable with her knowing, but maybe Kylie could trust her not to blab.

Gran sat down with her dinner and gave a little cough. I'd been mashing the meatloaf around and hadn't eaten a mouthful. I guess it did look rude. But at least I was sitting at the table. No one else was.

I took a deep breath and lifted the fork to my lips.

She coughed again. 'Haven't you forgotten something?'

I put my fork down. I just couldn't get in step with life here.

'Sorry,' I mumbled.

'That's all right,' she whispered. 'How about you saying grace tonight?'

# NINE

Lunchtime the following Tuesday, the list for 'St Benedict's First Fifteen Rugby Union Team' was pinned up outside Harvey's office.

The fellas pushed and shoved trying to get a geeze. I stood back and watched.

'Yes!' Someone yelled.

'Soupe, hooker?'

'No way!' a couple of them scoffed.

'Way to go, Tonelli!' and, 'Good man, Harrigan!'

A bit of the regulation slapping on the back and a couple of high-fives, and the lads were off. I went over to check it out for myself.

1. Joe Hickie / tighthead prop

2. Charlie Soupe / hooker

3. Brad Wiseman / loosehead prop

4. Jonno Deakin / second row

5. Marty Donohue / second row

6. Dominic Finch / breakaway

7. Miles Harrigan / breakaway (vice-capt)

8. Ben Gonzales / lock

9. Tom Brennan / half-back

10. Rory Whelan / five-eight

11. Marcus Frahle / winger

12. Anthony Tonelli / inside centre (capt)

13. Jimmy Rogers / outside centre

14. Dean Nolan / winger

15. Harry Weaver / full-back

Reserves: Sammy Hutchens, Henry Fletcher, Paddy O'Maera

Training to commence Tuesday 24 Feb 3.30 pm sharp till 5.30 pm and will continue every Tues & Thurs for the duration of the season.

Michael Harvey – Coach

Joe Brennan – Assistant Coach

So there it was, my year mapped out before me.

I snuck up to the library. Everyone was going on and on about the selections, but I couldn't share their enthusiasm. If anything, it pissed me off. I wanted to shout at someone, anyone, 'I don't want to play. Don't you understand, this isn't my life anymore!' But I couldn't do it to the old man.

I needed to get away and find some space. It doesn't matter what school you're at, the library's usually the safest bet. I found a chair down the back in the corner and sat there with a book. If anyone walked past I picked it up, scanning my eyes along the page, acting like it was the greatest read ever. I don't think I even checked the title.

My mind was far away from Bennie's school library – I was back home kicking the footy with Daniel in our backyard.

Nearly every afternoon after school, and weekends too, Daniel and I'd practise passing the ball on both sides, then kicking with left and right feet. It never got boring, it was just something we did over and over again. Sometimes it felt like an understanding between us, not that we ever actually talked about it, but we knew, if we wanted to be really good players, this was what we had to master. I think even then we could feel it in our blood. I know I could.

I had an awesome season playing half-back in Year Nine for the 15As. Scored nine tries, kicked thirty-eight goals plus two field goals. We didn't lose a game and won the Wattle Cup, the junior division trophy. I was awarded best and

fairest for the third year in a row. God, I remember how stoked I was.

That summer, Dad and Daniel got me practising my passes with a brick. They'd line them up along the yard and I'd have to pick them up and pass them, bang, bang, bang, one after the other. Mum'd stand at the back door shouting, 'Watch your toes, love.'

'He's right, Tess,' Dad'd call back, with Daniel adding, 'He needs toughening up, Ma.'

It was hard work but it paid off. Year Ten I was picked to play half-back in the firsts for St John's. The youngest ever. Daniel was in Year Eleven playing five-eight. That year – just two years ago – the 'legend of the Brennan Brothers' began.

We were like men with a mission. Well, almost men. Daniel was shaving, and I was too if I spotted something that vaguely looked like a whisker. We kept practising each arvo, even if we'd just trained, and videos – we'd watch them a hundred times, rewinding and fast-forwarding moves that we wanted to practise.

Our gurus were Farr-Jones with Ella, Larkham and Gregan, and we were suckers for the Johns brothers. Always a half-back and a five-eight, that was our inspiration. That was our pledge – anticipating what the other intended to do on the field, like a sixth sense.

The back page of the *Billi Weekly* ran a photo of me throwing a dive pass to Daniel who was almost on top of our try-line, ready to kick. The headline read, 'The Legend of the Brennan Brothers.'

And if you'd asked me then what I thought, I would've said nothing or no one could take that away from us.

It was a while after the accident before we could go back to school. Kylie and I had endless counselling sessions, but nothing can prepare you. It was hard, really hard, but not for the reasons I thought it'd be. The teachers and most of the kids were okay. Matt and Snorter acted like we were Siamese triplets. It was hard because everything was a reminder of what life had been like just weeks before. There were so many times when I just couldn't believe this'd happened, happened to me, to my family. This sort of thing happened to other people, not the Brennans.

Each day at school was just another day closer to Daniel's sentencing date. It'd been set for the 19th of November, and life seemed to stand still until then.

The monotony of school – and let me tell you, my brain was seriously AWOL – was broken by various visits to the school counsellor, the grief counsellor and anyone else they thought I should talk to. Never to the oldies, though, they were too busy with Daniel and the battle to keep him out of gaol.

But as D-day got closer, Talbot pretty much popped the bubble on any hopes we had of Daniel not going to prison. Instead, it became a matter of how long he'd get.

Talbot estimated it could be as long as eight years but nothing less than three. Then he'd talk about the non-parole term, which was the minimum time he actually had to stay in gaol.

Daniel had done all the things he was meant to, things to show 'remorse', that he was sorry. And of course he was sorry. He'd been absolutely ripped to shreds. He didn't sleep, eat, hardly spoke, never smiled. The only thing he did a lot of was cry. He cried buckets.

He wrote a letter to Luke's and Nicole's families. Daniel'd spent a lot of time at Luke's place. They were best mates.

I don't know exactly what Daniel wrote in the letters he sent, but I know every word of one he received in reply. I think out of many, many low points this was one of the lowest.

It was during dinner one night. We were actually all sitting down like a normal family. Gran and Brendan had come up to Mumbilli that weekend so they were with us too. It was a week before the sentencing.

Gran reckoned she heard someone at the front door. We thought she was being paranoid – that was before we realised we had reason to be. Dad got up to see if anyone was out the front and came back with an envelope. 'Someone must've slipped this under the door,' he said.

Slowly Mum said, 'Who's it for?'

'It just says "The Brennans".' Dad started to open it. He unfolded two sheets of thin paper, the colour draining from his face. 'It's from Nicole's family.'

Dad started reading it to himself. We watched him, waiting for his face to tell us just how bad it was. 'They thank Daniel for his letter and words of remorse.'

'Read it,' Daniel said.

'Read it?'

'Yeah.' Daniel spoke with zero expression. 'Read it aloud.'

'Mate, you might want . . .'

'Can you just read it, Dad?' he murmured. 'It's addressed to the Brennans. So they must want us all to hear it.'

'I'll read it,' said Gran, holding out her hand to take the challenge.

*'To the Brennan family and to Daniel,'* she started.

*'We thank you for Daniel's letter and words of remorse. It can't have been easy for him to have written those words. I don't suppose it's easy for any of us.*

*'We understand the court likes a letter of remorse, that it is looked upon favourably. We also understand from our solicitors that, letter or no letter, it is most likely Daniel will be sent to prison.*

*'This is our letter of remorse. To tell you, even if they locked you up for the term of your natural life, Daniel, it wouldn't bring Nicole back, and that is what we are sorry for.*

*'Daniel will be lost to you for a while. At worst you may lose his "spirited" outlook on life, an outlook the town has come to recognise.*

*'We have lost Nicole forever.*

*'The hardest part is the silence in our home. Nicole was always singing. She loved to sing, but we will never hear her voice again. Think of that sometimes. We will be thinking of nothing else.*

*'And words for you, Daniel.*

*'You are now a man. A handsome man, a sporting man. A man who likes to enjoy life. But remember your fellow man, Daniel, because life is more than just a one-man show. Everything we do in this life affects others. Did you think of that the night you got behind the wheel, your trusting passengers the loved ones*

*of others? We think probably not.*

*'We leave these words with all of you, the words of a respected citizen of this town, words that seem to represent what so many of us feel – "Daniel Brennan was an accident waiting to happen." What a shame his accident happened to others.*

*'Our family will be there in court next week, yet no sentence will be long enough.*

*'Please send our thoughts to Kath and Fin. Our prayers are with them in this difficult time and our prayers are with your family too.*

*'Keith, Rosemary, Peter and Annie Munroe.'*

Like I said, that was a low point.

After the local court hearing, no one really came to the house anymore. The oldies' only visitors were Talbot or the parish priest, Father Simon. Mum and Dad had always gone to the club on a Friday night with friends. Saturday had been sports day, Dad coaching and the old girl buzzing around organising the sausage sizzle and chatting to everyone. Sunday was mass, and maybe people over for lunch. Then the week would start all over again.

That all stopped.

Becky still hung around. She and Kylie should've got married. If I wanted to get out of the house, I'd go to Matt's, I was always welcome there. I avoided going to Snorter's. Snorter, like all of us, had been badly shaken by the accident and seeing all that stuff. Since then he'd been pretty quiet, at least quiet for Snorter, which was still loud for some. Sometimes I felt like his oldies kind of blamed me for the way he'd become. They never said anything, it was just a vibe I got when I was there. So I stopped going.

In the beginning Owen came to see Daniel a few times, but that dropped off. Claire visited for a while. It must've been hard for her at our place. Mum could barely look at her, let alone speak to her.

Kylie avoided Claire like she had some terminal disease. Once or twice I saw them trying to talk, but Kylie always ended up running to her room in tears. But I liked Claire being around the house, and so did Dad. It was about the only normal thing left.

Mostly Claire'd be in Daniel's room with the door closed. Maybe they just talked? I don't know. Once when Claire was there I walked past and heard him sobbing but that was nothing new. Sometimes when she left her hair would look messy and Daniel would actually eat something.

I overheard Daniel and Mum talking, late one night, when I went for a piss. Mum was using her new angry, spiteful voice that was becoming the norm.

'I just don't know if it's good for you, Claire dropping in like that.'

'No one else does.'

'I can't help thinking she's caused trouble. I know your father's very fond of her, but he just sees the pretty face and the good manners.'

'What are you trying to say, Mum?'

'I don't know. Maybe you wouldn't be in this situation if things hadn't turned out the way they did . . . that night.'

'How many times do I have to tell you, woman – this isn't her fault!'

'Dan, you know how much I love you. But it's all right for her, she can just get on with her life.'

But she couldn't. Claire didn't even stay and sit her finals. Her parents took her overseas; apparently they'd lined her up a job as a nanny.

One more loss.

The morning we were due at the district court I woke to the sound of Daniel chucking. Deep, loud, choking retches, like he was throwing up all the fear and waiting he had stored inside.

I lay in bed, thinking how last night was the last time Daniel would sleep under the same roof as us. There aren't words to say how black and empty that pain felt. It was deeper than the darkest hole. It had no beginning and no end.

Mum and Daniel had spent most of the week in his room with the door closed. We all sensed time was running out. The panic was suffocating.

Mum's and Dad's faces turned a pasty green when Talbot broke the news that Williams, the tough one, was the scheduled judge. Now it was just a matter of

getting through it, holding it together as best we could.

Daniel walked into the living room wearing the same navy suit he'd worn the day at the local court. Brendan had bought him a new tie, yellow with green dolphins. He said maybe they would help him feel calm.

Brendan was dressed in his spiffy grey suit, holding a card from Aunty Kath. She said her prayers and thoughts were with us all, and that Fin was doing a little better.

Not from what I'd seen.

Kylie and me went with Brendan to the courthouse. Dad drove Mum and Daniel. The district court was in the next town, about a forty-minute drive south, but the way it felt it could've been 400 minutes. I think the three of us maybe said five words the whole time.

We followed Dad's car around the side of the building. Talbot was waiting for Daniel at the back entrance; he kept hassling us to hurry up. I gave Daniel a hug. He tried to smile but he looked shit-scared. God, it made me want to grab him and never let him go, save him from what he was about to go through.

Talbot shoved Daniel in the door saying, 'We have to go,' and that was it: the last time I saw my brother as a free man. My insides were being ripped apart.

At the front of the court were a few people from the Billi. I didn't want to have a really good stare in case I locked eyes with someone. I could see Nicole's sister Annie with her mum, and standing next to them Luke's parents.

Matt and his old girl were there too.

'Come on,' Dad said, steering me through the courtroom. 'Let's get inside.' I could feel his hand trembling on my jacket.

Brendan looked like he was virtually holding Mum up – probably because he was. Kylie followed in silence.

It doesn't matter what was said in the court that day. It didn't affect the outcome. Judge Williams mumbled about the probation report and the psychiatric assessment that documented Daniel had most likely been depressed before the accident. The fact that Daniel had written letters to the victims' families, attended alcohol and anger management counselling, and had

maintained communication with his aunt and cousin who was now a quadraplegic, were all seen as positive progress and an expression of deep remorse. He noted the character references were excellent and he could see Daniel came from a loving family.

'However,' he said, louder this time, 'I tread carefully in showing leniency for good character, for fear of misguiding the community, as you were a provisional driver.' His voice grew stronger with each word. 'Unfortunately I have no alternative but to impose a custodial sentence. You ran from the car. Two young lives have been lost and a young man's life irreparably damaged. I have taken into account no previous convictions, and the probation and parole reports show you have good cause for rehabilitation, but we must remember this is a serious offence.' He paused. 'Daniel Brennan, you have been an active member in your community and school, especially in the sports you played. Being a team player, you should have known better. You should have been aware and responsible for those you offered to drive home the night of August 27th. The furious driving you undertook that night suggests to me an unrestrained anger and a highly irresponsible and selfish attitude. Your behaviour directly led to this tragedy. This is something you will have to live with for the rest of your life.

'Therefore, under Section 52a Driving in a Manner Causing Grievous Bodily Harm, I sentence you, Daniel John Brennan, to one year's imprisonment. In the subsequent two charges of Driving in a Dangerous Manner Causing Death under Section 52a, I sentence you, Daniel John Brennan, to two years' imprisonment on each account.'

Cries of 'unfair' and 'a life for a life' echoed as Daniel stood there shaking.

'Silence,' said the judge. 'I therefore sentence you to a total period of five years with a non-parole period of three years.'

Bang went the hammer.

'Take the prisoner away.'

# TEN

Dad woke me early on Saturday morning. He'd cooked a big brekkie of bacon, eggs and fried potatoes. Finally I was going with Brendan to visit Daniel. I hadn't seen Daniel since the fortnight before we fled the Billi, and that was six weeks ago. I missed him badly.

'Aren't you going to eat your potatoes?' Dad asked.

I was still struggling with the bacon.

Mum shuffled into the kitchen and sat down next to me. I put my knife and fork down.

'Want a cuppa, Tess?' asked Dad.

'Thanks love.' She turned her chair to me, putting a hand on my arm. Her palm felt rubbery as it ran up and down my skin. 'He'll be so pleased to see you,' she said. 'He really will.'

I had to lean away. Her breath stank.

She kept talking. 'Please tell him lots of happy things. He needs to hear that stuff.'

I was staring at her teeth. They looked yellow and slimy.

'Tell him how you got into the firsts and what the . . .'

'You knew I got in the firsts?' I blurted. I couldn't help it.

'Well,' she glanced up at Dad. 'Your father told me, of course.'

I nodded. My neck felt tight.

'Sorry.' Her hand moved to the table. She scratched her wrist up and down the edge of the timber. 'Didn't . . . didn't I say something to you . . . about it?'

I shook my head. 'I don't care. It's no big deal,' I muttered.

Mum looked at Dad again. He shrugged.

'Well, I just assumed you'd get in. Michael Harvey thinks you're the best player around.' Mum started to stroke my arm faster and faster. 'He said that, didn't he, Joe? And didn't I say Tommy was a sure thing? I said that to you, Joe, didn't I?'

Dad nodded. Brendan drank his tea quietly.

'Anyway, tell Daniel all about it. It'll take his mind off things. Maybe he won't feel so far away.' Now she was running her fingers up and down her own cheeks. Back and forth, back and forth, I watched her dirty nails scratch off flakes of skin. 'We just have to work on getting him through week by week. That's the most important thing. This is so, so hard for him.'

'Let's go,' Brendan said.

'Don't forget his parcel.'

'I've got it, Tess.'

Mum threw her arms around my shoulders, pulling me into her, close and tight. It wasn't just her breath that smelt, it was her body, her nightie, her hair.

I stood there, feeling my body stiffen as her hands clawed up my body to my face. She kissed me on the cheek, her face hard against mine.

'Give him my love,' she whispered. 'Tell him I'm always thinking of him.'

It wasn't quite 7 am and Brendan and I were in the ute again, this time heading three hours south-west to Westleigh Detention Centre, home of Daniel Brennan, eighteen – nineteen on the 26th of April.

'You okay?' Brendan asked me.

I shrugged and wound down the window.

'This is the pits, her being like this,' he said. 'I can tell you, I'm finding it bloody hard as her brother. I mean, how do you feel about it?'

'She smells.' How did I know how I felt about it? I'd watched her slide as Daniel's sentencing loomed closer, her anger turning to despair – but what could I do? I couldn't even say the right things to her. Staying out of her way was about

the only thing I could think of.

'She really can't seem to get it together, and she won't get any help,' Brendan continued. 'Your father's tried, I've tried, but she won't listen. Maybe if you talked to her. Maybe if you told her . . .'

'Her teeth look disgusting.'

A picture of Mum in her pink flowery bikini, sun-baking on our back lawn, leapt into my head. I could hear her calling, 'Joe? Joe, can you bring out my hat?'

I shook my head. Who was that woman in bed at my grandmother's?

'I don't know how long she can keep going like this.' Brendan was shaking his head too. 'Hey? I mean, what do you reckon?'

'Don't ask me,' I muttered.

Brendan turned, and for a second I felt his eyes boring into me. 'Yeah, that's right, Tom,' he said. 'Don't say anything, it may just hurt. We wouldn't want that.'

I held my arm out the window and said nothing.

We travelled in silence. The sheep and fences pasted against the landscape consumed my attention, along with a knot in my guts that had started to tighten.

Every now and then I felt Brendan's head turn to me. But I would not – could not – turn to him.

'Been a while since you've seen Dan.' Finally Brendan spoke. 'I know he's been hanging to see you.'

'Yeah?'

'I bet he looks forward to your visits the most. Not the same when he's seeing me and Tess and . . .'

'How – how was he last week?' I couldn't hang on to those words any longer.

'Sad,' he answered. 'Beating himself up and stuff.'

I gulped, forcing my Adam's apple back into my throat.

'Tom, you know I'm around. I mean, if you need to . . .'

'Yeah, okay.' I turned the radio on. 'Um, thanks.'

But I didn't want to spill my guts, not now. I needed all the strength I could muster. All the talk from the oldies about how down Daniel was had me nervous. Exactly what was I going to find when he walked into the visiting room?

The closer to Westleigh, the worse the flies got. Everything about this place felt hot and sticky, like a good clean was in order. The same greasy smell greeted us as soon as we drove through the gates. No wonder it was a fly's heaven. Walking from the car park to the visitors' area I counted twenty-seven of the little bastards on the back of Brendan's t-shirt, feasting on his sweat.

The change jingled in my pockets. That was one of the weird rules about this place: there was a whole lot of stuff you couldn't take in, but ten dollars' worth of coins for the vending machines was allowed.

The prison officers herded us into lines outside the visitors' area, the same as they did last time and the time before that. We were counted and searched before being allowed in, then our names were checked off on the computer.

I think they referred to us as 'approved visitors', some term like that, but 'visitors' didn't seem the right word. It just wasn't that kind of place. I couldn't help thinking that visitors are meant to feel welcome, not like they're an irritating itch up someone's arse.

Nothing or no one was allowed through until a thorough check had been done. The officers even looked down the babies' nappies, their shoes, everywhere. Brendan had to hand in Daniel's parcel in case we'd tried to smuggle anything in to him. Didn't they realise we weren't like everyone else here?

One lady was making a real fuss about a male guard searching her. They were a bit rough, so you could hardly blame her, even if she was about sixty-five and her tits were down to her knees. I wouldn't want those blokes putting their filthy hands on Kylie or the old girl.

'You're not feeling me up, sir,' she kept saying. 'You'll just have to go and get one of the female officers, that's what they did at Torklea.'

One of them walked away, muttering something under his breath. She'd won.

The final step in our interrogation was the metal detectors. I felt like a criminal standing there with my arms stretched out, then over my head. You wanted to

say, 'Look, Sir, I'm just here to see my brother Daniel. You know, the quiet one, the one who doesn't belong here.'

But if you hung around long enough, listening to the talk, you'd discover everyone inside was innocent, a victim of the law. I'm not saying Daniel was innocent, what he did was wrong, very wrong, but he was no criminal.

The vending machines were in the waiting room. Waiting here was an exercise in sitting around pretending not to look at each other, trying not to catch the eye of the big bloke covered in tatts who every now and then punched the side of the drinks machine and groaned like he was dying of some tropical stomach disease.

I watched the families pile in, mostly women and kids, all pretty rough looking and either really, really skinny or really, really fat. I was definitely the odd one out not having a tattoo or a piercing. At least Brendan had a tatt on his back, not that you could see it.

I recognised a mother and her two kids from last time. The younger kid was in a stroller and the older one kept climbing over the vinyl chairs. Her chubby legs were covered in mozzie bites, some scratched so badly they were now like pus-cakes. I couldn't stop staring at them. I glanced over at Brendan. He was looking too.

Her mum kept saying, 'Bianca, get down. Get down, now. I'll give you a slap, Bianca.' But Bianca's mum didn't move. Instead she sat there, her teeth ripping her fingernails off one by one.

I wondered if Bianca and her sister were visiting their father. I wondered if this was what they did every weekend, and I wondered what their father had done to land himself in here. By the looks of them, he was probably a real crim.

Westleigh was for males aged eighteen to twenty-five; apparently this created a 'safer enviroment' for the younger ones. I didn't even want to think about what that meant. It was classified minimum to medium security, so I s'pose they didn't have the heavy murderers and psychos you read about.

'Crack!' Bianca stood there, a can of Coke spilling over the floor.

'Bianca, you idiot!' The words were followed by a slap. 'I told you not to do that!' Her mother pushed her into the chair. 'Now sit there and don't move.'

The older lady who'd made the fuss about the male guards came over with

some tissues, got down on her knees and started to wipe up the Coke from the floor.

'Oh, no,' Bianca's mum started.

'It's all right, love,' said the lady. 'I always bring plenty of tissues. They always come in handy for something.'

The ladies cleaned the floor together. The younger one shook her head, saying something I couldn't quite hear, and the older woman put her hand on her shoulder, her swollen knuckles patting her calmly like a baby. When she stood up I quickly looked away. Brendan cleared his throat and shuffled around in the sticky vinyl chair.

What were we doing here? Would I ever get used to this place?

'All right,' the guard announced. 'Those without children up the front.'

Brendan and I lined up at the door. I couldn't figure if I was relieved to be getting out of this waiting room or reluctant to leave its uneasy comfort.

'Hurry up, please, folks,' he said. 'We haven't got all day.' Brendan was quick and grabbed a table at the edge of the room. The tables in the middle were closer together and it could get noisy. You couldn't just get up and move, either, as all the furniture was bolted to the floor. Probably a good thing as the chat could get pretty heated in here.

The men shuffled in wearing their 'visiting' white overalls with zippers down the back. Another security measure. This part was like waiting at an airport, searching through the faces for your relative to come through the sliding doors.

'There he is,' Brendan said, waving his arms madly. You were meant to stay seated at all times.

'Where?' I scanned the faces, looking for my brother, eventually realising the one staring back at me was Daniel. I lifted my arm and waved, covering my face so I could gulp down the lump rising in my throat.

Something about him had changed, and as he walked towards us I frantically tried to figure it out. Something in my head was telling me that if I could work it out before he got to us, perhaps it'd go away or wouldn't matter.

Daniel had dark hair and blue-grey eyes like Mum. But now the resemblance

was more than that. The pale, thin face, the downcast gaze of his eyes and the slow shuffling steps, as though he didn't have the energy to actually lift his foot off the ground, were an exact mirror image of Mum. It was like they were dying of the same disease.

I had one second till he was at our table. I took a deep breath and tried a smile.

'Hey,' he said, grabbing my hand, squeezing my fingers with his. 'Hey, Tommy.'

'Good to see you,' I heard myself say.

'Brendan.' He sat down on the chair. 'Thanks for bringing him.'

'How are you going?' Brendan asked. 'We brought some stuff for you.'

'Thanks, mate.' For a second his voice cracked. Quickly he coughed. 'I really, um, appreciate it. Thank you.'

Think of something to say, my mind kept yelling. Anything. Just talk.

'Mum sends her love.'

'Yeah? How is she?'

'Huh?' I didn't know if it was the softness of Daniel's voice or the hum that was growing in the room. 'Sorry? Couldn't hear.'

'Gets noisy,' Daniel said. 'I just said, how's the old girl?'

'She's okay,' I lied.

'And Dad, Kyles, Gran?'

'They all send their love,' Brendan answered. 'So what's been happening here? You had an okay week?'

'Bit better. They've put me up for a peer support program. Means I'd move to another section, some Crisis Centre'. He shrugged. 'Dunno.'

'It's good,' nodded Brendan. 'Real good.'

Silence.

'I'm, um, playing for the firsts at, um – Bennie's,' I mumbled, feeling like a

dickhead. 'Half-back.'

Something registered on his face. For a while he stared at his hands, his nail beds whitening as he pressed the tips of his fingers into the table.

More silence. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Maybe it was too much for him to hear.

Brendan leant forwards. 'Daniel?'

'I, um,' he whispered. 'I just —' He covered his mouth with his hands. 'I just – I need to say something.'

'What is it, mate?' Brendan's voice was soothing. 'You can tell us, it's just Tommy and me.'

'Tom?' He rubbed his chin, the palm of his hand supporting his jaw which had started to tremble. I wanted to look away but didn't.

'Tom,' he swallowed. 'I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry you had to leave the Billi. I'm so, so sorry.' He kept shaking his head. 'I'm just so sorry. Sorry.'

'It's okay, Dan.' I could hardly get the sound up my throat. I didn't care what I said, I just wanted him to stop. 'It, it doesn't matter.'

Daniel's head was on the table. 'I fucked up everything.' He banged his forehead on the laminated surface, once, then twice. 'Everything!'

'It's okay,' I choked. 'Dan – come on.'

'Dan, stop it!' Brendan slid his hand under Daniel's head, cushioning the knock. 'Stop it.'

'I fucked up everything. Everything.'

'Daniel,' Brendan urged. 'Look at me. C'mon, mate.'

Now I was glad these two had spent so much time together. Brendan was able to speak to him, and Daniel listened, hung onto every word he said. I think I did too.

Finally Daniel raised his head off the table.

'Hey,' Brendan comforted. 'The most important thing is you getting through

this.' Brendan's voice was calm but firm. It made you believe he really knew what he was on about. I realised he'd become good at this. He'd had to. Like us, he'd been given no choice.

I remember the morning after the accident, Brendan walking into our house and Mum folding into his arms. Dad was still at the police station with Daniel. Kylie and I stood there while Mum sobbed and beat her fists on Brendan's chest. He held her firm, rocking her gently, whispering things in the voice he now used with Daniel.

'You're going to get through this, Dan,' Brendan said. 'There are so many people who love you, who are counting the days till you get home.'

'I've got nearly a thousand days left in here, Brendan. Then what's going to happen? Who's going to want to see me? Fucking no one. Why would they?'

'You've got to concentrate on getting through this now, not thinking about what's going to happen later when you're out. Hey? We'll all be there with you. Won't we, Tom?'

'Yeah,' I nodded. 'Yeah.'

'Do you hate me, Tommy?'

His eyes were begging me, kind of dancing around in his head, desperate and terrified. I felt like I couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, and yet I had to keep my eyes on his. If I didn't it'd be like giving up on him.

'Daniel.' I swallowed. 'You're my brother.'

He didn't say anything for a while. I waited for Brendan, hoping he'd break the silence with one of his winning lines. But he didn't. And then, just like that, Daniel looked up and said, 'Who's playing five-eight, Tom?'

'Huh?'

'Who's playing five-eight with you?'

'Um – a guy from my year. Rory. Rory Whelan.'

'Is he any good?'

'Can't kick with both feet,' I answered, blown away by the sudden change in

conversation. 'Well, he can't kick with both feet like you.'

'Yeah?' And he smiled, and just for that second he looked like Daniel. It hurt. Hurt like a sledgehammer slicing through my heart. But it was a good hurt, if there is such a thing.

I smiled too. 'Yeah.'

'You going to teach him?'

'What?'

'Kicking with both feet.'

'It's a bit late for that, don't you reckon?'

'Worth a shot,' he told me. 'You were pretty lousy for a while. Remember?'

'Was not.'

'Yeah, your left boot never made it over the fence, just used to get stuck in that bit of gutter down the side of the house.'

'Once, I did that.'

'Nah.' He shook his head. 'It was definitely more than once. I remember, 'cause I was the idiot who'd have to drag the ladder over, climb up and get the ball down.'

'You're talking about when I was nine.'

'So.'

'Yeah, well, Rory's seventeen.' Now I was shaking my head. 'Err, bit of a difference, hey.'

'Still reckon you can teach him, though.'

I was still shaking my head. 'Nah,' I told him. 'Couldn't be bothered.'

'Doesn't sound like you, Tommy.'

From the corner of my eye I could feel Brendan watching me, and I could've sworn when Daniel said that, he smiled.

A week after that visit, Daniel started at the Westleigh Peer Support Facility, and

I started running with Brendan.

Brendan was one of those fit blokes who could keep running on the spot, never puffing, just talking away like he was lying on a beach sipping a cocktail. Whereas I couldn't make it even halfway up 'the ascent' without just about chucking.

'C'mon!' Brendan called. 'This must be, what, the seventh time you've attempted this hill? Do it without the theatrics. You're sounding like Daniel.'

'Give us a break,' I puffed. I was doubled over, spitting the crap out of my throat. 'The ascent is not a bloody hill, Brendan. It's a mountain!'

'Tom, there are mountains and there are mountains.'

'Whatever,' I groaned, staggering to my feet and leaning against a tree to catch a breath so I could speak. 'Hey, Brendan, who was the old girl speaking to last night?'

'Daniel's social worker.'

'Yeah?'

He turned and started to run down the hill. Now I had to force my legs to move and keep pace with Brendan so I could get the info. 'So what'd she say?'

Brendan explained the main reason Daniel had been moved was his depressed state. At the Crisis Centre they could keep a closer eye on him. They had a program, the one Daniel had told us about, the Peer Support Program, working closely with the family, keeping them up to date with his progress and planning for the future.

And that was what Daniel needed the most – a ticket out of the past.

I collapsed on the grass outside Brendan's cabin while he leant against the wall stretching his calves. 'You should be doing this too, Tom.'

'Yeah, in a minute,' I moaned, feeling like I was about to chuck again. 'So how long's he going to be there?'

'Few months, I s'pose.' Now he was doing arm weights. 'Until the program's finished.'

'Good.' I wasn't expecting to say that, but when I did I knew it made sense. Brendan was right. Daniel was depressed with a big 'D'. Him banging his head on the table, saying sorry over and over again, was an image I was still struggling to get out of my mind.

'I think it's good too, Tom,' Brendan said. 'I actually think it's more than good. I think it's a big bloody relief.'

'What does he reckon?'

'It gets him out of the mainstream for a while, gives him a bit of breathing space,' explained Brendan. 'He finds the visiting hard. I mean, it's his lifeline, but the guilt resurfaces every time. That's what strangles him.'

'Yeah.'

'The program'll help him move forward, see that there's a life after the accident.'

I sat on the grass as the morning sky turned into day.

'Sometimes I can't wrap my head around it,' Brendan said, getting down on the grass next to me. 'Well, most of the time. Daniel in gaol. What it must be like for him when they turn the lights out at ten. For some reason that's one of the things I think about the most. Stupid, eh.'

'Nah.'

Brendan stared at the sky like he could see something no one else could.

'I couldn't get into cars,' he finally said, 'my head in the bonnet all day. Boring. I think I knew I was destined to spend my life lying under tractors, maybe that's what turned me off cars. But Dad loved them. They were like a luxury to him after working all day on a tractor. Do you remember that P76 he had? It was green with gold stripes down the side.'

'Yeah.'

'He taught Daniel how to drive in that car.'

'Yeah? He never taught me.'

'You were only about ten,' Brendan answered. 'I've still got this picture in my

head of Daniel driving along the back track, swerving and braking all over the shop. I could hear Dad squealing like a kid. I remember thinking I never had that kind of time with Dad, but Daniel did. Maybe it was a grandson thing. Who knows.'

'Pa loved Daniel the most,' I said.

'We all loved Daniel.'

'And Daniel loved his car, too.'

Brendan nodded.

'Brendan, why did you stay?' I'm not sure where that came from, but I waited, wondering if Brendan would answer my question.

'Dad died, and I guess that gave me an excuse not to go to the city.'

'Did you want to stay in Coghill?'

'No.' Brendan stopped for a second, his eyes still on that same spot in the sky. 'It just got . . . complicated.' He stood up. 'Better get in the shower.'

That was the most he'd ever told me about himself. Strange, you can know a person all your life yet not really know anything about them.

I whistled as I walked back up to the house. I was hungry. Since I'd started running I seemed to be hungry all the time. It was like I had worms. I guess my body was making up for lost time. The knot in my guts had eased, not gone. There were still plenty of times I felt it tighten like a little tap on the shoulder, telling me not to get too comfortable.

I wondered if there was the smallest chance Dad was cooking up a weekend brekkie. Unlikely, seeing it was a weekday, but you could only hope.

When I walked into the kitchen there was no sign of a fry-up. Dad was sitting at the table looking grim. Kylie stood against the fridge, her arms folded and a dirty look pasted on her face.

'What's up?' I said.

'Oh, nothing much,' Kylie spat back. 'I probably just flunked my first home science assignment.'

'Huh?' I shrugged at Dad. 'What's she on about?'

'It seems . . .' Dad started calmly.

'It doesn't seem anything!' Kylie shrieked.

'Kylie?'

'No, Dad, stuff the manners,' Kylie snapped, yanking the fridge door open, nearly taking the whole thing with her. 'My apple strudel.'

I looked at the left-over strudel I had stuffed down my throat at 2 am when I'd got up to get a glass of milk.

'I . . . I was hungry. I didn't eat it all,' I offered.

'Look at that!' Kylie virtually shoved the plate in my face.

A piece, well, not really a piece, more like a mouthful of apple strudel stared back at me.

'I – I didn't know it was for your . . .'

'Of course you didn't know! You're too busy being stuck in your own little world!' she shrieked, a bit of spit flying into my eye. 'You used to be able to read. But now you're a moron. A sad lump of a moron.'

She slammed the fridge shut. Pasted up on the door was a sign written in thick black texta. 'KYLIE'S APPLE STRUDEL FOR HOME SCIENCE – DO NOT TOUCH!!!!!'

'I'm sorry, I . . .' But she didn't let me go on.

'If you didn't have your head up your arse thinking about rugby, rugby, and how much you miss St John's and all your mates, then maybe you wouldn't be such a dickhead.' Kylie's screaming was almost lifting the cupboards off the floor. 'Did you even notice I was up cooking half the night? No! Because you were locked away in your dark room in one of your dark moods not having a clue what's going on here.'

Dad piped up, 'Kylie please!' But we ignored him.

'You can talk,' I shouted. 'You're never bloody here. You're always at Brianna's doing some . . .'

'Brianna's my friend! Maybe you should think about getting some.'

'I have friends here. Rory, um, Dom . . .'

'I thought they were just blokes you had to play football with?'

I opened my mouth for a comeback but she'd blitzed me.

'I'll have to explain to Miss Dunsmore, my sexually frustrated home science teacher, that my sulky stupid brother Tom, you know, the one repeating Year Eleven – oh, sorry!' she suddenly yelled. 'That's right! No one's allowed to know you're repeating Year Eleven just in case it blows your cover. Maybe you'd feel safer if I said . . .' Her tone changed to sickly sweet, stuffed with sarcasm, 'Tom, my brother, you know, the one who's going to save your football team, ate my assignment that took me almost three hours to make! Believe it or not, Tom, things could be worse.'

'Yeah?' I scoffed. 'I'd like to see that.'

'You could be Fin.' I felt my eyeballs bulge out of their sockets.

'Well, stuff you,' I started. Now it was my turn.

Then I saw her standing at the gauze door, watching us. 'Aunty Kath?'

'Oh, my God!' Gran walked in from the hall. 'Kathleen!'

'It's okay, Mum. I'm a bit early.' She gave Gran a peck on the cheek. 'Hi, everyone. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.'

Then just to finish it off, Kylie walked up to Aunty Kath, wrapped her arms around her and started to cry.

'Hey, Kyles,' she whispered. 'You've grown taller.'

I don't think I had ever felt smaller than I did at that moment.

# ELEVEN

Aunty Kath was staying a couple of nights while Fin got ready for his move to rehab. As always, I seemed to be the only one who didn't know she was coming. Maybe I would've been more on guard if I had. But I think Kylie's and my little spat was the last thing on Kath's mind.

The bad start in the kitchen was forgotten once Kylie managed to stop bawling.

'Go and have a shower, Kyles,' Kath said to her. 'Cool off a bit.'

That left just Aunty Kath and me in the kitchen. I glanced at the clock: still half an hour till the bus left.

'So, Tom, what's news?'

'Not much,' I replied, pouring milk over my Weet-Bix. 'How's Fin?' You had to ask, even though the answer never really changed.

'He's looking forward to getting out of hospital. I think rehab will be really good for him – start to rebuild his . . .'

'Yeah,' I nodded, knowing she wasn't finished.

'He'll have some independence there. That's why they like us carers to choof off for a couple of days, let them adjust to their new enviroment.' Every now and then Kath glanced over at the door that linked the kitchen and hallway together. 'He'll know lots of the fellas at rehab too. It's like a reunion for some of them.' Slowly the realisation sunk into my thick skull – she was waiting for Mum to walk through the door. After a couple of days here, she'd learn that wasn't going to happen. 'Fin's really looking forward to you going there, Tom. It's so much more relaxed than the hospital, and being in the wheelchair means he can get around and have . . .'

I put my spoon down. Fin and wheelchairs: it zapped my appetite, just like

that.

'. . . some freedom. He even wants to have his birthday there. A bit of a get together, you and Kyles.'

'Yeah?' I swallowed. Sticking pins in my eyeballs would have to be better than sitting around with Fin and his mates, trying to think of things to talk about, trying to find a safe place to look.

With Daniel I felt different. I mean, it was bad – it was all bad – but even after the worst visits, there was still some hope when you left him, some hope in the realisation that one day Daniel'd be getting out of there, a free man.

But Fin would never be free, and that was too enormous to swallow. I understood it was one of the many injustices in this whole fuck-up of Daniel's. How could I not understand it? But the truth was, it was easier to be with Daniel, even where he was, than it was to be with Fin. With Fin, it was hard core.

Kylie came into the kitchen, her wet hair smelling of apples.

'Here's the strudel recipe.' She glared at me as she handed Aunty Kath the bit of paper. 'Are you sure you don't mind making it?'

'I'd love to,' Kath answered.

'You've saved me from Miss Dunsmore.' Kylie draped her arms around Kath's shoulders, nestling her face into her neck. 'Thanks.'

I couldn't even mouthe 'crawler' to her, 'cause it wouldn't be true. Aunty Kath and Kylie were close, always had been. Kylie was born a few months after Uncle Roger, Kath's husband and Fin's father, died. Aunty Kath used to call Kylie 'the bundle of joy that helped find my smile' – some line like that.

'When's home science, Kyles?'

'Just before lunch. About 12.00, I think.'

'I'll make sure I get it to school by then.' Aunty Kath had stopped checking the door every five seconds. 'It'll be good for me, pottering around in the kitchen. Something different. I miss cooking.'

Kath was a top cook, she could make just about anything. Fin had the coolest birthday cakes – footballs, cricket bats, anything he asked for. One year she

made him a ninja turtle with red licorice straps for the mask. I remember thinking it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen.

I reckon Aunty Kath made a big deal with Fin's cakes to make up for the fact his birthday was ten days after Daniel's, and most of the family had had enough of birthdays by then. They say Christmas is the worst day of the year to have a birthday, but I reckon the week after Daniel's must run a close second.

When I got home from school, Kath was still in the kitchen. Saucepans of her famous spaghetti sauce bubbled on the stove, making the kitchen smell the best it had in weeks. Plastic containers, some filled with food, some empty, were lined up along the table. Kath was down on her hands and knees, scrubbing the inside of the fridge like a possessed mad woman.

'Hi, Aunty Kath.'

She looked up, her face was red and sweaty.

'Smells good,' I said.

Kath got up off the floor and chucked the cloth in the sink. 'The fridge hasn't been cleaned in God knows how long. Half the food was covered in mould. I had to throw it all in the bin.'

'Oh?'

'Talk about a waste.' She slammed the fridge shut and the contents rattled inside. 'I don't know who's been doing the shopping.' She began to furiously stir one of the saucepans. The spaghetti sauce spilt over the edge, leaving a mound of squashed tomatoes on the stove top. She picked up the lid and slammed it back on.

The air thickened with our silence. I stood there, staring at my shoes, wishing I'd had some late arvo activity that'd kept me at school. Like usual, Kylie had gone to Brianna's and I was here alone.

Gran walked in and I was happy to see her.

'Gran,' I think I said in an overly chirpy way, 'hi.'

'Hello, Thomas,' she replied with a strange look. 'Good day at school, dear?'

'Yeah, thanks.'

She took in the scene. 'Oh, Kath, I thought Tess was going to help you?'

'So did I.' It was almost a snarl.

Gran frowned and started fussing around with the empty containers on the table. 'I wonder where she is?'

Kath glared at Gran. I'd never seen her look like that before. Her lips were drawn into one thin line and her hands began to twist the tea towel around and around her wrists. 'Where – do – you – reckon – she – is?'

We were headed for something, and the next afternoon when Dad and I got back from footy training, we ran smack into it. Their voices hushed as they heard the screen door close behind us. But you could feel it, it was almost like a rumbling in the walls.

Dad and I didn't say a thing. We didn't even look at each other. Slowly he walked through the kitchen and down the hall. I followed, even though I knew where we were going.

Brendan was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. Mum was way over the other side curled up into a little ball. Gran and Kylie stood glued against the wall, while Aunty Kath paced up and down the floorboards.

'What's going on?' Dad said at the doorway. 'Brendan? What . . .?'

Brendan looked up. 'Daniel,' his voice croaked. 'Daniel . . .'

'What . . .?'

'He called.'

'He called?' Dad said.

'You know he's allowed those special calls from the unit.'

'Is he . . .?'

'He's fine.' Now it was Gran speaking calmly. 'He just wanted to speak to his,' she coughed, 'his mother.'

'But I answered the phone,' Aunty Kath said, a weary tone in her voice. I could guess what was coming next. 'And Daniel, well – I guess I caught him off guard.'

'Off guard!' Mum suddenly sat up in bed. 'He can't afford to be off guard in that place. Every second he has to watch his back.'

'Well, Tess,' Kath started, 'I'm sorry about that. But my son can't even turn his neck to see his back.'

No one moved. No one breathed. The silence rang in our ears.

'Let's not go there,' whispered Brendan. 'Please.'

'No!' Kath snorted. 'We wouldn't want to upset Tess anymore, would we? Oh, my goodness, that'd be a disaster. She might never get out of bed then. She just might decide to stay there forever.'

'Kath,' Dad's voice cracked.

I closed my eyes.

'Kath – please.' He managed to continue. 'Come on. We don't want to do this. Remember, we decided that? It's not, it's not fair . . .'

'Fair?' Kath yelled. 'Fair!'

'You know what I mean,' he answered.

'Joe, why do you let her lie here, wallowing?'

Dad started to shake his head.

'Why? Why should you and Mum and Brendan have to pick up all the pieces? She's his mother. She's their mother.' Kath pointed at Kylie and me. 'Hey? What about them? Where's her . . . her sense of responsibility to them?'

'What am I meant to do?' Mum shrieked. 'Get down on my hands and knees and . . .'

'Well, at least that'd be doing something,' Kath yelled. 'It's not too late for that.'

'I can't help it,' Mum's voice was shaking. I could feel my hands trembling behind my back. Kylie had hers pressed against her mouth. 'Some days, some days I can't move, can't speak. Can't do a thing.'

'I can't afford such indulgence, Tess. I have no choice. I have to move. I have to speak.' Kath took a deep breath. 'Do you need to shit, Fin? Where's the pain,

Fin? Why are you crying, Fin?' She stopped suddenly, turning, taking us all in. 'Do you know I even have to wipe the tears off his face?'

The rest of the week we tiptoed around each other. So when it came to mass on Sunday, I couldn't work out why Dad was making such a production of it. Surely we'd just slip in and slip out like we usually did.

Dad walked into the bathroom with my good shirt, the one I'm forced to wear to weddings.

'I'll give this a press,' he told me.

'Dad?' I screwed up my face. 'No way am I wearing that poofy shirt.'

He raised his eyebrows at me through the bathroom mirror.

'No!' I said again. 'I'm not. We're just going to mass. What's the deal?'

'Okay, okay.' Dad surrendered. 'Then a t-shirt with a collar. Just something nice.'

I shook my head. I could not work him out this morning.

'It'll keep your grandmother quiet.'

'Is Gran coming?' Usually she went to the early service on her own, which suited me. 'Why?'

'We're all going – together. All of us.'

I walked out of the bathroom, and there was Mum – showered, hair washed and dressed.

We had to take two cars. I was the sucker who had to go with The Grandmother. I could feel Kylie's smirk as she watched Gran drive off with me in the passenger seat.

I stared out the window. Gran's lecture on Palm Sunday and the deception of Jesus went in one ear and out the other. Mass was usually just under an hour, I'd timed it enough. But if the ancient priest who sometimes filled in for Father Vincent was there, then it'd be more like an hour and a half. He looked like a corpse on legs and his sermons went on forever. Sometimes there were huge silences between words. Everyone'd sit forward, wondering if he was going to

finish his sentence, or better still keel over and die, giving us an early mark. I never understood what he was raving on about. As far as I was concerned, sermons were nap time.

Gran marched straight to the front row. Soon Dad, Kylie and Mum were squeezing into the pew with us. Being Palm Sunday, the church seemed extra crowded. But we were in luck, as it was Father Vincent walking down the aisle. We'd definitely be out within the hour as long as there wasn't too much singing.

I stood, sat, knelt, every now and then glancing over at Mum to check she was handling it. Dad was holding her hand. She seemed okay.

Mum didn't take communion. Instead she got down on her knees, buried her face in her hands and prayed. Us Brennans had a lot to ask for and not much reason to give thanks. But I was thankful. Mum was up. Crazy, but I thought of those words when the men walked on the moon: 'One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind.' 'Cause today, for my family, that's what it was like.

Dom Finch, who played breakaway, stood in the queue for communion. In front of him was his sister Virginia, who worked in the newsagency. She was quite pretty, in a gawky kind of way.

Jimmy Rogers was behind Dom. He was the outside centre and seemed to have a pretty good set of legs on him. Apparently he'd done some representative running for the Coghill athletics team. He gave me a wave and mouthed a yawn.

I spotted Soupe with about six brothers and sisters, all of them younger, running up and down the aisles. Rory told me no one expected Soupe to get in the firsts yet he was made hooker. He seemed okay in the scrum, but his line-out throws were crap. Matt had one of the most pinpoint throws around. He could show Soupe a thing or two.

Upstairs in the choir, a lone voice sang. As far as hymns go it wasn't a bad one, and the girl singing was pretty good. Us lot down below would ruin the atmosphere with our assortment of flat tones. So we sat back, enjoying her voice and, in my case, enjoying the fact I'd be out of here in five minutes, tops.

I looked up and saw the chick with the good voice was Chrissy Tulake. Now I didn't want the singing to stop. I watched as she sang the last few lines. She had a sexy mouth. Her lips were full, the top one sort of curling up, and she had the same white, straight teeth as Jonny. Her dark hair was hanging over one

shoulder. Her boobs were big, not too big, just right for the shape of her body. She gave a little wave to a bloke down below and I watched him wave back. Of course she was taken. She was a bloody goddess.

The first official match of the comp was on the 19th of April, the first Thursday after the Easter break. I was relieved it wasn't the Saturday, 'cause it was my turn to see Daniel, and clicking away in my brain was a birthday pressie idea for him. Something real special. Something I knew he'd love.

I went down to the sheds before school. Brendan was in the middle of his 200 sit-ups. 'One hundred and thirty-nine,' I heard him pant, 'one hundred and forty.'

I sat on the doorstep outside his cabin, watching his face go from red to purple each time he heaved his chest to his knees.

'Where were you this morning, slack-arse?' he grunted.

'Slept in.'

That was a lie, I just couldn't be bothered getting up. Instead, I lay in bed, planning how I was going to get Daniel's pressie together by the weekend. It was my new mission. It felt good having my thoughts on some-thing, especially something that was good for Daniel. It stopped my mind finding its way to the dark places it still liked to visit.

I'd been running most days, so I was hardly being a slacker missing one morning's run. I had to be at the gate by 5.55 am or Brendan'd leave without me. A couple of times I had to sprint to catch up with him; then he'd keep up that pace to extend my suffering a bit more.

'You need an alarm clock,' Brendan said. 'Then there's no excuse.'

'Yeah, right,' I mumbled giving my nuts a bit of a scratch through the boxers. 'Anyway, you must've left earlier this morning.'

'One hundred and sixty-two,' he breathed.

'Or were you the slack-arse who didn't go to the top?'

'Hey?'

'It's not even 7.00,' I said, checking my watch. 'We usually don't get back till now.'

'One hundred and seventy-eight,' he puffed. 'What are you, a bloody detective?'

I felt something push against my back.

'Eh?' I looked up and saw Jonny trying to open the door. 'Sorry, Tom, didn't see you there, mate.'

Jonny stepped over me, wearing a pair of boxers too. His were covered in Homer Simpson faces.

'You all Simpsons fans?' I asked. Not that I cared. I just wanted to talk to detract from the 'cosy' scene I'd found myself in. 'I saw your sister's Bart slippers.'

Jonny smiled, his big white teeth glinting like a comic strip.

'One of my favourite shows, The Simpsons.'

I sat there trying to act casual. I mean, I guess Jonny and Brendan were together. That made sense.

'Um, Brendan? Remember Gran used to have those scrapbooks of Daniel and me playing footy? You know, articles and photos, stuff like that.'

'Yeah, I do,' he nodded. 'I think . . .'

'Oh, no, she hasn't burnt them or something, has she?'

'No!' He laughed. 'They're probably still in the wardrobe in your room. I haven't seen them for a while. Check the bottom drawer.'

'I want to make one for Daniel. For his birthday.'

'A scrapbook? Okay.' I watched Brendan nod as he took in my idea. 'That could be good. Yeah.' Jonny and him smiled at one another. 'That could be really good.'

'I mean, I'll photocopy the clippings. I won't just hand it over to him, Gran's scrapbook, that is. I want to make a new one. Make it really special. Give him something to, you know . . .'

'Yeah,' cut in Brendan. 'I might have some stuff you could use too.'

'You're a good brother, Tom,' Jonny said. 'It sounds real special.'

'Well, I think I'll go and have brekkie.'

Brendan didn't say anything, like, have brekkie here. A couple of times after our run he'd made awesome omelettes with ham, cheese and mushrooms but it didn't look like I was going to get them today and that suited me.

'Okay.' I got up and started back.

Ahead, a blue wagon had stopped at the bottom gate leading to the sheds. The driver's door was opening. I signalled I'd open the gates and jogged over, but he was already getting out of the car. I mean she! It was Chrissy Tulake.

Her hair was tucked up in a baseball cap, her long brown legs showing through her shorts, that were certainly short. I felt the blood rush to my groin. How could I ever have mistaken her for a bloke?

'Hi, Tom,' she waved.

'Hey,' I swallowed. 'How're you doing?'

'You're up early.'

'Not really.' Suddenly I felt like a prize jerk standing there in my racing-car boxers. My hairless chest looked hollow and my skinny arms seemed to have grown longer, as if they were dangling around my knees like an ape. At least I'd kept a lid on the movement in my shorts. I saw she was eyeing them. I leant against the gate.

'Cute,' she laughed. 'Racing cars.'

I racked my brains for something to say but my mind was blank except for the odd flash of her standing there with no clothes on.

'I've got this stuff for Jonny?' He's here, isn't he?'

'Yeah.'

'Can you give him something for me?'

'Sure.'

I went through the gate and followed her around to the back of the wagon. She leant into the boot, clanging things into a box. I tried not to perve at the back view but it was bloody impossible not to.

Chrissy tried to lift the box out of the boot. 'God, it's so heavy,' she groaned.

I got on the other side and we dragged it to the edge. A tiny drop of sweat had pooled in the top curl of her lip. I resisted the urge to wipe it. I was resisting a hell of a lot of urges.

'What's this stuff for?' I asked her.

'Tools for some repair, I suppose. I told him I'd drop them round this morning.'

'Oh?'

'Just put it in the entrance,' she told me, pointing to the sheds. 'He'll find it.'

'Sure.' I wrestled my arms underneath the box.

'Will you be okay?' I'm sure there was a smirk on her face. 'Maybe I should help you with it?'

'No, no, I'm fine.' I was going to bloody lift this box if it killed me. I groaned a bit too loud as I picked it up.

'Sure?' she giggled.

My fingers were burning and my biceps felt like they were going to snap. At least they looked good. 'It's not too bad,' I choked.

'Thanks, Tom,' she said, closing the gates behind me.

'Yeah, bye.'

The box was so heavy I couldn't even turn my neck to have one last look at her. I was doing my best not to stagger even though my knees were virtually knocking together. I took a deep breath and concentrated on keeping one foot in front of the other until I knew the wagon was out of sight. Then I dropped it, the tools spilling out all over the ground.

I got back to the house and took a long hot shower until Kylie started banging on the door and I had to hurry things up.

'What were you doing in there?' she said as I opened the door.

'You can't talk,' I replied, trying not to look guilty. 'You spend the most time out of anyone in the bathroom.'

'Do I need to disinfect?'

I smirked at her.

'I wish this house had another bathroom!' she yelled.

I sniffed my way to some clean boxers. Dad and Gran were doing most of the washing, and the rule was I had to put my dirty stuff outside the bedroom so Gran didn't have to pick it up off the floor. That suited me; I didn't want her snooping around in here anyway.

I pulled the bottom drawer of the wardrobe open and there they were, Gran's scrapbooks. I recognised the paper she'd covered them in: fluffy kittens playing with balls of red and yellow wool. A faded print of unicorns with flowing manes covered the oldest one.

I flipped the top book open. 'The Legend of the Brennan Brothers' was the page that fell open. I turned back a few pages. There was a photo of Dad and me together. The caption said, 'Tom Brennan with his father and coach Joe. For the third consecutive year Tom has been named Player with the Most Potential.'

I closed the scrapbook and opened the next. Pasted in the front were three certificates: 'Daniel Brennan, best kicker – under elevens', 'Daniel Brennan, best and fairest – under twelves', 'Daniel Brennan, most tries scored – under twelves'. This was exactly the sort of stuff I wanted.

I pulled one from the bottom of the pile. This book wasn't covered and looked fairly new. I turned to the back – nothing, so I opened the front cover.

The whack came hard and fast and I wasn't prepared.

Staring at me was the photo of Daniel's blue falcon up on its side, leaning against the tree.

'*Football Party Tragedy*,' the ugly black words read.

*'A party celebrating St John's Marist College's entry into the Wattle Shield Grand Final has ended in tragedy. Two passengers were killed and a third suffered suspected spinal injuries when the car in which they were travelling hit a tree outside the old scout hall in Booker's Reserve.*

*'The driver of the car was reported to be a P-plate holder, allegedly with a blood alcohol reading of 0.12. The driver was not injured. The third passenger was transferred to the Royal Prince Charles Hospital in Aralen. All passengers*

*were students of St John's Marist College.'*

# TWELVE

I sat on the floor in the cave, my fingers running along the smooth wood of the wardrobe drawer.

It was Wednesday night and I was running out of time. I had to have Daniel's present ready by the crack of dawn on Saturday. Tomorrow night was our first rugby match; that just left Friday.

Finding the news article about the accident, seeing the photo of his car, remembering that night like I was there all over again had set me back a few paces. It wasn't until now, two days later, that I could force myself back to the drawer and attempt once more to look at Gran's scrapbooks.

Once, probably not that long ago, I'm not sure I could've gone back at all. But here I was sliding the drawer open.

I took the books out and carefully, page by page, started to remove what I wanted to copy. With each memory I touched, I felt it again – that pain, like a sledgehammer slicing through your heart. It hurt so much but it was a good hurt because it wasn't in vain. This was going to help Daniel. If he had to face a future, then so did I.

'Who are you sticking on the fridge, Gran?' I yawned.

'This, Thomas, is Saint Vitus. The patron saint of oversleeping.'

I tried to keep a straight face. 'So why are you putting Saint Vitus there?'

'Your mother goes to the fridge.' Gran ripped the sticky tape with her teeth. 'This way Saint Vitus and Theresa will make a connection.'

'Right,' I nodded, then said, 'Do you really think Saint Vitus is going to, you know . . .'

Gran frowned like I was about to say something unbelievably stupid. I changed tack.

'I mean, Gran, you've got to admit, Mum has been getting up a bit more.'

'But still not enough.' In a way Gran was right. The last two nights Mum hadn't made it to dinnertime.

'Maybe Saint Vitus has started working on her?' I suggested.

'Well, Thomas.' Gran went back to ripping the sticky tape. 'Perhaps this way Saint Vitus can keep her . . . vertical for longer periods.'

Get Aunty Kath over to give her a roar up, I wanted to say. It'd be snappier than relying on old Saint Vitus.

'Didn't you go for a run this morning?'

'No.' I'd woken up on my bedroom floor at 3 am dribbling over a scrapbook.

'Do you want some breakfast?'

'Yeah, I'm starving.'

'Good.' Gran sounded pleased. 'I'll put some eggs on.'

'Oh, no,' I panicked. 'Weet-Bix'll be fine.'

She raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

'You know, today I'm going to the Hill Deli to buy one of their home-made lasagnes. I hear they're delicious.'

'Sounds good.'

'Well, seeing you don't like my cooking.'

'Huh?'

'You could have told me. Do you think I couldn't see you fading away those first few weeks? Living on cereal, my goodness, you silly thing.' She actually touched me kind of playfully, ruffling up my hair and tweaking my ear. I started laughing. 'I've got to look after you. You're my growing boy. You've started to fill out the last week. Must be the good Coghill air and the running with your uncle.'

'Maybe,' I muttered.

'If there's a meal you don't like I want you to tell me,' she said. 'I do have a thick skin, Tom. God knows I've needed one.'

'Is Kylie still asleep?'

'She stayed over at Brianna's.'

'Why doesn't she just move in there?'

'She's working hard on some sort of presentation she's giving on Friday.'

'Not another edible one?'

'No, thank goodness! I couldn't stand another fuss like that.' Gran shook her head. 'It's a debate, or a speech. Much simpler this time.'

Friday morning a few of us hung around the lockers talking about the match we'd played the night before. We won easily against a bunch of lightweights from Everley Christian College – if we hadn't there would've been some serious questions to ask. I scored two tries, set up all the others, kicked four out of five, and slotted over a penalty from the sideline.

The Bennie's fellas showed some glimpses. Jimmy, the outside centre, was fast, real fast, and it was virtually impossible for anyone to prop against Wiseman. But as a team they seemed to lack the killer instinct, which was completely different to St John's. I put that down to Harvey, the coach. He was a good bloke, but his attitude needed fixing.

After, in the dressing room, he kept whacking me on the back, saying things like, 'Well done. Everyone looked like they were enjoying themselves, and that's the main thing.'

Wrong!

I'm sure the old man would make him see the light eventually.

'The Everley lock was pathetic,' I said. 'He was as big as a house and did nothing.'

'Did you see Wiseman crunch him?' Jimmy chuckled.

'Yeah. I thought he wasn't going to get up.'

'Do you believe it, they had their footy camp last week,' Rory told us.

'Yeah?' I snorted. 'What a complete waste of time.'

'We've got ours in about four weeks.'

'The old man was telling me,' I said. 'Where is it? At some college?'

'Yeah, it's part of Barton Uni. Where we go is like a conference centre. Excellent sporting facilities.'

'You been there?'

'Nah,' Rory answered. 'Just heard a lot about it from Wiseman. Don't know how many rugby camps he's gone on now.'

'Heaps,' Jimmy answered.

'There's a nursing college at the uni.' Rory nudged me. 'They reckon it's a chick fest.'

'Yeah?'

'They reckon last year, Davin, he was the captain, a big player, scored that many chicks he fell asleep during a training session.'

'Yeah?'

'That could be us, Tom.'

'Doubt it.'

'Could be who?' Brad Wiseman dumped himself down next to us. You almost felt the ground shake.

'Been telling Tom about the rugby camp.'

'It's a good week, mate.' He winked. 'Your old man coming?'

I nodded.

'He's a good bloke,' Wiseman said. 'He shouldn't get in the way too much.'

'I was telling Tom about Davin.'

'Oh yeah, Davin, mate,' he chuckled. 'He got back in the dorm about 5.00 every

morning.'

'Talking about Davin.' Rory nudged me again. Chrissy was walking across the grass towards us. Davin must have been who she waved to in church. Her boyfriend.

'Ooh, I want her,' Wiseman moaned.

'Buckley's, mate,' Jimmy told him.

We were all gawking, our jaws slumped on our chins, when Chrissy lifted her hand, gave a big wave and smiled – at me. 'Hey, Tom,' she called. 'Good game, I heard.' I nodded. Speaking was out of the question. 'Hubba, hubba,' Wiseman whacked me on the back nearly knocking me over. 'Go, Tommy.'

Around the corner appeared Kylie and Brianna, deep in conversation. I'm sure Kylie saw me though she acted like she didn't. She knew I was suss of Brianna.

'What's your sister done to her hair?' Rory asked.

'Dunno,' I groaned. 'She spends hours in the bathroom putting shit through it.'

'They're up to something.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know.' Rory rubbed his chin. 'Brianna gets this "I'm very important" kind of walk. She sort of swings her arse.'

'You just reckon she's hot,' Wiseman mocked. 'You've always had a thing about her.'

'Piss off, Wiseman.'

The bell rang back to class. But for some reason Rory's words had tightened the knot in my guts.

I had a double period of maths, then lunch. I was in the advanced class with all the geeks. It doesn't matter where you are, the blokes in the advanced maths class are always the ones with poxy skin, bumfluff and bad haircuts – except me, of course. I sat next to Dom, the only other normal human in there. Some of the chicks were okay, but they were so brainy you didn't know what they were talking about half the time.

'My head hurts,' Dom complained as we wandered out. 'I hate having maths on a Friday.'

'I'm going to the canteen,' I said. 'See you down at the field.'

I seemed to be waiting forever in the canteen line. My tummy was growling. I counted my money, wondering if two meat pies, a packet of chips and a chocolate milk would be enough.

A few girls were whispering, and I could've sworn one of them pointed at me. When they saw I was looking they turned away. I watched them through the corners of my eyes and caught one of them nodding, like she'd just realised something.

For a minute I had to remind myself I wasn't at St John's. After a while I'd grown used to the whispering there. But at Bennie's? Nah, I told myself. I was being paranoid.

Then the girl behind tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Excuse me, you're Kylie's brother, aren't you?'

'So?'

'Just asking.'

No, I wasn't being paranoid.

The rest of the afternoon I felt the knot getting tighter and tighter.

Rory and Jimmy were hanging by my locker after school.

'We're going down to Burger King,' Rory said. 'You want to come?'

I still had half the scrapbook to do but something in Rory's face and the way Jimmy stared at his feet told me I'd better go with them.

We walked out in silence.

Once we were away from kids cramming onto buses and jumping into cars, Rory spoke. 'Your sister got herself a bit worked up.'

'What are you on about?' I said.

'Brianna and Kylie were up to something.'

'Just tell us, Rory.'

'They do that public speaking,' he began. 'It's an extra thing you can do in Year Nine. Anyway, it seems . . .'

He was giving me the shits so I turned to Jimmy. 'What's he on about?'

'Aw?' Jimmy frowned and stared at his feet again. 'Um?' He looked at Rory, who was obviously the spokesman.

'Kylie had a bit of a story to tell.'

I felt the knot snap, my guts landing at my feet.

'If you get what I mean.'

No, I didn't get what he meant. Kylie wouldn't do that – no way.

'Apparently the topic was terrorism.' Rory kept talking. I could tell he was trying to be careful with the words he chose. 'Most people talked about September 11, and Bali and London . . . but Kylie talked about, um – well, she called it domestic terrorism.'

'Huh?' But I got what he was telling me.

'What happened to your family back in Mumbilli and . . . stuff.'

I watched my feet, my black shoes putting one foot in front of the other.

'Why didn't you tell us?' Rory said. 'I mean, I could tell there was something up the first day I met you at the touch game.'

I kept my head down.

'Jimmy's cousin's in gaol. Isn't he, Jimmy?'

Jimmy nodded.

'She had no fucking right,' I muttered.

'I knew, mate.' Jimmy spoke quietly. 'A few of us do. My old girl saw it in one of the papers. You never said nothing about it so I didn't say anything to you. Wasn't your fault.'

My breath panted at the back of my throat. He knew? Jimmy knew?

'We're your mates, Tom,' Rory started. 'We're part of a ...'

'What else did she say?' I cut in. The anger was beginning to bubble in my veins. 'Huh? What other crap did she . . .'

'Apparently she talked about graffiti,' Rory said. 'Graffiti being sprayed on your house.'

'She had no right!'

'Mate . . .?'

'I can't do this,' I mumbled. 'I can't do this.' I turned the corner and started running.

I was suffocating inside my own body.

So that's why Kylie'd been at Brianna's place nearly every arvo and weekend. She was preparing her speech. Preparing to spill the guts of our family. Too busy to even visit her brother.

Words and pictures collided in my head as I imagined Kylie standing up on the stage. I could almost hear her.

I walked all the way home. Over and over, like a TV I couldn't switch off, my head spewed the memories, the other ones I didn't like to think about. Like the morning after Daniel's sentencing. The morning I'd walked out the back door to get some air, to get away from having to look at Dad's sad face staring at the wall in the kitchen, and seen the ugly black letters sprayed along the wall where Daniel and I once played handball. 'SHAME ON YOU, BRENNANS, SHAME.'

It was dark by the time I kicked open the screen door and threw my bag against the cupboards. Dad, Gran, Mum and Kylie were sitting around the kitchen. Kylie's head was on the table. She was sobbing. Loud hiccups shook her spine.

I stood there looking at them, their faces pulled and prised in all directions, their grief sitting in every crevice of their skin. I wasn't going to join them, join their sordid little circle that sat there doing nothing. I was going to walk out of this kitchen and not look back.

'Tom?' Dad stood up. 'Tom?'

'You stupid cow!' I spat at Kylie.

'Tom!' Dad called after me.

But I'd already walked out. I felt the power in my legs, and my heart pounding hard in my chest, as I strode past the picture in the hall that said 'suffer the little children', past the doorway to my mother's hideaway and back out to the night's crisp air.

Kylie wasn't going to destroy us, no way! I wasn't going to let her. Even if it took me all night, I'd finish the scrapbook for Daniel. I'd give him something to hold onto. Something to help him out of that past. Stuff her, I thought. She's not taking us down with her.

Brendan was sitting on the steps outside the cabin, a six-pack by his feet. It was as if he'd been waiting for me.

'You want one?' he said.

I nodded and he chucked me a bottle. I pressed it against my forehead, almost expecting the cold glass to sizzle on my skin.

'I don't know what in God's name got into her,' he said.

'She'd been planning it,' I spat. 'That's almost sicker.'

'She still crying?'

'Howling.'

Brendan glanced at his watch. 'Ooh, that's about four hours now.'

'Huh?' I paced along the strip of concrete outside Brendan's cabin. 'Four hours what?'

'Four hours she's been crying. She came straight home after she'd done that – that bit of theatre,' he told me. 'She was freaking out. Did your grandmother give it to her, or what! I thought she was going to get the old strap out.'

'Good.'

'Kylie's only tough on the outside.'

'What a joke!' I drained the last drop of beer. Its potion swum in my head. 'I just don't get her. Why? Why would you want to do that? Haven't we been through enough? What's her, her . . .?'

'She's angry. This is her way of getting it out. I guess it's better that way.'

'Better for who?' I mumbled into the empty bottle.

'What did you say?'

'Nothing.' I yawned. I suddenly felt tired – a tiredness like I'd been beat up till I surrendered.

'Chrissy came down here looking for you,' Brendan said.

'Chrissy?'

'She heard about it – at school.'

'I guess everyone knows by now.' I sat down on the ground. 'Everyone.'

'Tom, Coghill's not a little town like Mumbilli. It is possible for people to know things without it meaning the whole town knows.'

'Yeah?'

'Besides, there are heaps of people who already knew about it.'

'About – us?'

'Mumbilli is on Planet Earth, mate.'

'Well, why, when I picked up that stuff for Fin, did Chrissy think it was for someone else?'

'You weren't ready. That was obvious.'

'But you said it was . . .' I got up and sat down on the step next to him. 'You're doing my head in, Brendan.'

'I've figured you out, Tommy.'

'Hey?'

'You think what happened to Daniel will make people look at you differently?'

I buried my face in my knees. 'Remember what happened in the Billi?'

'Sit up!' he told me. 'I can't understand what you're saying.'

I sat up and linked my hands at the back of my neck.

'Come on, Tom, say it.'

'The Billi.' I tried to say a bit louder. 'Remember?'

'But that was in the Billi, Tom! The Billi's a completely different place. There's 30,000 more people in Coghill. That means there's a lot more stuff going on. Why do you reckon your oldies decided to come here? It was more than just us being here.'

I buried my face back in my knees.

'Everyone's got secrets, Tom, but this is a big town. Nobody's thinking about other people's business, they're too busy thinking about their own. Coghill's not Mumbilli. You got to remember that, mate.'

I sat up. My head felt like someone was whacking it with a steel rod. 'But – I loved the Billi.'

'Of course you did. It was your home. But it's a small town, and you weren't going to survive there.'

'How do you know it's not going to happen here?'

Brendan looked right into my face. 'Hey, Tom? What do you think is going to happen?'

I felt my shoulders lift then fall. 'That's what I'm shit-scared about. I can't – I can't go backwards.'

'Tommy.' He put his arm around my shoulder. 'Listen to me, mate. Kylie shouldn't have done what she did. She didn't give a toss about anyone else when she did it. But it's done. Sooner or later everyone would've known, that's the reality.' He gave my thigh a slap. It jolted me. 'We should've talked about this ages ago. But it wasn't the right time. Well, not for you.'

Again I shrugged.

'You're stronger than her.'

'No I'm not.'

'You are. She won't even visit Daniel.'

But for the last time I just had to get this straight. 'So,' I swallowed, 'you don't

reckon anything's going to happen?'

'Nothing,' Brendan answered. It was almost like he was laughing at me. 'Absolutely bloody nothing.'

Brendan was right. As Dad and I drove down Federation Street at 6.30 am, on our way to visit Daniel, there was no graffiti to greet us. No signs hanging from shop windows, or people lining the streets with placards that read, 'Brennans go home.' It was boring old Federation Street, slowly waking up on a Saturday morning .

I held my arm out the window. The cool autumn air tingled the hairs along my skin and the knot in my guts started to untie.

'Dad, can we stop at Maccas for some brekkie?'

'What? I made all that scrambled eggs you didn't touch. You said you weren't hungry.'

'I wasn't,' I answered. 'But I am now.'

'Make up your mind, Tom,' Dad said, making a U-turn into the Maccas driveway. 'Don't you go AWOL on me.'

It was different visiting Daniel at the Crisis Centre. Still all the rules, but the atmosphere was a little friendlier. I handed the scrapbook in. After the guards had been through it page by page, checking for razor blades and drugs – not that I could figure where I could've hidden them – they gave it to him.

'What's this?' Daniel asked.

'Have a look.' I was feeling a bit nervous. 'It's a sort of birthday pressie for next week.'

He opened it and a look of confusion wrinkled his face. He studied it for a second then looked up at me and smiled. Really smiled.

'This is awesome, Tommy.' He flicked through the pages. 'Must've taken you ages.'

'Some of the photos are classic.' I pointed to the one of him in the under sevens rugby. 'Do you reckon your shorts were pulled up high enough?'

'No,' Daniel squeaked. 'What's Mum done to her hair in this one?'

'Give us a look,' Dad said.

It was a photocopy from the newspaper. Mum and Dad were posing with Daniel. It said, 'St John's record try-scorer Daniel Brennan is congratulated by his mother, Tess, and father, Joe. Daniel plays for the 16As and is a sure thing for the first fifteen next year.'

'You were lucky the paper didn't pull this picture, son.'

I'd tossed up whether to put it in, but it was such a great picture of Daniel with the oldies.

'Yeah, remember the punch-up with the cocky little half-back from Booralee High?' Daniel said. As if any of us could forget.

Afterwards Daniel had smashed the window in the change room. We were sure he'd get suspended, but he didn't.

'What'd he call you again?' I asked him.

'Do we have to go through this, boys?' But we ignored Dad.

'He called me a pussy.'

'That's right,' I chuckled.

'I gave him a good seeing to. He was lucky he . . .'

'Who's the older guy?' Dad interrupted, looking over at the public phone. I could tell he wanted to change the subject, he'd been looking uncomfortable.

'That's Winston,' Daniel said.

'Isn't he a bit old to be here?' I asked.

'There's a few older blokes,' Daniel explained. 'They're doing time but they're also mentors. Well, that's what they call them.'

'You got one?' Dad asked. 'A mentor?'

'Kind of. His name's Jerry.' I watched Daniel talk. His face was getting a bit of a concentration camp look to it and the dark circles under his eyes were worse than I remembered, yet today he did seem calm. 'He's been in and out over the

years. Good guy, though. He spends a bit of time talking to me and this other poor bastard, Theo, who's in for the – the –' His expression cracked but he pulled it together. 'You know, in for the same thing – as me.'

'He's at the centre too?' Dad looked around.

'Don't do that!' Daniel said out of the side of his mouth. 'Don't look, but he's about three to Tommy's left. With his oldies. They're well pissed off with him.'

I heard Dad take a breath in. I reckon I knew what he was thinking.

The trip home from Westleigh was the same: staring out the window, pretending to listen to the radio but really exhausted, numb and wondering how our family, the Brennans, had ended up here. At least Daniel was in better form. That counted for a lot.

Dad switched the radio off.

'I didn't want to tell Daniel,' he said, 'but we got an offer on the house.'

I nodded.

'We're going to accept.'

'Is there still much legal stuff to pay?'

'Fair bit,' Dad sighed. 'There'll be a little left over though.'

'We going to stay at Gran's?'

'For the time being.' He sighed again. 'In her funny way I think she likes us there.'

'Yeah?'

'She's generous, your grandmother. She doesn't have a lot but she's generous with what she does have.'

'What about Mum?'

'What about her?'

'Do you think she's going to be okay?'

'Well, she's been up and about a bit more.' Dad made the turn into Coghill.

'Don't you think?'

'Yeah,' I yawned. 'A bit more. I just, I dunno . . .'

'What, son?'

'I just thought it might happen a bit faster . . .'

'She's doing her best, Tom.'

I shrugged. I didn't want to have this conversation after all. I was tired, and thinking about Mum and how slow and stuck everyone and everything was only made me more tired.

I guess I was getting impatient. Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe I was finding my ticket out of the past.

# THIRTEEN

When I walked into the school gates on Monday, at least ten paces behind Kylie, no one turned to look at us. No one pointed, no one whispered behind their hand, or worse still, shouted, 'There they are.'

Nothing. Everyone just went about their business – hanging outside the canteen, having a gossip around the lockers, the usual stuff.

Even Rory, Mr Motormouth, only said, 'You right?'

Yeah,' I answered.

I felt a bit hot and bothered when I noticed Chrissy walking towards me. I grabbed my folder and headed up the stairs. Behind me, I could hear her heels clicking faster and faster as she tried to catch up with me.

'Tom!' she called. 'Tom, wait up.'

I turned around. 'Chrissy?' I pretended. 'Oh, g'day.'

'Hi. I, um, tried . . .' She was breathless. 'I tried to find you, um . . .' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'On Friday – arvo.'

'Yeah. Ta.'

'You okay?'

'Yeah, no worries.' My voice sounded dull as, but what did she think I was going to say?

'Okay.' She shrugged and began to chew her lips. I wanted to reach out and touch them. 'Well, um, I guess I'll see you, then.'

'Yep.'

She turned left and I kept going. Now I was breathless and could feel my heart

going a thousand k's an hour. But it wasn't because of the stairs.

After school the fellas and I went down to Burger King to fuel up on some fries. It was freezing outside. It was the sort of cold where you couldn't feel the tip of your nose and there was no way to get your hands warm.

We sat around stuffing our faces, nodding and grinning at each other as we started to defrost. A couple of times one of them asked something about back home, but it wasn't like we suddenly started talking about it.

'How long's he in gaol?' Wiseman asked me.

'Three years.'

'So, what, that's two and a half to go?' Rory asked.

'About that,' I replied.

'How about your cousin, Jimmy? He's got another . . .'

'He's still got four to go.' Jimmy counted. 'I haven't seen him for a while.'

'What's it like?' Wiseman asked. 'I've never been to a gaol.'

'Boring,' Jimmy answered. 'A lot of waiting around.'

'Yeah.' Jimmy had pretty much summed it up.

I'd be a liar if I said an enormous weight hadn't lifted off my shoulders. It had. I felt lighter. I no longer had the burden of carrying a secret. And the consequences – well, there were none. The conversation drifted off to the footy camp, and that seemed to hold more interest for them than what had happened to me and my family.

Kylie and I still weren't speaking to each other. Even though I felt okay, I wasn't going to let her know that. In some ways, a part of me almost admired her guts, but she shouldn't have done what she did. Especially the way she did it. Hadn't we all been hurt enough by the random acts of others?

Kylie was spending even more time at Brianna's, and when she was home she walked around like she had a carrot stuck up her arse. There wasn't really anyone to tell her what she could and couldn't do anyway. Dad was busy down at the sheds working or being assistant coach. Mum was still on the go-slow, trying to

come to terms with life. That just left Gran, and Kylie couldn't give a toss about a thing Gran had to say.

Dad spent most evenings in the bedroom with Mum. Six pm still seemed to be the latest she could stay up, but I kept telling myself that anything was an improvement. Brendan mostly hung down at his place or was out. So that just left Gran and me. At least she liked watching *The Footy Show*, we'd have a good laugh over that. Sometimes she wasn't too bad.

'Do you still wish you had the chooks, Gran?' I asked as I was drying the dishes with her. 'You liked your chooks.'

'They were like my friends,' she answered. 'I still remember the day little Cain and Abel hatched out of their shells.'

'Why did you call them that?'

'Well, I didn't intend to call them Cain and Abel,' she told me. 'I mean, their mother was Agnes, and no doubt their father Paul. It didn't make any sense to call them Cain and Abel, did it?'

'Yeah, but Gran.' This is what had fascinated me as a kid. 'Did you think they were going to be roosters?'

'I couldn't tell. I wasn't much good at that.'

'So you just gave them boys' names?'

'It was more the way they behaved together. They seemed like brothers.'

'But they were sisters, Gran.'

'I know, but I didn't know that when I named them. They were only chicks, Tom, but they reminded me of Cain and Abel.'

'How?'

'Cain was always bossing Abel around, pecking and eating all the food. Very indulgent, I would say. Cain only ever thought about Cain.'

'Right.' She was talking about them like they were real people.

'Cain was the selfish brother, and Abel just tried to get along with everyone, minded his own business, didn't cause trouble.'

I felt the laugh blowing out my cheeks.

'It's not funny, Tom. Cain could be a very nasty hen.' She shook her head. 'You know Cain murdered Abel.'

'What?'

Gran nodded.

'When?' I'd never heard that before. 'I can't believe I ...'

'In the bible story, Tom! Not in my chook pen.' She clicked her tongue as she squeezed out the dishcloth. 'What do they teach you these days?'

'Why don't you get more chooks?'

'Your grandpa bulldozed over the chook pen when he built the sheds. So where would I put them?'

'Dunno. In the garden somewhere.'

'Tom!'

'Well, why not?'

She looked at me like I was a halfwit. 'I think I have enough on my plate.'

I'd hoped, prayed almost, that Fin'd give up on the idea of having a party at the rehab centre, but he didn't. So Aunty Kath was busy organising a barbie for the Saturday. The whole family was talking about Fin's birthday. This time it was Daniel's birthday that had passed by without a fuss.

Kylie tried to scam Becky coming but Gran told her it was an occasion for Fin, not an occasion to catch up with friends from Mumbilli. Gran was lucky she didn't get her head bitten off. Me? I didn't need the extra grief of seeing old faces from the Billi. Just seeing Fin in his wheelchair was going to be enough.

The Friday night before Fin's party, Kylie stayed home for a change and I went out.

The good thing about CoghilI was that it had a huge cinema. It even had a theatre with the armchairs you could lie down in, not that I could afford those tickets. Rory, Jimmy, Wiseman and I went and saw the new Vin Diesel movie. They were off to a party afterwards. I told them straight I couldn't go – it was my

cousin's birthday tomorrow and we'd be leaving at sparrow's fart, probably about the time they'd be getting home.

'No worries,' and, 'That'll be heavy,' was all they really said, and we left it at that. They never pushed me into talking about it, not even Rory, and I respected them for it.

Chrissy was at the movies with this Davin bloke, Chris Davin, the same bloke I'd seen her wave at in church.

'She's a hot bit of gear, that Chrissy,' Wiseman whispered to me as we lined up for tickets. She hadn't seen me, so I could watch her eat her choc-top without being busted.

'He's the dude I was telling you about at footy camp,' Rory said as we wandered into our movie. 'Big Davin.'

'What's he like?' I mumbled, shoving a mouthful of popcorn down my gob.

'Okay.'

'He's a big chick man,' Wiseman said. 'One of those lucky buggers. Gets whoever he wants, then, next please! You know the type.'

'Know it well,' I nodded.

When I got home from the movies Kylie was sitting on my bed.

'What do you think you're doing in here?' I grunted.

'Nothing.'

'Well, why don't you do nothing in your own room?'

'I'm sorry, Tom. Okay?'

'Bit late for that.'

'I'm still sorry.' She had no intention of leaving. Suddenly I wanted to hear what she had to say for herself. 'For some pathetic reason I thought it'd make me feel – good.'

'And did it?' I asked her.

'No.' Then quietly she said, 'It made me feel bad.'

'Well, now you know.' I lay on the bed. 'But it's too late to take it all back. You've told the whole world.'

'I know that!' Then she hesitated. 'Do you want to read it?'

'Read what?'

'My speech.'

'Are you off your head?'

'I thought you might want to know what stuff I . . .'

'From what I've heard you pretty much told everything.'

'Not everything,' she mumbled.

'Sure!'

'I didn't say anything bad about you.'

'Thanks, very.' Where did she get off?

She sighed. 'You know why I feel so bad?'

I rolled my eyes at her.

"Cause it affected you, Tom, and that's the thing that dawned on me afterwards. I'm so angry at Daniel because, well, because what he did has ruined everything for me and you. As if he ever would've thought of that.'

'Kylie! All Daniel thinks about is what he's done to us!'

'Now, maybe. Not then.' She sat up. 'And I didn't think about how this'd be for you. I saw the way you looked, every time you thought someone was going to say something. I mean, you've hardly even spoken to me, about – about the whole thing since we've been here. I don't know why I didn't think about that, about you. I guess that's what I'm trying to say.' She shrugged. 'Okay? Speech over. I'm so, so sorry. I don't know why I did it.'

'Look, Kyles, people would've found out sooner or later.' I relented a bit, 'cause it was true. 'But I guess I would've liked to have had some say over how they found out. Then again, I don't know if I would've had the guts to do what you did.'

'I don't know if it took guts. No brains, maybe.'

'Nah,' I shook my head. 'It was gutsy. Stupid, but gutsy.'

'Has it been . . . bad for you?'

'No.'

'Me neither.'

'I probably feel a bit better about it being in the open.'

'Yeah?'

'I'm not saying I'm happy about it though!'

'But you forgive me?' She looked at me, my kid sister with the black makeup all over her eyes and the stupid hair that was starting to flop on one side. I didn't want to be mad with her anymore. I was sick of being mad. I wanted to get on with it. In many ways she'd released me, pushing me into my own fear.

'Do you, Tommy, forgive me?' she squeaked. 'Just a teeny bit?'

'I forgive you that much.' I held my index finger and thumb close together. 'And maybe if you let me eat more of your home science projects I'll forgive you more.'

We laughed hard. Kylie kicked her legs in the air.

'Your face,' she squealed, 'when you realised what you'd done!' She wiped her eyes. 'Oh, that was funny.'

We sat there for a second, smiling. Then she sighed, long and heavy.

'What?'

'Tomorrow?' she said. Reality was never far away.

'Yeah. I feel so frigging awkward around Fin.'

'It's all awkward,' she replied.

'You know we couldn't have stayed at the Billi.' I was almost saying it to myself. 'It wouldn't have got any better.'

'Probably worse.'

'Probably.'

I stared at the ceiling. Kylie seemed to be staring at the floor.

'It's not so bad here,' I offered.

'No. Just different.'

'Yeah,' I whispered. 'Really different.'

For a few minutes we didn't talk. We didn't need words to say how we felt, our silence did that.

Finally she spoke. 'So what did you see at the movies?'

'The new Vin Diesel movie.'

'Any good?'

'Not bad.'

'Hey, I just remembered something.' Kylie started giggling. 'I heard Brendan talking on the phone.'

'So?'

'Guess who thinks you're cute?' she sang.

'Is this a prank? 'Cause I'll kill you if it is.'

'No, honest. I really did hear this.' Kylie had her hands over her mouth. 'Chrissy Tulake reckons you're cute!' Now she was pissing herself stupid. 'I think she meant cute-looking. Not, you know, cute personality or cute . . .'

'Kylie!'

'I swear.'

I grabbed her and put her in a headlock. She squealed and started kicking her legs.

'If you're spinning me . . .'

'No! Swear,' she shrieked through her laughter. 'God strike me down if I'm lying!'

'You better not be.'

One way to describe Fin's nineteenth birthday, other than unbearable, was interesting. Everywhere guys were whizzing around in wheelchairs; some had weird contraptions sticking out of them and strange-looking things they spoke into. Marvin from the old ward was there, and another man I recognised from when Fin first went in to hospital.

It was one of those days where you tried not to say the wrong thing, and tried not to stare at anyone or their space-age bits and pieces.

I got choked up when I saw Fin in the wheelchair. All the way in the car I'd been telling myself I was going to handle it, that it was no different to him lying in bed. But it was different, and no matter how prepared I thought I was, it bowled me over when I first saw him.

I bent my head and swallowed quickly. 'Good to see you, Fin,' I managed, but again I had to fight the reflex to slap him on the back or hand. 'Happy, um, birthday, mate.'

'Hey, Tom.' He smiled, but his eyes weren't Fin's. At least not the Fin I remember.

Aunty Kath made one of her famous cakes. This time it wasn't any special shape, I mean, you couldn't exactly do a motorbike, and it's not like a wheelchair cake'd be any good either. So it was plain old chocolate with white swirly things. It was good, though – I ought to know, I had four pieces.

Mum made an effort. She'd put some gunk on her face and her teeth were starting to look white again. Her clothes were baggy and there were lines around her mouth I hadn't noticed before. But she was up.

There was tension between Kath and Mum. It was like the air went icy when they were near each other. Brendan was putting in his best effort to improve the situation, I kept hearing him say things like, 'Tess, I was just telling Kath about the blah blah,' or 'Kath, Tess was saying how . . .'

At one stage I nearly pulled him aside to tell him to 'give up, mate!' It was bloody agony to watch.

I volunteered to cook the sausages with Dad. At least the barbie was away from everyone, but soon I heard the whirring of an electric chair and Fin parked

himself next to me.

His long-sleeved top and tracky daks swam on him, the long ridges of bone visible under the fabric. It seemed clearer now how tall Fin had grown – probably shot up just weeks before the accident.

'Did you hear St John's lost against the St Patrick wimps?' Fin said to us. 'What's the story there?'

Dad coughed. I shrugged.

'If they don't get their shit together, you Bennie's boys might beat them.'

It was hard to tell if this Fin was having a joke or having a go. We let him talk.

'That's a match I'd love to see. You and Matt playing against each other.'

I could feel him watching us.

'When's the game?' he asked. 'Bennie's and St John's?'

The old man started to flip the sausages, slowly, one by one, like it was the most important thing he'd ever done. We let him rave. You had to. They were the rules.

'Who's the Bennie's five-eight?'

'A bloke called Rory.'

'Is he any good?'

I answered carefully. 'He's not bad.'

'Wouldn't be like you and Daniel, though, would it?' Fin stared ahead. 'Sharing that brotherly instinct and all.'

I breathed out slowly. 'I don't know, Fin.'

'Did you see my birthday cards?'

'No.'

'Got stacks of them from the Billi.'

I didn't say anything.

'It'll take me days to read them.'

'I'm sure everyone misses you, mate.'

He turned his chair and whizzed off to bug Kylie.

I heard Dad swallow. It was loud and sounded dry. I couldn't hate Fin, but at that moment it was hard not to. The debt was overwhelming.

I went over to Kylie to tell her we were going. She was hugging Fin and nodding as he spoke.

'That's great,' she said. Her eyes were glassy with tears. 'Say hi to her.'

'Who?' I asked.

'I got a postcard from Claire.' Fin looked right into my face. I felt myself take a few steps back. 'She's in Rome.'

'Yeah?'

'Then she's going to Lourdes to get some holy water for me.'

It was good to get out of there. There was nothing more I wanted than to be hanging out with Fin as if nothing had changed, but that wasn't the reality. It was now the great divide.

If there was any doubt or question still in my mind, today had answered it. There was no point looking back because there was nothing there. Luke and Nicole took it all with them.

As Brendan made the turn into Coghill, I felt happy to be back.

We got the phone call the next morning. Daniel'd hit the wall again. All I could get out of the old man was that Fin's birthday had started it off, and he'd gone downhill quickly.

Mum and Dad left straight away for Westleigh. The Crisis Centre was open to families being involved, that's why the oldies had pushed hard to get him in there. They weren't sure how long they'd be gone. There was a motel about half an hour away from the gaol; they'd stay there and visit Daniel every day until they were sure he was okay.

# FOURTEEN

For the rest of us, life went on, but I'm sure we had the same thing in our heads – Daniel.

During the weeks the oldies were with him, I forced myself to get out of bed every morning to go running with Brendan. It was freezing. Sometimes the grass'd be covered with the finest layer of frost. When we were kids, Mum used to say that meant the elves had visited and sprinkled their luck. I wondered what she'd say now.

Sometimes Brendan and I talked. Other times I'd run till I saw the blackness of nothing. That's when I'd zone out, the weight of my thoughts shedding with each kilometre, like layers of skin falling onto the track, leaving an empty shell. All I could feel was the force of my breath.

But even then, Daniel was never far away. That's what Brendan and I shared, Daniel.

'Did Dad say he'd be back in time?' It was the week before footy camp.

'He's pretty sure he'll be right,' answered Brendan.

'What ab0ut Dan?'

'Joe didn't say much about him except that he was doing a bit better.'

We were back at the cabin. I dumped myself on the stairs while Brendan started his sit-ups.

'That's one of the worst things about all of this,' I said. 'No one talks about Daniel. They don't talk about how he used to be, and they don't talk about how he is now. Yet it's not like we're not thinking about him the whole time.'

Brendan didn't answer. He just went on counting his sit-ups.

'Sometimes it feels like he never existed,' I continued. 'I mean, what do the oldies reckon, we think they're having a holiday? If Dan wasn't in gaol, I wouldn't be out here before the sun's even up, freezing my balls off with you.'

'Where would you be?'

'Back home in my own bed asleep!' I got down on the grass next to Brendan and started doing sit-ups too. 'We have a right to know how he's doing. But I can never get the oldies on the phone,' I puffed. 'And when I do, they either say they can't talk for long or there's no news. It shits me.'

'Reading between the lines, I think they're having a pretty full-on time up there. I guess we all handle things differently,' he replied. 'You were hardly "Mr Have-a-Chat" when you arrived. Now I can't shut you up.'

I sat up. 'You know, Brendan, sometimes you really give me the shits.'

Jonny filled in for Dad as assistant coach. He had a slightly different style of training, he was more into ball skills and improving your technique. I don't think the boys were too happy about it. They were more at home with Harvey's approach – running your guts out, then finishing with a friendly game of tip.

One arvo Harvey didn't turn up, he had some late meeting at school. Jonny told me to take the backs.

I wasn't real comfortable about it. 'I don't know, Jonny.'

'Harvey said, "Get Tom to take the backs."'

'Yeah, but you know . . .'

'Tom, these fellas will learn a lot playing with you.'

I didn't say, *maybe if they were the 12As*, but that's what I thought.

Marcus, whose nose I'd put out of joint at the touch game on Australia Day, was one of them; so was Tonelli, the captain. At least Rory was in the group.

We started on slide defence. There was no ideal way to practise it, and I was pretty sure it was something the boys had no idea about. They seemed keen to learn so I started explaining how it worked.

'So I mark their inside centre?' Rory said. 'Not their five-eight?'

'Exactly.'

The fellas started nodding. 'Right.'

'Is that why you were calling "drift wide" in last week's game?' Tonelli asked.

'Yeah.' I looked at him, then at the others, then back at him. 'Didn't you get that?'

'Well, I think I thought . . .' He stared, a blank look on his face.

'Oh, forget it,' I mumbled. 'Let's just, um, have a bit of a run, eh.'

Afterwards Brendan turned up in the ute.

'Good sesh?' he asked.

'Geeze, Brendan,' I said. 'I think it's a bit late for footy camp. I don't think these blokes have any idea.'

'Yeah?' He laughed.

'I'm serious.'

'I'm sure you taught them something this arvo,' he said. 'They love the game, I can vouch for that.'

I climbed into the front seat.

'I thought I might take you to the club for a steak.'

I was guzzling the water. 'Sounds good.'

'Mum gave us some clothes for you.'

'My mum or Gran?'

'Gran.'

I must've looked panicked. 'Don't worry,' Brendan chuckled. 'She didn't put in a dinner suit.'

'I'll see you back at my place.' Jonny called from his car. 'Tom can have a shower there.'

'No worries.'

'What?' I asked. 'Where am I going?'

'Jonny wants to get out of his clobber before we go, so you can have a shower at his place.'

I wasn't too sure about this idea. 'Will, um, Chrissy be there?' Just say she walked in and saw me starkers! 'I mean, I'm just wondering.'

'Yeah?' Brendan looked at me. 'She'll be coming to dinner. Their old girl works Tuesday nights.'

'Okay,' I nodded casually as the panic set in.

I'd seen Chrissy a few times since Kylie told me that pile of shit about her thinking I'm cute. But since then, every time I saw her, I wanted to run the other way. Sunday mass was okay 'cause with her up in the choir I could stare all I wanted then disappear before she came down.

Now here I was with absolutely no warning, about to have dinner with Chrissy Tulake, and The Grandmother had packed my clothes.

Jonny handed me a towel. 'The hot comes on really fast and it's, like, burning. Okay?'

'Yep.' I acted serious, like I was listening to every word of his instructions, but really I was wishing I had eyes in a few more parts of my body.

So far, so good – Chrissy was nowhere to be seen.

'Get the cold on first,' Jonny continued, "cause the way the shower's angled it gets kind of tricky. I keep fixing it but it always breaks.'

The bathroom was the size of a cupboard, and of course it had one of those doors you couldn't lock – it didn't even shut properly. I rattled it a bit and thought about dragging something over to keep it closed, but the room was so tiny there was nothing in it that wasn't attached to the floor.

The shower cubicle was pathetic; a coffin was more spacious, but at least it had a door that closed. I climbed in and turned the tap on and, whooshka, came the water and it was boiling! I was trapped. I couldn't even reach out my arm to turn it off.

'Shit! Shit! Ouch!' I manoeuvred myself around to try another angle and this

time the hot water got me, scalding my arm and thigh.

'Aaaghhh!' I screamed, jumping out and knocking the tap. The hose fell out the shower door. 'Shit! Aaaghhh!' Hot water was spraying everywhere and I was trapped between the dunny and the basin.

Brendan and Jonny flew into the bathroom.

'Tom! Mate!'

In a flash Chrissy was at the doorway too. And I was – starkers.

'Aaaghhh! Oooooh!' I leant over the basin, splashing cold water on my arm. At least that covered the front of me even though my arse was out there in all its glory.

Jonny wrestled the hose, kinked it with his foot and turned the water off. Suddenly there was silence.

'God, are you okay?' Chrissy gasped.

Brendan and Jonny burst out laughing. They stood there pissing themselves. 'Oh, classic!' Brendan kept slapping his thigh. 'Poor Tom got caught in the Tulake deathtrap.'

Jonny passed me the towel. I wrapped it around me then turned to face Brendan. 'Ha, ha,' I said.

Chrissy was trying really hard not to laugh too. Her face was bright red and she had her hand over her mouth.

'Oh, Tom, Tom, are you – are you okay?' she spluttered. 'That happens to nearly everyone. Nice bum, but.' And that was it, she cracked up too.

Maybe that'd been a good ice-breaker, 'cause dinner was fun. I remembered just about every joke I'd ever been told, and did the punch-lines with such precision I was even killing myself. Chrissy laughed so much she knocked over the jug of water. She had a great laugh. It started out soft then grew louder and louder (not too loud though), and she kind of hiccuped at the end.

This was new for me; usually when I'd been out Daniel was there, and no one ever had a chance around him. Girls'd hang on to every word he said, even though he was hopeless at telling jokes. He'd either forget the punch-line or stuff

it up.

I was feeling pretty good, and when Chrissy said, 'You know, we should do this every Tuesday night,' I felt even better than good.

But then Jonny piped up with, 'What about the big Davin?'

'Yeah,' Brendan added. 'What about the big Davin? Is he still . . .'

'BIG!' Brendan and Jonny said together, like it was hysterical.

'You two are off,' Chrissy blushed.

'But you're still seeing him, aren't you?' Brendan asked.

'Well – yes.' And she blushed again.

The Davin was my obstacle.

Daniel was doing okay, which meant Dad could make it to footy camp; he was going straight there from Westleigh. Mum wanted to stay a bit longer just to be sure, so Brendan was going up to join her.

The arrangement was that after camp the old man and I'd go to Westleigh to see Daniel and pick Mum up. That way Brendan could get back to Coghill to help Jonny with a big repair and still be at Aralen the next weekend to look at a unit for Aunty Kath. If it was okay eventually Fin would move in there too.

Gone were the days when I didn't have a clue what the rest of the family was up to. Now it was one finely tuned plan and arrangement after another. We should've kept a tally on the kilometres we were doing; it seemed half our lives were spent in the car.

The bus trip up to camp was pretty funny. Soupe had eaten a curry the night before and was letting off farts that just about blinded you. Rory brought up a few dirty mags that were being handed around and Wiseman required the cold hose.

The boys were running a book on who was most likely to meet, let alone top, Davin's score last camp with the nurses. Rory, Soupe and Jimmy had their money on Miles Harrigan, the vice-captain. Miles would've had money on himself too. Someone said Miles couldn't get it up, so Soupe changed to Tonelli. Tonelli bet on Marcus, and Wiseman bet on me.

'Come on,' Rory kept elbowing me. 'You got to place a bet.'

'How would I know?'

These were the times I felt on the outer: a history I didn't have, names I didn't know.

'Come on, Brennan,' Tonelli called. 'You can't be a tight-arse.'

'Put a bet on me.' Wiseman stood up and beat his chest. 'I'm up to the challenge.'

'That's like burning money.' That much I knew. 'He'd bloody suffocate them.'

'Hey, Tonelli?' Harrigan shouted. 'Is Davin still rooting Tulake?'

My antennae switched on. Ever since dinner I'd been tuned into two words – Chrissy and Tulake.

'Eh?' Tonelli shouted back.

'Is Tulake and Davin still on?'

'You're in luck, Miles,' Tonelli answered. 'She dumped him on the weekend.'

'Go, Miles,' Wiseman hollered. 'Go, son.'

I felt my guts turn, but this time it was good.

Dad was waiting for us.

'Hey, Mr Brennan,' all the boys greeted him as they loaded off the bus.

'Welcome, fellas,' Dad kept saying.

'Okay!' Harvey called. 'Gather round. This is the deal: four rooms of four and one room of three. Got it?'

Everyone nodded and started shuffling into groups.

'Not so fast,' Harvey said. 'This is a footy camp, not a social event. The idea is we get to know one another, understand the concept of a team and . . .'

As Harvey rattled on, I realised this was what I'd been dreading, all that crap. It had been the same crap talk at St John's footy camps, but somehow it was different, I knew those guys inside out. We'd thrived on the bond we'd built.

That's what made us winners.

Bennie's just wasn't the same. Everyone got along, and there was no one person you'd call an arsehole, and they had team unity – you couldn't deny them that. But what they didn't have was technique, and that's what put them on the outer next to teams like St John's that could play the game in their sleep.

I looked at Dad, trying to figure out what he was thinking.

I got the draw with Tonelli, Marcus and Jimmy, and lost the toss on the top bunk.

'Was it the same at St John's?' Tonelli asked me as we were unpacking. 'Team unity, all that crap?'

'Sort of,' I answered.

'We're playing St John's at the end of July,' Marcus told us.

'Yeah?' I swallowed. That was going to be a hard one.

'We're only playing them once,' he added quickly. 'They're in a different draw to us.'

'You seen them play this year?' Tonelli asked.

'No,' I grunted.

I caught Marcus glaring at him.

'Oh, yeah,' Tonelli said. 'Just thought you might know what their form was like.'

'No.'

'Who's their captain?'

'Matt O'Rourke,' I answered.

'What's he like?'

'He's my best mate.' I sat there, unravelling and re-ravelling my St John's socks. Now I wasn't sure why I'd brought them. Were they my badge of honour? I shoved them back in my bag.

'Your old man's a good guy. Knows his stuff.'

'Well, I'm going out for a ciggie,' he said. 'I know they'll pull that amnesty caper on us tonight.'

Anthony Tonelli was right: after dinner Harvey made the announcement.

'Okay, boys. This is a week to get fit and concentrate on your football. Everything else goes out the window. Right? So you've all just wasted your money on that little book I heard about.'

Chuckles and grunts and, 'Sir,' echoed in the dining room.

'I'm going to hang a bag on the door and you know the drill. Cigarettes, alcohol . . .'

'What about syringes?' Miles Harrigan yelled.

'Yeah, funny,' Harvey said. 'Syringes and tourniquets too, please, boys. This is your chance to be anonymous. If I find you're up to stuff after this amnesty, you'll be dealt with according to school regulations. Anyone not understand?'

The morning routine was standard: up early for a run, brekkie, two hours of training, an hour of gym work, lunch. Then it was an afternoon's worth of bonding – canoeing, orienteering in teams of four, and whatever other dickhead activity you could imagine. The nights were a mix of games and footy videos, mostly of Bennie's getting flogged, which got me wondering what kind of a bullshit camp we were on.

For a start, what's the point of having a footy camp when the season's almost half over? These blokes needed this stuff weeks if not years ago.

St John's camp was a hard slog and at the beginning of the season. Dad used to get a city coach in, a real pro, and he'd work us ragged. But that's what we expected: camp was to get us into gear to win, to hang on to that Wattle Shield. That's what Mumbilli expected. We weren't there to have fluffy getting-to-know-you trust games. All that was a given.

By Wednesday I had the shits with the whole caper, and there was still Thursday and Friday to go.

I felt like saying to the old man and Harvey, 'There's no point to this. Why don't we get back on the bus and go home?'

Dad sussed me out. After lunch he came up to me.

'Tom, I want a word.' I followed him to the porch outside.

'What's the problem, son?' he asked. 'You don't seem to be into it. It's showing, too.'

'Come on, Dad,' I moaned. 'The 16As would be better than this lot. I mean, they're all good guys, but . . .'

'But what?'

'Dad, get real.'

'I thought you were a member of this team?'

'What sort of a question is that?'

'I thought you'd know by now what sort of a question that is.'

'Dad?'

'Did I push you too hard?' He placed his head against the railings of the porch. 'Was that it? Did I bend to Mumbilli's obsession with retaining the Wattle Shield at all costs?'

'What are you talking about?'

'You know why I got someone else to head the footy camps at St John's?' He started to crack his knuckles one by one. 'Because part of me didn't believe in that "winning is everything" mentality. Part of me knew there was more than that.'

'Dad, what are you going on about?'

'I'm not sure,' he said. 'I'm not sure of anything anymore.' His body leant against the railing then turned to me. 'No, there is one thing I'm sure of. You were lucky.' He nodded to himself. 'Not only has God given you a gift, and that I mean sincerely. You also had Dan. Now, he was good, but he was never going to be as good as you, and I think deep down he knew that. Did you? Did you realise how much better you were? How much more natural ability you have?'

The old man was freaking me out. AlI I could do was shake my head.

'But you had someone who wanted to teach you, who wanted to kick a ball around with you all day, every day. Every waking moment, you boys worked on your skills. Kicking, passing. There were nights your mother and I had to drag you to the dinner table. Then in summer you'd be straight back out again. An instinct developed between you two. You knew where he'd be and he'd know your next move. Brothers.'

Dad's eyes were starting to glaze, but I knew he wasn't going to stop until he'd said every last word.

'And then when you had the fortune to play together at St John's, it was like – music. But it was like that because of all the time that went before. That's why you're lucky, son. For what it's worth now, your brother gave you a fair go.' He looked at me, and all the pain and disappointment he'd endured sat deep in the lines on his face. 'I know it hurts, Tom.' Gently he touched my shoulder. 'But we can't undo what's done. Bennie's is giving you a chance and, as pathetic as it may seem to you, it's still a chance.' Again I heard his swallow, loud and dry. 'No one's above anyone, surely you know that by now.'

'Dad.' That's the only sound I could make. 'Dad.'

'Take it, Tommy,' he sighed. 'Do everything you can to make the most of it. It's not like you not to try. I know every one of them could learn from you. They deserve a fair go, like you did.' Slowly he nodded and said, 'Here's a challenge. Show me how good you really are. 'Cause I know you're better than this.'

Well, if that speech didn't make me feel like the scum of the earth, I don't know what would.

I'd learnt the old man was spare with his pearls, and more than that he was fair. He'd always taken a gamble on me, telling me things even if he thought they'd get my nose out of joint. With Daniel he didn't, because the backfire was always monumental. So I accepted his challenge and turned it up. Besides, what else was I going to do with myself? I couldn't stare at the try-line thinking of Chrissy Tulake for the rest of the season.

Every session I trained hard, like I was back at St John's. I managed to teach the boys a few things: slide defence was one of them, and they got it too. The arvo activities weren't so bad once you got into them. I pissed myself senseless when we tipped, or rather rolled, Wiseman out of his canoe.

I'd meant it when I said the Bennie's fellas were okay. They were top blokes. They knew how to have a laugh and not take things too seriously. I guess when it came to footy I just wasn't used to that attitude. Winning had been everything at St John's, but now I was confused, 'cause I think Dad was trying to tell me that wasn't enough.

I lay awake on the top bunk, his words turning over and over in my head. Some words stayed longer than others, and some refused to budge at all.

# FIFTEEN

At the end of camp the boys filed back onto the bus, still put out over the fact that the nursing students were away on hospital rotation. Brad Wiseman was convinced Harvey had arranged it that way. We all got our money back and Miles Harrigan retained stud status without having to prove himself.

'I can't believe no one put a buck on me,' Wiseman must've said fifty times a day. Rory and I'd pat him on the back and say, 'Next year, mate. Next year.'

Dad and I waved them off as Soupe chucked a farewell browneye from the back window. That was it, footy camp over for another year.

'Let's go,' Dad said. 'I told your mother we'd try and be there by dinnertime.'

The next morning I saw Daniel. The old girl thought it'd be nice if I saw him on my own. At the Crisis Centre that was possible, even though I was still a minor.

One guard led the oldies off to the left for their appointment with Daniel's social worker, while another had me follow him through further security points to where Daniel was waiting for me.

I got a shock. He looked awful. His head was shaved, and for the first time he looked like a prisoner – like all the others. He was so thin his green tracky looked five sizes too big, and he was slumped in the chair, his head hanging down. But when he saw me coming he sat straight, his eyes lighting up, and he smiled.

'Hey, Tommy.' He squeezed my hand tight.

'How're you going?' God, those first few minutes were difficult.

'I'm okay,' Daniel nodded. 'Wasn't for a while, but I'm getting there.'

'Good. Good to hear.'

'So how was it?'

'How was . . .?'

'Footy camp, mate,' Daniel laughed. 'You forgotten already?'

'Wasn't bad.'

'They still the worst footballers around?'

'They're okay,' I shrugged. 'Just different.'

'Different how?'

Since Dad's rave I'd been giving it all a fair bit of thought, but I couldn't exactly put my finger on it.

'You know, Dan, they really enjoy playing. It's not just about winning.'

'Can't see the point,' Daniel frowned. 'I mean, it's all about winning. Isn't it?'

'Dunno.'

Daniel shook his head. 'What's up with their coach?'

'Harvey's a solid bloke,' I told him. 'He knows they're not the best team in the world, but I think he makes them feel like they are.' I couldn't believe what I was saying, yet it made sense. 'Harvey's, like, it's about being part of a union, where what you do affects others. He kept going on about it being a life skill, not just a sport thing.'

'Hah!' Daniel scoffed. 'What did the guys think about that load of crap?'

But I was beginning to think it wasn't a load of crap. Something was dawning on me. Something I thought I'd never feel.

'St John's was all about winning, wasn't it? Retaining the Wattle Shield. That's all we were hungry for.'

'What's wrong with that?' Daniel replied.

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'That pressure was always there. Not from the old man, I think we did it to ourselves. It was like it was the only thing that mattered to us and the Billi. Maybe that took something away from it.' I shrugged. 'Just a thought.'

'Geeze, mate,' he said. 'Sounds like you've been having a bit too many of them.'

'The best thing about playing in the firsts at St John's was playing with you, Dan.' As I said it I realised that towards the end it had become the worst thing too – trying to carry him as his game slipped and he stopped caring about us, the Brennan brothers. 'I guess it's just different now.'

'It's all different,' Daniel sighed, "cause I fucked up.'

'It's not . . .'

'No, I did.' Daniel's voice was firm. 'I did, Tom, and that's what I'm trying to get a handle on.' He nodded his head a few times. 'But I'm going to get there. I got Jerry, my mentor, and Mrs Kumar, the social worker. She's been really good. Top lady. She's been good to Mum too. And then there's Theo. I got to keep it together for him. He's been flipping out, bad.'

'Yeah?'

'And all you lot,' he kept talking. 'You, you've stuck around. I don't know why, but you have.'

'We're family, mate.'

'That's the hardest bit. All the people I've hurt.' A tear slid down the side of his face. Quickly he wiped it away. 'Fin.' His Adam's apple bulged just like Dad's. 'Fin's the hardest, though, mate. It was the thought of his birthday at the rehab centre that sent me off. I just couldn't get this picture out of my head, Fin in a wheelchair. Remember, Tommy, I haven't seen him since . . .'

We squeezed hands. I smiled even though I felt my heart cracking.

'Brendan told me Aunty Kath's thinking of visiting.'

'Yeah?'

'I don't think she will,' Daniel said. 'Can hardly blame her.'

'She's pretty busy with Fin.'

'I'll see her one day, and I'll see Fin too.'

I tried to smile but it didn't come out right.

'I'm going to get there, Tommy,' Daniel whispered. 'I'm going to get there, I promise. I'm going to walk out of here one day, and I'll make it up to you all, I swear.'

'Yeah, mate. Yeah.'

We wouldn't be back at Coghill till late. Already the winter sun was starting to sink on us.

'I hate driving in this light,' Dad said.

'Why don't we stop at the next servo and have an early tea?' suggested Mum.

So we did, and when we got back to the car Mum opened the back door and said, 'Keep me company, Tom?'

'What? In the back?'

'Yeah.' She smiled holding her hand out to me. 'Please?'

'Don't mind me,' Dad grumbled. 'I'm used to being chauffeur.'

'Joe,' Mum laughed. 'Don't get the sour grapes on me.'

I got in the back and she wrapped her arm around me.

'That's better,' she whispered, running her nose across my hair, breathing me in like she used to. I put my head on her shoulder and closed my eyes.

'I'm sorry, Tommy.' The warmth of her breath brushed my ear. She smelt like Mum. 'I'm trying, I really am. I promise it'll get better.' She wrapped her fingers around mine and squeezed my hand. 'We're going to get through this. All of us.'

Curled up against her, the hum of the motor rocking us gently, I fell into a sweet sleep.

'You got any plans these Christmas holidays?' Brendan said as we were running.

'Are you serious?' I puffed. 'I don't know what I'm doing tomorrow, let alone in six months.'

'Want to go away?'

'What? With you?'

'Yeah. What's wrong with that?'

'Sorry. Didn't mean it like that.'

'Well, do you?'

'Like, where are you talking?'

'Nepal.'

'Nepal?'

'Yeah, Nepal.'

'Where exactly is it again?'

'Above India, Einstein.'

'Yeah. Well, I knew it was somewhere around there.'

'I thought we could climb to the Mount Everest base camp.'

'What! What's wrong with a week at the Gold Coast?'

'I'm serious.' Brendan stopped. 'Look, we're here.'

We'd reached the top of the ascent. I'd made it up without even realising.

Brendan cheered. 'You did it without a whinge. You must be ready.'

'You sneaky bastard,' I panted. 'You kept me talking so I didn't know how far we'd gone.'

He slapped me on the back. 'And you talked all the way up too.'

I slapped him back. 'I'm turning into you.'

We started running down, not talking, just the sound of our feet pounding the ground and our breath short and sharp.

'I'm serious about Nepal,' Brendan said.

'You mean this Christmas?'

'This Christmas, Tom.'

'So we wouldn't be here for Christmas Day.'

'Nope.'

'And you and me?'

'You and me and Mount Everest.'

'Gee.'

'Give it some thought.'

'I don't have any dough. I gave up my job at Kentucky after . . .'

'We can work that out,' he said. 'You do a bit of work for me in the sheds, I'll give you a loan.'

'Interest free?'

'Yes, you little dickhead.'

Back at the house Gran was frying up bacon and sausages. She seemed to be on some kind of feeding mission, which suited me. She'd finally mastered brekkie. It was the other meals that still made me nervous.

'Two eggs, Tom?'

'Thanks, Gran.' I gave her a peck on the cheek.

'You stink, Thomas.' She screwed up her face but I could see a smile. 'Go have a shower. Chop, chop.'

Kylie was staring in the bathroom mirror.

'You finished, Kyles?'

'I hate my hair.'

'What?'

'I hate my hair.'

'Just leave it alone,' I said to her through the mirror. 'Stop putting all that crap in it.'

'But I need the crap or it won't go right.'

'Why don't you tie it back like you used to?' I told her. 'That looked okay.'

'That was then,' she groaned. 'I'm not that person anymore.'

'Well, can you think about it in your own room? I want to get in the shower.'

She closed the door. I peeled off my sweaty t-shirt, getting a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I'm not one of those show ponies who love a good stare, but today I noticed my arms weren't looking bad. I gave my muscles a flex and there was a bicep sticking up on its own. I felt it. Not bad.

Daniel had built-up arms but he worked on them. Before school, when we'd brush our teeth, he'd shove me out of the way so he could watch his muscles bulge as his arm scrubbed frantically up and down his gums.

'Look at those pistons, Tommy,' he'd say. 'Go on, have a feel.'

It was okay when I was ten, but after a while I'd have to tell him to piss off. 'I don't want to feel your muscles, you faggot.'

He must've hated looking at his arms now – long, thin and wasted.

I was looking forward to the lunchtime grudge match against St Xavier's, Bennie's brother school, the other big Catholic school in Coghill. Like Bennie's, they'd combined with a local Catholic girls' school.

The boys had been talking about the game for a few days. The last two years they'd lost. Now they were deter-mined to make up for it. We had a few moves planned, and I knew they were looking to me to help them out.

After our warm-up, the Xavier boys started to arrive. As they loaded off their bus, another bus arrived, chockers with Xavier girls. They were like a bloody cheer squad, all wearing the footy jersey over their skirts, some in beanies and scarves too.

'Check 'em out.' Dirty Wiseman, always looking. 'There's hundreds of them.'

A big girl, squeezed into her jersey, came down the steps of the bus.

'Look at that!' He whistled. 'Do you reckon I'm propping against her?'

'It'll be the closest you ever get to a chick,' Jimmy laughed.

'We should've told our girls to come down too,' Rory whinged.

'Like who?'

Twenty minutes of tapping boots, doing up headgear, getting the psych-up talk and yelling the war cry, and we jogged out of the change room to find a human tunnel lined with Bennie's boys and *girls*, chanting and slapping us on the back. 'Bennie's! Bennie's! Bennie's!'

The cheering was almost louder than the Wattle Shield Grand Final. For the first time at Bennie's, I had butterflies. I was pumped, and more than that, I cared.

'Let's do it, boys!' Tonelli called.

From the kick-off we were on fire. The forwards took it to them and the backs were 'on song'. The first half was almost perfect, 10–0. The boys were rapt. 'Stay focused,' I barked. 'It's not over yet. Remember the last ten minutes. We've got to hold it together when we feel buggered.'

'Ellas!' I yelled to the backs. This was the move I'd showed the boys towards the end of camp after I'd pulled my finger out. They loved it too.

'Keep it up, boys,' Wiseman roared from the scrum.

I picked up the ball and darted down the blind side, throwing a cut-out pass to Tonelli, who found our full-back hitting the line with pace. Marcus loomed up beside him. With a clear run to the try-line he caught a perfectly timed pass, leaving the Xavier cover defence in his wake, and bang, under the posts. Marcus threw me the ball to convert.

'Mate,' I said. 'You make my job easy.'

He grinned.

We won 22–5.

Every Bennie's kid there was stamping their feet and yelling the war cry. '*Bennie's, Bennie's, we are the red machine.*' They were so loud we could hardly hear ourselves on the field, laughing and shouting.

Then something happened that'd never happened to me before: Wiseman and Tonelli lifted me up on their shoulders. And the crowd went psycho!

As we walked back to the bus I could still feel myself grinning.

'God, I wish I'd been there,' Chrissy said, that beautiful mouth of hers smiling at

me.

I was exhausted, but there was no way I was going to miss out on dinner at the club. The fellas didn't know what I did every Tuesday night. I couldn't trust them. If they knew Chrissy was there, they'd turn up like sick puppies that you didn't have the heart to get rid of.

'Choir rehearsals on top of extra lunchtime classes,' Chrissy moaned. 'I can't wait till the finals are over.'

'You still thinking of nursing?' Brendan asked.

'Yeah, I am.' She smiled. 'I'm going to apply to the nursing college at Barton Uni.'

*No!* I wanted to yell. *Anywhere but there*. I didn't want her becoming a footy camp statistic.

'That's where Tom had his footy camp,' Brendan nudged me. 'See you survived it, mate.'

I glared at him. I didn't want Chrissy knowing what I'd said about it being too late for a Bennie's footy camp. She'd think I was up myself. Besides, I didn't think that anymore.

'So you're going to do nursing?' I returned to the safer topic.

'I think so,' she nodded. 'What are you going to do?'

'Not sure,' I answered. 'I've thought about sports science, something like that. But I don't think I'd get the marks.'

'I'll tell you what he's doing first,' Brendan butted in. 'He's going to climb to the Mount Everest base camp with me.'

'So you're going to Nepal?' Jonny asked as he tucked into the biggest T-bone I'd ever seen.

'Wow!' Chrissy licked her fingers. 'When?'

'December,' Brendan said. 'If I can convince him.'

'You have to go, Tom. It'll be fantastic,' Chrissy grinned. 'Jonny, when are you going to get over your flying phobia? You can't go anywhere interesting unless

you go by plane.' Now her perfect mouth was sucking up long strands of spaghetti. 'Brendan has been dying to do that trip for years, Tom, but he can't get Jonny interested in anywhere unless you can get there by train. Which counts out pretty much the whole world.' I watched her lips curl around the fork. 'I mean, they can't sit around Coghill for the rest of their lives like an old married couple. Can they, Tom?' Her tongue licked some sauce off her top lip. I felt giddy. 'Can they?'

'Huh?' I muttered.

'You should definitely go,' nodded Chrissy.

'Yeah. I am.' *I am?*

'Great!' Brendan said. 'Good on you. Nepal, here we come.'

I had it bad. At least I think I had it bad. I'd never liked a chick like this before so I didn't have anything to compare it to. But if she's all you can think about and in three minutes she convinces you to go to a country you'd hardly heard of, then yeah, I had it bad.

The light in Kylie's room was on, her music pumping. I was glad she was still awake as my earlier tiredness had vanished. Maybe she'd be in for a DVD.

'Kyles?' I knocked. 'Kyles?'

I opened the door. Kylie was sitting on the floor, staring in the mirror, a pair of scissors in her lap and handfuls of hair stuffed into the bin.

'Shit!' I said. 'What've you done?'

'Tom,' she cried. 'I feel so awful.'

# SIXTEEN

I sat on the floor and put my arms around her.

'What is it, Kyles?'

She shook her head.

'Your hair wasn't that bad,' I said. 'Honest.'

'Oh, it's not that.' Bits of hair were sticking onto her tears, and snippings were scattered over her lap. 'I mean, it is but it's not. If you know what I mean.'

'It'll grow back.'

'I feel, I feel . . .'

'You feel what?'

'I feel like shit.' She began to sob.

'Hey?' I whispered, giving her a hug. 'It's only hair.'

'It's not the hair thing, Tom!' she shrieked.

'Okay, okay.'

The way she looked made me think of her back home at the Billi, her eyes flicking around in her head, like thoughts must've been turning over and over in her mind. The first few days after the accident, as the horrible realities set in, this is how she'd looked. Terrified. And of course she was. We all were, but what was she terrified of now?

'Kyles? What is it?'

'No one knows this. Well, no one really.' These words made her cry a bit more. 'It's about Fin and—' She bit her lip. 'And Claire.'

'Fin and Claire?' I repeated. 'What about them? I mean, we knew they liked each other.'

'Let me talk. Okay?' She took a deep breath and sat up straight. 'It's more than that.'

'Yeah?'

She pressed her fingertips against her mouth, trying to control the tears that were hiccuping through. 'I'd known for a while that Fin liked Claire, and then Fin found out Claire liked him. But Claire was with Daniel, of course.'

'Kyles, I know all this.'

'Not all of it, you don't. See, Fin and I used to talk. Probably 'cause I was always over at their place. Fin didn't know what to do. He really, really liked Claire, and he was stoked she liked him. He couldn't believe it; Daniel was the guy all the girls wanted, not Fin.'

'Yeah, but that started to change,' I said.

'It did! You're right, Tom. You notice things, don't you.'

'I don't know,' I shrugged.

'Remember that fight Fin and Daniel had, the week before that last game against Booralee High?'

For some reason I'd forgotten that, or at least stored it in the back of my head. It was a bad fight, just words and stuff, but it was tough, what they said to each other.

'Do you remember?' she asked again. 'It was outside the change room. It started 'cause Fin was talking to Claire. At least, that's what Fin told me.'

'He's right,' I nodded. 'It started over nothing. It was Dan getting all insecure. He was being a real arsehole.'

'He knew he was losing her,' she said. 'And maybe it was worse, because he knew he was going to lose her to Fin. I don't care how people try to protect Daniel now, but I'm sorry, you and me know, and the oldies too if they were honest, Daniel was totally up his arse about Fin. He always was, since they were kids.'

I had to agree 'cause it was right.

'I'm not trying to make excuses, but I still think about the time Daniel got off with the girl Fin took to the Year Nine dance. Even though I was only eight, I remember Fin telling me he liked this girl and he was going to ask her to their dance at the end of the year.'

'Jessica McCarthy,' I said.

'That's right,' Kylie answered. 'You remember too.'

'I remember Fin had a really big crush on her.'

'So why did Daniel get off with her?' Kylie's face was turning pink. 'He didn't like her. He just did it 'cause he didn't want Fin to have her.'

That was only one example. If you could be bothered digging deep enough you'd find plenty more – not always about girls. Sometimes it was over friends, possessions, football.

But in the end it was all about a girl.

'So, so, I'm not trying to make excuses,' she said again. 'But when Fin told me about the fight with Daniel and how he'd called Fin a desperate loser and all this other stuff, I said, "Stuff Daniel. He's an arrogant prick. Why should he always get his way." I was really mad, and even then I reminded Fin, not that he needed reminding, about that time with Jessica McCarthy.' Now Kylie's face had turned almost purple. I thought she was going to cry again but she kept on, her words getting faster and more desperate. 'Fin was so cut up about what to do. He still worshipped Daniel, God knows why. He asked me what I thought he should do, and I said, "Go for it! Claire likes you. Tough shit for Daniel." I went on and on. I was soooo pissed off with Daniel. One night . . .' She covered her face with her hands. 'One night when Kath was going to the club, I said to Fin, "Why don't you ask Claire over?" I mean, the Billi's such a small town, how else could they see each other. I told Fin I'd come over too, keep guard, kind of thing. Claire was scared, I mean, of course she was.'

'Did she?'

'Yeah. They snuggled on the couch together. Talk about feeling like the odd one out. They were kissing and giggling. I could hear Fin whispering to her. They were so cute.' Kylie's jaw began to shake. 'That was the night Claire and

Fin decided she'd break up with Daniel. It was the night before,' she whispered. 'The Friday night before the accident.' The tears streamed down Kylie's cheeks. 'Fin was so happy,' she choked. 'The only thing that's helped me get through this, Tom, is seeing Fin in my head – the way he looked that night.'

I wiped the tears off her face.

'If I'd just . . . minded my own business and didn't go in there playing matchmaker, then maybe . . . maybe . . .' She put her head on my shoulder. 'I feel so . . . so guilty,' she wept. 'Like it was all my fault.'

Now I understood why her anger was still so raw. She'd tried to be tough, but inside she'd been cracking up.

'No, Kyles,' I whispered to her. 'No. Don't do that crap to yourself. It was no one's fault.'

'But maybe if I hadn't . . .'

'Kylie, I walked away from Daniel that night. Did you know that?'

'No.'

'I told him he was a prick and then I walked away.'

Walking away. Hearing the bush crunch under my feet. That was the moment I now wanted to yell – stop the clock! Rewind. I take it back!

'I knew he was pissed. I knew he'd never let anyone drive his car. I could see how out of control he was, but I didn't care. At that moment I hated him so much I could almost taste it.

'Maybe if I'd hung around I could've stopped him from getting into the car. But you know what, Kyles? I don't reckon I could have. I mean, I know I couldn't have. Dan always did what he wanted to do. But still, I didn't try. I didn't try to stop him. In fact, I wanted him to really, really stuff things up. Then pay for it, big time. One of the last things I said to him that night was, "You're going down."'

She watched me, wide-eyed.

'When I visit him, and see how he is now, and then think about what he was like before, I can't quite work it out.'

'What do you mean, Tom?'

'Not sure,' I said. 'Sometimes I think I'm getting a clearer picture, but then it disappears from my head.'

Kylie shook her head. 'You've lost me.'

'Daniel was drinking a lot then.' I spoke carefully. I needed to get this right; it'd been bugging me since footy camp. If I could put it together then maybe I could put it behind me. 'He was on a self-destruct mission. He was hung-over all the time, that's why he was so slow on the field. Some games I'd pass him the ball and he'd stand there for about two seconds, like he didn't know what to do with it. He was pissing off a lot of people.'

'Yeah?'

'Luke and Owen were too. I mean, Luke was meant to be the captain. The three of them were prowling around together in Dan's Falcon. They were absolutely putting away the piss.'

'See, you do notice things, Tom.'

'Now, maybe, but then? You know what I didn't notice? How much bad shit was going down in the team. It was like we were only playing with twelve men. There was that much pressure on the rest of us. Fin was trying to hold the team together, but then he'd have Dan dumping shit on him, telling him he was getting a big head and stepping on Luke's territory as captain. But what were we meant to do?

'We were fighting all the time. The new young players were shit-scared. If you had a bad game you were dead meat. It wasn't about us, it was all about the Wattle Shield. We stopped looking out for each other. And fun? Well, stuff the fun, we weren't having any of that. Winning the sudden-death match and making the Grand Final was a fluke. We only did 'cause of Fin.'

'What about Dad?'

'I think the Billi put a fair bit of pressure on him too. He told me that's why he used to get the city coach in for the camp.'

'Bloody football.'

'It was much more than that, at least where the oldies were concerned,' I said.

'They couldn't control Dan. They were scared of him. Well, scared of the consequences if they tried to pull him into line.' I closed my eyes and pictured Daniel's face. The way he looked now, the way he sounded now. 'Maybe Daniel was always going to do something like this. Maybe he had to fall this far.' I shook my head thinking about what I'd just said. 'You know, you should go and see him, Kylie. He's different.'

'Why do you get this so much more than me?'

'Kyles, we've been eating, drinking, shitting and sleeping it these last . . .' I counted on my fingers. 'Ten months. It's become life.'

'God, and what a life,' she groaned. 'I just wish I was starting to feel a bit better.'

'You will. I know you will.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'Do you?'

'Yeah,' I answered. 'It's slow, but I can see ahead now, if you know what I mean.'

'Like?'

'Like life being okay again.' I squeezed her hand.

'You know what I keep thinking?' she said. 'That I don't want to be Kylie Brennan. Kylie anyone, but not Kylie Brennan.'

'Kyles, we'll never be the same, but that doesn't mean it has to be bad. Just different.'

She nodded and snuggled under my arm. 'Do you think I'll get there?'

'Course you will. You're a Brennan.'

'Ha, ha.'

'So, um, what are you going to do about your hair?' I'd been waiting for a better time to tell her. 'You know it's a bit lopsided.'

Kylie looked back in the mirror. 'God, do I look like Smeagol?'

'Frodo, more like it.'

'Shit!'

'Give me the scissors,' I said. 'I'll try and even it up a bit.'

'You better be careful, Tom. I'll kill you if you stuff it up.'

'Just shut up and keep still.'

Brendan had me doing a few jobs around the sheds. It was part of the 'earning my keep for Nepal' deal.

There was no going back on the words I said that night at dinner. Brendan was trying to get tickets for the week after Christmas: the oldies and Gran had said, on account of everything, it'd be nice if we could all spend Christmas together.

I couldn't believe I was going overseas. I'd only been on a plane twice, and that's when I was eight and we went to Melbourne for Dad's sister's wedding.

Nepal sounded cool, too. All the fellas said it: 'Cool. Nepal.' But I reckon if I asked them where it actually was, they'd have trouble telling me.

Walking to the Mount Everest base camp was going to be awesome. Brendan and I looked at photos on the Lonely Planet site. It was a bigger climb than 'the ascent'! Now I was like, 'Bring it on.'

Brendan didn't work me too hard in the sheds. Most of the time it was doing a bit of sweeping or cleaning up, trying to think of sneaky ways to extract info out of Jonny about his beautiful goddess of a sister.

A couple of times Chrissy came down to the sheds to give Jonny some things from home. After, she'd hang around and we'd chat. She was so easy to talk to, I'd find myself raving about anything. In fact I'd forget where I was. It was like being me again. And her laugh was sublime!

But this afternoon was different. She wasn't there, and Jonny had just coughed up some vital information. Chrissy still wasn't going out with anyone. He'd given me a real deep look when he'd said it. I'm sure I looked guilty too.

I was whistling as I hosed down a tractor.

'Tom, can we talk about something?' Brendan looked serious, and he'd waited till Jonny had left.

Instantly my guts went into panic mode. Maybe I'd asked Jonny a few too many questions. Maybe he was one of those crazed possessive brothers that are okay until you start going out with their sister, then they go psycho.

'I wanted to talk to you about dinner the other week.' He looked uncomfortable.

'Dinner?'

'At the club.'

Here goes, I thought. An 'if you know what's best for you don't go near her' warning from the uncle. My ears were about to shut down.

'You never mentioned what Chrissy said.' Brendan started digging his toe into the dirt. 'And, well, Jonny's not comfortable about it. I told him not to worry but maybe we should talk about it.'

'Uh huh.'

'Jonny thought it was better if I talked to you on my own.'

'Okay.'

'He can get a bit, you know, emotional.'

Crazy and violent, he really meant.

'Right.' I nodded, still completely in the dark.

'So . . .'

'So?'

'I mean, you know Jonny and I are – together?'

'Yep.' So it wasn't the 'Jonny's a possessive crazed brother' talk, just the 'I'm gay' talk. I breathed out in relief.

'I haven't really talked to you about it before.' Brendan rubbed his chin. 'When we run, we talk about Dan. Not really about ourselves.'

I contemplated saying, 'No offence, Brendan, but it hasn't exactly been the main thing on my mind.'

'I guess . . . before, I spent more time with Daniel,' he continued. 'You were younger. Not that that should've mattered.'

I shook my head. 'Brendan – forget about it.'

'Well, we are going away together, so it's good to – you know, get it out in the open. Then we're both comfortable. Eh?'

Before, Brendan had been someone who was just always around. Someone I never really thought about. Mum's little brother. My uncle, that was about as far as it went. But that's when life was simpler.

Now Brendan wanted me to see him. See who he really was. This was probably the way Daniel saw him and now I did too.

Rory came over that weekend. It was the first time a Bennie's mate had visited the house. He kind of invited himself over, but I was pleased to see him 'cause again I was home on my lonesome.

'I've always wanted to check this place out,' Rory said, peering around the front door. 'When I was a kid I called it "Saint Margalette the Butcher". My old girl'd say, it's "Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys" in this posh voice. Just the way she said it made me think the most exotic people must live here.'

'I'd never describe Gran as exotic,' I answered. 'Neurotic, maybe.'

'Anyway, where is everyone?' Rory was walking down the hall, taking in all the pictures of the saints. 'Who's the religious nut?'

'Gran.'

'So where is everyone?' he asked again.

'Dad and Gran are seeing my cousin Fin, and Mum, Kylie and Brendan are visiting Dan. Saturday's the main visiting day.'

'You didn't want to go?'

'Nah. Kyles hasn't seen Dan for a while, and it's better if she goes with just Brendan and Mum. It's good to have a weekend off.'

'Full on,' Rory said. 'Don't know how you do it.'

'You get used to it.'

'Kyles going okay?'

'She still hurts pretty bad.'

'Severe haircut she gave herself.'

'You should've seen it before I fixed it.'

I turned around, slotting a disc into the PS2. 'NRL okay?'

We lounged on the couch, the game controls in our hands, not really talking, just playing and shouting at the umpire on the screen.

Then Rory said exactly what I didn't want to hear. 'You know we're playing St John's next weekend.'

'Yeah.'

'You sweet about it?' he asked. 'The fellas and I were just wondering.'

'I can't say I'm looking forward to it.' I thought about Matt and the fact we were going to have to make some kind of contact before the game or it'd make it even worse, especially as he'd left messages that I just couldn't get around to answering. 'It's just a game,' I said, without taking my eyes off the screen. 'Some of them are still my mates.'

But this I wasn't really sure about. Once, they'd all been mates. I'd grown up with them, played footy with them. Now I didn't know which ones thought I was okay and which ones wanted to spit in my face.

But what I did know was that I didn't want to talk about it now. It was one of those things you knew you were eventually going to have to face, but it always seemed so far off. Now it was almost on top of me with only a week to go. I was scared, not just scared about seeing all the boys again, I was scared about it pushing me back into the big black hole.

Mum made dinner. Kylie and I helped. They were only omelettes, but that was the most she'd cooked in ages. She kept going on about how delicious they were and how you had to beat the eggs in a particular way to make them fluffy. Kylie

gave me a bit of an eye-roll but she didn't say anything. We knew these were big steps for Mum. We didn't want to do anything to spoil it in case she went back to bed and never got out.

The option of going back to my own cave and putting the covers over me wasn't a bad one. Maybe I was more like Mum than I realised. Maybe if I went back to the cave then this time *I'd* never come out. That scared me.

So to keep my mind off the St John's game, after dinner I wandered down to Brendan's cabin to research stuff for Nepal. It was my job to make a list of everything we needed for the climb, and just looking at the awesome photos of the mountain would be enough to lift my spirits.

I knocked on the door of Brendan's cabin. I could hear some noise so I opened the door and went in. He didn't know I was standing there, and I couldn't help but watch him.

Brendan was sitting on the couch, a half-empty bottle of gin and about five or six picture frames laid out on the coffee table. I could tell by the frames, they were mostly the ones of Daniel.

The CD he'd been listening to had just stopped. He staggered over to the stereo, pushed a few buttons, then slumped back into the couch, taking a big drink.

As soon as I heard the start of the music I knew exactly what Brendan was listening to. 'Daniel', the Elton John song Mum used to sing all the time. I hadn't heard her sing or play it the last ten months. I'd forgotten it even existed. But here was Brendan, listening to it, tears streaming down his face as he hugged the bottle to his chest.

I wanted to creep out the door but I was frozen on the spot. I couldn't move and I couldn't stop watching him. His eyes were shut, as silently he mouthed along with the song, his chest heaving with his sobs. He took another swig of gin and slowly I backed out the door, closing it gently behind me.

# SEVENTEEN

Monday morning, 5.50 am, I was first at the gate. Yesterday Brendan had kept a low profile, no doubt feeling pretty seedy. It's strange watching someone else cry when they don't know you're there. Especially when you know what their tears are for and what their pain is like. Brendan's tears could've been any of ours.

If I'd seen Brendan like that even a couple of months ago, I'm sure it would've sent me on a downward spiral. Now, it didn't. I felt bad for him 'cause I knew how much it could hurt, but for the first time it helped me look at everything with a bit of distance. I couldn't help him like I couldn't help Kylie. We were all on our own journeys, and some days the travelling was worse than others.

I'd gone down to the cabin to stop myself thinking about next weekend's game, but what I'd found there had somehow thrown me into it instead. The St John's game was a hill, just another hill to climb in my journey; then life would plateau for a while. That seemed to be the way it worked. I'd get through Saturday and life would go on.

If I could look at it like that, maybe I could stop myself from falling into the blackness.

We were running down the road when, just like that, Brendan said, 'Tom, have you figured out yet Chrissy likes you? I mean, really likes you?'

He got me straight in the heart. I felt like one of those cartoon characters who's just been whacked over the skull with a hammer. I could almost see the stars circling around my head.

'Tom?' Brendan chuckled. 'Hello?'

'Are you sure, Brendan?' The doubting Thomas surfaced. 'I mean, what makes you say that? Do you actually know?'

'Of course I know,' Brendan answered. 'She talks about you all the time. Tom

this, Tom that. Gorgeous Tom. Fantastic Tom.'

I burst out laughing.

'You're lucky I haven't shattered her illusions.'

'Brendan, they're not illusions.'

'Yeah, mate. Don't get too cocky. Plenty of boys ask her out. If I were you, I wouldn't leave it too long.'

The good gut-churning kicked into full speed. Where would I take a girl like Chrissy? The movies; the Gold Class cinema where you stretch out on the couches.

Brendan took a sudden turn off our running track. 'Hey!' I called. 'Where're we going?'

'No ascent today,' he called back. 'Follow me. I'm going to take you somewhere special.'

I would've been stupid to think the run was going to be any shorter or easier. We were jogging down plenty of hills, which only meant plenty to climb back up. Maybe this was our new Mount Everest training program. Brendan was in charge of that.

'Mate, where're we going?' I puffed.

Brendan kept running.

Soon the path dropped away and we were ducking and weaving through bushes. The light became speckled and the air cool and damp. The sound of rushing water was getting closer.

'We're near the river!' I panted, the sweat dribbling into my mouth.

'One second away,' Brendan answered.

We hacked through a mat of tangled vines that screened a passage leading to a clearing. There was the water, sparkling through gums that lined the riverbank.

'My secret waterhole,' announced Brendan, his hands on his knees, puffing gently. 'Hardly anyone knows about it.'

It was like an annex off the main river, a U-shaped private swimming pool.

We walked along the bank, our heavy breath echoing across the water.

'This is awesome, Brendan.'

'I know.'

'Do you swing off this?' I tugged at an old frayed rope dangling from a gum.

'Too old now. I tied that up when I was about ten,' he told me. 'Dan used to swing on it.'

'You took Daniel here?'

'Yeah. Fin too.'

We sat on the bank. The ground was cold and wet, soothing our red, heated skin.

'When they were about thirteen, I brought them here. Daniel reckoned it was like an initiation for becoming a teenager.'

'I never came.'

'This part of the river got infested with that blue-green algae, and I think I just forgot. It was only looking at a photo the other day of Daniel midair on the rope that I remembered I'd never taken you here.'

That was one of the photos I'd seen on the coffee table in his cabin.

'Is it okay to swim here now?'

'Yeah, has been for a while.'

I sat on a rock, skimming stones across the water's surface. 'One, two, three,' I counted with each 'plop'. Brendan sat next to me, staring across to the other side. It was peaceful.

'Remember you asked me why I'd stayed at Coghill?' Brendan spoke. 'I said it was complicated.'

'I remember.'

'I was going to leave. Jonny and I were both going to leave, move to Sydney.

I'd almost convinced Mum to sell the business. We had some good offers.'

'So why didn't you?' As I said it I realised what the answer was.

'The accident,' he sighed. 'How could I go?'

I tried to imagine what it would've been like if Brendan hadn't been around. He helped make us work. He took the pressure off the old man and that helped me. I could cope with Mum falling to bits, maybe I'd expected it. But Dad? If the old man had, then that would've been the end of me too.

'Thanks,' I murmured.

'Huh?'

'Thanks for staying.'

'Having you around made it easier, Tom.'

We sat some more, staring quietly at the water.

'I didn't come here once last summer,' he said. 'Sometimes you feel funny about places that are full of memories. Especially happy memories.'

'Gran says we've got to leave our ghosts behind.'

'Yeah, but it was a big sacrifice, Tom.' Brendan's voice grew louder. 'Don't ever underestimate what you've had to do because of something someone else did.'

I shrugged. If there was one thing I'd learnt, it's that there were no answers.

'But Mum's right. Don't tell her I said that.' He chuckled for a second then nodded. 'We do have to leave our ghosts behind. They've got nothing to offer.'

'Brendan, I've been thinking.'

As always, he said, 'That sounds dangerous.'

'I want to build Gran a new chook pen and get her some hens and a rooster.'

'Has she been talking about little Cain and Abel again?'

'I mean it.' I chucked another stone. This time I counted five skips across the surface. 'But I'll need a bit of help with it. I'm not a bushie like you.'

'So I noticed,' he scoffed. 'Well, it's Mum's birthday in September.'

'I know,' I said. 'The week before mine. We should be able to do it by then.'

'We?'

'Come on, Brendan,' I whined. 'I'll get Kylie to help too.'

'Now, that'd be interesting,' he nodded. 'We'll probably end up with a metal stake in our throats.'

'C'mon, I'm serious, Brendan. I can't do it on my own. I'm a townie, remember.'

All week I battled a gutful of nerves. But I never felt alone. The boys were training hard. Tonelli even called extra lunchtime sessions. There were certain moves we had to practise over and over till even I wanted to scream for a rest.

During the week it seemed the whole team came up to me, one by one, gave me a whack on the back then left, saying nothing. They didn't have to. I understood what their silence was saying and I was grateful.

The game was to be played in Wurambing, which was exactly halfway between Coghill and Mumbilli. In fact, if you drew a straight line west from Wurambing, you'd hit the gaol at Westleigh. Strange how things connect.

I was relieved we were meeting in neutral territory. It meant the game wouldn't pull a big crowd. To me, that was one less thing to worry about.

This was how they organised games between schools in the bush that were labelled 'geographically inconvenient' to one another. Harvey just called it 'the GI'. He talked a lot that week about the 'GI' of St John's to Bennie's. Sometimes I wondered if it was for my benefit.

Thursday afternoon before training he asked me to help take some sports equipment to the field.

'Did you know, last year I was invited to take up a position at St Joseph's, in Sydney.'

'Why'd you turn it down?' I asked.

'I like it here at Bennie's. My family's settled and I've got to know the boys. Guys like Tonelli and Harrigan I've been coaching since they were in the 15As. They're not the best players in the world, but their heart's in it.' He walked slowly towards the field. 'And next year it looks like I'll be a schoolboy selector for the

country area.'

'Dad was going to do that this year.'

'Yeah. But we're glad he came to Bennie's instead.'

Silence.

'You reckon . . .' I started. 'You reckon there are any of us in the country who'd make the NSW team? Or is the talent in the big city schools?'

He dumped the bag on the ground and started to sort through the boxing gloves. 'I reckon I'm looking at a fair chance right now.'

I couldn't deny I was flattered. I was also a bit embarrassed, thinking about how much I'd bagged this guy in my head.

'I think you're having a pretty good season here,' he told me. 'I remember seeing you play at a district game last July. You played well, but you didn't look as if you were enjoying it.'

Suddenly I felt like Harvey could see through me.

I hadn't enjoyed the last season at St John's, that I knew now. It hadn't mattered how good my game was, the pressure, the disgruntlement, the unpredictability of Daniel just didn't add up to good footy. It added up to frustration and division.

Now I knew differently. Bennie's first fifteen had taught me plenty. When I'd needed it most, Bennie's had reminded me that the game was better when a team was united and loving it. I thought of Dad's words at camp: 'Bennie's is giving you a chance.' And he was right. In many ways, they'd saved my arse.

Brendan went out to the club, but I stayed down at the sheds till way after sunset. I hosed, swept and scrubbed anything that looked vaguely dirty. I focused hard on the chores, making sure my mind didn't wander.

I'd checked my emails, 'cause I knew there'd be one from Matt. I was gutless not sending him one first nor replying to his others. Matt and I had been through a lot, not just the accident, we'd shared our childhood. Matt was someone I knew would forgive my silence. And later, after I'd finished school, we could pick up where we left off. Matt was one of those good blokes. He wrote, 'See you tomorrow. Remember we're mates.' Yeah, I knew we were mates. I just wasn't sure about the others.

I started to pack up, and just as I was pulling down the door of the last shed, I spotted the blue wagon coming down the drive.

Chrissy wound down the window and waved. 'I was hoping I'd find you down here.'

'Just packing up,' I answered.

She got out of the car. 'You want some help?'

'Nah,' I said. 'Nearly finished.'

She climbed onto the front of one of the tractors. 'I wanted to see you before tomorrow. I just wanted to tell you, well . . .' I could feel her eyes watching me. 'I wanted to tell you that I'll be thinking of you.'

'I guess you've got heaps of study.'

'Oh, no, I'm coming,' she nodded. 'For sure.'

'At least we're meeting in neutral territory.'

'You make it sound like a war, Tom.'

I stopped myself from saying, *Well, isn't it?*

'The Wattle Shield was very important in Mumbilli, wasn't it?' Chrissy asked. 'I mean, I know what people can be like about their football.'

'Too important,' I said, climbing up next to her. 'Making the Wattle Shield was a fluke last year. We only did 'cause Fin played brilliantly that day.' I started talking. That's what she did to me. 'As Fin got older he became a great rugby player. I think he kind of grew into himself. When I saw him sitting up in a wheelchair I realised he must've grown or something, just before. He looked so long and lanky in there.'

'Does Fin ever talk about it? Like, what it's like.'

'Not to me. But then I haven't seen him that much lately.'

'How come?'

I looked at her. No one had asked me that before. 'How come?' I repeated.

'Yeah. How come?'

I sat forward resting my chin on my hands. I didn't speak for a while.

'It's hard.' I swallowed. 'It hurts. It makes me feel guilty.' There, I'd said it, said what was lurking in the back of my mind. 'Out of all of it, Fin's the hardest. It makes me feel so bad when I think of him. Multiply that by 10,000, and that's what it's like when you're actually there with him, having to speak to him, having to look into his face. Fuck. Poor Fin.' I put my head in my hands. 'And you know the other thing? He's really, really angry. That makes being with him even worse. It's like it's hard to like him.'

'Tom,' Chrissy whispered. 'I'm sorry.'

'And here am I, sweating on a stupid footy match.'

'After my Dad's last stroke, I hated seeing him,' she said. 'He was gross. He couldn't shut his mouth properly. He had to wear these giant bibs 'cause he dribbled so much. I couldn't eat in the same room as him.' She sighed. 'But now he's gone, I really miss him, and I wished I'd spent more time with him.'

'I know I'll never get used to Fin being the way he is.' I jumped back down to the ground. 'C'mon.' I reached up my hand to her. 'It's getting cold.'

Harvey gave us the team talk in our dressing room at Wurambing, and next door in theirs, St John's shouted their hungry cry. It was surreal.

*'Boom-a-lacka, boom-a-lacka, green and white. Chick-a-lacka, chick-a-lacka, we will fight . . .'*

Tonelli stood up on the bench, and at the top of his voice said, 'Boys, this is the most important game of the season. We're going to play even better than the best of our ability, because Tom needs us to. Every game, he's done his best on the field for us. So today we're going to show him our appreciation. Aren't we, fellas?'

'Yeah,' they all cheered.

Then together, with me almost shouting the loudest, we broke into our cry.

*'Bennie's, Bennie's, we are the red machine.*

*Bennie's, Bennie's, the fastest that you've seen.*

*To the north, to the south, to the east, to the west.*

*Bennie's, Bennie's, put us to the test.*

*B-E-N-N-I-E-S, Bennie's, Bennie's, we're the best.'*

My heart pumped hard as I ran onto the field. The familiar green and white jerseys huddled round. But in the stands it was red and white, everywhere.

For a second I stood completely still, taking it all in.

A couple of the St John's boys lamely waved. From the other side of the field Matt gave us a thumbs up. Even from there I could tell his face was strained. It made me want to spew. I tried to smile back, but I could feel the corners of my mouth pulling down.

'You've done nothing wrong,' I told myself, over and over, as I jumped up and down on the spot. 'Keep your head up. Don't let them get to you. You've done nothing wrong.'

Tonelli looked psyched as he tossed the coin.

'We'll take that way.' Tonelli glared at Matt as he pointed towards the grandstand. Matt nodded.

I watched them shake hands. 'All the best,' Matt said. Tonelli grunted.

First half was tough but scrappy with a lot of dropped ball. It was nerves that played the biggest part. We all knew this was more than a game.

We went to the break 9–0 down, but we were doing okay. Jimmy's last-ditch try-saving tackle meant our line hadn't been crossed. His smile was priceless and that lifted my mood.

Half-time and we were still in it with a hope. Harvey hammered home, 'Stay focused!' Dad didn't say much. I think he was feeling overwhelmed by the whole thing, and he must've known I was too. Like a silent pact we avoided eye contact.

'Rory,' Harvey instructed. 'Kick it down there, boy, and we'll play it in their quarter. Jimmy, pin your ears back and put pressure on the back three. Let them make the mistakes. They're feeling the strain too.' He clapped his hands. 'You're not out of this, boys.'

'Forwards, get to the breakdown quicker – and no penalties,' Dad added. 'Dig deep. Bust your guts for the next forty.' Because we're busting ours, I wanted to say for him.

'Wiseman, you look stuffed.' Harvey handed him a towel.

'I'm fine, Sir.'

'Tom?'

'Yep. Fine.'

'Good.' Harvey nodded. 'So it bloody should be. I'm proud of you, boys.'

The second half was more free-flowing, the type of play St John's liked, the ball swinging across the field and from end to end. We held firm. Still no tries.

Rory kicked downfield. Their full-back knocked on, our scrum twenty metres out. I tapped Gonzales, our lock, on the back. He knew the move.

'Huge effort, boys!' Harrigan yelled as they packed in tightly.

Picking the ball up from the back of the scrum, Gonzales broke wide, taking the St John's lock and breakaway in the tackle. As Gonzales fell, he slipped the ball to me and I clapped it on. I spotted the gap, wrong-footed the full-back, outpacing the cover, and dived between the posts. Try for Bennie's.

'You beauty!' The boys came running. I was swamped. Through the arms and legs jumping around me I caught sight of Matt.

'Too good,' he mouthed.

After the conversion the score was 9–7. They were just in front, unheard of against Bennie's.

St John's picked up the pace, and for a while it was desperate stuff. With just over ten minutes to go we were defending on our line, but with no further score it was still anyone's game.

The crowd was cheering, 'Go the red machine.' I was sure I could hear Chrissy.

With a scrum on our line, St John's were screaming, 'Push over, push over.' You could smell their hunger. They wanted to finish us.

Then through the grunting and straining, a lone St John's voice rose above the sweaty bodies. I caught two words, 'killer' and 'Brennan'.

I staggered backwards. I thought I'd prepared for this. But you can't. Your guard is thrust away, and the words hit like bolts of electricity, every nerve in your body screeching with pain.

'Mother-fuuuuckers!' Brad yelled, and with a grunt the Bennie's pack gripped tighter. 'MOWER,' he roared as they splintered the St John's pack, driving the green and white scrum backwards. I heard the effort in their groans as they dug deep. Dug deep for me.

The siren rang for full-time, the score still 9–7 but you would've thought we were the winners. The Bennie's boys jumped all over each other as the St John's team looked on.

I started walking. I couldn't stay. I stumbled across the oval, my legs feeling like jelly, my head like it was disconnected from my body. The red and white in the stands was turning to a mottled blur.

'Tom?' Matt called. 'Tom!' He followed me as I headed to the fence.

'Tom!' His hand was on my shoulder. 'Mate, that was fucked. That, that shouldn't be fucking allowed. The ref should've . . .'

'I got to get out of here.' Now I was walking faster. 'I'll talk to you later, mate, but now I got to . . . I got to go . . .'

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned only because I heard her voice.

'I've got the car,' Chrissy said quickly. 'Come on.'

She took my hand and steered me through the crowd.

Chrissy didn't try to make conversation, she just drove. I sat there in my dirty footy gear staring out the window. At dusk we passed the sign for Aralen and crossed the Dungog bridge. Instead of keeping on the highway, Chrissy made a sharp turn to the right. In a few minutes we were on a dirt road and the night sky was shining.

'Are you kidnapping me?' Finally I could talk. Then I started laughing. 'Oh, shit!'

'Are you okay?'

'Whoa.' I shook my head and loudly exhaled.

She stopped the car and turned the engine off. Suddenly it was so quiet.

'Where are we?' I whispered.

'My dad used to take us here for picnics.' She opened the door. 'Oh, we can't see a thing, it's so dark. Stupid idea coming here, hey?'

'No. I needed a bit of space between them and me.'

'Well, you got that.' She closed the door. 'It's freezing out there.'

'It is the middle of winter,' I reminded her. 'At least you're not in shorts.'

'There's probably a blanket in the back.'

'Thanks.'

'I'll get it.'

'No, I mean thanks for getting me out of there.'

'I don't know what happened out there,' she said, 'but I could tell you were looking for the exit.'

'Yeah.'

'Was that a friend from Mumbilli? The guy following you?'

'My best mate.' I put my hands over my face. 'Shit, Matt.'

'What?'

'I've got to ring him. I've got to.'

Chrissy put the blanket over us and lowered the seats. We talked about the game against St John's. I told her every single second like I was still there playing.

'The boys were awesome,' I said. 'Awesome.'

We talked about her father and my old life in the Billi. We laughed over Brendan pulling the 'I'm gay' talk on me. We killed ourselves over me getting

burnt in the shower and the way my face looked when she'd said 'nice bum'.

We were curled up in our seats, facing each other. I leant over and took her hand. It felt so natural, no agonising involved. I just knew at that exact moment it was the right thing to do. She lifted my fingers to her face and ran them gently down her cheek and around her neck. Then we kissed, our lips so soft together.

Suddenly today didn't become the day I faced St John's. Today became the day I kissed Chrissy Tulake.

# EIGHTEEN

Fin was almost ready to leave the rehab centre. Suddenly the school holidays became hanging around in Aralen helping out. Kylie had opted to spend the whole two weeks with Kath and Fin, but all I wanted to do was be with Chrissy. But that was not to be. Family duty called again.

'I don't want to go to Aralen.' I lodged my complaint at dinner, the week before. 'Can't I stay here? How long do I have to keep doing these things? For Christ's sake, I'm eighteen next month.'

'Do not take the Lord's name in vain, Tom,' was all Gran had to say.

'He misses you, mate,' was Brendan's comment, and, 'Tom, it's important you see Fin,' was Dad's contribution. I didn't hear anyone say, 'Yeah, Tom, you've been good, you can have some time out.' Mum kind of smiled and shrugged, but that was piss-weak.

'Great,' I mumbled.

'Tommy.' Dad's face went serious and I started to regret opening my mouth. The old man was about to call it like it was. 'Fin needs you, even if it's just to keep him up to date with the rest of the world.'

'I'm spending two weeks with him,' Kylie said. 'I'm quite capable of keeping him up to date on world activities, if that's what you think he's really interested in, Dad.'

'You know what I mean.'

It's different, you're a girl,' Mum bravely said.

'Excuse me?' Kylie spat. 'What is that supposed to mean?'

'I'm sure Fin wants to hear about Tom's football, what his plans are for Nepal,

what his mates are . . .'

*His girlfriend*, Kylie mouthed at me as Mum kept on.

'How Matt and the boys are, the game with St John's ...'

'Okay, Mum!' Kylie groaned. 'We get the picture.'

'It's our responsibility,' Dad said. 'It's as simple as that.'

I hated thinking of Fin as a burden, I knew it was like giving up on him. It was just such hard work. If I were him, of course I'd be moody and pissed off too. He had nothing to smile about, absolutely nothing. But the fact was, I did. Worse than that, I was actually happy. It was hard to wipe the smile off my face.

'I'll miss you,' Chrissy said the night before I left. 'But you have to go.'

I groaned. 'Not you too.'

'Talk to him, Tom.'

'That's like saying talk to a rock.'

'Well, have you tried?'

'What, talking to a rock?'

'Tom!' She slapped my thigh. 'I'm being serious.'

'No.' I shrugged. 'I haven't. I'm usually concentrating hard on not talking to him. Well, not talking to him proper, like.'

'You spoke to Matt. You were dreading that but you did. And you're still breathing.'

'It's different with Matt.'

'You're there for a whole week,' she reminded me. 'Nothing to lose.'

'Gee, thanks. Now that's going to be bugging me the whole time I'm there.'

'Good.'

We were lying on her bed. Her mum was at work and Brendan and Jonny had gone to the club.

'You haven't changed my mind. I still wish I didn't have to go,' I moaned, because that was how I felt about leaving her. Lying next to her was almost more than I could take. She was so beautiful. Her long leg curled around mine, her foot rubbing up and down my calf.

I ached for her, and she seemed to feel the same. Sometimes when we kissed and touched I'd hear her make a little sound with her breath, turning me into a legless, dribbling, mute lump of jelly. I couldn't get enough of her: the way her hair smelt, the touch of her fingertips along my spine, her laugh, her eyes, her smile – her bloody everything!

We hadn't done it. Talk about self-control, but it just never seemed to be the right time. There was always her mum or Jonny about to get home, and the cave was hardly the most romantic or comfortable of places, with my squishy single bed.

I was a virgin. She wasn't. But I wanted it to be perfect like it was her first time too.

'It'll feel like my first time,' she said to me. 'I've never felt like this with other boyfriends. This is new for me too. I want to feel like this forever.'

Aunty Kath had decided not to go back to Mumbilli. Being a small town, it didn't have the facilities she needed for Fin. With the money from the sale of her house, she'd bought a ground floor unit in Aralen, near the beach, with a little garden out the back. She'd had to have it fitted out with railings and ramps, pull-out hoses in the bathroom and strange lifting machines that looked like mini cranes. Walking around her lounge room, examining all the contraptions that Fin now needed for the most basic things like having a shower or eating, still felt completely unreal to me. Maybe you never got used to it.

Fin was still living at the rehab unit, but more and more he was coming home for weekends. I guess it helped him get used to their new place and helped Kath get used to him.

'It's like having a baby all over again,' I heard her telling Kylie while Dad and I watched the league. 'I have to do everything for him.'

'Will you get some help?'

'The community sisters come each day, but I'm the one here twenty-

four/seven.'

'Is he excited about getting out of rehab?'

'He's terrified.'

Silence.

'Anyway . . .' Kath's tone changed. 'It's so nice to have you here for the hols, and it'll be even better in summer with the beach down the road.'

'Do you think you'll be here for good?'

Kath sighed. 'Probably, Kyles. It's easiest this way.'

There seemed to be two activities for the week: sitting around the rehab unit talking to Fin and some of the other blokes, or unpacking boxes at Aunty Kath's place. Dad and I were like the handymen, hanging pictures, assembling shelves, changing light fittings. You name it, we did it.

Kath and Kylie were on a cooking frenzy. I reckon they froze a year's supply of dinners. If they weren't in the kitchen, they were out shopping. They'd come home with arms full of bags, mostly new clothes for Fin. Everything had to be 'simple to get on and off ', Kath told us. 'No tricky buttons or zippers.'

Kath bought new blinds for every room, and a barbie. That meant more jobs for the old man and me. Putting together the gas barbeque required the brain of a rocket scientist, and even together Dad and I didn't come close.

One time I noticed Dad stuffing the receipts in his pocket.

'Are they for this stuff?' I asked him.

Dad kind of mumbled something.

'Are you paying for all of this, Dad?'

'Some of it.'

'Bullshit!'

Dad threw up his arms.

'You're paying for all of it, aren't you?'

'Well, what am I meant to do, Tom?'

'Did you buy her this place?'

'As if! I'd hardly be able to scrape the deposit together.' He looked at me and I knew he was reading my mind. 'We have no choice. It'll be years before they see any compensation.'

'Yeah, but it's like, like buying her off.'

Dad shot me a look. 'Tom, we'll never be able to repay the debt. So what we can do, we'll do. We're family, and I'm doing my damnedest to keep it that way.'

'It's never going to end,' I mumbled. I went back to cleaning the windows, the debt sitting in my guts.

One day when there wasn't a cloud in the sky, I picked up Fin at the rehab centre and took him for a walk. Well, I walked and Fin sat while I pushed his wheelchair.

'It's electric, Tom. It'll work on its own.'

'I like pushing it.' What I really meant was, it's easier talking to you when I can't see your face.

'Does it remind you of the billycart races we used to have?' he asked me.

'I'd forgotten about them.'

'Dan always made you push the billycart back up the hill. Remember?' Fin said. 'By the time you got to the top, you'd be purple and sweating like a pig. Then I'd jump in and hoon down.'

'Yeah.' I could almost hear the wheels skidding down the tar road. 'At least you pushed it back up after your go.'

'Geeze, Daniel's Whine. He did anything to avoid hills. I hated the way he made us go up for him. Bossy shit.'

And then without being able to stop myself I said, 'He's not doing much bossing around now.'

Fin didn't say anything and I couldn't see his face. After a while he groaned a bit and said, 'Fuck, I hate this.'

I put the brakes on his chair and sat on a park bench. From where Fin and I were, we could just see the ocean meet the horizon. Blue upon blue. Which was what our families had become – sad, angry, guilt-ridden, confused, lost. Blue. Or, for some of us, black.

'I don't hate him,' Fin whispered. 'I know you think I do, but I don't.'

'I couldn't blame you, Fin, if you did.'

Silence.

Fin sighed. I started to crack my knuckles, one by one.

'I got another postcard from Claire,' he said.

'Where is she?'

'Spain.'

'Nice.'

'You know we'd been together.'

I nodded.

'I really liked her. She really liked me too.' He cleared his throat. 'Kylie blames herself, but she was just trying to help out. Daniel was really hassling Claire for a while, getting really paranoid. I was so close to pounding him a couple of times.'

I turned to look at him and said, 'Maybe you should've.'

'Too late now.' He stared straight ahead. 'I'll go and see him, you know. Soon – maybe. I mean, he was like my brother.'

We were. The three of us, like brothers.

Now it was hard to believe that. Blood's thicker than water, so what's the difference between your brother and your cousin? I didn't know. I'd never know. I just knew being here with Fin hurt, and probably always would.

That's why I longed to be with Chrissy. It wasn't simply wanting to touch her, it was different to that. It was being away from this crap. The pain of the family, escaping Fin and Daniel and Kylie – all of them.

When I was with Chrissy, I was me again. Simple Tom Brennan – no ties, no debt, no guilt, no bad thoughts. Just me, the way I'd always known myself. Through all the shit, I hadn't really had a moment to pinpoint what I missed the most. Was it the Billi and my mates? Was it Mum not being Mum? Or Fin, Daniel and me, and the way we used to be?

But now I knew what I missed the most. I missed me, Tom Brennan, and that's why now I could smile, 'cause I could see that he was coming back.

The last week of the holidays I came back to Coghill and Brendan and I got stuck into building the chook pen.

Kyles was still in Aralen with Fin and Kath. One night she rang home and told us he'd had a big freak-out. She said she wouldn't come home until he was settled at the flat and she knew he was going to be okay.

They seemed so tangled in one another's mess.

After she hung up, I heard the oldies have a whispering spat in their bedroom.

'It's a big responsibility for Kylie,' Mum had said. 'I don't want her missing school, and there's Tom's birthday coming up.'

'That's in a couple of weeks,' answered Dad.

'I know!' She almost shouted. 'We're not going to forget about it like we did last year.'

'She'll be well home by then. Nobody wants to miss his birthday.'

'Yeah.' I nodded to myself, thinking what a top bloke I was.

'Tess, it'll only be a few extra days. Kath promised,' Dad said. 'She's sure he'll be settled by then.'

'And what if he's not?'

Silence, then Mum again. 'I know she's up to date with her school work, but let's face it, Joe, she's been battling. Just look at her hair! She hasn't settled the way Tom has, even though she tries to make out she has.'

'Tess, I know all that.' Dad's voice got a bit louder. 'What are we meant to say? "No, our daughter can't help Fin. Our daughter who is physically capable and . .

." '

'Enough!'

'Well, how can we?'

Silence.

'We have to think of our family too.' Then Mum sighed. 'It still worries me the way Kylie wants to be so involved with Fin and his recovery. I mean, you'd think . . .'

I crept away. They didn't know the burden Kylie carried and they never would. Maybe this was her way of making it up to Fin. Maybe Fin asking that she come was his way of giving her that chance. Whatever the reason, it was a journey Kylie had to take.

Brendan and I had mapped out the chook pen in the old part of the garden. It was blissful, that last week of holidays. Chrissy and I hung out together, while around us the chook pen began to materialise.

Chrissy had a good brain for practical stuff. I was seriously deficient in that area.

'How many chooks are you going to get?' she asked me one arvo as we measured and cut the wire.

'Dunno,' I answered. 'What do you reckon, a few hens and a couple of roosters?'

'Tom, for starters you only have one rooster,' she laughed. 'You'd cause big trouble with two. They don't share well.'

'Fair point,' I nodded. 'I wouldn't share you with anyone.'

'You don't have to,' she said, and I just about stopped breathing. 'I suppose I'll have to share you with Brendan when you go to Nepal.'

I screwed up my face. 'I wish you were coming too.'

Chrissy threw her arms around my neck, giggling in my ear.

'Hi!' It was Mum with some drinks. You could hear the ice clinking as she walked. 'Thought you guys might be thirsty. It's warm out here, and it's only just

spring.'

'Thanks, Mrs Brennan,' Chrissy said, taking the drink from her.

'How's it going?'

'Pretty good, thanks, Mum.'

'Do you think Mrs Healey suspects anything?' Chrissy asked the old girl.

'God, no!' Mum waved the idea off. 'This'd be the last thing she'd expect. Besides, she never comes down to this part of the garden anymore, no need.'

I poured the drink down my throat. 'Thanks, Mum.' I handed her back the cup, giving her a 'time to go now' look.

'Well, be careful cutting the wire.'

'God, she's thin,' Chrissy whispered as Mum walked back up to the house.

'She was thinner.'

'And pale.'

'Sun-tanned compared to even a few weeks ago.'

'Did she really not get out of bed?'

'Yeah,' I answered. 'I mean, she'd get out to piss and stuff, but after Daniel went away she pretty much only got up to visit him.'

'That's . . . awful.'

'It was weird. It got to a point where I felt like I hardly knew her anymore. She didn't look like Mum. She didn't smell right.' I shook my head. 'It was pretty bad for a while. But you know what's weirder? Now she's up and getting back to normal, it's kind of hard to remember what she was like then.'

'That's probably a good thing,' Chrissy said. 'My dad used to say the sign of a healthy mind is someone who can get over it and get on with it.'

'Nah, I reckon it's because I sort of didn't see her as a person.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I saw things, not her.'

'Like?'

'Like the greys in her hair, or the way her breath stunk and the room smelt of piss and b.o. Once I walked past her room; she was out to it and the sheet had slipped off the bed. All I saw were her toenails. They were so long they'd curled up on the ends. It was the most disgusting thing I'd ever seen. Well – not quite.'

'Do you think she'll be okay?'

'I hope so. It's made a difference, especially to Dad.'

'I bet.'

'I'm a bit nervous about next week,' I told her. 'It'll be the anniversary. One year since the accident. Feels like about a thousand.'

'Will you do anything?'

'Hide.'

'I'll hide with you.'

'Matt told me Mumbilli is having a big service in the bush, where it happened. There's like a memorial there where people put flowers and stuff.'

'You won't go?'

'I didn't even go to their funerals.'

She nodded.

'I've never been back there. I mean, to that spot.' I heard my voice shake. 'Too scared.'

Chrissy lay on the grass next to me. She picked up my hand, linking her fingers through mine. We stayed like that for a while looking at each other.

'What are you thinking about?' she finally whispered, her lips brushing against my palm. 'You're thinking bad things, aren't you? Tell me, Tom.'

'I was thinking about the ghost gums and the way they looked that night in the bush. The headlights on Dan's car were shining on them. It was like their silver trunks went all the way up to the stars.'

'You must've been so scared.'

'Beyond scared,' I swallowed. 'You know, Fin thanked me the other day.'

'Did he?'

'He said, "Mum told me you stayed with me all night. That you wouldn't leave my side." And then he said, "Thanks."'

Touching his hair, sticky with blood, whispering to him, 'It's okay, Fin,' were my last memories of the Fin I knew.

'What else?'

I looked at Chrissy and shook my head.

'Please, Tom,' she squeezed my hand. 'I need to know these things about you.'

It's strange the things you remember.

'The taste in my mouth as the dawn came,' I started. 'It was that dirty-sock taste you get after a late night. I was so thirsty. I remember that really clearly, and my eyes and my head. The way they ached when the sun started coming up. It was a brilliant orange ball, and the clouds were so pink. And of course Fin, his voice, and his scared little eyes as they cut him from the car.' I swallowed hard. 'Fuck. Why am I talking about this?'

"Cause it'll always be with you,' Chrissy whispered to me. 'You've got to talk about it.'

'Why me? Why us? I don't ask that anymore.'

'I used to feel like that when Dad got sick and all the other fathers would be at the netball except mine.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah,' she smiled. 'But you get used to it.'

'And you know what?' I said. 'You get sick of feeling bad all the time.'

The chook pen was finished. We bought three hens and a rooster, and on the morning of Gran's birthday, September 9th, we blindfolded her and led her outside. Kylie wanted to spin her around as well but I said that was overdoing it a bit for an old lady.

'Where are you taking me?' she hollered. 'I don't like surprises.'

'Come on, Carmel,' Dad chuckled. 'Have a bit of faith in us.'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I can't breathe through this scarf.'

'Mum, your nose and mouth aren't covered.'

'Theresa, you know I don't like enclosed spaces. I think I can feel a panic attack coming on.'

'Gran,' Kylie squealed. 'You're outside in the open.'

'Maybe you are, girly. But I'm in the dark behind this, this . . .'

'Da daa,' Brendan sang as Kylie pulled down the blindfold.

'Happy Birthday!' we shouted.

Gran stood there, her mouth open. 'My,' she finally said. 'My, my.'

'What do you think, Gran?' Kylie laughed. 'Do you like it?'

Gran looked at me with mist in her eyes, then winked. She walked towards the wire.

'Brrkk, brrkk,' she crooned. 'Brrkk. Brrkk.' She opened the gate of the chook pen. 'Brrkk, brrkk. Brrkk, brrkk.' She knelt down, picking up the rooster. 'Brrkk. Brrkk.' She smoothed his feathers over and over. 'I think I'll call you Harvey,' she crooned. 'Because Saint Harvey was famous for his miracles.'

Suddenly the rooster squawked, giving us all a fright. 'Oh, be quiet,' Gran scolded, 'or you'll be named Benedict, patron saint of bachelors. See how you like that, young man?'

# NINETEEN

The fellas were hassling about a party for my eighteenth. Firstly, I don't think they understood what a party at Gran's would be like: light beers, probably a sit-down dinner, and her patrolling the house with a torch in case anyone was up to no good. No, thanks.

Secondly, I wanted to see Daniel. I hadn't seen him since the weekend after the St John's game. He was good then, and according to Brendan, he was a bit better now.

Brendan's comment about how we only ever talked about Daniel when we ran didn't stop us. Both of us still felt the need to keep him close, and that was how we did it. It was like watching him grow up, going through his life year by year. Some days it felt as though he could almost be there, running alongside us, being cheeky and playful. Maybe one day he would be.

Brendan had designed a couple of running tracks for our Mount Everest training. We had to concentrate on building up our stamina, and there wasn't a single hill in Coghill Brendan hadn't found. The runs were hard and you hurt like hell but it was worth it.

I looked good, too. Not like one of those emaciated runners you see on the TV. That was 'cause I couldn't stop eating. Even Gran's dinners were starting to taste okay. The other night I had three helpings of her soggy meatloaf. You should've seen her smile.

My chest and arms had become so firm you could crack a nut on them. Chrissy loved telling me how sexy they were, and I loved hearing it. In my books, that was enough reason to suffer.

My legs and breathing were strong; running up 'the ascent' was almost a piece of cake. At least, I didn't feel like spewing when I got to the top.

The run to the waterhole was my favourite. September was warm, and one morning Brendan and I stripped down to our boxers and jumped in the river.

The water was cold and fresh. Somehow it felt full of promises. I could feel summer coming, and I pictured Chrissy and me lying on the river rocks, soaking up the sun like lizards.

'I reckon it'll be a hot summer,' Brendan said, floating on his back, staring up at another cloudless sky. 'A real scorcher. The cicadas are singing already.'

'Yeah, well, now I know your secret, I won't have to go to the toxic Coghill pool.'

'They're pretty heavy-handed on the chlorine there,' Brendan said.

'So my eyeballs discovered.'

I floated on my back, thinking of the time I saw Chrissy at the Coghill pool: how I watched the drops of water slide down her back, and how she turned around and whispered, 'How's your grandad?', pushing me into my fears and darkness. Back then it didn't take much. Now, I only thought of the drops sliding down her skin.

'Are you coming with me to see Daniel this weekend?' Brendan asked me. 'Even though it's your birthday.'

'It's my birthday on the Sunday, and anyway, big deal, it's just another birthday.'

'What did you do last year again?'

'It was the week after Daniel's hearing in the local court. The same week Kyles and I went back to school.' I swam towards the riverbank and pulled myself out of the water. 'Wasn't really a birthday to remember, that one.'

'You know, Tom, I never thought I'd say it, but Daniel's come a long way since then.'

'Yeah.'

'It was a bloody godsend we got him into the Crisis Centre. I can't even think about what could've happened if we hadn't.'

'So he's really into this mentoring stuff?' I asked.

'You'll hear all about it,' Brendan warned me. 'Daniel's mentor, the older bloke, Jerry, helps him mentor Theo, the other boy in there on a drink-driving charge who isn't doing so well.'

'Yeah, I've met him.'

'Poor bastard. He's quite a few steps behind Daniel.'

'Do you reckon Fin really will go and see Daniel?'

'He's talking about it. So is Aunty Kath.' Brendan was tying up his trainers. 'But honestly, I think they're still wrapping their heads around how to transfer Fin from a wheelchair to a bed.' Brendan stood up. 'It's going to be a long slog there, Tom.'

'He says he doesn't hate Daniel.'

Brendan shook his head. 'God knows why.'

Daniel, his dark moods, his jealous rages, his long periods of brooding and his complete lack of accountability: he took so much from so many.

We started the run back home, the hard part. It wasn't steep like 'the ascent'. Instead, it was a sequence of small- to middle-sized hills. The distance was further, that's what made it a little killer.

'It looks like we'll have a few days in Kathmandu before we fly to Lukla.' The day I could run and chat like Brendan would be the day I knew I was really fit. 'The trek starts from there. It's a gradual climb, which means we acclimatise on the way.'

'No "falling off mountain" stories, please,' I panted. 'I've been avoiding them.'

'The trek we're doing is graded tough, not superman,' he said. 'No ice-picks required.'

'Don't worry, I've done my research.'

'Kalar Pattar, which is where we go, is about 5,500 metres high. Awesome, eh? Imagine the sunrises.'

'I worked it out,' I puffed. 'It's almost twelve and a half weeks till we're there.'

'And counting,' Brendan said. 'What about Chrissy? You'll miss her, won't you.'

'Yeah, but she'll be here when I get back.'

'She will. They'll all be waiting for you.'

The day before my eighteenth birthday, 376 days since the accident, Mum, Brendan and I drove to Westleigh.

I could almost do the checkpoints with my eyes shut: name, approved visitor, belongings on the table, locker key, stand with your arms by your side, arms on top of your head – blah blah blah.

Daniel's hair was growing and his face had filled out a bit, but it didn't stop the punch in the guts I still felt every time I saw him in the regulation green tracksuit. Maybe it was my way of fighting acceptance, 'cause I could never think of Daniel as a prisoner.

Regardless of what Daniel did and what an up-himself, selfish dickhead he could be, he was my brother. He was the one who taught me how to kick and pass, how to raise my eyebrow, how to ride a bike, how to piss high up a wall, how to skip stones, how to drive Kylie crazy. Every memory I had, Daniel was etched into it.

Daniel didn't die that night and he didn't become a cripple. So many times, even now, the 'what ifs?' played with my head. What if Daniel had died? What if Daniel had ended up a vegetable, never able to move again? It made me sick to the guts. But another question always surfaced after that one, another one I battled with almost more. Was it so bad to be happy that my brother lived, knowing what he did that night was so unforgivable? Was it?

As always, Daniel's eyes lit up when he saw us.

'Hey, bro. Brendan. How're you doing?'

'Hey, mate,' we said, sitting down.

'Where's the old girl? They said she was here too.'

'She's got an appointment with the social worker,' answered Brendan.

'Yeah, good old Mrs Kumar.' He smiled. 'What would Gran call her, a saint who just had her gods mixed up?'

We shrugged.

'Hey, happy birthday, Tommy.'

'Yeah, thanks.'

'You doing anything?'

'Bit of a quiet dinner, I think.'

'With that sexy girlfriend I keep hearing about?'

'Piss off,' I groaned. 'What've you been telling him, Brendan?'

'Nah, it was Kylie.' Daniel shook his head and chuckled. 'She gave us the goss.'

'See!' Brendan threw up his arms. The guard turned suddenly.

'No hassles,' Daniel said to him. The guard nodded but kept his eyes our way.

'So, what's been happening here?' I asked.

Daniel scratched his chin, a cheeky smile sneaking onto his face. 'Oh, let's see. We had a bit of a time last night with a string of hookers the screws shouted us, and, oh, yeah, the night before we got stuck into the booze and . . .'

'Yeah, all right,' I said. Brendan was pissing himself.

'I'll tell you what did happen,' Daniel said to us. 'Owen visited the other day. Special allowance. I nearly died when I heard he was here. Every letter, he kept saying he was going to come.' Daniel paused. 'But – you know, you don't really expect them to.'

'Did it go okay?' asked Brendan.

'Yeah. I was glad I didn't know before, 'cause I would've shat my pants. Jerry, you know, my mentor, he says often they're the best visits, the ones you're not expecting. Less time to get uptight.'

'I didn't see Owen at the St John's game,' I told Daniel. 'I know he's helping coach. I s'pose it was a long way to go for a game against Bennie's.'

'He was there,' nodded Daniel. 'And he saw you.'

'Really?' My brain had registered the bare minimum that day.

'He couldn't believe how much Bennie's had improved. He thought it was probably 'cause they had you and Dad. I said, what do you reckon, you mullet, Tom'd make any team look good. Isn't that right, Brendan?'

'Yes, mate. Tommy had a blinder.'

'So Owen told me. See, Tom never tells me none of that stuff. You just said the game was okay. So I've got to imagine it, 'cause I'm not there with you.' For a couple of seconds Daniel looked at me.

'What?' I said.

'I'm proud of you. Is that okay, you turkey?'

Mum was escorted in.

'Darling,' she said, squeezing Daniel's hand. 'Doesn't he look well, boys?' she said to us.

'Yeah.' We nodded like little kids.

'Mrs Kumar says you're going great.' Mum pulled the seat up close to Daniel. The guards ignored it; they were used to her. Even though she looked atrocious to us, she was still pretty compared to most of the females around here. 'She says you're doing an excellent job with Theo.'

'It's going pretty well, Mum.' Daniel sounded serious but pleased with himself.

'I think finally Jerry and I are starting to get through to him.'

'That's wonderful.'

Daniel smiled, his blue-grey eyes like Mum's lighting up his face. Sitting there, watching him chat away, it was hard to believe these were the eyes that had flashed such uncontrollable rage and hatred that night. That these eyes belonged to the person who did such a terrible thing.

For my birthday dinner, Gran cooked roast pork. This time she got it right, with crackling that wasn't pure charcoal. Mum made her special apple sauce that we hadn't had for at least a year. Dad bought some champagne. Kylie decorated the table with flowers and candles. Chrissy made a chocolate mud cake, and Jonny brought these dickhead party hats with streamers coming out the top. Chrissy kept blushing, saying we didn't have to wear them if we didn't want to. But after

a while it was funny. Especially seeing as Gran wore hers back to front the whole night without knowing.

The heavy drapes on the windows were pulled back to let in the evening breeze. Gran's gallery of saints watched over us, but tonight I reckon they were smiling. They may have even been thinking, 'What a nice family.'

The pressies were good too. Kylie gave me a cool beanie. Brendan and Jonny gave me an awesome pair of gloves for Nepal. Mum and Dad put a cheque for two hundred dollars in a card that read, 'To Our Darling Middle Child.' (I hated the way Mum called me that. It made me feel like some fringe dweller.) 'You are very special and we are so proud of you. We hope your trek in Nepal is wonderful. You have already proved to us you can climb mountains. Love Mum and Dad xx.'

Chrissy bawled her eyes out when she read it.

In private, she gave me a travel diary. Each day I'd be away she'd written me a message. All kinds of things, like, 'Have you brushed your teeth?', 'Are you wearing clean undies?', 'Are you wearing undies?', 'Fifteen days till I see you,' and 'I love you, Tom Brennan.'

'Happy Birthday,' everyone cheered, their glasses in the air. I felt my eyes scrunch and my cheeks stretch, I was grinning so hard.

After everyone had gone home or to bed, Gran called me into her room.

'I've got something for you,' she said. 'I didn't forget.'

Birthday socks. That's what it always was.

She was sitting on the bed shuffling through a box. 'Here it is.' She pulled a small card out from under some papers. When she held it up I saw it was one of her holy cards.

I must've pulled a face of horror.

'Oh, this isn't for you,' she said, scribbling 'Father Vincent' on an envelope. 'I'm not that foolish.' She slipped the card inside. 'Okay, that's done.'

'Who was it?'

'A saint,' she answered.

Duh, Gran. 'Which one?' I said, sitting on the bed next to her.

'Saint Clare the Franciscan,' she said in her serious voice reserved only for the saints. 'Father Vincent is going to try to find me a large picture of her when he's in Sydney.'

'Right.' I nodded, hiding the smirk. 'Do you want to hang her up somewhere?'

'Above my bed.' She pointed. 'As you can see, I've taken Saint Bernadine of Sienna down.'

'How come?'

'Well, she never gave me any help,' Gran muttered. 'Pointless having her up there all these years.'

I didn't take that any further. I remembered who Saint Bernadine was meant to protect – gamblers, like my Pa.

'So what's the story with Saint Clare? I don't know her.'

'Saint Clare saved her home and town,' Gran said, shuffling around in the box again. 'When people tried to destroy everything she had, she stood firm with her faith.'

'Okay.' I think I understood what she was getting at.

'Well, Happy Birthday, Tom.' Gran's hand trembled as she passed me an envelope. She looked right at me, and for that split second I saw in her eyes the years of grief and uncertainty she had suffered. It was like suddenly understanding something about who she was. It was Gran who'd had no choice. She couldn't leave Pa, so her faith had become her armour as she weathered years in a marriage that'd cared little for her.

'Take it,' she whispered.

I opened the envelope. Inside was an airline ticket. Sydney – Kathmandu – Lukla – Kathmandu – Sydney.

'Gran!'

'Have a wonderful trip, Thomas.'

Chrissy was studying for her finals and I was trying my hardest not to get in the

way. I hung out with the fellas playing pool, eating pizza, watching videos, going to the movies, whatever was on offer. All they ever wanted to know was where Chrissy was. They were still having kittens over us being together.

The last week in October was stinking, with high twenties every day. There was nothing else to do but hang out with red eyeballs at the Coghill pool.

Rory's master plan was to get a holiday job there so he could dilute the chlorine by half. Brad reckoned it wasn't such a good idea as maybe it wouldn't kill the piss germs. That was a dead give-away. Now when Brad swum near us, we'd start yelling, 'Germ man,' or 'Piss germs.' Jimmy changed Brad's famous bellyflop from 'the flop' to 'the bladder buster'. There were worse ways to kill time.

I felt a bit lousy, not telling the fellas about the waterhole, but Brendan had sworn me to secrecy. He was right, though, it was special, and if everyone knew about it then it wouldn't be.

That wasn't the main reason behind my tight lips. After Chrissy's final exam, I planned to take her there for a surprise. It was that perfect place I'd been searching for.

As it turned out, she thought so too.

One arvo when I got home from school there was an envelope on my bed. Straightaway I recognised Chrissy's writing. There was no stamp or address – it just said 'Tom'.

I ripped it open, searching the house for Gran or Mum to find out who'd delivered it. Then I began to read the letter inside and had a snappy change of mind.

'Tom,' she'd written. 'Meet me at the waterhole (yes, I know about the waterhole!) tomorrow (Saturday) morning at seven. Love C xxx

'P.S. Make sure Brendan's not planning a morning run there!'

He wasn't, I knew that for sure. He was driving to Aralen with Kylie and Gran.

When I went into the kitchen the next morning wearing my shorts and trainers, Brendan went berserk. 'Way to go, boy!' He slapped me on the back. 'I told you the running gets in your blood. Hey, didn't I?'

*Crawler*, Kylie mouthed at me.

'Yeah, well, I thought I'd go for a bit of a jog.' That wasn't telling an actual lie.

'Which track?'

'Ah, the waterhole, I think.'

'Good man,' Brendan said to me. 'He's looking the goods, isn't he, Mum?'

Gran looked up from the kettle. 'It's my cooking.'

'Ah, yeah, Gran.'

Again Kylie mouthed, *crawler*.

'You'll feel like a dip by the time you get to the river,' Brendan said. 'They reckon it's going to be thirty-one degrees today. Tess and Joe'll be sweating it up at Westleigh. I hope they packed plenty of water.'

'Have they left?' I asked.

Gran's muffled voice emerged from the fridge. 'You'll have to get up earlier if you want to know the goings-on here.' It wasn't even 6.30.

'By the way, Tom.' Now she was packing oranges into an esky. 'Can you check the chooks later on? I think Bernadette is laying.'

'No worries, Gran.'

By the time Gran got through her epic chook-laying instructions, the clock said 6.50. It was a good twenty-minute run to the waterhole, and that was at a fast pace.

I waved them off. Closed the gates behind them. Stretched until their car was out of sight, then bolted.

I'd seen Chrissy once all week, and it'd been hard to think of anything else.

I hurtled down the hills and through the bushes, the overgrown branches scratching my arms. My legs charged out in front of me like they had a mind of their own. *Faster, faster, faster,* they ran, in time with my head.

Ducking and weaving through the trees was like trying to find the gap to break through and score. I could almost feel the ball in my hands and hear Daniel

running up alongside me, calling for it.

Soon the air cooled and the light speckled. Now I could hear the rush of the river. I burst through the tangled vines, my heart pumping in my throat. In one second I'd be kissing her all over, making up for the days I hadn't been able to.

'Chrissy?' I shouted. 'Chrissy?'

I walked along the riverbank, shaking the leaves and cobwebs off me. 'Chrissy? Chrissy?' But she was nowhere.

The sweat poured off me, my t-shirt stuck to me like a second skin. I peeled it off, tucking it into the back of my shorts. 'Chrissy? Christina Tulake? Where are you?'

A noise of something falling into the river disturbed the cockatoos above me. A mass of white flew off, squawking into the sky.

I looked around. There was no one there.

'Chrissy?' I called again.

*Plop*. A stone hit the water. *Plop*. Another one.

Then I heard the giggling.

'Busted!' I shouted, my voice bouncing over to the other side. 'Where are you?'

From behind a clump of orange waterlilies, Chrissy Tulake swam into view, her strong brown shoulders skimming the surface of the water.

'I'm going to get you!' I laughed, tearing off my shorts, chucking my trainers in the bush.

Chrissy shook her head. 'No boxers allowed,' she said. Her naked body floated along the water, shafts of sunlight flickering across her skin.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I ripped my boxers off and dived in.

Chrissy swam towards me, her giggles bubbling in the water.

'Hello,' she smiled.

I took her in my arms, her skin smooth and slippery against mine. I kissed her neck over and over.

'I love you.' Chrissy's fingers clawed at my hair. 'I really love you.'

'I love you.'

'Do you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'More than you'll ever understand.' I gripped her hands. We treaded the water, gasping in this moment. 'You are everything. Everything!'

'Really?'

'You helped me find my old self. Believe me, that's everything.'

Chrissy wrapped her limbs around me. For a second she held me tight then whispered, 'This is the place.' I looked at her. She smiled and nodded.

'Are you . . .' I began.

'Ssh.' She touched my lips. 'It's perfect.'

In silence we swam to the rocks. I took her hand as we climbed out of the water, our bodies trembling. We lay beside each other, our faces close, our breath warm and fast with hunger. And there on the riverbank she took me inside her, our bodies rocking gently as we melted into one.

That was the morning we swam and loved each other and that was the morning Tom Brennan came back, forever.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.C. Burke was born in Sydney in 1965, the fourth of five daughters. With writers for parents, she grew up in a world full of noise, drama and books, and the many colourful characters who came to visit provided her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations.

Burke decided to become a nurse after her mother lost a long battle with cancer. She specialised in the field of Oncology, working in Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplant Units in Australia and the UK.

A creative writing course at Sydney University led to a mentorship with Gary Crew and the publication of CBC Notable book *White Lies* (Lothian) in 2002. Burke has since written *The Red Cardigan*, also a CBC Notable Book, and its sequel *Nine Letters Long* (Random House Australia).

J.C. Burke lives on Sydney's Northern Beaches with her husband and two children. She does a lot of yoga, a bit of nursing, and housework only when absolutely necessary. She loves writing for children and young adults, as they still have an optimistic eye on the world.

Visit www.jcburke.com.au for more information about J.C. Burke and her books.

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