

School of Media, Culture and Social Inquiry

**The Threnodies of Love: Reading the Maturation Process in Young Adult
Love Narratives through a Kristevan Lens; and *Messy*, a Young Adult
Novel**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Date:8-08-2019.....

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the high-quality literary output of young adult literature, thereby addressing the neglect of its critical study by academia. Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva and other post-structuralist theorists who extend traditional representations of themes commonly associated with young adult literature, namely the construction of identity, growth and maturation, this thesis is intimately linked to Kristeva's theory on the construction of subjectivity within love relationships. Consisting of two parts, this thesis comprises an exegesis and accompanying young adult novel. At the heart of its creative component, titled *Messy*, lies a story about love, expectations and the power of forgiveness. The novel's protagonist is a determined Year Seven student with dreams of becoming a celebrated chef like her idol, TV celebrity Jackie Park. Cooking is her passion, helping her through the dark moments of her life, which revolve around her mother's crippling hoarding disorder, her father's failing relationship with his second wife Immy, and the strain of keeping her mother's hoarding a secret from her friends, resulting in a mounting feeling of loneliness. Although the protagonist fails in her endeavours to make it into the finals of a cooking competition, the pain of the experience enables her to understand herself as a Kristevan subject-in-process, a complex, multifaceted person whose subjectivity is constructed and renewed in a dialogic interrelationship with her world, thus freeing her from the expectations she places on herself. In its exegesis, four young adult novels are read through a Kristevan lens, whose critical investigation of changing subjectivities and psychoanalytic identity processes in love relationships is the key conceptual and symbolic underpinning of this thesis. The four selected young adult novels depict romantic love (Sonya Hartnett's *The Ghost's Child* and Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*), love in a mother-daughter relationship (Deborah Ellis' *Looking for X*) and Christian agape in the context of hope and faith (Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star*). Together, the four young adult novels discussed in the exegesis and my related novel illuminate different paths of an adolescent's journey that culminates in their coming into fuller subjectivity. Their conflicts are solved by the protagonists' renewed understanding of their own subjectivity in a dialogic relationship with the other, thereby troubling any assumptions of achieving a mature and essentially fixed self.

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Introduction: Contextualising a Kristevan Approach to Adolescent Literature

[T]he true 'site' of the subject is the very dialectic between dissemination and reconstruction (Minow-Pinkney, Virginia Woolf: 'Seen from a foreign Land', 164).

This exegesis and my connected young adult novel seek to make a meaningful contribution to the fast-growing field of young adult literature. It is a literary field of considerable popularity and influence, yet, as a select few critics have commented, it continues to be neglected by academia (Hollindale 1995; Hunt 1996; Westwater 2000; Coats 2001; Clark 2003; Stevenson 2011). This neglect endures in the face of the persistently high-quality literary output of many world-renowned writers in this field. In the past two decades, several book-length, post-structuralist approaches have made a vital contribution to the critical study of young adult literature in response to this gap (Rose 1984; McCallum 1999; Westwater 2000; Trites 2000, 2014; Coats 2004). These critical contributions have illuminated themes commonly associated with young adult literature, namely identity construction, growth and maturity (McCallum 1999, 2011; Trites 2000, 2014; Westwater 2000; Cadden 2011; Coats 2004, 2011; Stephens 2011). My own critical position within this field draws on this material that extends traditional representations of identity construction and maturity, most commonly termed a coming-of-age in young adult literature. Among other things, this exegesis is a call for a more vigorous engagement with the valuable and original contributions that expand the genre of mainstream young adult fiction. It seeks to make a vital contribution by including Julia Kristeva's theory on the construction of subjectivity within love relationships, which the novels discussed in this exegesis demonstrate.

Kristeva refers to herself as a "creature of the crossroads" (Kristeva 2000: 113) – a central location between psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism and semantics – and her theoretical concepts are uniquely suited for a critical study of adolescent literature, itself a creature of the crossroads situated between children's and adult literature with "its own constellation of concerns that mark it as distinctive from literature for either children or adults" (Coats 2011: 317). Kristeva's concepts shed critical light on the themes commonly explored in young adult literature, such as agency, maturation and the construction of identity. Mike Cadden speaks of a tension

in young adult literature “between the desire to create a romantic figure in search of self and of depicting society as the inscriber of the adolescent self” (Cadden 2011: 310). Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that the “questioning of social institutions and how they construct individuals”, which has become a significant characteristic of young adult literature, is the result of authors exploring “what it means if we define people as socially constructed subjects rather than as self-contained individuals bound by their identities” (Trites 2000: 16). All theorists attest to the importance of the young adult in continual negotiation of individual subjectivity in complex modern circumstances.

Young adult literature is a powerful symbolic space for the negotiation of selfhood, a concern of literature since earlier moments in modernity from the eighteenth century onwards. More recently, the influence of post-structuralism and semiotics on narratives that depict the development of identity has created a certain suspicion of the fundamental Enlightenment subjectivity with its sense of an essential self. My position is intimately linked to others who take Bakhtin and Kristeva’s work as a critical foundation, such as Robyn McCallum, who writes in her Bakhtinian analysis of the construction of subjectivity in young adult narratives that “the relation between self and other ... is structured so as to represent a dialogic interplay between different concepts of subjectivity, that is, between the idea of essential selfhood and *the idea of the subject as constructed within a series of provisional subject positions*” (McCallum 1999: 90, my emphasis). Basing her approach on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan, with their premise that “a sense of personal identity is shaped by an other and represents a dialogue between images of the self as essential and as multiple and internally fragmented” (McCallum 1999: 69–70), her study provides a vital alternative to “liberal humanist and romantic concepts of subjectivity [which] usually underpin narratives of maturation” (McCallum 1999: 67).

The young adult narratives that are the subject of this thesis reflexively mirror complex changing subjectivities and psychoanalytic identity processes through a self-aware narrative form which is conscious of the limitations of language in their attempts to evoke a world beyond linguistic representation. Vanessa, the main character of the accompanying young adult novel *Messy*, experiences the pull of a world beyond words in the passion she feels for cooking. It is this experience which ultimately enables her

to see past a limiting version of herself, allowing her to understand not just herself but also her mother as complex and multi-layered subjects with identities that are open to change and in a continuous dialogic interrelationship with one another. Amber, in Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star*, undergoes a similar experience in the aftermath of her mother's killing, in which grief and questions of identity converge into a confusing chaos of drives and emotions. Skilfully demonstrating the limitations of language, Quick reduces Amber's previous exuberant language, leaving room for pauses and the blank page to represent the dialogic construction of his characters' fragmented and fluid subjectivities. Khyber, in Deborah Ellis' *Looking for X*, learns to see not only herself, but also her mother, in the context of ever-changing subjectivities. Freeing her mother of the constraints she has placed on her by limiting her identity to motherhood, enables both of them to engage in fluid and dialogic interaction. Meg Rosoff's Daisy, in *How I Live Now*, finds resilience and strength in the experience of working through abjection. She witnesses the violent and chaotic diffusion and reconstruction of identity and responds to it with an openness that ensures her psychic renewal. Finally, Sonya Hartnett's Maddy, in *The Ghost's Child*, recognises the stranger within herself, which sees her emerge as a true Kristevan subject-in-process, recognising the diversity of her own psychic identity.

As the literary representation of maturation is a vital part of identity construction, recent post-structuralist studies have placed the depiction of maturation under greater scrutiny and have been more specific about what the term "maturation" specifically implies, thereby demonstrating the limitations of too-easily tying oversimplified notions of "achieving" maturation to being a young adult. (Trites 2000, 2014; Coats 2004, 2011). Trites identifies in the patterns derived from the bildungsroman and its related form the entwicklungsroman¹ a powerful influence on the idea of achieving or working towards a mature and essentially fixed self, which underpins a majority of commonly termed coming-of-age narratives (2000, 2014). In

¹ Trites argues that the appropriate term for children's and young adult novels depicting growth should be entwicklungsroman (literally *novel of development*), while the term bildungsroman (literally *novel of education*) should only be applied to "novels in which the protagonist comes of age as an adult" (Trites 2000: 10). In her later work, she drops this distinction in order to simplify her study of young adult representations of growth and almost exclusively employs bildungsroman to signify young adult coming-of-age narratives (Trites 2014: 26).

their most stereotypical examples, these narratives tend to employ a narrow or exclusive view of growth and maturation as improvement, thereby limiting the depiction of adolescence in literature (Trites 2014: 148). However, a Kristevan approach (in itself a call for a re-engagement with a key moment in the late modern time with a meeting of feminism, psychoanalysis, politics and post-structuralism) allows for a reading of identity formation as a recurrent and non-fixed process, rather than product, and is informed by her theory of the subject-in-process, the adolescent as open system (Kristeva 1995: 135–53) and by her contention that the unified subject is a myth.

My discussion here, as well as my young adult novel, is in keeping with a type of narrative that troubles any too-simple assumption about the experience of being a young adult. The following discussion of Kristeva, Trites and other theorists has been central to my assessment of the ethics and politics of young adult novels and underpins my own approach throughout the thesis. Kristeva's core interests of literary criticism, linguistic theory and psychoanalytic practice are centred around her examination of the speaking subject (Grosz 1990: 80; Moi 1986: 89). Her primary concerns are the examination of the construction of subjectivity and how "language [might] represent the unrepresentable" (Smith 1998: 28). The unrepresentable or unsayable signifies the semiotic elements, which Kristeva understands as the unconscious and the bodily drives and energies that are present in a human subject even before the subject perceives of themselves as such. These semiotic processes and their articulations are essential for later language acquisition and the constitution of the subject, which is the subject's entry into the symbolic order. Kristeva sees the semiotic as a precondition of the symbolic, and its irruptions in literature and art reject and disturb the unity which the symbolic attempts to portray, thus disrupting the symbolic while operating within it (Moi 1986: 103–4). Kristeva's theory of the subject as being constituted by both the semiotic and the symbolic firmly inscribes the subject's body in her theories (Moi 1986: 94–5; Grosz 1990: 94; Oliver 1993: 13; Smith 1998: 14, 73). Opposing a humanist hegemony of the mind over the body, Kristeva instead promotes a theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject of a heterogeneous process (Moi 1986: 28–31). Poetic language as "the inclusion of the semiotic within the symbolic" (Guberman 1996: 212) is instrumental to Kristeva's attempts to discover and trace the eruption of

semiotic elements in art and literature (Moi 1986: 12; Lechte 1990a: 25; Hill 1990: 148; Oliver 1993: 10).

Kristeva's emphasis on a crossroads of semiotic and symbolic elements in the symbolic order is the key conceptual and symbolical underpinning of this exegesis and the related novel, in which the interrelationship of semiotic and symbolic elements plays a vital role for its intended narrative shape and affect. The novel's protagonist Vanessa appears on the surface as a determined young adult who strives for success and rejects the chaos of her mother's hoarding disorder. The experience of falling short of her own goals disrupts this unified vision of herself and forces her to re-evaluate herself and her mother's hoarding, realising in it the visual manifestation of a confusion of forceful drives and energies that becomes instrumental in her acceptance of herself as a multi-layered and complex human being.

Kristeva's argument that the symbolic order is comprised of both semiotic and symbolic elements which are in a continuous process of disruption and renewal is the critical foundation for her psychoanalytic study of love and its significance in identity formation as "a true process of self-organization" (Kristeva 1987: 14). It leads her to introduce her notion of open systems, derived from "logical and biological theories (von Forster, Edgar Morin, Henri Atlan)", as an "opening up to the other [which] plays a decisive role in the evolution of the species as well as in the maturing of each generation, or in every individual's particular history" (Kristeva 1987: 14). Kristeva's emphasis on the plurality and polymorphism of human subjectivity as open systems is the critical underpinning of her theory of love "as reciprocal identification and detachment" and as "*model of optimum psychic functioning*" (Kristeva 1987: 14, emphasis in the original). Kristeva argues that the "psyche is one open system connected to another, and only under those conditions is it renewable. If it lives, your psyche is in love. If it is not in love, it is dead" (Kristeva 1987: 15).

Kristeva's notion of the human psyche as open systems contributes to her understanding of the human subject as a subject-in-process, which is a result of her engagement with Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and intertextuality within a psychoanalytic framework (Hill 1990) and the "starting-point for Kristeva's own work on modernist discourse" (Moi 1986: 34). As Leslie Hill explains,

Though the term, initially, was an ironically critical response to Althusser's concept of history as a process without a subject, it became a crucial means for Kristeva of integrating within literary theory the dynamic energy and structural complexity of the Freudian subject while, at the same time, elaborating a theory of the subject in literature that was designed to be non-reductive (Hill 1990: 143).

Kristeva's subject-in-process is closely linked to her notion of intertextuality. "If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that its 'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated" (Moi 1986: 111). In a Kristevan subject-in-process, identity is never complete, fixed or single. Instead, an emphasis on the "plurality of expressions" stresses a call to "maintain differences and to reject the notion that there is one specific ideal of being a human being" (O'Connor 1990: 42).

The figure of the adolescent, which has played a pivotal role in literature from early moments in modernity onwards, signifies more than any other literary figure such as a Kristevan open system and subject-in-process (Kristeva 1995). Thus, the "crossroads" in Kristeva's work signifies not only an integration of semiotic, bodily energies and symbolic elements that continually challenge, disrupt and re-vitalise one another, resulting in human subjects whose identities are in continuous and dialogic process, but also the adolescent figure who sits at a crossroads of childhood and adulthood. This concept is essential to the characters and narrative patterns in the novels I analyse as well as my own novel and has a clear relation to Kristeva's ethical position on the interrelationship between open systems. In her theory of the interaction of open systems, which is essential for identity growth and renewal, Kristeva includes an appeal for tolerance of unknown and foreign energies in oneself and others (Kristeva 1991; Guberman 1996: 26; Smith 1998: 69). Drawing on her concept of open systems and reciprocity in her psychoanalytic examination of the subject and the foreign, Kristeva "attempts to bring the subject into the place of the other by putting the other into the subject" (Oliver 1993: 5).

By adopting a Kristevan approach to a reading of subjectivity and maturation in young adult love narratives, the selected novels discussed in this exegesis and my accompanying young adult novel seek to demonstrate that Kristeva's concept of the subject-in-process and the importance she places on semiotic elements in the

construction of subjectivity make a convincing case for moving away from a linear view of achieving maturation as a coming-of-age toward a more cyclical understanding of maturation as a renewed “coming into subjectivity” and continuous “subjective rebirth” (Miller 2014: 5).

Kristeva’s theory of the subject-in-process, which is indicative of a post-structuralist belief in *multiple, fragmented and provisional subject positions* (cf. above McCallum 1999: 90), appears antithetical to the genre of bildungsroman, which “emerged in an atmosphere nurtured by the romantic belief in the individual” (Trites 2000: 11). The hero’s self-conscious quest for growth and independence culminates in an ending that sees him or her reach maturity, meeting “romantic expectations about growth” (Trites 2000: 15). The German prototype of this genre, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795), introduces common patterns, which Jerome Buckley traces in his seminal analysis of the bildungsroman, aptly named “chronicles of youth” (Buckley 1974: vii). Buckley writes that, “in its pure form [it] has been defined as the novel of all-around development or self-culture” with “a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience” (Buckley 1974: 13). Buckley uses the term bildungsroman in its broad sense “as a convenient synonym for the novel of youth or apprenticeship” (Buckley 1974: 13), but cautions against over-usage by arguing that in its pure form the bildungsroman “ignores [no] more than two or three of its principal elements – childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (Buckley 1974: 18).

As Buckley summarises, the English bildungsroman operates under the assumption that “the child questioning sense and outward things is father of the *understanding man*” (Buckley 1974: 282, my emphasis) and that “it is the quickened imagination, moral or aesthetic, that animates and eventually outlives the troubled season of youth” (Buckley 1974: 282). This view of growth and maturation as improvement and culmination in an essential self is opposed to Kristeva’s subject-in-process not least because it implies a moment in a subject’s development where identity becomes fixed and stable. The novels discussed here, as well as my related novel, mirror Kristeva’s notion of the human subject as always in a state of flux.

Kristeva's insistence on a continuous dialogic interaction between open systems is vital to the narrative development in my novel, in which Vanessa's idea of an essential self is challenged by the eruption of semiotic forces. As Vanessa is forced to accept the presence of unknown energies within herself, the novel portrays the reconstruction of Vanessa's self as fluid and multi-faceted. Similarly, while Sonya Hartnett's *The Ghost's Child* incorporates most of the bildungsroman elements identified by Buckley, the idea of a unified and stable self is continually challenged by the irruption of semiotic forces in the form of magical realism and the fragmentation of the self. Even though Maddy grows up to become Matilda, her identity is never fixed, nor is one developmental stage privileged over another, thus mirroring a significant characteristic of Kristeva's investigation of adolescence in literature, in which her focus is on adolescence as an open system rather than a developmental stage that is necessary, yet in some ways less, than adult maturity².

Thus, my position in this discussion and my related novel is underpinned by the work of post-structuralist theorists who have challenged traditional conceptualisations of growth as improvement and achievement in the past two decades (McCallum 1999; Trites 2000, 2014; Westwater 2000; Coats 2004, 2011; Nikolajeva 2005). Trites argues for example that Hans Heinrich Borchardt's description of the bildungsroman as "a reasonably direct line from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty" (quoted in Trites 2014: 22–3) might "translate into cultural narratives that privilege certain models of growth, most notably, growth as improvement, over other models of growth, such as the much less laden concept of growth as simple change" (Trites 2014: 147).

Trites argues that in "a literature often about growth, it is the rare author who can resist the impulse to moralize about how people grow" (Trites 2000: 73). Since young adult literature frequently employs a youth-adult binary with adults holding "the knowledge that represents the highest goal: truth" (Trites 2000: 79), she warns that these narratives imply that in order to have the same access to truth and knowledge, the young protagonists have to "quit being adolescents themselves" (Trites 2000: 79).

² "I understand by the term 'adolescent' less an age category than an open psychic structure" (Kristeva 1990: 8).

Trites' criticism centres around the concern that "if that is the case, by that formulation young adults automatically become outsiders in their own novels" (Trites 2000: 79).

Trites explains that for Peter Hollindale "teaching adolescents about growth is the whole point" because young adult literature is "by definition a literature about transitions" (Trites 2000: 80). Yet, the hegemony of a stereotypical pattern reveals an inherent paradox in young adult literature, which "seems to delegitimize adolescents, insisting that 'adolescentness', especially immaturity, is unacceptable, even though the surface intention of most YA novels is ostensibly to legitimize adolescence" (Trites 2000: 83). Since instances of young adult literature which do not represent growth "in terms that are value-positive" (Trites 2014: 148) are rare, growth has become "such a frequently employed script in adolescent literature ... [that] it has taken on the role of being a cultural narrative: teenagers are required to grow" (Trites 2014: 78).

In Trites' view, allocating growth the value of "learning and being more than when we were young" results in a "power imbalance" where "one phase in life is marked superior to the other" (Trites 2014: 134). Reversing the trend of "metaphors that effectively entail youth as negative, as something to be outgrown" (Trites 2014: 145), Trites calls for epistemologies that question our understanding of growth as improvement.

While it is true that there is nothing inherently evil about growth because it is a fundamental factor in everyone's life, I still cannot help wondering if we are not somehow missing other ways of being, other epistemologies, that would help young readers understand literature – and life – in less goal-oriented ways. After all, in literary depictions, coming of age does have a clear-cut trajectory that is defined by only one goal: maturity (Trites 2014: 148).

A Kristevan approach to young adult literature is therefore a call to engage with young adult novels that expand such "goal-oriented" conceptualisations of growth by depicting the ways in which their adolescent protagonists negotiate their changing subject positions with the complex circumstances of the world they live in. The applicability of Kristeva's theories to young adult literature has been demonstrated by a number of theorists (McCallum 1999; Trites 2000, 2014; Westwater 2000; Coats 2004), among them Martha Westwater, who was the first to publish a book-length Kristevan study of adolescent literature. Her *Giant Despair Meets Hopeful* (2000) echoes Kristeva's belief that the symbolic is in crisis and that the late modern time is

essentially a depressed time (Westwater 2000; Miller 2014). Like Kristeva, Westwater identifies in literature, more specifically contemporary adolescent literature, a possible cure and argues that it can “inspire hope” (Westwater 2000: 44). While O’Malley is justified in calling Westwater “curiously out of step” (O’Malley 2002: 189) with the choice of her discussed novels, Westwater’s approach is original in “testing” Kristeva’s theory (Westwater 2000: 14) in the work of six established young adult authors. Westwater structures her study by identifying a particular Kristevan concept in the work of a young adult novelist, such as the subject-in-process in Jan Mark’s fiction or the interplay of semiotic and symbolic elements in Patricia Wrightson’s novels.

My own critical approach to a Kristevan reading of young adult literature seeks to make an original and vital contribution by focussing on Kristeva’s theory of love and her subject-in-process in the depiction of maturation, moving from a linear view to a cyclical understanding of identity formation as renewal and rebirth. The four young adult narratives selected for this purpose, as well as my own novel, represent key moments of crisis and renewal in which “the semiotic is not simply a stage or phase surpassed in later integrations” (O’Connor 1990: 45–6), as evidenced by the adult characters in the narratives. Drawing on Kristeva’s subject-in-process in her examination of love, I see in these love narratives an expansion of the representation of maturation. Just as “the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic” (O’Connor 1990: 46), the depiction of maturation in young adult literature cannot be thought of as a mastering of the semiotic.

In their unflinching expressions of pain and anxiety, the four young adult narratives discussed in the following chapters are equal to literary narratives marketed to adult audiences. They are grouped into two parts which highlight different aspects of Kristeva’s examination of love in her oeuvre, most notably in *Tales of Love* (1987), which is intended as an “archaeology of love in the Western world” (Moi 1986: 238). The two chapters in Part One are a reading of the depiction of romantic couple love in Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now* (2004) and Sonya Hartnett’s *The Ghost’s Child* (2007) and seek to identify the redemptive values of love in a Kristevan sense. While the dynamics of the love stories are developed in opposite directions, both novelists depict love as necessary for identity formation. The two chapters in Part Two are a reading

of two young adult novels in the context of social realism, highlighting themes of social justice and poverty. In Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star* (2010), the novel is placed in a Kristevan discussion of Christian love as *agape*. Moments of severe crisis cause the protagonist to experience utter abjection, but they also bring about her psychic renewal, making the protagonist's maturation not a process of disillusionment but rather an affirmation of hope. Chapter Four explores love in a complex mother-daughter relationship in Deborah Ellis' *Looking for X* (1999). One of Kristeva's main contributions to the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan is her examination of the maternal body and the pre-Oedipal subject prior to the mirror stage and language acquisition (Moi 1986: 12–13; Guberman 1996: 265; Smith 1998: 16). Kristeva sees subjectivity as a process that "has its beginnings in the maternal function rather than the paternal function. The maternal body itself is a primary model of the subject-in-process; its unity is called into question by the other within, an other-in-process" (Oliver 1993: 13). As a logical consequence of her investigation of the split between the subject and the maternal body, she investigates how the separation from the mother with its accompanying painful sense of loss becomes a "precondition of love" (Lechte 1990a: 29).

My accompanying young adult novel *Messy* examines love in the context of an individual's artistic expression and her complex relationship with her mother, who suffers from a hoarding disorder. It explores Kristeva's "notion of art as constitutive of the subject, rather than constituted by the subject" (Lechte 1990a: 24) and describes the protagonist's psychic reorganisation by discovering the unknown within herself after a confrontation with abjection as a source of crisis and potential of renewal. Taking its cue from Kristeva's concern with the representation of the unsayable in literature and art, *Messy*'s teenage protagonist Vanessa has found in cooking the art form that allows her to express herself most fully. Her artistic expression is contrasted with her mother's obsessive hoarding behaviour. Sensing a void underneath this obsessive hoarding, Vanessa is in equal parts frightened and repulsed by her mother's behaviour. Reconciling her increasingly abject living conditions with the exhilaration she experiences in cooking becomes an impossible balancing act. When her mother's hoarding obsession is made public and she suffers a breakdown at the same time as Vanessa tries out for a popular cooking show, Vanessa's failure to make it into the finals brings about a moment of crisis and collapse. Vanessa is able to regain a sense

of self by recognising and accepting the semiotic forces within herself, allowing her to reach out to her mother in open affirmation.

Messy is not only the depiction of an adolescent's desire to express herself more fully in her chosen artform. It is also a depiction of intergenerational trauma and the cycle of mental illness, inspired in equal parts by Kristeva's theory of love and the subject-in-process, and by the four narratives discussed in the exegesis. The amatory principle present in my narrative is shown to be "messy", as the title suggests, and both Quick's and Ellis' narratives share *Messy's* cyclical depiction of family trauma and crisis. While *Messy* does not portray romantic love, the theme of love is present throughout the narrative as a continuously evolving self, which Hartnett and Rosoff have so beautifully portrayed in their narratives.

The four young adult novels discussed in the exegesis, together with my related novel, illuminate different paths of an adolescent's journey that culminates in their coming into fuller subjectivity. Their conflicts are solved by the protagonists' renewed understanding of their own subjectivity and the choices they make. Whether the narrative makes a plea for not changing (Amber in *Sorta Like a Rock Star*) or for changing (Khyber in *Looking for X*), the protagonists' maturation is depicted as an opening up of themselves to the other. Both the exegesis and related novel seek to make a vital contribution to the field of young adult literature by calling for a critical engagement with the representation of growth and maturation in coming-of-age narratives.

Part One: Love Stories, Couple Love

[The] amatory principle is indispensable for a body to be living (Kristeva, Tales of Love, 382).

Part One illuminates the Kristevan notion of the subject-in-process through a discussion of pivotal narrative moments in two young adult love narratives. In the two novels discussed in the following chapters, moments of romantic love parallel the forceful interplay of semiotic and symbolic energies and lead to an understanding of the self-in-process.

The two narratives discussed here are unconventional and literary young adult novels that encompass trauma, pain and irresolution. Their female protagonists experience moments of subjective rebirth and a renewal of their identities in connection with the complex, overwhelming moments of love they experience. In both Meg Rosoff's dystopian account of a love story as redemptive force in a world of war and destruction (*How I Live Now*, 2004) and Sonya Hartnett's exploration of couple love as an impossible, yet indispensable endeavour (*The Ghost's Child*, 2007), the protagonists defy societal expectations by choosing unsuitable lovers, yet their experience of love is not the same. While Rosoff's protagonist experiences love as cure, love becomes a destructive force for Hartnett's protagonist. In *How I Live Now*, Meg Rosoff elaborates on the theme of love juxtaposed by the collapse of the symbolic order. In *The Ghost's Child*, Sonya Hartnett examines the impossibility of a lasting love relationship, while at the same time presenting love as the necessary, yet always elusive, ingredient in human interactions. Despite these differences, however, both young adult novels converge in their depiction of the necessity of love as a "synthesis of ideal and affect" (Lechte 1990a: 30) in the formation of subjectivity, and I argue that Kristeva's discussion of love and the possible renewal of one's identity based on an open psychic structure provide a constructive framework for a meaningful discussion of the depiction of the maturation process in these young adult love stories.

In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva examines Freud's study of the myth of Narcissus, explaining that "Freud seems to suggest that it is not Eros but narcissistic primacy that

sparks and perhaps dominates psychic life; he thus sets up self-deception at the basis of one's relationship to reality" (Kristeva 1987: 21). Because of its primacy (in a chronological sense) in a subject's psyche, Kristeva proceeds to examine the close connection between narcissism and emptiness, a term she uses to signify the separating groundwork prior to an infant's psychic birth with the realisation that she is a subject with corresponding objects. This emptiness "is intrinsic to the beginnings of the symbolic function [and] appears as the first separation between what is not yet an *Ego* and what is not yet an *object*" (Kristeva 1987: 24, emphasis in the original) and is intimately linked to Kristeva's investigation of the earliest moments of a child's (psychic) life. Emptiness becomes a protection of the underlying chaos of dissolved borders between a subject and her objects and Kristeva identifies in narcissism "a means for protecting that emptiness" (Kristeva 1987: 24) against the underlying chaos. Hence, narcissism becomes a crucial means of protecting oneself from the chaos and confusion of dissolved borders (which Kristeva analyses in depth in her study of abjection in *Powers of Horror*, 1982) and Kristeva proceeds to investigate the influences of narcissism on a subject's love relationships.

As narcissism assumes such a crucial role in the construction of subjectivity, the choice of a love object is intrinsically linked to it. Kristeva argues that for Freud "the choice of the love object ... proves satisfying in any case if and only if that object relates to the subject's narcissism ... either through personal narcissistic reward ... or narcissistic delegation" (Kristeva 1987: 21). My analysis of Hartnett's and Rosoff's portrayals of love is closely linked to Kristeva's critical position on narcissism and love, and Kristeva's observation that the lover relates in some way to the subject's narcissism underpins my discussion of Hartnett's and Rosoff's protagonists.

Identifying narcissism and not eros as the basis on which a love identification is built leads Kristeva to theorise that the "loving madness" of identification with an object (another person) is strictly speaking "not objectal" because the identification is not with this object, but with "what offers itself to me as a *model*" (Kristeva 1987: 25; emphasis in the original), which means an idea or version of someone as it relates to the subject's narcissism. Kristeva therefore poses the question if the "loving state is a state without object" (Kristeva 1987: 25)? In other words, do we truly see who we love, or do we only love the person who in some ways offers us narcissistic

gratification. According to Lacan, the object of identification is a metaphorical object, meaning it is rather a non-object than a partial object (cf. Moi 1986: 247) – it does not exist as such per se. Kristeva’s argument that the “object of love is a metaphor for the subject” (Moi 1986: 247) reiterates her theory that the love object is more indicative of the subject than the object, but also that both are part of the realm of the symbolic. The love object is the subject’s “constitutive metaphor, its ‘unary feature’, which, by having it choose an adored part of the loved one, already locates it within the symbolic code of which this feature is a part” (Kristeva 1987: 30). This ambivalence in love as a complex process of identification is simultaneously a necessary beginning of the extension of the self.

The close connection of narcissism, separation and emptiness in subject creation, together with the narcissistic nature of the choice of a love object, firmly inscribes narcissism in subject creation and love identification. However, while narcissism may be at the foundation of love, love also transcends narcissism by turning a subject’s focus to an other. A “lover is a narcissist with an *object*” (Moi 1986: 250; emphasis in the original), Kristeva observes. Directing one’s focus outwards, “[l]ove involves a sizeable ‘Aufhebung’ [i.e. cancellation] of narcissism; consequently, the relationship established by Freud between love and narcissism must not cause us to forget their essential difference” (Moi 1986: 250). The person commonly termed a narcissist “is precisely someone incapable of love” (Moi 1986: 250).

Narcissism is involved in love because “there is an idealizable other who returns [the lover’s] own ideal image (that is the narcissistic moment)” (Moi 1986: 250). This means that it “is essential for the lover to maintain the existence of that ideal other and to be able to imagine himself similar, merging with him and even indistinguishable from him” (Moi 1986: 250). Based on this inextricable interaction between narcissism and love, Kristeva writes that the “‘narcissistic structure’ thus remains a permanent fixture in the threnodies of love that beckon to us” (Moi 1986: 263). Love is infused with the constant symbolic death, which is the end of self, and symbolic rebirth as the moment of subjective renewal. Similarly, the protagonists in Rosoff’s and Hartnett’s novels experience their first romantic love as part of an essential cyclic return of birth, death and rebirth.

The love object, which Kristeva calls a “metaphor for the subject” (Kristeva 1987: 30) forms the intersection between narcissism and love. The two young adult novels discussed in the following chapters are remarkable because of their interesting choice of love object. In both *The Ghost’s Child* and *How I Live Now*, the choice of love object, a mystical being in one, a first cousin in the other, are crucial plot elements and a vital part of the depiction of the protagonist’s subjective rebirth. Hartnett’s protagonist Maddy falls in love with Feather, a wild, untamed spirit who, in her mother’s words, resembles a “savage” (Hartnett 2007: 70). Feather incorporates many of the character traits which Maddy treasures the most in herself, but which put her at odds with her mother. While Hartnett’s protagonist loves a mystical man, Rosoff’s protagonist Daisy, whose mother dies in childbirth, falls in love with her maternal first cousin, thus possibly attempting to retrieve a part of her dead mother (this is detailed further in the following section).

Hartnett’s and Rosoff’s depictions of romantic love are fundamentally antithetic. Placed in a Kristevan framework, the difference in Hartnett’s and Rosoff’s portrayal of love in the context of otherness becomes even more pronounced. In Rosoff’s narrative, love exalts the female protagonist, it becomes a loving cure and a vehicle of transcendence, as she moves beyond the death drive of anorexia³ and abjection to merge with her ideal lover. Indeed, the trajectory of the plot follows closely the process by which the two lovers merge and become one, a unary being similar to Plato’s androgyne (cf. Kristeva’s discussion of Plato’s *Eros* 1987: 69). In Hartnett’s narrative, love lacks this sublime exaltation and is portrayed as an unhappy prison that shackles both the lover and the loved one. The impossibility of a “happily ever after”, revealing their true selves as fundamentally incompatible, renders them abject and melancholy.

Even though both protagonists choose their lovers in defiance of social rules, which Kristeva calls “transgression or outlaw love” (cf. Kristeva’s discussion of *Romeo and Juliet* 1987: 209), the tragic end which Kristeva argues is in the nature of

³ The meaning of anorexia in Rosoff’s narrative is set in the context of a compensatory response to a lack of power and control, and an internalisation of the stepmother’s hatred towards the protagonist. It will be discussed further in the following section

such transgressive love⁴ occurs only in Hartnett's text. One could argue that in Rosoff's novel the protagonist's transgression love assumes redemptive powers since the symbolic order is portrayed in a state of chaos and collapse as a total war ravages the world. Daisy's love, despite being outside the law of the symbolic order, is depicted as transgression love only in the sense that it contrasts the symbolic collapse of the adult world with the redemptive power of the teenager's love. Given the collapse of the symbolic order, their love requires no sanctions of the law,⁵ but provides the promise of a loving cure.

The narcissistic lover, "torn between ideal and abjection" (cf. Kristeva 1987: 320), between an intoxicating desire for sublime love and the suffering of abject emptiness and meaninglessness, is present in both Rosoff's and Hartnett's narratives. Both female protagonists suffer under the guardianship of a disapproving (step)mother. Conscious of being considered a disappointment and a nuisance, both characters are depicted as abject beings, and both experience the narcissistic gratification of being loved as a form of intoxication. However, Hartnett's protagonist discovers that a happy co-existence with her lover proves impossible because they desire different lifestyles. Thus, Maddy's experience of love as a power struggle is directly opposed to the empowering and healing qualities that Rosoff ascribes to love in *How I Live Now*. Whereas love empowers and cures Rosoff's protagonist, providing an antidote to the death drive of anorexia, it draws out the worst qualities in Maddy in *The Ghost's Child*.

⁴ Kristeva argues that the logic of this kind of love is constituted by the very fact that their love is forbidden, meaning that any legalisation of outlaw love is intrinsically doomed to fail (cf. Kristeva 1987: 209).

⁵ One could also posit that since the love relationship of Rosoff's lovers is taboo, it has always already existed outside the law.

Chapter One: How I Live Now

Meg Rosoff's exploration of love in times of war is a surprising young adult love story and particularly significant in a Kristevan context. Kristeva has written much about the crisis of granted authority symbols in late modern times, based on the deconstruction of authority figures such as the Christian church or the paternal figure, which had such strong influence on the history of development of Western society. Rosoff's dystopian novel depicts the collapse of the symbolic world in the form of a total global war, which bears partial resemblance to World War Two resistance narratives. Amidst this uprooting of Western society she portrays the transgression of the incest taboo by two teenagers. At its core, *How I Live Now* is the story of an unloved girl who experiences an extraordinary love set in a time of crisis. Her cousin's loving gaze teaches Daisy that she is loveable. As Daisy's hatred for her stepmother is transformed into passionate love for her cousin, this process is mirrored by a simultaneous transformation of Daisy's sense of self from victim to subject with agency and self-determination.

Rosoff's young adult novel consists of a number of key narrative frames. One is the protagonist's unloving American stepmother and father, who send Daisy to England to live with her dead mother's family. Another key frame is an unnamed, unspecified total war, which provides the novel with a background of invasion and destruction. Rosoff avoids giving clues to the identity of the enemy troops who overrun England. Neither does she provide any details to the causes of the conflict, suggesting that most wars and acts of terrorism share a similar rationale. Instead of using national identities of the enemy troops, Rosoff resorts to a capitalised *Us* and *Them* when she thematises the unidentified crisis at key points in the narrative⁶.

6 An example is the gossip in their village: "Here's the sort of thing we'd hear, all in low hushed tones especially when us Children were around ... 1. My brother-in-law says it's the French bastards. 2. My friend in Chelsea said the looting is terrible and she got the most amazing wide-screen TV. 3. My neighbour in The Lords says it's the Chinese. 4. Have you noticed that no Jews have been killed? 5. There's a nuclear bunker under Marks & Spencer that's only open to shareholders. 6. People are eating

In England, the rebellious and anorexic Daisy quickly becomes amazed by the beauty of the countryside and the resourcefulness of her cousins, and falls in love with her first cousin Edmond. The entire world is at the brink of war, and shortly after Daisy's aunt travels to Norway for a peace conference, enemy troops invade England. Rosoff's young adult novel is remarkable in portraying the "Decline of Western Civilization" (Rosoff 2004: 48) with an almost innocent *jouissance*. In the absence of adults and against a background of war and crisis, the children experience an Arcadian idyll and Daisy's love affair with Edmond blossoms.

When English troops arrive at their farm house, the cousins are split up and moved to different parts of England. Daisy, determined to reunite with Edmond, flees with her youngest cousin Piper, thus beginning their quest to find Edmond and his brothers. It is in this part of the novel that death and destruction are introduced to the narrative, instilling it with a sense of abjection and loss. The quest ends for Daisy only years later, when a permanent ceasefire is reached and she is finally reunited with Edmond.

Rosoff's themes of love and death find a parallel in the underlying themes of exile and revolt which guide the movement of plot in *How I Live Now*. The teenagers' love is juxtaposed to a world in crisis, in which key narrative elements such as Daisy's anorexia or the massacre at Gateshead are symbolic of a world in violent crisis, leading to abjection and loss of speech. In the collapse of the symbolic order it is the regenerative power of love that rises as redemptive cure and facilitator of subjective rebirth.

their pets. 7. The Queen is Bearing Up. 8. The Queen is Breaking Down. 9. The Queen is one of Them". (Rosoff 2004: 41).

Revolt and Exile

With the fifteen-year-old Daisy, Rosoff introduces a protagonist whose gratification resides in starving herself. Part of the plot structure is the gradual revelation of the underlying reasons for Daisy's anorexia as her pleasure shifts from anorexia toward Edmond. Daisy's anorexia seems closely linked to an abjection of the feminine, which is visualised only negatively as a threat (her father's introduction of another woman in their life⁷), horror of death (Daisy's own mother died in childbirth), or disgust at female reproduction (her stepmother's pregnancy). Daisy's world is characterised by a lack of the positive feminine. Repulsed by the feminine, Daisy's experience of anorexia can also be understood as a form of denial of entering the symbolic moment. Thus, anorexia is a revolt against the imposition of the symbolic and the negatively experienced feminine in the form of a threat from outside (stepmother) or from within (the feminine threatening to erupt in Daisy's own female body)⁸. Ultimately, by starving herself Daisy attempts to stave off the dread of death that accompanies an entry into the symbolic. Her healing process is set in motion by experiencing love⁹, yet is not fully complete until Daisy acknowledges the presence of death in the latter half of the novel.

In her native New York, Daisy is a rebellious teenager who refuses to accept her father's new wife or fit into the social order. Exhausted by her resistance, her father and stepmother send her to England, which Daisy experiences as an involuntary exile at first. Quickly growing fond of her mother's relatives, in particular her cousin Edmond, she is surprised and flattered by his interest in her. As this narrative can also

⁷ When Edmond asks Daisy about her anorexia, she explains "about at first not wanting to get poisoned by my stepmother and how much it annoyed her and how after a while I discovered I liked the feeling of being hungry and the fact that it drove everyone stark raving mad and cost my father a fortune in shrinks and also it was something I was good at" (Rosoff 2004: 43–4).

⁸ (cf. anorexia and bulimia as "refusals of the feminine" in Kristeva 2010: 108.) Kristeva also observes that "Less ideologically than organically, the anorexic is an idealist who sacrifices her body to an ideal phantasmatic object (papa-mama merged under the severe gaze of the superego). Here, she withdraws, to judge herself: a piece of trash, a cesspit with orifices, soiled as much by what penetrates as by what comes out. Disappointed with all objects, incapable of supporting the object within, because no object can live up to the object, which she wants to want her entirely" (Kristeva 2010: 138).

⁹ "And after a little while of this my brain and my body and every single inch of me that was alive was flooded with the feeling that I was starving, starving, starving for Edmond. And what a coincidence, that was the feeling I loved best in the world" (Rosoff 2004: 45).

be read as an examination of exile, it is worthwhile to note that the themes of revolt and exile as acts of dissidence are recurrent and prominent in Kristeva's oeuvre. "Exile is already in itself a form of *dissidence*, since it involves uprooting oneself from a family, a country or a language. More importantly, it is an irreligious act that cuts all ties" (Moi 1986: 298, emphasis in the original). Exile, in a Kristevan context, is a visible and distinct form or reiteration of the original separation of a child into subject with corresponding objects, which she sees as the precondition for subject formation. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), *Tales of Love* (1987) and *Black Sun* (1989), Kristeva discusses the necessary pain of separating from the maternal body to enter the symbolic as a separated subject with objects. Underneath this separation lies the threat of emptiness, this "barely covered abyss where our identities, images, and words run the risk of being engulfed" (Kristeva 1987: 42).

In Rosoff's *How I Live Now* the theme of exile assumes an interesting dynamic, since Daisy's involuntary exile, punishment for her social rebellion, quickly becomes her preferred state of being. It is only in exile that Daisy learns to see her father as "dead" (i.e. unavailable) to her and begins to recover from the wounds to her ego which she suffered while leading a revolt (of anorexia) against her stepmother. Yet Daisy's exile from America can also be read in a larger context as exile from the world of adults. Rosoff's English idyll is a world of children and the separation from the world of adults resembles a prolonging of pre-symbolic existence, delaying the full entry into adult society. It is in this double form of exile that Daisy encounters for the first time that precious form of listening which Kristeva mentions as lying on the other side of exile¹⁰. Edmond's attentiveness seems so unusual to Daisy that it is placed in the context of the mystical¹¹.

The theme of exile and revolt continues to underlie the plot structure in the second half of the novel. When adults finally arrive in their country idyll, the children are banished to different corners of England, resulting for Daisy in the experience of

¹⁰ "Hope is the other side of exile, and its only reality that of listening" (Kristeva 2010: 185).

¹¹ The following is one of many instances showing an unusual connection between Edmond and Daisy. "I was thinking about almost nothing except that bird and then Edmond was next to my ear whispering Skylark, and I just nodded, knowing it was futile to ask how he knew the answers to questions you hadn't even got around to asking yet" (Rosoff 2004: 18).

another involuntary exile. In protest, Daisy and her youngest cousin Piper abscond and begin a quest to find Edmond. Yet, Daisy's father enforces her return to America during a temporary ceasefire, thereby prolonging her involuntary exile from Edmond. Daisy is placed in a number of hospitals and mental institutions, where she was "stunned silent, frozen rigid with anger and grief" (Rosoff 2004: 167) and "dying of loss" (Rosoff 2004: 168). Six years pass in which Daisy lives in America in a kind of limbo, "waiting to come home" (Rosoff 2004: 170) to Edmond. Finding strength in love and her rebellious self, Daisy "refused to let go of what I loved" (Rosoff 2004: 168), withstanding six years of waiting until a permanent ceasefire is reached and her return to England made possible.

The Ideal Lovers as Pre-symbolic Unit

The mythical Narcissus would heroically lean over that emptiness to seek in the maternal watery element the possibility of representing the self or the other – someone to love (Kristeva, Tales of Love, 42).

In Kristeva's theory "narcissism is a defense against the emptiness of separation" (Kristeva 1987: 42), connecting narcissism and love with an underlying emptiness. Yet, Kristeva sees narcissism reconciled in the lover, because the idealizable other is someone other than oneself (cf. Kristeva 1987: 33). In a key narrative frame, Rosoff's novel presents this other as Daisy's maternal first cousin, allowing her to engage with that part of herself which was forbidden under her father's rule, i.e. her dead mother¹². In her cousin Edmond, Daisy meets an other who represents more of herself than any other lover could possibly do, implying both a union with the lost mother and narcissistic gratification, leading to the most provocative form of revolt in *How I Live Now*, Daisy and Edmond's transgression of the incest taboo. Describing the passionate love of her protagonist as a frenzy, something outside the lovers' control, Rosoff writes,

¹² "Dad was one of those Never Mention Her Name Again type of fathers" (Rosoff 2004: 19).

Sometimes I felt like I was being consumed from within like a person with one of those freak diseases where you digest your own stomach. And sometimes we had to stop, just because we were raw and exhausted and still humming humming humming with something we didn't even have the strength left to do anything about" (Rosoff 2004: 53–4).

Their passionate and consuming *jouissance* is accompanied by a change in Daisy's attitude toward starving herself, and toward hunger itself. "It was the first time in as long as I could remember that hunger wasn't a punishment or a crime or a weapon or a mode of self-destruction. It was simply a way of being in love" (Rosoff 2004: 53).

Rosoff is careful to balance Daisy's passion with descriptions of an almost innocent *jouissance* and an otherworldly transcendence. "Love is, in short, the soul's *sight* for invisible things" (Kristeva 1987: 110, emphasis in the original), writes Plotinus, and in Rosoff's narrative, Edmond and Daisy display a gift for seeing and hearing the invisible, with Rosoff implying that it is their love which makes this heightened perception possible. Their passion gives them almost supernatural powers of telepathy¹³, in which their spirits roam freely from the constraints of time and place to reunite even as Daisy and Edmond have been separated in the war¹⁴. Rosoff's text evokes the sense of two lovers who experience their fusion as idyllic state,¹⁵ reminiscent of a state of pre-symbolic blissful union. In Rosoff's narrative the symbolic world which forms the foundation to Daisy's hatred¹⁶ is a world in crisis, a world undergoing violent acts of terrorism. Daisy and Edmond's love is in this sense a kind of revolt or counteraction. Describing a day spent in the company of Edmond and his siblings without adult interference, Daisy remarks that "I guess there was a war going on somewhere in the world that night but it wasn't one that could touch us"

¹³ "During all this time I was in touch with Edmond ... I had to be in a certain state of mind – quiet, distracted, sometimes half asleep – and then I might feel a kind of aura, a lightening of the space behind my eyes and I'd know he was there ... Once, in a trance that wasn't quite a dream, an image appeared in my head and I knew it was the place he and Isaac were living" (Rosoff 2004: 89–90).

¹⁴ Kristeva writes that "The moment passion is experienced as passion, and not as emotion, it is a border state between the real and the symbolic, biology and reflexive consciousness" (Kristeva 2010: 78).

¹⁵ "[I]f there ever was a more perfect day in the history of time it isn't one I've heard about," (Rosoff 2004: 64), Daisy remarks on their first outing after the outbreak of war.

¹⁶ Freud postulates that "hatred is older than the love erected on top of it" (Kristeva 2010: 157), and in Rosoff's young adult novel, Daisy's hatred (for her stepmother) has (chronological) primacy over her love (for Edmond).

(Rosoff 2004: 64). Their love becomes a reaction to “the multifaceted hatred” that Kristeva sees as “inseparable from human destiny and the speaking being” (Kristeva 2010: 157).

In *How I Live Now*, the love story develops against the dystopian background of a world war and the total collapse of the symbolic order. Though initially safe in a country idyll, the lives of the abandoned teenagers are soon permeated by death, destruction and hatred. Yet, the experience of death is also present as a significant narrative moment which the subject-in-process has to integrate as part of her cyclical rebirth. From the moment of Daisy’s birth, her life has been permeated by it, first by her mother’s death in childbirth, then by using anorexia as weapon against her stepmother¹⁷.

As the symbolic world deteriorates into a state of war and destruction, Rosoff creates an atmosphere which the protagonist experiences not as threat or emptiness, but as a gateway to new possibilities, leading to “the world’s most inappropriate case of sexual obsession” (Rosoff 2004: 48). Depicting “adolescent eroticism” (Kristeva 1989: 224) as a source of *jouissance* and healing, the regenerative portrayal of love, illuminated against a background of “military and political cataclysms” (Kristeva 1989: 222), turns *How I Live Now* into a hopeful and life-affirming young adult love story.

Daisy’s coming into subjectivity is linked to the revolt and transgression of societal rules. Daisy and Edmond operate outside the symbolic where Daisy is free to fully express herself. Laws and taboos crumble around her and Edmond as the war

provided a perfect limbo in which two people who were too young and too related could start kissing without anything or anyone making us stop. There were no parents, no teachers, no schedules. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do that would remind us that this sort of thing didn’t happen in the Real World. There no longer *was* any Real World” (Rosoff 2004: 46).

Thematising the two taboos of totemism which Freud argues lie at the beginning of the morality of man, namely murder and incest (cf. Kristeva 1982), Rosoff’s narrative

¹⁷ “Do you ever think about dying? Edmond asked me, talking on a tangent. And I said Yes, all the time but mostly as a way of making other people feel guilty” (Rosoff, 2004, 44).

focusses on murder as destructive force in the world of the adolescents. The chaos and murderous instincts brought forward by the collapse of the symbolic is in stark contrast to the teenagers' idyllic Arcadia. Their forceful separation by English troops symbolises an entry into adult society as a kind of awakening to a world of collapse and crisis.¹⁸ Invaded by murder and abjection the adolescents' world spirals out of control. Daisy's quest to find Edmond moves the trajectory of the plot along, but years pass and she reaches adulthood before she can finally reunite with him. Although the novel ends on a hopeful note, implying a happy ending of sorts, the lovers have been changed by their experiences of death and abjection, and their previous pre-symbolic *jouissance* is no longer available to them. Yet, as I outline below, the experience was imperative to their survival and maturation as subjects-in-process.

Abjection and Love as Cure

How I Live Now thematises death and abjection as disrupting the protagonist's blissful state of love, yet Daisy's acknowledgment of the existence of death allows her to accept responsibility for herself and Edmond's young sister¹⁹, ultimately turning her into a resilient survivor. As is the case in the other young adult narratives discussed in this exegesis, *How I Live Now* includes a stage of depression, represented by a "symbolic breakdown" (Kristeva 1989: 37), but contrary to the other narratives, it is not the protagonist but her lover who suffers this breakdown, brought about by feelings of abjection, horror and guilt. One of the novel's most memorable scenes of abjection is set up as a pivotal narrative point in Rosoff's description of Gateshead, an abandoned farm building and the site of a massacre. It is this site of murder and starvation that becomes the focal point of abjection and loss of identity for Edmond. Rosoff's description of the horror in this scene of destruction propels the reader to an understanding of the horrors of war, with its accompanying threats to identity.

¹⁸ At one point in the narrative, Daisy states that "[it] was only a few months ago that there was finally a pause in the thousands of wars being waged all over the planet. Or was it one big war? I forget. I think everyone has" (Rosoff 2004: 171).

¹⁹ "By saving Piper I saved myself, and all the things that might have killed us were also the things that saved us" (Rosoff 2004: 193).

With the first occurrence of a violent wartime murder in the lead-up to the Gateshead massacre, the narrative becomes sober and the children's experience of war changes. On a stylistic level, the depiction of violence brings about a clear maturation in style. Rosoff's idiosyncratic, at times whimsical prose becomes darker and deeper, adding weight to the increasingly complex theme of survival during war. Meaningless numbers ("something like seven or seventy thousand people got killed", Rosoff 2004: 24) assume a face and identity. When Daisy and Piper, on their quest to find Edmond and his brothers, arrive in Gateshead, they are confronted with corpses and starving farm animals, among them Piper's pet goat. Both Daisy and Piper experience death with understandable horror. Yet, while the girls manage to work through their experience, it traumatises Edmond so severely that he still suffers from it years later when he and Daisy finally reunite.

I know that he will never silence those unspeakable voices. He heard how people killed, and how they died, and their voices infected him, coursed through his body, poisoned him. He didn't know how to turn off the noise, or turn the hate back out onto the world like the rest of us. He turned it on himself. You could see that from the scars on him (Rosoff 2004: 193).

Grosz notes that abjection is "an avowal of the death drive, a movement of undoing identity" (Grosz 1990: 90). Kristeva defines the abject (namely the object of revulsion) as "more a process than a 'thing'", which is represented by "any kind of transgressive, ambiguous or intermediary state" (Moi 1986: 238–9). Corpses are defined by Kristeva as "the most horrifying example of waste" (Grosz 1990: 91), signifying "the utmost abjection", because they represent "a border that has encroached upon everything" and "the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders" (Kristeva 1982: 3–4). Kristeva argues that corpses may bring the subject to the frontier of their experience as a living being. "It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object" (Kristeva 1982: 3).

The experience of corpses as utmost abjection with its potential to undo one's identity is forcefully illustrated by Rosoff with Edmond's reaction to the massacre. Having witnessed the massacre firsthand and holding himself at least partly responsible for it²⁰, the experience causes him to lose his place in the symbolic,

²⁰ "Isaac knew that his first responsibility was to survive, and to make sure Edmond survived. But Edmond didn't see it that way. The way he saw it, if they left, they abandoned all those people to certain

depicted by his loss of speech. Unable to process or expel the sight of destruction, the field of corpses haunts Edmond's thoughts and leaves him unable to communicate his trauma until Daisy returns to him. Love provides the only possible cure in the face of such abjection and Rosoff's narrative ends with the promise that beyond abjection a renewed identity is possible.

We sat like that, close together in the white garden, lit by the cold white light of the stars, with only each other for warmth.

"OK," he said finally, and he said it out loud, his voice odd and strained, like he'd forgotten how to speak.

That was it. OK.

And then he freed his hands and took mine, stiff and icy cold, and wrapped them in his, which were warm.

It was a start (Rosoff 2004: 185).

Rosoff's narrative, by following Daisy's path, chronicles the process of her initial sexual obsession into a renewed subjectivity, a process that sets Daisy up as a proper subject. The renewal of Daisy's identity is founded as much on her love and concern for Edmond as it is on a (re)newed view of herself. Daisy's view of herself has become a reflection of what Edmond sees in her, augmented by the implication, early on, that Edmond has an almost supernatural power to see inside people and discover their true essence, thus implying that the true Daisy is someone worth loving.

Because of its elaboration of identity and abjection, inextricably linked with the dominant themes of love and death, the depiction of maturation in *How I Live Now* assumes the dynamic of a rebirth. A role reversal of the healing lover (it was Edmond at the beginning, while it is Daisy in the end, who heals her lover from a state of abjection) makes it clear that her experience of love is what opens Daisy up to the possibility of becoming a full subject. Placed in a Kristevan context, Rosoff's narrative demonstrates a turning of "love into a cure" (Kristeva 1987: 381), asserting "the permanence of love as builder of spoken spaces" (Kristeva 1987: 381–2). *How I Live Now* is a unique example of young adult literature in juxtaposing the crisis of the

death ... When Isaac left, Edmond went back to Gateshead, even though he knew how dangerous it was. He had worked and lived side by side with every one of those people for months and perhaps he felt that if he could warn them better, make it clearer, force them to listen, he could save them" (Rosoff 2004: 188–9).

symbolic with love. It is characterised by an intimate relation to Kristevan love and the journey of the self which this entails.

Chapter Two: The Ghost's Child

We shall thus love what we do not have; the object (of love) is the lacking object (Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 73).

The view in psychoanalysis of narcissism as something essential, yet inherently self-deceptive, provides a useful framework for analysing Hartnett's protagonist. The narrative arc of *The Ghost's Child* follows the life of imaginative, solitary Maddy, in whom narcissism is closely connected to a deep existential need for transcendence. This need is initially signalled through a desire for the mystical, and Maddy facilitates her escape from her mother's confined upper-class society by peopling her world with magical creatures. Maddy's desire for her "life to be mystifying" (Hartnett 2007: 47) only deepens with age, and soon after her return from a quest with her father to find (and define) beauty, her path crosses that of the mystical young Feather. Experiencing herself as desiring subject for the first time, Maddy finds the experience of love unsettling and humiliating, likening it in key scenes to a battlefield, a prison, a cruel endeavour, or a crime (cf. Hartnett 2007: 75–82, 92, 94–5, 114–15, 151). The narrative reveals Maddy as someone unaware of herself and unable to reconcile the nature of her lover with her own narcissistic desires, which seem more closely aligned to those of her antagonistic mother than Maddy wishes to be true. As mentioned previously (in part one), Kristeva argues that a love object is found satisfying only if it relates to the subject's narcissism²¹ (cf. Kristeva 1987: 21), which leads her to make the observation that a "narcissistic destiny would in some way underlie all our object choices" (Kristeva 1987: 21).

By falling in love with Feather, Hartnett illuminates the intricate archaeology of Maddy's soul, who takes pride in her own mystical state. She thinks of herself for example as a "misfit who regretted she hadn't been raised by wolves" (Hartnett 2007: 59) and is immediately attracted to Feather, "the most mysterious person" (Hartnett 2007: 54) she has ever met. Within a very short time, Maddy becomes so infatuated

²¹ "[E]ither through personal narcissistic reward (where Narcissus is the subject), or narcissistic delegation (Narcissus is the other; for Freud, the woman)" (Kristeva 1987: 21).

with him that she feels “vulnerable to his loss” (Hartnett 2007: 54), exclaiming to her magical childhood companion, the nargun, that “[v]ulnerability is what love is” (Hartnett 2007: 54).

The more mysterious and magical Feather is revealed to be, the more all-important he becomes to Maddy, who arrives at the conclusion that “she would certainly die without him” (Hartnett 2007: 62). In a sense, the fact that Feather’s magic is confined to Maddy’s eyes²² corresponds to Kristeva’s observation that the “love object absorbs my narcissistic needs, erotic desires, and most phantasmatic ideals, like the ideal of eternity. The resulting amorous object is thus a phantasmatic construction” (Kristeva 2010: 139). Kristeva explains the importance such a love object assumes for the subject by stressing that this phantasmatic construction “becomes the subjects’ absolute pole of stabilisation, magnificence, or exaltation” (Kristeva 2010: 139).

In Hartnett’s narrative, Feather quickly becomes such a pole of narcissistic gratification and magnificence for Maddy, whose “mind, which had for so long been as teeming as Aladdin’s cave, was empty, but for him. Feather was all that mattered, the single essential thing in the world” (Hartnett 2007: 54). Conscious of her own vulnerability, loving Feather becomes for Maddy a guilt-ridden tug-of-war of submission and dominance. Mirroring Kristeva’s quote of Plato’s and Lysias’ conviction of the hostile nature of love,²³ Hartnett portrays the state of being in love in negative and (self-)destructive terms, infused with a strong sense of vulnerability and finitude. Maddy’s magical childhood companion, the nargun, remarks for example: “You don’t seem free to me ... Your heart is a prison, and you are locked in it too” (Hartnett 2007: 59).

The realisation of love’s beauty in the latter part of the novel might strike some readers as conflicting with Hartnett’s earlier portrayal of love as destructive power dynamic, yet it reflects the protagonist’s growing awareness. Though the cause of pain and suffering, it is also the source of great joy. “And you take pride in knowing you’re

²² Maddy’s mother, symbolising societal norms, regards Feather merely as a “savage” (Hartnett 2007: 70).

²³ “[I]n the friendship of the lover there is no real kindness: he has an appetite and wants to feed upon you: ‘As wolves love lambs so lovers love their loves’ ” (Kristeva 1987: 65).

capable of great love,’ [Maddy] said, ‘and live in the knowledge that you can feel it again.’” (Hartnett 2007: 151).

Love: A Quest for the Most Beautiful Thing in the World

The first half of Hartnett’s fablelike novel centres around a literal understanding of a philosophical task set by Maddy’s father to see the wonders of the world so she may answer truthfully “the only important question there is”, which is “*What is the world’s most beautiful thing?*” (Hartnett 2007: 27, emphasis in the original). Maddy’s task matures along the narrative arc into an excavation of emotions and drives that are buried deep in Maddy’s self. The trajectory of the plot provides a number of possible answers to her father’s challenge, reflective of Maddy’s multifaceted and changing subjectivity. At first, sea eagles are what Maddy considers as the most beautiful, prompting her father to mock her provinciality and whisk her away on a quest to see the world, so she may be in a position to give a more considered answer. After she and her father have travelled the world for years, Maddy decides that “[e]ach beautiful thing is supremely, absolutely beautiful. There’s nothing that is lovelier than everything else combined” (Hartnett 2007: 37). Her father, however, presents her with a mirror together with the instruction to “look more closely at what is right under your nose” (Hartnett 2007: 37). Realising she is her father’s most beautiful thing fills Maddy with pride and courage, but it is only when she experiences love herself that she can truly understand her father. “‘Papa,’ she said, ‘Feather is my answer. Feather is my most beautiful thing’” (Hartnett 2007: 67). Thus, Hartnett’s narrative shifts the answer to the question that lies at the heart of *The Ghost’s Child* from literal objects to a love object, just as Maddy’s growing awareness moves from sea eagles to Feather. Thereby, the narrative development reflects Plato’s philosophical enquiry into the relationship between love and beauty. As Kristeva writes, Plato’s Psyche “speaks and displays herself only in love” and “soars on a winged flight toward the supreme Good through the glowing, soothing, ebullient vision of the Beautiful” (Kristeva 1987: 59). Hartnett’s narrative reveals that to truly understand love it is necessary to be the subject, not only the object, of love, since no one is more beautiful to the lover than the loved one. The following is a key narrative scene which illustrates the relationship between beauty and love that underpins Maddy’s maturation and subjective journey.

Maddy would never forget the moment when all the loveliness she'd seen on her travels around the world crumbled into insignificance – when she knew for certain that Feather, homeless on the beach, tousled and tameless as a flash of lightning, was the most beautiful thing in the world (Hartnett 2007: 60–1).

Maddy realises that nothing is more beautiful than the person one loves dearly, and thus she seeks to keep her lover to herself. However, Feather's disappearance after Maddy's miscarriage and attempted suicide, and Maddy's subsequent psychic journey into a painful abject space, reflect the experience of separation at the beginning of one's entry into the symbolic. On Feather's mystical Island of Stillness, Maddy finds the answer to the question²⁴ that encapsulates the main theme of the second half of the plot.

Maddy saw it in her mind, a great coin flipping slowly, showing first the whiplash tail of sadness, next the warm facet of joy. Sorrow and joy, bonded so closely that occasionally they spun inside each other. 'And you take pride in knowing you're capable of great love,' she says, 'and live in the knowledge that you can feel it again' (Hartnett 2007: 150–1).

Her realisation of the sorrow and joy of love recovers the theme of the narrative's earlier quest. In tying both parts together, Maddy arrives at the conclusion that the *capacity* to feel great love is the answer to her father's question. Love becomes a source of pride, even though it is so closely linked to loss and sorrow. Thus, the movement of the plot from a love that is drawn toward the ideal other toward a renewed appreciation of her own self mirrors Maddy's changing subjectivity in a true dialogic relationship with the other. Taking pride in the love she felt for Feather, Maddy knows that love's sorrow and joy were both instrumental in revealing to herself her innermost and unknown desires. No longer a complete stranger to herself, the Kristevan love journey underpins Maddy's growing knowledge of herself, which is also signified in the moments of her death, when it is no longer Feather but her child's ghost, and thus a part of her own self, who becomes the embodiment of love and beauty. As the ghost of her son appears to lead her away to an afterlife, Maddy's quest for love and beauty finds a successful end.

²⁴ Thus, the two quests in *The Ghost's Child* are attempts to find answers to the two questions posed in the narrative. To her father's question ("What is the most beautiful thing in the world?"), Maddy adds her own: "How can you love, and lose it, and go on living without it, and not feel the loss forever" (Hartnett 2007: 150)?

The Impossible Couple

Hartnett's representation of love as doomed, yet necessary endeavour, is a poetic attempt to find expression for the unspeakable sorrow and joy in a person's capacity to, and yearning for, love. The pain of love's precariousness permeates *The Ghost's Child*, yet it is counterbalanced by a recognition that "love is like moonlight or thunder, or rain on a tin roof in the middle of the night: it is one of the things in life that is truly worth knowing" (Hartnett 2007: 57). Hartnett's narrative is a unique young adult love narrative not only because it allows the reader a deep engagement with the intimacy of love and loss, but also because it offers a fresh perspective on a Romeo-and-Juliet type of romance.

Maddy's first encounters with Feather on a deserted beach are almost immediately foreshadowed by a fear of loss as the realisation grows in Maddy that she not only wants but needs Feather. In an attempt to cement their relationship, Maddy introduces Feather to her parents. Although Maddy's upper-class mother tries to prevent their union, Maddy's father grudgingly agrees to their relationship, provided Feather will "live life as a civilised fellow" (Hartnett 2007: 73). However, Hartnett reverses any expectations of a happy ending by revealing the lovers as utterly unsuitable and unhappy in their life together. In her discussion of Romeo and Juliet's outlaw love, Kristeva similarly imagines an alternative, happy ending for Romeo and Juliet, predicting that in the face of daily routines and lacking the excitement of transgressing symbolic laws, their love would eventually peter out. "Their romance is guaranteed by secrecy and sanctioned by brevity" (Kristeva 1987: 217), Kristeva argues, positing that it cannot survive the limits of legality or the removal of the *jouissance* inherent in outlaw love. Thus, Kristeva asserts, the "story of the famous couple is in fact a story of the impossible couple" (Kristeva 1987: 210). It seems that Hartnett's couple in *The Ghost's Child* is similarly an impossible couple and happy only while their love is outside the symbolic law. Hartnett foreshadows the impossibility of their marriage by portraying Maddy as torn between what her heart desires and what she knows to be right. "She knew someone better than herself would say don't do it, Feather, don't agree" (Hartnett 2007: 73–4). Yet, her desire wins. "But Maddy was herself, and she loved and wanted him, so she stood in anxious silence and said nothing and saved nothing, hungering for him to agree" (Hartnett 2007: 74). When

Feather agrees to their marriage, “Maddy did not feel like the architect of a goal, but exultant and victorious, and no longer alone” (Hartnett 2007: 74).

Reversing the expected happy ending of love narratives, Hartnett skilfully portrays the couple’s life together as deeply unhappy. Feather’s mystical qualities, once the source of her joy and infatuation, now scare Maddy. “The sight of him alone on the sand, his knees drawn up, his face turned to the breeze, had once filled Maddy with soaring delight. Now it chilled her to the core (Hartnett 2007: 82), Maddy observes. However, Feather’s attempts at fitting into society seem similarly misplaced, as for example the following weeding scene illustrates: Maddy, “being something of a weed herself” (Hartnett 2007: 78) would prefer Feather to let the weeds in their garden grow, but she simultaneously realises that “then the garden might be ugly, not beautiful. Their house might seem laughable, their life together unconvincing” (Hartnett 2007: 79).

The impossibility of reconciling two opposing desires underpins a deeper, unsettling balancing act of semiotic and symbolic elements. Maddy finds it impossible to content herself with an existence outside society²⁵, just as Feather cannot reside within it. “They sat together at the table in sorrow, the lonely fairy-tale princess and the wondrous being chained to the ground” (Hartnett 2007: 87), Maddy narrates, and yet she is unable to let him go. Finding Feather once again standing by himself on the beach, Maddy observes him “looking out to sea”, at something “to which she was blind”, and regarding it “more devoutly than he ever looked at her”. Maddy realises that of “all the things that were important to him, this thing was immortal” (Hartnett 2007: 84). Almost immediately, Maddy is resolved to fight to keep Feather from returning to his mystical life, even though this may mean the loss of the very qualities that drew her to him. Maddy’s following contemplation illustrates the painful predicament of her impossible love: “She couldn’t bear losing him to this shapeless need. She would fight to keep him – but how to battle something that has less substance than air? And if she fought it, and if it died, wouldn’t part of Feather die too” (Hartnett 2007: 86).

²⁵ Early on after moving into the cottage with him, Maddy finds herself “wishing she had just one friend, to whom she might show him off” (Hartnett 2007: 77).

Even though it was the recognition of her own semiotic qualities in Feather that made him the ideal other, Maddy feels she needs to erase Feather's semiotic nature to securely anchor their relationship in the symbolic. By forcing Feather to relinquish his semiotic nature, Maddy thus becomes his gaoler who regulates what he wears, where he sleeps and how he spends his days, desiring a respectable, secure existence with him in her world.²⁶ Yet, Maddy's efforts of mastering Feather's and her own semiotic nature are not gratifying. Instead, they leave her in a state of abject melancholy, described by Hartnett as "a ship buoyantly riding the waves while, under water, its hull is splintering on the reef" (Hartnett 2007: 90). Whereas Rosoff's narrative depicts love's healing qualities, Hartnett's depiction of romantic love as an impossible fusion portrays the alienating qualities of love. The loss of love, though painful, is an essential part in the journey to maturation and acceptance of the unknown in oneself.

Alienation and Self-knowledge Through Love

Does delirium know a truth which is true in a different way than objective reality because it speaks a certain subjective truth, instead of a presumed objective truth? Because it presents the state of the subject's desire (Moi, The Kristeva Reader, 308)?

In Hartnett's narrative, love is presented as alienating from the start, and thus never far from a state of abjection and melancholia. The "heart that loves wonders how it lived, in the past, without loving – and how it will live now, now that it loves" (Hartnett 2007: 58), Maddy discovers, scared at how vulnerable this love makes her. The fear of losing her lover turns her into an abject being, someone who fears the emptiness and void that would result from the loved one's absence. Maddy is first introduced to the loss of a loved object in childhood when she gives up her toy giraffe, "the first present Papa ever gave her" (Hartnett 2007: 18), and instantly regrets it. As soon as she puts the soft toy into a box of hand-me-downs, Maddy is racked by remorse and "felt more impoverished than anyone who'd ever lived" (Hartnett 2007: 18). The loss of her toy,

²⁶ Cf. Maureen Clark's postcolonial reading of Hartnett's *The Ghost's Child*, in which she clearly delineates the ways in which Maddy "conquers" Feather (Clark 2014).

together with Maddy's realisation that "she could be callous and stupid" (Hartnett 2007: 18), result in a feeling like a "mortal wound" (Hartnett 2007: 18) from which it takes Maddy a long time to recover. Fearing to feel the same pain again, Maddy decides that "for the rest of her life, she would hold tightly to what she loved" (Hartnett 2007: 18–19). This helps explain why Maddy's love of Feather makes her feel so vulnerable to his loss, even though the loss of him is depicted in less painful detail than their depressed and melancholy life together. After all, Hartnett portrays Maddy at her most alienated and fragmented when she lives together with Feather in their forest cottage, unable to accept Feather as "an other" with different desires and needs²⁷. Thus, Maddy's journey to self-knowledge centres not on her brief, turbulent relationship with Feather, but rather on her acceptance of Feather being an other, which in a Kristevan context is always connected to the uncovering of the stranger within oneself. This "openness to the other and a relational, 'intertextual' or intersubjective construction of meaning" (Dayal 2000: 24) is essential in the construction of subjectivity. As an opening up to the stranger within herself underpins Maddy's identic renewal, this is rendered beautifully in Hartnett's narrative through a use of magical realism, utilised to signal both the alienating and healing qualities of love in a journey of self-discovery. As a literary inscription of the incompatibility of the two lovers, magical realism in the form of mythical creatures, allegories and fantastic metaphors allows the plot to go beyond the limits of reality in order to depict love's alienating nature. But by providing a link between metaphor and reality, Hartnett's conceptualisation of Maddy's journey of (self) discovery as a magical journey also includes healing qualities that are revealed after Maddy's arrival at the "island of Feather's dearest desire" (Hartnett 2007: 149). More than any other experience, the fact that Feather's island turns out to be utterly "horrible"²⁸ (Hartnett 2007: 147) forces Maddy to open herself up to Feather as an other if she is to make sense of his desires. Yet, at first Maddy finds it impossible to

²⁷ Maddy's depression and melancholy abjection after the loss of Feather and her miscarried child informs Michelle Preston's analysis of Hartnett's novel (cf. Preston 2009).

²⁸ "She had imagined the sand would be clean and powdery, but it was coarse under her bare feet. She turned up the flame and held the lamp aloft, expecting to see palm trees and pools of azure water and the tumbling quills of gorgeous birds. Instead she saw craggy ochre rocks piled haphazardly upon one another, a harsh rent scenery like the floor of an exhausted quarry. She picked a path over and between the boulders, slipping on yellow grit. As she climbed, she listened for the grumble of hyenas or rattlesnakes. The island seemed the sort of place such bad-tempered creatures might call home" (Hartnett 2007: 141).

reconcile this island with her ideal lover. “There was nothing that moved; there was a pallor of strange deadness; there was nothing pleasing to see” (Hartnett 2007: 142), Maddy thinks and decides that “Feather, who loved the pulse of living things, could never have desired to find himself in this barren place” (Hartnett 2007: 142). Only after her realisation that in his eyes, “[e]verything is always lovely” (Hartnett 2007: 144) on his island, Maddy is forced to admit to herself Feather’s alterity. “The island was horrible, all her struggle seemed wasted, and Feather was someone she couldn’t understand” (Hartnett 2007: 146). Although painful and alienating, the sense of Feather as an other is also the first step towards acceptance and tolerance. If “she were forced to stay, Maddy would stalk the beach just as Feather had done, relentlessly scanning the horizon for elsewhere” (Hartnett 2007: 149), Maddy realises. This insight, though painful, is what underpins Maddy’s maturation in a dialogic interrelationship, and it is a narrative moment that is repeated in the other novels discussed in this exegesis, as well as my accompanying novel, setting them apart from the more plot-driven young adult franchises. Rather than offering quick recipes of “achieving” maturation, this moment of opening oneself up to the other and revealing unknown facets of oneself, allows the protagonists of the young adult novels discussed here to see themselves as multifaceted and full of potential. Maturation thus becomes a process rather than a product, a cycle of rebirth and renewal that does not end with reaching adulthood. Essential in Maddy’s journey of self-discovery, the acceptance of Feather as an other is a pivotal narrative moment that defines the rest of her life. Accepting their incompatibility without regretting the great love she felt for Feather, Maddy does not object when Zephyrus, the west wind who helps Maddy return from Feather’s island to her hometown, remarks that “[y]ou don’t want peace or sameness. You know that life is for going, not stopping” (Hartnett 2007: 155). Instead, as a Kristevan subject-in-process, constituted in a truly dialogic relationship with the other, Maddy re-enters the symbolic to renew her childhood identity as a searcher²⁹.

²⁹ “Were you a sailor?” Maddy is asked when the ghost of her child comes for her at the end of her life, to which Maddy replies: “I was a sailor. Although, in truth, more a searcher than a sailor ... I searched for the answer to a question. I sailed the world trying to find it, and eventually I did. But some answers don’t finish a quest – they merely start it” (Hartnett 2007: 14).

Maddy's Maturation as a Subject-in-process

How does one craft sturdy happiness out of something as important, as complicated, as unrepeatably and as easily damaged as life? (Hartnett, The Ghost's Child, 25)

Hartnett illustrates the dialogic relationship of coming into subjectivity through a number of narrative devices. For example, she utilises the names of her characters to signal their (changing) interrelationship and multiple, fragmented selves. Maddy is called Matilda Victoria Adelaide, but thinks of herself in her youth as Maddy, and only becomes Matilda after her parents pass away. Another important character in the dialogic construction of Maddy's subjectivity is her father, who she experiences either as loving travelling father or respected iron man, based on a misunderstanding in early childhood.³⁰ While the respected iron man is someone who mocks and scares her, the travelling father marks a crucial stage in Maddy's development because he introduces her to the notion that love and beauty are entwined in the eyes of the person who is in love. Hartnett's portrayal of Maddy's loving father resembles Freud's father of individual prehistory (cf. Kristeva 1987: 26), a stand-in for both parents since the pre-Oedipal child is not yet aware of sexual difference, who "is the guarantor of identity and the bridge by which the child succeeds in leaving behind its fusion with the mother and moving toward an identification with the formal paternal function associated with language and law" (Miller 2014: 214). Kristeva describes the relationship of a child with this father of individual prehistory as "being looked at by someone who makes him exist in his delicate identity" (Kristeva 1987: 321). Similarly, the mirror which her father gives Maddy, together with the admission that love and beauty are inextricably linked, represents a significant moment in the construction of Maddy's identity.

Similarly important for the depiction of a changing subjectivity in Hartnett's narrative are mystical creatures, whose names are indicative of their nature. Both the *nargun* of Maddy's childhood and later the wind *Zephyrus*, who becomes Maddy's

³⁰ "When she was small and her mother said the word 'earning', Maddy hadn't understood what she meant. She decided that Mama had meant to say 'ironing'" (Hartnett 2007: 17).

helper on her quest to find Feather, are crucial companions in Maddy's changing sense of self. The two beings that are Maddy's objects of desire are named by her *Feather* and *Fay*. Feather's name bears connotations not only to the bird world (both think of sea eagles as the most beautiful thing in the world, and Feather is described as having a special relationship with birds), but also to Plato's winged soul taking flight. The miscarried child, who Maddy calls Fay, is reflective of the magic that surrounds their cottage in the forest. However, the only characters whose names change are Maddy and her father, thus signalling their multi-layered subjectivities.

Another narrative device to illustrate Maddy's subjective renewal and rebirth is the motif of sea journeys, with the sea symbolising the interplay of semiotic and symbolic elements in Hartnett's narrative. During her adolescent search for the most beautiful thing, Maddy traverses the oceans of the world to mark the end of her childhood. After her failed marriage with Feather and the loss of her unborn child, Maddy sails the ocean again. This second sea voyage resembles a painful and chaotic semiotic space that has to be traversed before the subject's re-entry into the symbolic world. Maddy's subsequent sea voyages lead her to England and signal her re-entry into the symbolic, marking a time in her life in which the semiotic elements retreat and almost disappear. The magical figures, which are plenty in Maddy's childhood and adolescence, retreat, just as the semiotic forces that are so strong in her early life, fade. The ocean, crossed frequently on vacation or to return to her childhood home for her parents' funeral, has lost its semiotic qualities until the very end, when the ghost of Maddy's unborn son visits her to ease her transition from life to death. The ocean with all its semiotic qualities reappears as Matilda dies and the Fay leads her away.

Beyond the door, very oddly, was an emerald ocean and a blue sky. A wooden boat bobbed on the water, and Matilda and the boy stepped into it ... The boy hauled up the anchor and Matilda hoisted the sails; the slim boat caught the billowing breeze, jumped the ripples of frothy green waves, and was away (Hartnett 2007: 179).

Finally, it is Maddy's relationship to her unborn child, whose death is a source of greater sorrow than her unhappy marriage to Feather, that keeps her in an ongoing constructive dialogue with the unknown, semiotic qualities in herself, providing Hartnett's narrative with resilience in the face of tragedy (cf. Flanagan 2014). Maddy's love for her own unborn child mirrors that of her father towards her. As soon as Maddy realises that she is pregnant, she regards the child as a source of possible redemption.

“The fay meant it wasn’t cruel to love Feather, for nothing so wonderful could come from something wrong” (Hartnett 2007: 92). When she miscarries, Maddy is overcome with a feeling of self-erasure. “No part of her felt like a real self – she was only strings and jointed limbs ... From now on, she would always be someone who could be lifted up, danced about, dropped aside, and hurt” (Hartnett 2007: 113), Hartnett writes, and her portrayal of Maddy’s depression closely resembles Kristeva’s description of a depressed patient: “She was overcome with a sense of total incapacity, quickly followed by utter dejection that separated [her] from the world, caused her to withdraw into her room, dissolve into tears, and remain speechless, thoughtless for days on end” (Kristeva 1989: 72).

Although Maddy comes to accept Feather’s loss, she continues to long for her unborn child throughout her life. Thus, the revelation by her mysterious visitor, to whom she narrates the events of her life, that he is in fact the ghost of her son, fills Maddy with immense delight, even though she understands the implications of his visit. Aware that this signifies her passage from life to death, Maddy’s childhood need for transcendence re-emerges and fills the moment not with dread but joy and curiosity. Maddy’s ghost is released from the physical shell of her body and she and her son step into a little sailboat and sail away, thus marking Maddy’s death as a true rebirth in a semiotic, mystical and magical sea. In depicting Maddy’s death as cyclical rebirth, Hartnett’s narrative provides the ultimate challenge to the idea of a unified and essential mature self, yet it also reaffirms a Kristevan view of the continual eruption and disturbance of semiotic elements within the symbolic order.

Part Two: A Disadvantaged Reality

The following chapters attempt to illuminate other paths of love in young adult literature than the romantic couple love discussed in Part One. Chapter One is dedicated to a discussion of a philosophical and religious expression of love as *agape* in Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star* (2010). Its portrayal of a socially disadvantaged teenager's complex changing subjectivity framed by Christian love and faith marks it as an unusual novel in the field of young adult literature and gives voice to the existential questions that arise in adolescence. Deborah Ellis' *Looking for X* (1999) uses social marginalisation as a setting to stage a difficult engagement with and full entry into the symbolic world. The mother-daughter bond in this narrative offers the protagonist a protective layer against the perceived threat of the outside world but puts constraints on her development. According to Kristeva, a successful separation from the maternal is vital for the entry of the pre-Oedipal subject into the symbolic and for the construction of subjectivity (cf. Kristeva 1987), and Ellis' novel depicts the difficulty her troubled protagonist has with completing this separation.

The different forms of love discussed in both Part One and Two present alternative paths of the same developmental imperative for the adolescent protagonists. As such, they shift the depiction of maturation from bildungsroman-inspired conventions to a Kristevan subject-in-process that, as a creature of the crossroads, never reaches completion. The two young adult novels discussed in the following chapters are especially important because they offer portrayals of love that exceed common conceptions of love in young adult literature as primarily romantic. In *Tales of Love* (1987), Kristeva makes a significant contribution to the examination of various forms of love. The following chapters seek to engage critically with Kristeva's body of work in a reading of two unusual and vital contributions to young adult literature.

Chapter Three: Faith, Love and Hope in Matthew Quick's Sorta Like a Rock Star³¹

Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star* (2010) is a significant contribution to young adult literature and serves to illustrate Kristeva's approach to adolescence as an "open system", which Coats calls the "adolescent's neverending creation and recreation of the self" (Coats 2001: 214). *Rock Star* represents moments of youth as non-fixed, fluid and a time of openness, and depicts maturation as a renewal of the self and an opening up to that which has been repressed. At key moments the novel echoes the complex nature of adolescence in literature which Kristeva discusses in her essay "The Adolescent Novel" (Kristeva 1995), in particular the adolescent as a mythical and ambiguous figure of the imaginary (Kristeva 1995: 135). Kristeva writes about adolescence not in the sense of "a developmental stage [but] an open psychic structure" (Kristeva 1995: 136). In *Rock Star* the "essentially open, incomplete structure" (Kristeva 1995: 152) of the adolescent protagonist Amber provides the perfect screen for Quick's parable of a battle of hope against despair.

The protagonist's experience of identity formation assumes Christian parallels in her search "for a chance to make a difference in the lives of people who needed it the most" (Quick 2010: 52). Quick's portrayal of a Catholic teenager battling homelessness and depression avoids propaganda statements of the religious right as it goes straight to the heart of some of philosophy's and religion's big questions. What does it mean to have faith? Are love and hope essential qualities for a Christian? What does Christianity have to offer in today's society? And finally, how does one respond to evil without losing faith?

The narrative presents these religious and philosophical questions as key moments in Amber's identity formation. In its narrative frames, the novel contrasts disadvantage, marginality and poverty with its deeper narrative of hope. Amber Appleton, Quick's teenage protagonist, is homeless and secretly camps with her mother in the school bus her mother drives for a living. A deeply symbolic narrative, Amber's homelessness presents a foil against which a narrative of hope works in deep

³¹ I was fortunate to be able to present this chapter in an earlier version at the 2017 AAWP annual conference, aptly titled *Climates of Change*. The paper was published in the TEXT Special Issues Series (No 51, October 2018).

contrast. Amber's traumatic experiences and her utter abjection assume Christian nuances as Quick stages a philosophical and religious crisis. God as *agape*, or hope, is contrasted with Nietzsche and nihilism throughout the narrative in the form of a rhetorical battle between Amber and the widow of a German philosopher who counters Amber's youthful optimism with Nietzsche quotes, foreshadowing some of the traumatic events of the latter part of the novel.

“What do you know, child?” Joan of Old says. “Life always gets harder toward the summit – the cold increases, responsibility increases.’ Also Nietzsche. You haven’t even begun to feel pain, young woman, but you will. You will feel pain. Life is hell, and your life has only just begun.”

Joan sorta stares at me through her pink wrinkly eyelids, and suddenly, this old, Nietzsche-quoting woman chills my bones. Maybe she’s right. Maybe there is nothing but pain in my future. Endless pain and then you die. Can this be what’s true? (Quick 2010: 118).

Rock Star's battle between hope and despair is framed on various, interlinked levels. On the level of language, Amber's hopeful exuberance is contrasted with her nemesis' unaffectionate tone and a tendency to counteract youthful optimism with Nietzsche quotes. The protagonist's exuberant tone becomes muted in the wake of her mother's murder, evocative of Amber's emptiness, which is stylistically characterised by the dominance of the blank page. The written word becomes sparse, and Quick's sentences assume a staccato-like pattern reverberating the short, explosive eruptions of Amber's grief and horror at the brutal murder of her mother, while the physical turning of the page corresponds to her monotone melancholy with a loss of language. With a renewal of her hopeful optimism, Quick's style picks up speed again and the protagonist's exuberance is even more prominent than before:

Before I burst into tears, in my mind, I start pumping myself up with accolades to stop the waterworks, and I'm using a super-mega sports announcer voice:

The indomitably hopeful one!

The girl of unyielding optimism!

The teen of merriment!

The fan favorite!

Your undisputed champion!

“Amber – Rock Star of Hope – Apple-TOOOOOOOON!”

I yell across the Friendly's, and everyone in the joint turns and looks at me like my head is on fire (Quick 2010: 354–5).

The battle between hope and despair is also fought on a thematic level in the nature of events presented in Quick's narrative. *Rock Star* is marked by tragedy both familiar (homelessness in an unaffected city, abandonment, alcoholism, poverty) and extraordinary (the brutal murder of the protagonist's mother). Amber's tragic life is contrasted with her deep love for Jesus, her loyalty to her friends and her stubborn optimism. The concepts of love, faith and hope are elaborated along two interlinked dynamics. Love and hope play a fundamental role in driving the plot structure and form the core of Amber's identity, as she and others think of herself. Yet, love and hope are also placed within a Christian context and structured within this framework.

Christian Love and Hope: Agape and Love-thy-neighbour

The contextualisation of love within a Christian dynamic in *Rock Star* allows a reflection on Kristeva's writings on *agape* (godly, Christian love). "Christian love is definitely a *disinterested gift*. Far from needing to deserve it or to fear its withdrawal by God, the Christian is assured of being loved, independently of his merits. Could that love also – especially? – be a love for those who are unworthy?" (Kristeva 1987: 139, emphasis in the original). Smith writes that "the movement away from the (object) mother towards the (ideal) father ... is the precondition for idealisation which forms the basis of love as *agape* (love tending towards the ideal) engaged in a neverending struggle with *eros* (passionate and destructive love)" (Smith 1998: 34).

As Kristeva's analysis of the concept of love as a crucial building block of Western subjectivity moves from the biblical Song of Songs to an elaboration on Paul's interpretation of God as *agape* (cf. Lechte 1990b: 172), Saint Bernard de Clairvaux's views of passion in love, and Thomas Aquinas' self-love as crucial premise for the love of another, she calls attention to Paul's doctrine. "[T]he ideal is there already in me – if only I would recognize it: 'I' is everything in the ideal, even if the body is nothing. Through the symbolic (active principle), I surpass all passivity – masochism included. And in opening myself up to the symbolic (Other), I will love the other as myself" (Lechte 1990b: 173).

The above summarises Amber's approach to "help people who needed it" (Quick 2010: 52) and her approach to society in general. Contrary to the protagonist's

view of society as threat in Ellis' novel (cf. Chapter Four), Amber's interactions with the outside world are characterised by openness and a love of the other as herself. Embodying the active enlightenment that Paul calls for, Amber touches on the lives of those in her hometown who need it the most – a disabled and bullied student, a low-income teacher, an abject war veteran, immigrants who are intimidated by the prospect of learning a new language and the forgotten residents of a retirement home. The plot in Quick's narrative is driven by *agape* or love tending towards the ideal. Amber's actions of love are destined to instil hope in the people around her. In the absence of Christian *agape*, Quick's narrative has a tendency to present love as either manic (Amber's mother, whose search for the ideal boyfriend becomes the driver of her destruction), or solitary (the traumatised war veteran who suffers in solitude, unable to share his pain with the people around him). Love is presented as pure and constructive mainly in the Christian context, as a love of self that becomes the progenitor of a love of others. Thus, *Rock Star* offers an original and vital contribution to the depiction of love in young adult literature and the importance of love in adolescent development by placing the focus not on romantic couple love but love as *agape*.

Amber's interest in Christianity stems from religious children's books titled *Jesus was a Rock Star*, which are "the only thing my father, Bob, left behind for me when he took off" (Quick 2010: 53). After being baptised in a more orthodox church, Amber, with a distrust of authority characteristic of her marginalised existence, quickly becomes disaffected with the traditional conservatism of the Catholic Church and finds what she is looking for in Father Chee's derelict Korean Church. The aesthetic of abjection as evidenced in the depiction of the small church with failing congregation numbers is in deep contrast to the narrative of hope. Amber's church of choice is "an old shoe store turned house of God, and sits nestled between a McDonald's and a liquor store" (Quick 2010: 51). Paralleling the Christian narrative of the New Testament, Amber's actions of love and hope centre on misfits and outcasts who are as marginalised as she and her mother are. Her message of hope assumes the symbolism of repair, which Father Chee likens to a miracle.

[W]hen I asked Him for help, God sent me a young, hopeful girl who was able to convince a group of shy Korean women to sing The Supremes – making ordinary women into divas – doubling my church's membership. This was a great miracle that I saw with my own eyes. It boosted my faith much (Quick 2010: 215).

The nature of *agape* is also echoed in Amber's weekly "Afternoon Battle between Hope and Pessimism" (Quick 2010: 114) in the retirement home, in which Amber, as the "Princess of Hope" battles verbally with the "woman in black" (Quick 2010: 114), the widow of a German philosopher, who is fond of quoting Nietzsche and challenges Amber's hopeful outlook on life. When Amber's optimism is challenged, she finds an answer in *agape*. "I walk over to Joan, say, 'That's okay. Be as pessimistic as you want, JOO. I'll still love you anyway', and give her a big sloppy kiss on the cheek" (Quick 2010: 118).

In the course of the novel, Amber's conversation with Jesus and her own faith moves from a relatively firm foundation based on *agape* to utter despair in the wake of her mother's killing. The disinterested nature of *agape*, the belief that it is already inside oneself and only waits for recognition, coupled with the belief that one is intrinsically worthy of it, is a foil to the senseless and brutal murder of Amber's mother. Although the people in her life rally around her, Amber struggles to reconcile her faith with the existence of such an evil act, and the novel poses questions it cannot truly answer, such as "why do bad things happen to good people" (Quick 2010: 199)? In an attempt to counter Amber's struggle to reconcile love with the existence of hatred, Father Chee reiterates the core message of love when he calls the "story of Jesus ... a good story, simply because it teaches us that we should be kind to others. That we should do whatever it takes, that we should sing soul music if it makes the lives of others better. That we should try to be good people, and love everyone" (Quick 2010: 237).

Despite these words, Amber seems unable to continue her existence in Christian love, neither able to love herself nor the other, until a key moment in the narrative repeats her earlier avowal of seeking to help those in need. Her rescued pet dog needs medical attention and Amber experiences this moment of need as a renewal of her hopeful, loving self. The town sees Amber's return to hope in the face of abject despair as a triumphant moment and rallies around her at a fundraiser for her dog's treatment. *Rock Star's* main message that life becomes meaningless in the absence of hope is voiced at the event by the Nietzsche-quoting widow, thus symbolising a victory of hope over despair.

"I understand the town is having some sort of pep rally for you because of what happened to your mother and because you were so constantly on your guard that you are no longer able to

defend yourself, like Nietzsche said. I hear you've lost hope, and – regardless of my philosophical views – you're far too young for that. What will you have to look forward to in old age, if you become a nihilist before you hit eighteen?" (Quick 2010: 328).

Amber returns to hope in part because the townspeople repay her in kind. After years of reaching out to her community in hope and love, the people she has inspired return the gesture. Their effort to help her through depression is borne out of love for the other and love for the self, a crucial precondition for any kind of love at all. Kristeva argues that love allows us to rise above ourselves and our situation and suffering (Kristeva 1987: 165). She explains that self-love was not pathological for Freud, "provided it takes place through an ideal of oneself" (Lechte 1990b: 172). Self-love is also crucial to Christianity. Thomas Aquinas sees in "love of self (*Amor sui*) ... the first move in loving others" (Lechte 1990b: 173). Kristeva explains that in the Christian "ontologies of love" (Kristeva 1987: 170) by Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas, "*love of self* as both the necessary and limiting basis of all love" means that "the speaking subject is a loving subject" (Kristeva 1987: 170). With *Rock Star*, Quick has developed this argument further by suggesting that a loving subject is also a hopeful subject.

Love and Hope as Identity

As the events of the novel delineate a battle of hope against despair, and the trajectory of the plot takes the reader on a roller-coaster journey from youthful optimism to depression before it arrives at a conclusion founded on love, faith and hope, a reflection on Kristeva's engagement with the crisis and renewal of identity allows us to delve deeper into Amber's identity as "work-in-progress" (Coats 2001: 214). Kristeva calls her notion of the subject-in-process an "attempt to articulate as precise a logic as possible between identity or unity, the challenge to this identity and even its reduction to zero, the moment of crisis, of emptiness, and then the reconstitution of a new, plural identity" (Guberman 1996: 189).

In Amber's case, love and hope form the core of her private and public self. Her identity cannot be truly seen outside a Christian context, because the two are deeply intertwined in the novel. Given the traumatic nature of events, a reading of *Rock Star* in the context of maturation will necessarily have to address disillusionment

as part of the bildungsroman pattern (cf. Trites 2014), especially since Quick presents optimism as a fundamentally youthful quality. Mirroring the contrast of hope with despair, Christian *agape* is opposed with disillusioned nihilism in key moments in the narrative as Amber in her grief ponders her mother's senseless murder and questions how to respond to it. Either she will be able to "return to her hopeful self" (Quick 2010: 268) or she will "never recover from the blow" (Quick 2010: 216).

At crucial moments of self-doubt, Amber leans towards the second choice, such as when she decides to "quit being Amber Appleton ... I can't keep living the way I used to live" (Quick 2010: 178). These moments of disillusioned resignation are contrasted with Amber's earlier selfless work for people who need her as a symbol of hope. In the novel's early stages, Amber's hopeful optimism and her charitable love are the faces of her public identity³². Painfully aware of her precarious situation, Amber puts conscious effort into presenting herself as a "Princess of Hope" (Quick 2010: 114). In the wake of her mother's murder, Amber questions her public image, unsure whether it is a true representation of her identity or "all an act" (Quick 2010: 299).

Realising that her rescued dog needs medical attention results in Amber returning to her hopeful self before she fully realises it.³³ It is selfless love that triumphs over resignation, conceptualising Amber's maturation not as disillusionment but as a return to love and hope. However, it is a new and plural identity that is reconstituted. Acknowledging that her hopeful self was a façade for the sake of other people, she reclaims her hopeful, loving identity for her own sake and builds a new identity that no longer denies the existence of hatred but remains hopeful despite of it. This moment of rebirth is depicted in the form of a haiku when Amber confronts her mother's killer in the final pages of the novel.

How I am responding to his murdering my mother.
You may exist in
This world – but I exist too

³² Amber explains after her mother's murder that "what you probably don't realize is that I cried a whole bunch before my mother was killed too" (Quick 2010: 299).

³³ "[B]efore I know it, I'm praying again ... And then I sorta promise JC that I will try to return to my hopeful self if He spares BBB's life" (Quick 2010: 268).

And I will not yield (Quick 2010: 348).

As Coats notes in her review of the novel (2010), Amber bears resemblance to Eleanor Porter's Pollyanna, the heroine of her eponymous children's books about an orphan who advocates Christian virtues and unbridled optimism. However, Coats rightly remarks that "unlike Pollyanna, Amber begins to question her approach before she is thrown face-to-face with genuine darkness" (Coats 2010: 39). Amber's early moments of self-doubt signify that unlike Eleanor Porter's children's books, Quick's novel challenges social disadvantage and raises social issues such as a fair minimum wage, affordable health and child care, and financial aid for single parents. Most importantly, though, society's view of Amber's mother is challenged. Amber, under no illusions as to her mother's parenting,³⁴ is also deeply aware of her mother's love for her, which she recounts for the reader in a list of "top-seven all-time Amber-and-her-mom moments" (Quick 2010: 12). This complex and balanced characterisation of Amber's mother breaks away from conventions in young adult literature to place an adolescent between two opposing parent figures, such as Westwater identifies in her discussion of abjection.

At the apex is a child or adolescent seeking identity – who to be and how to be. On one leg of the triangle is the parent who has not accepted the pain involved in earning an identity, and on the other, the parent (or authority figure) who has come to terms with the pain of abjection, accepted it, and achieved wholeness (Westwater 2000: 84).

While Donna, the mother of Amber's friend with a disability, is indeed presented as having "achieved wholeness", Amber, at crucial plot points, recounts memories of her mother that serve to underscore the narrative's message that Amber is the person she is because of her mother's love for her.

Quick's novel subtly illustrates the ways in which society marginalises and excludes Amber's mother and paints Amber's experience of this exclusion as a form of involuntary exile. Frequently drawing on personal experience, Kristeva comments that "the psychical working out of exile – of separation, loss, incompleteness – was the path required to reconstruct their living, demanding, and creative psychical space"

³⁴ "She sucks at being a mom. Emphatically" (Quick 2010: 9).

(Kristeva 2010: 184). The plot of Quick's novel leads Amber from the experience of homelessness as an enforced exile to a voluntary exile in Donna's home to work through loss, separation and the trauma of poverty, which is depicted as a sojourn into the semiotic chaos of depression.³⁵

Love and death, like social inclusion and exclusion, are different images of the continuous battle between hope and despair, the complex dynamic that interweaves the various plot elements. In an almost ironic twist, the murder of Amber's mother symbolises the end of Amber's social exclusion in poverty and homelessness, and the way Quick foreshadows and contextualises the event gives it sacrificial overtones, facilitating Amber's return to social inclusion.

We were both crying in public, with our six trash bags of belongings circling our feet, and for some reason, right then and there, I felt like I was saying goodbye to my mother, that she was going to descend into a place that doesn't allow you to return ... But it was also sorta like a beginning for me, because what I promised my mother – I didn't take that vow lightly then, and I sure as hell don't take it lightly now (Quick 2010: 346).

The eruption of nihilistic violence in the form of her mother's murder provides the necessary crisis, and with it the awareness that hope and love are a life philosophy of her own choosing. As Kristeva summarises in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), she considers to be the true gift of Freud's discovery of the unconscious the existence of the uncanny and "foreignness within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided" (Kristeva 1991: 181). Similarly, Quick also thematises this realisation in *Rock Star*. The arbitrary and brutal nature of her mother's killing forces Amber to revisit her view of hope and love in the face of hatred. During her retreat to the safety of Donna's home, in which she experiences both the semiotic energies and the pull of the symbolic, she questions how her mother's murder will affect her approach to the world. Amber experiences her mother's killing as an act of nihilistic evil and as such it threatens the fabric of her identity and the core of her belief. Quick utilises this aspect of Amber's depression to crystallise the novel's main message that "no matter how much evidence we have to prove life is meaningless, we should believe that life makes some sort of sense" (Quick 2010: 237). However, he is careful not to propose any answers in

³⁵ This is artfully presented on a stylistic level with extra-linguistic features such as the predominance of the blank page and the sparseness of the written word.

definitive terms. While his novel is an unabashed plea for remaining hopeful and celebrating love,³⁶ the renewal of her hopeful self is presented as Amber's individual journey.

With the help of everyone she has inspired, Amber manages to work through her crisis of identity, choosing hope over despair, and her return from depression is depicted as a triumphant moment, with society welcoming her like a rock star. By staging Amber's choice to be again a part of her community as a key narrative moment for her psychic renewal, Quick's novel becomes a narrative of community and participation, and Amber's renewal becomes a symbol for love and hope. Thus, contextualising Amber's renewed life philosophy in a Kristevan notion of the subject-in-process offers a vital contrast to a more stereotypical representation of maturation, which would illustrate Amber's growth in a linear pattern with an evolutionary-like trajectory that sees Amber move from immature optimism to disillusioned cynicism. But such a portrayal would miss the main point of Quick's novel, and thus the cyclical pattern of Kristeva's subject-in-process offers a more suitable screen. Never blind to the precarity of her situation, Amber's hopeful optimism is less youthful naivety than sublimation of personal pain and suffering. Her charitable love provides a kind of refuge and the necessary precondition for sublimating the pain of being a social outsider. Celebrating community and participation, the novel instrumentalises love and hope to represent Amber's subjective renewal, stating: "I spread hope. I'm a hope spreader. I guess that's what I do – licentiously – that's why I'm still circling the big flaming ball in the sky" (Quick 2010: 355).

³⁶ The final part of the novel is titled "We are not alone" (Quick 2010: 271).

Chapter Four: A Dolphin Among a Sea of Dolphins. Looking for X

Women doubtlessly reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers. Complicity in the unspoken, connivance of the inexpressible, of a wink, a tone of voice, a gesture, a tinge, a scent. We are in it, set free of our identification papers and names, on an ocean of preciseness, a computerization of the unnameable. No communication between individuals but connections between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences. The community of women is a community of dolphins (Kristeva, Tales of Love, 257).

Resembling Quick's *Rock Star*, Deborah Ellis' *Looking for X* (1999) uses poverty and disadvantage as a setting to depict a difficult engagement with the symbolic outside. Similar to the examples of romantic love in Part One and *agape* in Chapter Three, the protagonist's difficult separation from her mother is a different iteration of an adolescent's journey of coming into fuller subjectivity. *Looking for X* depicts the developmental stasis in the protagonist as a result of a threatening outside world. The mother-daughter bond is a protective layer against this threat, but results in an incomplete separation from the maternal and thereby an incomplete entrance into the symbolic world. The absent father figure further develops a stasis to separate from the mother.

The intricacies of mother-child, and in particular mother-daughter relationships, have been of enormous interest to Kristeva. Grosz remarks for example that "the sexual couple Kristeva focuses on is not man and woman but mother and child" (Grosz 1990: 94)³⁷. Likewise, Smith sees Kristeva's "enquiry into the representation of the maternal, and by extension the feminine, in culture, and into the structural importance of the mother-infant relationship ... at the heart of her intellectual and psychoanalytic practice (Smith 1998: 3). In his introduction to

³⁷ Grosz explains that for Kristeva, the "cultural horror of menstruation ... is not straightforwardly linked to the horror of sexual *difference*. Menstruation does not simply differentiate female from male; rather it marks the differences between men and *mothers* (or potential mothers). The horror of menstruation links women to a (presumed) natural maternity without acknowledging women's sexual specificity" (Grosz 1990: 92, emphasis in the original).

Kristeva's *Crisis of the European Subject*, Samir Dayal explains that Kristeva "has written in the past about the maternal, the 'semiotic' and the 'chora' ... to emphasise the centrality of the mother in the emergence of subjectivity" (Dayal 2000: 23).

[T]he mother's love for the child fleshes out, while giving new meaning to the religio-civic ideal of "Love thy neighbour as thyself" so that it becomes a dramatization of ethical praxis in the psychoanalytic sense. The mother's love for her child is an ideal but not merely idealized virtue. It provides a universal instance of the realization of the ideal: the subject's constitution by means of an openness to the other and a relational, "intertextual" or intersubjective construction of meaning (Dayal 2000: 24).

Kristeva takes her cue from the place of women within the Lacanian symbolic order. Yet, according to Oliver, one of Kristeva's greatest contributions to both psychoanalysis and feminism is her attempt to redirect the focus in psychoanalysis towards the mother, and in particular the maternal body (cf. Oliver 1993: 3). More than the maternal body, it is the mother's role in ushering her child into the symbolic order which Kristeva seeks to examine. From the pre-Oedipal child to the subject anchored in the symbolic order, "it is the mother who for the child, and metaphorically for culture at large, facilitates, enacts and embodies the passage between semiotic and symbolic modalities and the path to representation" (Smith 1998: 22).

Deborah Ellis' *Looking for X* depicts a variation of such a passage from the semiotic to the symbolic. Her web of an idealised mother-child relationship in interaction with the symbolic is so intricately woven that it is difficult to assert one's primacy over the other in terms of chronology or importance. With *Looking for X*, Ellis has created a narrative of narcissistic injury and a portrayal of the problematic idealisation of the maternal in the face of social exclusion. The young protagonist Khyber lives with her mother and twin brothers, who have a severe disability, in a housing complex, aware that her family's poverty makes her a social outsider. When she learns that her mother plans to move the twins to a home for children with autism, Khyber's world spirals out of control. Enmeshed in fights at school and outside, her only friend is the psychotic homeless woman X, who disappears after a group of hooligans attack her and Khyber. Accused of vandalising her school, and seeing her mother's trust vanishing, Khyber sets out to find X and thus vindicate herself. Her quest fails, however, when Khyber returns home, she learns that the true vandals have been found. Khyber and her mother reconcile and decide to move close to the twin's new home, ending the novel on a hopeful note.

Fighting the Symbolic

[T]he child must come to terms with the Symbolic Order as a necessary precondition to understanding herself as a subject constructed of language. S/he must do battle with the Symbolic Order over the phallogentric obstacle to her/his desire in order to become an actualized subject (Trites, citing Lacan, in Disturbing the Universe, 69).

Deborah Ellis' examination of love in a mother-daughter relationship in her slim narrative, *Looking for X*, focusses as much on the daughter's bond with her mother as it explores her wary attitude towards society. Ellis portrays an almost Kleinian family (male figures are by and large absent), in which the protagonist's maturation, structured along a linear narrative pattern, complete with a quest, centres around her shifting attitude towards the outside world.

Ellis, who won the Governor General's Literary Award for her loving portrayal of an unconventional, financially struggling, tight-knit family, has created with the protagonist's mother an unorthodox matriarch. Like Amber's mother in *Sorta Like a Rock Star*, the maternal figure in *Looking for X* is a social outsider, a former stripper and single since the birth of her twins, who have autism. She provides for her family with the assistance of welfare, which allows them to share a modest flat with sparse furnishing in a depressed housing area in Toronto. Despite their financial difficulties, the mother is portrayed as loving and capable, and her parenting is rewarded with an exceptional child. The young protagonist, Khyber, is wise beyond her years, a high achiever at school, fiercely protective of her mother and her brothers. Ellis' style lacks Quick's exuberance, but not his discerning eye, and her quiet, skilful observations are well-suited for the portrayal of an introverted, imaginative young girl, a kind and generous friend to a colourful array of social misfits. That the mother figures in both *Rock Star* and *Looking for X* are socially marginalised may tempt the reader into drawing comparisons between the young protagonists. However, the reader will quickly appreciate how little Khyber and Amber have in common. Where Amber fights for social inclusion and has faith in God, Khyber's role as outsider is more complex. Her unfavourable assessment of society, and of people deemed successful,

is characterised by a sense of distrust and betrayal. Here is a protagonist who views the outside of her small circle of family and friends as a fundamental threat to herself.

Ellis showcases with her plot the tug of war in a mother-daughter relationship, who are in constant, mainly oppositional, interaction with social conventions. In the narrative, it is Khyber who refuses most fiercely, and perhaps with a young adolescent's absolute conviction³⁸, to form a pact with society. Unlike Amber, Khyber regards the outside world with deep distrust. Feeling angry and frustrated with their marginalisation, she exploits social conventions wherever she can. Her struggle with the bruising way society excludes her family as punishment for being different leads her to sublimate for her family's marginalisation by creating the fantasy of a supreme mother, a "phantasmatic ideal" (Kristeva 1987: 362), in which she seeks reassurance and permanence. Despite the grandiosity of her dreams, in which Khyber aspires to explore the world, she seeks shelter in an idealised mother-child relationship, thereby expressing the wounds of a subject who has been deeply injured by her marginalisation. Khyber displays an impossible duality, idealising the maternal and reducing her mother's subjectivity to a purely maternal function, while at the same time situating herself in firm opposition to society, fully aware of her exclusion and marginalisation, seeking a reversal of power dynamics by using this marginalisation as a weapon.

As Khyber's concealed injuries are slowly brought to light in a plot that leads the protagonist from fantasy and crisis to psychic renewal, Khyber's attitude to society undergoes a slow change towards progressive openness. Khyber's maturation is depicted as a slow detachment from her fantasy of a supreme mother, a movement through depression towards the outside world. Elaine Miller, in her introduction to *Head Cases*, writes that both Kristeva and Melanie Klein share the concept of a child's depressive position at the origin of the subject's entrance into language and culture. "Depression, in this version of standard child development, is caused by the child's gradual and necessary separation, as it grows older, from its "mother", or primary provider, and its subsequent assumption of a subjective identity in the "father's" realm

³⁸ Kristeva writes about the "the malady of ideality", which causes the adolescent "to relish both the fantasy of an absolute Object as well as of the fantasy of its vengeful destruction" (Kristeva, 2007, 715).

of language and social interaction” (Miller 2014: 3). Miller observes that “[t]he individual cannot return to the position of fusion with the mother, but she can and does attempt to recuperate her, along with other objects, in imagination and, later, in words” (Miller 2014: 3), a transition that Klein named the “depressive position”. *Looking for X* presents Khyber in a transitory state that veers between the developmental stasis of the mother-daughter bond and the pain and melancholia of a subject separating from her mother. Khyber’s separation from her mother is further hindered by her view of society as a threat, an unfavourable assessment of society, which rests in equal parts on Khyber’s marginalised existence and on society’s tendency to render invisible what it, in turn, views as threatening and undesirable.

Power in Otherness

[T]he presence of the abject hero reminds us that part of that self-construction in community depends on abjecting others that we or our communities revile while continuing to use them for our own purposes (Coats, Growing Up, In Theory, 320).

Karen Coats identifies in young adult literature the ideal place to work “through the physical, psychic, and social abjection of the teenage body seeking meaning and value in a culture that places that body in a liminal space between childhood protection and adult responsibility” (Coats 2011: 319). In young adult literature, the protagonist is often depicted in a struggle to break the parental bonds which they see as representing the conventional, traditional social order. However, when the social order is clearly dysfunctional, as it is portrayed in *Looking for X*, seeking retreat and shelter in the maternal is an understandable response. Coats reiterates Kristeva’s view of a symbolic order in crisis, a “contemporary society” that does not provide the “cultural supports for those processes [of repression, displacement, or sublimation] needed to keep abjection at bay” (Coats 2004: 145). Coats clarifies that in the “absence of such supports, the abject figure never gets to that point where drive energies are sublimated into the substitutive logic of the Symbolic” (Coats 2004: 145). She identifies a certain type of (social, familial, moral) outsider in adolescent fiction as a Kristevan “abject figure” who “finds expression in certain characters of young-adult fiction” (Coats 2004: 145). Coats characterises this abject figure as being fully aware of what entry

into society entails, and as having made the choice “to organize their existence around the pole of that nonbeing – the unsublimated expression of the death drive – rather than to organize it around the pole of the Name of the Father and desire” (Coats 2004: 145). Coats argues that “the most useful way to think about these figures of abjection is to say that they refuse to or cannot sublimate the death drive and hence are compelled to enact and reenact it” (Coats 2004: 145). In a way, we can see Peter Pan’s refusal to grow up reflected in Ellis’ protagonist Khyber. However, Peter Pan refuses entry into the symbolic because he experiences an intense feeling of *jouissance* connected with the state of childhood (cf. Coats 2004: 89–90). Yet, Khyber’s difficult engagement with the symbolic is not synonymous with *jouissance* in her experience of being a child, but stems from her assessment of the symbolic as dysfunctional threat.

Ellis’ narrative manifests the abject hero in the other, the outsider, the person marginalised, not just in economic disadvantage but also in the form of disability, psychosis and homelessness. Oliver observes that Kristeva “is concerned with representations of difference that allow individuals to express their individuality without being marginalized in society” (Oliver 1993: 2). For instance, Kristeva has been outspoken about modern Western society’s refusal to meaningfully engage with disability. She urges for the full inclusion of people with disability in society, and has become instrumental in lobbying the French government to guarantee the protection of people with disability in the French constitution. Kristeva writes about disability as something that is multiple and yet singular in that each person with a disability experiences their disability in their own specific and unique way (cf. Kristeva 2010: 34). Yet, she postulates that their exclusion is different from the exclusion of other minorities because for the non-disabled person, disability collapses borders and produces a confusion of an inside/outside. Resonating with her earlier works on the different forms of abjection (cf. Kristeva 1982), this view leads to Kristeva’s argument that the treatment of disability is in many cases a form of modern abjection.

In *Looking for X*, disability becomes a central focus and is a fundamental plot element. Khyber expounds the problem in the opening paragraphs, observing that a “lot of people think that just because Mom used to be a stripper, her children are screwed up and will stay screwed up forever. Not so. My brothers would have been the way they are no matter how Mom paid her rent” (Ellis 1999: 7). Aware of how

society abjects disability, and attentive to one of society's most sacred rituals, Khyber proves ingenious when using this knowledge to her advantage. Sitting with her brother in a spot which is popular among wedding parties for taking photographs, Khyber earns money through "working a wedding" (Ellis 1999: 39). "A wedding party swarmed into the greenhouse and headed for my bench. Their faces dropped when they saw David and me sitting on that bench like we owned it" (Ellis 1999: 39). Khyber observes how the people "tried to smile pleasantly because they could see David was special, and they didn't want anybody to accuse them of being mean to special children" (Ellis 1999: 39–40). Refusing to move from the bench, the thinly veiled bigotry of the wedding party is exposed. "'She must be retarded,' the bride said to the men. 'This is my wedding day,' she said to me, very loudly and slowly. 'Do you understand? My wedding day?'" (Ellis 1999: 40). Khyber understands better than the bride anticipates, waiting not just for money to be bribed off the bench, but also for the bride to lose her temper. "Next came my favorite part. Someone always lost their temper ... This time, it was the bride ... 'Get off that bench and take your defective brother with you, before I throw you off myself!'" (Ellis 1999: 42–3).

Khyber's awareness that difference is punished by marginalisation or invisibility fuels her distrust of society. Yet, the above scene also reveals Khyber as a playful and imaginative character, and as someone who is aware of the identity others bestow on her. Knowing that she has little control over how society perceives her and her brothers, she has decided to use this perception to her advantage. Instead of being victimised by the identity others give her, she exploits it. The awareness that society prefers her to be invisible, gives Khyber a unique form of power, which she uses to her full advantage by monetising her in/visibility. In this way, Khyber resumes power by exploiting her public image. As an "individual grows in subjectivity he is bound to play with the rules and at times revolt against them and transgress", Smith observes in the context of Kristevan transgression and abjection. "This revolt is both disgust at the reminder of what is now forbidden by the laws and taboos which structure the socialised individual, and a reaction in the name of subjectivity at the suppression exerted by those laws. The lining of that revolt is the boundary state of abjection" (Smith 1998: 50).

Khyber's exploitation of her public identity as a transgression is both playful and abject, punishing a society which refuses to see Khyber's family in their specificity³⁹. The above scene illustrates Khyber's realisation of the potential power dormant in a state of otherness, a state that, according to Kristeva, fills the symbolic with abjection because disability is a transgressive, ambiguous and intermediary state (cf. Moi 1986: 238). Yet, disability and poverty are not the only source of otherness in Ellis' narrative. One of the most enigmatic characters in *Looking for X* is Khyber's psychotic, homeless friend, X, who suffers from paranoia and has lost practically all ability of speech. X has lost her place in the symbolic order, and with it her access to language. She consists of a confusion of drives and energies, and is, in the eyes of society, as invisible as Khyber's family. Because she is a figure of the semiotic chora⁴⁰, the true essence of X cannot be found in speech. X finds expression through extra-linguistic means such as gestures, sounds and humming. When Khyber sings the "soup song", a symbol of her safe and loving family unit, her singing becomes an access point to X and marks their last scene together. Prompted by Khyber's singing, X engages for the only time in conversation with Khyber and proceeds to sing a number of songs, regaining brief access to language. "X started singing. Her voice was raspy and tuneless, as though her brain could remember singing, but the memory hadn't gotten down as far as her voice yet" (Ellis 1999: 86).

Characteristic of an existence outside the symbolic order, Khyber's friend X finds expression only in what is left unsaid, in the pauses between words, in her breathing, her gestures, her cries (cf. Kristeva 1995: 18). The symbolic, "identified with judgment and the grammatical sentence" (Kristeva 1989: 264), is no longer available to X, whose characterisation echoes Trites' observation of a protagonist's retreat from language "when the discourse reinforcing her powerlessness becomes too overwhelming" (Trites 2000: 50).

³⁹ Noreen O'Connor explains that "Otherness here is specified as that which cannot be thematized, yet is the specificity of an individual in relation to me" (O'Connor 1990: 49).

⁴⁰ Kristeva identifies with chora "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (Kristeva 1989: 264).

The Supreme Being

Ellis' mother-daughter story is an idealisation of love in constant interaction with the symbolic. As noted above, Khyber's experience of society as negative has resulted in her difficulty of successfully detaching from her mother, and in the creation of a fantasy, the supreme maternal. Yet, when the unity of her family is threatened, Khyber realises with horror that the threat comes from within (Ellis 1999: 49–52). Her mother, desperate to provide better care for her sons, is making preparations to have them homed in a special care facility for children with severe autism. Khyber experiences this looming move of her brothers as a betrayal, thereby revealing how unwilling she is to accept her mother as a person and an individual outside the maternal function.

Observations made by Kristeva in her essay "Women's Time" (1995) about a girl's difficulty in detaching from her mother and the logic of sacrifice as foundation of the social contract resonate with Ellis' depiction of a highly intelligent and sensitive girl who understands that she is punished for being different. In response, Khyber has created an idealised image of the mother-child relationship, and a mythical archaic mother, Khyber's ideal love object. This is not without problems, because Khyber's cult of the archaic maternal obstructs her mother from reorganising her own psychic identity (Kristeva 1980: 237). Successful detachment, Kristeva asserts, is an indispensable prerequisite for a girl's ascent to the symbolic order. Yet, Khyber's refusal to fully detach from her mother symbolises her unwillingness to engage in a threatening society that perceives her family as "screwed up" (Ellis 1999: 7). Due to this refusal, Khyber, who has created firm identifications with her mother as idealised love object, has not yet formed an identity outside her family structure. This explains the fierceness with which she defends her family from any interference from the outside world⁴¹. Yet, as defender of the archaic mother, Khyber is at a loss when it is her mother who refuses to continue this fantasy. More than a threat to her family, the refusal of Khyber's mother to continue in her role feels like an existential threat to

⁴¹ Consider for example Khyber's reaction to a visit from a social worker: "It made me mad that this strange woman with the briefcase could make Mom feel bad. It made me livid to then see the social worker put an ugly, claw-like hand on Mom's arm, as if to comfort her, and Mom let her do it!" (Ellis 1999: 19).

Khyber, who has centred her identity around the family unit. Thus, she reacts to her mother's revelation with harsh words:

I followed her, saying nasty, vile things all the way across Ward's Island.

'You're probably doing this so you can become a stripper again,' I said. 'First you put your sons in a home, then you'll put me in a home, then you'll have the apartment all to yourself. You'll sell us, then you'll have lots of other children, and you'll sell them, too.' (Ellis 1999: 51).

The harshness of Khyber's words, which she knows to be untrue even as she utters them, is evidence of her strong attachment to the fantastical mother and caused by her abject position, where the female "disappointed or unable to identify with the symbolic order, returns to an undifferentiated relationship with the maternal body" (Smith 1998: 88). This ties in with Kristeva's observation in her essay "Stabat Mater", an elaboration on the concept of motherhood, in which Kristeva calls motherhood the "*fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory" (Kristeva 1987: 234, emphasis in the original). Similar to nostalgia for a particular place, which is not so much a yearning for a geographical location but rather for the feelings and affects associated with it (cf. Kristeva 1989: 60), the fantasy of motherhood "involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her ... an idealization of primary narcissism" (Kristeva 1987: 234). Kristeva further posits that "the archetype of the belief in a good and pure substance ... is the belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, full, total englobing mother with no frustration, no separation, with no break-producing symbolism (with no castration, in other words)" (Moi 1986: 205). Khyber's feelings toward her mother speak of this idealisation and are nourished as much by the hurt she experiences from a lack of recognition as by her perception of society as a threat. In refusing to fully separate from this fantasy of motherhood, Khyber performs the dual role of protecting the supreme mother and dissenting from society. Thus, Ellis' mother-daughter story not only presents a critique of society but probes an adolescent's difficult detachment from her mother. The depiction of Khyber's maturation, set in motion by her mother's decision to have her twins re-homed, requires Khyber to finalise her incomplete detachment from her mother and to literally venture outside, undertaking a quest to clear her name and prove her innocence. In Kristeva's view, a detachment from the mother is frequently more

difficult in mother-daughter relationships⁴², arguing “why and in the name of what dubious symbolic benefit would she want to make this detachment so as to conform to a symbolic system which remains foreign to her” (Moi 1986: 205)?

Despite her failure of locating X, Khyber’s quest facilitates a successful detachment from the supreme mother, making it in turn possible for Khyber to reassess society, not as a threat, but as a possibility, and to re-energise her relationship with her mother. The narrative arc culminates in Khyber’s renewal of her identity and an improved relationship with her mother. Thus, the process by which Khyber fully emerges into the outside and views the world more positively as an opening up of possibilities, is rooted not in the existence of a mother goddess but, to the contrary, in a farewell of the mother goddess. Freed from the constraints of seeing her mother as an essential self with a fixed identity, Khyber herself gains a similar freedom of seeing herself as subject with plural subjectivities. The narrative arc depicts her as moving from the identity which society bestows on her, and over which she has no control, to an identity of her own choice (of an intrepid explorer). Discussing Lacan’s concept of assumption, Trites cites his postulate that “one is always responsible for one’s position as subject” (Trites 2000: 6) and gives the example of Cormier’s protagonist in *The Chocolate War* who “starts out forced into a position that is painful, but then finds the pleasure in the situation by wilfully accepting the enforced position” (Trites 2000: 6), thus accepting and enjoying the position of an Other. In Ellis’ narrative, this development is reversed, with Khyber learning to use her agency to break out of her enforced position, a break which is only facilitated through her opening up to alterity within herself and the other, a precondition of the Kristevan subject-in-process.

⁴² cf. Moi’s introduction to Kristeva’s “Women’s Time”: “[T]here is also the connivance of the young girl with her mother, her greater difficulty than the boy in detaching herself from the mother in order to accede to the order of signs as invested by the absence and separation constitutive of the paternal function” (Moi 1986: 204).

Conclusion

Love is the Great Enabler, which allows lovers their selfhoods. Whether it is parental, fraternal, or sexual love, all those in love must be the enablers of the other (Westwater, Giant Despair Meets Hopeful, 108).

This exegesis seeks to contribute to the study of adolescent literature by expanding the linear understanding of maturation as a “bridge over the troubled currents of adolescence to a more stable maturity” (Buckley 1974: 4). In understanding the struggles of adolescent protagonists as experiences of a cyclical renewal of plural subjectivities rather than “adjustments required for a mature equipoise” (Buckley 1974: 258), this research, in both its creative and exegetical components, makes a case for reading maturation in young adult literature as a continuous and ongoing process of renewal and rebirth as the adolescent protagonists live through and resolve moments of crisis.

The selection of young adult novels discussed in the chapters above is by no means exhaustive or complete. It is however a call for an engagement with significant and original contributions to a portrayal of crisis and renewal of identity within an amatory framework, and an attempt to demonstrate the potential of a post-structuralist, Kristevan reading of subjective rebirth and identity formation. Recent movements such as the non-profit organisation *We Need Diverse Books* and *Own Voices* (both of which have their origins as hashtag movements in children’s and young adult literature to argue for greater diversity and authenticity in the field) have contributed significantly to a re-examination of the representation of marginalised experience in young adult literature. This exegesis aims to create space for a wide-ranging discussion of love narratives in the field of young adult literature, including LGBTQ representations of romantic love (ranging from Stephen Chbosky’s 1999 *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to the award-winning *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sàenz, and Jandy Nelson’s 2014 *I’ll Give You the Sun*). Similarly, there is room for a timely discussion of non-romantic love in friendships (with Paula Chase’s *So*

Done (2018) and Patrick Ness' *The Rest of Us Just Lives Here* (2015) two award-winning examples of multiple and fluid subjectivities within complex friendships).

While the selection of novels included in this exegesis is by no means exhaustive, it is influenced by the Kristevan subject-in-process. The female protagonists discussed in this exegesis, together with the protagonist in the accompanying creative component, are shown as subjects whose identity is “a continuous intermixture and intermittence, a dispersal and reassembly of diverse elements” (Minow-Pinkney 1990: 168). By contemplating the “continual regeneration of the subject” (Dayal 2000: 9) rather than a linear coming of age, plurality and polymorphism replace fixed and stable identities.

The above chapters seek to demonstrate the ways in which the protagonists move through the processes that are constitutive of their fluid and multiple subjectivities. Vanessa, the protagonist in accompanying young adult novel *Messy*, is equally shown as being a ‘work in progress’, a subject-in-process. Vanessa’s story of intergenerational trauma is framed by the abject conditions of living with a person who suffers from obsessive hoarding. Her mother’s compulsive accumulating and sorting of a wide variety of objects, together with the resulting unsanitary living conditions, directly contravene Vanessa’s artistic desire, which is cooking as an art form. The novel delineates not only Vanessa’s ways of sidestepping her obstacles, but also portrays her relationship with her mother as a tug of war of conflicting desires. As such, the final scene of the book is a key narrative moment which refuses to offer a “quick fix” for mental disease, but instead aims to be an acknowledgment and a recognition of the idea that we share a feeling of horror in the moments when we witness the borders around us dissolve and our selves disseminate. It is also a recognition of the idea that true change and renewal occur not in isolation. Just as the semiotic and symbolic elements inside us continuously disrupt and reconstruct our selves, we, as open systems, continuously challenge, disturb and renew one another.

The amatory principle in *Messy* is not only present in the dialogue between different subjects who continuously challenge, adjust and re-negotiate their subject positions in relationship to themselves and each other, it is also present in Vanessa’s relationship to her artform. Cooking is more for Vanessa than a source of immense *jouissance*, which occasionally borders on the self-destructive death-drive; it is a

process that sets her up as subject with an identity. Lechte explains that “Kristeva views art less as an object, and more as a process, or practice, which ‘creates’ the subject” (Lechte 1990a: 24), and Vanessa’s passionate attempts to perfect a risotto in order to secure a place on a popular cooking show call attention to Kristeva’s argument that “art is constitutive of *both* subject and object” (Lechte 1990a: 24). Given the importance which cooking as a form of artistic expression assumes for Vanessa, her abjection in the face of her mother’s hoarding disorder is understandable. However, the compulsive and indiscriminate accumulation of objects, which makes their house and investment property uninhabitable and causes a feeling of mounting loneliness in Vanessa, causes Vanessa’s mother Trish to feel a *jouissance* comparable to Vanessa’s when she cooks. On the surface, both live together in a form of symbiosis that barely masks the violent turmoils of their clashing passions and desires. Vanessa experiences her mother’s obsession as a threat to her identity, but underlying this feeling is her disappointment at the realisation that her mother’s *jouissance* is independent of her experience of motherhood.

In various ways, Vanessa is forced to confront her abjection in the course of the novel, and reacts to these confrontations with an irruption of semiotic drives, such as the moment that depicts her and Evan in a wild chase through woodland, culminating in her releasing some of the tension she feels in a crying fit. However, Vanessa’s real source of abjection is revealed as her fear of failure. When she fails to win a spot on the cooking show, she succumbs to a depression that can only be understood when recognising the true meaning of cooking for her. Kristeva’s “notion of art as constitutive of the subject, rather than constituted by the subject” (Lechte 1990a: 24) explains the void Vanessa experiences when faced with her perceived failure. However, as she lingers in a kind of semiotic chora, Vanessa retrieves forgotten and repressed moments of the past, which make her realise that her mother was the first to recognise and encourage *jouissance* in her. When Vanessa recalls the moments of her artistic birth, together with her mother’s encouragement, she sees for the first time her mother in herself. Bound by the love they feel for each other, both have something inside themselves that is not defined by their roles and relationships. Vanessa’s maturation is a process that allows her to realise that her art form is constitutive of her, just as her mother’s source of *jouissance* is constitutive of who she is. Not only seeing herself in the other, but the other in herself, allows Vanessa to

reconsider her father's statement that she and her mother are alike, and react to it not with anger but acceptance. It is also this moment which allows Vanessa to realise that her mother's hoarding disorder is more than an illness in need of a quick fix. When Vanessa approaches her mother in the final pages with a new kind of openness and acceptance, her mother divulges parts of herself that she has never shared before, allowing Vanessa to further open herself up to the stranger within.

Kristeva's notion of the subject as "open system" means "that rather than thinking of the outside world of the other as a threat, we should see it as a stimulus to 'change and adaptation'" (Lechte 1990a: 33). Moments of crisis or trauma "should be seen as sources of an 'event' in the life of the subject" and become "absorbed into the psychical structure" (Lechte 1990a: 33) to increase the capacity for love. In Kristeva's view, love and art as "two solid aspects of the identificatory process are only ways of preserving our psychic space as a 'living system'" (quoted in Lechte 1990a: 33), which Lechte explains is a "work in progress always subject to change and renewal" (Lechte 1990a: 33). In *Messy*, this is illustrated by Vanessa's return to cooking after she has opened herself up to the stranger within. The risotto she creates in the final chapters symbolises her experiences of change and adaptation as a result of opening herself up to the source of her abjection. It signifies a moment in Vanessa's life that brings together her artistic expression and the love she feels for her mother, culminating in a moment of rebirth both as artist and as daughter. As Lechte explains, "to experience art to the full, we should open ourselves up to the other as the artist s/he is. This is to appreciate art with love. Love and art, therefore, are a mutual opening up of the individual's psyche" (Lechte 1990a: 33).

It is not the purpose of *Messy* to depict Vanessa's maturation process as the culmination in a fixed and stable identity. Rather, it seeks to illustrate a critical moment in the formation of identity that is informed by crisis and renewal. Kristeva sees it as an actual "duty of the subject to regenerate itself continually through a faithfulness to one's own culturally determined economy of desire, and to be prepared to do so through the crisis of subjectivity" (Dayal 2000: 37). The writing of *Messy* is influenced by Kristeva's concern with avoiding a "too rigid concept of 'self'" (Moi 1986: 14) and aims for ways in which a subject can express themselves as a "*work in progress*" (Moi 1986: 14, emphasis in the original). As Oliver writes, "[w]e must learn to live within

the flexible, always precarious borders of our subjectivity in order to learn to live within the flexible, always precarious borders of human society” (Oliver 1993: 13).

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Messy

Chapter 1

It's past eight on an overcast Wednesday night when I finally make it to the corner of a bustling dining strip. I look down a narrow laneway bordered by rubbish bins from the nearby cafés. Walking past a handful of alley cats, I slip through a gap in a low white picket fence which glows faintly in the dim light and cross a small parking lot. Clouds obscure the moon and stars and in the dark, I almost don't see Brie leaning against the brick façade of an abandoned storefront, trying to look inconspicuous.

"Vanessa," she whispers, and I give a startled cry as I jump in surprise.

"Brie." I breathe a sigh of relief when I realise it's her. "You scared me."

"You're late," she complains, flicking her long blonde hair, which she keeps tied in a loose plait, over her shoulder. She folds her arms over a shaggy grey fur vest and levels an accusatory glare at me.

"Do you have the keys –" I begin, ignoring her rebuke, but Brie pulls a bunch from her vest before I can finish.

"Do I have the keys? Of course I have the keys!" Her dad's keys jangle as she holds them up in triumph. "Easiest thing ever."

"Good. I've got everything else," I say as we start towards one of the Federation-style stone cottages at the far end of the carpark. I begin counting off a list on my fingers. "Olive oil, extra virgin, of course –"

"Wait, did you just say *extra virgin*?"

I make a face. Sometimes, Brie's jokes are hard to take.

"Lemon, garlic, onion, tomatoes, carrots, mushrooms –" The list goes on, but we've reached the solid wooden door to the GP practice of Brie's dad. Brie fumbles around with the keys while I glance anxiously at my watch. To cook the perfect tomato sauce for my Mediterranean risotto, I need at least an hour; another hour to allow the rice to absorb its flavours and reduce the liquid so it's no longer a soupy stew. Every second counts.

“Hurry up,” I press Brie in an urgent whisper, wrapping my parka tighter around the shoulders, hands clamped under my arms for extra warmth, stepping from foot to foot to keep the damp cold from creeping through the soles of my boots.

“I’m trying.” Fumbling with the keyring, Brie turns a large key over and tries it the other way. “Remind me again why we’re doing this?”

“Because we’re renovating our house and the audition is in three weeks,” I reiterate, trying to ignore the fact that I’m lying to my best friend. “Less than three weeks. Our kitchen at home is a construction site and I still haven’t perfected my risotto. It needs to be irresistible.”

“It already tasted pretty good, last time you made it.” Brie smacks her lips in memory, the keys rattling as she rubs her belly.

“Stop worming your way out of this,” I warn her. “You promised, remember.” There’s a small electric stovetop and sink in the GP practice, which we’ll use to find the missing ingredient in the tomato sauce for my risotto. I reach over and snatch the keys from Brie.

“I’m not trying to worm my way out of anything!” Brie’s eyes glow with reproach. “I got us the keys, remember? It’s just hard to unlock a door in the dark.”

“I know, dummy. You need to feel, not rely on eyesight.”

Finally, we find the right key and the door creaks open on squeaking hinges. Funny how the second you enter somewhere where you’re not supposed to be, you walk like a shy nocturnal animal picking its way through garbage cans. Brie clings to me and I to Brie, and together we creep down the hall in unfamiliar darkness.

“Don’t use the lights. I don’t want to attract attention.” Brie sounds so nervous she makes me jumpy. I giggle with excitement. “Stop it,” she commands and takes a small torch from her bag.

“But I need good light to cook,” I protest.

“That’s okay, you can’t see the kitchen from the street.”

I lay my hand on her arm, tufts of faux fur under my fingers. “Mum always says beggars can’t be choosers, but Brie, you have to stop calling it a kitchen,” I tell her. “Please tell me you don’t really think it’s a kitchen.”

“You make it sound like kitchens are a place of worship.” Her plait bounces as Brie shakes her head. “And by the way, worshipping can be done anywhere. My mum watched this show on Buddhism last night –”

I hold up a hand, shushing her as my eyes scan the small kitchenette. There’s a rank smell in the room. In the dim torchlight the place looks even more basic than I remember, but it’s the only way to practice the tomato sauce so I put my bag down and empty it out.

“No carbs, right?” Brie’s breasts have been growing at an alarming rate and she’s nervous about putting on weight even though every girl envies her curves.

“It’s just vegetables, Brie. And lots of healthy fats”

“Because carbs are deadly at night.” She picks up the bottle of olive oil and tries to read the label.

“That’s such a myth.” I take the torch from Brie and search for the light switch. A moment later, a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickers on and we watch two black cockroaches scurry under the counter with the hotplate.

“That is so gross,” I mumble, making a face. What kind of doctor has cockroaches in their practice? “And what’s that smell?” I wrinkle my nose, take another sniff.

Brie, whose nose is permanently blocked by an impressive array of allergies to all sorts of things, looks around. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Standing next to an open sewer would be an improvement,” I explain and hand her a knife.

“What do you want me to do with that?” Brie looks at the knife like it’s space junk. She’s got a gigantic kitchen at home that’s completely new, and when the cleaners come it totally sparkles. It’s right out of a brochure with an extravagant kitchen island and hidden lights, but no one seems to do a lot of cooking at her place.

When cooking at home stopped being an option, I went over there to cook after school. But a lot has happened in Brie's life in recent times. Her mum remarried and had a new baby, plus post-natal depression, so her kitchen's no longer my sanctuary.

"Make yourself useful. Tomatoes or onions, your pick."

Brie takes one of the vine-ripened tomatoes which I bought at the Italian deli for nine dollars a kilo. "How do you want me to cut it?" she asks and squeezes it like she's testing a new range of stress balls.

"Not to hurt your feelings, but –" I take the tomato from her, frown at the bruised skin, then peel an onion, cut the tops off and quickly chop it.

"Hey," Brie exclaims, her pretty eyes about to pop out of her head. "You're even faster than last time. That's a new record you're setting."

I shake my head self-deprecatingly, but secretly I appreciate her comment. Then I turn my attention back to the chopping board. I like onions because they are not simple. They are sharp and bite, which seems a lot like a metaphor for my life. But there's no better aroma on earth than onions browning in butter. They are like the essence of what it means to be alive, delicious, yet bitter; the foundation to everything.

When the onion's chopped, I take out my beat-up old saucepan and really crank up the heat. Next, I throw a good handful of butter cubes in the hot pan. They sizzle like crazy. When the butter begins to blub and boil like a geyser in Iceland, I twirl the pan like one of these mad theme park rides.

"That butter better be diet," Brie mutters, but it can't. Most of the flavour's in the fat, that's a fact.

"If you want to lose weight, cut out the sugar," I suggest, because it's true. I've known Brie since Year One and never seen her put anything in her mouth whose main ingredient wasn't chocolate or sugar. Preferably both. "You can't cook a good risotto without some fat."

"And why do you have to yank it like that?"

The trick is to add just a tiny amount of water to the butter and shake it like crazy so it becomes smooth and creamy. "Because otherwise it won't mix and I'll have

to throw it away,” I explain, face scrunched in concentration. Now is about the right time to add the onion and garlic, I think, and within seconds the dingy little kitchenette is filled with aromatic, mouth-watering smells.

“Okay, we can leave that for a moment,” I mutter to myself and turn to the tomatoes, which would be my favourite all-time ingredient, right after onions and garlic.

“Come to me, oh voluptuous goddess,” I declare in a theatrical voice because cooking makes me feel good and Brie laughs so hard she gets the hiccups. But it’s true, tomatoes are like this symbol for fertility and summer and – well, just saying, but if it were up to me, I wouldn’t have tempted Eve with an apple.

I cut the tomatoes in half and quickly trim the tops off, before I expertly dice the halves and add them to the butter sauce. As soon as the tomatoes start to soften, I open a jar of tomato paste.

“Smell.” I hold it under Brie’s nose.

“Hmph?” Brie shrugs. “Tomatoey?”

Some people. I shake my head in amazement, add the paste to the pan and stir it in, thinking how I really love working with my hands, how this is exactly what I want to be doing for the rest of my life, until my last day on earth, in the kitchen, experimenting with food.

“Can I cut a tomato?” Brie asks, suddenly interested.

I shake my head. “You’re so not worthy,” I tell her and give her a carrot instead.

She makes one cut and the knife buckles on the board and slips out of her hand. It stabs the floor with a twang, barely an inch away from my big toe. We stare at the floor for a second, then we look at each other and burst into giggles. Five minutes later we’re still laughing. That’s why, when the big fluorescent lights in the hallway flicker to life, we’re completely taken by surprise.

Brie yelps and I give a startled jump and drop the saucepan, which clangs to the floor with ear-splitting noise, so Brie yelps again and I jump again. Rich tomato sauce spills over the dirty carpet and splatters on our shoes. The sight of my precious

tomato sauce in ruins makes me curse under my breath. But before I have time to fully feel the sting of it, a sound like angry grating attracts my attention. My eyes wander back to Brie, who gives a little gaspy kind of cough and mutters, “Oh no.”

I follow her gaze and look up at the source of angry grating, straight into Mr McDouglas’ face, who stands in the doorway, grinding his jaw, a super-angry look on his face.

“Briella. Girls,” he exclaims, but then he doesn’t say any more. It’s obvious he needs to collect himself before he can go on.

“Dad! What are you doing here?” Brie squeals, horror oozing from her voice.

“I was over at Cicerello’s when I realised I had left my – but that’s beside the point! What is the explanation for this?”

I’ve always felt uncomfortable around Brie’s father. Not so much because he looks ancient, sporting a bushy beard speckled with grey and a receding hairline. But mainly because there’s a cold, unflinching glint in his bright eyes that makes it impossible for me to hold his gaze for more than a split second. Coming face to face with him in his GP practice is like being stranded in a safari park surrounded by a pack of hungry lions. My knees almost buckle under my weight, while my hands reach out for support, find Brie’s clammy palms and squeeze them tight.

In such a moment, a lesser friend than Brie would hang me out to dry. Her dad can be so strict that, as an example, she wasn’t even allowed to watch any TV until she was in Year Four and everyone at school was like, “Brie, are your parents in a weird cult or why don’t you ever get to watch any shows?”

And even when we don’t break into his surgery and peruse his stinky dingy cooking alcove for risotto emergencies, he looks like he’s mad at the world. Brie thinks it’s because last year her mum divorced him so she could have a baby with her boyfriend who’s her new husband. Even though her parents never seemed the loved-up type of couple, we both agree this must’ve made him mad as hell because Mr McDouglas likes things exactly the way they are. On a menu, which is how I sometimes think about the people in my life, Mr McDouglas would be the Sunday roast, complete with carrots, gravy and Yorkshire puddings.

Brie, for obvious reasons, would be the cheese.

Wringing our hands under his scowl, Brie ventures in a small voice, “Please, don’t be angry, Dad. We’re just making tomato sauce for Healthy Thursday at school tomorrow.”

My eyes dart to her at the lie. Her face is big and pale as the moon outside, but she keeps meeting her dad’s glare unwaveringly. When I glance back at her dad, his face reminds me of the molded relief map of the Himalayas I made in social sciences for a school project. His eyes pierce us like daggers and I sink in a swoony fashion to the floor, glad I’ve got the mess to pick up because I would totally cave in under his glare.

“Is that true, Vanessa?”

“Hunh?” I not-look sort of look in the general direction of Brie’s dad’s shoulders. “Sure.”

“It was my idea. Vanessa’s house is being renovated and Mum isn’t feeling well. Sierra’s teething. She’s been crying all day. And I didn’t know when you’d be home ...”

You’ve got to hand it to her, Brie knows where her parents’ pressure points sit. Her dad seems to relent, but then a new thought occurs to him. “How did you even get in?”

Brie sighs and her shoulders slump.

I cast a brief look to her, then try and gulp down my fear. I can’t let her take the fire for me. “It was my idea,” I whisper and stop scrambling on the floor to look at her dad.

“No.” The charms on Brie’s leather bracelets clink slightly as she nudges me. “Don’t. It was –”

“My idea,” I cut in, crossing my arms. “You’re not getting into trouble because of me.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Mr McDouglas responds coolly. “Briella is in trouble and so are you, I would assume.” His eyes wander over the red splashes on

the stove to the mess on the dirty carpet. “When you two are finished cleaning, Briella and I will have a discussion. Where are your parents, Vanessa?”

“Um, Dad’s in Zambia at the moment and Mum’s out,” I tell him, praying he won’t have me call her. With everything that’s going on in her life, she wouldn’t be able to handle this.

“I see.”

Brie and I scramble under Mr McDouglas’ scrutiny to restore his kitchenette to its former grime. When I’ve put everything back in my pack, he levels a bloodcurdling look at me.

“I don’t want to see you here again, Vanessa. Is that clear?”

I just nod, the sting of tears hot in my eyes.

“You can go now. Brie, get your things. I’ll drive you home.”

I squeeze past Brie and her dad with bated breath, furiously wipe at my damp cheeks and stumble down the lit hall. As soon as I’m outside in the smoky night air, I exhale sharply, not sure what to feel.

Running down a busy street to the nearest bus stop, I feel my pulse racing and my heart throbbing wildly in my chest. Some light raindrops fall on my face, like soft crystals caught in mist. I arrive at the bus stop out of breath.

“Why the long face?” the bus driver, a portly woman in black-rimmed glasses and a mop of tight brown curls, asks when I board the bus.

Where should I start, I think, but instead I just put my headphones on and stride to the back of the bus. Not only did I get my best friend into trouble, also tonight’s practice turned out a complete disaster.

I frown as I consider my options. A saner person would take tonight’s flop as a cue to abandon her plans and just give it her best shot at the audition in three weeks.

But I’m not sane. Not when it comes to cooking. And despite everything, I feel I’ve got Jackie Park on my side. Remember the time her pie landed on the floor? Did she get discouraged? Did she let a little accident get in her way?

Well, no. She didn't.

There's solace in the thought of Jackie urging her viewers (me, specifically!) to be courageous rather than safe.

Chapter 2

Judging by the darkness behind the stained-glass panels in our front door, Mum is still out. I lean my shoulder against the timber, pushing hard, and the door budes a little, enough for me to squeeze through the narrow gap.

“Storm?” Brushing my dark hair out of the face, I frown into the darkness. A tiny mewl tells me where my cat is. With my hand against the boxes stacked on the near wall, I carefully pick my way halfway down the hall past chairs buried under newspapers and empty flower pots, carefully sidestepping half-empty jars and jam glasses that are stacked in precarious towers along the other wall. When I get to the pile of shoes and coats where Storm made his nest, I lift him into my arms, hugging his warm fur tight to my face. Then I follow a narrow trail to my room.

If our electricity hadn't been cut, sheaves of papers and drawings would be visible, together with all the other clutter in the hall, the shopping bags, plastic containers, Grandma's old cardigans, dead insects, Grandpa's tobacco boxes, plastic lids, little thingies from homeware shops, Ikea clutter, the cardboard rolls of toilet paper and paper towels, random shoes, empty tissue boxes, dirty scarves, a glove with its companion missing, bits of rotten fruit, socks, umbrellas, newspaper holders, incomplete board games, pens, broken CD cases, stuff I made when I was little, incense dust, the odd blanket, cables that could be useful, plastic clips. Everything.

That's how we live.

In my room, which is the one place in our house that's free from clutter, I light the big camping lantern and orange light throws flickering shadows on the wall. With a tiny meow, Storm wriggles out of my arms and scoots under the bed, while I take down one of Jackie's cookbooks from the shelf above my desk. It's her first. For a moment I just hold it in my hands, close my eyes, feel its weight. Slowly turning it over, I open the book and leaf through the pages, feel them running through my fingers. *My Cooking Extravaganzas*. My glance falls on a picture of Jackie and a famous Italian chef with hair like white meringue. Both are standing in Jackie's quirky kitchen, fresh

ingredients set out in neat glass bowls on a clean counter. She's got great taste, just look at her cookware! The photographed dishes look deliciously fresh.

The book makes a loud thud as I drop it on the floor. How soul crushing this is, to be on the outside, with nothing but cookbooks in my hands. How I long to be inside these pages, with Jackie and the Italian. What I would give for a chance to cook with her. To be an artist like her.

Sliding my phone from the bag, I open an episode of the first season of Jackie & You on YouTube.

"Fried rice is really basic, a versatile dish," Jackie says off-camera, and then the camera zooms to the fridge where she takes out refrigerated rice.

"It's sort of what I order when we get Thai but I haven't cooked it at home yet," a woman to Jackie's right says. They're all dressed in normal streetwear, Jackie in a yellow top and blue skirt, the woman to her right in a tight-fitting summer dress. That's the kind of show this is. Casual. Collegial. Collaborative. Once you make it into the finals, you basically just enjoy the company of other good cooks. The competition's over. It's a chance to guide and be guided, to teach and learn from others, to enjoy each other's company. That's what makes this show so special.

"So I didn't know you had to refrigerate the rice," a man says and steps closer to take a look. "This is interesting. What happens if you use fresh rice?"

While Jackie talks, her hands are busy peeling garlic and deseeding a long red chili. My mind begins to drift. I lean back, close my eyes. Three more weeks, I tell myself. Then you'll cook the risotto and, by God, you'll cook yourself right into Jackie & You.

Storm meows and I glance up. A car's headlights shine into my window for a moment, throwing my room in blinding light, before the engine is cut. A door slams outside and a moment later I can hear Mum's footsteps scraping down the hall toward my room. She pushes through the door, covered in stacks of folded laundry, back home from the laundromat.

"Hi, beautiful!" Half the tower of socks and shirts tumbles to the floor. "Fuh-uh-uh." Tonight must be one of her I-wish-I-cursed nights, which she doesn't do, ever.

The closest she ever comes is sugar, for shit, and fudge, for you-know-what, because she works all day with little children and is scared a swear word would put her in the parents' bad book. "You should think of celebrating your evil side," I tease her sometimes. "There's a million playgroups, but only one ... tadah! ... wait! ... The cursing playgroup! Think about it! Parents would pay extra for a chance to let it all out. It would be like a curse jar, reversed." But she just shakes her head. "Only in theory," she says, which is her answer to any of my ideas that she thinks won't fly.

She scoops a ball of socks from the floor and reaches for one of her long skirts when Storm scoots out from under my bed and pounces on it like a leopard.

"How is Briella?" Mum asks as I bend down to lift Storm on my lap.

"Good." I wrinkle my nose, thinking of the angry look on her father's face. *Hopefully still alive*, I add in my thoughts. "You know, Sierra's teething, so we can't meet at her place anymore. Her mother freaks out at a pin drop."

Mum looks at me with this really paranoid frown in her face. "If she wants to come over, she can't," she says.

This gets me fuming but Mum acts like everything's normal. She begins to separate the clothes on my bed into two stacks, one for her, one for me.

I'm not asking Brie to come over anyway because I lie to her an awful lot. Like, that we are in the middle of renovations. That there's nowhere to sit. That I have to share a room with Mum because the rest of the house is under construction. All imaginary, of course. No one in their right mind would dream of renovating our house, if you can even call it that. It's a tiny box, made of panels of fibre cement nailed to a naked wooden frame. I still remember the plans my parents had, their talks, late into the night, of how they were going to demolish it and build a new one.

"You wouldn't even bother renovating this," Dad used to say. Then he moved out and we stayed and almost four years later the place is still the greatest eyesore on the block.

There're Jarrah floorboards, which look nice, I guess, and when I was little I used to put socks on and pretend I was ice skating. But the boards are uneven and full of holes. Our house is on a little slope, with nothing but a timber elevation, so you can

peer through the holes at the construction rubble underneath. Blobs of hard concrete and left-over wire bordered by mossy rocks and unused slats of timber. On a chill-blown winter morning with two degrees outside, it really feels like we live in a skating rink.

I also told Brie that we're simultaneously doing renovations in Mum's Mount Lawley apartment, which she bought when we were still rich and looking for investments. I tell that to Brie in case she ever stops by unannounced and wonders what the hell we're doing, living in a house where every available inch is totally cluttered. I mean, *buried*, absolutely jam-packed with stuff. There're cardboard boxes and storage bags and weird things everywhere in the house. I had to come up with something because Mum's not the only one who's paranoid. I'd rather sleep under a bridge than tell anyone – anyone! – that ever since my parents' divorce, Mum's turned into a hoarder who can't throw anything away.

I squint across the bed at Mum, her painted fingernails, her made-up face. No one would guess from her looks at the disgusting state of our house.

I turn my attention back to Storm and tickle him behind an ear. "She won't come over," I say, fake carelessness in my tone. "I'll go to sleep soon anyway. I want to cook breakfast for Cale before school tomorrow morning."

Mum gets this look on her face, her silver bangles jingling as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

"What?" I frown, massaging Storm's white fur under his chin to the sound of his soft purrs.

"I thought we could drive to the apartment after I finished with the clothes. I need your help to move a few things."

This gets me fuming even more, so I ignore Mum, which totally irritates her. Patience's not her strong suit.

"What?!"

"Can't you leave the cat alone for a moment and focus on us?"

“Mum, you sound like a ...” but I don’t finish the sentence. I don’t know what. Desperate? Lonely? Like we’re an ancient couple going to be buried together.

Storm’s getting restless on my lap. “It’s only three more weeks until the audition,” I tell Mum but she’s not listening.

“Because I have been thinking about the cupboard in the main bedroom and I think if we changed the shelves, we could fit some of the bathroom stuff,” she says and picks up a top and yanks sharply at the corners, like testing to see if the fabric can withhold her mood, before folding it quickly, exactly in half, her mouth set. The lines around her lips wrinkle out like a river delta.

“No. I can’t. I’m tired.”

Mum looks at me disapprovingly. “I just thought that if we emptied out the little room, we could perhaps rent it to a student.”

I shrug. I’m sorry if I sound defensive but talk about the Mount Lawley apartment depresses me. Like our house, it’s absolutely crammed with things, mostly with my dead grandparents’ stuff.

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in a tight spot, financially. If we can get an international student, the rent would go a long way. We could get on top of our bills.”

“Money, money,” I say. “With you, it’s always about money. Did you even hear when I said that in three weeks –”

“Because you have no idea how hard it is for me, what an eternal struggle it is!”

“Struggle?” I say. “What’s that?”

Mum chuckles. “I get your point. I’m a lousy parent.”

“Not lousy. Just different.”

“Well, now you’re being passive aggressive.” She leaves the pile of clothes for a moment to give me a quizzical look. “Tell me, what would it take to make your mother more awesome?”

That's a no-brainer. "Just make sure you sign the form for the audition," I say, without hesitating. Underage finalists need their parents' permission to film in Adelaide for the rest of the show.

Mum walks over and cups my face in her hands. "It will break my heart, Vanessa, but yes, I will. If you get into the finals, I'll sign the damned form. Aunt Beth sends her greetings, by the way. She's prepared her spare room for you." Mum gives me an evil wink. "Just so you know, she snores really badly. And the walls in her house are paper thin."

I ignore her remark, pumping my fist in the air instead. "It will be so cool," I promise her. "And I'll do chores, so Aunt Beth won't have anything to complain."

"It will be horrible without you here," she replies gloomily. "Remember, you once told me that special thing about our house? Like the way the sight of it breaks through the line of trees when you walk home from the bus stop and it makes your heart skip a beat. That's what you said. 'It makes my heart skip a beat.'" Mum smiles at me. "Remember, I told you I feel the same?"

She tries to pat my hand but I quickly bury it in Storm's fur. It's true. I told her that stupid thing. But she totally misunderstood. What I wanted to say was that, from a distance, our house looks like a normal place. Like all of our troubles have disappeared. Then I get closer and remember how cluttered, how uninhabitable it is.

I gently rub Storm's head with my thumb and marvel at the way his fur is neither brown nor orange, more like a rich grey of precious rainforest timber, and black stripes that dissolve into spots on his legs, and a belly so soft and white it's the purest nest of goose feathers. He's a Bengal cat and somewhere in his DNA lurks a big cat, like a leopard or an ocelot. When he feels like a cuddle, his warm weight on my lap just clutches at my heart, pretty much like in *Misery Business*, the way Hayley Williams sings, before the drums really set in. The way she sings, *It feels so good*.

"It feels so good," I hum. Less than three weeks to the audition. Three weeks and I will be whisked away, to live with Aunt Beth in Adelaide and film the new season of Jackie & You. All my dreams will have come true!

"I think cats beat dogs hands down," I say.

“Well, that’s a weird segue.” Mum grimaces. She hasn’t totally forgiven me for bringing Storm home without asking first.

“I just like the way cats have a mind of their own.”

“Thanks to Immy for that.” Mum makes a face like the Black Gate of Mordor, as always at the mention of Dad’s second marriage. “And just so you know, most parents are not cool with their ex-husbands’ wives palming scrawny pets off on their children. Most parents would tell their ex-husbands’ wives to get fu-dged.”

Storm flattens his ears against his head as if he’s listening. He is wiggling on my lap and it’s a job to keep him still. He shifts his weight and shifts it again.

“I admit you don’t totally suck,” I say because it’s true, when I brought this tiny, wet-looking limp ball of fur home, Mum almost didn’t bat an eyelid.

“It’s because I have a soft spot for pets. As soon as you move out, I’ll get a dog. Because there’s no question, dogs rule!”

That’s like a joke between us because when I was little I was scared to death of dogs and even now I still can’t stand them. Unfortunate, though, because they’re Mum’s favourite animal in the world.

“I know why you like dogs better,” I tease her. “Because they do what they’re told.” They sit and roll over and stay and never complain as long as their owner’s around. “But cats are different, aren’t they?” I run my fingers through Storm’s fur but he has enough of lying on my lap. He scratches me, once, and leaps into the pile of clothes on my bed.

“Did he just scratch you?” Mum asks, narrowing her eyes.

“No,” I lie.

“I’m pretty sure he did, though. And take him off my blouse. His hair is everywhere.”

I try to scoop him back up but he leaps to the floor and disappears under my bed.

Mum holds up her blouse and inspects it with flexed eyebrows, picking a few cat hairs off the fabric. “You have to teach him not to scratch,” she says. Then she pauses. “I wonder if that’s the reason why Immy gave him away? Because he scratches and she didn’t want him around Cale.”

“Probably she was just sick of his hair,” I joke but judging by Mum’s look it wasn’t a good one. “He didn’t scratch,” I say. “Also, we have a mouse problem and he can help with that.”

“That’s not true.” Mum shakes her head. “We never had any mice before Storm. You know he brings them into the house.”

“He doesn’t.” This is an on-going argument between us.

“He does. They’re his favourite toys.”

“Mum. That’s cruel.” I clamp my hands over my ears but Mum takes my hands and prises them from my head.

“Cats *are* cruel. Where do you think the phrase cat-and-mouse comes from?”

Truth is, I don’t see a lot of mice – but that’s just testimony to the kind of mess we live in. If you look somewhere in our house, like a cluttered shelf, or a toaster piled on top of books and plates, you’ll see insects, cockroaches, crickets flying through the air like spitwads. Dead flies caked to tomato sauce from another month. But mice? Sometimes a tail disappearing under empty shopping bags. Sometimes a bunch of paper rustling and moving, as if by magic.

But I hear them, day and night, inside the walls. They make these scratchy noises with their paws when they search through our things. I even hear them in the ceiling where Mum and I haven’t been in years.

“Who do you think would win, Storm or a rat? I think there’re rats in the ceiling.”

Mum groans. “Ugh, I hope not.” She peers out the window. “If he scratches you again, you should take him back to her.”

I think of the early morning when Immy removed Storm from a worn plastic carrier. Animal welfare had rescued him from an abusive breeder. He was so tiny we

could carry him in the palm of our hands. His bones were like tiny brittle twigs. Because he was so weak, we used a syringe to feed him special milk from the vet.

“I would never give him back!”

Mum raises an eyebrow at the vehemence in my voice.

We’re both looking at Storm when a thought occurs to me. “Will you look after him while I’m in Adelaide?” I ask. I wonder if Aunt Beth likes cats.

“Sure.” Mum smiles sweetly. “As long as he doesn’t scratch.”

“Mum! Don’t say such things.”

“Well, of course I’ll look after Storm. Why do you even ask? Even if we can’t really afford his food right now.”

“Once Immy’s over her cold, I’ll make heaps more from sitting Cale.”

“Sweetie.” Mum gets up and takes her pile of clothes. “Your babysitting money is yours. You’re saving it up for that knife and I don’t want to dig into it unless we really have to.”

“I’m just saying. Before Storm goes hungry.”

“Well, I think pursuing your dream is more important.”

To hear that from Mum makes me laugh, though she has a point. I really do have a dream. I mean, besides making it into the finals and cooking alongside Jackie Park and becoming a world-renowned chef and opening my own restaurant and making it into the Michelin guide. I want – hell, no, I need! I crave! I require, like the air in my lungs, a chef’s knife. A simple, sleek, powerful kitchen tool. An absolute necessity, if you’re serious about cooking. But I don’t want any chef’s knife. Certainly not the kind you find on supermarket shelves. Not even the pricy department stores will do. What my heart desires, with an ache so powerful it’s like a painful twisting and turning on my inside, is a Wuesthof chef’s knife. The Porsche of knives. The most beautiful, elegant, exquisite thing I’ve ever seen. A tool, really, but also so much, much more.

It's worth over three-hundred dollars. Just so you know, there're no sales on Wuesthof knives. Besides, you don't haggle for something like your dream. It's worth every cent.

"Do you think I can buy it before the audition?"

Mum frowns. She doesn't like talking about the audition because she knows that as soon as I make it into the finals, I'll move to Aunt Beth in Adelaide and there's nothing that can stop me.

"Sweetheart, I don't know."

But my mind's already onto something else. "You know what I'll cook?" I ask and before Mum has a chance to answer, I tell her. "The Mediterranean risotto."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mum."

"What? What do you want me to say? You're so thin-skinned sometimes."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you know the one I mean." I coax her. "The one from the around-the-world cookbook. The one I like to cook."

Mum doesn't seem as impressed as she ought to be. "I don't see why you need such an expensive knife if you're going to cook a risotto," is all she says.

"I probably won't have enough to buy it anyway," I mutter. The thought makes me feel like Sisyphus. I've been saving up since the beginning of the year, after I signed up for the audition of the new season of Jackie & You, and now it's June and I still haven't managed to buy it. And this although I'm practically babysitting my way into kindergarten heaven. But I never realised how expensive groceries are and I need heaps for my cooking. Plus, at first I thought I'd do a meat dish and meat is expensive. Then, I thought I'd do something Asian, but seafood is even more expensive. And though risotto is kind of on the cheap side, I've been on the hunt for the missing ingredient. To get really good, high-quality stuff you need to go to the expensive stores, the Italian delis, the kind of places where you buy a can of tomatoes and the guy at the check-out rings you up for fourteen dollars.

“Well, so, anyway.” Mum takes a breath, goes with her fingers through her hair. “How about dinner? Did you eat something at Briella’s? Because I’m starving.”

After the ruined tomato sauce and the kitchen disaster with Brie’s father, the mention of food stings. “I’m not hungry,” I mutter, shaking my head.

Mum frowns. “You’re not secretly dieting, are you? A person your age needs to eat.” Her face softens. “You might get hungry once you smell food. I’ll get us something. What do you feel like?”

“Sushi,” I say. “Or noodles.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“No, Mum, wait,” I call her back. “You know what I actually feel like? I feel like cooking something for us.”

Her earrings give a glow in the dim light of the lantern as she shakes her head. “It’s an obsession with you,” she mutters.

I give a weak shrug. I know she’s right, but it’s not like I have a choice. There’s nothing else I think about anymore. Every second of my life, I ponder things like, I wonder if the temperature is right? Is the taste of my Mediterranean risotto more balanced if I substitute butter for olive oil? Does an eggplant lose its bitter flavour if I soak it in milk? I’m obsessed. Obsessed with cooking food.

“So, can I?”

“Well, no, Vanessa. You know there’s no room for that right now.”

“But you asked what I felt like, so I said.” I need all the practice I can get for Jackie & You. I practically can’t wait for my life to finally start, after the audition. I’ll cook alongside Jackie Park. I’ll finish school – if I absolutely have to! – and then I’ll enrol in Le Cordon Bleu cooking school. After that, I’ll travel the world to cook at all different sorts of restaurants. You know the ones I mean. Cool places with exposed brick and polished concrete floors, stainless-steel appliances, factory-style dining rooms. Awesome places where the right kind of people come to eat, the kind of people who appreciate a good meal, who swoon over the dishes I create, who make me feel like I can do anything. The kind of people who don’t have to worry about paying their

bills in winter. The kind who have cool and awesome kitchens at home. Uncluttered kitchens, which they can use whenever they feel like it.

Mum exhales impatiently. “Right. No good parent. Anything else on your list of grievances?”

“I could use the kitchen if you tidied up.” I’m sorry if I sound bitchy, but I just don’t get what it is, with Mum and rubbish. Looking at her, you’d think she lived in one of these stylish homes that are featured in magazines, she’s so groomed and made up it’s not funny. If she were a dish on a menu, she would be the Wild Barramundi. Almost beautiful, in a classic, black-and-white kind of way.

“If I had some help, I could get on top of all these things,” she snaps.

I roll my eyes because I know the mantra. All of her hoarding is only because she has to go through the trauma of my grandparents’ death without any support from her lazy sisters, who sit in their townhouses in Adelaide like fat flies on the windowsill. But I know it started long before that.

“I’ll help,” I reply. “If you’re really serious, I’ll stay up all night. I’ll fill every rubbish bin in the park.”

“Well, that’s not –” Mum hesitates. When she continues, there’s a hint of bitterness in her voice. “It’s not so simple, Vanessa. As you know, there’re your grandparents’ things, and while I’m busy sorting through them – this is by the way exactly the kind of pressure I meant when I spoke to Beth the other day. Exactly the kind of pressure that’s negative and depressive and won’t get us anywhere. So let’s just stick to the plan. You can do your cooking at school or when you’re at Dad’s and –”

At school? What planet does she live on? “I can’t cook at school!”

“You’re in the cooking club.”

“The cooking club? Mum. You mean Healthy Thursday. Do you even know what that means? It’s like, you read Jane Austen, and then you’re in a club watching Nickelodeon.”

“Or at your dad’s.”

“But Dad moved out of their house and Immy’s not really in the mood for a lot of cooking. And Dad’s not even here and I can’t wait that long till he comes back!”

“Well.” Mum’s at a loss. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out between your father and Immy. Is that what you want to hear? I mean, what do you ...?”

“Forget it.” To Mum’s credit, she never said it serves Immy right that she and Dad broke up.

“Not to be mean but I knew from the start that this wasn’t going to last,” Mum says in a very quiet voice.

“Yeah?” Well, I know differently. Some matches are made in heaven, and Immy and Dad are meant to be. Because, even though Dad can be a total jerk sometimes, like the worst!, he can also be the most amazing person in the universe. Like, when Mum injured her back in the water-skiing accident that changed her life, back when they were still dating, long before they had me – well, a lot of friends stopped visiting her in hospital, but my dad came, every afternoon, for four months! That’s the kind of person he is. And he’s an awesome dad, and he always gets lonely without company, plus separation’s not the same as divorce. It’s not even a separation, it’s a trial. It’s like living in two places instead of one, but still sharing things. A lot of things.

“It’s just not the right time for cooking at home,” Mum concludes.

Not the right time for cooking. I mull this over while watching Storm’s weird way of attacking the chips packet. It hurts, though, because Mum doesn’t get at all what cooking means to me. And thinking of the way she handles the kitchen, how could she? Cooking is opening a can of baked beans and popping them in the microwave. Cooking is knowing that you can’t put a can in the microwave. That’s cooking for her.

Storm pounces on the chips packet. A corner sticks up and he swipes at it with his paw.

And Dad’s even more random in the kitchen. No, it’s like that’s an area where I’m all on my own, and it isn’t even that hard, really.

I sniff, my voice hoarse with disappointment. “I just don’t understand what’s taking you so long, going through all their stuff?”

Mum lays a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “That reminds me of my father, your Grandpa Peter.”

“How anal he was?” Mum likes to shock me with my dead grandparents’ military-style childrearing methods.

“How *strict* he was. How we lived in constant fear of his judgment. And not just us girls either. Mother too. Everything had to be his way. Everything had to be super tidy.”

“Like I said. Anal.”

Mum doesn’t seem to hear. “Your room, for instance. There’s no way he would’ve tolerated this mess. Or your cat.”

“Why? What’s wrong with Storm? He’s a million times cleaner than a dog.”

“Doesn’t matter, it’s the principle. No pets. In fact, he treated us girls like pets. For example, we had to wear special kinds of socks when we were allowed into the formal living room, where the good carpet was.”

“I think you told me, Mum. About the socks.” We’re both silent, pondering the awfulness of life with Grandpa Peter for a while.

“So, then, did I tell you how every time we had a gift, like on birthdays or Christmas, we had to take the wrapping out to the bin straight away, before we even had a chance to properly unwrap our presents?” Mum asked.

“And one time a card got thrown out with the wrapping? With money in it?”

“And when Grandma Nancy called – that’s my grandma, your great-grandmother. You never met her. God, I’ll never forget Father’s face. Absolutely gobsmacked.”

“You told me. And you had to run out and go through the bin, and there was all this disgusting duck grease, and you cut your finger on a glass shard. You tell me

the story every Christmas. And just so you know –” I pause, frowning. “I think your analogy sucks.”

“Why, it’s the same!” Mum protests. “Some things can’t be rushed. That was a big thing, you know, back then. A fifty-dollar bill. That was a really big deal.”

“It still is.”

“Yes, but back then it really was. And so the phone rings and Father answers, and then it’s Mother and my sisters and me, all digging through the garbage out back in the light of Father’s big torch until we found the card.”

“And so ...?”

“And so, this here,” her arm sweeps through my room (which I choose to keep very, very tidy, thanks a lot!), “this would’ve been completely inconceivable.” She looks at me with a triumphant smile like her messy lifestyle’s something of an accomplishment.

“He didn’t seem such a neat freak to me,” I say, drawing up my legs and hugging them in an effort to stay warm.

“Well, you didn’t really know him. He changed in retirement.”

Mum creases her brow and shakes her head in marvel at the little nine-year-old girl she once was, before she gets up abruptly and heads for the door. “So, noodles. Okay?”

Chapter 3

After dinner, I sink into bed like a corpse, so tired I just kick my boots off, not even bothering to slip out of my parka or fully undress. A moment before sleep washes over me, there's a soft thud and I hear Storm's gentle purring in my ears. He jiggles under the blanket and curls up along my parka, and I fall asleep with my hand around the ball of his head.

When I wake it's from a noise in the kitchen. My first instinct is to search for the light. It takes a number of flicks with the light switch before I remember that our power's been cut. The continuous noise is hard to ignore and finally gets me out of bed. Picking my way through the room in the dark, the floorboards feel like ice under my bare feet. Hugging myself in the frigid night air, the dark is inscrutable. Having been something of a crybaby as a child, I force down the rising panic inside me and take a torch from the top drawer of my bedside table. Out in the dark hall, clambering over a menacing confusion of things that block my way, silently praying I won't be set upon by a cluster of mice or rats, I follow the noise to the kitchen.

I find Mum near the sink. Her torch balances precariously on the kitchen scales as she rummages through a barrage of utensils in a dim-lit circle. In the faint light I can make out paper serviettes and glass jars among what looks like a pot without lid and bowls stacked inside. Dirty plastic plates clatter into the sink as Mum shakily tugs at the cord of the jaffle maker she's holding in her hand.

Something rattles to the floor and I spot my old lunchboxes, the ones I don't use anymore because I can never find them. Over to the left are the bamboo cutting boards we once bought at Ikea, on one of our earliest shopping sprees after Dad moved out, with Mum throwing around money like it grew on trees.

Icy air seeps through my parka. The floorboards are so cold they burn my feet.

Mum moves two egg cookers that have stopped working and the toaster she chose as reward for shopping at the local supermarket, to make place for Tupperware, most of which holds other Tupperware. Some containers have cutlery stuffed inside, others blunt knives and scissors. There are tea candles, incense sticks, old phone books,

half-empty bottles of olive oil, jars with sugar and tea bags, serviette holders and three kinds of stick blenders, none of which we can use. Microwave ovens and kettles, all useless, all crammed into our tiny kitchen.

Even when Dad still lived here he used to complain about the lack of space. Mum always had a thing for clutter. Long before my grandparents died and we had to find room for their furniture, Mum already carted in stuff from her shopping trips, unable to pass up on any kind of sale, making our tiny two-by-four kitchen look like there are other kitchens out there, somewhere, and Mum's taken all their stuff and dumped it in our place, on top of what we already had.

It's like this happened to all the rooms in our house, and though Mum tries to put things in order, there's no amount of sorting or stacking or piling that will do that.

I clasp my hands around my shoulders in an effort to keep warm and Mum turns around. In the flicker of light, only bits of her face are visible. Her mouth looks like black liquid ink. Shadows are dancing on her forehead and cheeks. Her brow ridge casts her eyes in deep darkness.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" She has a bright it's-alright voice, an airy cheerfulness that's a lie in itself and that has me on alert because it's like a thin veil covering something underneath, something stark and grim that stops up my throat when I think about it.

Watching her from the doorframe – we have a kitchen door that slides into a cavity in the wall and that we choose to keep open for lack of space – my voice sounds scared when I finally speak.

"What are you doing?" I ask, the sight of her grouping containers and dragging the microwave into the corner before changing her mind and rearranging the whole scenario in our filthy, overfilled kitchen at – a glance at my watch – at 2a.m. so pointless, so irrational that I'm glad we have no electricity and I'm spared the full sight of it.

She doesn't answer right away, her manner brisk, businesslike, like lining things along a bench is what she's been put on earth for, when I spot the noodle boxes

and chopsticks from dinner, hovering on the outside of the circle of light, almost invisible, as if trying to blend in with sticky tapes and notepads.

“We don’t need to keep those, though, do we?” I say. I know it’s hopeless but I say it anyway.

“Oh, you never know when they come in handy.”

My head fills with white noise. I shut my eyes. Think happy thoughts.

“You’re shivering, Vanessa.”

“I’m so cold.”

“Why don’t you go back to bed? I don’t know what you’re even doing up at this hour? Unless I woke you of course. Did I wake you?”

Hair flies around my face as I shake my head.

“Well, so don’t you have school tomorrow? Go on, back to bed. I’m nearly finished here anyway.” Mum pauses for a moment, stretches her arms, puts a hand on the small of her back. The look she gives me before she drops her eyes is so sheepish, so lost and hopeless that for a moment I forget how cold I am.

“There’s so much – *stuff* – everywhere, as you know, so. I’ve been trying, these past few hours. I’ve been thinking. If only we can clear ...”

Her voice trails off, the moment gone. She sets her jaw, doesn’t give me another glance, her hands busy arranging the kitchen bench. I know she can be five minutes or five hours, assembling and organising lifeless things, picking through them, stacking them, delicately, like a game of Mikado.

I stretch a cold hand, give a pile of tea towels a tentative poke.

“Don’t!” She swivels around, glares at me, before her gaze softens. Shutting her eyes, she rubs them with tired hands. “It’s better if you leave it to me. So just. Don’t. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say. “I’m only looking for Storm anyway.”

“That cat,” she says.

I leave her standing in the kitchen and go back to bed.

It's still dark when I get up in the morning, the room an icebox outside the blanket, the thought of a shower completely out of the question. It must've been months since we ran actual water in the tub and when we did it was a nasty orange brown.

Storm's weight under the blankets, somewhere near my feet, tells me he's busy ignoring my getting up, curled into a ball so tight not even a can of tuna could prise his eyes open. I sink my face into the soft fluff of his fur, blow him a kiss, find my Docs under the bed and sprint out of the room. I'm tired as hell from last night, but if I want to catch Immy and Cale before they leave the house, I have to rise early.

At first, when Dad told me he was moving out of their townhouse, I thought he was joking.

"You can't," I told him. "What about Cale?" And Immy? But I didn't say that. It was so like what he'd done to us. "That's a joke, right?" Against all hope.

"It's not a joke, Nessy," he said. "It's a trial."

"A trial of what?"

"A trial of living apart."

The sound of his voice, the way he said it, as if it was a mere afterthought, nothing more important than changing sheets or airing a room to get rid of an unpleasant smell, made my heart clench with anger. My voice choked with impatience.

When he saw the look on my face, Dad explained. "Immy and I married so quickly. We want to try out living apart for a while."

I didn't think his words made an awful lot of sense, because he left Mum four years ago and of those four years he spent six months sleeping around, chasing every skirt from here to the mines and causing Grandpa Peter to use very, *very* bad words whenever he thought I was out of earshot. The rest, Dad spent completely and insanely in love with Immy.

Their separation stings, almost as much as my parents' divorce. What stings more, though, is that I don't get it. You don't wait your whole life to meet *the one*, and then just let her go! How am I supposed to make any sense of this? I feel like Grandpa Peter asking, but I just have a hard time understanding Dad. I don't get what he wants.

"I want," he says, but then he sighs, like the sum of it is somehow too big for words. "I want freedom. Just a little bit more space."

"So Immy doesn't give you enough?"

"It's not Immy's fault. It's no one's. It's mine. It's time off, that's what it is."

Time off. I repeat these words frequently, silently. Time off. There's hope in these words. A possibility.

On my way to the door I pass Mum's room. When I poke my head in, she waves from the bed. A plastic lantern on the headboard sprinkles the room with sparse light. She's on top of her blankets listening to music on her phone. Beside her small frame, books and magazines are strewn over her bed, the floor around her a patchwork of stacked boxes and the bookshelves along the walls overflowing with her CD and DVD collections, her newspapers, teaching material from when she did her EA course. Odds and ends are precariously stacked on top of each other. The dark's a mercy that hides her mess and all the clouds of dust underneath.

"I'm off now."

She didn't hear me, the Chrissie Hynde music she likes to listen to when she can't sleep drowning out every other sound. Smiling tiredly, her hand pats the mattress beside her.

I hesitate. I'm tired and late and I don't feel like climbing over piles of trash in the dark. But she has that look that sweeps me right up, that's always made me feel like I'm the only one that matters. Muttering softly under my breath, I clamber over the boxes.

"Quick hug," I say and stoop over her, while awkwardly trying to keep my balance among the cardboard boxes on the floor. In her arms, with her hair over the

both of us like a curtain, the memory unfurls of being a little child and listening to her music on the old Walkman. I think of how she'd fold me into her arms and her breath would run like mist over my shoulders, and then, finally, I feel not quite so cold.

"Are you still coming after school?" she asks, when she lets me go.

"Sure. You know that." It's Thursday and she runs an afternoon playgroup at the community centre.

"You haven't been the last month."

"I had assignments that were due. I was busy." I smile. "Don't worry. I'll come."

Outside, it's even colder than yesterday. My fingers fumble with the bike lock. I ride a Specialized Vita Sport which I got from Dad when I turned twelve. It's white with purple stripes and a padded white saddle. The tyres have a wide profile, but it still goes like a rocket. When I carry it up the three steps to our veranda, I'm always surprised by how light it is. It's got such a solid look, like a tank, but I can easily lift it to the metal rails where I lock it overnight.

My helmet is freezing and not as fancy as the bike. I never liked wearing it, hated it on cold mornings, until Immy gave me a bandana to wear underneath.

"Now you look like Axl Rose," she laughed. I laughed too because Dad used to listen to Guns N' Roses, so I knew who he was.

So I put my Guns N' Roses bandana on under my helmet and swing onto the bike. Dawn hasn't broken yet and for a moment it feels like I'm alone in the universe. Like something sci-fi has happened and wiped out every living soul except Mum and me.

Then the sound of a motorbike breaks the silence and a minute later a car rolls past on the side street. When someone calls my name, the surprise of it nearly knocks me off my bike.

"Vanessa!" Our neighbour, Caroline, a recovering meth addict, if the rumours on our street are to be believed, removes herself from the fringes of the hedge that

separates her driveway from ours. She stops before me, her long brown hair like a sail in the wind. Her frame is so incredibly thin, she looks skeletal, and her walk is as careful as if every step had to be accounted for. My eyes dart from her face to her fingers, which are covered in thick silver rings. Shiny blue and green stones flash in the orange streetlight as she sweeps her hair back.

Mum and I never quite manage to guess her age. She looks to me wedged somewhere in that grey zone of middle age, but Mum says she's younger than she looks.

“Steady now, I didn't mean to scare you.”

I wave hello and look out for Maddie and Muffin, her two small dogs. I spot one of them sniffing at our bougainvillea breaking free from the colourbond, before lifting his leg and aiming at the pink abundance of the flower petals. Caroline tries in vain to shoo him away, but isn't terribly embarrassed when the deed's done.

“Hey, Muffin,” I say but when he comes over to sniff at my leg, I nudge him away with my shoe. I still don't like dogs all that much.

“That's Maddie, not Muffin. Muffin's at home,” Caroline says. “He hates the cold. You won't be able to get him out, not if you tried. He stays inside until the sun comes out.” She pauses briefly to cast a querying look over the sagging end of our colourbond fence. “Are you by yourself?” Her silver bracelets clink softly together as she raises one arm to point at the park across the laneway from our house. “You shouldn't be out, not in the dark. Not without a grown-up.”

I make a face, which I'm quick to hide, not wanting to snub Caroline. But her concerns seem unreal. We live in a nice leafy metro suburb, just separated by a tiny laneway from the local reserve. There're renovated Federation-style cottages and modern double-stories everywhere. Ours and Caroline's are the only two fibro houses on the block. All in all, it doesn't really strike me as a ghetto neighbourhood where you need someone to watch your back.

“Well, have a nice day,” I mutter, pushing my bike up the driveway. I'd better get going if I want to cook breakfast for Immy and Cale.

Hitting the street perhaps a little faster than I have to, I cross the four-lane highway behind our house without giving it proper thought. Flying down a sleepy side street, the bike has enough momentum to swerve up an incline and the next right, along a street with cottage-style houses set back from the road behind fences and prettified front lawns. The mop of a peppermint swishes over my shoulders. In these streets, the trees are shorn on top because of the overhanging power lines, but their end bits are left dangling like the sidewalks are too special for actual human people to walk on.

I hop off the footpath and onto the street, crossing the next big road without so much as a glance, because traffic won't pick up until after seven, and then I'm at Immy's townhouse. A quick glance up tells me that the sky's on the pale side of dawn, and the thought hits me that darkness has these onion skins that are peeled back by time and space. But then I give a chuckle and shake my head. Time to cool off with the cooking when even the sky resembles an onion!

Chapter 4

At Immy's place – and someone ought to write a song about this little cocoon of bliss and happiness! – the lights are on and it's warm inside. The difference to the dump where Mum and I live couldn't be greater.

Happiness, my own personal daily dose of it, begins with a step through the door into the comfort, the warmth, the space, the neatness of her home. Everything, from its tasteful furniture to its state-of-the-art gadgets and black-and-white framed photographs is like it's meant to please and accommodate.

“Vanessa!” a kid's voice shouts out and the next moment I crumple to the floor under Cale's assault, my three-year-old half brother, who absolutely rules my world.

I kiss his soft-tussled baby hair, smell the sweaty scent of his scalp, scoop him up in my arms and want to crawl into his just-out-of-bed warmth. If cuddles had a smell, they'd smell like Cale, frothy milk moustache and jam-on-toast stickiness.

I give him an extra hard squeeze before releasing him from my hug. He's impossible to contain, tears through the morning like a pint-sized hurricane, just woken from eleven hours of sleep, rested and fed.

“How about a hot chocolate?” Immy asks from the kitchen counter. She still sounds totally blocked from the cold she and Cale had over the weekend.

I rise to my feet. Everything at Immy's is open-plan living, which is pretty much exactly what Immy and Cale are to me. They're everything good, all in one place.

“Great, thanks! How are you feeling?”

“Much better. And Cale's finally sleeping through again, so.” Immy mixes a spoonful of coffee with milo in my cup because she knows that's how I like my hot drink and I take the mug from her and wrap my frozen fingers around it. As the cold shrinks away, it leaves a painful tingling in my skin. I exhale slowly, hunch on one of the bar stools that are lined along the outside of the feature island, blow into the steam of my mocha and take a look around.

“So nice in here,” I remark. “So tidy.”

Immy gives me one of her long slow smiles that’s not exactly shy but also far from confident.

“Is your mum still collecting her ...” Immy frowns with concentration, “her – what was it? Stone candles?”

“Crystal candle holders,” I say. That’s ancient history. When Dad left, Mum was all about holistic healing. Rhodonite is the stone of gentle love.

“Yes, tea candle holders,” Immy says. “Is she still into them?”

I nod, shrug, blow into my mug. “She still collects things,” I say vaguely. It’s not really Immy’s business what my mum does.

Immy nods. She didn’t mean to pry, was only trying to include Mum in our conversations. My smile returns because I understand. It’s not easy being a second wife. But so far, Immy’s rocked at it.

“So. How are you holding up? Are you starting to get nervous?”

“Look.” I hold out my hand, the black polish on my short fingernails gleaming in the light. “I’m shaking like a leaf every time I think about it. But mostly, I’m keen.”

“There’s no need to be nervous. You know that, Vanessa. You’re an artist in the kitchen.”

I don’t say anything, but on the inside I feel like I could walk on water. An artist!

“Alright.” As Immy claps in her hands, the gold charms on the link chain around her wrist chime gently. “Have you finally decided on your dish?”

“I’m going to make a risotto.”

“And you’re not going to change it again?” There’s a glint of humour in her eyes.

I blush slightly. “No, but I’m still refining it. It doesn’t taste quite right yet.”

“You know, you have to be able to cook it again if they pick you,” Immy warns.

“I know,” I sigh, considering her words. “I won’t change it too much, just enough to get through to the finals.”

“Which you will.”

“Which I will.” I nod. “Oh, Immy, I’m just so excited, I can’t even think of anything else. It’s not even three weeks away, just two and a half! How am I going to survive until then?”

“Well, your dad will be back so you get to spend the weekend with him. And you probably still have some exams at school.”

“No.” I take my mug up, blow in the steam. “All done. There’s nothing to do but wait and perfect my risotto.”

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Immy slaps her forehead and runs from the kitchen. A moment later, she returns with a bulky bag in tow. “That’s a thermal bag. For your risotto. You know, I think risotto is the right choice.”

“Yes, me too.” I set the drink down and take a closer look of the bag, its numerous zippers jangling as I try them. “If it’s still okay with you, I’ll cook it here the night before the audition.”

“Sure. We have nothing on. But are you sure your mother wouldn’t prefer you to cook it at home?”

“Well, you see, the thing is, Mum gets terribly nervous,” I lie. “She just can’t stand the excitement. So I think it would be better if I could cook it here.”

“Sure.” Immy shrugs. “Whatever makes it easy for you.”

“Risotto is such a cool choice.” I watch Immy emptying out her coffee cup and putting it away in the dishwasher. “It’s so easy to bring along. And not difficult to dish up either. I’ll bring bowls and serve it with chopped parsley to make it look pretty.”

“I’ve got a nice set of bowls,” Immy remarks from the sink. “You can have them for the audition. You’ll see, you’ll make it into the finals.”

“God, I hope so, Immy. I really do.” I twirl my mug so the brown liquid inside sloshes around. Immy leaves the sink and takes her phone off the charger.

Taking a deep breath, I look around. “So. Shall I start with breakfast or what?”

Immy scrolls through her mail. “Listen, we’re actually in a bit of a hurry this morning.”

I give her an alarmed look.

“My monthly meeting at UWA? I’m dropping Cale off early today. He’s had his breakfast already.”

A huge wave of disappointment washes over me, but I try not to show it. What if Mum is right when she says I’m addicted to cooking? Because I feel like I haven’t had my fix in a while.

“Are you sure you have to go?” I say, wincing at the obvious pleading in my tone. “I thought of making eggs benedict. It’s a really quick recipe.”

Cale, for whom breakfast is like a moment that doesn’t pass, glances up curiously. We both look to Immy, but she meets our eyes with a frown.

“Eggs benedict?” Her many virtues notwithstanding, Immy is an absolute disaster in the kitchen. “Sounds complicated.”

“I can cheat if you like and poach the eggs in the microwave. It’s super quick.”

“I hate the kitchen.” Immy slides her phone in a bag and tries in vain to coax Cale to change out of his pyjamas. “It makes me feel inadequate.”

How could the calm and purposefulness of a well-equipped kitchen make you feel anything but calm and purposeful yourself? I shake my head. “You could never be inadequate.”

Cale abandons his line of plastic trucks on the floor and scoots over to the couch, hiding behind the coffee table. “I don’t want to go yet,” he complains.

Immy walks over to a pile of fresh clothes on the sofa. “You don’t understand,” she says to me. “I’ve got no patience.”

“Then let me show you. Eggs benedict. You’ve got everything we need. I checked yesterday. I can do it while you’re getting Cale ready.”

“Yeah, no, I know, and I know you’re disappointed. I know that, Vanessa.” Immy eyes the couch, weighing her options of talking Cale into coming out from behind the coffee table voluntarily. “I’d love for you to come and cook your eggs for us tomorrow morning, if you have the time.”

I try hard not to show my disappointment. Cooking is the only time when I don’t have to think about anything. Not myself, not Mum, not school, Brie or her crush of the day. It’s like the girl that other people call Vanessa vanishes and all that’s left is another person inside of me. The cook, the one who whisks eggs, who thinks about composition and flavour. When I cook, the world around me becomes a quieter place and everything around me slowly peels away. When I cook, it’s like the real me is able to step out of her shell.

Immy crouches into a fighting stance, not taking her eyes off Cale. “In any case, I packed you a little snack for school. Is that okay?” She hurls herself over the couch and lunges at my brother, who dissolves into giggles. “Stay as long as you want. It’s a bit early for school, isn’t it?” she puffs while fighting to contain Cale in her arms, wrestling to get one of his arms out of his pyjama top.

I set the mug down, determined not to be a nuisance. Her culinary indifference is Immy’s only flaw, as far as I can see. If you saw her on a menu, she’d be the most gorgeous cocktail of fruits de mer, served in a crystal bowl on a bed of shaved ice. But she’s only fragile on the outside. My stepmum’s nothing but a go-getter.

Take, for instance, the day when Dad moved out of their townhouse and into his yuppie apartment across the river (the one which I hate because it’s not child friendly, and where will Cale play when he’s over? Plus, it’s pretentious. And there’s this river separating us like Dad has hurled himself to the other side on purpose). It took Immy all of three seconds to get her head straight. The next week, she was enrolled in a master’s course at UWA and Cale went to daycare.

“Just to make myself more employable,” she said on the phone to a friend, when I couldn’t help but eavesdrop because I was in the same room and Immy wasn’t exactly whispering. “You know, I’ve got this gap in my CV and with the downturn in mining ...”

Her friend had a lot to say to this and Immy rolled her eyes and then she winked at me, which made me feel like her confidante.

Immy's job as hydrogeologist has never failed to awe me. Whenever she mentions it, she makes it sound like an adventure. Which it is. Before Dad moved out, he and Immy took Cale and me on a camping trip to Kalgoorlie and we went gold digging, and even though we didn't find any, we had the best time.

Dad, by the way, is also a hydrogeologist, but when he says it, it doesn't sound like an adventure. It sounds just like a job, even though he travels pretty much anywhere in the world. He has projects in Western Australia and Africa, and sometimes he's away for six weeks before he has a break.

While I'm mulling this over, Immy's managed to change Cale into his clothes, put on her own boots and retrieve a pink container from the fridge. It has two compartments. Leftovers from last night (chicken korma, courtesy of the Indian down the road) in one and fresh fruit salad in the other.

I grab it and it disappears into my bag. A container with actual lunch inside seems a pretty extraordinary thing.

"I wish he hadn't moved out," I say, out of nowhere, the mocha growing cold in my hands, refusing to meet Immy's eyes. "I just really wish he hadn't."

"Yes," sighs Immy after a long pause. "Me too."

"In any case, it's just a bit of time off. Right?"

Immy doesn't say anything to this, apart from another long sigh.

"Time off," she mutters to herself and makes it sound like prison.

In my effort to blink away my tears, I knock my cup over and spill some of the cold drink. Eyes hot and stinging, I fuss to wipe it up. Immy places a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Don't be too harsh on us," she says and gives me a quick hug before pushing Cale's arms into his coat.

I nod, but secret tears prick my eyes.

Cale wails a bit when he realises that I'm not coming and Immy distracts him with rapid-fire questions about dinosaurs and construction vehicles until he forgets what he was upset about and the next minute he's smiling his picture-book smile and waving bye to me.

"Remember, we'll spend the weekend with Daddy," I promise from the doorway. "Two full days. Just you and me and him."

He seems content enough with the prospect of this.

When I finally close Immy's door behind me, I'm almost late for school. After I ate two slices of toast and had a bowl of cereal with warm milk (Immy has a froth maker and I love cereal with frothy milk. Also, she has the more upmarket cereal brands, the ones with dry roasted almond slivers and oat clusters), I had a shower and washed my hair with her expensive shampoo and conditioner.

When I remember it's Thursday, which means Healthy Thursday before class, it's almost too late. I squeeze my wet hair back into the bandana, load the dishwasher, wipe down the benchtops with Immy's eucalyptus mix and lock up behind me.

The second I pull my key out the latch, I get all choked up with a longing to be back inside. There's something dark lurching in the edges of this longing, something inadmissible and dangerous. Before it has a chance to come into full view, I swallow it down together with the lump that stops up my throat.

The ride to school brings me down to the river, which is breathtakingly beautiful in the early morning, a silver band blended with pale winter light and sparks of sunlight dancing off it like little sprites. The frost-dusted grass along the bike path glimmers in the sunlight like fake gems.

My lungs fill with air while my legs pump. Only when my chest feels like it's going to explode do I slow down. Every glance to the left, to the river, brings a nagging thought of how this really is a division line. There's north of the river and south of the river, and we live south, always have.

Wind is coming off the water and I lean into it, hard. My feet are rapidly pedalling now. Hardly any trees have been planted on this stretch of the river, so there's nothing to cloud my view, no sheoaks, gums, or paperbarks. The parkland opens up like the gesture of a grand monarch. Empty now, but crowded in the afternoon, provided the weather's right, which in Perth it almost always is.

I can't understand Dad. How can he, on purpose, put the river between us? Why choose the city, when he can have all of this? It's almost like another form of leaving, I think, and then my lungs hurt too much and my eyes sting not only from the freezing wind.

I have enough of the Swan, chase the grass up to the highway and cross where they've only recently put up a set of pedestrian lights.

Chapter 5

Resolution Drive College is nestled in an industrial complex near the old racecourse, an area frequented by gambling addicts and petrol station attendants on lunch break. All the big charities have their op-shops on Resolution Drive and the school is always fundraising. Every Thursday, the Year Nines cook a healthy morning snack that can be purchased for a gold coin donation, which goes to the Salvos' Red Shield Appeal.

“Good, you made it!” Mrs G, our supervising teacher, calls out, her face barely visible above the folds of a grey scarf. I take the stairs to the kitchen two at a time, though my enthusiasm for Healthy Thursday is curbed by the thought of RDC's food policies, which eliminate anything more exciting than sugarless wholemeal pear muffins, paleo pancakes, or kale fritters.

Scanning the group of faces gathered around Mrs G, I can tell that I'm one of the last to arrive.

“I thought you'd overslept,” Brie pipes up from behind her.

I bound up the remaining steps, so relieved to see she's okay, and press her to me in a tight bear hug. “How did it go after your dad threw me out?” I ask, my cheeks red from the cold.

“He didn't throw you out.” She considers for a moment. “Oh, well, I guess he did. I mean, we snuck into his GP practice.”

“I'm really so sorry I got you into trouble.” I squeeze her hands. “So, what's the punishment?”

“Grounded.” Brie blinks forlornly into the weak morning light and stretches her mouth into a pout that would do an actress proud.

I slump my shoulders. “I'm so sorry, Brie. It's all my fault. For how long?” Given how rigorous her father can be, I brace myself for the worst.

But Brie waves my concerns away, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Don't be silly.” Her teeth gleam white as she gives me a sneaky grin. “I'm not sure he's realised you actually have to live in the same house with the child you've grounded to enforce

it. I mean, he and Mum don't even talk. It's like, he might as well live in another country."

"Way to go, Cheese!" I cheer, hunching my shoulders against the cold and clamping my freezing fingers under my arms.

"And you?" Brie plays with the strands of her leather bracelet, flipping a small peace symbol over so it lies flat against her olive skin. "Did your mum say anything? About staying out late?"

"My mother?" I try hard not to laugh at the suggestion. "She thinks I was studying at your place. Don't worry, she won't catch on. I mean, she thinks I can cook at school!" That alone should tell Brie everything there is to know.

But to my shock, Brie seems to seriously consider the possibility. She stops playing with her bracelet to give me a pensive look. "Hey," she says, a brooding expression on her face. "That's not such a bad idea." She lowers her voice and her eyes dart to Mrs G, who is removing a bunch of keys from her handbag to open the door to the school kitchen. "You should ask her."

"What is it with you people?" Lowering my own voice now to match Brie's, I shake my head. "I can't cook here!"

"You totally could," Brie insists. "All you need is a stove."

There's a crunch of footsteps on the stairs behind us. "What are you guys talking about?" Evan asks, as usual the last, pushing back his hood and squinting into the weak morning light. Evan's an enigma to me that I can't figure out. One week, I think he would be the classic Surf n' Turf on a menu. The next, he looks at me with these eyes that are framed by impossibly long black eyelashes and I think he's like a bowl of steaming ramen. There are days when his voice is like Tahitian vanilla beans and days when I think he's overrated like truffles. For the most part, though, he's like a pinch of salt: just right.

"Risotto emergency," Brie says in a tone as if that explains everything. Since I decided what to cook for the audition we've been through several risotto emergencies, always on the hunt for the one thing that will make my risotto irresistible.

Evan looks confused for a moment, then his face lights up. “Oh, you mean the audition. What are you going to cook?”

“I’ll make a risotto” and “She’ll make a risotto,” Brie and I say at the same time and burst into giggles.

Mrs G flicks the light switch and leads the way into the kitchen, handing me this week’s approved recipe. “Are you getting excited, Vanessa?” she asks as she unfolds the scarf around her neck and shakes her padded winter jacket off, placing it carefully over the backrest of the closest chair. She knows everything about the Jackie & You audition and has been counting down the days with me.

“Oh, Mrs G!” I say. The recipe flutters as I lay my hand on my stomach and lean forward. “Every time I think about it, I get butterflies.”

“You’ll be great, Vanessa, I know you will,” reckons Mrs G, undoing the buttons on her cuffs and carefully rolling up the long sleeves of her blouse so they won’t get any egg yolk or flour on. “Don’t forget to focus and do the calming exercise we talked about.”

“Thanks, Mrs G. I can’t believe it’s in two weeks. Two weeks and two days, to be exact!”

“Remember.” Mrs G stops what she’s doing and levels a warm glance at me. “The world doesn’t stop. Just do your very best.”

“A risotto?” Evan whispers as Mrs G turns to the fridge to get the ingredients out. A hint of disappointment lines his voice. “Is that the best you could come up with?”

“You sound like my mum, she said the same thing,” I tell Evan. “But there’s a lot that goes into the preparation and it’s a really tricky dish to master. I’m still trying to get the balance right.”

“I don’t know,” Evan shakes his head. “I just don’t think ... risotto? It sounds kind of everyday, doesn’t it?”

“But see, that’s where you’re wrong,” I insist. “Do you know how hard it is to make a good risotto? One that’s not soggy?”

Brie gives a wry smile. “Even I know that and I don’t know anything about cooking!”

“But shouldn’t you be making something, like, I don’t know, something that sounds French? Something that looks good. You do really impressive dishes, choose one of those!”

“Believe me,” I say, “a really good risotto is impressive.” But on the inside, I’m glowing. My friends think I’m an impressive cook! “Anyway, I need a kitchen to practice the tomato sauce or I’m done!”

“Let me see if I can help you out,” Brie announces and before I can stop her she approaches Mrs G, butter in hand.

“Could Vanessa use the school kitchen to practice her tomato sauce? After school, of course.”

Mrs G slowly sets the butter on the counter. Her face doesn’t look like she thinks it’s a good idea. “That won’t be possible,” she replies, too quick to have given Brie’s plea proper consideration. “For a number of reasons. First, who’s the responsible adult supervising her in the kitchen?”

“I am,” I say, approaching the two. “I’m very responsible. I’ve been cooking our dinners since I was ten. Mum lets me do everything in the kitchen.”

“So use your kitchen at home.” Mrs G isn’t used to bending rules and it shows in her face. “That’s the second reason. The school kitchen is not the right place for private cooking experiments.”

“It’s not an experiment, it’s an emergency,” I try to explain. “There’s still something missing in my tomato sauce. I know it, I can taste it isn’t right yet. And I can’t cook at home because ...”

“They’re renovating.” Brie now, her brow creased.

“We’re renovating,” I echo Brie. “And if I can’t perfect my risotto, I don’t stand a chance to win.”

Mrs G raises her eyebrows. “Well, regardless. The answer is no. Do you have any idea how many rules I would violate if I made an exception for you? What is our school motto?”

“Rules and Responsibility,” I reply, giving a bag of flour a soft punch. “But I wish they’d change it to Purpose and Determination.” My eyes wander from Mrs G to Evan and Brie, before settling back on my teacher. “So is it policy before people? Is that how it is in life? Rules should be made for people, not the other way round!”

“You are very persuasive, Vanessa, as we all know,” here, Mrs G makes a pause that’s hard to place, “but the answer is still no. Regardless.”

“Oh, come on, Mrs G. How would you like people to think of you? Like a boring old chicken drumstick or an exciting coq au vin?”

Brie’s head swivels around and she shoots me a look like, *You didn’t just say that!*

To my surprise, though, Mrs G gives a laugh, the beads on her necklace clicking good-naturedly. “I don’t even know what that’s supposed to mean,” she says. “And still,” a shrug as she lifts her hands and gives me a look of amusement, “we’re at no.”

“There’re only two weeks left. Only two. I can’t do it at home and I can’t do it at my Dad’s because he’s not here. He’s in Zambia.” Mention of that always softens Mrs G’s great big heart, I know it. I can see it in her face. Her eyes start to waver, she starts to shift her weight, there’s a wriggle of her head. Oh, I can see it. She’s like a big hard rock of ice dropped in the middle of the Gibson Desert and I’m like a bunch of hairdryers all set to full blast. “And my stepmum’s so busy right now and I can’t cook at her place all the time. Please.” There’s like an imaginary puddle where we’re standing right now and Brie is watching me with an appreciative glance, Evan just a step behind her. All our energy is focussed on Mrs G.

“You know,” I say and my voice is little more than a hoarse whisper, “it’s not easy for us kids of divorced parents.”

Mrs G holds up a hand. “Enough, Vanessa. Enough.” She pauses and when she speaks, she makes careful choice of her words. “Let me take it up with the principal.

If he thinks the school should support you, then yes, I'll be happy to supervise you tomorrow afternoon. That's all I can do. Do you understand this?"

I nod my head vigorously.

"It's not a promise. Very likely, the principal will say no. But it's worth a try." She takes a deep breath, smooths a few strands in her straight dark hair, glances at her watch. "And now let's get started on the lamingtons." She disappears in the walk-in pantry, while Brie and I jump with excitement.

"Oh, you beautiful coq au vin!" I call after her.

Chapter 6

When I lock my bike at the Community Centre, Crystal is out in the park with a bowl in her hands, feeding birds. The metal fence rattles as I pull my chain through and Crystal turns and waves me over.

Judging by the noise, a whole flock of magpies and butcherbirds crowd the canopy of the bottlebrush that hangs over Crystal like a blanket. The community centre manager is your classic fish and chips. She's easily a head taller than Mum, broad-shouldered and round, and has a penchant for wearing bright-coloured stockings under her black tent-like winter coat. Right now, she carries a metal bowl with what looks like sacrificial offerings in her hand.

"Ew." A glance inside the bowl makes me wrinkle my nose in disgust. Those must be the most pungent cuts of meat a butcher can possibly find. Tossed out, no doubt, because not even a dog would touch them.

"Not dogs, but magpies," she declares. Her eyes shine with excitement. The rest of her butterball face is sucked into her puckered lips. The next moment, she exhales and releases her face into its usual plumpness.

My eyes follow her to the canopy. "How many are up there?"

She frowns with concentration, counts them off as they swoop in and out of the tree. One lonely, leftover bottlebrush sticks into the overcast winter sky like a red feather duster.

"Well, I haven't seen the big one, so five, I guess." Under her open coat, several layers of clothing are visible. A dark fleece partly covers an unbuttoned checkered shirt, under which a black woollen turtleneck is stretched to its limits over an impressive bust. She wipes her hand on her purple stockings, her forehead crinkled with concern.

Crystal is engaged in an immediate response effort to a large threatening plastic owl that has appeared overnight in someone's front garden.

“The whole morning,” she shakes her head, the chain links on her large gold necklace rattling. “There’s been this racket and if people for one second stopped to think what they’re doing to their neighbours, they wouldn’t go about putting up these scary, *scary* plastic things.”

“They’re probably sick of the magpies ruining their windows and shitting on their chairs.”

There’s silence as Crystal ponders this. “Sure. Sure. The thing is, though, it’s caused an unbelievable noise, like nothing I’ve ever heard. And wouldn’t you think that a little chip in the window is a small price to pay?”

“Not if it’s yours.”

Crystal isn’t convinced. “You can’t imagine the ruckus! Considerate people, like I was brought up to be, wouldn’t waste their money on such frightful things. And the birds. Who thinks of the poor birds? They are so territorial. So territorial. Like warriors.”

As a dedicated backyard feeder, Crystal has a relationship with all the birds in the park, especially the big magpies. Every afternoon, she brings them a packet of gizzards that look so gross not even the most experimental French cook would find much use for it.

“But when the time comes, it’s the parents that thank me the most,” she reminds me now. “Because I train these beauties so they won’t swoop at their little darlings.”

“I had no idea you could even train a magpie.” I watch how they come down from the branches and virtually snatch what looks like it belongs in the digestive tract of a rat before Crystal has time to throw it in the air.

“They’re as social as dogs. Even more so.” Crystal’s fingers pick through the cut-offs for another choice piece for the birds. Here come a pair of them dancing through the air, but not to strings and flutes. Their flight is something right out of *Fast and Furious*, to the strangled sound of a guitar worked into a blistering solo. “You should’ve seen them this morning. As soon as the sun was up, they were challenging that owl.” Crystal offers the last bit of meat to a magpie whose wingspan is at least the size of Cale’s trike.

“Well, people get annoyed,” I suggest. Even Mum complains about the birds pecking at the windshield of her car. They knock on everything. When they built the new house on the corner of the park, they had to replace a pane in the glass door because a pair of butcherbirds kept at it, not so much pecking as hurling themselves against the window with their wings and claws, attacking the glass with their rogue beaks. One day over the last holidays, helping out with a morning playgroup, I witnessed one of these birds on the roof of Mum’s car, manoeuvring himself with his head bent so he could look at his upside-down self in the windshield and going against the glass like he was picking a fight with his reflection.

Crystal is done. She folds up the paper inside the bowl, wipes her hands on her stockings and fetches a cigarette from a packet in her coat pocket, which she expertly flicks in her mouth and lights.

“Are you coming?” She holds a hand out for me and looks disappointed when I don’t take it. Well, I’m sorry, but gizzard hands are not everyone’s cup of tea. I keep watchful eyes on her hands and follow at a distance.

Mum is happy, in a good mood, like always when she’s with her playgroup. I like to see her smile, even though Dad thinks her new job is a joke. Mum used to have a career in risk analysis before she became pregnant with me, at the ripe age of forty-four. My birth helped her realise that her whole adult life had been designed around the impossible task of winning her father’s, my grandfather’s, approval. After I was born, she understood how wrong she’d been; how her father’s praise would always elude her; and how, therefore, she ought to stop giving a damn about other people’s opinion of her.

The way she stopped giving a damn was that she decided to try a gazillion different things to find herself. She did an education assistant course, took art classes, learnt to crochet and finally opened a creative arts playgroup in the community centre, where she can charge parents twenty dollars a session for letting their offspring cut pieces of foam into star shapes and wallop each other with self-made paper dolls.

The class is always full on Thursday afternoons. Thirteen toddlers and their parents are here. Some kids have brought their baby brother or sister. Nearly half of them are still in nappies. They wobble over the obstacle course outside, do colouring-ins with the pencil clasped in their fists, cut and paste and learn to carry their own plates of food to the table with the little chairs. “The sweetness of it,” Mum remarks from time to time. “That’s really one of the biggest surprises for me.” She claims she’s never been extremely clucky. “But, oh my. The sweetness of these early years.”

Today, though, Mum’s oblivious to sugar. The playgroup takes place in the large community centre hall, with a smaller backroom extension that she can use for storing her equipment. Outside the room is the community kitchen, a toilet with wheelchair access and nappy change table, and Crystal’s office – “Door’s always open, that’s my policy!”

But it’s the backroom that keeps Mum busy. When I turn a corner, I see why. The room is so filled and crammed with a barrage of things that it looks like an extension of our home.

I groan. This hoarding obsession of hers gets me boiling. The room was almost empty the last time I was here. Reaching absent-mindedly for a piece of fruit from the food table, I frown, taking stock of the damage.

On three sides shelves run along the walls and bend under the weight of toys, books and craft material. The wall nearest to me has a big roller door like a garage that you can pull down and lock with a padlock when the playgroup is over, because Mum shares the hall with Al-Anon and Narcotics Anonymous. Just inside the backroom and to the right of the tracks of the roller door is a little table with a chair and an oversized, old-fashioned computer, where toddlers take turns yanking on the mouse until the cow on the screen goes moo and the sheep goes baa. But table and computer have disappeared from view under a confusion of things that engulf every inch of the place.

The shelves are so overpacked they sag under the weight of all the rubbish. The rest of the room is a baffle of things, carry bags and overflowing boxes. It looks like a garbage truck took a detour through the community hall and tipped a full load over the room. It’s an indescribable, maddening mess of things and the sight of it fills me with shame.

“Vanessa! It’s so nice to see you again. How are you?” One of the playgroup mothers opens a smile to me and I smile back, reflexively, not able to take my eyes off the backroom. The sight is so nauseating, everything spins for a moment, before I remember to breathe and the room comes back into focus.

“I’m good,” I lie, my eyes roaming through the hall.

You can tell by the wound-up look on the kids’ faces and the barely covered tedium on the faces of the parents that it’s nearly the end of the session. The general level of whininess is set on high. Small incidents set off tantrums of major proportions.

A kid is carrying a full plate and negotiating a chair from under the table at the same time. His father hovers beside him, forcefully biting his lips to hold himself back from snatching the plate from his son and pulling the chair out for him, everything so much more efficient when he does it. But he can’t because this is his son’s playgroup, he’s the three-year-old and he’s the one who’s supposed to be learning life skills.

Tomato halves and apple slices begin their inevitable descent to the floor, while the chair’s still stuck under the table. The boy’s bottom lip begins to tremble and the next thing you know he sets off like a fire alarm, only louder.

“Welcome to paradise,” Mum whispers in my ear and puts her arm around me.

“What happened here?” I push her off, gesture at the mess in the storage room.

“What?”

If there’s one thing Mum’s good at, it’s playing innocent. She knows perfectly well what I mean.

“The backroom.” I point, then wave my hand for emphasis. It’s all I can do to keep myself from shouting. “Aren’t you supposed to go through my grandparents’ stuff? Empty out the house and the unit? Isn’t that the plan? Instead of ... this, this ... *this!*”

My voice catches in my throat. There’re no words for this mess before us and maybe the playgroup parents don’t know, maybe they’re blind or don’t care, or perhaps just too wrapped up in looking after their offspring. But still. People are bound to

notice. They have to! Because no one could look at this sickening mess of a room and not arrive at the same conclusion as me. That Mum is a hoarder.

I look at her and shake my head.

“Oh, *that*.” Mum laughs throatily, rolls her eyes. You’re such a worrywart, her face says. You always get worked up over nothing. “Method in madness, you know me. The chaos queen.”

Another shrill laugh, a shrug. “I’m actually in the process of going through all these things. There’ll be shelf rotation,” – the changing of toys and books on the shelves outside – “and a new craft station. A project-of-the-week desk. Perhaps a little baking, cooking with three-year-olds.”

“But they can’t even use the computer anymore.”

“Well, it’s not for long. You see, Crystal has put me on to this thing, and what they do is, there’s these offices that are getting rid of a lot of stuff, like, see?” She delicately pulls a sheaf of printer paper with black smudges from under a stack of tinfoil and holds them up like they’re the holy grail. “Or empty paper rolls. Bubble wrap. Filing organisers. For free.”

“What do you mean, *for free*?” I’m sorry if I look at her like she’s lost her marbles, but hello, who would want to pay for empty paper rolls?

“Sweetie, do you have any idea of the things you can do with such a roll? Add a bit of tissue paper, some wool, a marker pen – there you go, it’s a doll. Or a little bit of plastic wrapping, here and here, and it’s a spy glass. Bunch up the tissue paper around the bottom, like so, now you have rocket ship. The possibilities are endless.”

I give her a blank look. I mean, how many rocket ships do you need?

“Look, Vanessa, use your brain for a second. This is an arts and craft playgroup. Parents pay eighteen dollars fifty for a session with their child. That’s a lot of money.”

“I know it is.”

“And look at this table. Look what they made today. Isn’t it awesome?”

My eyes wander to a small table that displays today's artwork, little paper jellyfish puppets with coloured woollen strings for tentacles and paper plate oceans. "But they used to love the computer," I say meekly.

Mum freezes in her speech, but only for the tiniest nanosecond, then she pulls herself back together.

"Art and craft is more important than computers. Especially at this age. I don't see why you refuse to understand? There's a lot of material required for it and all of it needs a place. All these things, Vanessa, they're treasures. Treasures! People may see no value in them, but let me tell you, to a little boy or girl, a little two- or three-year-old, these things mean the world."

This is a stage in our arguments that we have perfected over the years. It's called a stalemate and two things happen. I refuse to buy Mum's lies and she refuses to talk to me. I can tell by the way her face goes blank and her eyes hard, like a computer screen gone totally blank, that I can't start her back up.

Fuming on the inside, I retire to the colouring-in table and work on my assignments for school, while Mum is in the backroom rummaging through her treasure chest. Then it's time to pack up and Mum tells the kids to leave the shelves outside the room, she will wheel them in later.

I make a face because, unless she's determined to fill every dumpster from here to home, there's no way she's ever going to be able to make room for the small wheelie shelves.

But I don't say anything, and then there's story time and singing and dancing and good-byes.

We stay back for an hour or so, Mum busy in the backroom while I finish off the last bit of homework.

"How about something to eat?" Mum casts me a querying look, points to her purse on the little desk where she's usually perched during playgroup. "What do you feel like? Subway? Pies?" A smile, a flicker in her eyes. "Something quick to cook?"

There's the bait and I'm the fish, and though I know how she plays, I can't resist. Last night's failed tomato sauce, this morning's sugarless lamingtons haven't satisfied my hunger for the kitchen.

The facilities in the community centre are basic. The kitchen is a small nook with not much more than a dishwasher and stovetop, a microwave oven and a tea kettle.

But these are the kind of challenges that set my pulse racing. To come up with something that's better than average, in this less-than-average kitchen space is a challenge I love to rise to. I want to tease out the flavours in fresh, quality food. I want to feast on the astonished faces of Mum and Crystal, want to see them savour every last bit of my creation, lick their fingers and crave more.

Yes, Mum had me and she knows it.

"I'll cook the risotto," I say before I even have time to think.

But Mum shakes her head. "I know how long it takes," she says. "It's Thursday. The Al-Anon meeting starts in an hour."

"But can't I at least try? Maybe I can do a quick version."

Mum laughs. "There's no quick version with you in the kitchen. You take your sweet time and you know it. Besides, risotto is probably not the kind of catering Amanda asks you to do?" Mum gives me a curious look and I'm in a hurry to change the subject, for reasons I don't want to think about.

"Okay, something else then." I grab Mum's purse, take a fifty, but Mum shakes her head, so I put it back and slide a twenty out instead.

In the shopping centre across the park, I scan the fresh vegetables. Really, no matter what you choose to cook, vegetables, meat, fish, or cardboard boxes, everything needs a marinade, something to compliment the texture and flavour. To underscore a mushroom's earthy taste or the sweetness of a capsicum.

So this is where I take inspiration. I let my eyes feast on the abundance of colour, the greens and reds and yellows, my tongue imagining flavours that I crave to create.

I can't make up my mind so I decide to take my cue from outside. A cold winter day, a slow shift in weather, the sky a few shades paler than it seemed in the morning, clouds accumulating, a possible low gathering off the coast, or has it already travelled inland, has it crossed the river? Will it rain?

The weather suggests a warmer dish, heat radiating from thinly sliced, spicy chilis, the aroma of onions browning in the pan, a quick paste of Asian greens, creamy coconut milk, diced meat. Comfort food. A curry.

"Why is everything so damned expensive?" I mutter while my eyes dart over the vegetables in the fresh food section in search for specials. If you ever tried shopping for a curry in a place like Perth, you'll know you need to be frugal. But thrift is the enemy of a lavish, exuberant, creative artist. Penny-pinching caution is anathema to the joy of cooking with abundance.

Buying one ingredient that somehow clumsily incorporates the elegance and flavours of three separate ingredients is a bruising experience. Yet, what can I do? I have to weigh the value of a dollar against the value of a meal.

"Oh, stuff it, I'll just compromise!" I tear my eyes from the lemongrass stalks and fresh ginger, and pull out a homebrand curry paste and meat reduced for quick sale.

Back in the centre, Crystal makes a show of watching the chef in action, as she puts it. She puffs under the weight of a spare chair which she drags into the already crammed kitchen nook and perches on it with the serious expression of a judge on MasterChef.

"Why don't you wait with Mum? It will only take twenty minutes, you know." Squeezing past her, I fill enough rice for three people in a colander and rinse it in cold water.

"Oh, I don't mind. But, my, twenty minutes. That's not much time for a square meal." Crystal gives a chuckle. "I guess these days time is of the essence."

“The point is, though, that’s kind of a long time? To be sitting here?” Finished with the rice, I have to weasel my way around her to the saucepans. After a quick examination, I choose the biggest one, careful not to clonk Crystal on the head with it, as I side-step her hip on the way back to the sink.

“Well, it takes the time it takes.”

I give a silent groan. Boy, is she hard to get rid of. “But wouldn’t you be more comfortable,” I look over to her office, the large computer screen with two kittens in playful pose on her screensaver, “if you didn’t have to sit in this tiny kitchen? It’s so uncomfortable, compared to your office.” I duck around her outstretched arm to pull a microwave rice cooker from the drawer to her right and carefully measure in water before transferring the rice.

“Well, now, don’t you go about worrying about me. I’ll be here, quiet as a mouse,” another chuckle, “and watch the master chef. The new master chef. Your mother must be so proud.”

I guess she is. I navigate my way back around Crystal and empty a couple of slowly decomposing apples out of a glass bowl. “Sorry.” Threading my way past Crystal’s hips in the tight confines of the tiny kitchen, I quickly rinse the bowl before I begin to create a marinade for the meat. Stirring ginger, garlic, tiny flakes of chili, coconut cream and tomato paste, I add the beef and massage the sauce into the meat. Throwing a quick glance at the clock in Crystal’s office, I realise we won’t have enough time to let the meat marinate, and proceed to simmer sauce and beef on the stove. Still, when I arrange tender beef strips over fluffy basmati rice, the flavours of the curry sauce are so intense that there’s a small, delayed explosion of pepper and chili with every spoonful. Mum and Crystal heap praise over me.

“This is a meal that seeps through your bones,” fawns Crystal, accompanied by Mum’s oohs and ahs. “It literally oozes heat and comfort, doesn’t it?”

“Perfect dinner for tonight,” Mum agrees and we follow her gaze outside, where the weather has turned and it’s drizzly and miserable.

After we've eaten and done the dishes, Mum's good mood disappears. She's finished with the backroom for the day, so we wrestle with the roller door until we manage to slide it down in its tracks and Mum snaps the padlock in.

"But, hang on!" I take a look around. "We forgot to wheel the shelves in." There are bean bags, toy shelves on wheels and her little desk with the paper guillotine still outside.

Mum massages her temples with manicured fingers, giving me a pained look. "Don't worry," she says after a brief pause. "It's only temporary. And the cleaners won't come until Wednesday."

After a moment's deliberation, we line the shelves against the roller door and put the guillotine on top of one. Mum grabs her purse and is ready to go.

But once we're at the door, we just stand there and look out into the parking lot.

The winter rains haven't really set in yet, though the sky looks ready for it. The sun has vanished and rain comes in light spats. It's windy, grey, unfriendly and the view out over the parking lot couldn't be any more uninspiring or downright depressing.

I feel Mum shift her weight beside me and one look in her face tells me that her hoarding frenzy is over for the day and she remembers again our situation. Her face looks as glum and pale as the outside gloom.

"I forgot about the rates," she says, out of nowhere.

I make a face. I have a feeling of something terrible to come and brace myself for it.

"The letter came this morning." Mum studies my reflection in the glass door. "Remember, when you offered your babysitting money?"

My mouth goes dry. Please, not the money. "You said you didn't need it." My voice is shaky. "I need it to buy groceries. Mrs G promised I can use the school kitchen tomorrow after school. And I nearly have enough to buy the knife."

"Sweetheart. It's the rates," is all Mum says, holding my gaze steadily.

A big sigh. The story of our lives. We're still looking out through the glass door, and what's left of the winter light makes Mum squint. She takes her sunglasses out of her hair and puts them on.

"I'm sorry. It's an emergency," she says. "And I'm sorry for letting you down. I know you wanted to get the knife."

"You didn't even hear what I said about Mrs G! I need money for the ingredients if I want to practice the risotto tomorrow."

"So how much do you need? How much can you spare?"

"I'll give you a hundred."

Mum shakes her head. "I'm really sorry, Vanessa, but that won't be enough." She puts her hand on my shoulder, squeezes it lightly. "Come on. A risotto isn't that expensive. All you need is a can of tomatoes and some rice."

"It's not just a can of tomatoes!" I shake her hand off, boiling now. "And the audition is in two weeks!" Accusation seeps from my voice and there are tears that stop up my throat. "I won't have enough time to save up for it! Not if I give all my money to you!"

"It's in two-and-a-half weeks and you're cooking a risotto. You'll shine even without the knife."

"But I really want it."

"Without your money, we won't be able to pay the rates," Mum states flatly.

"But what about a refinance?" I look at her beseechingly. "You always tell me the bank would give us more money because our mortgage is so small!"

"I'm sorry," Mum repeats. "I know that's no way to live. But don't worry," her voice picks up momentum, like a rollercoaster on a downward spiral getting ready to climb the big tower. "Don't worry, Vanessa. Another month at most and we'll be back on track. You'll win the audition without the knife and with cheaper ingredients, you'll see." There's a short silence. "Maybe I can hold a garage sale with my parents' furniture, what do you think?"

I rummage in my pocket, pull out some crumpled bills, hand them over with a scowl. *There goes the knife.* “I think it’s a great idea,” I mutter in response to Mum’s pondering. A garage sale. Perhaps that’s really the way forward?

There are toy shelves that don’t fit in the backroom anymore, yet still I manage to entertain the thought, for a moment, of Mum putting price tags on my grandparents’ framed paintings, their bric-a-brac, the keepsakes from their vacations overseas, the scuffed furniture they were too attached to throw away while still alive.

“Though, the thing is, who would pay more than a couple of dollars for these things?” Mum muses.

I sigh. Her treasure, everyman’s trash.

“Warm in here, isn’t it?” Straightening up, she puts an arm around me and looks around.

This time I don’t shrug her off. I try to picture us from the outside. Two figures pressed against the glass, against a backdrop of bright fluorescent light. I make a half turn, look Mum in the eyes. Huh, I think. We’re almost the same height. When did that happen?

She strains her mouth, gives me a fake smile that’s supposed to cheer me up, but it’s actually just as heart-ripping as the thought of the two of us alone in her dirty, dark hoarder’s house. Her eyes look tired.

“Go ahead, Mum. I’ll stay and help Amanda with the catering.”

I must’ve mumbled because Mum has to ask twice before she understands and nods. “Okay.”

Chapter 7

It's dark outside when Amanda finally comes in, swept through the door with leaves and rain, which is picking up in strength outside. Her tote rides cumbersomely down the arm that's bracing the door, her free hand clutching a cardboard tray with three hot drinks from McDonald's.

I spring to attention, put the cardboard tray on Crystals' desk, but Amanda's bag is too unwieldy for me to wrench through the door. The wind has definitely picked up. It beats us with a roar like an angry beast, big gusts chasing leaves through the parking lot, the branches of the towering gum trees aching with loud groans.

The sound of flushing comes from the bathroom and a moment later Crystal opens the door. The wind eases up just long enough for us to pull Amanda into the hall. Grunting slightly, Crystal pushes the heavy glass door shut before the next big gust can tear it from her hands.

"Wow, winter's arrived," Amanda says, her face flush with cold. For an instant, everything's in a downward swoop. Her shoulders, her bag, her coat, her scarf, the wetness in her hair, even her theatrical expression, it all sinks to the floor and gathers in a puddle around her shoes. Her shoes! At the sight of them, I begin to wonder how on earth I will ever make my way home in the downpour.

Her wet-cat look notwithstanding, Amanda is classic French petit fours. Her figure is full and delicious, her auburn fringe is cut to exact length just above her well-shaped eyebrows, a hint of rouge embellishes her pearl-white complexion, which powder keeps matte and oil free, and her lips are drawn in perfect red lines.

"Thanks for the coffee." Crystal pulls a flat white from the tray.

Amanda casts a glance at her watch. "I'm running late," she observes with a frown, brushing wet hair out of her face. As she tugs at the bulk in her bag, she removes a folded cloth from it and her eyes settle on me. "Will you help me get the room ready?"

“Sure.” The short stilettos of her pointed wet heels hammer across the floor with purpose as we walk to the back and push two plastic tables together.

The cloth, some colourful Oxfam rug, rustles like hay in her hands. “When so much of your life is held hostage by dark forces, it’s the little things that matter,” Amanda remarks as she shakes out the bright fabric with two quick flicks from her wrists. I take hold of the other end and together we spread it over the tables and pile cups and saucers on.

“Alright now,” Crystal calls from the doorway. In her hands, she clutches what’s left of her flat white. “I’ll call it a night then.”

“See you next Thursday.” I wave, grateful that my lie continues to go undetected for a little while longer, and help Amanda pull a plain Al-Anon sign from a cupboard to set it up out front.

What lie? Well, it’s sort of a complicated story. To start at the beginning, neither Mum nor Dad have a drinking problem. So what’s my business at these meetings, where relatives of alcoholics come for support?

The front I keep up for Crystal and Mum is that, for a very small fee, I help Amanda with the catering. That’s one half of the lie.

The other half – well, here’s the tricky part. I never actually told Amanda I had an alcoholic parent. It’s just, well, implied by my presence at her meetings.

And what exactly is my business at these meetings?

I feel I need to explain because if she ever finds out, Mum will be so furious. And Crystal will be the first to jump to her defence, because in her opinion my mother’s a saint who can do no wrong.

But think about it. Brie’s mother has a seven-month-old baby that screams at the top of her lungs every day from the time she wakes up till she goes down at night. All through primary school, I used to spend a lot of time at Brie’s house, building LEGO, and later, when her parents divorced, watching TV or playing Minecraft. But because her little sister is such a screamer, and because she keeps changing her

naptime, I'm not allowed to come over anymore. Brie's mum thinks the baby will wake at the drop of a needle.

And because of my mother's hoarding, Brie can't come over to my place. Sometimes she says that we've been renovating for an awfully long time. I agree.

Apart from the library, the coffee shop or the mall, there's not a lot of places for me to hang out.

Mum came up with the idea of sending me to a Youth Group which the Baptist Church runs on Thursdays, but Brie totally refused to come along. And when Mum drove us past the building to check it out, we noticed a sign that said, "Why God tests your faith with suffering." I thought that sounded like a fairly cynical comment. "If that's what God's like, I don't want to find him," I said and after briefly pondering my remark, Mum agreed.

So Brie's house is out. Youth Group is out. The library closes at seven and the mall is kind of a dreary place when you have no money to spend. It's winter and at home, Mum cooks tea on the camping gas cooker. After that, we just lie in bed and read in the light of our camping lanterns. Sometimes, Mum opens the curtains a little to let in light from the streetlamps. But our louvres are so broken that the curtains help keeping the warmth inside.

The point is, hanging out at Al-Anon is not such a bad option. Often, it's actually as nice as the biscuits Amanda bakes at home and lays out on a plate. I'm enthralled by the warmth and kindness she creates in the community hall and I don't think that's a crime. And if she prays a lot and seems a bit churchy, I don't mind. Instead, I have the feeling that Amanda and the women who attend the meetings have kind of adopted me when there's nowhere else to go.

Finally, seven o'clock brings my hour of peace. Amanda begins the prayer, the others joining her in a low murmur. "Lord, give us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change."

"And the courage to change the things we can," I say, perhaps a bit louder than necessary. But I can't help it, I always get carried away at that bit.

“And the wisdom to know the difference.”

The voices subside and we all look around.

“Welcome tonight on this wet night,” Amanda intones, in a clear, well-toned voice.

Then, nothing much happens. We sit in chairs in a circle. Every now and then, one of us gets up to refill her cup of coffee or tea. Someone clears their throat over a prolonged period of time to let the others know she has something to say but doesn't quite know how to share it yet.

“So, there's a big Al-Anon meeting in Bunbury next month,” the woman to my left begins.

The others nod.

The woman sighs. “My husband doesn't want me to go.”

Amanda takes a sip of coffee and blinks a few times. “He doesn't, does he?”

The woman shakes her head. “He says he doesn't have a drinking problem.”

“Hm.” Amanda considers this, picking some fluff from her slacks. “So you're not going?”

“I probably shouldn't.”

Amanda inspects her cinnamon fingernails. “You might find it inspiring.”

The woman looks around the room. “To know the difference,” she murmurs after a long pause.

The silence grows longer. Everyone seems lost in thought.

“How are you doing, Vanessa?” Amanda asks after a while.

I close my eyes. If I don't keep my mind absolutely focussed on the audition, there're a lot of dark thoughts that plague me. The audition is like a star in the night sky, but today, the light is shining weak. A lot of dark is edging in.

“I've been thinking about my career as a cook,” I begin.

When the silence that follows becomes too long, the others nod encouragement.

I try again. "It's almost as if I'm addicted to cooking. I'm obsessed with it."

I look around the circle. The others don't seem to think there's anything wrong with it.

"It's like I imagine giving birth or something," I say, rolling my shoulders back to loosen the tension in my neck. "Like you take something and transform it into something else. Make it better."

Amanda nods and smiles.

"Well, and if you have a talent for it, which I do ..." I blush a bit but Amanda seems to find no fault with tooting one's horn. She smiles, her eyes warm with attention and I continue. "So, what I'm trying to say is, I'm good at taking things and making them better. In the kitchen."

"I agree. I absolutely agree," Amanda says, placing her mug on the floor with a small hollow clank.

"But it doesn't help if I don't get the opportunity to cook. It's like no one even cares about it. I mean, like my mother. She doesn't care about food." I think of the money, crumpled bills, my Wuesthof-knife-deposit that I gave Mum earlier.

Amanda sits back up and nods gravely. "You want her to understand how important it is to you?" she clarifies and even though she sits two chairs away from me, her voice is gentle and soft, like an arm put around my shoulder. "Even though she doesn't care?"

I stare at the bright laces in my scuffed Doc Martens. I don't feel like speaking anymore. In my heart, night has fallen. The worries that keep me up. The thought that there won't ever be a garage sale, that things will go on like this forever, forcing us to live in a pile of garbage, being buried under a mudslide of useless things. "I just want us to be normal."

The next thing I know my cheeks are wet and the women crowd around me, offering Kleenex and comfort.

“And you really think you’ll be okay?” Amanda has asked the same question at least three times on the ride home. My bike is in the boot of her enormous SUV. We sit in the front, so high off the ground I feel like I’m riding a magic carpet. The smell has a clean-laundry freshness to it and the inside is so unbelievably clean, it looks like a showroom vehicle, not a family car. A tissue box balances precariously between us, sliding forward whenever Amanda touches the brakes, which, given that she’s a careful and circumspect driver, she never does abruptly.

“I’m fine,” I mumble. There’s a slight tinge of shame in remembering my tears. I mean, what was that all about? I can’t buy a knife. So what? As long as I find the missing ingredient, I’ll be fine. I’ll ace the audition and become the youngest star on Jackie & You in its entire history. Things are going to be fine. Everything’s going to be fine. It always is when you believe.

Amanda studies me quietly but I keep silent for the rest of the drive. When we stop outside my house, I quickly gather up my bag and helmet while Amanda wrestles with the bike. At last, we get it untangled and I’m free.

“Nice neighbourhood you live in,” Amanda observes. She squints at the colourbond and I’m glad it hides our house so well. Glad, also, that it’s already dark and that the rain, which earlier slowed to a drizzle, is picking up again. “Are you renting or is it your own place?”

“It’s our own,” I say. The horror-film look of the mess inside weighs like a stone on my heart. All I can think is how cold and dark it is. But before she can ask any more questions, I sling the bag over my shoulder. “Thanks for the lift.”

Storm’s on my mind now. I need him with an urgency that tugs at my heart. Amanda’s car is a retreating shadow, two red lights fading into the night, and I wonder briefly what her house looks like. No doubt, it’s a home. I mean a proper home, with lights and a shower and the warm blast of a heater to take the chill off the night.

I turn and weave my way through the gate that doesn't open properly. The glass in the kitchen window is dull with grease and the tattered blinds that sag in the middle give way to the mess and grub of the kitchen sink.

I hitch up my bike and climb the couple of steps, fumble in the dark for the lock. The bike secured, I find the front door unlocked, slide through a narrow gap and make my way carefully past the mess that blocks the entry.

"Is that you, Vanessa?" Mum calls from her room.

I start slowly down the hall, making sure I keep a firm hand against the boxes to prevent them from tumbling over me, reacting only when I hear Storm's anticipatory purr. My bag and helmet drop to the mess on the floor with a muted sound as I lift Storm from the box he's perched on.

From her room, Mum calls again.

"It's me," I answer, holding Storm tight to my face. In the next moment, I'm in Mum's room, negotiating my way through to her bed like wading through knee-deep water, complete with snakes and alligators.

But it's worth it because Mum's got a torch on and there's the soft sound of an old Eurythmics song coming from her portable CD player. She shoves books and photo albums aside to make room for me on her bed. Not even Storm is cause for drama.

I crawl under the cover, cold from the night, clutching Storm to me.

"You were out so late," Mum murmurs after a while. I must've dozed off because the sound of her voice travels a long way through my unconscious, arriving long before I can make a meaning of her words, just as if I were a baby. Unable to make sense of language, beyond the recognition of my mother's voice. "Your teacher called."

"Mrs G?"

"Is that what you call her?" Mum gives a chuckle. "Anyway, she asked me to tell you, the principal said no." Mum turns a page in her book. She doesn't look up. "Oh, and before I forget. I'd prefer if you stopped telling lies at school. Or, if you

absolutely have to lie, tell me, so I know. I had no clue what she was on about. Renovations?”

“Well,” I shrug. “Wishful thinking.”

She continues flipping through her book, the pages whooshing softly through her hands. “Yeah, so.”

Anyway, the principal’s answer is a bummer. “He’s a sauerkraut,” I mutter.

“Who?”

“Mr P, obviously.”

“Your principal?”

“Mhmm.”

Mum closes the book with a sharp slap and turns to look at me, pinching her chin thoughtfully. “You would tell me if you were in trouble, wouldn’t you?” she says.

I nod. “Sure.”

“Okay. So look what I found.” She rummages around the books and papers sprawled over the cover until she thrusts something flat and smooth into my hands.

“The Around-the-World Cookbook!” I open the book. Some of the pages are stuck together with age-old stickiness. Residues of grease and sauce are evident on almost every page. I got it for my ninth birthday. “I thought you’d thrown it out.”

“Sweetie, I never throw anything out,” Mum says with a wry laugh.

“I know ... oh, but look here.” I flick through the pages, take in the colourful illustrations, the beauty and perfection of photographed food. The same excitement washes over me as when I first opened the book, almost six years ago. Then I find what I’m looking for.

“Here!” My finger stabs at the bright colours of a Mediterranean risotto, the green of the parsley and red of tomato so vibrant the picture seems to buzz with freshness. “That’s what I’m going to cook for the audition.” My finger pauses on the page. “Do you remember the first time I made this?”

“I do.” Mum strokes softly over the ridge of a scar on my index finger, which is still pointing at the picture.

“I thought it was cool that you let me use the sharp knife.”

“I did, too.” Mum chuckles. “Until you cut yourself.”

I shrug, turn the page. “I remember you and Dad fighting over it.” They were arguing in the back while I stood at the sink, my face wet with tears. Water ran over my hand and mixed with the blood from the gash in my finger. The knife had sliced off a flap of skin with as much ease as cutting a strawberry. “He didn’t want me to use that knife.”

“It’s a scary thought, you know. Your child growing up. Using a sharp knife for the first time. Catching public transport. Staying out late.” Mum gives me a look. “Like tonight. I was worried about you, you know?”

I slowly let the cookbook fall shut, settle deeper into her bed. “Me too,” I reply sleepily. “I’m worried about you, too.” And that’s the last thing I know before sleep washes me away, so deep I don’t even dream.

Chapter 8

The winter rains have set in. Water lashes down on us throughout the night without pause. I wake up to a downpour, so sudden like the gates of heaven have just opened. Wind drives sheets of rain against our house until the roof tiles rattle and Storm comes in wet, leaving muddy prints on the covers before I get a chance to wipe his fur with an old towel.

When it comes to water, Storm is unlike any other cat. He seeks it out, unable to resist. As the rain gains in intensity, pelting our street, Storm stands guard near the bedpost, listening to the deluge. He pricks his ears, his tail swooshes from side to side and in one elegant pounce he's down on the floor and through the door back outside. I imagine him squeezing his sleek body through the catflap and wonder what must go on in his ancient, big-cat heart. What images of torrential rain must float in his unconscious? What dreams of swimming in rainforest waterholes under the dense canopy of jungle giants?

It is still raining hard in the morning. Water seems to be coming at me from all directions. My bike remains on the porch and I take the bus to school, where the heavy rains have flooded the upper lawn area and water is running in rivulets past the Year Nine lockers.

"Have you heard of umbrellas? A really cool invention, designed to keep people dry," Brie remarks when I shake my wet hair out of the parka.

I give her an annoyed glance. Brie's mum may suffer from post-natal depression, but she's nothing if not conscientious about driving Brie to school each morning.

"Oh, yeah?" I say, stuffing my bag in the locker and taking my English books out. "Have you ever tried opening an umbrella in this wind?"

But as is her MO, Brie has already moved on to another topic. "So are we still on for tonight?" she asks as we scuttle to our English classroom. Her plan is to hit the mall and scan the shops for cute winter tops. "Evan," she calls out, catching sight of

him trotting across the junior playground toward the classroom. “You’re coming, too, aren’t you?”

“So what time do you think you’ll finish in the kitchen? We could go straight after.” Brie is dancing around me with excitement. I gently nudge her out of the way and collapse into a chair in the third row and lean on the back legs while holding on to the desk for balance. “Sauerkraut said no,” I complain.

“Who’s sauerkraut?” Evan asks, pushing his hood off his head. He combs through his hair with spiked fingers and gives me a curious look.

“Mr P of course, who else?” I look at him, fuming at the injustice.

“You’re seriously deranged, you know that?” Brie laughs, plonking her books down on the desk next to me. “Like, all the cooking’s fried your brain.”

But Evan notices the look on my face. “About using the school kitchen?” He grimaces in sympathy and chews on the inside of his cheeks for a moment. “Hey, you know what?” Evan plops down on my desk, his butt firmly planted on my English book.

I squint up at him. If I can’t perfect my sauce, my life is over. “What?”

“Why don’t you do it anyway?” He cracks his knuckles in a totally annoying way.

“What do you mean?”

“Do it at school.” Pop, pop.

I wince. The noise keeps me from getting a clear thought. “Please stop.” Obediently, Evan stops playing with his knuckles. “Sauerkraut said no,” I remind him.

Evan gives me his biggest grin. “He doesn’t need to know,” he says and starts cracking his knuckles again.

Hands down, this must be the craziest thing we’ve ever done. And all for a simple tomato sauce. I feel like on the inside I want to shriek and do a mad dance, but instead Evan, Brie and I are crouched low behind a peppermint tree like an unlikely combat

unit, impatiently waiting for Nielsen, the maintenance guy, to get in his van and drive off.

The clouds hang threateningly low in the bleak sky, the afternoon light like dead ash. Next to me, Brie tries to suppress a shiver.

On normal days, this would be a total suicide mission. The fence around Resolution Drive is armed with an alarm that goes off at three different places: Nielsen, the principal, and the security firm.

But this is not a normal day. This has been one of the wettest days this year so far. More than 60 mm have already been dumped and more's to come. And because RDC is an old school and a lot of its systems are out of date, the alarm stops working properly in the rain. It becomes irregular and so Nielsen disarms it on days with more than 20 mm rainfall.

"Watch. Now," Evan hisses under his breath, his hood drawn deep into his face. He ducks down and points with two fingers at his eyes and then along the fence.

I shift my weight in the wet grass as Nielsen slides the van door closed with a clunk. The moment we see his red taillights disappear behind a corner, we slip out from behind the gnarled tree trunk, grass squelching under our feet as we cross the street and follow the footpath to the school's side gate. In a heartbeat, Evan and I have scaled the fence, balancing our weight precariously for a moment before landing on the other side, glancing around the school yard.

Behind us, Brie clammers the fence ponderously, her feet slipping repeatedly on the slick chain links. Evan and I exchange a look. She's our best friend and one of the most loyal persons I know, but this girl's no ninja. In silent agreement, we reach up and take hold of her soggy woollen cardigan and together we manage to haul her over the fence. Her feet smack the concrete with a solid thump.

"Oof," she heaves, adjusting her sleeves and pulling her cardigan straight, before following us across the damp concrete. At the grass area, I pause, casting furtive glances over the yard before scrutinising the scattered buildings.

"Come on," Evan urges, pressing ahead, and we carefully make our way across the squishy lawn.

The school kitchen is sandwiched between the chemistry lab and the art room on the upper floor of an ugly bile-coloured modular building, which the Year Nines affectionally call *the vomit*. Wet leaves squelching under the rubber soles of his sneakers, Evan mounts the stairs to the kitchen ahead of us. I follow next, with Brie bringing up the rear, her footfall heavy as she lumbers to keep up with Evan's lithe steps.

"Try not to make so much noise," I plead under my breath, but she shakes my warning off with a shrug.

"Don't be such a chicken. Nielsen's gone. I could do a tap-dance on the stairs and no one would care."

I cock my head in the dull light, flash a sweet smile at her. "There's only one problem."

"Yes?" Brie looks at me expectantly.

"You can't tap-dance."

Brie sucks in her belly, squares her shoulders and attempts a dancing pose. "I can try."

"Hey, you two!" Evan throws an irritated glance at us from the top of the stairs.

We pause at the door to the school kitchen, the doorknob glistening in the rain, momentarily stumped at how to get in. Beside me, Evan digs deep in his jeans pockets. When he feels my eyes on him, he looks up, shrugs with an apologetic smile and produces a small bobby pin.

"Worth a shot," he mumbles, more to himself than us, and fumbles with the lock. Despite appreciating his enthusiasm, I bristle at the fact that we're really breaking into the school.

A sharp click breaks my train of thoughts. I look up as the door springs open.

"After you." Evan bows theatrically and moves aside.

Hesitating briefly in the doorway, we slowly step into the empty room, our footsteps ringing out in the silence. The cupboards along one side are crammed with

art supplies and dirty paint brushes litter the sink. I lift a tea towel from a benchtop and wrinkle my nose at its musty smell.

“This is more The Block than MasterChef,” mutters Evan.

I smile briefly, then open the fridge, but there’s such a strong smell that I shut the door without a word.

“We don’t need more than a stovetop anyway,” I state, trying to look at the bright side.

Like in the GP practice of Brie’s father, I start by chopping onions and garlic, sauté them in the butter sauce which I have perfected over the last few months, before I add fresh tomatoes, tomato paste, grated carrots, mushrooms and herbs. For today’s attempt, I have decided to scale back on the amount of parsley in the sauce and replace it instead with a fistful of fresh basil and lemon zest.

“What do you think?” I hand Evan and Brie each a spoon and watch them taste with furrowed brows.

“Mmh, good,” Brie says.

Evan shuts his eyes thoughtfully. “Needs more salt.”

“I agree.” Adding a generous pinch of salt, I wait for a moment before trying another spoon and carefully reduce the heat. “We’ll let it simmer until the liquid has been reduced. After that, we’ll build the risotto. Do you remember what it tasted like last time?” I ask Brie.

Brie walks over to a window near the door, casting a careful glance over the rooftops of the smaller school buildings, and screws up her face apologetically. “I’m not really good at spotting small differences,” she says. “I think they all taste good.”

“Meh.” I wiggle my head. “I used mostly broth and just a bit of sauce for the rice. But I think the broth taste was too strong. I wonder if it tastes better with just tomato sauce on its own. Anyway. We’ll see.”

Evan hasn’t said much since I started in the kitchen. I almost forgot he was here. But now he takes his phone out.

“Let’s watch your show,” he says and keys a few words in the phone. “Is that a good episode?”

I glance at the screen. “They’re all good.”

“So what happens after you get into the finals? You clear out of here?”

Slowly stirring the sauce, I consider his question. “I’ll be in Adelaide for a few months,” I say after a pause. “Until the filming stops. Then I come back.”

With a flick of his head, Evan shakes his sand-coloured hair from his face. “That’s it? There won’t be any more cooking for you after that?”

“I’ll always cook.” I frown, trying to explain. “After school, I want to go to Le Cordon Bleu cooking school. And then I’ll travel the world and learn from chefs around the world. There’ll never be a time when I won’t think of cooking.” I pause, unsatisfied with how it all sounds. “Look, I’ll never not breathe, for as long as I live. I’ll never not cook either. It’s my world.”

“Why?” His fingers pause mid-air as Evan meets my eyes with a curious look.

“I just don’t know what I would do if I didn’t cook. It’s not just an obsession. It’s me. It’s what makes me *me*.” To my relief I notice the sauce has thickened enough and requires my full attention. The wooden spoon clanks against the rim of the saucepan as I start to build the risotto. Slowly adding one spoon of rice at a time, I stir continuously, focussing on texture and smell.

“And if you don’t get in, what then?” asks Evan.

“Why do you have to pester her like this?” Brie pouts from her place near the window. Throwing a last glance at the overcast sky, she abandons her post and walks over to join us at the stove. “First of all, everybody knows these things are manipulated. Like *Married*, or the *Bachelor*? There’re a hundred producers behind the scenes and everybody’s coaching their guy. It’s all fake. And second, Vanessa’s a great cook –” Brie wallops my back so hard I almost drop the ladle, “and she’ll kick arse!”

“Right.” Blushing deeply, I stir like my life depends on it. But Evan’s comment niggles at me. What if I don’t get in? The calm I usually feel in the kitchen gives way

to sudden panic. No. I shake my head to clear my mind. Don't let these thoughts bring you down.

The silence continues. Brie and Evan swipe around on their phones, in search of a podcast they both like. My eyes wander from them to the window and the dark sky beyond. The rain has picked up again. Water lashes down on the school, wind driving sheets of rain against the kitchen windows so that the glass panes rattle. "Nearly done," I say softly, more to myself than anyone else, and turn the heat off under the pan.

When I look back up from the stove, the imposing figure of Nielsen, the maintenance guy, is standing outside the window. A high viz vest worn loosely over a marine winter fleece, the tail bits beat violently in the wind and his grey eyes glare like steel as his fingers tap angrily on the glass. It's hard to say who looks more gobsmacked, Nielsen or us!

Momentarily, everyone seems at a loss. Evan's phone drops with a sharp clatter to the floor as he stares open-mouthed at Nielsen, and Brie, after her first shock, retreats slowly into the darkness further back.

"I swear," I groan from my post at the stove, wooden spoon suspended in mid-air, "this is getting ridiculous! How hard can it be to cook in damn peace?!"

Chapter 9

When I wake the next morning, the rain has stopped. The air's wet like a drenched towel, but the sunlight is strong enough to make me squint as I climb down the rickety old staircase that leads from the kitchen into the yard out back, where I've planted my kitchen garden.

With Mum's help, we cordoned off a small area between the rusty garden shed and Caroline's fence, where the ground is sandy and the grass patchy and weak. Then I filled the two smartpots that I talked Dad into buying at the last school fundraiser with soil and mulch from the park across the road. All I needed was some first-grade fertiliser. But as usual I was low on funds. Luckily, Caroline's always potting and planting, growing and pruning, and in exchange for a day's worth of labour she was willing to give me some leftover sheep manure and half a bag of blood and bone. A strong smell hung in the air for days afterwards, our backyard reeking like a blocked sewage drain.

Carefully making my way through the wet grass, I notice with pleasure that the winter rain has de-funked our yard and my smartpots look shiny and fertile. As expected, the parsley's doing fine. But the Chinese mint is still in its infancy. Tiny green leaves poke from the black soil, fragile life digging out toward sunlight

"In this weather, your herbs will grow like they're on steroids," Mum remarks from the landing. I turn to wave at her. She salutes back with a mug in her hands, looking oddly dressed and ready to go so early in the morning. When I ask where she's headed, she replies that she's seriously working on the apartment now, her garage sale project.

"Christina called again last night, before you got home," she says. "And we got talking. It would be nice for us sisters to get together, a siblings' reunion. But I can't, you see ... As long as the apartment hasn't been put into order, that is. I simply can't. I can't. That's what I told her last night. God. Everything's such a mess ..."

I look up at the small and fragile shape leaning in the doorframe, her hand raised against the glare of the sun. She's clutching a mug that I haven't seen in her

hands since I was a little girl, her face brave in the morning light because she knows I'll be at Dad's this weekend. My heart beats faster at the thought of what her hoarding does to her.

"Are you sure you want to go? I could make us some soup. Or how about breakfast?"

"Where? How?" Mum shakes her head. "No, you have your father to get ready for. I don't want to encroach on your time with him. It's just as well I won't be here. Will you be back Sunday or Monday?"

"I think I'll stay Sunday night, so I'll see you on Monday. After school."

"What about the meeting with your principal? Don't you want me to come?"

That much I've got to say – Mum is great when it comes to school and stuff. Daughter breaks into school kitchen to try a new tomato sauce recipe? Sounds totally reasonable to her. She didn't even bat an eyelid when she picked me up from the office. The only thing she said was that throwing my risotto in the trash seemed like a terrible waste to her.

"You rock, Mum."

"I know. Thanks anyway."

"But I think I'll ask Dad." Sometimes it's good to have a six-foot giant on your side. A meeting with Mr P is definitely one such occasion.

"Your father? Sure. That will be good." She's trying very hard but can't prevent herself from sounding disappointed. "Great." And as if to convince herself, she repeats it several times. "Great."

Like always, Dad's late. I get bored in the garden and Storm has wandered off under the house with his tail in the air like a proud frigate. So I sit outside on the nearest park bench, the one that catches sunlight from early morning until late in the afternoon. The sky is high and blue. Soft vaporous clouds line the horizon and I nearly forget the world around me, thinking ahead to my weekend with Dad and Cale and the meals I'll cook.

I won't do the risotto. All my risotto memories stem from a time when Dad was breaking up with Mum. I may have forgiven him, but the risotto is not for him.

Instead, I'll do a Molokhia, an Egyptian dish I found in my cookbook. There's a ridiculous amount of ingredients required and I wonder if I can convince Dad to take us to the farmer's market, where I'm sure I'll find everything I need.

Then I think how Molokhia has a somewhat slimy texture and if that's something Cale will be squeamish about. I wonder what the most child-friendly dish would be to reward his courage for tasting the stew, when Caroline slips from her gate and walks through the grass toward me, a dog, a mutt of some sort which I haven't seen before, at her heels. I nod in greeting and wave.

She laughs and as always, the first thing I notice are the gaps in her mouth. Her remaining teeth are stained in a colour like wet sand. Her skin is blotchy and baked into leathery striations and when she speaks, her words roll out of her mouth like they're unsure about their place, some sounds toppling over others, pauses stretched into eternities.

When she reaches the bench where I'm perched, she pauses briefly. "I'm going to pick up my boy now," she informs me. "As soon as Mart's back, I'll get on the bus to pick up my boy. Mart can look after Jack here – I've only had him for a few days and Muffin doesn't like him. Not yet. Hey, Jack, is that right?"

Her new dog breaks free from the tree where he was digging something up from the ground and bounds across the park back to us. He's younger than her other dogs and crowds into us bursting with life and impatience.

I lift my feet off the ground and wince as he sniffs at my shoes. "Can you please take him away?" I ask.

"Off, Jack!" Caroline warns. "Do you like him? Mart got him for me for my birthday."

I wipe my shoes in the grass, careful to avoid the dog's panting mouth. "He's cute," I say politely, embarrassed by how unconvincing my voice sounds. "I'm a cat person," I explain, eying Jack warily. "My mum's the one who likes dogs. I didn't know you have a son," I add after a brief pause.

Caroline's face looks worried for a second. Though she hasn't moved, her breath comes hard like she's been on a jog around the block.

"I do." She looks over at a tree where two magpies squabble over something. "He's in Year Five. About your age."

"I'm in Year Nine," I correct her, trying not to sound annoyed.

Caroline nods, her plaited hair bouncing sharply on her back. "I won't let him take the bus by himself. Not with what's going on in the world these days. Not with the kind of people you meet on public transport. Better safe than sorry." Talk of her son has electrified Caroline. She's like a high-voltage power plant, her smile strong like the sunshine hanging in the tops of the trees.

"They give him back to me as soon as I finish the program," she says. "This is the first time he's allowed to stay for the night. Next week, he's allowed to stay the whole weekend."

"Well, I'll have to cook something for him one day," I say because I don't know what else to say.

"Oh. Yeah?"

"Yes. You know, like you and gardening? Cooking, that's my thing."

"You don't say. What, like MasterChef?"

"Like in Jackie & You. Do you know her?"

Caroline shakes her head.

"She's the best. I want to be a chef like her. I'm going to the audition in two weeks."

"That's a thing. A chef. Well, anytime. You can cook for my boy anytime you want."

"Not this weekend, though. I'm staying with my dad."

As if on cue, there's his new white Audi rolling down the street, a lone child seat in the back for Cale.

As long as I can remember, Dad used to be big. He had an expansive front – some would say a huge gut. He seemed like a giant, six foot tall and topping a hundred and twenty kilograms, with a heavy-set face. And even in business shirts, he always looked scruffy, like he himself had invented grunge.

When I turned nine, though, or perhaps it was when I was still eight, Dad started to lose the weight. At first, it was ten kilograms and we cheered him on. Mum did some calculations on the computer on how every kilo that he lost reduced his chances of developing diabetes by some ridiculous number.

Then it was twenty, thirty – until he wasn't the middle-aged man anymore that I'd known. The guy with a rumpled shirt and stains down the front, with an unshaved face, whose hair was always windblown – that guy disappeared.

My parents' friends started to comment on how handsome he looked, how young he seemed, how he could even pass for this actor, the one with blue eyes, like Dad's.

But the younger Dad got, the older my Mum seemed to be, simply by comparison. After all, Dad is seven years younger than her and it was like he'd just remembered it.

So, here's a list on how to spot someone cheating on you:

1. Dad lost weight.
2. His daggy shirts and pants disappeared into charity bins.
3. He began to buy brand jeans and dress in designer boardshorts on weekends.
4. There was always a sparkle in his eyes, like someone had just taken a cloth and polished them.
5. He was always in a good mood and forever texting on his phone.
6. He looked like he was going to burst any second now, his chest full like a cockerel, his shoulders squared, his head high, his face always, always full of

smiles. He looked like he could hardly contain himself. Like a rocketship, ready for blast-off.

7. And finally, there was blast-off.

Next came tearful accusations and screaming, shrieks even, and Mum staring bleary-eyed into the early morning light. Her friends kept asking her if she'd suspected something – because she must've known, must've had an inkling. The tiniest, littlest hint of suspicion.

After Dad's blast-off, there was a month – a month at least – where I ignored his calls. I simply couldn't talk to him. Not after seeing the devastation on Mum's face, not after witnessing the way he'd reduced her from somebody to almost nobody.

Was I scared about the way Mum's eyes stared out of her face, like a kind of madness? Yes, I was. Was I hurt beyond words with the way Dad packed his bags and kicked the door on his way out, slammed it shut behind him? Yes, I was. Was I hateful when he introduced me to Immy, over-critical, a bitch? Yes, I was. Did I feel betrayed and cheated?

Yes, I did, and when I see his new Audi roll into our street, there's a stab of this. A kind of thought that clenches my heart like the mess in our house. I need to shut my eyes quickly and count the steps of my risotto recipe to make it all go away.

Forgiveness is like this tiny little flower that's called a snowdrop. The most amazing thing, it can push through frozen ground and snow. No other flower, not even one twice its size, can grow where a snowdrop grows.

And so, like a snowdrop, forgiveness grew inside me until I could look at Immy's rounded belly and marvel at the kind of baby growing inside her. Once Cale was born, I was washed away by a feeling of love so strong it seemed all encompassing. My love for Cale included Immy and I could start becoming her friend.

“Hello, sunshine,” Dad calls from his car. I sling my bag over the shoulder, race through the park and give him a big hug through the open window because he just got back from Zambia and I haven't seen him in nearly two months.

Chapter 10

Dad leans over and opens the passenger door with a soft click, his face beaming as he watches me slip into the seat next to him. Cale, wearing his favourite Spiderman top and pants, is strapped in the back seat, his eyes alive with adventure.

“Vanessa,” he crows, because he generally seems incapable of pronouncing my name in anything but shouts and shrieks. His face is shiny with pleasure. “Do you know we’re going to the park?”

“The park?” I look at him in mock surprise. Pearls of giggles burst from Cale. “The park? Who ever heard of such an outrageous thing?”

“Yes, and do you know? It’s the one with the spider web! And we’re going to see if there’re any jellyfish in the river.”

I turn to Dad. “That’s nice,” I say. “He really likes the foreshore.” Then I remember the meals I want to cook. “Dad, do you think we have time to go past the Manning Street Markets? After the park, I mean?” And to Cale, “Will you help me do the food shopping?”

“Yes,” promises Cale. “After the park.”

“Well,” Dad starts and that’s my first hint that the weekend won’t go the way I planned. “I thought more of a quick stop before we head to the apartment.”

“What’s at the apartment?”

Dad gives me a look before shifting his eyes back to the road. “Nothing. I just thought. Hey, you look pretty.” He adjusts his sunglasses, turns west onto the arterial road behind our house and stops at the lights. “So I see you’re still getting your clothes from the Army Surplus Store.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

“Or did you graduate? Is it the Salvation Army now?”

“Hilarious.” I tuck some loose strands behind my ears and try to shrug out of the parka. It’s hot in Dad’s car, probably because Cale’s just coming out of a cold and

still has a runny nose. “You should become a comedian, you know? These are Doc Martens, just for your information.” I hold up a foot and wiggle a shiny purple boot. “They’re expensive. In any case, each to their own. Isn’t that what you always say?”

“You could try a different hairstyle though.”

I exhale like I need all the patience in the world. Dad turns right and we head north towards the foreshore. When the car picks up speed down the hill, I put my arms out in a reflex. “You’re going too fast.”

“I’m keeping to the speed limit.” Another quick glance in my direction. “Tie it back, I don’t know. What’s it called? A French braid? A bun. You’ve got a sweet face. You’d look so classy. Surely, Immy could teach you.”

I grimace. Dad likes it classy, and he pronounces the word sharp, almost like it jolts him. Like an electric current.

“I like my hair this way,” I say.

“Well, I guess it’s sexy,” Dad says, which gets me fuming, as he knows it does.

“I don’t care about sexy,” I say curtly. “All I care about is cooking. And the audition in two weeks.”

“It’s very rock n’ roll. All the bands I used to like had hair like this.” He gives a chuckle. “Why not wear it like your cook? Jackie Park? She looks classy. But that’s celebrities for you. Once you’re a brand, you need to maintain your image.”

“Jackie’s not a brand. She’s a cook. A chef. An artist,” I protest. “She doesn’t care about celebrity.” I find that I secretly agree with Dad though. Jackie Park is elegant, but not in the conventional sense and, I suspect, not the kind of elegant that Dad likes. I wouldn’t mind at all to look like her.

“Maybe that’s what we should do? Take you to the hairdresser?”

I laugh, still shaking my head. “No, Dad. Seriously, I like it this way. I’d rather spend the day in the park and then go home and cook us something.” As if on cue, I fish a shopping list out of my parka.

“What’s that?” Dad asks in alarm.

“That’s the things we’ll need. I was thinking of making a Molokhia – do you know what that is?”

Both Dad and Cale shake their heads.

“Well, it’s Egyptian. It’s chicken soup.”

“Is that what you’re cooking for the audition?”

“No Cale. I’m going to make a risotto. You know the one I made when you were sick. Did you like it?”

Cale nods vigorously.

I smile. “That’s the one I’ll cook for the audition. But today, I’ll make us a Molokhia. Chicken soup.” I glance outside. “Don’t you think it’s the right kind of weather for soup? We’ll follow up with chicken kebabs – perhaps in peanut sauce. You like peanuts, don’t you, Cale? And for dessert we’ll have semolina cake with syrup and cashews. It will be Egyptian themed. We could listen to Arabic music and watch Aladdin. Have you seen Aladdin?”

Again, Cale shakes his head.

“It’s a funny movie,” I promise. “It’s got a monkey and, uh, a tiger, and there’s a genie in a bottle. That’s like a ghost, but a good one. You’ll see. Peanut sauce is not to everyone’s taste, I know, but it’s worth a try. Or we could leave it off. Up to you. I think it will be okay. And we’ll do some side dishes, some veggies that can tie the peanut sauce to the Chinese mint. Maybe a watercress salad. Or something with spinach. I’ll think of something.”

“I don’t know,” Dad says, slowing down to scan the car park for an empty spot. “I don’t know,” he repeats under his breath and I can’t shake the feeling that he has something up his sleeve, something he’s careful to tread around because he doesn’t know what I’ll think of it. Or he does and he’s afraid I might not like it. And now I’m afraid too – afraid that he’s right.

We end up in Dad’s apartment shortly after ten. “Just a quick stop,” he promises, but then he remembers that he was supposed to pick something up from the drycleaner

and mail some documents, which have to go out that day, were actually due the day before, and if we don't mind, he'll just run his errands while I keep Cale company, and then we'll have lunch together.

"Nothing store bought," I warn him. I'm serious. The apartment has an induction cooktop and a pyrolytic Siemens oven, and when Dad moved out of Immy's townhouse, he bought whole new sets of cookware and cutlery. There's a turquoise blender and a Nespresso machine, there's a dishwasher and space, so much clean space, and I'm keen. "I want to cook."

Dad gives me his solemn promise that he won't buy any takeout for lunch, and then he sets off, but by eleven thirty he's still not back.

"I'm hungry," Cale wails, in typical Cale fashion, and if I hadn't babysat him since I was twelve, I guess I would panic. Given how quick things can turn from sweet to sour, I still feel a rush, but only briefly.

"Okay," I say, my voice soft like sponge cake. "Let's have a look what Daddy's got in the kitchen."

Cale springs up from the table where we've been busy doing his colouring-ins and flits in the kitchen before I get a chance to screw all the lids back on the pens. Dad's apartment is a sparse one-bedroom box that comes with an in-built corner desk and a laundry in a wardrobe. It takes a heartbeat to walk from the bedroom to the balcony out front, it's so tiny. It's also white and shiny and half-empty. Dad doesn't like clutter.

I follow Cale's receding footsteps into the kitchen. Dad's pantry is a one-door cupboard at the back of a little nook. Resting my hand lightly on my little brother's shoulders, I pause to consider the room. What I don't like about Dad's kitchen is the lack of natural light, or any light, really, because Dad's not one to worry about cooking. Two of the overhead lights need new bulbs and in the semi-darkness it's hard to take stock and find something Cale will eat without protest.

"How about I make us some eggs on toast?" I finally ask and Cale seems eager.

"So, what do we need?" he asks in his chef's voice, the one that cracks me up, and I sit him on the benchtop and go through the process, step by step.

Cale is only little for his age and takes up next to no space. Still, he's like a bag of beans, so full of energy I need to remove my water glass and half the bowls I set out in preparation for our feast so he won't knock them over.

"How about we poach the eggs – you do like poached eggs, don't you?"

"I don't know?" Cale gives me a worried glance. "How does a poached egg taste?"

"You'll like it, you'll see. Then you can tell Mummy that from now on, you like your breakfast egg poached. It's nice."

"Is it slobbery?"

"A little." I think for a moment, take stock of Dad's fridge. "We'll balance it with some crispy bacon. How about that? It's going to be nice."

"Okay."

It feels like Cale would promise his life away, anything for a chance to help me cook, so I cut him some parmesan cheese as a treat and get to it.

I ask Cale to line a baking tray with paper and watch him arrange slices of bacon on it with clumsy toddler hands. A soft beep tells us the temperature is right and together we slide the tray in.

Noticing Cale's longing glance as the bacon disappears behind the glass door, I promise it won't take long. But I'm already busy spraying Dad's egg cooker with oil and cracking two eggs in, careful to keep the yellow yolk intact. Balancing Cale on one hip, I go on the hunt for bread and strike gold when I discover frozen baguette hidden in the back of the freezer. A blast of heat blows in our face when we open the oven door to pop slices of baguette on the tray with the bacon to heat it up.

"I'm hungry," Cale reminds me in thirty-second intervals, like he's incapable of waiting a minute for his food. But when the egg cooker beeps and I take the bread and bacon from the oven and slide the eggs ever so carefully onto the assembled baguette so they don't break, he goes *very* quiet.

"Tadah!"

He gives me a dubious look. “I actually don’t think I like poached eggs,” he says.

I chuckle. “Dude,” I tell him. “There’s like no way I’ll let you off without at least trying.”

“But I’m pretty sure I don’t like it.” He gives the food on the plate careful consideration before he looks up to deliver his verdict. “It looks yuk!”

“What? This looks awesome, man!” I mask my face with mock outrage and Cale’s expression softens slightly. “Come on, let’s set up a feast.”

We carry our plates – Cale balancing his with slightly less enthusiasm than I do mine – out on the balcony, spread a folded bed sheet over the table and fill water in two champagne flutes.

“Now watch,” I tell him, the clink of glasses still ringing faintly after we toasted to our weekend at Dad’s, and reach over to cut his baguette in half with a steak knife. Spreading the two halves on his plate with careful fingers, I let him watch the yolk run over bacon, lettuce and crispy bread. It collects on the white ceramic like a river of sunshine; no, like sunrise, on the most glorious day of your life. “Enjoy.”

Cale isn’t really interested in tidying up after we eat, so I take the opportunity to teach him some basics in the kitchen.

“Or pretty much anywhere in life,” I say as we stack the dishwasher. “Tidy up after you’re done so you don’t make yourself sick.”

Cale watches me with saucer-big eyes, like I just invented the universe and I explain to him that a clean kitchen is the first rule in hospitality. Then I drop words like “bacteria” and “germ-infested,” and let him watch a few YouTube videos of messy kitchens on my phone.

When we finally go back to the sofa, the kitchen benchtops sparkle softly in dim light. With a pang of frustration, I realise that it’s already afternoon and Dad’s still not back. His phone is turned off and Cale’s voice is lined with boredom and pent-up

energy. He is getting seriously fed up with being kept cooped in a tiny apartment with more suits in the wardrobe than toys for him to play.

“When is Daddy coming back?” he asks, his voice high, teetering on the verge of a major meltdown. I don’t particularly like being around him when he loses it, but he’s my half brother, my *only* brother, and he’s still the cutest, sweetest three-year-old in the southern hemisphere.

“I’ll find out,” I promise, but when Dad finally texts me back he just says that he got held up, but he won’t be long, et cetera, et cetera.

“What does he say? What does he say?” Cale asks from his position on the floor. He has his arms wrapped around my legs and follows me like a shadow everywhere I walk as if he’s scared of being abandoned by me too.

“He says,” I say and look over to where Cale’s toys are spread on the couch, then to him, his hair mussed, his eyes glassy with tears, “he says he’ll be a while and that we should go out if we want.”

I lower my voice to a whisper. Cale loves being my co-conspirator. “I’ve got an idea. Do you want me to show you the knife I want to buy? For cooking? My special knife?”

“You mean when you’re a chef?” he asks.

“Exactly. The shop’s not really that far from here. What do you think? Shall we go?”

Chapter 11

It's a sweet thing, walking the few blocks from Dad's apartment to the mall in Hay Street, watching my brother getting distracted by a thousand little things, while I hold his hand and tell him about the knife I want to buy.

Actually, it's a tossup between two knives. There's the twenty-six-centimetre Wuesthof chef's knife, which is like a silver Porsche. It has a curved handle that nestles into your hand like it's been cast just for you. Crafted from a single piece of steel, the blade looks like it could split a hair. Buying it will set you back three-hundred-and-sixty dollars, which is reasonable for a top-range knife, I tell Cale.

I know, just by looking at the knife, that it's worth every single cent.

The other knife is a Kasumi, which is slightly cheaper. It's Japanese but has a European look, or fusion look, so I guess it's a good knife for the kind of cooking I want to do. The shining steel blade makes me imagine it chopping through bunches of green coriander, mincing garlic, taking care of lemongrass stalks, slicing salmon into the thinnest pink-orange slivers for a salmon carpaccio. And with its pointy edge, whoever comes into your kitchen, you could just fling the knife at them and pin them to the door. Whoosh and twang!

"Like a badass ninja," I tell Cale. A kick-arse knife with a black straight handle and Japanese writing on the blade.

"Imagine," I say as we open the door to the soft ding of a bell. "In Seki, there are whole streets of one swordsmith after another. They make everything, from kitchen knives to Samurai swords. All the knives are manufactured by master bladesmiths. And you walk through these back alleys and —"

"Where's Seti?" Cale, balancing on toes, cranes his neck to reach the display cases.

"Se-ki. It's in Japan." I grab him under the arms and lift him up so he can get a better look at the knives.

"Where's Japan?"

I get momentarily distracted by the glint of light on the knives' keen edges. "Oh, Cale," I murmur. There's nothing that comes even remotely close to the shine, the assembled force of steel, their collective beauty and pure craftsmanship. "Imagine you had the kind of money where you could just walk in here and pick out the knives you want."

We stand in front of the Wuesthof case and marvel at each and every one of the knives.

"Japan is a country where they eat a lot of fish," I continue my story in a low whisper. "And they are known for their knives. One of the most famous Japanese styles of eating is Kaiseki, which is a progression of foods, one tiny morsel after the other. Sometimes there can be as many as twelve different courses in a single meal. All of them are artfully and skilfully prepared. They arrive on small plates or bowls and are often not more than a single sliver of meat. To make really good Kaiseki you need to be a firstclass chef, with a top-quality knife. And what happens when you're a world champion chef, you can visit a local knife shop –" I pause, my eyes stinging with longing as they feast on the Wuesthof chef's knife that I so crave, "but not just *any* knife shop. You're invited to the master of all knives. The king of knives. And because you're the best chef the world has ever seen and your meals are so delicious they could bring back to life a dying prince, he will create a knife just for you. So he beats layers of hot steel, and while you drink tea together – they drink a lot of tea in Japan – he will hand you the knife with a bow, but your own bow will be deeper, to show your respect for this honour. It's like a ceremony, the handing-over-of-the-knife. And then you will go and cook for the Japanese princess and it will be a twenty-course meal and people will sing your praises on the streets!"

Cale has been listening raptly, with dreamy eyes. "So are these the Japanese knives?" he asks in a whisper.

"No." I shake my head. "These are the German ones. Because, Cale, you see, the Germans are also world class in manufacturing knives. And when I work as a chef _"

"But you already are a good cook, Vanessa."

“Yes, I know. But when I’m a *chef*, a real chef, then I’ll travel the world and do nothing but eat and cook. I’ll spend a year cooking in France, at Le Meurice or L’Arpège, and I’ll travel to Germany – to Solingen – which is where these knives,” my fingers leave a smudge on the shiny glass of the display case, “are made. The town is known for its knife factories. And German steel is very durable.”

“I liked the Japanese story better. I like princesses. And dragons. And I like ninja and frogs,” Cale lists excitedly, so we walk over to the Kasumi knives. After a while and in a soft voice so people can’t hear, I start picking out the other knives I’m going to need when I start my culinary career, because, even though a chef’s knife is an essential tool, like a wrench for a mechanic, it’s just one in a whole set I’m going to need. Together with my own sharpening stone and carry case because, for obvious reasons, you can’t just walk the streets and travel the world carrying your knives around on your person.

Cale listens so patiently as if he hadn’t been kept in a tiny apartment all morning, and I show him the impeccable white of the chef’s uniform, the simple statement of the black apron, all the other bits and pieces, when a shop assistant in glasses and practical flats asks if we need any help.

She doesn’t really want to let us touch the knives without a parent, she says, when we ask, and looks like we make her uncomfortable. We browse a bit through a table with items marked for sale, but the woman keeps shooting glances at us. I feel like the magic has gone.

“Let’s go,” I tell Cale and pull him back out onto the street. A light spat of rain has set in and the sky hangs low and grey. It’s not very inviting weather to spend outdoors, so I take Cale’s hand in mine and think up stories to entertain him as we head home.

When Dad finally comes back, at a quarter to four, he looks out of breath and rushed, but pleased with himself.

“Sorry I’m late, Nessy!” he calls. “But here’s an idea. Let’s have dinner out tonight, shall we?”

“But what about the Molokhia?” My eyes wander from him to the clock on the wall and back to his empty hands, and I fold my arms, lips pressed shut. The obvious lack of shopping is as infuriating as his tardiness.

“What’s that face, sweetie?” Dad softens his voice like he’s pacifying a baby, but I’m still seething.

“You promised you were going to do the shopping,” I snap. “First, you’re gone the whole day, and then you break your promise! You know my audition is in two weeks – like, exactly in two weeks! I get butterflies in my stomach just by thinking about it. And I need all the practice I can get. And I don’t care what excuse you’ve got _”

Cale’s voice cuts through my accusations. “Why are you so late, Daddy? We looked at Vanessa’s knife.”

Dad lifts my little brother in his arms and squeezes his face into Cale’s neck, blowing raspberries on his soft skin. “I’m sorry I’m so late,” he says above the sound of Cale’s delighted giggles, holding my gaze. “I ran into a friend, that’s all.”

I try to stay angry, but Dad’s blue eyes – eyes that make the sea look pale by comparison – drill into me until he has me. “Look, we were thinking of going out tonight, but if that makes you unhappy, it’s not a big deal.” His face splits into a wide smile, a flash of teeth, as he sets Cale back down on the floor and walks to the fridge. “You want to have dinner here? We’ll cook something. Easy. I’ll tell my friend to come over and eat with us. Watch a movie. Done.”

“Yes, but you haven’t got the things I need so I can’t make the Molokhia.” In any case, it’s too late to start now. To achieve the right amount of sliminess, the soup needs to simmer for hours. I put my hands on my hips, fuming again, but Dad’s smile doesn’t waver as he unscrews a beer top and takes a long swig.

“Sweetheart,” he says, wiping his mouth with the back of the hand and considering the bottle for a moment. “I just spent six weeks in Africa. This is the first weekend with you.”

He doesn’t say more but I can tell from his face that there’s no foul mood or soup dish that’s going to ruin the weekend for him.

“So?” My hands still on my hips, I cock my head and look at him with reproach.

“So,” Dad replies, returning my look with a wide grin. “Let’s cook. My friend’s vegetarian, so chicken soup wouldn’t be the best dish to cook anyway. What do you think? Got any vegetarian tricks up your sleeve?”

I pause for a moment, my expression softening as I go through the recipes I know by heart. There’s nothing I like so much as a challenge. Dad has a wok and there’re a million ways you can cook a vegetarian dish with rice or noodles. On the way to the knife shop, I noticed snow peas in the shop windows. It reminds me of the Jackie & You episode in which the finalists make fried rice. But we need garlic and ginger, sesame oil, that kind of thing.

“I’ll go back out and get what you need,” Dad promises and this time he’s true to his word. Twenty minutes later, he’s back, carrying two shopping bags and a brown paper bag.

“What’s in there?” I ask. Cale has retreated to the couch and is about to drift off to a movie.

“You’ll see.” Dad’s grin is almost too big for his face. His eyes sparkle like the blue crystals we grew in Year One as part of science week, and I get it, I suppose, what women see in him.

I take the bag, paper crinkling in my hands. It’s heavy and when I open it, a corner of Luke Nguyen’s Vietnam cookbook peeks out.

“A good chef,” Dad tells me, “has a great repertoire of recipes.”

“Dad,” I gasp. His gift bowls me over. I look at the cover, leaf through the pages, quickly skim the many recipes. “Dad. This is amazing.”

“Just another step on your journey,” he grins. “Once you’re a chef, travelling the world from one restaurant to the other, you can take me along on your trips.”

“I will,” I promise and I’m about to tell him the many ways this book is exactly the kind of thing I want to do, when the doorbell rings and Dad buzzes someone in.

“My friend,” he says not even a minute later, leading a tall, dark-haired, impossibly good-looking woman to the curved sofa where Cale’s sprawled over

creamy cushions. She's dressed in black heels and skinny jeans with a high waist and ripped knees, and a white, partly unbuttoned boyfriend-shirt, and has the most dazzling smile I've ever seen. "Tonya."

Despite my attempts to play it cool, I visibly tense at the revelation that Dad's work mate is a drop-dead gorgeous woman.

I take her hand and we shake stiffly.

"Hi. I'm Vanessa."

"It's so good to finally meet you," she croons in a pleasant voice, her dark eyes shiny with delight.

I notice a tiny brown mole on her left breast, just above her heart, where the shirt falls open. She's easily as tall as Dad, with a tiny waist and a smile that bounces off her face and leaps into the air, lighting up the room like fireworks.

"I'm a friend of your dad's. From work," she adds, her voice like a canary, and then she bends down to pat Cale's sleepy face nestled in a cushion on the couch.

"You don't mind, do you, Nesy?" Dad, having moved to my side, asks in a half-whisper.

I want to tell him I do – I haven't seen him for nearly two months. I want this to be just us. Besides, I don't trust my father around gorgeous women. But instead a reluctant smile appears on my face and that's all Dad needs.

"I knew you'd understand."

He gives my shoulder a grateful squeeze and darts to the balcony to throw the French doors open, his voice rising above the jumble of sounds coming from the TV.

"Anyone care for a drink?"

We all do, so he zips back in the kitchen, from where he reappears a moment later, a tangle of glasses, cans and bottles in his arms. Flitting from one person to the next, he hands Tonya a glass of white wine, cradles a beer for himself, opens a can of Coke for me and serves Cale a glass of juice, even though my little brother is still flopped on the sofa bed and will likely spill it on Dad's cushions.

All the while, Dad doesn't stop talking – about so-and-so from work, about Cale and what he's like in the evening, about what a great cook I am and planning to become a chef.

A moment later, he runs off to fetch Tonya a snack, a tea towel for Cale, who's spilled his drink, another beer for himself, flailing his arms like a wind turbine to make a point about their project in Zambia, and now spilling his own drink and running back for the tea towel.

He's so full of excitement he reminds me of Cale when Immy and I took him to the petting zoo.

"This is a really cool place," I hear Tonya sing from her spot on the balcony and Dad tells her how awesome it will be on Australia Day, with all the fireworks.

"All our places have a good location, don't they, Nussy," he calls to me. "Nussy and her mother live in Kensington, and Cale's mother lives near the foreshore."

Gah. I almost choke on the Coke. Why "Cale's mother"? It should be "my wife"!

"Don't they all have great locations, Nussy?"

I nod, Coke in my nose.

Dad pauses, lowers his voice to a more acceptable volume. "Although I think we should be thinking about selling the Kensington place." He turns to Tonya, begins to draw a picture for her with his hands. "Beautiful spot, right next to a local park, close to all the good schools. The value of the land," he blinks as he considers the point for a moment, "must be well past eight-hundred by now. Easily. We should have it valued –"

"What do you mean, you want to sell it?" I interrupt his waffling. Having managed to clear my nose, my eyes still teary from coughing, I scrunch up my face into a serious expression and join them on the balcony. "Mum and I live there."

"Yes, but, Nussy. The house is a dump. At least it was when I lived there." A breeze comes up, snapping at the untucked tail ends of his dark-navy shirt, and he takes Tonya's arm to lead her back inside the room. "This is one thing I have to speak to

your mother about, Nesy,” he remarks with a glance back at me. I meet his eyes with a frown, pausing for a moment in the doorway before following them inside.

“Because it would be good, Nesy, if we could sell the place. Just imagine the kind of house – townhouse – or even apartment you could live in instead.”

“I like Kensington,” Tonya trills and Dad turns his attention back to her, his smile as impeccable as always.

“Sure you do,” he nods. “Everybody does. It’s a great neighbourhood. Fantastic place to bring up children. But it makes no sense to live in a dump, when there’re people dying to take it off your hands. Let them knock it down, build something new. While you live the good life. In a nice apartment. Somewhere nice.”

Crossing my arms over my black Paramore shirt, I say, with a hint of terseness in my voice, “We already live somewhere nice.”

Dad hesitates and I hold his glance with steady eyes despite the lie, trying not to think of the overcrowded rooms, the filth under all the clutter, the dead flies caked to the windowpanes. I would gladly live somewhere else, but there’s just no question – *at all!* – that Mum would ever consider Dad’s proposal. So I might as well nip it in the bud right here.

It’s obvious from his face that Dad doesn’t seem happy with my response. But too bad. I finish the Coke in one long, thirsty sip and retreat into the kitchen.

“Do you need any help?” Tonya offers.

“No. I prefer peace and quiet when I cook,” I reply in a bitchy tone. Luckily, Dad is still running laps in his apartment and therefore too busy to notice.

I try to leave the maddening confusion of emotions to retreat to the space inside me from where I can focus on cooking great food. But with Dad acting like a madman and Cale kicking up a bit of noise himself now, trying to climb up Dad’s lap and being a grouch when Dad springs to his feet half a minute into their cuddle, it’s impossible to reach the state where it’s just me and the food.

Gales of laughter trail from the couch to the kitchen and despite forcing my attention repeatedly back to the wok, I catch myself sneaking looks at Tonya, whose

hair is done up in a complicated bun at the back of her nape. Studying her from the corner of my eyes, I must admit that even though she's in jeans and shirt, she just spells elegance. When she notices my glance and looks up with this fantastic smile on her face, I snap my eyes over to Dad, who follows her movements like she has him on a leash.

Taking a deep breath, I turn back to the chopping board, the knife clanging sharply as I behead the remaining snow peas. Taking the rice from the freezer to a background of Dad's happy yapping, I realise with a sinking heart that it's still too soft and fresh when I add it to the wok. As if to prove my point, the snow peas go limp, sesame oil clinging to their tips like an oil spill. Trying to swallow down my anger, I take a careful sip from the spoon and almost instantly wince with disgust. Tonight's dinner is going to be a disaster.

My face, when serving up the rice, should say it all, but Tonya and Dad are too engrossed in work gossip to take note of me or the food. Cale reaches for a spoon as soon as his bowl touches the tablecloth. He takes a big breath and blows on the rice to cool it down, wisps of his hair curling back in the process.

Tonya looks momentarily perplexed as she catches sight of the clunky bits of soggy rice peppered with mushy vegetables. When she notices my eyes on her, she quickly plasters a dazzling smile on her face and reaches for the chopsticks, fishing out a limp pea with grains of gooey rice glued to it.

She hesitates briefly, the chopsticks poised inches away from her pouting mouth, then squares her shoulders, her eyes narrow with determination. In one quick swipe of her hand, the food disappears between her lips. "Mm," she intones in her voice of Swarovski crystals. "Great taste." She slides her chopsticks under more sticky rice and transports it to her mouth, her teeth holding the clumps delicately, forcing the food to the back of her mouth while carefully avoiding contact with her tongue. After every bite, she proceeds to pat her lips for a prolonged time with the linen napkin Dad has magicked up. "Your dad's been singing your praises for the last six weeks in Zambia. He believes you will be the next Jackie Park." She turns to Dad. "Isn't that true, Michael?"

Awk. I almost gag. Michael?! Dad's been Mike all his life.

"I like the garlic," Dad announces and makes a show of refilling his bowl, savouring each bite.

"The garlic is beautiful." Tonya's eyes are back on me, the tangle of pendants and charms around her neck dinging softly as she takes her chopsticks up again. "Seriously, your food's divine."

Deadly fugu, I think to myself. On a menu, that's what Tonya would be.

Later, on the couch, with Cale nestled in the crook of my arm, I feel his breathing slowing and deepening, an almost imperceptible shift. His eyes are still wide open but they are coated with a glassy film, as if he's considering something far away, in dreamland.

Dad, who has been watching us, notices Cale's drifting off to sleep, too.

He rises to his feet, stretches a hand out to Tonya and hoists her to her feet. "I'll walk you home," he offers.

My head snaps around and I look at him, first in surprise, then quickly shifting to anger. Tonya notices my frown. "No, no, you've got your kids!" she protests.

Dad shakes his head at me, unsuccessfully trying to hide a look of annoyance. "At least let me get you an Uber."

"What do you want me to do with Cale?" I interrupt, nodding my chin at my brother, who's sound asleep now. My voice sounds impatient and Dad's look of irritation deepens.

"Well, can't you take him to bed?" he asks, walking to the door and helping Tonya into her maroon blazer.

"Why don't you?"

"Vanessa." A whole world of reproach is contained in the three syllables of my name. "I'll walk our guest to the door. If your brother is too heavy for you to carry –"

“He’s not,” I mutter, but don’t make any attempt at getting up.

Dad stares at me for a moment, then he brusquely turns his attention back to Tonya. “Ready?”

“Sure.” She hesitates briefly before walking back to the sofa, her footfall soft and lithe in comparison to Dad’s. Putting her hand lightly on my arm, she waits till I meet her eyes. “It was lovely meeting you, Vanessa. And good luck with the audition!”

“Sure,” I say, half-regretting that I was such a bitch. After all, it’s not Tonya’s fault.

The door doesn’t fully close behind them and dim blue TV light spills into the corridor. As I crane my neck over the sofa cushions, I catch a glimpse of Tonya clasping my father in a passionate embrace at the elevator doors.

The sight of them kissing fills me with shame. I sink back on the sofa and close my eyes. Taking a few shaky breaths, I wait for my pulse to slow down and my hands to stop trembling. How can Dad cheat on Immy like this?

“I thought you were taking Cale to bed?” Dad lingers in the doorway, fumbling with the lock.

I mumble something in response, pretending to be half-asleep myself.

“We’ll share the sofa bed,” I mutter, so softly I can barely hear my own voice.

Dad pauses at the head of the couch. I can feel his eyes on me, hear his shirt rustle as he bends over to kiss me lightly on the top of my head.

Pressing my eyes tightly shut, digging my fingernails into the palm of my hands, I hold my breath until I hear his footsteps recede.

After I hear the soft click of his bedroom door falling shut, I exhale slowly, squeeze my eyes even more tightly shut, and yet I can’t prevent the tears that have built up from spilling over my face. *You do your best to show me love, but you don’t know what love is*, Hayley Williams sings in my head.

The same question runs circles in my head. How can Dad cheat on Immy like this? Over and over, I ask myself the same thing.

How can he? How can I make him stop?

Chapter 12

I decide to go home on Sunday afternoon instead of Monday morning. When I call Immy from the foyer of the belltower where Dad has dragged us in the morning and where he's still busy upstairs showing Cale the photographs of the history of the bells, her voice sounds breathless and alarmed.

“Is everything alright? Did anything happen to Cale?”

I imagine Immy standing in her townhouse, in the spot behind the u-shaped sofa and next to the buffet, which is soaked in light all afternoon.

“Everything's fine,” I reply. “Dad is showing Cale photographs of the history of the bells.”

“Really? I thought your father hates the belltower. Are you sure he's okay?” she teases and my smile disappears, eyes stinging at the thought of Tonya and Dad. My lying, cheating, worthless Dad.

Instead of the truth, I cook up a long, convoluted story about homework and other chores and in the end she agrees to be home for Dad to drop us off at her place after two.

“Vanessa,” she says softly before I ring out. There's a pause in her soft breathing, then her voice comes back, hoarse now, strained. “I don't really want to see him.” Her voice has gone completely flat, is barely audible over the static in the line, and then I flush because I realise that it's not static; she's crying. “You understand, don't you?”

Sitting next to Dad on the drive back is like torture. The afternoon is the first in a row of increasingly warm days, with people milling in the streets and on the path along the river in summer clothes, welcoming the change in weather.

“By the way, you have to come to school tomorrow,” I inform Dad a few minutes into the drive.

“Why?” Dad shoots me a curious look. “Are you in trouble?”

He’s just joking but when I don’t answer, he looks at me again, with disbelief this time.

“You *are* in trouble! This can’t be true! My straight-A girl, in trouble!”

“Stop it, Dad.” I frown at him. “It’s not a joke. Mr P is seriously pissed.”

“Mr P is seriously pissed,” Dad repeats, shaking his head. “This must be the greatest sentence in the English language.”

“Dad!” I slam my elbow in his side. “Do you have to treat everything like a joke?”

“I don’t. It’s my way of dealing with the unexpected.”

“Well, can you deal in a different way?”

“I’ll try. So, who is Mr P? Hang on, I get it. Petersen. Your principal? Were you caught doing drugs? Drinking? Stealing?”

“No, Dad.” I sigh. “Maybe I should just ask Mum.”

“No, seriously, Nessy. I’ll go. I’ll be there. Let me do that.”

“Sure?”

“Sure. Absolutely one hundred percent.”

“Tomorrow at eight.”

“Not a problem.” He tosses me his phone. “Put it in my calendar. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks.”

We don’t say much for a while, everyone absorbed in thought.

“Will you tell Mummy you had fun?” Dad asks Cale into the silence. His roundabout mention of Immy reminds me that I’m still mad at him.

“So, how is it?” I scoff. “The separation? Are you getting all the space you need?”

Dad keeps his eyes on the road. “There’s no call for that,” he says.

“Hey, I’m just asking!” I feel anger rise inside me. “Don’t you even miss her?”

“Of course I do.” We change lanes, Dad’s eyes glued to the traffic on the bridge. “I miss her ... more than you think I do.”

“So why not go back?”

“Nessy,” and the way Dad says my name makes me clench my teeth. “It’s not so simple as that. Separating was good for both of us, you know?”

Immy’s voice comes back to me, the tears she tried to stifle, and I shake my head.

“That’s a lie. She hates it. You’re the only one who gets anything out of it.”

We drive the rest of the way in total silence and when he parks outside Immy’s, I bang the door shut behind me.

“So how was it?” Immy wants to know. She’s in white shorts that show off her long, strong legs, and a loose shirt with light pastel-coloured stripes that makes her look like she’s my older sister, not my stepmum. She has us sit at the table, a juice for Cale and a Coke for me and gets up to get herself a drink as well. Cale is busy lining up his loot from a weekend with Dad and a trip to the belltower.

I watch him, entranced, feeling the warmth of the sunlight on my back where the window opens up to the street below, eating one of the cookies Immy placed in front of us. I sweep the crumbs with the back of my hand into the middle of the table, though what I really want to do is spring from the chair and fling myself into her arms, and cry and cry and cry.

The sodastream bleats out and releases the bottle with a mechanical hiss and suddenly it comes to me what I should be doing instead of crying about all this craziness from my parents. I should do the same as when I cook. Because, basically, cooking is nothing other than taking separate ingredients and combining them, changing their texture and finding the perfect balance. Cooking is making things better than they were before.

“You want to know the truth?” I say.

Immy walks back to the table, sits down in her chair but jumps up right away, as if a bee has stung her. She wrings her hands, paces up and down on the grey tiles where the sun has thrown a patch of light, and looks uncertainly at me.

“Yes,” she says after a pause. “I do. Tell me.” She visibly braces herself for the worst kind of news. For the Tonya-kind of news.

“It was miserable.” I empty the Coke with one last sip, push the can away. “*He* was miserable.” I lean away from Cale, lower my voice. “He misses you.”

I watch the transformation in Immy’s face – like someone has released all the air in a balloon and then refilled it straight away. Her face relaxes. She gives me a look of surprise, then gladness and finally pure delight.

“He does?”

I nod. “Yes.” A strategic pause, another nod. “He really does. Immy, why can’t you forgive him?”

“I ... well. It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s complicated. Why, did he ask to – did he say anything?”

“He did. He’s just – oh, Immy. It’s horrible. He feels so ashamed. He’s afraid he’s ruined everything.”

“Well.” Immy sits down beside me, glances at Cale and lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “He has. In a way. But, you know, things can be fixed. If he wanted to.”

“He does.”

A noise from Cale, who pushes his toys over, bored with them now and bored with sitting at the table, and before his whine can drown everything else out and we have to turn our attention to him, I grab Immy’s hand, whisper urgently.

“He wants to meet you. When do you have time?”

“I can’t this week.” Immy looks helpless, second-guessing herself. “I have a presentation due on Thursday. I have to prepare.”

I grab her hand harder, refuse to let go. “Then what about next week? Friday?”

“Next week? But Vanessa, that’s before the audition. Aren’t you going to cook the risotto here?”

“So?” I shrug. It’s exactly like cooking, see? Take the people in your life, change them, make them better. Exactly like cooking. “I can babysit Cale for you and cook the risotto at the same time. I’ll tell Dad you’ll meet him at that Vietnamese restaurant that you like. Six o’clock.”

Chapter 13

The day couldn't be more beautiful. When I leave Immy in the late afternoon, I walk home in sunshine and high spirits, the air alive with little things dancing through beams of light. The grass along the verge and in people's front yards has exactly the same shade of green as Tinkerbell's dress and everywhere people are outside, enjoying the break in weather or catching up on their gardening.

My glance glides over the houses along the footpath. It is striking how extensively progress has taken over the hills of South Perth. The places where well-maintained cottages have their heritage on proud display are slowly making way for flash new buildings with striking features. As I trudge uphill towards Kensington, I'm determined that Immy shouldn't fall victim to the same fate.

The little park on our street is crowded. Families play cricket with their young children or chase a ball around the grass. Whole nests of children of all ages cluster in trees and on slides. The playground is under attack, the swings squeak busily, everyone making the most of the remaining hour of daylight. A group of neighbours with wines and blankets have come together around a picnic table, as the sun has begun its inexorable retreat to the upper branches of the park trees. A giant lone bottlebrush casts a long, late-afternoon shadow over the playground, where the children refuse to conclude their weekend fun.

As one of the women around the picnic table, a practical, outdoorsy type dressed in low-cost jeans and a polyester jumper, catches sight of me, she waves me over. "How are you, Vanessa? We never see you or your mother in the park anymore."

"I'm good," I begin, suppressing a shiver. There's been a perceptible drop in temperature as the shadows are getting longer. "Just busy with school and stuff." I roll my sleeves down and slide into my parka.

Adjusting her hair, which is swept back in an unflattering pony tail, the woman leans back, points a finger at me. "Tell your mum, I won't stop until I get her back out again to join us for a glass on one of these Sundays."

"I will," I promise her, turning down towards our house. "I'll tell her that."

“Vanessa?” Mum calls out from her room when I shut the door behind me. “Is that you?”

“It’s me, Mum.” I look around for Storm, who usually pounces at me the second he hears me come in, but he isn’t around. He must be upset with me, I decide, for staying out and not coming home last night. Cats don’t understand how divorce or shared custody work. All they know is that their special person is missing.

“You’re home early.” When I stick my head through her doorway, I find her sitting cross-legged on her bed, birdsong coming through the open window. Her parents’ slides and photo albums spill over the bed covers and the rickety bedside table beside her. She’s dressed in an oversized green woollen jumper whose colour doesn’t suit her, the front embroidered with hundreds of small sequins.

I’m just about to trudge back out in search of Storm as another sound joins the carols of magpies and screeches of lorikeets. Someone shouts at the top of their voice. Mum and I exchange a look. Angry shouting. Bad words flying through the air.

I move towards the window, but Mum is faster and bangs it shut before I get there. She yanks sharply on the curtains to draw them close, but not before I recognise Caroline’s boyfriend, a frightful sight on every day. A man who, even when he isn’t standing in his backyard and hurling obscenities at the huddle of Caroline and her dogs, like he’s doing now, is enough to make small children run for their mothers; enough for young women to cross the street.

He’s a tall skinny man in a bright red jumper, unkempt hair raining over his shoulders and collecting under his chin in a beard that seems alive with nits and rage. Two eyes leap from the mess of his face like red-hot sparks.

I’m unsuccessfully searching Caroline’s yard for clues about the target of his rage when the curtains swoosh closed before me.

“Mum,” I protest, giving the dark brown material an annoyed flick.

“Believe me,” Mum replies, her lips thin. “It’s better this way.”

With the window closed and curtains drawn, the room smells stale and musty.

“If you’d told me you were coming home early, I could’ve got something to eat,” Mum says, crossing the room back to her bed. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m not,” I say. It’s the truth. Immy’s cookies, the scene outside, the food I ruined at Dad’s place, the kiss he gave Tonya – I don’t think I can ever eat again. “Are you?”

“You know me.” A little laugh, nothing like Tonya’s silver bell. Weary, sad ... like life is too much sometimes and all you’re doing when you’re laughing is giving yourself a little release. “I don’t get hungry much anymore.”

“Still. You need to eat.”

Mum’s hair falls in her face and she tucks it carelessly behind her ears. Visibly forcing herself to look cheerful, she finds my gaze and holds it. “Thanks, sweetie. I already did. I ate something. Earlier.”

Less than two steps and I’m at her bed, fling myself into her arms. The plastic sequins scratch my arms and dig into my cheeks, but I don’t mind. “Storm’s not here,” I sputter and finally, the tears I’ve held back since Saturday night burst out. Between sobs and cries, I feel Mum’s hands on my back, patting and rubbing like she used to when I was little.

“There. There,” she says in a low murmur. “There’s no reason to be so upset. You know Storm. He’s a cat. He’ll be back in his own time.”

“But what if something happened to him? What if he ran away?”

“He didn’t.” Mum laughs again and this time it’s genuinely cheerful. “That cat loves you, Vanessa. He thinks you’re his mummy.”

“Still.” As my sobs dry up, my breathing slows down, but when Mum drops her hands, I tell her not to stop rubbing my back.

“Mum?” I ask a little while later, as a thought crosses my mind.

“Hmm?”

“Mum, were Grandpa and Grandma – were they happy? Together?”

“You don’t remember anymore?” Mum shifts her weight and the plastic sequins on her jumper crease. “All their fighting? I don’t think they did much else.”

“So why did they stay together?”

“Oh, Vanessa,” Mum says. Her hair is darker at the crown and she ruffles it once, twice, to fluff it up. “Why, it’s complicated. Why two people stay together or not. Besides, for my parents’ generation, it wasn’t such a common thing to get a divorce. Not as common as it is today, anyway.”

“So they stayed married because people didn’t get a divorce?”

Mum releases me from her hug and draws her knees up. “I never asked them,” she admits thoughtfully, sliding the sleeves up to her elbows and hugging her legs. “But my guess is that they took their commitment seriously. Besides, with the way Father was, I don’t think Mother would have had the courage to –”

“It’s weird when you say these things,” I interrupt. “I always thought it was Grandma who was in charge.”

Mum leans her chin heavily on her pointed knees as she considers this. “No, it was Father,” she maintains, in an oddly unaffected way. “He was like a tyrant.”

“But I thought it was Grandma who always took everything away from you? You always tell me these awful stories.”

“True,” Mum admits after a short pause. “But just so you know how hard it was for me growing up. I never had anything of my own that I was allowed to keep. I didn’t even have my own diary – Mother made me hand it over to her every Sunday night. As if I wasn’t even entitled to my own thoughts. And you’re right about her. She took my shoes practically off my feet the second I’d outgrown them to pass them on to Christina and Beth. But it was Father, mainly, with his obsession about cleanliness. Every time, for example, when there was a toy on the floor, or a speck of dust on the mantelpiece, every time Mother was slack about having us change into a dress before dinner ... he would make us all feel so uncomfortable. So not at home. In our own home, imagine.”

There's a soft thud outside Mum's window and a moment later we hear claws click on glass.

"See, crybaby," Mum exclaims, a triumphant glint in her eyes. "There's Storm now."

I tear the curtains aside, push the window open, where Storm sits on the windowsill, his tail curled around his body. "Storm," I give a relieved sigh. "You scared me." I lift him gently inside.

"That's the kind of behaviour that lands you a diagnosis these days," Mum observes. When I twirl around to glare at her, she laughs and shakes her head. "Not you. Father. He'd be diagnosed with OCD these days."

"Immy doesn't have OCD," I muse on my way back to her bed, my fingers around tufts of Storm's soft fur.

Mum gives me an odd look. "And that's apropos of ...?"

"I just wish Dad and Immy had stayed together." I realise a heartbeat too late what I just said. Smacking my hand over my mouth, I stare at Mum with huge eyes.

Mum has gone quiet beside me, though she still looks at me without blinking.

"Mum," I gasp, hurriedly reaching for her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

Mum gives a sharp nod, turns her face to the wall. She still hugs her legs, her knuckles going white. "I know," she replies in a quiet voice, but I can feel she's upset. She's a small woman, small and slender, like a pixie, and I know the story how after her accident, which left her in hospital for four months, unable to even wipe her own backside, with the loss of a kidney to boot, she was forced to keep much closer watch of her health.

Mum once told me, when their divorce was fresh and I hadn't completely forgiven Dad, that she'd always felt unaccomplished in his presence. When I protested and told her it wasn't true, that she could outshine him any day, she showed me a picture of them out on the Swan River, in their early days, before the water-skiing accident.

Dad, easily a head taller than Mum, looked like a movie star in his swimming trunks, while Mum, perched beside him in a modest bikini, looked uncomfortable and shy on what must've been a cold spring day.

"I knew it," she told me while she carefully tucked the photo away. "My friend warned me but she could've saved her breath. I knew it wouldn't last. Couldn't. I mean. Look at us." She drew a breath, smiled. "But then I broke my back, and it changed everything. All of a sudden, he cared. Mike was there for me every single day of the week, for four months. He came to visit me every single afternoon after work."

"Don't worry," Mum says, but when she turns her face back to me I can see the glint of fresh tears in her eyes. "I know what you meant. You know," she releases her legs, shifts into a more comfortable position. "I met Immy. Once." She turns to me, takes my head in her hands and pulls my face close to hers. "Immy used to work in your father's office when she was fresh out of university. I saw her, once, when I came into his office."

"You never told me." I stare at her in surprise. "Did you talk?"

"We did." Mum shrugs as she lets go of my face. "About nothing, really. About the weather. Some pleasantries. About work."

"But what did you think?"

"What did I think?" Mum chews on the inside of her bottom lip as she considers the question. "Don't worry, I won't say anything mean. I know you like her. I thought she looked very elegant ... stunning, that day. A gorgeous skirt, peach-coloured, I think. Smooth. She had beautiful legs. I was a bit jealous, I remember. They were a good fit."

"You were a good fit, too," I interject.

Mum shakes her head, a touch of irony on her face. It's obvious she doesn't buy my attempt to placate her. "No," she says. She reaches over with a hand to brush hair from my eyes. "No, we weren't. We were never meant to be. But Mike and Immy

..." She draws a long breath, closes her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I've been up since three."

"Don't be." I watch her settle down in bed, draw the blanket over her and hold her, a little longer, the plastic sequins cold under my hands, while she closes her eyes, and then, when her breathing becomes more regular, I allow the moment to ooze through me ...

I stay with Mum for a while, mulling things over. It feels like she's forgiven Immy. She even agrees that they make a good couple.

When I sneak from her room into my own and slip my phone from the bag, settle on the bed and bring up Dad's number to text him that Immy wishes to discuss Cale with him on Friday week, I feel that Mum, in a way, has endorsed my little ruse.

Chapter 14

Dad is waiting for me outside school in his running shoes and loose black Nike shorts that make him look a touch dorky. His hands are buried in the pockets of a grey, hooded gym top, while he is jogging on the spot to keep warm. When he sees me lock my bike near a line of trees, he jogs over, exaggerating the movement of his legs.

“I missed this!” he beams, bending and stretching a leg next to the bike rack. Puffs of breath hang in the cold air like smoke. Frost covers the grass in the kerb and the street trees seem alive with the whistles and trills of birds. With the morning mist lifting slowly and revealing a bright blue sky, it’s obvious that this is going to be another sunny day.

“Don’t people jog in Zambia?” I ask, wincing at how nerdy Dad looks.

Dad stretches his chest out and takes a deep breath. He barely seems to notice my embarrassment. “You have no idea how beautiful Perth is! People don’t appreciate their town until they move.”

I glance around, sarcasm etched into my face. Resolution Drive College is only a few blocks away from the racecourse. When there are no races on, the whole thing looks like a deserted space station on Mars. Shadowy characters lurk around the petrol station up the road and in their weekly newsletter the school reminds parents not to leave any valuables in the cars. When I first started school, Dad was so suspicious of the area that he insisted on walking me from the carpark to the classroom door. But since he started spending most of his time in Africa, he’s won a new appreciation for Perth.

“I don’t think I’ll miss it when I’m in Adelaide,” I remark.

Dad makes a face. “You have to keep reminding me, don’t you?”

“Well, it’s ten days, so it’s time you get used to the thought of me leaving.”

“Good thing you won’t be gone for very long.”

“Perhaps Le Cordon Bleu will make an exception ...” I tease.

Dad drapes his hand over my shoulder. “I’ll support you, Nussy. You know that. I admire your drive.”

“So next time you come home from Zambia, you might have to fly to Adelaide to see me,” I continue.

“Enough!” Dad squeezes my shoulder, looks around. “Are you ready?”

“I was born ready,” I reply and push the big glass doors open.

“**Oh, goody,**” **Mr P exclaims** as the school admin ushers us into his office. With his bright snowman winter sweater and a pair of Birkenstocks over navy ankle socks, he looks even dorkier than Dad in his too-short shorts. He squeezes out from behind a desk with flimsy metal legs. “You brought your father.” He claps in his hands before extending them to us in warm greeting. “I was just saying to Anne when was the last time that we saw you here?”

Dad gives a strained smile in response. I can see that he tries very hard, but unsuccessfully, to mask his belief that Resolution Drive is run by a bunch of airheads with inane pedagogical views. I give both him and Mr P an encouraging smile and take the lead as we stride into the office.

The principal takes a flutter of tiny dance steps aside, revealing two tiny plastic chairs in the colour of rusty pipes. “Please, take a seat.”

“What, here?” Dad gives the chairs a startled look. They are so small they look like they belong in a classroom of smurfs.

“It’s because I see more students from our junior school,” Mr P apologises. “This is so they feel they have a voice in the conversation.” Still obviously convinced he’s going to win this, Mr P nods his head and the snowman on his jumper puckers his arms.

“Hmm.” Dad gives one of the chairs a tentative wiggle. “That reminds me of an interesting article I read on the plane, about affordable school construction in Kenya. Do you know why orange is the most popular colour for classroom furniture?” He glances at me innocently, ignoring the look of disapproval on my face.

I barely shake my head.

“It’s cadmium, not orange,” Mr P interjects.

“I thought it was peach,” I utter in surprise.

“Cadmium *is* orange.” Dad waves our objections aside.

“Perhaps we should get started? Colour isn’t really what I’d like to speak with you about this morning.” Mr P squeezes back behind his desk. “As first priority, I’d like to invite you to join me in a smile. Just so everyone feels their presence is acknowledged. I think I mentioned, we like to give reassurance that every voice is heard.”

Dad follows my lead and crouches low in the tiny chair. He turns to me. “Do you want to know?” he asks. “The interesting thing.”

With a scowl I ask, “What is the interesting thing?”

“Yes, what’s so interesting about classroom furniture?” Mr P agrees, leaning forward in his office chair. “Shall we find out, right after we share a little smile?”

“The colour chosen most frequently is orange,” Dad continues. “Now this happens for a specific reason. Can you guess?”

“We could start by simply expanding our facial muscles while relaxing the stress in our forehead.” Mr P leans on his elbows and brings the fingertips of his hands together, his smile spelling encouragement.

“The specific reason is that sometimes little children have trouble making it to the toilet on time. It’s scientifically proven that orange –”

“Cadmium,” Mr P reminds us, his smile fixed on his face.

“Which is a shade of orange – that this is the perfect pigmentation to camouflage toilet accidents,” Dad finishes, unperturbed.

“Eww!” My parka rustles to the ground as I jump from the chair.

“Please stay in your seat, Vanessa. We’re not finished yet. In fact, we haven’t even started.” Mr P gives Dad a reproachful look and waits for me to settle back down

on the hard plastic chair. “No one’s had a toilet accident in my office, I can assure you. Now, a smile, which we can simply achieve by –”

Dad’s phone makes a ding. He fishes it from his pocket and reads the message with a furrowed brow. “Jesus Christ!” he grumbles.

Mr P’s smile wavers momentarily before reappearing in renewed strength. “Resolution Drive College is nondenominational but if you need a moment for prayer, we would be very comfortable with it,” Mr P assures him. “We make every effort to accommodate the specific needs of our diverse community.” After rummaging for a while in a slim desk drawer, the principal produces a stack of folded pamphlets in pretty colours. “Perhaps you would like to grab a copy of this? It’s a feelings thermometer? It has proven helpful in the past to help individuals locate their emotions in stressful situations.”

Dad cranes his neck for a better look. “Is that a dinosaur there?”

“It’s Dino the dinosaur,” I explain, accepting a brochure on Dad’s behalf. “He’s you. You can adjust how you feel on the wheel.”

“Would you say more stress or is it frustration?” Mr P has taken one of the copies himself and fumbles with a small paper circle above a dinosaur’s head.

“How about utter disbelief?” Dad proposes with a scowl. “Does Dino know how to work that?”

“Here at Resolution Drive we believe that the ability to correctly identify and manage emotions is a life skill,” Mr P responds in his ever cheerful voice. He puts the feelings thermometer aside. “Perhaps it will come in handy later. So, where were we?”

“Here!” Dad points at the tiny kindergartener chair. “And not going anywhere. And I just found out that I need to be in the office in twenty minutes.”

“But you’re on holidays,” I object.

Dad blows out air in frustration. “I may be, but the project is not. Welcome to the real world.”

Mr P looks at Dad disapprovingly. “Right. So let’s cut to the chase and talk about why we’re here, alright?”

“Why are we here?” Dad gives another exasperated sigh. “Vanessa is a straight-A student.”

“Vanessa is a wonderful scholar,” Mr P agrees. “Diligent, enthusiastic, applies herself consistently and across all subjects. One of our best Year Nine students.”

“Does this mean we can all go home now?”

“Well, no.” Mr P’s mouth thins out as he shoots me a withering glance. “Vanessa’s academic achievements are not what we are here for. As she may have told you, Vanessa, in the company of two other students, broke into the school kitchen on Friday afternoon.”

“What? Why?” There’s a look of utter disbelief on Dad’s face as he turns to face me.

“Because she wanted to cook something in the kitchen, a request which, after thorough consideration, we rejected. A decision which Vanessa, however, chose to ignore.”

“Come again?” Dad shakes his head in confusion and frowns at Mr P.

“We snuck in the kitchen to practice the tomato sauce for my risotto,” I explain quickly. “There’s a missing ingredient, I’m sure, because it doesn’t taste quite right yet, so I’m experimenting.”

Dad gives me a look. “You did not!”

I hold his look. “Did.”

He cracks a smile. “Badass,” he says.

“Well, we were hoping –” Mr P interjects, but Dad cuts him off.

“Did you like it?”

“What?”

“The sauce you cooked?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug, looking pointedly at Mr P. “Nielsen threw it in the bin before I could taste it.”

“We were hoping,” Mr P tries again, his voice rising over our conversation, “to find a way to make Vanessa understand that academic excellence does not entitle one to go beyond school rules. Rules and Responsibility – our school motto – are the backbone of our community and by choosing to ignore this kind of behaviour, we would send the wrong message to our student body.”

“Has there been any damage?” Dad inquires. “Is there anything we have to pay for?”

“No, they didn’t do damage to school property. Mr Nielsen made sure they cleaned up before he escorted them off the property.”

“So no damage, no vandalism. Just a bit of cooking.”

“On school grounds,” Mr P reminds him. “Which was expressly forbidden.” He reaches for his coffee mug on the desk. “There are a few ways we could handle it,” he says, beginning to count them off on his fingers. “We could suspend Vanessa or even expel her –” He pauses, his face serious. “But we do believe it contains a teachable moment.” He sets his mug down with a clink. “And so we arrived at a way that we think will make this meaningful for everyone.”

“What are you saying?” I ask, bracing myself for the outcome.

“We are inviting you to detention in our junior school after-hours program.” He turns to Dad to clarify. “This would involve Vanessa stay at school until six every day and assist the coordinators in the delivery of their after-school program.” He shifts his eyes back to me. “And since you like cooking so much, you’ll be in charge of afternoon tea.”

“But I can’t,” I say. “There are only ten days until the audition. I can’t stay until six every day! I have stuff to do!”

“What stuff?” Dad asks and looks at me curiously.

“Immy-and-Cale stuff,” I say. “Immy already told me I can babysit Cale every day from four to six.”

“You don’t want to help out with the after-school program because you want to babysit?” Dad says incredulously. “Why?”

“Because Immy pays fifteen dollars per afternoon,” I cry as if that explains everything. To Dad’s astonished look, I add, “I need money to buy the ingredients for the audition. And Immy promised that I can use her kitchen to practise.”

“Why don’t you practise at home?” Dad asks.

I sigh. It seems such a straightforward thing to ask, but there’s no way I’ll ever be able to explain.

“The renovations aren’t completed yet,” Mr P inserts helpfully.

“What renovations?” Dad asks.

“Never mind,” I announce quickly. “I’ll take the punishment.”

“It’s not a punishment.”

“What renovations?”

“It’s a consequence of your actions.”

“I take the consequence of my actions then,” I say and pull Dad by the arm. “Come on, let’s go. It’s getting late.”

“I’m relieved to see you assume responsibility,” Mr P states and gets up as well. “I hope Briella and Evan will choose the same path.”

“What renovations?” Dad asks again as we’re back outside on the footpath.

“Nothing.” I wave the question aside. “Something he misunderstood.”

“You’re not renovating that place, are you, Vanessa?” Dad grabs my arm and waits for me to meet his eyes. “Because if you are, your mother would be totally insane. There’s absolutely no value in renovating the house, as I’ve said often enough.”

“She’s not renovating,” I repeat. “It’s something Brie once said and Mr P misunderstood, that’s all.”

Parents and students are milling around us on the footpath. It must be getting close to nine. I catch a glimpse of Brie, a tall guy in high viz in tow. When she sees me, she gives me the thumbs-up sign. “Yay for stepdads!” she mouths and, “How did it go?”

I make the victory sign in return and wave to Brie's stepfather, glad for Brie to have come up with the perfect solution.

Dad nods at Brie, then turns back to me. "So, what do you think? It doesn't strike me as such a bad punishment, does it?"

"Only I won't be able to look after Cale."

"We can find another babysitter. That's not an issue."

"But also I won't make any money and groceries are expensive."

"Well," Dad says, shaking his arms and legs loose in preparation for the run back into the city. "Consider it no longer a problem. I'm happy to help out with the groceries."

"Dad!" I throw my arms around him, dorky clothes notwithstanding. "That's a huge help."

"That's what I'm here for." He nods curtly, but the glint in his eyes betrays his pleasure at my reaction. "Anything else?"

"I also need a space to practice."

"Your cooking? What's wrong with your kitchen?"

"It ..." Mind racing, I try to come up with something. "It's not clean enough. I mean, we had this mouse problem. And so Mum put out bait. And other poison. And now we can't use the kitchen. It's only temporary."

"Your mother—" Dad starts, but then he doesn't go on. He just shakes his head. "Anyway, it's okay. You can do your practice at my place."

"Your kitchen?" My face clouds over. "I can't cook with you around. And not if you and Tonya—"

Dad's expression hardens, but only momentarily. He opens one of the many zippers in his top and digs around the pocket before holding up a small silver key.

“I wanted to give you a key to my place anyway.” He looks at me with a tender smile. “Consider my kitchen your kitchen – every day until your audition, from six to eight.”

“Dad!” Despite the jostle of people around us, I grab hold of his hands and spin him in a happy dance. “That would be awesome!”

“Done. Any other items on your list?”

“No.” I shake my head and stare at him in disbelief.

“Then why do you smile like the cat who got the cream?”

“My God. You have no idea how totally amazing you are!” I tell him and squeeze his hands one more time before letting go.

Chapter 15

When we gather outside the after-school building, Evan and Brie have already changed out of their school uniforms. Brie has come to school this morning wearing her hair in two long plaits and she's found a slouchy, baby-blue beanie with two oversized wooden buttons to complete her winter look. My glance drops to her baggy woollen cardigan and skinny ripped jeans, wondering briefly if the programme coordinators will make her change back into her blazer and skirt.

"Are you the Ratatouilles the school is sending over?" a gruff male voice demands. It quickly turns out that the voice belongs to a young, slightly unkempt man who has appeared in the doorway to the concrete building and casts his shadow over the outdoor sandpit. "Here to help with afternoon tea?" He turns his head slightly and jabs his chin in the direction of the building. A sickening smell like the burning gates of hell wafts from the inside toward us. The man looks vexed. "Kirsty burnt the popcorn again," he complains in a grim voice. His eyes travel back to the three of us. "And I thought anyone can cook. Isn't that what your movie promises?"

I don't like his smirk, but Brie seems to appreciate his attention. Evan and I exchange a wordless look.

"Just so you know," I say scathingly, "it is *not* our movie and *not* anyone can cook!"

The reference to the movie is lost on Evan, who simply shrugs his shoulders and grudgingly follows the man inside the building.

In a messy kitchen niche, a woman with pink hair and a variety of ear piercings, as young as the man but nowhere near as disagreeable, gives us a warm reception. Pinching the corner of a bloated popcorn bag with outstretched fingers, she throws us a desperate glance.

"Burnt." She nods at the bag, as if the smell wasn't a dead giveaway. "Must be the microwave's fault." She directs her smile successively to each of us and holds out her free hand. "I'm Kirsty and that's Paul. And we're really glad you're here."

A gaggle of Year Ones and Twos is seated cross-legged in a circle on the floor, throwing hungry glances at us. Brie gives them a friendly wave, while stabbing me lightly in the side and mouthing, “Do something, Vanessa. You’re the cook.”

My eyes wander uncertainly through the kitchen niche before they settle on a bunch of bruised bananas going to waste in a stained fruit bowl. One of Jackie’s earliest episodes comes to my mind, in which she made sweet jaffles from bananas and Nutella. This being a nut-free place, hazelnut spread is out of the question, but I’m sure there’s a substitute for it. I open the fridge door to the sharp sound of bottles clinking together and scan the sticky glass shelves. A small tub with crème fraiche catches my sight. “Hmm,” I wonder and reach for it, checking the use-by date on the lid and smelling the contents dubiously. “Still good.” I turn back to Kirsty and Brie, who are staring at me expectantly. “Are there any chocolate sprinkles? And honey?”

“Sure.” Kirsty whirls around and bangs open a cupboard above the microwave. She rummages around and empty plastic containers rattle to the floor. “Here!” She re-emerges, clutching a gluey bottle of honey and a dusty plastic jar with sprinkles. “What are you making?”

“Um, banana jaffles?” I suggest and Kirsty and Brie clap their hands enthusiastically.

While Brie helps the children decorate paper snowflakes with crayons and glitter, Kirsty shows Evan and me around the kitchen.

“It’s so nice of you to help us out,” Kirsty says while Evan plugs in the sandwich maker and sprays the plates with oil. I spoon the crème fraiche in a bowl and stir in honey and sprinkles.

Evan creases his face at Kirsty’s comment. “We wouldn’t be here if Nielsen hadn’t noticed lights in the kitchen,” he growls.

The cutlery drawer clatters as Kirsty pulls it open. She selects two butter knives and shuts the drawer with her hip. “What were you doing in the kitchen anyway?” she asks.

“Experimenting with risotto.” I take one of the knives from her. “For the Jackie Park show?”

Kirsty drops her knife to the floor with a sharp clank. “No way!” she exclaims.

“Yes way,” I reply, sounding a bit blasé.

“That’s like my favourite show on earth!” Kirsty continues, her hands clapped together, ignoring the knife on the floor. “That’s insane. We should all come and watch you cook!”

I pick up the knife in Kirsty’s stead. Over in the corner among the Year Ones, Brie selects crayons for a shy girl’s winter drawing. “There’s nothing to watch,” I declare, handing the knife back to her. “You basically just stand in a long line and wait for the judges to call you in and taste your food, while a ton of producers ask you annoying questions.”

Evan throws slices of sandwich bread on bright plastic plates and slides them across the benchtop in our direction. To my alarm, Kirsty proceeds to spread margarine over the bread with her dirty knife. “So you don’t actually cook anything at the audition? What’s the point?”

“You cook beforehand,” I explain, taking the margarine from Kirsty while trying my best to ignore the rusty stains on my knife’s blade. “There’s going to be over four hundred people, so imagine the time it would take to wait for everyone to cook their food.”

“I guess,” Kirsty admits. “I never really thought about it. But –” a new thought occurs to her, “how can the judges make sure that it’s really you who cooked it?”

I quickly cut the browned bananas into thin slivers and lay them out on the buttered slices, pushing them back in Evan’s direction to load them in the jaffle maker. “Well, you make it at home and bring it to the audition, and if you get picked, you have to be able to replicate it so they know you didn’t cheat. You share the kitchen with the other Perth finalists, until Jackie decides which one she would like in the finals to represent Perth.”

Evan slides the toasted jaffles back onto their plates and cuts them into triangles. I take the plates from him and spoon a dollop of sweetened crème fraiche on each before handing them to Kirsty.

“So it’s like the semi-finals in soccer?” Kirsty observes. She packs a large wooden tray with a bevy of colourful plates and weaves her way past the smaller children towards the long tables out back.

Evan begins to wipe down the surface and packs away the bread with a sour face.

I glance at his scowl. “What’s the face for?” I ask.

“It’s being here.” Evan leans against the counter, folds his arms over his Bliss-n-Eso jumper and gives a miserable look around the room. “When there are games on, we practise every afternoon.”

“Oh.” The thought that Evan is missing his soccer practice because of me fills me with remorse. “I’m so sorry.”

His shrug is offhand, but I know it must rankle him to be toasting jaffles instead of kicking the ball. “It’s true,” I insist. “It’s my fault.”

Evan glances up with a look of utter surprise. His eyes search mine and when our gaze meets he holds it, not blinking once. I’m the first to look away.

“That’s not true. It’s my fault. It was my idea,” Evan corrects gently. He helps me unplug the sandwich maker, which Kirsty and Paul keep stowed in a cupboard above the fridge. Teetering on the tips of my toes, I stretch my arms high but can’t quite reach. Evan watches me struggle and takes the toaster from me. “And it was worth it. I’d do it again,” he comments as he swings the cupboard doors closed with a clack.

Chapter 16

When I finally get off the bus at Dad's apartment, it's already dark. I realise with a relieved sigh that Dad was true to his word. Clicking the door shut behind me, the apartment is dark and empty. I walk from front door to bedroom, switching lights on everywhere, before retreating into the kitchen.

With a pang of gratefulness, I notice the groceries that Dad bought for me lined up on the kitchen bench. *Hmm*, I frown, giving the tomatoes a thoughtful squeeze. *Not exactly the best quality there is, but it will have to do.*

For the first time in what seems like an eternity, I have a clean, well-equipped kitchen all to myself. As soon as the realisation washes over me, I burst out in peals of giggles, so excited and keen that my hands shake as I fish a knife from the drawer, banging cupboard doors open and shut in my search for Dad's cutting boards.

When I have everything ready, I slide a big cast iron saucepan from a low drawer under the inbuilt oven and immediately my hand sags under the enormous weight.

"Oof," I huff, as I heave the saucepan onto the cooktop, my heart ringing out in pleasure. That's the weight of good quality. A moment later, my attention on the sizzling butter cubes, I start wiggling the pan, first softly, but a second later with all my strength. Slowly dripping filtered water into the butter sauce, I see drops of water pearling on the melted pools of butter. Accompanied by the sharp clinks of the metal spoon hitting the rim of the saucepan, I stir the water into the fat until the two combine into a creamy texture.

Half-spinning around to fetch the finely chopped onions, sweat begins to form on my forehead as I drop a tiny onion flake into the sauce to see if it's the right temperature. Satisfied with the fizzle of butter around the onion, I shake the rest into the butter sauce, hungrily inhaling big sniffs of the glorious aroma. I watch the onions sauté with a keen eye, until it's time to add crushed garlic, diced tomatoes, grated carrots and, a new idea, a cupful of dried porcini mushrooms. After another fifteen minutes, I open a jar of tomato paste and measure out a few spoons.

Stepping back to survey the sauce, I observe some charred bits of garlic, which rankles me. I'll need greater control of the temperature next time. But when my glance falls on the transparent glaze of the onions, my spirits rise. Pleased with having been able to chop the onions finely enough for them to practically dissolve into the sauce, I try a spoonful of sauce, hesitate before swallowing, observe the lingering aromas, before reaching for my notepad and pen to jot down thoughts for improvement.

The days pass in quick succession, bringing with them a return of the winter rains. The last Monday of term, the reprieve from winter is finally over. The weather is wet and horrid and a burst sewage pipe on the side street has flooded the front entrance to the after-school building. Dismissing us early, I bolt past Paul and Kirsty, jumping at the chance of an early practice at Dad's. The taste still hasn't fully convinced me and mulling things over the previous night, I decided that the taste of the porcini mushrooms was right but too overpowering. I would try the sauce with only half a cup instead.

When I'm done, the taste is near perfect and my spirits are high, but my face falls at the sight out of the window. The sky is low and as dark as the mould growing between our bathroom tiles. Gales of wind drive rain up from the south. The prospect of walking home in the rain makes my stomach sink.

I briefly wonder if I should stay at Dad's and wait the rain out, but I'm tired from lack of sleep and secretly worried that he'll bring Tonya home. When there's a break in the rain, I put one of Dad's old jumpers on under my parka and trot outside.

Trying to avoid getting soaked by cars driving through blocked rainwater drains, I cross a busy city street, the wind picking up in strength and rain lashing down on me like a whip. I'm soaked through before I can find shelter under a shop's awning, my Docs squelching on the wet footpath, water running over my face and into my eyes and mouth.

I fish out my phone and dial Dad's number. "Hey, I'm finished for today," I say. "But it's raining. Can you come and pick me up?"

"Where are you?"

Dad doesn't sound particularly happy with my request, but I know he'll come. A few minutes later his Audi pulls up outside the little deli, windscreen wipers flicking angrily at the wet inconvenience of the rain.

"You're soaked," he observes when I duck into the car, his gaze wandering from my dripping wet parka to his soft leather seats.

"I know. I was going to catch the bus, but –" I perch gingerly on the leather and try to manoeuvre the seat belt around me without leaning into the backrest.

Dad shakes his head. "You'll catch a cold," he worries. As if to underscore his words, I sneeze once or twice into the heater that blasts hot air into my face.

"We can't have that," Dad decides. "I was going to take you out to a café but you look like a drowned cat. Let's get you home and get changed. We'll go out for dinner after."

"Are you sure you don't have to go back to work?" I can't prevent sounding a bit wistful.

"This project's been crazy," Dad admits. "But we need to celebrate. Only five more sleeps." He reaches over and gives my arm a squeeze.

I punch the air. "I know!" I still can't believe it's so soon.

"You've worked so hard. You deserve a break. I have an idea. We could go to the steakhouse in Applecross. The one that overlooks the river?"

"Wow, really?" I give Dad a surprised glance. The place is superfine with cloth napkins and dark wood and the wine menu comes in a leatherbound book. We haven't been there for ages. "For no reason?"

"I don't need a reason to take out my daughter," Dad announces. "And who knows? This could be the kind of restaurant where you cook in a few years."

"Perhaps," I muse, not fully convinced. The food is always cooked to perfection, but I mind its old-fashioned stiffness and secretly hope for something more modern and hip. "After I travelled the world and cooked in Tokyo and Rome."

Dad chuckles. "Talk about those places must drive your mother mad."

“It does,” I admit. “A little. I don’t talk about it much. First, I have to finish school anyway. Le Cordon Bleu doesn’t accept under eighteens.”

“And how is she coping with the idea of you living with your Aunt Beth in Adelaide for a few weeks?”

I brush my dripping hair out of my face. “Good, I think. She said she’ll sign the form.” I glance out of the window. We’re crossing the Swan River, the bridge congested with rush-hour traffic.

“So let’s get you home. Maybe you find something nice to change into?”

I give Dad a strained smile as a thought occurs to me. “Do we really have to go home first?” My pulse begins to quicken at the thought of Dad wanting to come inside.

“Look at you!” Dad gives a chuckle, puts his blinker on and pushes his way into the south-bound lane. “There’s no way they’ll let you in the steakhouse looking like that. Besides, you wouldn’t be very comfortable.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” I admit.

“There’s a thing I wanted to discuss with your mother anyway. Do you think she’ll be home?”

I try to make a noncommittal face. Under no circumstances can I let Dad inside the house. He has no clue that Mum’s fondness for bric-a-brac has exploded out of control. But where could she be? Mind racing, I try to think. Playgroup? There’s no way Dad could possibly know her schedule.

“No,” I say. “She isn’t. She’s at a meeting. At her playgroup.”

“Jesus,” he mutters. “Playgroup.”

“Maybe some of your life choices give her pause too!” I retort haughtily. I’m sorry but as far as I’m concerned, Mum’s not the only parent who’s acting weird.

“Maybe,” he concedes. “But, Jesus. Playgroup!”

“You could try later,” I suggest, feeling water drip from my hair on to my shoulders.

“Sure,” he says. “Or maybe I’ll just call. Because, you see ...” Dad shifts in his seat, “we really need to talk.” He grips the wheel tighter before cutting his eyes to me.

“What do you need to talk about?” I ask obediently.

“Well, about selling the house.” Dad makes a pause. “I’m serious. It’s a waste. A sale would free up funds. It would make so much sense. For everyone.”

Our block is coming up fast. “Yes,” I say. “I see. I mean, I see your point. I don’t really mind either way, but I think Mum will. But, Dad. You know, I just remembered I still have homework to do. And, well, it’s quite late ...”

“But what about the steakhouse?”

“Maybe some other day?”

Dad tries unsuccessfully to hide his disappointment.

“Hey, I know,” I suggest. “Let’s go there on Saturday, after the audition. Then we’ll really have something to celebrate! Immy and Cale can come too.”

“Saturdays are always packed,” Dad mutters, but in the end he agrees. “Okay. We’ll go there for lunch. So will you at least talk to your mother about selling the house?”

I look up and meet his eyes. “You really want to sell our house?”

“It’s not just for me,” Dad replies. “I’m sure she can use the money too. Because, if she’s not going back to work, she’ll be burning through her inheritance faster than you can say *for sale*.”

The Audi turns a corner a block away from our house. I nod. “I will,” I promise. “I’ll get her to call you. I will. And sorry about making your car wet.”

He pulls up outside the gate and I open the door just wide enough to squeeze through. One foot already out, with the rain coming in spats, I remember Immy.

“So, you’ll be there?” I ask, water dripping on my head from the overhanging boughs of a park tree. “On Friday?”

Dad's face is an absolute blank, his mind on the business of selling the house, the sound of the windscreen wipers drowning out the birdsong from the park. "Where?"

"You know," I remind him. "The date. With Immy."

If there's one thing I don't like about Dad – and there's not much because if he wanted to, he could make a tea towel like him – it's that his face, when he chooses to, has about the same amount of expression as a marble statue.

"About Immy –" He squints at me thoughtfully. "Did she tell you anything? About why she wants to meet?"

My own face is nothing like Dad's. I always show my emotions, mostly before I even know what I feel. Trying to hide my blush, I look down, fumble with the zipper on my parka. "No," I mumble, afraid my voice will give me away. "No idea. I think it's about Cale. She wants to talk about him."

Dad's eyes are still on me. "Sure," he nods slowly. "We have to talk about Cale." He stays in his car, parked under the canopy of trees, while I slip through the gate and disappear behind the fence.

Chapter 17

Thursday brings a break in the weather. The clouds hang low and full, the light is as achromatic as an old photograph, but it stays dry. I'm fiddling around with my bike lock. Kirsty and Paul are still fighting the WaterCorp over the burst pipe, so they have no use for us. I promised Mum to help with packing up her playgroup equipment for the term break before heading to Dad's for more cooking practice. When I glance up I see Evan and Brie ambling up to the bike stand.

"Nerves?" Evan asks, thrusting his chin in the direction of the tangled chain. A shock of hair falls in his face and he sweeps it back with a careless gesture. "Don't let them get to you."

"Yeah, well." I squint and shrug. "I'm glad the wait is nearly over. Now I just need to concentrate on not freaking out before Saturday."

"You'll be great. You don't even look nervous." Brie has only caught the tail-end of my sentence. She puts an arm around me. "Even I get butterflies thinking about it!"

"You don't know half of it," I protest. "I'm like a zombie. If it's true what they say and cooking is an expression of yourself, then my food will taste like a horror show."

"So we're hanging out at my place, listening to the new Hoods album," Evan says apropos nothing.

"There's this cool new podcast, I thought we could listen to the Montaigne interview," Brie objects.

"Anyways. Do you want to come?" Evan's voice seems a bit shaky although he does his best to appear unaffected.

I check my watch, guessing that if I get to the community centre too early, I'll just get angry at the sight of the backroom. "Sure," I shrug. "I've got an hour."

"Cool!" Evan is already turning toward the gate, indicating for us to follow. "Let's see if we can beat the rain."

It's a slow, gradual climb up the hill to a gentrified corner of a depressed neighbourhood directly under the airport's flight path. Accompanied by a plane's decelerating whine as the engines spool up on their final approach, we amble east along streets lined with young paperbarks, past derelict workers' cottages from the early seventies, the dilapidated roofs and neglected front yards in stark contrast to my own neighbourhood, the porches under assault from the kind of rubbish people put out for kerbside collections – tattered mattresses, broken plastic toys, copper coils, wooden slats, old bathroom sinks. The porches themselves are rain-stained concrete slabs surrounded by patches of sandy dead grass.

Evan turns down a steep driveway and through a tall, black metal gate. The two-storey brick house behind the fence is rendered in shades of off-white and grey, the eaves flush with the walls. Black roof tiles glisten wet in the pale afternoon light.

Evan's room is upstairs, with a window overlooking the small pool out back. A plastic pool noodle, the colour faded into a soft shade of pink, floats lonely in the water, next to a water-logged tennis ball and an avalanche of leaves.

“How hot was last week?” Evan's voice sounds a fraction too loud in the quiet of his room. His eyes turn to me, a pink glow rising from his cheeks to his ears.

I drop my bag with a thud and walk over to the window. Below, just outside the pool fence, an angry-looking dog barks at the floating noodle and makes as if to ram the fence with his head. He stops short and sinks to the ground, head on his paws. A short while later, he bounds up the driveway to growl at something on the other side of the gate.

There's the scuff of Evan's sneakers as he joins me at the window. “Banjo's driving me crazy with his barking,” he remarks, but the warm glow in his eyes betrays his concern. “He's old,” Evan adds. “Sometimes I think the only reason he barks is so he knows he's still alive.”

“We have a dog, too” Brie announces. “A Labrador mix. She's really cute.” She pulls up a chair to the window and settles in backwards, leaning one arm over the white-painted backrest and supports her chin on the hand, playing with the blinds cord

that someone has taken the trouble to bind neatly around a hook. “She’s old, too. I’ve had her since I was six.”

Evan nods and looks around the room, hands by his side. His room is small, at least smaller than I expected considering the size of the house. A box with a window that lets in just enough light to illuminate the scuff marks on the floor and the stains on a cream-coloured rug. The furniture is right out of an Ikea catalogue, with a loft bed nestled into the back corner along two walls.

“Dad and I built it last year,” Evan explains, noticing my look. “It took us two weeks. You don’t want it to collapse so ... but it’s really comfortable. You can climb up if you want.”

I decline but Brie has a stickybeak. “It’s so cool, Vanessa,” she calls from up the ladder “It’s got everything, shelf, radio, lamp, books – really cool!”

Evan nods. “Dad’s a carpenter. Last summer, he built the deck out front.”

The rest of the room is practical – a desk and chair under the window, a wardrobe under the bed, a couple of bean bags in the little space between.

“I should probably go soon –” I say, keen on getting the centre out of the way before heading to Dad’s, and watch Brie carefully negotiating her way down the ladder.

Evan kicks aside some of the clothes and books that are scattered on the floor, shuffles some papers on his desk and unearths a dock. He fumbles with the phone for a minute, enters his passcode, then scrolls through the music until Maverick Sabre’s voice fills the room.

Brie turns the volume up. She makes as if to dance a few steps, swaying her hips and flicking her hair in time with the beat. The sound is as soft as velvet, Sabre’s voice rich and full.

Evan plays one Hoods song after the other. Brie keeps swinging round the room, twirling like a little girl, her hair sailing through the room like wind in the wheat belt. When she catches sight of me in the chair, jiggling a leg, her face turns into a frown.

“Come on, you cooking star!” She grabs my hands, pulls me out off the chair and twirls me around in a bear hug. “Day after tomorrow! I’m so excited for you!”

I laugh, squeeze her hands and clumsily twirl with her around Evan’s room.

“That’s it, do a happy dance!” Brie cheers. “A happy risotto dance!”

Despite wanting to race off and get to Dad and his kitchen, I have to laugh. “You’re such a cow sometimes,” I grumble, but I obediently follow her lead and lift one foot after the other, stomping around like an idiot.

“What’s that?!” Brie shrieks with laughter. “That’s what you call a happy dance?”

“That’s it,” I verify. “That’s me. Dancing.”

Brie’s hands pump the air like a basketball star, her skin glistening with sweat, her eyes large and liquid. She never cares what anyone thinks as long as she’s having a good time.

Brie is unstoppable. She doesn’t give up until she’s got Evan out of his bean bag as well. I don’t know how it comes about, maybe Brie jostled me or I tripped, but I find myself stumbling into my friends’ arms, crowding into Evan and Brie, and all the pent-up tension from the past weeks peel away. I imitate Brie, pump my fists in the air, let out a crazy howl. I feel alive, feel like someone’s pulled me free after days spent under the rubble of a mudslide.

The shadows outside are getting longer and a cold frozen dusk has begun to close in on us, but it’s nothing to us. I howl again as Sabre’s voice ricochets off the walls, pump my fists in the air, grab Brie’s and Evan’s hands and twirl like a little girl.

A faint vibration in my back pocket jolts me back to reality.

I fish my phone out, breathless, my fingers trembling with the rush of life that surges through me. “Hello?” I shout above the noise. The number is not one that I’ve saved.

“Vanessa?” a voice probes. Female, faintly familiar, but I can’t quite place her. “It’s Crystal.”

“Crystal?”

“The community centre? Vanessa, this is about your mother. I think you’d better come. Quite quickly.”

“Mum?” I can feel adrenaline leap through me, while all the fun and excitement of just a moment ago are already distant memories. “Why? What happened?”

Brie and Evan slow down their dancing. They pant, their hands at their sides, exchanging a look and a shrug. I lower my voice. What in God’s name could’ve happened?

“I think she ... well. There’s been some complaints, so ... Oh, Vanessa, the whole story’s too complicated. Can you come? I think she really needs you now. You’ll see when you get here.”

“Sure.” I fish my bag from the floor and wave to Brie and Evan. Fumbling with the door handle, I fly down the stairs so fast I nearly lose my balance when my socks slip on a worn bit of carpet. “I’ll be right over.”

Chapter 18

I race my bike as fast as it goes uphill from school and across a busy thoroughfare congested with traffic. Crystal's words are like a rope pulling me east.

When I arrive at the community centre, I hesitate briefly at the top of a set of concrete steps leading from the upper carpark to a grassed area outside the foyer. The courtyard is like a Greek battle scene. Trying to get my breath back, my face slick with sweat, I survey the pandemonium all around me. Under a maple tree a small woman clings to the arms of two city rangers like they are Spartans inside Troy. Her shrieks sound like those of a madwoman. With a sharp pain I realise that the woman is my mother.

Behind her, parents pour from the centre, pulling their frightened toddlers behind. Crystal stands to the side, her body flattened to the plastered wall with outstretched arms. A parent rushes past her, clutching the hand of a gaping boy, eyes glued to Mum. The woman speeds up the stairs and brushes past me, bundles her son into her car and whisks him away to safety.

The thought occurs to me, if only for the briefest of moment, that there's still time for me to turn and run as well.

Instead, I drop the bike right where I am, push my way through the crowd of parents and children and fling myself on Mum, struggling to pull her from the rangers.

Crystal pushes herself off the wall, hurries toward me with flapping arms and after three or four attempts the words she shouts in my ear begin to make sense. "Take her inside!"

"How?" I pant and shoot her a helpless glance. It's all I can do to hold on to Mum, the wool of her coat thick under my grip.

"Take her inside, Vanessa," Crystal repeats, but Mum lets out another of her bloodcurdling screams, so beside herself and beyond reason, that I imagine her pulling at her hair and tearing her clothes any moment now.

"What's this all about?" I manage to ask when there's a lull in Mum's yelling.

“We had a complaint,” the ranger starts. The rest is drowned out by Mum’s long piercing screech that would have scared anyone away.

“What kind of complaint?” I ask, a sense of panic washing over me. My eyes cut to Crystal. Before I have time to repeat my question, she whispers in a hushed voice, “A parent. Someone saw a rat’s tail in the backroom.”

“A rat’s tail?” I echo.

“Unbelievable, I know.” Crystal shakes her head, her permed fringe bouncing in outrage at the thought of it. “There’re no rats in my centre.”

With our attention on the subject of rats, Mum takes the opportunity to dash back inside the centre. After hesitating briefly, I follow her in to the backroom.

“I need your help,” Mum utters when she hears my footsteps, her voice reduced to a whisper, hoarse from screaming. “We need to clear the room out, Vanessa, and they’ve only given us until the end of today. We need to ... uh ... bring it home, I guess, and then ... because there’s no time now, that much is clear, to sort through it ... so the best, I think, is to just take it home and then ...”

“Sure,” I say soothingly and drape my arm around her shoulder. “Sure. Anything you want.”

As I walk inside the room, my resolution begins to waver. If anything, the hoarding has even got more out of control. There are plastic containers and cardboard boxes overfilled with what looks like nothing worth keeping. On the floor are bundles of paper in all shapes and forms. Gift wrapping rolls from various seasons and occasions. Recycled paper with wrinkles smoothed out, edges torn. The shelves are cluttered with play equipment that looks broken and bent. There’s a small chair, the red plastic cover torn and filling spilling out. The floorboards are completely obscured by a mass of clutter and the shelves along the walls sag under the weight of boxes, books and toys.

“Mum,” I say, as gently as possible. “Do you think that —”

The look Mum gives me tells me loud and clear all I need to know. Cursing softly under my breath, I square my shoulders and take my bike helmet off.

“Okay. Let’s get started then,” I give in. “How much time have we got?”

Time, it turns out, is not enough. We can’t talk the rangers into giving us another day. They’re adamant that the room poses a health and fire hazard and as such has to be cleared immediately.

“Whatever’s left by tonight gets taken to the tip,” Mum keeps reminding us, her voice so choked with emotion it’s as if someone’s threatened to sell her only child on the black market.

And so, with the little time we have, it’s left to us, Crystal, who keeps her head down and says nothing, and Mum, who carries boxes and bags to her car and cramps them in until her sedan looks like a smaller version of the backroom, and me. We roll up our sleeves and move box after box of Mum’s hoarded treasure outside into the parking lot.

In the end, and though Crystal and Mum do five trips each in their sedans, we manage to empty barely a third of the room, perhaps less. The scene when the rangers come back and take possession of the keys is ugly, uglier than the one in the afternoon, Mum beyond anger now, beyond rage.

“You can’t,” she yells, so that people in the carpark stop and stare at us. “You’ve got no right!”

“What do you mean, we can’t?” The senior ranger takes her keys with a look of exasperation.

I swallow hard, intent not to let the dark wash over me. There are more important things to do right now. It takes all our combined strength to haul Mum into Crystal’s car. We push her in the backseat where the doors have childlock, and Mum rattles on the handle and bangs her fists against the glass like a lunatic.

I stare at her. She sobs wildly, her grief so heart-rippingly real I can feel the sting of tears in my own eyes.

“Vanessa?” Crystal touches my arm softly.

I don’t react.

“It’s going to be alright.”

I look at her. *How do you know*, I want to yell. With Mum’s muffled screams and her fists banging on the window, it seems we’re far removed from alright.

Chapter 19

It feels like the aftermath of a tsunami the next day. I lie in my bed, awake in the dark before dawn, and listen to timid bird song outside the window. Tomorrow is my big day. I try to feel excited, the same rush I felt the morning before. Everything I waited for, all my dreams – tomorrow is the day to prove myself.

Instead, I feel empty and confused. Sitting up in near darkness, I pull the covers around my shoulders. There's a stirring by my feet.

“Sorry, Storm,” I whisper. “I didn't mean to wake you.” I frown in an effort to stay focussed on the audition. There's an overwhelming list of things to get through. It's the last day of term, I need to buy groceries, help Immy get ready for her date with Dad, keep Cale happy and cook the same mouth-watering risotto I did in the previous days at Dad's.

But despite my efforts, my thoughts keep slipping back to the centre. As soon as dawn breaks, I creep out of bed and take a look out the window. The grey morning light is weak, yet it's enough for my heart to sink. Our garden looks like the debris-strewn path of a super wave.

I swallow hard, the curtains rustling shut as I let go of them. *Keep a clear head. Stay focussed on tomorrow.*

I'm halfway down the hall when the creak of floorboards cuts through the silence, the soft thud of bare feet on timber floor coming from Mum's room.

“I'll be out in a second,” Mum calls through her closed door. “Get started already, will you, sweetheart?”

“But I have to get ready for school, Mum.”

There's a pause before her voice comes back. “Isn't it the last day of term? Do you really have to go?”

I frown. “Plus I need to get the groceries for the risotto. Immy said I can use her kitchen in the afternoon. She's waiting for me. I already told her I'll cook breakfast.”

“Vanessa.” Another pause. When her voice comes back, it’s tinged with fatigue. “Let’s move everything inside, then I’ll clear some space in the kitchen. You can cook your risotto at home.”

At home? I stare at Mum’s closed door. “Mum. It doesn’t look like there’ll be any room for it.”

After another long silence, Mum says hoarsely, “Alright, then do it at Immy’s later on. You need to help me now.”

I think with longing of Immy’s clean, generous kitchen, feel a stab of panic at the thought of the audition tomorrow. I shake my head slowly, try to clear my mind. “Sure,” I call, placing a hand on the rough wood of Mum’s door. I leave it there for a moment, trying hard not to worry so much about her. “I’ll do it later.”

“Immy won’t mind if we’re late,” I tell Storm as I walk with him in my arms outside to take stock of our garden, where in the confusion and the dark of last night we’ve left all the boxes and bags.

Storm wiggles excitedly, his tail thrashing from side to side. I open my arms wide enough for him to leap to the ground. His curiosity barely in check, he dashes in and out between my feet, nearly tripping me up in his excitement to get to know all the new hiding spots. At least I’m not alone, I think, smiling at his antics while trying to estimate the kind of struggles that lie ahead of us in tackling this mess.

There are cardboard boxes everywhere, plastic bags thrown over the fence, magazines and clothes spilling from carry bags, pieces of incomplete or broken toy equipment strewn across the grass.

The sprawl of clutter makes me shake my head, sigh in disbelief that this much and more, much more, was piled high in the little backroom at the community centre.

“Oh Storm,” I say to the slick fur ball between my splayed feet. My Docs feel cold and damp in the early morning, the long grass stalks bursting in lush green after the spats of rain from last week, the sky high and cold like a domed palace. My breath trails through the cold air in little puffs of smoke. I bend to pick Storm up, not able to think of a sweeter place to bury my face than his slick-licked coat, if only for a moment. “What are we going to do about this?”

Leave everything as it is? Impossible. Winter's nowhere near over yet. We still have two months to contend with and it often rains well into October. Even in dry winters, even when the rains hold out for weeks, this would be a lousy situation.

Picking my way from the front fence around the house and out back to the fledgling garden bed, I carry Storm in my arms and keep my face close to his warm fur. I can't suppress a wave of hopelessness rushing over me. Why has this junk such a strong hold over my mother? Why does it seem such a blow to give it all up, when it seems a blow, instead, to have to keep it? Why hoard all these worn out, useless, broken things?

Mum's voice breaks the silence. She calls from the front porch, in a tone that's bright but losing its grip.

"Here's what I think we should do," Mum announces when I've made my way around the house, her feet in two oversized black boots that remind me of a cartoon character. Her hair is swept back in a careless pony tail. She picks her way carefully across the porch and down the few steps to where Storm and I are standing.

"God, I hate the cold," she complains, pulling her glittery grey mohair jumper closer around her tiny frame, the air completely still around us as if the day is holding its breath.

A white moth breaks from the neglected tangle of bougainvillea that camouflages our fence. Storm's nose begins to twitch and then he's out of my arms in one great leap, chasing the moth over and around the sprawl of bags.

"Careful he doesn't break anything," Mum warns in a voice gone hoarse from too much screaming and crying.

"Leave Storm alone." My own voice is perhaps a hint too harsh, considering what Mum has been through, but I don't care.

"Don't be such a sourpuss." A shiver runs through Mum's frame, while she pouts over the disarray in the garden, only half paying attention to me. "You know I can't stand it when you use that tone."

“Well then, don’t start,” I mutter, but Mum’s attention has already moved on to different things.

“Instead of squabbling, we should be turning to the task,” she observes, walking over to the nearest container.

“Which is what?”

“Which is finding a place for all this, of course.” Her eyes sweep over the chaos before they settle on me. “What else?”

Hours later and the sky is as bruised-looking as I feel on the inside. Mum carries box after box inside the house, her communication scaled back to a minimum of grunts and growls. Storm has long vanished in the undergrowth out back where he spends his mornings chasing bugs and trapping earthworms. And I’m cold, so cold I catch myself dreaming of the hot steam in Immy’s shower, remembering every little detail of her gorgeous restful bathroom.

“I think we’ll be quicker if you stay outside and pass everything to me,” Mum says toward mid-morning, stopping to wipe her brow and stretch her back.

I pause to wipe some cold sweat from my own brow, rolls of Christmas gift wrapping under my arm. It’s neither here nor there where each of us is, I think. The task remains Sisyphean. It feels like everything I set out to do is as futile as the next thing. Save money, experiment with my risotto, practice for the audition. Find room in our crammed house for all this trash that litters our garden.

“If that’s what you want.” I add, as an afterthought, “I’m hungry. We haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Mum gives me an exasperated look.

“I’m sorry, but I need food,” I complain.

“Then go and find some.” Mum fumbles in her hair for the pair of sunglasses that have got tangled in her brunette locks and gives them a sharp yank. “Christ!”

I can see that patience is not her strength this morning. I should try to be the grown-up, mature and practical daughter she's so proud of. But I'm hungry. Yesterday's lunch is a long-digested memory, the sandwich the last thing I had. My stomach is painfully empty. I have visions of food. Glorious warm cooked bacon, eggs on toast, maple syrup and waffles dance before my eyes.

"I need money."

"Use some of your own."

"But I can't. I gave you all I had the other day. I need what's left to buy the groceries for the audition, remember?" I say it urgently, hoping she'll come to her senses. But when I steal a glance at her face, I realise she won't relent.

"Well, then there's no money!" Mum snarls, her hair in disarray now, the glasses caught in the frizz where a rubber band holds the strands together. Another pull and her glasses come free, but that doesn't seem to lift her mood in any way.

"You look like a witch right now, you know that, don't you?" I remark, the words out before I can stop myself. I don't even know where the cruel words are coming from. Mum stops what she's doing and in one fluid movement she leans over and slaps my face.

That's it! I fling the rolls of gift wrapping paper back in the grass, watch them sink into the overgrown weeds. My inside caves in like a deflated jumping castle, my cheeks wet before I know I'm going to cry.

This is the moment, I think, hoping it is. The moment for us to bury the hatchet, to make up and embrace and remind us of the fact that it's us two against the rest of the world. We'll clear up Mum's mess and then Mum will find some money and we'll go food shopping. We'll have pizza and iced tea and I will buy all the ingredients I need for my risotto. We'll spend the day at home, talking about the audition. In the afternoon, I'll set off to Cale and Immy and cook my risotto, while Immy and Dad have their date and fall in love again.

All that is going to happen, right after Mum apologises to me.

But the look on Mum's face says, *Grow up already!*, and the moment's gone faster than a heartbeat. There's not going to be any reconciliation. I'm hungry. I'm cold. Instead of being in a kitchen and doing what I love, I'm standing in what looks like a garbage truck has taken a detour through our front yard. I've had enough. And I'm not going to let a ... a lunatic, a *hoarder*, walk all over me!

"I'm not doing this shit for you," I announce under my breath and stomp past her to the porch, where the steps are blocked by a barrage of things. I have to clamber over unused flower pots, a broken plastic crocodile seesaw, a pile of bedraggled, cheap paperbacks to get to the door. The hallway is so jam-packed with furniture and cartons that I can't see past the clutter to my room. Walking down the hall feels like I'm hacking my way through the densest, deepest part of the Amazon, the light that filters through the dirty louvre windows not enough to illuminate the shock of trash, old and new, that's piled wall-to-wall.

I'm past caring. Another day and I'll never set foot in this house again. Even after the show in Adelaide, I'll rather sleep under a bridge than spend one more day in this mess. All I want now is to get to my room, shut the door and wait for Mum to apologise.

But when I reach the door and push it open, my heart sinks. Mum, in her eagerness to find a place for everything, must've forgotten that my room is off-limits.

Seething, I take a look around. Her crap is everywhere – bed, desk, floor, cupboard. Everything has fallen victim to her hoarding.

"Mum!" I yell and box my way back through the house, but halfway down the hall I change my mind and storm back into my room, yank at the window that's full of grease, tracks littered with dead insects, until it finally gives under my weight and slides open.

"Mum!" I yell again. She pretends she can't hear me. I take the first thing in reach and fling it into the garden, a waterlogged shoe carton with broken crayons, alphabet-shaped, mould-coloured pasta, cardboard squares, several lengths of string. Rubbish. Out with it.

From deep inside me, a flame of broiling anger leaps up and before I draw another breath I reach for the next thing, a bag so old it tears open when I yank it free from under a plastic toy stroller. The stroller is next out the window.

Holy cow, do I have Mum's attention now. From beyond the skeletal fingers of a Jacaranda tree she fixes me with a glare as comprehension ripples through her eyes.

"You stop that immediately!" Her voice breaks, is reduced to a whisper. "Do you hear me, Vanessa? Stop and put it down this minute!"

I usually do as I'm told. But not this time.

"You promised!" I shout and fling a box out of the window. Plates, cups and saucers that she must've bought at Vinnie's or the Salvation Army hurl through the air.

"Stop it!" Mum screeches, her voice a pained and tortured instrument, whipped back into action by the sound of porcelain smashing into pieces.

Mum is wild with rage, but there's a fire in me that's at least equal to her fury, blazing roaring flames through me until every fibre inside me is set alight.

"No!" I yell. "You promised!" I reach blindly for the next thing.

Mum breaks into a run and rushes in the house.

"Stop it this minute!" She bursts through the door and grabs hold of what I have in my hands.

It's a small moving carton, like the ones that are used for packing books, filled with clothes such as summer shirts and blouses and pairs of sneakers that neither of us will ever wear because they're a man's size eleven, scarves and hats and mitts stuffed in between them.

"No, Mum. Let go! You promised, remember? You would leave my room alone!"

"This is still my house! You live in my house!"

Mum and I both tug at the box like cartoon characters until the carton, old and damp with age, gives like limp papier-mâché and the contents spill to the floor. Mum squeals with frustration. She turns to pummel me with her fists, but it's nothing, she's nothing, and I push her into the wall with all I have.

“Keep your house to yourself!” I yell and brush her aside. I storm past her out of the room, leaving the relentless mess behind me, break through the front door, find my bike under piles of crap. I'm out of here.

Chapter 20

Eyes blind with tears, I'm hunkered low over my bike, the world around me a blur, when all of a sudden Evan materialises before me, slipping from behind a parked car and into my path like a Halloween ghost. Worse, he has a bike in tow, which I see too late. It makes me swerve and nearly lose my balance. "Watch out!"

The look on Evan's face, equal parts embarrassment and surprise, is all I need to make me explode.

"What are you doing here?" I ask scathingly, my voice dripping with outrage.

Evan ducks his head and murmurs something in response that's so quiet, so humble, it further inflames me. "You weren't at school today."

"So?" I glare at him. "Aren't people allowed to be sick?"

His voice miserable, Evan insists, "You don't look sick."

"I got better." As if to prove it, I cross my arms over my parka, feet splayed wide, eyes sparkling challengingly.

He answers my glance steadily, blind to my challenge. "I was worried about you. You had to leave so suddenly yesterday."

Evan's eyes are a mystery to me, not so much a colour as a texture. They remind me of the Swan River, brackish water that glitters in the sun.

"I wanted to make sure you're not freaking out about the audition."

"I'm not," I reply quickly and swing back on my bike, half oblivious to the fact that, after a moment's hesitation, Evan gets on his own bike and starts racing after me.

We ride downhill, heading southeast, away from the river and the city. The houses we pass are set back from the street, their front yards rippling unencumbered towards the footpath without any fences or gates. Some are neat and tidy, others neglected, with derelict car wrecks parked out front in overgrown weeds.

I pass a little house on the left and swerve around a dark-green Toyota people mover that's parked on the footpath, before I steal a quick glance back. Sure enough, there's Evan hunkered low over his bike, his feet double-peddalling to catch up with me.

"Vanessa," he calls and sounds desperate in the cold. His hair flies around his face. Neither of us is wearing a helmet. "Vanessa. Wait."

I turn my eyes back on the road. A faint vibration in my back pocket adds to the chaos of the moment. Without a doubt, it's Dad, ringing me for the gazillionth time to ask if I've spoken to Mum about selling the house. The Jackie & You show is tomorrow, and I'm painfully aware that I can't blow my chance. The sense of frustration I feel in this moment is so overwhelming it nearly knocks me off the bike.

I yank at the bar, swerve abruptly to the right and into the parkland that stretches east to the border of the technology park. The bike jolts over ruts and furrows, jars along the tracks of a stone-strewn path, sodden sand chewing at my wheels, spokes churning out dregs and mud spraying my legs where it thickens to a chunky kind of paste.

Riding the bike becomes painful the further into the tree-lined park I get where trees form a kind of domed entrance to the woodland behind. I ditch the bike at the combination of staggered chicane and kissing gate and begin to run, actually run. I haven't done anything like this for years.

Sprinting along the path, I can hear the squelch of Evan's footfall behind me. Following a sudden whim, I veer off the path and scrabble through thick dense shrub, branches snagging at my parka, whipping my face with the skeletal fingers of their cold wet leaf stalks.

My leather boots smack through undergrowth, the thin soles alive to every bump and bruise, every vague depression and dip, the sound of Evan's persistent footsteps crunching twigs and leaves in my back, his voice calling out. "Vanessa. Wait."

There's no power on earth that could stop me. I duck under leaves and bat branches out of the way, thread my way through hop-bushes and wattles, their skinny,

twisted shapes overgrown with mistletoe, the strong scent of their leaves heavy in the air. My feet slip on wet leaves and rain-drenched clumps of moss.

Evan keeps pace behind me. He jumps over the rocks that trip me up, sidesteps puddles as we come to a rise. My Docs are completely soaked through.

If this were a proper forest, I'd run into the cover of willows, across stones dark from rain, scrabbling over boulders rising from the ground in prehistoric shape, and then down the other side, where I'd make my way through the brown water of a gurgling creek, my boots agitating the sediment, the call of motorbike frogs revving on the banks, and then I'd be mounting an embankment, and on, and on ... but it's only a small reserve and up ahead I catch glimpses of a wide road.

The sound of traffic momentarily distracts me and when Evan slips on a tangle of wet twigs and leaves and loses his balance he catches me off-guard. With flailing arms he reaches out, grabs hold of my shoulder and thuds to the ground beside me. Toppling down a small incline, we land in black dirt so moist with decay it's like the inside of a compost heap, the smell as powerful as a slap in the face. Gasping for air, we roll against the base of a pricklybark.

Leaves and foliage conceal the sky, but strangely I don't feel scared. It's more like the trees are protecting us from the cold indifference of the world. I feel like they're folding us into their earthly embrace. Somehow, the only real thing is the piece of bark we're rested against, the clumps of moss damp under our hands. All around us, the bush is teeming with insect life.

And then I turn to Evan, fold my hands around his neck, press my wet hair against his collarbone and begin to cry, sobbing so hard my whole body shakes.

I must've cried for a long time, cradled in Evan's arms, none of us saying anything. Time ticks by, I'm sure it does, because the earth around us is alive and I'm alive with it. Ants walk over my hand and down to where my fingers are intertwined with his while a bug digs a tunnel in the soft moist foliage.

Finally, Evan breaks the silence by clearing his throat.

“Uh, our bikes,” he says and his eyes look everywhere but in my face. “Do you think we should get them?”

“No.” I smile, poke a fallen branch with my toe. The bark is dark with mould and moss. “I’m soaking wet,” I add.

“I’m sorry I tripped you over.” He turns so he can face me and gives me a smile that sends my pulse racing.

“I don’t care.” The wet and cold come slowly up from the ground and seep into my bones. I try not to shiver. “Chocolate fondue,” I murmur.

“What?”

That’s what Evan would be, on a menu. “Nothing. Just thinking of food, as always.” I stare at him for a moment longer – how different his face looks up close. The sweet curve of his lips, the perfect arc of his nose and the black mass of eyelashes, framing his impossible eyes.

Evan gently brushes a wet strand of hair from my face and brings his face close to mine. “I love the way you cook,” he whispers softly and I forget how cold and wet it is, the only thing on my mind the way he holds me.

Chapter 21

When I ring Immy's doorbell at half past four, an eerie calm has spread inside me and a feeling of deep regret. More than anything, I wish I could take back everything I said to Mum. Start again, and not walk out on her. But I can't and I'm trying to keep everything together, holding on to the feeling I had when I cried in Evan's arms.

"Where've you been!" Immy opens the door and gives me a quizzical look. "I've been trying to reach you all day. Is everything alright?"

"Sure." I smile feebly, forcing myself to believe that things could indeed become alright again.

Immy frowns and leans forward, her silk blouse rustling. Her eyes search my face for clues. "You look hot," she states. "And out of breath."

"I was on my bike."

"I guess." She pauses before she goes on in a careful manner, "Sometimes, when we work very hard towards a goal, we begin to second-guess ourselves. That's absolutely normal." She takes the grocery bags off me and steps aside to let me in. "It's okay to feel nervous. It's just the adrenaline kicking in. It's important to stay focussed. Don't let the butterflies distract you."

"I won't," I promise, shrugging out of my parka and pulling the sweater over my head. Smoothing down my purple shirt, I smile at her. "Believe me. I'm excited. I know I can do it."

"You're right." Immy shuts the door and ushers me to the sofa, where she turns down the volume on the TV. "Look who's here, Cale."

"Vanessa!" Cale throws himself onto my lap and continues to watch his show at earsplitting volume. "Can we make pizza later on?"

"No. We'll cook my risotto. You know, my special one, for tomorrow."

"Because tomorrow is the big day?"

I try not to laugh at Cale's cuteness. "That's right," I say. "Tomorrow's my big day." I glance at Immy. "I can't believe it's tomorrow!"

"I know, right? And you're sure you're up for this tonight?"

"Sure I am. I've got all the steps down. I've got everything I need."

"Your missing ingredient?" Immy gives a soft chuckle.

I cock my head, flicking damp hair out of my face. "Porcini mushrooms."

The smile on Immy's face is as genuine as a sunrise. "Right. I trust you. It's just, Cale can be a bit full-on sometimes. If he gets in your way, give me a call and I come right away, you hear? And I won't be late, I promise."

"Like I said. Don't worry." I gently lift Cale off my lap and get up to level a glance at her. "I've got this. Enjoy your evening with Dad. What time are you going?"

Immy shakes her sleeve up and checks her watch. "In an hour. I'll get ready now. What about you?" Then she pauses, squints at me and leans forward. "Is that leaves in your hair?" She combs through my hair with her fingers, picks out some tiny twigs and dead leaves. "Where've you been?"

"We went to the park after school." I look everywhere but in her eyes. I can feel my cheeks burn with my secret. Mum's hoarding feels like a shadow cast over my life. I sink back into the soft sofa cushions and turn to the screen, where talking animals with big heads and scuba suits are in the process of rescuing a baby dolphin. "I guess I am a bit nervous." Cale jumps back on my lap and I'm glad for the distraction. "Well, was. Not anymore."

Immy perches on the edge of the sofa to study my face. "And now you're feeling better?"

I flash her a smile in the hope she'll drop the subject.

"Promise you'll call if your nerves are acting up again," Immy says and gets up from the couch.

While Immy is upstairs getting ready, I watch three more episodes with Cale, just to erase the image of Mum's hoarding from my memory. Then I get up and start getting food out of the bags.

"What kind of risotto are we making?" Cale asks. He tries his best to divide his attention between the TV screen and the kitchen.

"Uh, it's a special one that I learned when I was little."

"So is it one of Jackie's?"

I smile. "No, we're not allowed to cook any of her recipes for the audition. We have to come up with our own thing." I shrug. "It's probably better that way, I think."

"Does it have cheese and ham and bacon and ...?" Cale's voice trails off as the action on the screen picks up.

All of a sudden, I'm starving. "No," I tell him. "But it's the best risotto you're ever going to taste."

While Cale watches his show, I soak half a cup of dried porcini in just enough water to cover them. Transferring them carefully to a small saucepan after a while, I bring them to a slow simmer and wait for the liquid to absorb.

"Mmh, what's that smell?" Immy, dressed in a short lamé shift dress with silver and black stripes, clacks into the kitchen on impressively high heels and glances curiously in the saucepan. "I thought your risotto is vegetarian."

"That's the mushrooms," I explain, pride oozing from my voice. "I had the idea while I was cooking at Dad's. The trick is to get the amount right. Too much and their aroma drowns out everything. Not enough and there's barely a taste. I need to get it just right –"

"I see, Goldilocks," Immy laughs. Then she stretches her arms to the side and takes a slow spin in the kitchen. "What do you think?"

"I think, breathtaking," I answer truthfully before turning my attention back to the mushrooms. Preparing a creamy butter sauce in a larger saucepan, I add onions,

garlic and tomatoes, leaving them to simmer, while I arrange the plump, cooked porcini mushrooms on a cutting board and chop them into fine slivers. Immy's goodbyes and Cale's comments from the sofa recede to a faint background noise, while I realise with satisfaction that I'm in the zone. Even before adding the tiny mushroom flakes to the tomato sauce, I feel in my bones that this is going to be the best risotto I have ever made.

With the risotto cooling on the bench, I prepare pancakes for a quick dinner for Cale and me. Then I empty half the bubble wash in the bath and sit Cale with his toys in it. He refuses to get out until the water is cold. I wrap him in his soft blue towel and find his pyjamas under his pillow.

"I want to cuddle with you," he says when I tuck him in, so I go under the blanket as well and read books to him until his eyes close from exhaustion.

I must've fallen asleep myself because I'm still in Cale's bed when Immy yanks my arm and wakes me so abruptly that I almost fall out of bed.

"You had no right!" she hisses, the lamé stripes sparkling angrily in Cale's nightlight.

I stare at her with huge eyes. What the hell is going on?

"You're little trick? Well, it backfired."

I scramble out of Cale's room and stumble down the dim hall. I don't understand and for an awful second I think she's found out about Mum, disgusted at the thought of me leaving her when Mum needs me the most.

"I – what do you mean?" I stutter, reluctantly meeting her eyes.

Immy grabs hold of my wrist and glares at me, ripples running through the metallic fibre in her dress. Immy's eyes and her strawberry blonde locks look like they caught fire. I've never seen her so mad.

"I know what you did, Vanessa, and I'm so, *so* disappointed with you. How could you have stuck your nose in your father's and my relationship. You have no right, absolutely no right to meddle with things that don't concern you!"

“But they do.” Slowly, comprehension spreads through me and the source of Immy’s anger becomes clear. I try to wrench my wrist from her grip and shake my head. Why is she so upset? “All I did was give you guys a chance to get back together.”

“Fun fact: it’s not your place to give us anything. This is not your place, Vanessa. Do you understand me? You don’t interfere with the relationships of grownups.”

“Oh, please!” I feel a surge of anger run through me. “Grownups? You guys behave like the worst babies! It’s like, make up your mind already!”

“You have no right!” Immy repeats, her voice rising in frustration. Her eyes are hot with anger. She looks like a Norse goddess, ready to unleash her fury.

“No right?” I snap. “I’m sick of people telling me I’ve got no right! I’ve got every right and so does Cale. Because it’s not just you and Dad. Does that not get into your head? It’s all of us. And you call yourself a grownup.”

Immy’s face is a whirlwind of emotion. Her angry eyes scare me, as do her balled up fists, and I inch backwards until I reach the landing. Feeling the curve of a step under my bare feet, I quickly turn and sail downstairs, Immy behind me.

“This was a terrible thing you did, Vanessa! Terrible.”

We come to a halt in the big open living room. Everything’s packed up, neat and tidy. On the counter sits a white ceramic bowl with the risotto ready for the next day.

I point at the clock on the wall. “If it was such a terrible thing to do, how come it’s nearly ten o’clock?” I shout in triumph. “You met at six, so it couldn’t have been so horrible.”

“The fact that it’s ten has nothing to do with it.”

“But if you hated it so much you would’ve been back sooner,” I insist.

“Time is not the issue here. Our discussion is not about time. It’s about the right of people to live their lives without other people messing it up for them.”

“Ha!” I shout and stomp my foot. “You guys are doing a pretty awesome job at messing it up for yourselves!”

“I’m not saying we’re perfect,” Immy shouts back and glares at me angrily. Big red splotches spread over her cheeks. “I’m not saying anything other than don’t stick your nose in other people’s business.”

“I know what you’re saying. I can hear you. And I *say* it is my business.”

“Only to the extent that I’m married to your father. Only in so far as we’re getting a divorce. Anything else doesn’t concern you.”

“Oh yeah?” Hands on hips, I glare at her, shivering in my thin shirt. “Then why do you always beg me to babysit Cale when you’ve got something on?”

“I do that because I think you can use the money. But don’t worry, it won’t happen again.”

“No, but, the point is, Cale is my brother. And it kind of is my business. Our business. What our parents are doing.”

Immy takes a step closer, her narrowed eyes returning my furious glare. “I’m not your mother, Vanessa,” she says in a flat voice. “And it’s about time you get that into your head.”

“I know you’re not my mother!” My eyes sting and I bite back hot tears of self-pity. God, life feels like such a crappy disappointment sometimes. “I know that. I’m not stupid.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

Immy’s harsh words ring out before she can clamp a hand over her mouth and I see regret flash in her eyes as she notices their sting.

“You’re right.” Blinking tears from my eyes, I brush past her into the kitchen, grab the bowl from the bench. It still feels warm in my hands. “I’ve got no business here. I won’t bother you anymore.”

Immy shuts her eyes, massages her brow with tense fingers. “Vanessa,” she says in a strained voice. “Where do you think you’re going at this time of night?”

“Well, it’s only ten. I think we’ve established that. And this is not my place. We’ve established that too. So I’ll be going home now.”

Immy tries to block the door. “I can’t let you leave at this hour,” she says.

I fish for the handle behind her back, the bowl balanced precariously in one hand. “Well, you can’t stop me because, as you rightly mentioned, you’re not my mother.” I yank the door open but Immy immediately slams it shut with her foot.

“Vanessa! What about the audition tomorrow? What about the picnic basket?”

“Screw your picnic basket!” I reach for the door at the same time as Immy grabs hold of my arm. In the ensuing struggle, I can feel my grip on the bowl loosening. I try and push Immy away, dive for the door, but slip on the tiles. With a horrifying smash, the bowl slides from my hand and shatters on the floor.

I cry out and drop to the floor, scrambling wildly among the pieces of broken china and splattered risotto, trying to salvage enough for just one small bowl. Enough to convince the judges at tomorrow’s audition. But small shards of broken china are scattered everywhere. Only after I pricked my fingers and stare at drops of dark blood do I give up. I sink to the floor, defeated, cry out in frustration.

“Vanessa.”

Immy’s hand reaches for my shoulder, gives a gentle squeeze.

“Vanessa.”

I wipe furiously at my tears and rise to my feet without looking at Immy. Flicking her hand away, I step over the mess on the floor, reach for the door and walk through it briskly, slamming it shut behind me.

The moment the door falls shut, the moment I hear the loud metallic click of the lock, my heart sinks into a bottomless pit.

I think back to the afternoon, when all was well and Immy, Cale and I formed this warm fuzzy triangle of love that tried to make it in a world that seemed just so ... well, *messy*. I remember the dark that always seems to loom around the edges. Like a foreboding feeling that something will happen to this triangle.

Slowly turning up the dark street, pushing my bike along as I walk, I feel so completely at a loss that the ground seems to sway under my feet. When I finally manage to draw a breath, it's like coming awake.

The risotto for the audition is ruined. Immy has turned me out and Mum and I had a massive fight. Dad, I assume, must be as angry as Immy at my interfering. The way I see it, the only people not mad at me right now are my friends. I pull my phone from the bag and bring Brie's number up on the screen, pressing dial.

"Vanessa?" Brie's voice is a mix of surprise and pleasure.

"Did I wake you?" My own voice is shaky, trembling with emotion. I swallow hard.

"No. I'm at Evan's. We're playing Overcooked. What's up?"

I take a deep breath. "Can I come over?"

Brie doesn't even pause. "Sure," she says and I hang up, so relieved I cry.

Chapter 22

I'm in a strange mood. Dressed only in a thin purple shirt, I can't stop shaking, yet my face feels hot and my cheeks burn. Everything seems so unreal that I briefly wonder if I've lost my mind. It's like I've stepped out of my body, watching another person who looks exactly like me swing her legs over the bike and lean into the pedals, while I float in the air, desperately trying not to go completely insane.

I have nearly reached Evan's house when the phone in my back pocket comes to life. I slide it out with trembling fingers. More than anything, I hope it's Mum. Hope that she's okay, that we can mend things.

But when I look at the screen I see Immy's name. I answer the phone nervously.

"Vanessa!" Immy's husky voice floats through the speaker.

"Immy." My face turns hot at the memory of our fight. "I'm so glad you called," I admit, trying to blink away tears that have sprung to my eyes. "I'm so sorry for everything."

"Vanessa, it's me who's sorry. We're beside ourselves with worry. Where are you?"

"I'm –" I glance around, not sure of the street name. "I'm on my way to Evan and Brie. Why?"

"I just got a call from your father. I think ... Vanessa, I think it's better you come home. Come home to my place."

"Yours? But –"

"Something happened at your house, Vanessa. You need to come home to me."

My heart begins to pound like a road train thundering along a highway and a noise inside my head drowns out any other sound.

"Vanessa?" Immy's voice, so delicate and probing like the wings of a butterfly. "Please come home now. We know."

Chapter 23

I didn't listen to Immy. After calling Brie and telling her that I changed my mind, I ride through the dark backstreets and the long road up the hill toward our small park. When I see the river and the city lights beyond, I turn east. Toward Mum.

It's close to midnight when I reach our little laneway, but there're lights on in every house around the park. Cars are parked outside our house and I gasp as I realise one of them belongs to the police. Neighbours poke their heads out from behind curtains and Dad's white Audi is parked under a bottlebrush.

I swallow hard. So that's what Immy meant when she said, *we know*.

I drop the bike next to Dad's car in the damp grass and slowly walk up to the house. Two men step through our front gate, deep in conversation. When I draw closer, one of them looks up. Recognising a familiar face, I break into a run and throw myself in his arms.

"Dad." I feel his arms tighten around me as he scoops me up and kisses my cheeks.

"I'm so glad you're safe," he murmurs in my ear, before shaking hands with the other man, a police officer. "Let's go to Immy's. Oh, wait." Something moves in his arms. "Here. He was running around near the fence so I picked him up. I didn't want him to get run over in the dark." He lifts the bundle to the light of the street lamp and I recognise the heart-shaped face and green eyes looking out at me with love and trust.

"Storm." I gently remove my cat from Dad's hands and cradle him in my arms. He studies my face with a curious look and curls his tail around him, content to be carried for the moment. "Thank you. Oh, thank you."

"Immy won't mind if you bring a cat, I'm sure." He wraps an arm around my shoulder and walks me to his car.

"But Mum –"

“I’m sorry, Nesy.” Dad tries to speak brightly, matter-of-factly, but his voice breaks.

“Why are you even here?” I ask, suddenly suspicious, narrowing my eyes.

“Because after the stunt you pulled with Immy and me, I came to speak to your mother.”

“I’m sorry about the restaurant,” I say quickly, burying my face in Storm’s soft fur.

Dad waves his hand as if it’s ancient history. “Don’t worry,” he reassures me. “Kind of amusing, when you think about it. But I hadn’t heard from you all day, so I didn’t know if you’d talked to your mother.”

About selling the house! I groan. With everything that’s been going on, I forgot to tell Mum about Dad’s plan.

“And when I got here ...” Dad’s voice trails off and he shakes his head. “Christ, Nesy.”

“You sort of picked a really bad day.”

“Any day, by the looks of it. Any day would’ve been a bad day.”

“Yes, but today especially,” I insist. “You couldn’t have picked a worse day.”

Dad looks at me for a moment. “Sometimes I forget that you’re still a child,” he remarks.

My eyebrows shoot up angrily. “What do you mean?”

“Nesy, you should’ve told me. This – I mean, how long has this been going on?” His face serious now, his open winter jacket rustles softly as he puts his hands on his hips.

“But it’s not your business,” I reply.

“What do you mean?” Dad fixes me with an impatient look, the buttons on his jacket clacking in the breeze. “You’re my daughter. I pay child support to keep you

safe and looked after. Where did you even sleep? Where did you eat? Where did you shower? Besides, half of the house belongs to me. How is this not my business?"

The breeze gets stronger and I cross my arms tighter around Storm to keep warm. "Because you left. Because it's Mum and me."

Dad pops the boot open, removes the front tyre from my bike and lifts the frame in. "That's what I mean, Nussy. You look at things from a child's perspective."

I watch him wrestle with the front tyre. In the back of my mind there's this nagging thought that Mum is nowhere to be seen or heard. "Where is she?" I strain my eyes to scan the dark corners in our yard. "Where's Mum?" I lay a hand on Dad's shoulder and wait for him to focus on me. "I don't want to go to Immy's. I want to stay with Mum."

He shakes his head, clearly frustrated with me. "Nussy, you can't," he snaps.

"Why?"

Dad closes the boot with a resounding thud and turns to me. "Why?" he asks incredulously. "Why? Nussy, just take a look inside. If you think I'll let you stay one more minute in this hole ..."

"But where's Mum?" I insist, shivering noticeably in the frigid air. "She isn't also going to Immy, is she?"

"No, of course not."

"So where is she?" I hug Storm in an effort to stay calm. My head feels heavy and my eyes sting with fatigue. In little over nine hours, I'll have to wait in line at the Channel Seven studio in Osborne Park for my chance to be picked as one of the eight finalists and I haven't even got my audition dish.

Dad gives a long sigh. "She's in the hospital," he finally admits.

"What? Why? What happened?" My voice rings through the dark night, but Dad's own voice is barely audible. "We had an argument and when I called the police, she lost it."

I stare at Dad. I can't believe my own ears. "So you had her admitted?" I shout. Storm tenses in alarm. His body stiffens and I grab tufts of his fur. I can't lose him too.

"No." Dad shakes his head, takes me by the elbow, but I shake his hand off. "No. She had herself admitted. Nussy, I swear, it's the truth. She had a breakdown. I told her I'd have the house cleared out and she just – I've never seen her like that. She went into shock or something. She's not up to it anymore."

"Not up to *it*?" I shake my head wildly, my loose hair flying around my face. Storm's claws dig through the thin fabric of my shirt, but I don't mind the sharp pain. It's reassuring to know I can still feel. "What does that even mean?" I glare at Dad. "What about me?"

Dad wraps me in his arms. I struggle in his hands. My ears ring and white noise fills my head. The dark that always looms along the edges washes over me like a wave.

"What about me?" I yell, knees buckling, feeling myself going limp in Dad's strong hands. Everything around me seems a blur. "What about us?"

"She can't be there for you right now," I hear Dad say in a flat voice before the noise in my head blocks out any other sound and all goes dark.

Chapter 24

When I'm finally in bed in Immy's spare bedroom, I'm so tired my eyes burn like hot coals. Still, I can't fall asleep. It's past midnight, the first Saturday in July. Audition day.

Rolling over onto my back, I try to force myself to sleep at least for an hour or two. I guess at some stage I must've drifted off because a knock on the door jolts me from a terrible dream about Mum struggling with a police officer over a water-logged carton full of baby clothes.

"Vanessa? Are you up? It's ten past six."

"Thanks, Dad." I slowly sit up in bed. Storm lies on top of the blankets near my feet, curled into a tight ball. When I stir, he opens his eyes to a squint and levels a calm, steady look at me.

As I lean forward to stroke his soft, marbled fur, a sharp bolt of pain explodes behind my eyes. My head feels heavy and there's throbbing pain in my ears. My skin feels hot and damp to the touch. "I'll be down in a minute."

Swinging my legs out from under the blanket, I just sit for a few moments, staring at the floor, watching myself getting ready to rise to my feet. After a while, I straighten my back, look around. How warm it is in here. How tidy.

Reaching for my jeans, I find the phone in the back pocket. There are a few texts from Brie and Evan asking if I'm okay and sending lots of excited emojis. They'll be waiting for me outside the Channel Seven studio. I quickly send them a dancing, cheering emoji back, though what I really feel like is drained. Drained and exhausted.

"Vanessa," Dad calls from downstairs.

"Just a sec," I yell and bring Mum's number up on the screen. For a moment, my finger hovers over her name, then I drop the phone, dress and tie back my hair.

Downstairs, both Immy and Dad are already dressed, waiting for me with a big cup of steaming hot coffee.

When she hears me coming down, Immy walks up to me with quick steps and pulls me into a hug. “I’m so sorry, Vanessa,” she whispers in my hair.

“I’m sorry too,” I whisper back.

Without makeup, bluish circles tinge the skin under her eyes. She has an almost haggard look as she takes my hands in hers and looks at me anxiously. “That the risotto got ruined last night – I feel it’s my fault.”

Part of me wants to agree and blame her, blame anyone. Instead I just hang my head.

“No, it’s not your fault. It’s hers,” I say. But my words sound hollow. I correct myself with a sigh. “I guess it’s no one’s.” A feeling of helplessness washes over me, so strong that I almost run back upstairs into bed.

But Dad, who has been watching me intently and seems to guess my thoughts, intercepts me before I reach the first step. “Come on, here, drink this.” He thrusts his steaming coffee mug in my hands and watches me take a careful sip. “Another one,” he urges me, his eyes warm and concerned.

I swallow the hot, strong liquid and can feel my head clearing up a bit.

“Now, Nussy, we talked about this last night,” Dad says. He drapes an arm around me and leads me to the kitchen counter. “There’s still time for you to cook the risotto,” he continues. “And I want you to know that we’re here for you. If you want to pull out because of what happened, that’s okay.” Dad pauses to look me in the eyes. “You’re a remarkable person for getting where you are today. I just want you to know that.”

I take another sip and glance at him. “You shouldn’t have told her that you were getting rid of her things,” I reproach him in a hoarse whisper. It’s painful to speak and my throat feels like red hot lava has been poured down it. I swallow cautiously and set the coffee down to touch the lymph nodes under my jaw. They seem swollen and hurt as I give them a light squeeze.

Dad ignores my rebuke. “You sound like you have a cold,” he frets. Both he and Immy begin to fuss over me. “Maybe some Lemsip will help? Do you have Strepsils?”

While Immy goes through the medicine drawer, Dad boils more hot water.

I stop checking my lymph nodes and pull out a large saucepan from under the benchtop.

“I need the stove,” I rasp and shove Dad aside.

I only have two hours to cook the perfect risotto, but there’s no need to fuss with the recipe. Over the past weeks, I have practised and perfected it so much that I could cook it blind. There’s still half a cup of porcini mushrooms left over from last night. I’ve got the freshest herbs, the ripest tomatoes, the most expensive tomato paste I could find. The rice is a high-quality import from Italy. I have everything I need to make this risotto irresistible.

And yet, right off when I dice the first onion and Dad makes a show of how impressive my onion-chopping skills are, I know that this isn’t going to work.

“What’s wrong?” Dad asks when I stop midway through quartering a vine-ripened tomato. “Do you need anything? Can I help?”

I unsuccessfully try to hide the irony in my smile. The one time I could really use some help, I’m surrounded by people who are hopeless in the kitchen.

“Dad,” I say, trying to sound convincing. “I have literally cooked this over a hundred times. I can do it.”

“Sure, I know.” He raises his hands and steps back from the stove. “You got it.”

“I got it.”

Our eyes turn to the onions sizzling in the butter sauce. We watch them crackle for a while, none of us saying a word.

“Smells good,” Dad proclaims with a satisfied nod. “You’ll see. This is going to be one badass risotto, Nussy.”

“Okay, Dad.” I exhale impatiently. “I need to focus now.”

“Sure. Focus. I’ll leave you to it.” Dad indicates a spot in the corner. “I’ll be right over there if you need me.”

After thirty minutes, it’s time to add the rice slowly to the sauce. I take a careful taste from a spoon.

“And?” Both Dad and Immy look at me expectantly.

I shrug. “Not bad,” I murmur, but in truth my throat is so stopped up that I can’t taste a thing. The smell is right, I guess. But the rice looks a little on the sloppy side, which worries me because I almost always get it right. If today is the one day where I don’t ace it, it would be a catastrophe.

There are a few other things that rankle me. The texture doesn’t look right. The sauce is too oily. The whole risotto, while creamy, looks a bit soupy. Perhaps, I think, if I carefully pour some extra fluid out, I can fix it. But now it’s too dry and after another ten minutes into it there comes the distinctive smell of burnt rice.

“Vanessa,” Immy calls from the pantry, where I can hear her rummaging around. “It’s nearly time to go.” She re-emerges with a thermal container and picnic basket. “We’re pretty late already.”

“I don’t have to be the first in line,” I protest. “It says here, anytime until nine thirty.”

“Still. If we leave in ten minutes, we’ll just make it.”

With a sinking heart, I turn the flame off under the saucepan. “Okay. Sure.”

“You’re almost done anyway, aren’t you?” Immy gives me a reassuring glance.

“Sure,” I say again, trying to feign confidence. I try to stay positive but this is a disaster. The risotto neither looks nor smells like it should and I still can’t taste anything. My head feels too heavy and I’m too tired to come up with a way to fix it. I swallow, take another Strepsil, swallow again. I try as hard as I can to convince myself that it isn’t really all that bad.

At the sound of my phone ringing, my heart skips a beat, but when I rush to check the screen, I have to take a deep breath to stifle my disappointment. Only Brie.

“Your mother may have had to hand in her phone. I can call the hospital if you like?” Immy, who has been watching me closely, asks softly.

I shake my head, too upset to speak. “Later.”

“So.” **Dad claps in his hands**, rubs them together, casts a look in the saucepan. “Looks delicious, Nesy. Absolutely delicious.”

“I can’t taste anything, Dad.”

“That’s the anaesthetics in the Strepsils, sweetie.”

“Can you taste it for me?”

Dad takes out a small spoon and carefully blows on the risotto. “Mmh. Tastes so good,” he munches a moment later. He gives me an encouraging nod. “Let’s do it.”

Dad and Immy transfer the risotto into a thermal container and screw the lid on, while I stand aside, shaking my head with a sinking feeling. I know, just by looking at it, that it’s nowhere near as perfect as the one I cooked last night. A horrifying certainty washes over me. This dish won’t get me into the finals.

“Carry me! Carry me!” crows Cale in the rush of getting ready and dribbles around me with his arms stretched in the air. “Carry me, Vanessa.”

I brush past his outstretched arms and snatch the thermal container from Immy. “No!” I cry and run back into the kitchen. “I need to redo it!”

“What are you doing?” Dad asks impatiently, car keys in hand.

“I need to fix it, Dad.” I throw an imploring glance at him before turning back to wrestle the lid off the container. “I need to cook it again.”

“But why?” He smacks his keys on a little bench next to the door and glances at his watch. “You said yourself that you can’t taste anything.”

“I just know it, okay, Dad? I can feel it, like, in my bones or something. I just know this isn’t the best I can do.” My fingers are shaking so much that the lid keeps slipping from my grip. I can feel the sting of tears in my eyes, blurring my vision.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Dad asks, “So what do you want to do?”

I take a shaky breath, rub furiously at me eyes. “I’ll fix it,” I repeat after a moment’s deliberation.

“No way.” Dad shakes his head, the collar of his blue turtleneck jumper rubbing against his chin. “Nessy, you don’t have time for that.”

“I can’t go to the audition with that,” I yell, my voice desperate. “Just trust me, Dad. Why can’t you trust me just once?”

“It’s your nerves,” Immy interrupts. She looks composed and cool-headed in dark blue jeans and a white, loosely knitted jumper. Crossing the floor quickly to the kitchen, she puts her hands on the container, her eyes calmly holding my gaze. “That’s normal. This has been very stressful for you and with everything else that’s been going on –”

“But it’s not!” I return her gaze imploringly. “Please. Believe me. I have to cook it again.”

“Vanessa.” Immy’s voice is soft and gentle, her face clouded with concern. “There’s just no time for it.” She puts a gentle arm around my shoulder. “If we don’t leave in the next few minutes, you will be too late and you will miss out. This way, at least you’ll have a chance.”

Chapter 25

When we finally get to the Channel Seven studio, I'm the last in line. The moment she sees us, Brie practically leaps into my arms with excitement while Evan gives me a tight hug and checks to see if I'm okay.

"I was so worried! Where've you been?" Brie wails, jumping around me wildly. "Your phone's off, I couldn't reach you! I even tried your mum!" She gives me an accusing look. "No texts, no snaps, I thought someone had killed you! Evan had to convince me that you're alright." She shakes her head, her loose plaits swinging softly around her face. When she reaches for my hand, she squeezes so hard that my fingers hurt.

"What on earth," Dad mumbles surprised and surveys the line on the footpath. "I had no idea cooking is so popular."

Our eyes follow Dad's and we scrutinise the line in silence. There're all sorts of people, mostly in their twenties and thirties, thronging around the entrance as security directs them through the lines.

Cale keeps dancing around us, bustling into the man in front of us.

"That's alright," I tell Immy after the man has turned around for the third time to ask Cale not to upset his dish. "Why don't you guys take Cale for a walk? I'll call when it's my turn."

"Call at least ten minutes before so we won't miss you," Dad warns. "I want to be there when my child becomes a star."

This is so embarrassing. I groan, shooing them away. "Go already." Then I hook one arm under Brie's and another under Evan's and take a deep breath. Together we push through the crowd and reach a hustle of people with tablets and their phones out. Brie gives my name to a woman in a blonde pixie cut and a navy shirt, the words "I Am A Free Elf" emblazoned in gold on it. The woman fixes us with a curious look. There's a glint in her eyes that gives me goose bumps. She spins one of the gold studs in her ear while contemplating her screen. "So, Vanessa ... how old are you exactly?"

“Um, almost fifteen,” I say, at the same time as Brie blurts out, “She’s fourteen. We’re fourteen.”

“Huh.” The producer’s eyes glide over us. Her fingers have stopped spinning her earring. Her smile appears suddenly, crinkling deep lines around her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

“Oh, this will be good,” she murmurs and disappears.

We are ushered into the building and told to take seats in a crowded hall littered with garden chairs and big screens that broadcast directly from the audition room.

Everywhere, people are huddled in groups. Brie steers us toward a stack of chairs on the far side. As we cross the room, people stop their conversations to throw startled looks at us. Someone nudges their friend, who rolls their eyes. I try not to get discouraged, but as soon as Brie has lifted a chair from the stack, I sink into the plastic seat, wishing I were invisible.

“Don’t mind them. They’re just jealous,” Evan says, circling his arms protectively around the picnic basket with my risotto inside. He stares hard at a group near us, the men in hipster beards, the women heavily made up. “A joke,” one of them mutters before looking away.

I pretend I didn’t hear her but I can feel the colour rising in my face.

“Notice how this is always the first thing people do?” Brie curls an arm around me. “Tell everyone, younger means dumber. It’s like it’s written in a handbook somewhere.”

“Growing-up 101: how to be a knob,” Evan agrees, throwing his arm around me as well. He angles for another chair with his foot and pulls it over, setting down the picnic basket with a look of reverence worthy of the crowning of a queen.

I can feel my friends’ eyes on me, but instead of meeting their glance, I stare at the basket with my risotto inside. This is it, I think. The moment I’ve waited for so long. Despite everything that’s happened in the last two days, a lopsided grin appears on my face. Somehow, I’ve always pictured this moment deeper than cheap white plastic chairs.

A puffing noise and the whiff of expensive aftershave interrupt my thoughts. Dad drops in the chair next to me.

“Immy’s still out with Cale,” he says. “But I just had to be here with you.”

“So, Mr ...” a producer has appeared from behind us, keying notes in his tablet. Before he can finish his sentence, the woman in the “I Am A Free Elf”-Tee swoops on him, shooing him away.

“Leave them, she’s mine!” she calls after the guy, her unnaturally white teeth gleaming dangerously. I feel myself further shrinking in the chair, my hands all clammy. Her lipstick has the colour of blood.

“Hey.” Dad nudges me and waits for me to meet his glance. “Don’t look so worried, Nessy. You’ll be fine.” He winks an eye at me. “They only eat kids occasionally, you know.”

I’m still trying to pull myself together when Brie slams an elbow in my side.

“Look!”

Her voice has jumped up an octave and my eyes follow her hand to the big screen on the wall. Five new contestants have appeared in the audition room and are introduced to the panel.

My eyes light up.

There is Jackie Park, the second on the right, in a sunshine-coloured top and brisk blue culottes. She inspects the five contestants, converses with her fellow judges, addresses the first of the five.

“What brought you here today?”

“Um ... I went to an audition for Season Two,” the man replies, his hair wet with sweat.

“Cooking’s a tough business.” Jackie appears unmoved.

“It’s brutal,” another panellist trumps her. He’s got thick brunette hair and a faintly familiar face. “The long hours, the self-destructive behaviour of people in the industry –”

“It’s my passion,” the contestant puts in, a defiant look in his eyes.

The familiar-looking judge winces, like he’s heard the word ‘passion’ one too many times.

“Well, good luck to you...”

Unable to take my eyes off the contestant, my mind beings to wander. What will I say when Jackie asks me that question?

“... always felt this really close connection with food ...,” the next contestant, a cocky man in spikey hair says.

“That could be you,” Brie giggles and hooks her arm under mine. “Did you hear that? *Obsessed with food from a very young age ...*”

“Or that one.” Evan nods his chin toward the fourth contestant, a petite woman in a headscarf. “She just said she’s always dreamed of opening her own restaurant.”

Before I get a chance to reply, I feel the weight of a hand on my shoulder.

“Vanessa?” the “Free Elf” producer asks. “I managed to swap some things around. You’ll be up shortly. I need you to come with me.”

Dad looks alarmed, half-rises in his chair.

“Where’re you taking her?” he wants to know.

“Backstage. Over there.” The producer goes with her hand over her pixie cut, flicking her fringe to the side. “We’ll do a short interview before.” Her glance travels over Dad and my friends, before it settles on Evan.

“Are you two *boyfriend girlfriend*?” she asks to my horror.

Evan’s face is ablaze.

“No!” we both shout at the same time. I feel at least as mortified as Evan looks. We avoid meeting each other’s eyes.

“A shame,” the producer mumbles and reaches for her tablet. “You sure?”

“None of your business,” Evan replies testily.

“Oh, well.” She busily keys in some things, seemingly unperturbed, and shoves the tablet back into her belt. “We’ll do it the traditional way, then. You’re the father? Would you mind coming with us?”

Together with Dad, we pass groups of other contestants and reach a little holding area, crammed with cameras, microphones, people with headphones on. To our right are heavy dark curtains.

“I’ll be right back,” the producer promises and disappears behind part of a kitchen set.

A man to my left turns around, gives us a wistful glance. “A father-daughter team always gets top ratings.” He pauses as he looks at me. “You must be proud of your dad.”

“I’m the proud one,” Dad corrects him and places an arm around my shoulders. “She’s the chef.”

The man’s eyes widen in surprise. I can’t help but notice that he also looks relieved.

“Is this your first time?” he asks.

“Yes, why?” My mouth feels dry. “Have you done it before?”

“All the time.” The man gives a sad chuckle, his expression even more wistful than before. “MasterChef, Jackie & You, MKR, anything. It’s something like an obsession for me.”

“She’s obsessed with cooking too,” Dad throws in and cuffs me lightly on the arm.

The man nods, seeing nothing wrong with it. “Whenever I can take time off work, I’m in.”

I look confused. I’ve never given the thought proper consideration that if you loved cooking and were passionate about food, you could become anything else but a cook.

“So you mean you don’t cook? Professionally, I mean?”

“God, no.” The man shakes his head. “I drive trucks for a living. Up in Karratha. That’s my day job. But cooking, that’s my life.” He chuckles as a thought crosses his mind.

“There was this one time, when I went to a MasterChef audition in Adelaide ...” He pauses, shudders as he relives the memory. “I was broke so I had to use my frequent flyer points. But they stuffed around with the flights and I had to fly from Karratha to Perth to Melbourne to Adelaide. I arrived late at night and bribed a guy at a Backpacker’s to let me use their kitchen. When I got to the restaurant the next morning, I waited in line for four hours. They took one taste and said, ‘Sorry.’ I went back home to Karratha the same day.”

I don’t know what to say but the man beats me to it.

“It’s heartbreaking sometimes.” He sighs.

“But you’re here.” I look around. The “Free Elf” producer has re-entered the room, two men in tow. A cameraman is trailing them with his camera. “You haven’t given up yet. There’s still a chance.”

The man sighs again.

“I guess there’ll be a point when I will give up,” he says.

“When?”

The two men stop a few feet away from us, face the camera. The producer has melted away in the background. “Perth has fantastic beaches,” one of them, dark-haired with a pinched face, announces. “A brilliant nightlife,” the other chimes in, his equally dark hair wavy, slicked to the side. “But does it have what it takes to make it into Jackie & You?” the first one exclaims, his voice loud and excited. “Talent!” the second one shouts and the camera sweeps over our faces.

“I guess I’ll know when the time has come,” the truck driver from Karratha whispers in my ear before beaming in the camera. “All I can say is, it hasn’t come yet.”

To my horror, the camera lingers on my face. “Tell them about you,” the producer’s breathy voice meanders through the stage set to my ear.

“Um ... I’m Vanessa,” I stammer into the microphone one of the dark-haired men has jammed in my face.

“Hi, Vanessa,” both men croon in fake voices. Their cheerful, excited faces look like Halloween masks. I can feel Dad at my side moving in, squaring his shoulders, getting ready to intervene. The two hosts must’ve sensed it too because they’re backing off.

Squeezing my eyes shut for a brief moment, I try to swallow, control my nerves, my shaking hands.

“How old are you?” one host asks.

“Fourteen,” I reply, miffed that this is still all about my age. “I’m in Year Nine.”

The men don’t even bother to hide the look they exchange, their sneers for the camera so obvious it makes me go numb. Oh no, I think. This has been a terrible mistake. To think of everything I’ve done to be here and just so I’ll be roasted, humiliated on national TV! I’ll never be able to show my face at school again or talk to the people in my class. Abject fear grips me, twists my stomach painfully.

One of the hosts seems to sense my panic and plasters a conceitful smile on his face.

“Well, it’s your turn, Vanessa,” he says and gives my shoulder a patronising pat. “Good luck.”

No knowing what’s happening or what’s going on, the producer’s hand appears out of nowhere, yanking the black curtains aside. I feel a hard shove in my back and stumble out.

Strong theatre lights blind me. Four other contestants, all adults, have gathered around a long table and look in my direction. When they see me hesitate at the curtains, their postures relax. One of them, a young woman with strong eye makeup, says something to the man next to her that makes the man’s lips curl slightly.

Turning to my left, there's the panel, seated at another long table, stern looks on their faces. The four judges watch in silence as I make the long way across the room to join the other contestants.

"So ..." A judge with blonde hair cut in a neat bob addresses our table and gives me a glance over her reading glasses. "How old are you?"

"I'm almost fifteen," I answer, shaking so badly that I have to let go of the picnic basket, setting it down on the table with an audible thud. Bending forward, I rest my hands on my knees, feeling my whole body vibrate. "I'm sorry," I whisper, clearing my throat. "I'm sorry," I say a bit louder, throw the judges an apologetic smile.

"Are you feeling sick?" the blonde judge asks, her face not unfriendly, the links on her eyeglass chain jingling softly.

"I'm just really nervous," I admit, still clasping my legs with my hands, trying to breathe or at least not throw up. Lack of sleep clouds my vision. The other contestants seem to visibly draw back from me, as if stage fright were contagious. One or two scrunch their faces, roll their eyes, impatient with my drama.

"Do you need a moment?" the judge probes, her reading glasses sliding down on her nose. She pushes them back up with a carefully manicured finger.

I'm grateful there's at least one friendly voice in the room. Another shaky breath sees me let go of my legs, straighten up and face the panel.

"I'm OK," I say, feeling the opposite of. "It's just overwhelming to be here."

The panel takes this as their cue.

"What does it mean to you to be here today?" a male judge who's unbelievably handsome asks.

"It means ... to be in the same room with Jackie ..." My voice trails off, my glance falls on Jackie, who stoically waits for the end of my sentence. "I would do anything to learn from you, Jackie," I blurt out, my eyes shooting to the curtains, where I know Dad is waiting, the side next to him empty. I swallow hard.

A brief smile flickers over Jackie Park's face as she brushes a strand of perfect hair from her face.

“Can you tell us a bit more about your dream?” she probes, her silver ear hoops sending sparkles of light through the room. “What would it mean to make it into the finals?”

“It would mean every ... EVERYTHING,” I exclaim, my voice breaking, my hands shaking again like leaves in a storm.

“You’re still nervous.” Jackie exchanges a look with the other panellists before returning her attention to me. “Who did you bring with you? Who is waiting for you outside?”

“My dad ... and my friends ...” I stammer, shutting my eyes. “Who’s not here today is my mother,” I continue after a brief pause, drawing a deep breath. “I’m not even sure she will ever speak to me again, so ...”

An uncomfortable silence descends on the room. Jackie Park moves in her chair. The faces of the other panellists look chiselled in stone.

“Well, shall we start then?” Jackie suggests. “What did you make?”

“A risotto.”

A snicker from the other contestants, but Jackie nods, scribbling something on her pad. There’s an awkward pause as I fumble with the zippers of the picnic basket, the clinks of ceramic as I remove four bowls the only noise. The blonde judge has her eyes fastened on my shaking hands and bites her lip. Jackie keeps her eyes on the pad in front of her, obviously not wanting to embarrass me any further by watching my pathetic flop.

I draw a deep breath. That’s the moment I’ve been waiting for. With a final glance to the curtains, I open the lid of the thermal container and look at the risotto inside.

It’s as if I’ve split in two, as if the real me is a spectral presence that hovers somewhere above the physical shell that pretends to be me. It’s the physical shell that’s trembling and shaking. The real me is coolly analysing the food.

Good manners dictate that contestants show team spirit right from the start. When the ceramic bowls clank sharply against each other, the young, slightly chubby man to my right offers to take them from my shaking hands.

“I don’t know?” I glance at the panel, who are watching me with stony faces. “Perhaps I should do it myself?”

The man nods his shock of pink hair. A variety of ear piercings glow in the strong lights.

“Don’t let them see you’re scared,” he advises. “They’re like beasts. They sense fear.”

My eyes wander over the food on the contestants’ table. The pink-haired man has served up a delicious-looking pear tart on Royal Doulton plates in pacific blue. The woman next to him, round and pretty like a fruit torte and dressed for the occasion in a festive summer dress, has brought a goat curry in red sauce with white jasmine rice that looks mouth-watering on pastel china.

I watch the other contestants approach the panel. There’re no disasters as they serve their food either shaking with nerves or trying to be composed. No one trips. The judges try each contestant’s dish with the same stony expression that borders on disdain.

“You shouldn’t cook,” the male judge with the faintly familiar face says almost immediately as the first forkful touches his lips, addressing the woman in the summer dress.

Her jaw drops and all festivity melts away from her. The look on her face is naked horror. I feel sorry for her, but I’m shamefully aware that I also feel glad. Glad it’s her who’s out. Glad I still have a chance.

They’re all cruel.

“You’re not a cook,” the blonde bob informs the pink-haired man after a taste of his pear tart.

“But I am a cook,” the man protests, his cheeks matching the colour of his hair. “I cooked this tart, therefore I must be a cook.”

“Fine then, you’re a cook. But you’ll never be a chef,” the woman announces.

Unnecessarily cruel.

The tremble in my hands increases. All the other contestants, every one of them, has been put into place by the panel. Their eyes turn to me.

“We won’t go easy on you just because of your age,” the handsome man warns.

“This is not a charity show,” the faintly familiar face agrees.

I approach the table slowly, place the ceramic bowls in front of each judge.

The clank of ceramic on wood sounds like the blade of a guillotine being pulled into place above my neck. The blonde judge takes a spoonful of the risotto and holds it up to her eyes. Sweet scent from her perfume drifts through the air. “I use Carnaroli rice when I make a risotto,” she remarks, squinting. “It tends to keep its shape and doesn’t get soupy.”

I shut my eyes. That’s it, I think. The truck driver from Karratha is right. It really is heartbreaking.

The judge has finished inspecting my dish. “Right,” she announces. “Let’s taste it, shall we?” She takes the spoon in her mouth and closes her eyes thoughtfully. “Nice taste,” she muses after a while. “The rice has a crunch to it.”

“What do you think?” Jackie, who tasted my risotto without a comment, asks the blonde judge as she returns her spoon to the table.

“A bit oily,” the woman replies, her reading glasses sliding back down on her nose.

Jackie considers the bowl in front of her. “That’s how a lot of Italians cook it,” she says thoughtfully and turns to her fellow panellists. “What do you think?”

“A bit rich,” the handsome man replies. “But nice. Crispy *and* moist.”

“An amazing contrast. And not too tomatoey,” Jackie puts in.

“I experimented a lot with the sauce,” I say.

The judges look at me with a new expression in their faces; the other contestants too.

The atmosphere has changed, from disdain to breathless expectation.

I look at Jackie with my heart beating wildly. I don't dare to take a breath.

"It makes me wonder ..." begins the man with the familiar face, "... what else would you be capable of?"

Jackie nods.

"When you walked in here, you were all shy and nerves. I half-expected you to run off the stage, you looked so nervous." A smile bounces off her face. "I'm impressed that you didn't. You faced your fears. But that's only half of it." She touches the bowl and turns it slowly. "The other half," she tells me, "is your actual cooking. And I'm just not sure you managed to convince me." Jackie turns to the other panellists and they converse in hushed tones.

"I'm sorry," Jackie says when she returns her attention to me. "It's a really close call. But for this once, it just wasn't enough to make me believe in you."

I feel like someone has yanked the floor from under my feet. A bottomless pit opens up beneath me and I feel like I'm falling, falling without help.

Jackie hesitates. The fabric of her culottes rustles, as she crosses her legs. "I love that you're so passionate about cooking," she continues, her voice warm with emotion. "And believe me, your food shows enormous promise. Please don't get discouraged by today's decision. Keep cooking and I look forward to seeing you again on this stage."

"But that's the end of the world for me!" I cry, hugging myself fiercely.

Jackie has already turned to the other judges, but at my words she turns back to me. "No," she says, with a more serious face. "Don't say that. The world is a great place and today is not the end, it's a beginning. If you love cooking, don't give up."

Chapter 26

“I went to an audition for Season Four, that was in winter, and it was months before we even knew ...”

“... a friend called and said ...”

“I wonder if they hadn’t picked me what ...”

“... always felt this really close connection with food ...”

“... cooking is like this creative process, to me, that ...”

“... I just feel really confident right now that my roast chicken will ...”

Chapter 27

The rug swallows Brie's footsteps as she walks to where I lie on Immy's sofa. Her eyes scan my face before cutting to the various types of medicine bottles and packets on the wooden coffee table. She crouches down on the rug in front of me and lays a hand on my shoulder. "There's something I need to get off my chest and I'm sorry if you're sick, but I just feel I have to get it out," she murmurs.

Instead of asking what it is, I hold up my phone. "Look at him," I rasp and tap on the screen. I stretch my hand out so Brie can see. "He just got absolutely wiped out." I tap again and a man in a chef's apron begins to speak. "Cooking's such a tough business." He looks puffed and out of breath, flipping steaks over in a pan.

"He spent six hours in the kitchen and was just told he'll have to redo it," I explain, unable to take my eyes off the man. The expression on his face fascinates me. He looks like he's been through a mangle, like a shipwrecked sailor rescued after weeks spent on a raft in the middle of the ocean. His cheeks look sunburnt, his eyes burn like flames.

Brie gives a slow shake of her head. "What a dude," she says, obviously not quite sure how to respond to my odd behaviour.

I glance up. "Yeah," I say after a pause. "What a dude."

When I don't say anything, Brie, pushing various bottles and packets aside, leans her elbow on the table. Her eyes look keenly at me.

"I'm sorry to be doing this to you." The honey-coloured curls that frame her face ruffle as she exhales. "I wouldn't under normal circumstances. You're my best friend, you know that."

Reluctantly, I pause the MasterChef episode and push the phone under a cushion. I stare at her without blinking. There's the low murmur of Immy's and Dad's hushed voices arguing over something in the kitchen.

“But I’ve got to tell you, you could’ve told me about your mum.” Brie, satisfied with having spoken her mind, crosses her arms over her woollen cardigan and looks at me pointedly.

I slowly turn my head toward the brown fabric of the sofa and push my hand under the pillow, groping for the phone.

“It kind of hurts, you know,” Brie continues when the silence between us grows long. “I thought we’re friends. I literally tell you everything that happens in my life.”

My fingers touch the hard plastic of my phone and close around it. Sliding it out from under the cushion, I check the screen. Mum has not replied to any of the many messages I left on her voicemail. All my calls to the hospital receive the standard answer from reception: she’s not ready to engage with her family yet. It’s almost as though she doesn’t exist at all.

“We could’ve thought of something together. I mean, I remember going over to your place all the time. It can’t have been that bad,” Brie insists.

I can feel her worried eyes on me as I continue to stare into space. My tongue feels swollen and hot. I haven’t been able to eat anything. Every sip of water is like a stab of sharp pain.

“Are you really not going to say anything?” she asks in a whisper, her voice breaking into a sob. “Are you really just going to lie here and ignore me?”

The hushed argument in the kitchen comes to an abrupt halt and an uncomfortable silence settles around us.

“Vanessa,” Dad calls in a firm voice. “Brie deserves an answer.”

At the sound of Dad’s voice, my hands begin to shake in an uncontrollable manner. “Stay out of it!” I croak hoarsely, lifting myself on elbows to shoot an angry glance over the sofa cushions at him. “It’s your fault my mother’s in hospital! So stay out of it!”

“Vanessa.” Dad forces a smile but the flicker in his eyes betrays him. He turns to Brie. “I apologise for her behaviour. She’s disappointed, that’s all.” And to me, “Stop pushing everyone away.”

“Disappointed? Disappointed?” I fly from the sofa, propelled into the air by an anger that’s greater than anything I’ve ever felt. “I know what I can do! I know the kind of food I can cook! I could become a great chef if only you guys would let me!”

“I know you can,” Dad says soothingly, taking a step toward me. “You still can.”

“You!” I stab my finger accusingly at him. “You destroyed my chance! You and Mum!”

Dad freezes. My words ring in the air, leave a visible wound on his face. “No, Vanessa.” He shakes his head determinedly, his eyes not leaving mine. “You know that’s not true. It was bad timing, that’s all. You can still win a place next year. If you really want to become a chef, you will.”

I feel my anger evaporate. What’s left is a feeling of such despair, all I want to do is lie down. Lie down and never get up again. I can’t even fight the people around me anymore.

“You should go,” I say in a weak voice, almost inaudible. “Just go.”

“Nessy.” Dad crosses the room to crouch down beside me. “You’re the strongest person I know. I’ll ask my boss for extra leave if you want. You come and stay at my place and we’ll figure it out together.”

“No, Dad. I had enough of your apartment. If Immy’s OK with it, I want to stay here for a bit.”

“I’m OK with it,” Immy interjects from her spot in the kitchen. Dad throws her an annoyed glance. She shrugs. “Well, I am.”

Dad turns his face back to me but before he can say anything, I hold up a hand. “You should just go back to Zambia, Dad.”

He gives me a hurt look. “Is that really how you want to end this conversation?”

Curled up on the sofa, waiting for everyone to leave, be finally by myself. It’s how I want to end everything.

After what feels like an eternity, Dad gives a frustrated groan and rises. He holds out a hand to Brie. My friend hesitates briefly before she accepts it. He drapes an arm around her shoulder and leads her gently to the door. I take up my phone, tap furiously on the screen and watch the entire first season of Jackie & You.

Chapter 28

In the days to come, I think about Mum being in hospital. About her being a hoarder. Sometimes the agony of her not accepting my phone calls feels so crushing, all I do is cry. Other times I feel too exhausted to even do that and all I want to do is curl up and die. Instead, I watch Jackie & You on my phone, let the agonies and victories of the contestants drown out everything inside my head.

“I’m just so proud right now!” a young man in a beard calls in a triumphant voice as he punches the air in victory, his dark meringue cake cooling behind him on a benchtop in Jackie’s kitchen. “So proud.”

“Have you always been drawn to pastries?” a voice off-camera asks.

The man pauses, a quizzical look on his face. “There’s this almost religious belief among pastry chefs –” he starts. I swipe to the next episode.

“A really difficult challenge,” a woman puffs, “so I followed my instincts and I know, adding the cream to the cooking process was a mistake, but I feel –”

I swipe, swipe again. Take the earplugs out. My gaze falls on the window and the grey afternoon light beyond. The world is just such a shitty, shitty, messed-up place.

Storm shifts his weight on my feet and I reach down to pet him.

“Do you remember,” I say to Immy, who’s just come into the room to get herself a glass of water from the kitchen, “that you once told me to buy no other cat food than a particular brand, I forgot what it was called. We couldn’t afford it anyway.”

“Did I?” Immy pauses at the sink, glass in hand and looks at me questioningly.

“Because you told me that all other brands use fish from slave ships.” My fingers play idly with Storm’s thick winter fur.

“Fish from slave ships?” Immy repeats, her eyebrows raised.

I lean forward to bring my face close to Storm’s and blow a kiss on his whiskers. “You told me how people were kept on these ships and never set foot on

land for years. How they were sold from one ship to the next and the only land they ever saw was miles away. Like a mirage.”

“I remember now,” Immy nods. She frowns. “Why?”

“No reason. It just crossed my mind.” I slump back on the sofa and tug the blanket up over my chin. When the silence grows long, there’s a sharp hiss from the sink as Immy fills her water glass and drains it in one long sip. It clinks as she returns it to the sink and leaves the room. But the thought gnaws at me how clueless I am. What makes us be so cruel to each other sometimes? What does Jackie see to say things like, *the world is a great place*? Has she never heard of hoarders or breakdowns or slaves on fishing boats?

Later, after Immy and Cale have left for the park, and the world is grey in grey again, I put the earplugs back in and watch the rest of Jackie & You, over and over again.

“Your dad had to go back to Zambia but he said he’d be back in time for your birthday. He’s paying child support, but he also left you some spending money. It’s in your room.” Immy nods in the direction of the stairs.

I shrug. I’m mad at him anyway.

Grunting softly, Immy pulls the solid coffee table closer to the sofa where I’m slumped and sits down on it. There’s a long silence. When Immy’s voice suddenly breaks it, I give a start. “So, I spoke to your aunt,” she says. “She’s flying over next week. She wants to see you.” Immy clears her throat, makes herself more comfortable on the coffee table. “She’ll most likely handle the sale with your father – you know, while your mother is in hospital. Trying to get better.”

When I don’t react, she continues. “I still find it unbelievable.”

I lift my eyes to look at her. “Find what unbelievable?”

She gives a big sigh. “Everything,” she explains. “How you lived. That you never told me. That you didn’t get into the finals.”

I turn to the side, put my earplugs in, open Jackie & You. A moment later, I watch the episode where a young cook from Victoria burns her pie crust and bursts into tears.

“I made this soup,” Immy says later. She has followed me upstairs to my room. “It stinks. Cale helped. He’s so sweet. He said lots of encouraging things. He ate a whole plate before he asked for vegemite toast.”

I sit cross-legged on the bed and Immy draws up a chair. On the bedside table between us is a tray with two bowls of steaming soup.

“I ate with Cale,” Immy continues. “But I thought I’ll eat with you too. Shall we?”

She offers me a spoon but I just stare at her with empty eyes. My hands seem made of stone, so heavy no mortal could lift them.

After a moment, the spoon clinks on the polished surface of the table as she sets it back down. She reaches for her bowl, but instead of eating she just lets out a sigh.

“Vanessa,” Immy pleads, exhaustion etched in her face, and I feel a pang imagining how this must be for her. “If you could only – boy, this soup really *stinks*. If you could – Cale’s been asking about you, you know. He keeps trying to spend time with you. My mother will take him for the weekend. He’s been asking to make this soup with you, Vanessa. And I know you don’t want to ... believe me, I know that. You just don’t feel like cooking right now. And that’s okay. That’s fine. Take your time. But if you do ... when you do ... Vanessa, sometimes it’s our favourite things, you know, the little things that make us tick, that can make a difference. In our life. In your life.”

“Cooking is not a little thing. Not to me,” I manage to say before my voice chokes up and the tears come.

“It’s okay to cry. Cry.” Immy rubs my back. “Let it all out. There you go. Let it out.”

Chapter 29

Winter wears on, one day after the other, sunshine alternating with rain. I've given up cooking. I've given up babysitting. I've given up saving money for the Wuesthof knife. All I do is sit on the sofa or lie in bed all day, stare out the window or watch cooking shows on my phone. Sometimes, I call the hospital, though I know Mum won't accept any calls. Sometimes, Dad calls from Zambia. I take his calls, but only so I find out if the hospital told him anything they didn't tell me. I don't really care about what he tells me about Zambia and Tonya and his work.

My eyes feel raw from crying and I rub them violently, like trying to wake from a nightmare. I was supposed to be in Adelaide by now, living my dream of cooking with the greatest chef on earth. I was supposed to be on my way to becoming a star cook myself. Instead I'm here, in Immy's house, being a burden to the people I love. Back from work, Immy's busy in the kitchen unwrapping takeout containers. When she feels my eyes on her, she looks up and smiles at me.

I smile back, but my mind mulls over the dark circles under her eyes, her puffy lids, the unhealthy glow of her skin. *It's not fair.* I know she worries about me. *It's not fair to burden her with all my crap.*

There's a sound at the front door, the bell rings, the sound of voices from the doorway. I shift my position in bed, stretch my legs. How long have I been lying here, thinking how low I feel, how without any hope?

"Vanessa." Immy's muffled voice from downstairs. A moment later, I hear her footsteps on the stairs, a knock on the door. "Vanessa. There's someone here to see you."

"I don't want to see my aunt." I draw my legs up, curl into a tight ball.

"It's not your aunt. It's someone who says you know her. From –" a pause, "from a group called Al-Anon?"

"Vanessa." Amanda's clear voice rings out.

I'm so surprised, I nearly knock my head on the headboard. Quickly, I shake the cover off and rise to my feet. I feel unsteady and faint, but after a moment the room comes back into focus and I walk out on the landing.

"Amanda?"

"Come downstairs," Immy calls over her shoulder, already halfway down the stairs. "I'll make you a coffee."

Together with Amanda, we sit at the table. She smiles calmly at me, doing her best to hide her concern.

"How did you know where to find me?" I ask after Immy has left the room.

"Your neighbour, Caroline, was so kind to give me your father's number," Amanda says. She looks at me with curious eyes and studies my face for a while. "I had to find you. I kept thinking about that day in the community hall. I had to see that you're doing okay." She pauses, takes a sip from her coffee. "Is your mother feeling better now?"

I can feel my face flush. Not daring to look her in the eyes, I mumble in a hoarse whisper, "She's not an alcoholic, you know?"

"Of course. I figured that out."

"Are you mad at me? For lying?"

Amanda reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. "No," she says, shaking her head so that her fringe bounces gently. "I'm not mad at you at all. I'm relieved to see you have a place to stay." She looks around appreciatively. "Quite a nice place."

"Yes."

"And your mother? Caroline said she's in hospital. Is she still –"

"I don't know when she'll be released." I swallow, eyes stinging with tears. "She was suicidal for a while, Dad said. But he's gone back to Zambia and Mum refuses to come to the phone. My aunt is coming over from Adelaide. Immy thinks she'll sort it out. Only ..." I pause.

“Only what?”

“Only, Mum can’t stand her. They always fight. She’s the last person Mum would want to rummage around in her stuff.”

“Well, then it will be up to your mother to tell her that.”

“But she can’t. She’s sick.”

“She’s trying to get better.”

“But she’s not!” This is it. This is exactly what I can’t wrap my head around and it cuts me up into a million little pieces, each little cut hurting more than I ever thought it would. Because she’s not trying to get better. Amanda doesn’t understand – no one does – but the world has been taken from her. And the world – this is the cut that stings the most – the world to her, isn’t me.

Amanda shakes her head slowly. “You know, I can’t help but marvel at how well you managed to disguise everything. And the cooking ... Vanessa, I do wonder, sometimes, at how the world works.”

“I didn’t get in,” I whisper, my voice barely audible, the pain of the memory so real it feels like a stab in my chest. “The audition? I worked so hard for it. I could’ve made it, if only I had had enough time to concentrate on it. To practice my risotto more. If only they’d let me show – show them what I can do!”

Amanda looks at me in concern. Deep lines are etched into her forehead. I notice for the first time that she isn’t young anymore.

“You’re a great cook,” she says quietly after a while. “Your time to shine will come.”

“But I wanted it to be here already!” I yelp, wringing my hands. “Mum always said it’s an obsession. I don’t know, perhaps it is. But when I’m in the kitchen, I feel like I can do anything. I don’t feel clueless or desperate. I feel like I can be anyone.”

“Your staff and your rod in the valley of deep darkness,” Amanda murmurs. She leans forward to place a hand on my arm and looks at me with great sympathy. “That’s a quote from the bible. It means something that carries you through dark times. I realise cooking gives you great strength. But what about the people you cook for?”

“What about them?” I stare at my hands. “Everyone has left me.”

“It may seem that way. But – and this is the last bible quote I have, promise ...” she pats my arm lightly before letting it go, “out of all three things – faith, hope and love – love is the greatest. I hope you will remember that.”

Chapter 30

I wake up in a cold sweat, jolted awake by a feeling of indescribable dread. My first impulse is to call out for Mum. Squinting around in the darkness of Immy's spare bedroom, memory comes slowly back to me but brings no solace. I reach for the phone, its blank screen a hurt I'm well acquainted with, wondering with a pang where Mum is now and how she's coping, on her own, with everything, all she's ever possessed, gone?

I was barely over ten years old when I made the discovery that cooking was more than just spreading vegemite on toast or following simple instructions on the back of a packet. Cooking, I realised, was an experiment with textures and flavours. It was the creation of something new. In brief, it was a gift and I had it.

It was even before I knew who Jackie Park was. Four years ago now, going on to five, in the early days of my parents' separation. Mum and I were in the kitchen, which was full then, cluttered, but still a kitchen. The little breakfast bar was covered in all sorts of things, with my homework to one side, pens, sticky tape, receipts, tissue boxes and dirty dishes spread over the rest. It was Mother's Day and we were going to cook something together.

I leafed through a stack of cookbooks on the counter, avoiding a glance at Mum's eyes, which looked raw and red. She'd lost a lot of weight over the last few weeks and seemed to have also lost the pride she usually took in her appearance. My own eyes were puffy as well, the grief of my parents' breakup still fresh.

"It's so cold in here," Mum observed. Her voice cut through the silence in our little kitchen and startled me. Looking up from the cookbooks, I noticed her shiver and reached for the baggy grey jumper on the chair behind me.

"Here." I threw the jumper at her. The soft material swished as her bony shoulders disappeared underneath it.

She pulled it closer around her and tucked her hands under her arms. “I always feel so cold.”

I had spent the day at soccer practice. Brie’s dad had picked us up and taken us out to McDonald’s afterwards. When I got home, Mum had been sitting in the dark on the sofa in the living room, just staring into space.

“Have you eaten anything since breakfast?” I asked, reaching for the next cookbook. I hadn’t found what I was looking for yet. I felt like cooking something complicated and grand. Something you would eat in an expensive restaurant. Something to match the Mother’s Day lunches of previous years, when Dad took us out to places in the city where they did incredible things with food and folded their cloth napkins like swans.

“Uh, I can’t remember.” Mum smiled, turned the radio on.

“Probably not,” I guessed with a frown. “I should’ve stayed home.”

“No, why?” Mum protested. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to take care of me.” She punched the air like a boxer. “See? I’m alright.”

I tossed the cookbook aside with a frustrated thud and opened the next one blindly, without looking where my finger would land. Squinting my eyes open, I saw a photo of a colourful risotto. *A Mediterranean Delight*, it said in the cookbook.

I read through the list of ingredients, frowned as I went through the many steps.

“Maybe we should just order pizza,” I wondered, stymied by the task. It was obvious that Mum had been crying the whole day. Her eyes looked like burnt coal, her face was covered in bright red splotches. She looked like she’d shrunk and her hair hung dull and limp in her face.

I cut my eyes over to her, expecting her to agree, pizza or just cereal, maybe nothing, she probably wasn’t hungry anyway and I had lost my appetite as well.

But instead, she shook her head.

“No,” she declared. Rattling the cutlery drawer open, she selected a cutting knife that had lost all edge and studied it for a moment. “Screw him.”

“Mum,” I observed from my spot at the breakfast bar. “It’s totally blunt. Let’s just get pizza, okay?”

Ignoring me, she rummaged through more drawers until she found the whetstone, held it under the running tap and gently, in circular motions, she sharpened the knife. I gave a smug grin at her attempt to copy the chefs on TV, but my smirk disappeared when I saw the determined look on her face. She selected a small brown onion that was slowly decomposing at the bottom of a plastic bag, peeled the layers of decayed skin off and divided the pale vegetable into two.

I had moved closer to be of help and watched her cut the onion, was in fact standing too close, sharp scent driving tears into my eyes.

“Don’t cry,” Mum directed me, crying herself. “Screw him.”

I nodded blindly, numbly, and reached for another, equally spoilt onion. “Give me,” I said and took the knife from Mum.

Tchok.

The first cut that split the onion in half liberated me. There’s no other way to describe it. The old self peeled away and I was reborn as a cook.

As I diced the onion with sharp clanks, everything melted away from me. Anger and shame, grief and longing, it all seemed to vanish into thin air. All that mattered were my fingers wrapped around the knife and the onion under its sharpened blade. Cooking the risotto became a moment of rebirth, of a new self, complete with new dreams and passions.

We ate like royals that night, Mum and I, we ate like nothing had ever tasted so good or been prepared with such care.

“You know, you could become a real cook,” Mum remarked, her mouth full of rice, and leaned forward to help herself to more.

I looked up at her in surprise, met her eyes, where the sting of tears was still visible. My own eyes were dry and curious. “Yes,” I said thoughtfully. “I guess I will.”

“Vanessa?” Immy knocks on the door, opens it an inch and dim light from the hall spills into my room. “I thought I heard a noise.”

“What kind of noise?” I rasp, wiping furiously over my damp cheeks.

Immy creeps in, walks softly across the carpeted floorboards and eases herself down on my bed.

“I thought I heard you cry,” she clarifies. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“No.” I shake my head. “No, I had a good dream.”

Immy considers this for a while. “She will get better, you know,” she states. “She just needs some time to figure things out. But she will come around and she’ll want to see you. It’s only natural. You’re her child.”

I swallow hard. More than anything, I want to believe her.

“Your dad is still trying to figure out what to do with all the stuff.” Immy lets out a sigh. “It’s just so much.” She shakes her head, reaches for my hand. “Vanessa, sweetheart, I had no idea. We had no idea you had to live like this.”

But I barely listen because there’s something she just said, just now, a second ago. I stare at her.

“So everything’s still there?”

“Sure.” The mattress squeaks as Immy rises to her feet. “We didn’t touch anything.”

Chapter 31

What strikes me first, that day in late July, with the sky hanging low and the promise of rain in the air, is how uninhabited the house looks.

Among other things.

It's perhaps even more of a dump than I remember, the winter rains nothing but cruel on the fibre boards. The roof tiles look dark with decay, the colourbond sagging hard under the rampant growth of bougainvillea and when I finally bring myself to look at the mess in the yard, it looks so desolate that I feel discouraged before I've even set foot in it.

The yard is overgrown with patchy grass and Mum's stuff – a waterlogged unidentifiable mass of things – is under attack from long stalky weeds. There're ripped bags, sodden cardboard boxes, lumps of clothes so shrivelled and sand-clogged they look like filthy rags. Paper gone to pulp, all traces of ink washed off. I poke a water bottle with my shoe, lift a paper ad for electronic goods by its corner before I let it sail back into the weeds and throw my arms up. This is hopeless.

And yet, a crazy thought keeps popping up in my mind. A mad idea that makes me wonder if I've gone insane.

With sheets of rain slowly coming in from the sea, I slump on the porch steps, my arms on my knees, my gaze wandering over the yard and out onto the tree-lined street, where the air is full of the whistles and peeps of birds and a group of fantails is chasing insects through the air. Dark clouds broil in the sky. Amongst these hopeless ruins which are my mother's only possessions my idea slowly solidifies into a plan. Though my heart may tell me otherwise, I find myself the unlikely protector of this junk.

Everything she has fought so hard to keep and refuses to let go.

It's not a cold day and despite the incoming rain there's a promise of a hot and early spring ahead. I let my hands dangle and wait for the first drops to fall.

Chapter 32

City Beach with its wide-open panorama is one of my favourite beaches in the world. Rolling waves crash on the sand with a roar. In summer, there're cafes, gas barbecues and shady picnic spots. During winter, though, the beach is deserted. Gusts come howling in from the open sea in a way that resembles disaster movies. Further out at sea, the darkened sky bleeds into the churning water. A lone sea gull sails a gust out over a life buoy. The fish-and-chips place near the playground looks like it's gone out of business.

But it hasn't. When I prise the door open, a girl greets me from behind the counter. She has her hair swept back in a low braid that makes me think of Brie and the thought of my best friend whose calls I've been ignoring since the failed audition is so bruising I can feel the sting of tears in my eyes.

"Oh. Hi. I'm waiting for someone." I flee from her eyes, take refuge behind a table in the back and bury my face in the oversized plastic menu.

When the door opens a short while later, Dad, wearing his black hooded winter jacket unbuttoned as usual, casts a quizzical look around the restaurant.

"Didn't look like you're open," he informs the girl behind the counter. "On a day like this." Then his eyes fall on me. He rushes across the room toward me, his face unable to hide the surge of emotions. I rise from my seat and he pulls me into a tight hug. The smell of his aftershave engulfs us.

"Nessy!" His voice rings out with joy and he pushes me at arm's length away to look me all over, gently stroking a strand of hair out of my face. "I'm so glad you called."

"Me too," I admit. "I called as soon as Immy told me you took some extra leave."

His smile doesn't fade from his lips. "Don't worry. Let's figure it out together, shall we?" He pulls me into another hug, his voice soft like Storm's fur. When he finally releases me from his embrace, he eases himself on the bench across from me,

his eyes not leaving my face. “What can I get you? Fish and chips? A Coke?” He has aged over the past few weeks and there are deep lines carved into his face.

“Don’t know.” I finally manage to peel my eyes from him. My glance returns to the menu. “I don’t feel like battered fish.”

Dad lets out a laugh that rings through the empty café and startles the girl behind the counter. “Then why on earth did you pick this place? We could’ve gone into the city. There’s this rooftop grill where they do amazing things with steak. Shall we go?”

I shake my head, turn to let my eyes wander out over the water. Gusts tear through the sand and parking lot. Out at sea, rain pelts the churning waves in heavy sheets.

“No one likes the beach in winter,” I remark.

His shirt crinkles as Dad shrugs. “Yeah. Well. There’s a reason for it, don’t you think?”

But I shake my head. “It’s lovely.”

Dad follows my gaze out to sea. “Lovely’s not the word I’d choose.”

“It’s real.”

“Yes,” he admits after a pause, clearing his throat. “I see what you mean.”

It *is* real. Not picture perfect or mild but honest and true. It feels like there is no pretence.

Dad talks on about his day in the city, the weather, how he used to come out to the beach when he skipped school, but not to City Beach, Scarborough was his destination, because it was at the end of the bus line, when I interrupt.

“So you’re selling the house?” My voice is steady, matter-of-fact, but I can’t prevent a little shake from sneaking in. Like it or not, it’s been my home for as long as I can remember.

The ice cubes clink in the glass as Dad sets his drink down on the table and levels his eyes on me. “Yes, Nessy,” he verifies. “And the sooner we put the whole business behind us, the better.”

I nod. Despite what he may think, I don’t plan to put up a fight.

Dad continues. “I’m glad you agree. As soon as it’s in a presentable state, we’ll put it on the market. It doesn’t need much because whoever buys it will most likely knock it down anyway. We just need to clear it out so people don’t feel like they’re buying someone else’s rubbish.”

“No. Dad.” I let out a sigh, drop the menu on the table. A pressure on my shoulders creeps over me, like I’m carrying the weight of the world.

“But didn’t you just say –”

“I said it’s okay to sell the house,” I correct him. “I suppose there’s nothing I can do to change your mind?”

“No.” His aftershave drifts through the air as Dad shakes his head. “You can’t.”

“But I’m not okay with you throwing out Mum’s stuff,” I clarify.

“Throwing out her stuff? Christ, Nessy.” Dad throws his arms up and gives me a look of utter exasperation. “Someone should pay me for it. I mean how could you ...” Noticing the expression on my face, he reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “No, forget it. I’m going to be the bigger person.” He looks at me intently. “I’m not blaming you. No one is. This is not your fault. Your mother is sick. But the important thing is, she’s getting help. And we’ll all support her. Agreed? Her stuff? It’s nothing. Worthless. I mean, it’s not as if I’m making a profit from it.” His shirt stretches across his belly as he leans back in his seat and adjusts his belt. “I’m losing money over it, Nessy. I have to pay someone to take it to the tip.”

“But here’s the thing, Dad.” I lean back too, wrap my arms over the parka as I look him levelly in the eyes. “You’ve got no right. You’ve got absolutely no right to touch her stuff. It’s hers. You need to keep it for her to ...” I hesitate, at a loss. I don’t know what for or to do what with. The thing I’ve always asked myself. What does she want with all this junk?

“There’s more,” I continue, keeping my voice level and holding Dad’s gaze steadily. “In her apartment. Her investment unit,” I add in response to Dad’s quizzical look. “The last time I was there it was the same as the house. Completely jampacked with stuff.”

“For crying out loud. Nussy.” Dad exhales, leans forward to take a sip and sets his glass down with a thud so the Coke foams. “When were you going to tell me? And, more to the point: what do you want me to do about it?”

“Don’t know.” My shrug gets lost in the parka. I reach out and toy with the salt and pepper shakers, my eyes thoughtfully on the checkered tablecloth. Slowly, I squint back up to meet his eyes. Truth is, I know exactly what I want him to do.

“Well, you must have a key. Right? Do you want me to take a look?” Dad proposes.

I shake my head. “Dad,” I say as calmly as I can. “There’s only one thing to do.” I lean over and whisper in his ear.

“Storage?” Dad jerks his head away and looks at me like I’ve gone mad. “Are you insane? For that – that *crap*?! Sweetie, that’s not worth anything. It’s trash. I mean, look.” He points at the window, the rain outside sheeting over the parking lot. “Whatever’s in the garden is ruined. And the junk in the house? By the look and smell of it, most of it decomposed years ago.”

Against my will, I burst out in a giggle. “No, I haven’t lost my mind.” I take a sip from my water glass and set it back down on the wet rim on the tablecloth. “You just can’t throw it away for her, that’s all. It’s like what her parents always did when she was little. She was never allowed to keep anything that was hers.”

“Well,” Dad exhales and drapes his arms over the backrest as he leans back. “She made up for it.”

“So will you keep it? For her?”

Dad exhales, pinches the bridge of his nose and gives a slow shake of his head. He looks half angry, half beaten. Finally, he throws his hands up in the air with a frustrated sigh. “You *are* your mother’s daughter, you know that?”

“What do you mean?” My eyes widen at his words and my eyebrows shoot up.

Dad picks up the plastic menu, his lips moving slightly as he scans the meals options. “I mean what I said,” he says levelly.

I glare at him. “I’m nothing like her.” Now it’s my turn to be angry. How can he say a thing like that? Say I’m like Immy. Say I’m like Jackie Park. Say I’m the sort of person who grows up to become the woman she aspires to be, who leads a life of balance and control, who fulfils her dreams, who knows what she wants. Say anything. Just don’t say I’m like my mother.

“That got your attention, didn’t it?” Dad smiles at me nonchalantly. “So can we now please drop this nonsense of paying for garbage and eat?”

“It got my attention,” I confirm, but before Dad gets his hopes up I continue. “But we can’t drop *this nonsense*.” I make a meaningful pause. “Because it isn’t nonsense. That’s the whole point. It’s what’s *fair*. And stop comparing me to Mum, please.”

Dad sighs, rubs his eyes with tired hands. The silence grows so long between us that the sound of his voice startles me when he begins to speak. “I’m sorry, Nesy, but I just don’t get it. I want to help her.” He smacks his phone on the table. “Look, I googled hoarding. It’s a mental disorder. She can’t throw things away. But I can do it for her. If she can’t do it, I can help.” He shakes his head at me, baffled. “Only you won’t let me. So why the hell can’t I throw her rubbish away for her? That’s what I want to know?”

“Because,” I say and wave the waitress over to place our order, “she has to do it herself. On her own terms. That’s why.”

Chapter 33

Sometimes, the best thing about time is that it passes, like a river flowing out to sea – which brings me to my friends’ eyes and the way they look at me from across the table.

And this is no ordinary table. No school desk, no picnic bench in the park, not even the rough checkered cloth with the tomato sauce spills at the local fish and chips. This is the real deal. Moments earlier, in Immy’s living room, Cale helped me drape a white clean tablecloth, starched and ironed, over the dining table. I spent the early morning watching tutorials on how to fold cloth napkins into swans and then we polished Immy’s silverware and set out her porcelain plates.

When the doorbell rings and Immy leads Brie and Evan into the room, I take in the splendour of the table. And my friends’ eyes. Which ripple like water toward me.

“Happy birthday,” Brie says. She and Evan are wrestling with a seedling tray that they present to me with an awkward smile. “Every great cook needs fresh herbs,” Evan adds, obviously worried that I won’t get the joke.

“Wow, thanks a lot.” I take the tray off them and set it on the kitchen bench. “A book would’ve been fine too, you know.”

Brie cocks her head and grins. “A book for someone who does nothing by the book.” She pauses by the table.

My eyes go from her to Immy and back. “It was such a shitty thing to do,” I finally say. “I really regret not telling you everything from the start. You don’t know how much I regret it. And you’re totally right if you never want to talk to me again.”

Brie waves her hands as if swatting invisible flies from her face. “Please, save your breath.” She shrugs, her plait bouncing on her back. “Though it *was* a shitty thing. And I’ll hold you to your word. From now on, I want to know what’s going on in your life.”

“Oh, Brie,” I wail and press her into a hug. “You’ll be the first to know, I swear.”

“So. I’m sorry about your mum and the whole situation at home. Though I still get mad thinking about it.” She pauses to shake her head at me. “I just want to know why? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I should’ve,” I agree. “But I was too ashamed.”

Before Brie can think of anything to say, the door opens and Dad lets himself in, shopping bags bulging in his hands.

“I went to all the necessary shops,” he announces as he sets the bags down in the kitchen, plastic rustling and glass jars clinking on the granite benchtop. “I bought onions too because I didn’t know if you had any.”

“Hard to believe but I do have onions,” Immy remarks coolly from her place next to the fridge. She and Dad exchange a look that’s hard to place. That it’s Dad who ducks his head and turns away first, makes me a little sad. Like he doesn’t allow himself to think of her as his wife anymore. Just an acquaintance you don’t know well enough to fight with.

“And you’re sure you don’t need me to drive you? Joondalup’s a long way off and I don’t know how often the buses go to the hospital.”

“Dad, I’m sure.” I’m already rummaging through the bags, intent on getting started.

“Because it will take you over an hour to get there, you know?”

“I’ll be right, Dad.” I say that a lot recently. *I’ll be right*. And the funny thing is, I know it’s true.

“In that case,” Dad approaches and fumbles for something in one of the bags, “I want to give you this. Happy birthday.”

His smile is so sheepish, yet so full of expectations, that I can’t help but smile back.

“Thanks, Dad.” I take the plain white bag from him and give him a kiss.

“Let’s have a look,” he urges me.

Brie’s eyes are riveted on him. I can tell she’s impressed by his good looks and the way he dresses. And just the way he looks, so eager to please, has an effect on people. Well, women anyway.

“Open it, open it, open it!” Cale crows and dances around me.

“Okay.” I take a deep breath and take a curious glance inside the crinkling plastic bag. Inside is a long, oblong object. Something that feels substantial in my hands. It’s gift-wrapped in emerald tissue paper and a golden bow and looks ... beautiful. Luxurious. Exquisite.

I rip the wrapping with trembling hands, revealing a black box that looks like it could ... but that’s impossible, isn’t it? How could Dad know that this is what I want more than anything?

“When your dad called to ask what he should get you for your birthday, I told him about the knife,” Brie answers my question for me.

I lock eyes with her for a moment, moving my lips in a silent *thank you*.

“You’re welcome,” she replies with a wide grin.

With knees that threaten to buckle under me, my hands shaking like leaves in a storm, I open the box. For the longest time, I simply stare at it.

“Well, do you like it?” Dad finally breaks the silence.

“Love it,” I rasp, my voice gone hoarse. I can feel the eyes of the others on me and glance up. Finding Dad’s eyes, I hold his gaze.

“Do you know that in some cultures it’s considered bad luck to give someone a knife as present?” Immy remarks from the kitchen.

I turn to grin at her. “If that’s bad luck, could I please have some more?”

“Take it out.” Dad rubs his hands together, his eyes happy, and gives me an encouraging nod.

“Okay.” My fingers run along the steel blade, in awe of such craftsmanship, before they curl around the handle. I grip it tight, feel its satisfying weight, the smooth curve that nestles into my hand like it’s cast for it, and lift it out of the box.

“Dad,” I breathe, “this is incredible.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he answers sincerely. I look at him and burst into giggles. Even after the others have stopped laughing with me, I can’t stop. *He’s glad I like it!* I dissolve into fresh giggles.

When I finally manage to draw a big breath, I’m barely able to speak. “Dad,” I declare. “There is nothing that compares to this. I don’t like it. I adore it. This is so awesome.”

When Dad and Immy go out to the balcony to sit in the sun, I turn to Brie and Evan.

“Has Immy told you about my plan?” I ask them.

They hesitate briefly before they give an uncertain nod.

“So you’re okay with helping me?”

“I’m okay with helping you,” Brie affirms but a frown appears on her face. “I just don’t get why you even need us. I mean, you’re a whiz in the kitchen. Compared to you, I’m like a caveman with a stone axe.”

I smile. The knife in my hand feels heavy and serious. *This is the first meal I’ll cook with it, I tell myself. The first onion to chop. The first mushrooms to slice. The first lemon to cut in half. The first tomatoes to dice.*

I clank a cutting board on the benchtop, fish an onion out of Dad’s shopping bag, inhale slowly like a yogi beginning her meditation. *This is it, I tell myself. My first cut.*

Tchok.

Without lifting my eyes from the board, I tell Brie and Evan a story. “Of a little girl who wanted to cook.” And of her mother, who indulged her. “And every night, I’d ask, ‘What’s for dinner? Can I help? Can I cook?’ And Mum let me.”

“I help a lot,” Cale pipes up, his shock of hair bouncing as he jumps up and down.

I smile and give him a conspiratorial wink. “You do,” I confirm. “You help me all the time.”

“I once spilled a three-litre-bottle of milk when we were making pancakes. That’s it. Mum never let me in the kitchen again,” Brie chuckles at the memory.

I grin. “I probably wouldn’t let you in the kitchen either, if I was your mother,” I say, before getting serious again. “When I was ten, I wanted to use one of her sharp knives to dice a carrot and she let me.” I held up my index finger and showed off the scar. “When we ate that night, I imagined with every bite that I could taste my blood.”

“Gross.” Brie wrinkles her nose.

Evan doesn’t say anything but his face has gone a shade paler.

There’s a satisfying metallic sound as I set down the knife on the benchtop. I hold up my hand again and study my finger. “It hurt so much,” I remember.

“And still, you kept at it.” Brie climbs on one of the barstools lined along the outside of the kitchen island and crosses her legs. “A true chef.”

“I think,” I continue slowly, “that cooking is an expression of yourself. I love the process so much. I’m good at it. It makes me feel like I can do anything. Be anyone.” I give my friends an apologetic smile. “I’m not much of a team person, you know?”

“You don’t say.” Brie crosses her arms over her cute pink mohair jumper and gives me an accusatory look.

“But today is different. That’s why I need you guys. We’re cooking the risotto today – only, we’re doing it a little differently. We’re making it for someone special. Someone who has always liked creamy food. So, I’ve been thinking. Perhaps a little bit of cream in the risotto, right toward the end ... what do you think?” I look at their faces expectantly.

“The missing ingredient,” Brie says after a moment’s pause.

“The missing ingredient,” I agree. “That’s you, guys. Not the tomato sauce, not the porcini mushrooms, not the cream. You two. And the special person we’re making it for. The missing ingredient is everyone, everyone around us. Because it’s not just the cooking that defines me. It’s you, it’s Mum and Dad, Cale, Immy. If cooking’s an expression of who I am, then it has to include you. Because you’re what’s good about my life.”

Brie gets up from her stool and gives me a tight hug. When she releases me, she wipes discreetly over her cheeks. “Well, if cooking were an expression of *my* life,” she says after a moment, her voice still a bit shaky with emotion, “there wouldn’t be much else than baby porridge.” She picks a tomato quarter from the board. “My sister’s on solids now.” She sticks the quarter into her mouth and chews thoughtfully.

Evan grins and pokes her with the elbow.

“Practice for later,” he jokes.

Her plait flaps violently on her back as Brie shakes her head. “No way,” she remonstrates. “At first, when they’re born, you think they’re so cute, but then all they do is cry all the time and everything’s always about them.”

“So ... not very cute?” I venture.

“Not at all,” Brie verifies. “Believe me, once my sister’s at school, that’s it. I’m not ever going to look after one of these monsters again.”

“Your cooking would probably still not extend past baby porridge,” I declare and try to dodge Brie’s tea towel attack.

Chapter 34

When I enter her room, I find her in bed, her hair a shade darker than I remember and spilled out on her pillow, an array of useful items on her bedside table, a book beside her on the sheets, next to her hips. Her fingers touch it lightly but she stares ahead, somewhere off into a distance that isn't there.

"Is there a reason why you're in bed? I mean, you're not sick, are you?" I approach her slowly. The hospital, as far as I can see, is full of people like Mum, with the exception of a few of the doctors perhaps. I try to touch as little as possible, clutching the picnic basket like a shield.

Mum directs her gaze to me and in the space of one second, which is the time it takes her to register my presence, I regret everything I've said.

"Hey. I'm sorry. I'm such a moron sometimes." I take her hand in mine, pick up the book to read its title. "How are you doing? I didn't mean – I mean, it's okay. If you want to lie." The bathroom door opens and a cleaner pushes her trolley past us into the corridor. "I didn't give you much warning, did I?"

Mum's face breaks into a smile and that's something, always has been something – to watch Mum's face in its dirty off-white complexion split into a smile. Forget it. There's no way you could imagine. It's just ... breathtaking, I guess, and a little alarming to see how she looks plain one moment and beautiful the next. Her smile always makes her look luminous.

"Vanessa!" The next moment she's out of bed and hugs me tight. "Vanessa. I'm so glad you came."

"Mum." It takes me a moment to recover from the hug. "I would've come earlier, you know. Had you picked up the phone."

"I know, I know, sweetheart." She brushes my hair out of my face and holds it between her hands. "I was just ..." A sigh. "I had to get my head straight first. I'm sorry. I hope you understand."

I duck from under her hug and look around her tiny room. There isn't much furniture, still it looks crammed.

"I'm not sure I ever will," I admit softly. Then I think of the regret I felt after our fight, the pain when she left my calls unanswered, the way I took it out on Dad. "Maybe I will one day," I venture. "I didn't speak to Dad for a while, for how it all went down ... you know, that night?"

Mum shakes her head, a crestfallen look on her face. "I never wanted to stand between you."

I bite on my lip, unwilling to meet her eyes. "You don't. And I didn't come to talk about Dad. I came to say I'm sorry."

Mum leans against her bed, crosses her arms and studies me. "Me, too," she says. "I know this is not how your life should be."

I lean against the windowsill and cross my arms as well. None of us wants to mention the audition or her hoarding or our fight. We just pretend like everything's normal.

I lift the picnic basket and hold it up for her to see. "I brought us food."

"Oh, nice. Let's have a picnic. I should go for walks anyway." She opens a small cupboard and rummages around for her cardigan.

"Have you been eating?" I ask and try not to look too closely at her tiny frame.

Mum gives a vigorous nod. "Yes," she says. "The food's really good here."

"Come on." I tug at her arm, impatient to get her out of the room. "Let's have a picnic under a bottlebrush."

Outside, I can't help staring at the people around us. Can't stop guessing why they are here. The thought that Mum is one of them sends my pulse racing. Mum, who hoards stuff like a dung beetle. Who doesn't throw anything away.

"What are you thinking?" Mum asks.

“Nothing.”

“Oh. You’re awfully quiet.”

I look around. The day seems to keep its promise, with a brilliant sky and soft vaporous clouds like fluffs of cotton. There are palm trees, their feathery, full-sized leaves swaying gently in a light breeze. Whole flocks of white cockatoos raid them for seeds with their black beaks and strong tongues.

“Let’s sit here.” Mum points to a bench near a frangipani. “That’s always been my favourite tree, you know?” She tugs at a frangipani leaf in fairy-tale green. The buds are still closed, but in another two months, the yard will be awash with the powerful sweet fragrance of the tropics.

“They’re pretty,” I agree. I bring the picnic basket closer and open the lid. “Do you want to see what I brought?”

“Sure.”

“Here.” I dish risotto in two bowls and hand her one.

“Mmh.” Mum looks at her bowl dreamily. “Smells nice. It looks familiar. Did we eat that somewhere?”

“It’s the Mediterranean risotto,” I tell her, sounding impatient. “From the audition.”

“Oh.” Mum falls quiet. The silence grows long between us. We clumsily negotiate the bowls on our laps. I can hear Mum chew and swallow next to me.

“It’s really good,” she finally announces. “I don’t remember it tasting so ... creamy. It’s different.”

“That’s because I know you like cream.” My fingers play absent-mindedly with the spoon in the bowl. I would never have dreamed of changing a recipe to suit the particular taste of a person. If someone didn’t like my food, it was their fault. But in the past weeks, I’ve felt a change come over me. Slowly, like morning mist lifting off the hills in the distance, I can feel myself letting go. Perhaps, I wonder, the missing ingredient has always been within reach.

Mum reaches for my arm and lays her hand softly on it. "I'm sorry about the audition," she says after a while where we've just sat and listened to the birds sing. "If I could, I'd go back in time and do things differently, but I can't and I've learned something really important here."

She swallows, sets the bowl down and closes her eyes. After a deep breath, she slowly exhales, touches her forehead with her right hand and slowly drops it to her belly.

"I think of what I did well," she murmurs with closed eyes. "And what didn't go so well." Another breath and she opens her eyes and stretches her arms to the side. "And what I can do better next time." She smiles. "I also learned this. Listen. 'Today, I will forgive myself.'"

I finish off the risotto. "Nice," I munch. "Does it help?"

Mum sighs. "Yes. For a moment. Then it's back to ... you know."

I set my bowl down and look at her for a few moments. "It's my birthday today," I say.

"Vanessa. Oh no! I'm so sorry!" Mum looks crestfallen.

"Don't worry. I didn't think you'd remember."

"Vanessa! That's a horrible thing to say. I never forget your birthdays, never. I can't believe I—"

"Perhaps the meds?" I suggest, though the idea of my mother taking all sorts of pills is not really a thought I want to pursue.

"Perhaps. I'm on anti-depressants. At first I was a little confused but now I think they're starting to work."

I look off into the distance. "It's a good thing, though," I say after a while. "That you take them."

"I agree." Mum exhales. "I want to get better, you know, Vanessa? I want to be your mother again, make a home for us."

“That’s nice of you.” I take her hand in mine. “It’s nice that you’re trying to get better. Though it’s not like I’m a kid. I can take care of myself.”

“Oh.” Mum’s face falls.

“It would be good if you tried getting better for yourself.”

“For myself ...” Mum’s voice trails off and the pause becomes so long that I have to check to see she hasn’t fallen asleep. “Myself,” Mum repeats, like the thought’s foreign to her.

“Yes. Once you’re better, you could ...” Now it’s me who pauses. “You could visit Christina and Beth,” I suggest after a moment. “You could travel. They travel.”

“They do. They do.” Mum nods. “That’s right. I could do that. Or ...”

She finishes the rest of the risotto in silence, then I rinse the bowls with some water I’ve brought and put them away. I clear my throat. Now’s the moment to tell her. But part of me is scared.

“How is school?” Mum asks. “Are you keeping on top with all your assignments?”

“Sure.” I shrug. “It’s only school, you know.”

Mum gives a laugh. “What an incredible daughter I have,” she declares. “I would’ve loved to be so cool when I was your age. But I was a nerd. And my father wanted good grades.”

I squeeze Mum’s hand. “Let’s not really talk about school today,” I suggest.

“Sure. Whatever you want. What do you want to talk about?”

I think for a moment. “Dad gave me the chef’s knife.”

“The Wuesthof? That’s awesome. Oh, Vanessa, I’m so happy for you.”

I nod. “You know, I cooked the risotto with it.”

“Yes?” Mum turns to face me on the bench and smiles at me. “And how was that?”

“Amazing. Really amazing. It’s a brilliant knife. I’m almost too scared to use it.”

Mum laughs. “It sounds really great,” she says and nods like crazy.

I can’t hold it any longer. “Your things are in storage,” I announce matter-of-factly because I can’t think of any other way to tell her. “All of them. And Dad’s paying for it until you get out.”

Her reaction is like an everything-at-once. Her hands begin to shake, like I’ve sometimes seen them do, and she has a longing in her face that’s frightening in its intensity.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. We brought four full truckloads of your stuff to Osborne Park. Here’s the key to the storage place.”

She looks at me incredulously. “Is that a joke?” she asks.

“No, Mum, it’s not a joke.”

“But Mike would never –”

“I know,” I sigh. “I asked him. And he did.”

“But – why?”

I look at her, the eagerness in her face, the shine in her eyes that were lustreless a moment ago. It’s out of my hands, I tell myself. Let it go.

“I told him to pay for storage because they weren’t his things and it wasn’t fair that he should throw them away. He’ll deduct it from the house sale.”

Mum nods like crazy. “I know. I know,” she keeps repeating. Then she looks up. “They’re not the kind of things your father would want to keep though.”

I laugh out loud. “Mum,” I tell her. “They’re not the kind of things anyone should want to keep. That’s what I’d like you to do. You know? Once you get out and go to the storage rooms. Sort them out into things you want to keep and things you want to get rid of.”

“Yes, I will. I will. It’s too much to keep, anyway.”

I shake my head. I can’t help feeling that I’ve made a terrible mistake. “You’re right,” I whisper after a while. “It’s just too much.”

Her face shines like a crystal but tears well up in her eyes. I take comfort in the fact that she’s crying. Because it tells me that somewhere inside her, she feels like I do.

“That’s a really big thing you did for me,” Mum murmurs. “You don’t know how grateful I am. I can’t believe ...”

“It’s okay. It’s only fair.”

“But I thought you hated my things.”

I ponder that for a while. “I hate that you hoard rubbish,” I say.

“It’s not rubbish!”

“For me it is. You don’t have to keep everything, you know?”

“Yes, I know,” she agrees after a long silence.

“It’s okay to let go.”

“Yes.” Another silence. “I know. So why do this for me, then?”

I take a really big breath. “Because, when I was little, you told me that I could become a real cook, a chef one day.” I lean against her, turn my eyes back to the sky, the racket of cockatoos. “Dad said I’m like you.”

“What did you reply?”

I point to the cockatoos. “They’re pretty noisy, aren’t they?”

Mum hugs me tight. She’s crying like mad. We both are.

“Vanessa, I hope you’ll become a real chef,” she sobs and squeezes my shoulder. “And realise your dreams and open your own restaurant and make it into the Michelin guide. You’re so determined, so driven. Never lose sight of your dreams. And I want to tell you ... because I never told you. Because I didn’t think it was the place of a child to know. But, Vanessa, you have no idea of the dark inside me. No

idea of where I've been. And I can't say why I find it so hard to let go. I don't know. All I know is that when I'm around my things, I feel alive. Almost happy. I feel full, not quite so empty and alone."

I push my face against her wet cheek. "Your staff and your rod," I whisper.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Nothing." I nestle closer to her. "Just something Amanda said."

She hugs me even tighter then and I fight her embrace for a moment but the heat of her body seeps through my jeans, my top. I think of all the great things I want to do with my life. The elegant restaurants I want to cook in, the amazing dishes I want to create – but right now, I'm here, on a bench, next to Mum. It's as if my soul opens up and the moment grows longer.

"It's nice and warm here, isn't it?" Mum remarks after a while and wipes tears from her cheeks.

I inhale, exhale. The day is great. Our food was great. Jackie Park is right. The world's a really great place.

Inhale. Exhale. Let go and hold on. Next to me, on the sun-drenched bench, Mum is doing the same.

"Mum?" I touch her shoulder.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"You know what I told Dad?"

"What?"

"I said, you bet."

"You did?"

I nod, taking her hand in mine. "I did. And I said that I was proud."

"Proud?"

"To be my mother's daughter."