FATHERLESS SUMMER
Chapter One

In the very same moment as my father was crushed by 40 tonnes of steel, I realized that our bodies are composed of a billion tiny lives. It was the sort of hot, Queensland day that seemed to favor the clammy expanses of adolescent armpits and made the tin roofs of the houses crackle like fireworks. No form of air-cooling mechanism could provide an escape, because the desert-hardened breezes found invisible gaps in every one of the single-story wooden houses which surrounded the mine. When wind came it was as if the town collapsed under the weight of the hot air. Everyone stayed inside and counted their lines of third-generation crockery, polishing it until you could see beyond the stains. The vinyl couch stuck to my bare thighs, a mix of sweat and dust collecting in its syrupy folds. On the grainy television there was a woman talking about appliances. She was saying “fast, fun and healthy” over and over again. I was wondering why they couldn’t find one more word that started with ’f’.

The town smelt like air-conditioner filter. I had this craving deep in my stomach for vegemite scrolls. I changed channels. They lacked anything remarkable – bad animation and washed-up daytime TV stars. I went back to the original channel. The woman had not changed in my absence, her ponytail and undersized business suit still pulling at her latte-coloured skin. Her face involuntarily twitched, letting me glimpse a moment of her humanity. I felt sure that the rest of my summer holidays would be just like this. The woman smiled at me. She was alive. In her body were a million trillion tiny lives, and yet she looked so dead.

There was a crash, a sound of errors and miscalculations which filled the town. I knew what had happened. The leaps of thinking and logic came together with lightning speed in my mind, like a train derailing. The sound kept going and I stopped breathing. But I could hardly
hear it. What filled my mind was the same thing over and over again, even as the woman’s voice moved away. Even after the ad changed and there was a show about penguins in Antarctica. Even after my mother turned the TV off and pulled me outside. Even after the CEO’s voice drained away to the sound of the air conditioner in the claustrophobically tiny office. Even when the flow of consolation cards stopped dramatically one day. Even when I found my mother crying in the bathroom. Even when the new workers came that day, their faces too new, their clothes and conscience too clean. Even when she found me, even when I found me. There was only the sound of a million billion trillion tiny buzzing lives, which in one moment, in one second, all turned to perfect silence.
Chapter Two

The rest of that summer, the town smelt like casseroles. Pity, for us, came via airmail, from relatives far away whom I had to look up in the photo albums. You could tell they were lost for words, that they had asked their husbands and wives what to say. The cards sat in a row on our mantelpiece and quivered whenever somebody walked past, as if they were whispering soft, meaningless condolences. Nineteen were dead - nearly half the families in the town. And they kept saying it was a one in a million chance, that it was a glitch in the machinery. But to the town it didn’t matter that it was statistically nearly impossible; it only mattered that there wasn’t anyone to fix the carburetor anymore; there was no one to make bad jokes or good steak; there was no one to hold them because the eternity of the desert landscape cut into their mind. My father had always worked shifts. Before he was a miner he was a trawler hand. He used to be gone for three months and then exist in a hazy mist of sleep for the next two. They told us he had died painlessly. That it all would have been split-second, not even that. My mum cried. I cried. My mother’s crying sounded desperate; mine sounded like imitation. I had loved my dad, but he hadn’t been my dad. He had been a sometimes-man. I used to pretend mum was a single parent, but without the poverty. But mum, she loved him.

And I could see why she loved him. He was beautiful. He had a manner which could have lent itself to comedy, but which seemed to fit better in casual everyday life. He had killed a man, a very, very long time ago, blind drunk driving mum’s Commodore on the traffic lights in Adelaide Street. When I was born he was two months in. He used to write these long letters to my mother. You’d think he’d be the sort of guy who would hide how bad it was, but he didn’t. He hated jail. And I suppose maybe he sat down trying to make it happy, but it slowly turned dark. And I knew that some of the letters he wrote were very, very dark. He
told my mother he missed the smell of her hair. And I think maybe that smell of her hair made her go a little crazy, because she cut it all off when I was two. People always thought she had cancer, and sometimes she used to pretend she did. When her hair grew back, it grew differently, in tight brown curls. And then dad came back, and started trying to find jobs in industries which didn’t need to know much about his background and I got a father again. And then he started working a lot of shifts, and leaving for months, and I had a dad sometimes. And one day we had to move, to the desert, for six months, because we needed the money. Two months later, he was dead.

My parents were subtly in love. Some parents were in love in a way where they make a point of it. But they weren’t. Maybe so many years of being separated had made them used to being in love from far away. They touched fleetingly, their eye contact was long and intense, sometimes so much that you could see the prison warden between them. Eyes were their link. When I was about twelve, my father was away for four months, and my mother told me about when he was in jail. She read me some parts of his letters. She told me about her hair. She told me about me, told me how they wouldn’t let him see me be born, how the midwife had to hold hands with her as she delivered. He organized for Uncle Cameron to send her flowers, twenty types so that there would be at least one type she loved. She said the air was so thick she could hardly breathe it in. They were flower-poor for two and a half months.

She told me how I had asked why there was a man coming home with us the day of my seventh birthday when he was released. She told me how I hadn’t wanted to talk to him and how he had begged me, sobbing, to love him. She told me how she miscarried their second child because she was too old, how she always wanted 2 kids. How he had been training to be a teacher but he couldn’t, how he’d always wanted a house for them in the eastern
suburbs with a dog and two cats and a budgie. She told me how small his dreams were, but that his world, after jail, was too small even for them. And when he came home I felt like I had done too much wrong in the short days he had cameoed in my life, that I hadn’t said enough of the right things. That his whole life had been one big mistake and I made him realise it. That everything was against him and anything I could say would only make it worse, and so I said nothing, I loved him when he was home and forgot him when he was away. He yelled at me once, he said “You will never know what I’ve been through!” And he was right. I would never know him, and I thought he was so much that I shouldn’t ever try.
Chapter Three

Since Dad died, my life has fallen into a routine. I wake up and eat cornflakes and then turn on the radio loudly so that it echoes on the walls. And I listen for what seems like hours to the hits of yesterday and today, feeling something universally relatable about the melodies and the way they fit to my heartbeat. I walk up to my mother’s room, and flinch as my fingers touch the doorknob and I imagine what I might see. And then I walk inside and she is alive and I open the window and let the cold morning sunlight stream onto her body, and then I leave. My mother has no routine. She lies still all day, every day. Her room smells like her, but so concentrated that it makes me feel sick. She is always splayed on the bed, sweat-tinged sheets silhouetting her figure, flies gathering around her immobile body, flocking in from the barren desert to feast on her sweet, sweat-rich skin.

After breakfast, I walk around town, buy lemonade and take it up the mountain which threatens the homes below. The mountain is more of a large hill than a mountain, and climbing it is easy. At the top there is a small wooden structure which catches the wind inside of it. For as far as I can see in every direction there is just pure, breath-taking nothingness. The town seems strangely small from the top of the mountain, a clutch of houses and the industrial claw of the mine, whose aluminum casings crack and shudder in the summer heat. The repairs are nearly finished and they say this time it is one in a billion, nearly literally impossible. But bigger impossibilities don’t convince anyone anymore.

The town seems to have split into two parts, those who have lost and those who haven’t. The people who have lost no one seem filled with sympathy, as if the only way to engage with someone who has lost a husband/brother/son was to pour sympathy onto them, to remind them of the statistics which seemed to contradict the event happening. The summer
is beginning to scheme in the town and half of the houses have simply closed their doors, turned on the air-conditioner, and kept everything inside, the giant repairs trucks making shadows on their windows. In the afternoons I go home and sit in the backyard in a bikini, tanning. It isn’t that I need or want a tan, I just like how meaninglessly easy and destructive it is. The sprinkler next door churns. Mrs Flannel trims her roses and sobs. It is almost like there are no dark shadows on the town. And then Mrs-Rose-from-next-door’s son moved in. One day I am tanning in the backyard when he comes out with a notebook and a cigarette. I open one eye to look at him. He must be about 21. And he sits down and he does nothing. Every day he does the same thing, walked out, sat down, and looked at the endless desert. And then one day he walks over to the fence.

“Hello,” he says to me.

“Hi,” I reply, pulling my sunglasses off my face.

“The sun kills you,” he says, pointing to the sun with disdain, as if it were a murderer. I say nothing.

“I’m already dying,” he says, replying to himself, “so it’s okay for me. My name’s Benjamin.” I say nothing.

“You know, I thought dying would be exciting, like people would want to do something with me, like they’d want to value the time I still had. But no one cares; it’s taking too long. All I do is watch TV and get injections and sit outside trying to write a novel.”

“What’s your novel?” I ask, trying to reflect some of this guy’s enthusiasm for the world.
“Nothing so far. But I’ve got a concept. Every famous novel is about death. And me, I’m dying. I’ve got like an insider’s view,” Benjamin says, smiling, “I’m waiting. I’m going to write a masterpiece.”

“Okay, yes, cool,” I say.

“Can I jump the fence?” he asks. I nod.

He’s wearing a beanie even though it’s summer and he jumps over the fence, landing on the long, brown grass. He sits down beside me.

“Wanna hear some?” he asks. I nod. “Humans only love in one of two ways,” he starts, “safe love, like a love which feels comforting and familiar, the sort of love which makes you go home at night. The sort of love which makes marriages and middle-aged affairs. This sort of love feels right, feels politically correct. And then there’s real love…”

He stops short of ‘real love’, holding his stomach. “I’m so sorry,” he mutters. And, stepping towards a small, dead flowerbed, vomits.

“Chemo,” he mumbles dismissively, coughing. Tears crystalise in the corner of his eyes. It’s 27” but he’s wearing a jumper. He smiles at me looking at him. “Where was I?” he declares grandiosely, “Ah yes, real love, passionate love, vicious love! The Heathcliff, the Oscar Wilde! Destroys our world!” He is not even reading off the page now. “Pulls us apart! Kills our parents and burns our aunts and sets our hearts on fire! The stuff of life! The essence of human being!” he yells, his voice hitting the distant mountain. He falls back into the chair,
breathing heavily. I think my parents were passionate lovers. I think this boy is a passionate lover of Being Alive in this backyard in this tiny town while his own cells pull him apart. One day it will happen to him, one day it will happen to everyone, our everything, our billion everythings will turn to silence. But you wouldn’t know it, the way he smiled.

In that endless summer, I would make two friends. He would be the first.
Chapter Four

I haven’t seen my mother move in five days. Every day I bring her food and she eats all of it. But I’m running out of money and I don’t know where to find hers, or the compensation money. Her face is in the pillow and I don’t know if she’s asleep or not. Her body shudders as a mosquito lands on her bare shoulder.

“Mum,” I say softly. She is still.

I walk out, resign myself to try again tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, until the day she is alive again.

I feel as though I am in a trance. Because I feel nothing. People say that after your family member dies, the first thing that happens is that you wake up expecting them to be there, and then you remember. I just don’t think I ever expected my dad to be there when I woke up. The air smells like syrup, so thick I feel sick. I walk out onto the street.

“Hey, look!” Benjamin calls, pointing to the white bottle-brush which is positioned between our yards, “it’s in bloom!”

He is smiling semi-manically, sitting on the small front porch with his stripy jumper over his bare legs, his boxer shorts clinging to his shaking legs. On his head is the same beanie.

“They smell disgusting!” I call, making gagging faces and grinning.
“Cynical view on life you got there,” he replies, shaking his head, “It’s a beautiful day, sun’s a shinin’, birds are a singin’. The world, and I, are alive! Today’s the day, young friend, today’s the day I write the masterpiece which will be remembered for generations to come! Today’s the day for lives to change!”

“Did you read that in your horoscope?” I smile, squinting against the sun.

“You caught me!” he replies, putting two hands above his head in mock capture, dropping a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

“Ha!” I reply, turning down the road.

“Have I told you recently how great it is to be dying?” he yells after me, “It’s awesome, you can’t beat it!”

I smile. Smiling feels wrong, like I can’t be happy when my father is dead. Like you’re not supposed to be normal if your father is dead.

I found an old dam the other day, up behind the mountain. It feels very secluded, like no one else in the world knows about it. I’d take mum up here if she’d get out of bed. I’d take Benjamin if he wasn’t dying of cancer. I think both of them would like it here; it’s quite beautiful, in a pure way. I take off all my clothes except my bra and underpants and dive into the tannin-stained water. It strokes my body with cold fingers, and underwater everything is gone. I come up. In two weeks I will be sixteen. I think mum is going to kill herself and I don’t know what to do about it. I think I have lost both of my parents and I don’t know what to do
about it. And I think I should be reacting differently to all of this and I don’t know what to do about the fact that I’m not.

“Hey,” someone calls. I rise from the water and make eye contact with her.

“Um, hello,” I say.

“You’re in my dam,” she says firmly.

“Sorry,” I say. I climb out and stand on the edge, my wet underwear clinging to my body.

“It’s okay,” she says, “I suppose I don’t own it.”

“Okay,” I say. She takes of her t-shirt, her bra, her skirt and her underwear, and dives naked into the water.

“My name’s Sophie,” I say to the brown water. She re-emerges.

“What did you say? I heard you say something but I was underwater,” she says.

“I said my name’s Sophie.”

“Mine’s Lainie,” she says, closing her eyes.

“I’m sixteen, nearly,” I say to fill the silence.
“Sixteen and a half,” she says. I have never heard anyone above 10 use half years.

“I haven’t seen you around,” I comment, trying to sound casual.

“How long have you lived here?” she asks, floating on the water.

“About three months, a little less,” I say.

“That’d be why,” she smiles. “What do they say about me down there? Have you heard the one about me murdering my own baby daughter?”

“Um,” I start.

“It’s okay,” she says, “I don’t need to know, I can live a lie.”

“I haven’t heard anything about you.”

“God, that’s disappointing. I guess I have to do something interesting then don’t I?”

“Good idea,” I say, smiling.

“Do you know why they call this Mermaid Lake?” she says.

“No, I didn’t know they called it anything, I didn’t know it was a lake,” I reply.
“Well it’s because there used to be this girls’ school institution thing over there,” she points vaguely west, “and all the girls used to come on Saturday nights and go skinny dipping here. Then one day someone found out, never discovered who, and came down and killed them. Every last one except little Margaret Flannel. She moved away for forty years and wrote some self-published thing and got married to some talk show host or something and then came back. Psycho. But yeah, that’s what they call it around here. After that, the scandal that it was, they closed the whole school. I can show you the building if you like, they never knocked it down or anything.”

“Sure,” I say.

“I’ll show you right now if you like,” she says, “got nothing better to do.”

“Okay,” I say, glancing at my watch. And then I say “Okay,” again.

She smiles and hops out, her body growing a film of thin goose bumps along every limb. She smiles and cocks her head to the side and pulls her clothes back on as they stick to her wet-sticky skin.

“You’re quiet,” she says.

“Not really,” I reply.

And she would be the second.
Chapter Five

And then the rest of that summer it was like I was sitting in the uncomfortably warm living room of my mind looking at slides of my life. And they seemed like the moments I made myself remember, or those I didn’t have to make myself remember. They were captured in the resin of that summer.

And here is me sitting with Lainie on the veranda of the abandoned girls’ school, and we have come here five days in a row even though I have to climb all the way up the hill, and tradition has convinced me I need lemonade every time which is a lot of money when you have none, and Lainie is frozen in the middle of a story about something which is making her smile more than any real life thing she could experience, and I am smiling too because whatever the story is its funny. And then here is me and I am at home this time and I am singing to my next door neighbour while he writes and he is loudly declaring that I am his one muse and I am going to be this masterpiece and I am laughing. And here is my father’s funeral, and there are white roses everywhere and I feel like I’m going to choke, and my mother isn’t crying in a way where it is noticeable but in a way where it is just trickling out from her, and there is just me and mum and then there is the CEO and no one else because my dad had only been there three months and he didn’t have friends yet and the funeral had to be ‘remote and quick’, and I wonder if there is really a such thing as moving on and if there is I wonder how, and we came down in the train and it was past all these cane farms and my mum said nothing except she said ‘Why can’t you just leave me alone?’ because I was trying to look her in the eye so I didn’t try anymore, and I could tell I shouldn’t have made her come because she still smelt like she was dead and I think she felt like she was dead too. And then here is the town and it is so quiet.

And then here is me at Lainie’s house on the mountain when she had to show me her kitten called Herman which she found near the mine and there is her father and he is lying on the
couch under perfect rectangles of yellow light from outside and her house smells like broken people and the couch is torn and he is holding a bottle which has a tiny bit of some drink in the bottom and I realise that he is a capital-A Alcoholic and this is why we never go to Lainie’s house and he looks so much like my mother and I want to tell her she is not the only one but she doesn’t even notice and Herman has a paralysis tick and I find it and she has this face like ‘oh’ like I ruined her nice thing. And then here is the train station and the town are standing there and so are Lainie and I because everyone is, and there are the new people who have come to fill the positions and people are not protesting they are just standing there and some are crying and then the CEO comes in this black car and he smiles and someone says ‘shame’ in this tiny quiet voice and the CEO turns around like he’s not sure if he heard it or not and the new miners and their families look so happy and ready to work and the mine is glimmering, just glimmering like its proud of Development and Progress.

And there here is an ambulance parked outside of my house but it’s for next door and here is me walking down the street and my heart and my breath and my mind stopping for a second because I think he’s dead and then here is the bed on the front porch and here are the crumpled sheets and the sun hiding in their folds and there is him and there are the needles in his skin which is pale and there is the tube pressed against his throat and there are his eyes which are closed and here is the thin shiny film of dried saliva on his chin and here is me and there is his mother blending food to the right consistency and there is the tree and the white flowers are turning brown and rotting on the soil and the smell is so putrid and sweet I am choking and the sharp parts of his face are sunburnt because she puts him on the front porch every day like he can see something and the beanie is still on his head and he is still wearing the jumper but now it is like a jumper full of broken twigs. And here is Lainie and I and we are burying Herman in this shallow grave we dug with our hands outside her house and the kitten has such soft limbs when it is dead and it falls into the shape of her hands and it is so, so small and we cover it with dirt but there is not enough so
we can still see the outline of its body and there are thick millimetres of dry soil under my fingernails and Lainie starts singing this song with no words and no particular melody but it feels strangely familiar and I sing it but I don’t know how I know it and we do harmonies together and it is beautiful and there are these weed flowers and we put them on top of the dirt along the outline of the kitten’s spine and we are singing the song long after we walk away.

And here is me and I am at the funeral of my next door neighbour and it is the same place that my father had his funeral and there are so many people there who have caught the train and I remember what he said about people not wanting to be with him because he was dying and his mother won’t stop crying and I realise that he was her only son and her husband is dead and she must be very, very alone but I don’t know what to do about it and I ask her at the wake if she has his novel and she says he never wrote a novel but she hands me his notebook and she is right it is not a novel, but it is just a hundred different things he thought and wrote down and then on the last page there is a sentence and it is in lead pencil and when he wrote it his hand was shaking and it just says ‘Turns out, dying is just shit’ and on the way back on the train past the pineapple farms I think I have been to too many funerals for a sixteen year old.

And then here is me walking into my bathroom and here is my mother sitting against the wall with thick green rope in her fingers and it is twisted around her and she looks at me with this shocked-betrayed face and I realise what she is trying to do and I freeze and she just looks me in the eye and she is crying and she says ‘I don’t know how to tie it properly’ and I sit down on the opposite side of the room and I take the rope from her fingers and I want to hug her but I am scared that there will be nothing left of my mother to hug. And then there is today and it is me and Lainie and we are sitting in the veranda of the school
and there is a piece of paper in my hand which is changing everything and it is a plane ticket
to Sydney and Lainie is smiling and she is saying ‘I’m finally going home to mum.’
Chapter Six

“You can’t leave,” I say again even though the words feel thick and wrong as they stumble from my lips.

“Sophie,” she starts, saying my name like it’s a sigh, “I have to go to Sydney even if we are friends.”

“Aren’t we best friends?” I ask. Irrational fury builds, watery and warm, in my eyes.

“I don’t know; why are you being so clingy and weird about this?” she asks.

“Who else is your best friend?” I say louder than I planned.

“I don’t know, can’t I just not have one?” she says, dropping her hands onto her knees.

“Would it really kill you to say that I’m your goddamn best friend? Do you know what I’ve been through this summer?” I say and I am standing and yelling and crying.

“What the hell Sophie? What’s up with you?” she asks and she is yelling and standing too. “Just because your dad died? Half the time you act like you don’t even care about him!”

“You think I don’t care that my dad is dead? My mum tried to kill herself! Why can’t you ever get past the fact that I’m not poor and that my parents didn’t abandon me or aren’t alcoholics or... or...” I say, trying to find something to say.

“Oh well wow! So it makes you feel better to hang out with me? Do I make you feel like you’ve got it alright, because at least your mum didn’t run to Sydney with her boss for a new family and at least your dad isn’t fucking incontinent?” she yells.

“No! I just... I’m scared my mum’s going to kill herself and I have no one to go to and I just want you to tell me that we’re best friends and you’re not going to leave!” I say and I am not yelling, I am just crying.
“You’re not my goddamn best friend Sophie! Because I already have a best friend and he’s dead,” she says and she’s sitting down now and she’s not crying.

“What?” I say, suddenly forgetting that I was angry.

“You know your dad wasn’t the only one killed in that stupid accident! Josh and I were going to get married! He said he’d take me away and we’d go and live in Melbourne, just because this one time I said I liked it in this tourist magazine. And he worked in the underground stuff, and he was so close to getting this promotion and then he said he’d just be six months, six months and we could leave and see it all. But a glitch in the engineering and suddenly I’m alone. I couldn’t even... I couldn’t even go to his funeral in case someone found out,” she says.

“How... How old was he?” I say even though I shouldn’t.

“Oh right you want to know just so you can feel better about yourself? Because I’m sixteen and I’m pregnant with the baby of a dead 26 year old? Do you feel better Sophie?” she mumbles, tears filling her cupped hands.

“You’re pregnant?” I say, and I feel like I’m going to vomit.

“Why do you think I’m going to Sydney? Mum might have been a bitch about it but at least she’s got a house and some money down there; I’ll bring up the baby with her. I don’t know, I don’t need to finish high school anyway, tonnes of people didn’t. I can do hair or something,” she says like she only half believes it.

“Lainie...” I start, but I realise I hadn’t thought of anything to say.

“What can you say: ‘Stay here Lainie, don’t leave. What will I do without someone to make my problems feel minor?’ The only thing keeping me here was him and now that’s gone. What else can I lose?” she says.
“Lainie that’s...” I start.

“I’m not... I’m not going to be a failure Sophie, just watch me,” she says and she is crying and she is standing up and she is leaving and she is gone and I am alone. And it is just me.
Chapter Seven

Behind the town they have put up a few dozen temporary box-houses, sitting like a cluster of ugly pimples against the nose of the hill. Sometimes you can see them standing outside their houses watching us in the real town, just watching us. Watching us like they’re trying to figure us out, figure out why we won’t talk to them or look at them and why we won’t move out of the houses which they need down in the gully. Their bodies are black and silhouetted by the sun against the mountain. There is a group of their children who ride their mountain bikes up the hill and they call out and it shatters the silence. It is the only noise now, apart from the mine, the mine which is running. It makes these noises, as it starts up again, which are so harsh they make the windows shudder. The sound of metal on metal. And every time I hear them I cannot help but think of my father and his body being crushed in the giant metal cogs and it makes me sick.

Aunty Vanessa moved in. Because I didn’t know what to do and I called my grandmother even though I am afraid of her and she sent Aunty Ness who is mum’s sister. When I came home the day when she arrived she was sitting at the table smoking a cigarette and reading a magazine called Modern Psychic. She dropped it and looked at me and there might have been tears in her eyes when she hugged me. She told me I had been so, so brave and now I could show how I felt really and I said I didn’t feel anything and she looked at me like I had said that I had killed my father and then she said quickly that she was going to get my mum to take a shower.

The other day I came home and mum was sitting at the table with Aunty Ness and Aunty Ness was reading Modern Psychic and smoking a cigarette and watching mum and mum was reading nothing and she had a cold cup of tea in front of her and she was just looking out
the window like she was on standby mode. She was wearing a floral shirt which used to fit her and she was wearing a skirt which was very cream and very domestic. And I said to her, ‘Hi mum I’m home’, and she looked at me like I was empty and she was empty and she said, ‘Hello Sophie’ and I walked away and Aunty Ness put her cigarette down and made mum a new cup of tea which she didn’t drink. And I am not very sure about anything anymore, myself included.

And now it is nearing the end of summer and the air is still thick and the world is still wrong and I am waking up covered and sweat with the sheet clinging to the contour of my thighs. Since Aunty Ness has moved in I feel uncomfortable sleeping in just my underpants but Australia gives me no choice. In front of the full-length mirror there is an image unsatisfactory. Also I need a haircut; I think I would like a haircut from Lainie but I think that will probably not happen now. Maybe I will ask Aunty Ness. I walk into the lounge room/dining room and Aunty Ness is smoking out the screened window and making scrambled eggs. I cannot see mum and so I assume she is still asleep. Aunty Ness’ pull-out couch bed is covered in crumpled sheets and clothes and magazines. “What are you doing today Sophie?” she asks me, sounding happy but also bored and sad. “I’m going to see my friend and say sorry,” I say, which was not what I was going to do but is what I am going to do now. She looks at me and smiles. “I don’t believe in apologising,” she says. All day I will wonder what she meant by that.

When I am climbing the hill I have the clearest view of the new box-houses. There are a group of men sitting in the shade of a tree drinking beer with the younger children riding scooters around their feet. I watch them for a while, living their lives, their wives cleaning their mining uniforms underneath its metallic, silver, glimmering shadow. Then one of them sees me and he points and they all turn to look at me and I feel a paralysing and unjustified
fear electrocute me and I run 200 metres up the hill. First I find the school because I know Lainie’s house is just along the top of the mountain from there. I find it sooner than I had hoped and I knock. There is a soft rustling and the door opens. It is not Lainie, it is her father. He looks at me and then he smiles this soft, confused smile. “Hi,” I say, “I’m Sophie, Lainie is my friend.” He keeps smiling his smile and I feel like I should say something else. “Do you have the number or the address of Lainie’s mum in Sydney?” He keeps just smiling at me but he cocks his head slightly to one side. “Lainie’s not in Sydney,” he says. He is just looking at me like he doesn’t understand what is happening. “She never left. Her mum has triplets down there now with that new guy you know, fucking triplets. Anyway she called her mum but the bitch pretended she didn’t know who Lainie was.” he laughs softly, as if it is a funny and offensive joke. “Do you want to talk to her? She’s just in the other room,” he says. I nod and he opens the door. The house is noticeably cleaner, but I don’t know who did it. Her dad has a kind smile, and the creases in his cheeks make it somehow more beautiful. I think I can see who he maybe used to be.

He makes a wide, sweeping ‘here we are’ gesture at her door and I say thank you softly. I open it slowly. The window is open and the eucalyptus outside is spilling in, its crackly, dry leaves making a carpet on the wooden floor. The bed is a tangle of sheets and leaves and legs. I walk to it and I push softly on Lainie’s shoulder. She turns around and with the same smile as her dad she says, “Heya Sophie.”
Chapter Eight

Now I can see that she is pregnant. She is wearing a soft, white cotton shirt and it falls like a veil over her stomach. Her face looks like it is made of the bright, yellow-y sunshine which comes after a storm. I am lying naked on a rock next to the water and she is swimming and the water is folding around the shape of her. I think about the girls from the school who were doing the same thing as us and how they died. I think that if my life was like this moment then I would probably never die. She emerges and she looks at me just like the first day I met her. “He keeps kicking me, I think the water is too cold,” she says, smiling. I grin at her, one eye closed against the sun. She steps out and walks towards me. “You have to be careful, the rock is really hot,” I say. She does not care and she throws herself onto its burning, grey surface, the water coming into circles on her bare skin. I smile at her and she smiles at me and I feel Happy. “So what’s it like?” I ask and she smiles again because she knows what I am talking about. “It’s like there is a school of fish inside of me,” she says, “a tiny, lovely school of fish.” I smile. Everyone is smiling.

I walk home and Aunty Ness is sitting at the table smoking and crying. At first I assume that mum is dead, and I surprise myself with how calm I am. She looks up and tries to stop crying, but she knows I have seen and it is now too late. “What’s wrong Aunty Ness?” I ask, sitting down at the table and taking her hands in mine like people do in movies. She looks at me and smiles even though she is crying but it is a sad smile. “I don’t think I can fix your mum,” she says softly. I try and smile at her. “I don’t think anyone will be able to fix mum. I think the only person who could fix mum is dead,” I say. She looks up at me like I’d let her down, like she’d hoped for more from me. “I thought if I came here and I made her take baths and wear clothes that weren’t pyjamas then she’d be okay,” she says softly. I smile but she’s not looking at me. “Sophie, sweetheart, I think your mother might be going to kill herself,” she
says, looking me right in the eyes. She looks so concerned, like I might just die in front of her from hearing that. “She’s already tried,” I say. And Aunty Ness makes this face like she’s going to cry and then she walks to the phone and calls grandma and they are talking for a very long time and I am sitting on the bar stool looking at nothing like my mum and I am also on standby and Aunty Ness is crying so I start crying too. And then mum walks out wearing this long, flowy dressing gown with her hair in a messy bun on top of her head and she says “Why is everyone crying?”

Later I am in my room and Aunty Ness comes in and she’s holding the phone and she says, “Sophie darling we’re going home.” I don’t say anything. I look at her and she sits next to me on the bed and I’m not sure what she’s trying to comfort me about. “I can’t go,” I say, which is not true because like Lainie I have nothing left in this town. I can go, and I know then that I will go because if I don’t I think my mother might very quickly figure out how to tie the rope properly. She looks at me with her eyes like everything except the skin of her body has given up. “I can’t go yet,” I say. She nods, but she thinks I mean a few days. Maybe I do. And then there is a strange feeling which is like there is a small explosion inside my heart and it is pushing it open and it is because I want to stay. Because I want to stay in this stupid town where my father died even though she didn’t want to stay. And that is because I love Lainie. And then I realise, as simple as it seemed not to be, she does not love me back.

And I feel this sudden fury at her aloofness, about how little she cares about leaving or staying or being best friends. I walk to her house and I knock on the door and she opens it and she is wearing a long white cotton dress and she has her hair tied up on top of her head and she looks like an adult and I look like a child and she smiles and she says “Hi Sophie.” And then I am just crying. And I am crying for my father and my mother and my neighbour and Aunty Ness and Lainie and her baby and everyone else who seems to be crying through
me. And the long months of summer where the rain never came seem to come all at once and I cannot stop crying against the soft curve of her white dress and she presses her hands against my back and says sorry for nothing like she is an Adult and I am a Child and it makes me cry more because it is true and I am so, so alone and weak and I don’t want to leave this town or her arms and I don’t know if I’m ready for the real world where everyone isn’t mourning with their windows and doors closed, where people are still living their lives, because I don’t know what that’s like. And then is when I realise exactly why I love Lainie, because she has not asked me what is wrong, it is why I always come back because she takes away everything that hurts inside of me and I don’t know what will happen when she is gone.
Lainie and I are walking down the crumbly east side of the mountain and our cheap shoes are twisting ankles on the yellow-brown stones. The box-town is dead; someone plays a radio and it wafts out of the window of one of the houses with the smooth, soothing sounds of the hits from yesterday and today. Lainie hums something. She told me she was learning songs to sing to the baby. She learnt this song called ‘The Golden Vanity’ which she said her mum used to sing to her and it is very sad and it breaks my heart a little bit. When I told her I was leaving she said it was sad but inevitable and that she had something to show me. And I wish she had just cried a little bit or asked me not to go. But she is Lainie and so she did not. And now we are walking to see what I need to be shown and whatever it is it lives in the box-town which is annoying because I didn’t want to go to the box-town. She is smiling so much. We walk over to one of the box-houses and she knocks on the door. There is nothing and so she opens the door. The box-house is all white inside and there is a bar fridge which is open and she closes it with her foot. I am still at the door but she walks into a small room which is closed off to make a bedroom and there is a small, muted commotion. “Stop, stop it,” she says, “come and see I’ve brought Sophie.”

I walk in and there is Lainie sitting on the bed next to him and he is has a beer in one hand and with his other hand he is touching her everywhere as I walk in. She hits his hand and blushes, and then looks at me. “Sophie this is Liam,” she says. Liam looks far, far too old. He chuckles at something. The air conditioner is unbearably loud, like the day when we had the meeting with the CEO. Liam keeps trying to squeeze Lainie’s body and she keeps pushing him away and saying ‘stop it’ under her breath. He smells. He smells like something strange and rotten and I want to walk out because I feel sick. Liam grabs her and pulls her onto the bed and starts kissing her. And he is saying something softly and I am closing the door and
walking down the stairs and running out of the box-town and up the gravel hill and I am sitting in the shade of a tree and breathing very quickly into my hands.

And then it must be a while later because Lainie is walking towards me and she is saying, “Hey sorry about that, he was kind of drunk.” And I look at her and her dress is falling off one shoulder and there are the rosebud marks of his fingertips on her skin. “He’s my fiancée, we don’t have a ring yet but... he was my surprise. I mean I’m going to be alright, I’m going to leave and I’m going to be alright.” I look at her and I am going to start crying I know, I can feel it and I can’t stop it and I say, as though I am not even myself, “But he’s so horrible. He’s horrible and disgusting and I hate him.” And she looks at me like I have hit her in the face and she says “But Sophie I love him.” And then I am crying more and she is not hugging me and the radio in the box-town is saying that it is Love Hour and I am crying and crying and crying and it seems like that is all I do now – cry for Lainie. “Sophie,” she says, putting two fingers on my cheek and turning my face towards her, “this is it for me. I’m good at this, at men, at babies, I love Liam and he loves me and we’re going to have a great life. I’m not going to fail. I’m not good at much, I’m never going to be a lawyer or a doctor, I’m probably never even going to be a hairdresser, but I can be everything Liam wants me to be. That’s what I’m good at, I understand men and what they want me to do. This is what I’ve always wanted.” And then she smiles at me and stands up and hugs me very briefly and walks down the hill and opens the door to the box-house and walks inside. And I would never see her again and she would never say goodbye.

And when I come home Aunty Ness is packing my suitcase in the lounge room and she is folding my underwear and placing it on top. I sit down on the couch and everything inside of me aches. Aunty Ness smiles at me and sits down next to me. “What’s up chicky?” she says, putting her arm around me, “ready to go?” And I close my eyes and I think of Liam’s big
hands on Lainie’s pale skin and Lainie’s dad lying on the couch looking like he was dead and
Lainie’s mum running away with her boss to Sydney and of burying Herman in the dirt and
what Joshua was like and what Lainie’s baby will think of Liam and where Lainie will go and
where they will live and what he will work as and then I just say, “Yes.”
Chapter Ten

And finally, I am walking up the mountain to Lainie’s house to say goodbye and the air is so hot, like summer wants to make a point before it finally disappears. Aunty Ness has done the enrolment for me to go to my old school in Brisbane because I have already had a long time off from my dad dying. She bought me these workbooks to catch up. They smell like plastic. The track to the mountain goes past the dam and it is shimmering in the sun like it is full of secrets and things that are alive. I walk to the house and knock on the door for the hundredth time. Her father answers and he says, “Sophie,” and smiles his small smile. I smile back. He looks somehow more alive and I can’t tell how. “Is Lainie here?” I ask. He shakes his head slowly, and then takes a sip of something brown from a bottle on the counter. “Do you want to come in?” he asks. I nod and walk inside. The house is strangely clean and it smells like chlorine.

“She disappeared last night, ran off with some guy from the new bunch. On a motorcycle across to Perth, that’s what she told me anyway. He’s got some shack on the beach down there, who knows. He’s got something lined up. Look I’m really sorry Sophie. I’m leaving now, but she left something for you in her room, I can’t remember where. I’m going down to Sydney and then I’m going to kill myself,” he says and he picks up a bag from near the door and simply walks past me and down the hill, his form slowly silhouetted by trees. I walk into Lainie’s room and it is empty, everything is gone except the thin film of leaves which had blown in to cover the surface of everything there. There is a piece of paper on the floor, folded in half with a few words across the top, as if she was going to write more but she forgot and I don’t want to read it. I don’t want to know what it says yet because I know it is important. And then on the other side there is a sketch in a square box in the corner it is of two people and one is Lainie and the other is a boy with a head of messy brown curls and
they are both smiling and Lainie is wearing the white dress and underneath it says ‘I only had one photo of us together and I couldn’t give you that so I sketched it. Sorry it’s not very good. But God Sophie, he was so beautiful.’

And then I close the door to the empty room and run down the mountain and open the door and Aunty Ness says “Where have you been?” and I just smile and then when she walks away I just start to cry. And I walk to the car and sit in the back seat and I imagine Lainie walking outside and along the sandy beach and into the cold water and feeling the baby kick her with its soft limbs because it doesn’t like the cold and her white dress floating around her body and her diving under the water and imagining that the soft caress of the water around the contour of her limbs is the caress of the fingertips of Joshua on her skin and the light of the house is yellow and dancing on the surface of the water and there are suddenly no tears left in me. And mum steps into the car and she is dressed in a floral dress and a pair of slippers and she looks straight ahead at nothing.

And Aunty Ness steps into the driver’s seat and starts the car and the bitumen is nearly melting because it is so hot. And the houses are all closed against the heat and the air smells like air conditioner filters and on the hill the children of the new miners are riding up and down and yelling on their mountain bikes and the miners are working and the mine is heating up and crackling like rice bubbles in the heat of the day and the long metallic arms are making jagged shadows over the town and up on the hill Mermaid Lake is heating up on the top but staying cool underneath so when you dive in you feel it all at once and our house is empty but the TV is on and the same woman has started doing ads for vacuum cleaners and she is dead for them too and next door his mother just keeps watering her plants and the sun is so bright. And in my lap I unfold the paper and it says on the front in messy, long letters, ‘I’m not going to be a failure Sophie, just watch me’.
And I believe her.