

Change is a funny thing; sometimes it rears up and charges at you, forcing you to meet it head-on. Other times it takes time to build, like the rumbling earthquakes surrounding a volcano before it erupts. But change most often takes the path that nobody could foresee, springing up in the most unlikely places, and taking on the most surprising forms. In my case, change took the form of the moving van that rolled into our neighbourhood and the house across the street in the mundane depths of summer. My siblings and I were spread around the lounge room watching the midday cartoons when it arrived, and all four of us looked up when the sound of the truck's engine cut through the muggy silence outside.

Even the birds seemed to stop calling in the worst summer heat, and every creature sought refuge from the stifling heat. People retreated to their houses in the middle of the day, hiding in the shade and air conditioning. For the uncommon interruption of silence on our dead-end street, I pushed myself up off the couch and walked out of the lounge room to investigate, lifting my legs high over my older brother Dean's casual attempt to trip me. I pulled the blinds open on our front window and squinted into the blinding sunlight, my eyes watering after the pleasant darkness of the house. The driver had pulled the moving van off the road and parked it on the curb across the street, out the front of the house directly opposite ours. The big black truck had 'Mayflower removal Services' plastered across the side in yellow script, the font on 'Mayflower' curly and the rest of the writing in block letters.

A white car slowed and drove around it to pull into the driveway.

"What's going on out there, Ava?" My dad called from the lounge room, and I imagined that his eyes never left his newspaper.

"It's a moving van," I reported, still watching through the window, "it's pulled up out front of the house across the street."

"Didn't realise it was sold," dad muttered.

"Well the real estate agent took the 'for sale' sign down ages ago. It's probably just that nobody bothered to put the 'sold' sticker on it before they took it down," my little brother Mason replied from his spot sprawled on the living room floor in front of the TV. Mason was 11, and one of the smartest, most observant people I had ever met. He noticed absolutely everything and commented on it, a trait which helped his grades, but constantly got him into hot water.

"Shh Mason! I can't hear the cartoon!" Maelle, the youngest and by far the bossiest of the four Williams kids, effortlessly kept all the boys in line, including my dad at times. I smiled to myself as I turned back to the window, in time to see the newcomers pile out of their car.

First the mother, a slight woman with porcelain pale skin, dressed in old jeans and a t-shirt, climbed out of the passenger seat. She stood looking at her new home, hands in her back jean pockets, and I watched her shoulders heave up and down again in a sigh. A little boy with a mess of brown hair and chubby cheeks leaped out of the backseat and dashed straight up to the front door. He looked about Maelle's age, maybe a year younger, and I fully expected my sister to dub him her new playmate. The driver's side door opened slowly, and a man climbed out before slamming it shut again, making his wife jump. The last person to emerge from the car was a girl wearing an oversized red hoodie and jeans. She had the

same mess of dark hair as her brother, only hers was cut just below her chin line and dyed electric blue. She stared up at the house as she shut the car door, then shoved her hands in the front pocket of her hoodie and walked quickly past her dad, her head down and only slowing down when she met her brother at the front door.

Her mother threw her the house keys from her handbag with a smile, and she passed them down to her brother. Placing a hand on top of his head, she smiled down at him as he stretched up on his tiptoes to fit the key in the lock.

“Ava! Earth to Ava! Come in Ava!”

I dropped the blinds and turned around when I noticed Dean calling my name. “What?!” I asked in exasperation.

“Geez, no need to be defensive,” Dean said, holding his hands up, “I called your name five times. Come back and watch, leave the newbies to settle in. Not everyone likes being spied on, you know,” he said, adding the last comment when I didn’t move.

“There’s no spying going on,” I replied haughtily, raising an eyebrow at him. After a moment’s hesitation to show him that I wasn’t feeling guilty, I went back to the lounge room anyway, plonking myself down in my spot on the couch next to Maelle. I sat pretending to watch cartoons for a while, but I eventually gave up and went upstairs to my room. Mason and Maelle shared a room, and Dean and I, being the oldest, had our own. They wouldn’t, much to their relief, have to share a room for much longer; Mason would get Dean’s room when Dean left for sports college next year. Dean won a scholarship to a fancy sporting college, so he would be boarding there next year. At the time, I hadn’t really considered how quiet the house would be without Dean around, mainly because I tried not to think about him leaving too much. When he did leave, though, it hit me harder than I thought it would.

My bedroom was the smallest in the house, but I didn’t really mind. Most people would say that I was messy, but I preferred to think that all my clutter made my room more cosy. I had decorated it with warm yellow, and light pink and blue. There were literature quotes and pictures of the ocean stuck to my walls, alongside photos of my friends and siblings. My desk sat surrounded by bookshelves and discarded notebooks, homework swamped and buried beneath dozens of stories. My scratched old wardrobe stood guard by the window, its inbuilt mirror reflecting the image of a tall, dark-skinned girl with long, curly hair, rectangular glasses, and a body with too many sharp edges.

I quickly looked away from the mirror and crossed to the window. Pulling the white curtains back, I had a clear view of the street below, as well as the house opposite. Their front yard was now a flurry of activity, people carrying boxes and pieces of furniture. The blue-haired girl jogged down the front path, and took a box from the removal company worker standing in the back of the moving van. I smiled quietly as she stopped her brother, and watched the grin on his round face widen as his older sister gestured to them, and then to the front door. He copied her as she crouched into a racing stance, and electric blue hair flashed as they darted across the lawn to the front door. The girl slowed and let her brother win, over-faking disappointment at his victory.

I left the window as they went inside and flopped down onto my bed, staring at the ceiling. The house across the street had been empty for so long, I had almost forgotten what it looked like with lights on in the windows and a car parked in the driveway. The day after the new family moved in, my mum announced that we were all going over there to welcome them to the neighbourhood. "You realise that the only thing you're actually managing to accomplish here is awkwardness, right?" Dean said as mum shepherded all of us out the front door. Mum's reply was her signature death glare thrown over her shoulder at Dean. To this he just shrugged indifferently, "well someone had to say it."

The six of us tramping across the road, albeit some more reluctantly than others, must have been a pretty intimidating sight for the poor newcomers, and Dean and I tried to explain this to mum, but she was determined that we make a good first impression as a family. Her sheer strength of will had even managed to drag my dad out of the house so she could present the whole family to our unsuspecting new neighbours. Mum marched us straight up their front path and arranged us in front of the door, turning around to assess us before she knocked. She tutted quietly under her breath as she fixed dad's (perfectly folded) shirt collar, smoothed Maelle's (already smooth) hair, wiped (imaginary) stray crumbs off Mason's chin, straightened my (already straight) glasses, and hid Dean's (somewhat acceptable) gold chain.

"We look fine Helen," dad grumbled good-naturedly, walking forward to put his arm around mum's waist and planted a kiss on her cheek. Mum smiled at him, rolling her eyes, "I know, I'm just making sure." Mum knocked three times, and we heard shouting inside before a flustered-looking woman whipped open the door.

"Uh, hi," she said warily, her eyes darting back and forth among all of our faces.

"Hi!" Mum said brightly, and I could practically see the overly-wide grin plastered on her face through that one word. "We just thought we'd come over and introduce ourselves to our new neighbours."

"Oh, that's really nice of you," the woman said, smiling at all of us in turn. She said 'oh' a lot before she talked. Trait of a nervous person, I decided, looking at the taut expression on her face. When her eyes flickered over my face again, I made sure to smile at her. We all jumped as a man's voice shouted towards the front door from the depths of the house, and the woman winced, her fingers tightening to a white-knuckle grip around the door. "Well I think I have to go, but it was lovely meeting you all

"It was lovely meeting you, too," mum replied, "I'm Helen, by the way, and this is my husband Marcus and our kids, Mason, Dean, Maelle and Ava," mum told her, proudly, gesturing to each of us as she said our names.

"Oh, yes, how silly of me! I should have asked your names earlier," the woman said, looking more flustered than ever.

"No no, that was my fault," mum said, shaking her head softly, "quite a rude mistake, on my behalf Mrs..."

"Oh no Mrs, please, you can all just call me Liz."

"Well Liz, how would you and your family like to come over to our place for a welcome barbeque on Friday night?" Mum offered.

“That would be brilliant,” Liz said, half distracted now by her husband’s yelling, “we’ll all look forward to it. See you then!”

And with that, she gave us a little wave and shut the door on us. We all stood and listened to her bare feet slap away over the tiles back into the house.

Mum didn’t say anything until we were about to cross the street, at which point dad asked her quietly what she thought of Liz. Mum shrugged, “she seemed nice enough. Bit jumpy, though,”

“I didn’t like the sound of the husband,” Dean put in, frowning, “he didn’t sound like the nicest of guys, did he?”

The response was a unanimous headshake. Mum sighed, “we’ll just have to wait until Friday to meet him.”

“No use judging him now,” I added, and mum smiled over at me, reaching across to give me a half-hug.

“What if it’s easier to judge him now?” Maelle asked nobody in particular, “he might act different with strangers around.”

“Always give people the benefit of the doubt, Maelle, “dad told her, tucking my little sister under his arm, “if you judge them before you know who they are, you don’t give them a chance to show you the sort of person they can be. You understand?”

Maelle nodded thoughtfully, and dad hoisted her up so she was sitting on his shoulders, laughing giddily. “Atta girl,” dad said, smiling.

I spent the rest of the steaming day inside, the majority of it on my bedroom floor reading. We had less than a week of summer holidays left before we had to go back to school, and Dean was the only one in the house with social plans. No, actually, Maelle was going over to a friend’s house on the weekend. That only highlighted my despair; Maelle was eight, and she already had a more exciting social life than I did at sixteen. From my bedroom window, I could see straight over to the upstairs bedroom of the house across the street, and for the first time since I had seen the blue-haired girl claim it as her room, she didn’t have her curtains drawn. I could see her sticking things on the wall next to the window, dancing and mouthing the words to the music I imagined was probably blaring out of her headphones.

I smiled to myself and returned to my book, consciously preventing myself from becoming the creepy neighbour. Friday rolled around relatively quickly, considering I didn’t do much other than read and half-heartedly flirt with writing a short story in my abundant free time. I didn’t think too much about what I wore for mum’s welcome barbeque: I wasn’t a girl who planned her outfits three days in advance, to say the least. Anyway, there wasn’t much point in dressing up to meet the people who were now officially our neighbours and would be seeing us most days. When I watched the family, led decisively by Liz, walk across the street all dressed in jeans and t-shirts, I knew I was right in assuming that this little gathering wasn’t going to be treated as a formal occasion.

Maelle, however, didn’t get the memo. When I came downstairs, she had trussed herself up like a glittery pink Christmas tree. She was wearing her favourite sequined t-shirt under a fake-leather jacket, with glittery leggings and light-up sneakers. All of the aforementioned

garments were various shades of pink, of course.

“Maele, you’re going to blind someone,” Dean told her, chuckling as he slid down the stair railing to land beside me. When she turned to throw him her signature ‘shut up stupid’ glare over her shoulder, I saw that she had even applied some of her kiddie makeup. Dean held his hands up in mock surrender, but couldn’t quite manage to smother his laughter.

The doorbell rang and mum ran through the living room to open the front door, pushing past both Dean and I. She wore a flustered but excited smile of a woman who was ready to open her home to guests, and didn’t even notice Maele’s outfit as she bustled past. Liz noticed though. When mum opened the door, she said hi, and her eyes involuntarily flew to the brightest thing in the room: Maele. I watched poor Liz’s eyes widen ever so slightly as she took in the garish pink outfit and then the makeup. Clearly, her own daughter hadn’t been a pink-and-sequins type of girl when she was younger.

If I had been in Maele’s position, I would have wanted to crawl into a hole in the floor and disappear until the coast was well and truly clear, purely from that astonished glance. But then again, if I had been in Maele’s position, chances are that I wouldn’t have been wearing a pink fake-leather jacket and blue eyeshadow. You never know; eight-year-old girls do strange things, you know. Her Disney rock star look garnered the same brand of response from Liz’s husband, who I later learned was called Rob, and from little Nico. Maele sent a grin his way and he could do nothing but smile shyly in response. Liz said he was Maele’s age, but his quiet demeanour had led me to guess younger when I met him in person. Or maybe he was just understandable scared of Maele.

The last person to come in was the girl with the blue hair. She was wearing ripped skinny jeans, red Converse sneakers and a grey tank top, her bright blue hair left to hang just below her chin. She took one look at Maele and smiled, “nice eyeshadow,” she told her.

“Nice hair,” Maele replied, her face lighting up at the compliment, “I’m Maele.”

“Josie,” the girl said.

“Ah, you’ve found someone who appreciates the makeup,” dad said, coming in to greet our guests, “how old are you, Josie?”

“Sixteen,” Josie replied, brushing some stray blue hair strands out of her face.

“Oh you’re the same age as Ava!” Mum said enthusiastically, shooting me a smile that said ‘now’s your chance, be social Ava. Go on then.’ I hated when my parents did that to me. pointed out things I had in common with complete strangers to try to get me to make a new friend. This, of course, only ever succeeded in making things twice as awkward for everyone. I didn’t say anything as every pair of eyes in the room swung in my direction, just stood there at the bottom of the stairs and awkwardly pushed my glasses further up onto the bridge of my nose. I discovered that day that Josie Parker had this way of looking at you that made you feel as if you were suddenly translucent, like she could see straight through you.

“Cool,” Josie said, smiling at me. Her little grin made me think that she knew how I felt about my mum embarrassing me in front of new people. I tried to return the smile, but I think it got lost somewhere as I self-consciously straightened the hem of my shirt and smoothed the imaginary wrinkles out of my jeans. God I was turning into my mother, finding

imaginary wrinkles in clothes. I stared down at my worn-out sneakers so everyone gathered in our front room wouldn't see the involuntary rush of pink that crawled across my cheeks and over my ears. It was dad who eventually came to my rescue, suggesting that we all head out to the backyard and the barbeque.

I waited until everyone else had walked out towards the back door before following them. I took a deep breath and told myself to relax; these people were our neighbours, I was going to have to get used to being around them. When I walked out the back door, carefully shutting the fly screen behind me, everyone had spread out around the backyard. Dad and Rob were standing at the sizzling barbeque, mum and Liz had adjourned to the outdoor table, and the little had set up camp on the grass. Dean was nowhere to be seen, doubtless he had escaped back to his room the instant everyone else went outside.

The girl, Josie, was standing with mum and Liz, and she looked up as I came outside. I returned her relieved smile with a fumbling one of my own, and she walked away from the mums and over to me. "You're Ava, right?" She asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, and you're Josie," I replied.

"Guilty," she said, grinning. I couldn't help it, I grinned back.

"Girls come and get some food," dad called, and Josie followed me over to the barbeque to get a hotdog. I squirted barbeque sauce on mine, Josie had onions and tomato sauce on hers. She wasn't one to follow along and copy.

"Ava, go and drag Dean out of his cave, will you?" Dad asked me as I walked away from the barbeque, and I sighed and nodded my compliance.

"Do you want to come?" I asked Josie, heading back towards the fly-screen door.

"Sure," she replied around a mouthful of hotdog, "wouldn't want to be left out here to be bored to death by the adults."

"Definitely not," I agreed solemnly, and both of us laughed. I walked back through the house and up the stairs, listening to the old floorboards creak as Josie followed me up, taking the house in with wide, curious eyes. I got to the landing and turned left down the hallway towards Dean's room.

I pounded on the door, but there was no reply. "Stupid video games," I muttered under my breath. I shoved the door open and announced to a deaf room that there was food ready in the backyard. The figure seated on the end of his bed, hunched over a game controller and drilling his gaze into the TV screen, didn't even register our entrance. I sighed and rolled my eyes at Josie over my shoulder, who chuckled in response. Stalking over to the TV, I reached behind it and yanked the power cable out of the wall.

"Hey!" Dean protested indignantly as the screen cut to black, "what did you have to do that for?"

"I shrugged, "that's what happens when you can't pay attention, idiot."

Dean grumbled under his breath, but put the controller down and heaved himself up anyway. "There's food down there, then?" He asked, and I nodded. He pushed past me and ruffled my hair on his way out the door.

"You would have known about it sooner if you had listened to your sister, Josie chimed in.

for a second I was shocked at her; she had met Dean all of ten minutes ago and already she was talking to him like he was her brother instead of mine. Dean didn't bat an eye, though.

"That so, mermaid?" He asked, smirking proudly at his new nickname.

Josie put her hands on her hips and smirked right back, "mermaid? Is that actually the best you can do with this?" She asked, running her fingers through the ends of her blue hair.

Dean shrugged, "I'll think on it," he told her nonchalantly, passing her and crossing the landing to slide down the stair railing to the ground floor. I tried not to show Josie my shock, but in truth, her brazen manner took me aback slightly. I hadn't ever had a friend who was so forward and confident. I was about to follow Dean back downstairs, but Josie stopped in the hallway. "Your room, I'm guessing?" She said, gesturing to what was indeed my closed bedroom door. It had a light blue letter 'A' stuck on it, clearly distinguishing it as mine.

"Yeah," I replied, nodding.

"Can I see inside?" Josie asked, her hand already on the doorknob.

I was going to say no; I didn't like people who weren't my immediate family in my bedroom. It felt a bit like letting tourists into my sacred place. But then I thought that Josie might think I was weird and secretive if I said no, so I quickly said yes.

"You sure?" Josie asked, her eyebrows drawing together slightly.

How did she know? "Yeah, I'm sure," I reassured her, letting out a breathy laugh which I instantly regretted, "why?"

Josie shrugged, "some people don't like strangers in their rooms."

She pushed open my bedroom door open while she talked, and I followed her in.

She didn't say anything for a while, she just wandered around and looked. I went and sat down on my bed, trying way too hard to appear nonchalant.

"So you like the beach, then?" She asked, gesturing to my clustered pictures of the ocean that were blue-tacked to the walls.

"Well, I don't really know," I said, "I mean, I like the look of it, but I've never actually seen the ocean in real life."

"What?" Josie gasped incredulously, "what do you mean you've never seen the ocean in real life?"

"My parents don't like it, so they never took us."

"We are so going one day," she said, grinning at me, "you'll love it."

"Okay," I agreed dumbly, smiling at her.

She walked all around my room. Not speaking, just looking.

"Ah, and you're a reader," she said, running her fingers down the spines of the books piled haphazardly on my desk.

"It makes me feel incredibly nerdy when you say it like that," I told her jokingly. She turned around and flashed me a grin.

"What's your favourite?" She asked, picking up the title on top of the pile.

"The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak," I answered without hesitation.

"Whoa, for most book lovers, that one's an impossible question," Josie said, then scrunched her face up for a moment before asking, "The Book Thief is the one about Nazi Germany,

and this girl whose parents hide a Jew in their basement, right?"

"Her foster parents, actually," I corrected her on reflex. I had read and reread the book so many times that I knew almost every aspect of it inside out.

"I bet you've read that book way too many times to be healthy," Josie said.

"Well... Can reading ever not be healthy?" I queried with a mischievous grin.

"Thought so," Josie said, shaking her head and smiling.

"Oh come on," I protested, "There are worse things I could be reading, you know!"

"Yeah but so much reading about war can't be good for you," Josie argued.

We left my bedroom bantering about my unhealthy reading habits, and Josie mounted the stair railing when we got to the stairs. She slid all the way down, just like Dean always did.

There you have it, then: that was how our friendship started. One day Josie wasn't there, and before we went back to school a week after the welcome barbeque, I couldn't imagine our neighbourhood, or my day-to-day life for that matter, without her or the rest of the Parker family in it.

That was just how Josie operated. She had learned, from moving between countless houses and neighbourhoods, to slip into the pattern of a new place so quickly, so seamlessly, that nobody could detect where it was that she had entered. The rest of the Parker family, especially Liz and Rob, remained outsiders, newbies, for a while longer; they couldn't fit into their new place with a whole host of new people as easily as their kids could. But that's normal for people moving to any new place, right? But for Josie? Not so normal. She had a certain charm about her that allowed, and practically begged, people she met to welcome her, almost immediately, with open arms. Exhibit A: my entire family.

The night before school resumed, Josie and I were laying side by side on the roof outside my bedroom window. I asked her if she was nervous about her first day at a new school.

"No," she replied, her eyes fixed stubbornly on the stars, "what do I have to be nervous about? It's just another high school."

I didn't reply, but when I shifted my head to look over at her, I could see the truth plastered undeniably across her face. At the time, I had thought that she was the type of person whose every emotion overtook their features, but it didn't take me long to figure out that she could hide absolutely everything. She must have thought the inky blackness surrounding us concealed her emotions for her. "You'll be fine," I assured her.

"I know." Her reply came quietly, murmured up into the night and carried away on a cloud of foggy breath in the crisp night air.

On the first day of school, I got up and ready as quickly as possible so I could read before I had to leave home. Much to my annoyance, I only got through half a chapter before Maelle came into my bedroom, whirling in like a glittery pink hurricane and demanding that I hurry up and get going. "Do you seriously want to be late on the first day, Ava?" She asked me incredulously, rolling her eyes at me and flipping her hair on the way out.

"Shouldn't it be me telling you that?" I muttered as I got up from my bed and slung my school bag over my shoulder and threw my book down on top of the ever-growing pile on my desk before following Maelle out.

Liz told mum that the Parker kids were attending the local public primary and high schools with us, mum had organised that Dean would drive all of us, and I had promised Josie that I would show her around to save her the mortifying experience of being shown around by a teacher. Dean was not pleased with mum's new arrangement, to say the least, but he didn't dare disobey her, especially since mum made a valid point that he would waste fuel money if he just drove himself while the rest of us caught the bus. I was appointed to run over and collect the Parkers while Maelle got Dean out of his bedroom and into the car.

I jogged across the road and up the Parkers' front path to the door. I raised my fist to knock, but shouting reached my ears and I hesitated. The shrill, desperate sound leaked through the cracks around the door, it bled through the frosted glass panels on either side. As a deeper voice yelled a furious reply, I winced and unconsciously took a step back away from the door. I was just about to go back and get Dean to knock on the door when a frazzled Josie whipped the door open and pushed Nico out of the house in front of her. She slammed the door so hard behind her that the glass rattled and Nico and I both jumped.

She refused to meet my bewildered gaze until she collapsed beside me into the backseat of Dean's car, and even then she only shrugged apologetically. It was clear that I wasn't going to get an explanation anytime soon. She didn't say anything as Maelle, Nico and Mason got out at the primary school, and her face resembled a thundercloud as we climbed out of the car, emotions rumbling and rolling across her features. She kicked at the loose gravel of the high school parking lot, her face etched with frustration. Dean nudged her with his elbow, "your first day probably isn't the best time to unload all your grievances on the world, you know."

Josie didn't reply, so Dean nudged her again, "lighten up on all the doom and gloom, Little Miss Sunshine."

That at least got a smile out of her. Pulled from the depths of her self-invoked cloud of annoyance, it was tiny and reluctant, but it was there just the same. Josie got a lot of calculating looks as we walked in, kids' eyes lingering on her blue hair and black elastic choker. The expressions of surprise morphed into astonishment as they saw me walking next to Josie. The English lit geek and the bold new girl. I was sure that the rumour had already circulated that Josie had moved to my neighbourhood during the summer, and I was just as sure that nobody expected us to remain friends after Josie started school.

Our principal, Mr Murray, had mercifully placed Josie in the same homeroom as me, which I was glad about. Actually, it's not true that she was placed in my homeroom, actually. She told me later that she had begged, argued and bargained with the principal and managed somehow to weasel her way into my class. Josie's mouth was always her blessing and her curse both; her unflinching employ of words could get her straight into and out of various sticky situations. After I showed Josie where the principal's office was so she could receive her timetable, I went straight to homeroom and sat in my usual seat on the far side of the classroom.

Josie walked in ten minutes late, escorted by a frowning Principal Murray. She didn't stop to take the class in or even politely greet the teacher, she just walked straight over to the

empty seat next to mine as the principal introduced her to everyone.

"It's Josie," she corrected the principal loudly when he introduced her by her full name.

"What did you say?" Mrs Anderson, our homeroom teacher, asked in astonishment.

"I said my name is Josie," Josie repeated flatly. Nobody spoke for a moment.

I could have sworn I saw an odd look fly between Murray and Anderson before the principal afforded the class a strained smile and awkwardly exited the room. Josie plonked herself down at her desk and looked sideways to roll her eyes at me. She didn't appear to notice or care that the gazes of the entire class were still very firmly trained on her. I couldn't help but smile in response, earning myself a disappointed glare from Mrs Anderson. By the time recess rolled around, Josie had already scraped through another three similar encounters with new teachers. Some I witnessed, and others she grudgingly told me about on the way to our lockers. This manner of first impressions was piquing other kids' interest in the new girl. As if her punkish fashion sense wasn't enough to get the rumour mill up and running after summer, everyone was now discovering that with her attitude, she could walk the walk and talk the talk with ease.

At the start of recess, I grabbed my food and went straight to Josie's locker, organising the books, all of which she had carelessly thrown into the bottom of her locker at the start of the day, by subject on her top shelf. I saw the disaster approaching before Josie did, and I felt the immense urge to melt away into the background at that moment. The disaster was zeroing in on Josie's back where she was casually leaning up against the row of lockers, watching me work on hers. I muttered a warning under my breath and Josie turned around just as the disaster stopped in front of her. Said disaster goes by three names, Brit, Courtney and Lara, three of the most popular girls in our year. They introduced themselves to Josie without even so much as a glance in my direction.

"Do you want to come and sit with us at lunch? We can show you around the school, if you want?" This was from Courtney, speaking for all three of the girls. I wanted to disappear more than ever. This had happened to me on many occasions in the past: the do-gooder geek starts off showing the new girl around, but soon enough the newbie finds some friends they fit in with, and the geek is tossed aside yet again. Oh, I recognised the scenario way too well for my liking. This was the part where Josie shrugged, smiled and said 'sure, why not?' and waved goodbye to me. But to my astonishment, what came out of Josie's mouth was, "no thanks. Ava's tour guide skills are pretty hard to beat."

I froze. That wasn't right at all. Josie was supposed to be walking away from me down the hall, chatting with her new group, wasn't she? But she wasn't.

"Well have fun with that," Brit said to Josie, coming forward to stand beside Courtney, "I guess we'll see you around."

"I guess you will," Josie replied, slapping Courtney's snarky little wave right back into her face. As they walked away, she turned to look at me and I caught the end of an eyes roll before she halted at the sight of my gobsmacked expression.

"What? Did you actually think I was going to fall into their bitchy trap, did you?" She asked me, planting both hands on her hips as she turned to face me. My face spoke for me, and

she laughed, “ugh please. I’m not that stupid.” She scoffed in disgust and grinned at me. I grinned back.

“Come on, that’s enough locker organising for today,” she said, grabbing her food and slamming her locker door shut, “I’m starving.”

“Same,” I groaned as she slung an arm around my shoulders as we walked away, “we’ll see if we can find an empty spot to eat.”

Dean drove us home again after school, even though there were lots of kids offering Josie lifts in their cars or their parents’ as we walked out to the parking lot. Josie sat in the passenger seat and drove the whole way with her window wound all the way down, her head stuck into the wind and her blue hair streaming back against the seat.

We pulled into our driveway after picking up our siblings and everyone piled out of the car. Mum came running out to meet us, somehow managing to envelope all three of the little kids in one crushing, welcoming hug. She fired off the typical mothering questions about their first day of school, and they chattered enthusiastically over the top of each other to tell her about their day. They hadn’t adopted the dutiful one-word responses that to roll along with high school. We could hear the shouting coming from the Parker house all down the street that afternoon, and it continued into the night. Josie and Nico slept at our house, and my parents tried their hardest to make it a fun time, especially for Nico. Mum and dad stubbornly refused to let either of the Parker kids go home to that.

Fast forward a month and the shouting matches across the street had become routine. Josie and Nico snuck out of the house the instant they started up, and subsequently they both spent most weekends and school afternoons at our house. Mum always made sure to cook enough food to include the two of them at our dinner table. One of the rare afternoons after school that Rob was out, Maelle and Nico went over to the Parkers’ to play instead of using our living room. Apparently the Parker house had better rooms for dress-ups and hide-and-seek. The street seemed to heave a sigh of relief in the peace and quiet of Rob’s absence. Josie and I had traipsed up to my bedroom after we got home, and we had the window open with a steady breeze flowing through the room.

I was laying on my back sideways across my bed, my book held up in front of my face, and Josie was stretched out on the floor with one of her many sketchpads, her lead pencil flying furiously across the paper. We had music playing softly on Josie’s portable Bluetooth speaker, which she left in my bedroom because Rob hated when she played music in his house. I was humming along to the song playing, and I almost missed the sound of a car pulling up in the Parkers’ driveway.

“Dad’s home,” Josie announced absently, and I rolled over and pushed myself up onto my elbows so I could glimpse the car out the window.

Rob opened the driver’s door, dropped the butt of a cigarette on the driveway and crushed it into the paving with his heel. He got out of the car and drained the last drops of potent amber liquid from a brown glass bottle, throwing it in the recycling bin with a crash. He only got halfway to the front door before he realised that he had forgotten his bag. He threw his hands in the air in frustration and stomped back to retrieve it. He opened the front door and

slammed it shut again behind him. I jumped and Josie sighed as she dropped back down to her sprawling position on the carpet.

It didn't take long for the yelling to start up again. At first Josie and I ritually ignored it, but when a child's anguished cry joined the ruckus, we both shot up in alarm.

"Shit!" Josie swore loudly, leaping up and sprinting for the door, "that's Nico!"

Josie fumbled and wrestled with the doorknob, and we scrambled downstairs just in time to see Rob Parker stride into our front room, holding a crying and squirming Maelle by the scruff of the neck.

"Excuse me!" Mum cried indignantly, anger and outrage giving the lines in her skin a sudden appearance over her face, "let go of my daughter!"

Rob grudgingly obliged, with a glare of disgust pelted down on Maelle, who ran and hid behind mum the instant Rob relinquished his hold on her.

"What in god's name is this all about?" Dad asked, arching into the front room to stand with his wife, a protective arm wrapped around Maelle.

"Your disgusting little daughter can never play with my son again," Rob seethed, "and she will never be allowed in my house."

"Dad, she's eight years old!" Josie protested, the only person in the room besides Rob not frozen shock and bewilderment.

"I'll say what's harsh around here, Josephine!" Rob yelled, and Josie's face contorted with emotion, then stilled, and went as hard and expressionless as a slab of concrete.

With concrete mask firmly in place, she pushed past Rob and stalked out the front door, jogging across the street to her house. Still nobody said anything, not even Rob, until the Parkers' front door slammed shut.

"Alright, that's quite enough, Rob," dad told the man, quietly but decisively as he grabbed the swinging open front door.

"Keep her away from my son, do you hear?" Rob slurred angrily, crooking his finger at Maelle as he stepped back out of the house.

"We hear you just fine," dad said to him calmly, before slamming the door in his face.

"Mae," mum said quietly, turning around to face Maelle, who in turn looked down at the floor, "what's going on?"

Maelle said nothing, just shook her head and traced the pattern of the linoleum with wide, terrified eyes.

"Come on Maelle, Rob wouldn't have said all that for no reason. What happened over there?" Mum pushed. Maelle remained silent, but her small body started shaking. Tears dripped onto the floor.

"It's okay baby, you can tell us," mum turned to coaxing now, squatting down to rub Maelle's back in comforting circles.

"No!" Maelle burst out, looking up fearfully and backing away from mum. She wiped a clumsy, fumbling hand across her blotchy face and turned to flee up the stairs, pushing past me with an elbow to my thigh.

Mason appeared at the top of the stairs, his eyes wide with confusion behind his glasses.

“Mae, what happened?”

Maelle shoved past him too, running into her bedroom and locking the door behind her. Mum and dad started talking animatedly as they walked back into the kitchen, and I trudged back upstairs. Mason was still standing on the top step, exactly where Maelle had pushed him. “Do you know what happened?” He asked me, utterly bewildered.

I shrugged, putting an arm around his shoulders and affectionately ruffling his hair with my other hand, “it’ll work itself out, whatever it is.”

Mason nodded and sighed, and my arm slipped off his shoulder as he headed back to his bedroom.

I picked my phone up off my desk as I walked in, and went to stand near the window to text Josie. ‘u all good?’ I typed, watching her through our respective layers of glass as she picked up her phone to receive it.

She looked out the window, over at me, and gave an exaggerated nod so I could make it out. She dipped her head to type a response and I tapped my fingertips on the windowsill impatiently.

‘what happened? Nico not talking.’

I read her reply, looked up and shrugged, lifting my arms up with the gesture so she got it.

‘Maelle not talking either,’ I typed back. Josie nodded and threw her hands in the air in what I assumed was exasperation. She threw her phone down on her bed and waved to me as she left the room.

I blew out a breath, puffing out my cheeks, and put my phone back on my desk. I wanted to go and talk to Maelle, but I knew she wouldn’t say anything if I pressured her. When she came down to join the rest of the family for dinner, she didn’t say a word. At our usually loud and somewhat chaotic dinner table, you could easily have heard a pin drop. By the time I went up to bed, I was angry at Rob Parker. I wasn’t interested in what had happened anymore, I was just angry at him for silencing my vivacious little sister out of fear. By the time I called goodnight to my parents down the stairs and switched my bedroom light out, I was furious. How dare he break her like that! I lay on my back in bed, glaring miserably at the ceiling. If looks could kill, my bedroom ceiling would have had a hole burned through it.

Slowly, the house and surrounding neighbourhood wound down to the steady pulse of sleep. I was sure everyone else was long gone by the time I started feeling drowsy, so I was surprised to hear the muffled sound of a child’s feet shuffling on my bedroom carpet. My blankets shifted and a small, fragile body climbed into bed beside me. It felt like the curled-up form of a baby bird, wings and feathers tucked carefully into a ball. I wrapped my arms around Maelle and stroked her hair, feeling her ribcage expand as she let out a tired sigh. “I did something bad today, Ava,” she confessed in a haunted whisper. Guilt and fear were tangled in her voice.

“I’m sure it wasn’t as bad as you think, beautiful,” I reassured her, giving her a gentle squeeze.

“It was,” she rasped, and her body quaked with a second bout of sobs, “Rob was really angry.”

“Why don’ you just tell me what happened?” I asked her, brushing hair off her face, “I’m sure we can fix it up.”

She sighed, and for a minute, I didn’t think she was going to say anything. I was just about to tell her that it was okay and that she didn’t need to tell me when she spoke.

“I went over to play with Nico, and I brought my skirts and my glammy kit so I could do dress-ups.”

Just a sidenote, her ‘glammy kit’ was a big box (glittery and pink, of course) which she plastic jewellery and kiddie makeup.

“That sounds like fun,” I told her, willing her in my head to continue.

“I put my pink skirt on, and I was putting on my bangles and my makeup, and Nico asked if he could wear some of my dress-up stuff too.”

“Did he?” I asked, regretting that I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice.

“Maele nodded, “yeah. He wore my purple skirt and some bangles, and I asked if he wanted some makeup like mine and he said yes.”

“So you put it on for him,” I guessed, starting to piece together why Rob had blown up. For someone like Rob, coming home to find your son in a skirt and makeup rang major alarm bells, regardless of the fact that he was only eight and that he was doing absolutely nothing wrong.

“Yeah,” Maele said, nodding again. She had to stop talking for a while and take in big gulps of air until her crying had subsided enough for her to speak coherently again. I could see her tears glinting on her cheeks in the shafts of moonlight flooding in from the window.

“Rob came in when we were playing, and he got really angry at Nico,” she explained, “he took his belt off and whipped him with it and then he locked him in the bathroom.”

She got all this out in one massive breath, and then she dissolved into a quivering mess of tears and snot and hid herself under my blankets. Poor Nico. Poor Maele, too. My anger resurfaced stronger than ever and I had to fight not to roll over and scream into my pillow in frustration.

“It’s okay, it’s going to be alright,” I cooed, “hey, why didn’t you tell mum and dad about all this earlier? They would have helped you, and they could have had a talk to Rob” I asked her gently, not wanting her to clam up again. Both of my parents would have liked to have an extremely serious talk with Rob, had Maele told them the full sorry story of what happened at the Parkers’ house. Probably too serious to keep the peace, if I’m being truly honest with myself.

“I didn’t tell them because I must have done something really bad, and I was scared that daddy was going to whip me with his belt like Rob whipped Nico.”

This time I was speechless. The lump in my throat seemed to close up my airways. It was too big to swallow or speak around. When I was sure I could talk again without my voice wobbling or breaking down completely, I took her by both shoulders and said, “Maele, look at me. look at me.”

She rolled over and untangled her head from the blankets, so that we were both lying on our sides in the bed. salt water droplets made the lashes framing her big brown eyes appear darker and thicker in the semi-light. “I promise you that dad will never whip you, or smack

you, or beat you. No matter what you say or what you do wrong, he won't ever hurt you. I promise." I tapped the end of her nose with my fingertip and waited until she nodded, before enveloping her again, squeezing her to my chest protectively.

"I don't understand, Ava," she said quietly, her voice muffled by my embrace, "what did we do that was so wrong? Why was Rob so angry?"

I sighed and searched desperately for words. They all giggled and ran into hiding. I finally, after a miniature war with myself, decided to keep it simple and as truthful as I could manage, "sometimes people want you to be a certain way, the way they feel is right. Whether that is to look a specific way, or to like some things and not others. Sometimes they forget that everyone is different, and that that is perfectly acceptable. They completely forget that we are all our own unique, special person. Rob was one of those people today." Maelle didn't say anything, but she nodded and I could just about hear the cogs turning in her head as she mulled my explanation over.

I fell asleep shortly after that, with my arms still wrapped around Maelle, but when I woke up Maelle had migrated back to her own bedroom. It was Saturday, so we all just lazed around the house for most of the morning. Dean went out to play footy. Maelle played with her dolls. Mason continued building his model spaceship. I read. I didn't see the Parkers all day; they had obviously gone out somewhere all together. Nobody talked about the drama the day before, however I do know that later that day, Maelle went tentatively to mum and dad and told them what happened. They were understandably angry, but none of it was directed at her, and I'm positive mum explained everything much better than I did.

We were all asleep after an exceedingly boring day when the Parkers got home that night. Josie, however, in typical Josie fashion, decided to text me at 5am the next morning instead of even waiting for the sun to come up.

'u up?' her text asked.

'I am now,' I typed in reply, rolling my eyes and sitting up in bed.

'meet u on your roof?'

'K.'

I got up and pulled on the first set of track pants and hoodie I could find in the darkness, then pushed my window all the way open to go and sit on the roof of the veranda.

I squinted to watch a slight figure scale down the side of the Parkers' house and dash across the street. Josie climbed up and sat next to me a couple of minutes later.

"Did Maelle tell you what happened?" She asked quietly.

I nodded.

"How could he do that?" She whispered hoarsely, "take two innocent little kids and break them both like that? How could he?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to; I had thought the same thing a million times last night.

"And how do we all just accept it? Why doesn't anyone fight back?"

She asked this with frustration, not exasperation, and I felt that more than some of that frustration was directed at herself. I thought about it as we sat there in silence, hugging my knees to my chest. "Fear drives silence," I answered quietly, not even knowing myself where

the words had come from, but knowing immediately that they were true. Our matching frosty breaths melted into the night sky, and I lay down on my back. Josie followed suit.

"You should be a writer," Josie told me, turning her head to look at me across the roof.

I laughed, "there's no way I would be good enough to make a living out of it."

"Oh Ava," Josie scolded, sitting up again, "maybe it isn't about just making a living, you know? Maybe it's about doing something that you love or about chasing your dreams. You can't just sit up here and dream your life away. If you rule out every option before you even start, then how are you going to get anywhere?"

"Good speech, Josie," I told her, giggling, "very motivational."

"You know what?" Josie said, getting up and walking back towards my window.

"You're mad and I'm not," I replied sarcastically, and she grinned mischievously at me over her shoulder. Her blue hair glowed in the night.

"We're borrowing your brother's car," she informed me, "where does he keep his keys?"

"On the kitchen bench," I stupidly replied, "why? Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Josie replied shortly as she swung around my doorframe and disappeared out into the hallway.

"I hate surprises," I muttered as I padded downstairs as quickly and quietly as possible, following Josie, who was already feeling along the kitchen bench for Dean's car keys.

"Got 'em!" she announced in a triumphant whisper, "hold these for a second," she told me, pressing the keys roughly into my hand and turning to head back upstairs.

"what are you doing?" I asked, confused.

"I'll meet you in the car," was the only reply I got. I sighed and walked out to the car, sitting in the passenger seat and fitting the keys into the ignition. Josie came running out and got in the driver's seat, turning the key and starting the car.

"Do you even know how to drive?" I asked her sceptically.

"Josie turned and looked at me like I was stupid, "do I even. Oh ye of little faith," she tutted when I still looked dubious.

I turned the radio on as we pulled out of home, and neither of us spoke for a while; I knew it was futile to try and get Josie to reveal our destination. Josie drove for an hour and a half before she pulled off the highway and onto the Oceanside tourist drive. I had been hunched over, sleeping sitting up, when Josie shook me to wake me up. I sat up and when I turned to look out the window, I was greeted with a view of the sea that seemed to go on forever.

"Seriously?" I asked Josie incredulously, the excitement beginning to bubble up.

"I said I would take you one day, didn't i?" Josie said, returning my excited grin with a satisfied one of her own. I wound the window all the way down and stuck my head out, laughing gleefully as the wind whipped my hair into my face and the salty air tickled my nose.

Josie pulled up in a beach parking lot, the massive space all but deserted, and we raced each other down to the sand.

I stopped only to roll my track pants up to my knees, then I ran straight into the surf. I felt the rush and pull of waves for the first time, the swirl of the icy ocean water around my bare

legs. I buried my feet in beach sand and marvelled at how fake the sand was at the local playground. We sat on the beach and watched a pink and purple sunrise as the waves lapped at our toes.

"I gave your sister a reminder," Josie told me, and I turned to her, surprised.

"This morning?" I asked. She nodded.

"A reminder of what?"

In reply, Josie handed me her phone, switched on and open on a photo of a pencil sketch. At first glance, it could have been any little girl, but after a while, I began to notice the tiny details that made my little sister.

Josie had drawn Maelle as her rock star-princess self, dressed in the outfit she had been wearing the first time Josie met her. In the sketch, Josie had replaced her sneakers with long, heeled boots and added a tiara to her curly head of hair. Written underneath the drawing in all capitals was 'never let anyone dull your sparkle.'

"I left it on her bedside table," Josie explained with a soft smile.

"She'll love it," I told her, and I knew, with a certainty as strong as the ocean, that she would.

THE END