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To Niamh and Finn

**CRASHING  
down**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

Lucy eyes with amusement the clothes strewn over the bed. They have to be the single ugliest collection of garments she has ever seen. The Thrift Shop Ball. The final social event before the beginning of the exam period. You had to buy your clothes from the Salvos — a far cry from the sheer extravagance of the School Ball earlier in the year, which saw thousands of dollars spent on dresses and H2 Hummers and ornate hairstyles. The Thrift Shop Ball was meant to be a statement. Lucy snorts — she knows everyone else regards it as just an opportunity to blow off steam and celebrate before the exams.

This is the last week of school, the mocks are two later, and then, after that, the big ones. The final

exams. University entrance or — what? She can't even consider the possibility of not making it.

'Well?'

Lucy looks up as Georgia stands in the doorway. She is a sight. Green velvet mini over red paisley tights and knee-high brown boots.

'Beautiful,' Lucy says, laughing. 'Lydia?'

Lydia emerges from the bathroom in a floor-length blue chiffon gown with a huge diamanté brooch gathering the fabric under her breasts. The dress, which was probably the height of fashion in 1950, completely swamps Lydia's tiny frame. She looks like she is drowning in an ocean of fabric.

'Oh. My. God!' Lucy collapses on the bed in hysterics.

'What?' Lydia asks. 'Does it make my bum look big?'

'No,' Lucy says, 'but it makes your boobs look huge.' Lucy can't take her eyes off Lydia's sudden page-three-girl proportions.

Georgia reaches over and pokes one. 'Yeah, they're massive, Lyd.'

Lydia smirks. Georgia and Lucy exchange a look — they know that smirk. It's the one Lydia uses when

she is feeling incredibly pleased with herself.

'Weeeelll ...' Lydia drags the word out and turns to face the mirror, adjusting her enormous bosom as she speaks to their reflections. 'The dress was obviously too big.'

'Obviously,' Lucy and Georgia agree.

'And so I needed a little ...' — Lydia dips her hand into her cleavage and pushes her boobs up even higher — 'help.'

'Chicken fillets?' Lucy suggests.

'Ewww.' Lydia wrinkles up her nose. 'No, these.' She extracts a plastic insert from inside her bra.

'Chicken fillets,' Georgia confirms.

'What?' Lydia looks alarmed, she sniffs the plastic. 'Gross! Are these made from chicken?'

'No, Lydia.' Georgia sighs. 'That's what they're called. Could you have got them any bigger?'

'Nope.' Lydia puts the fake boob back in. 'Biggest they had. A double D. Why? Are they not big enough?'

'Seriously?' Lucy laughs. 'You look like a walking mammary gland.'

'Ewww,' Lydia says, 'what kind of animal is that?'

'Oh, Lydia!' Georgia sighs again, and then points

to the black pants-suit in Lucy's hands. 'You wearing that?'

'Yep.' Lucy holds it out in front. 'Finest PVC, circa 1981.'

'Catwoman, eat your heart out,' Georgia says.

'You're going to look hot.'

'I doubt it.' Lucy slides the tight vinyl up her legs.

'Wait till Carl sees you in that,' Lydia says. 'He may not make it to the dance.'

'Sure.' Lucy pulls the zip up her back. Does everyone think he's a sex addict? 'Man, it's tight.'

'Don't think you're going to hear any complaints from him.' Georgia raises her eyebrows. 'How come you can make some daggy old pants-suit look hot?'

Lucy hears his car, the rumbling throaty V8, from several blocks away, as he drives too fast, as usual, to her house. She opens the front door. It is raining heavily. Across the horizon are small flashes of light. The promised storm is heading their way. It could be a fierce night.

Carl is slouching against the portico, dressed in a blue velvet jacket and pink lace shirt. His tight polyester pants flare at the bottom. He offers her a

corsage and gives his slow, lopsided smile. 'Cara mia,' he says, as he always does, 'you look beautiful. You could wear a garbage bag and still look as good.'

Lucy smiles at him as he pulls her close. 'And you look like a hot '70s porn star.'

He kisses her, far too deeply, and then holds her at arm's length to assess her closely again. 'Speaking of porn stars?' He raises his eyebrows.

'Stop it.' Lucy laughs lightly and pushes him gently in the chest. Sometimes he is too intense. 'Come on, I'll get the girls — we've got to go.'

The music is thumping as they walk up the steps to the school gym. Inside, lights are flashing and a machine sporadically spurts smoke into the air. Carl squeezes her hand as he sees his friends.

‘I’m going over there. See you in a bit,’ he says.

Everyone is colourfully and hideously dressed. Lucy, Georgia and Lydia spend the first half hour admiring their friends’ outfits.

‘Far cry from the real ball, hey?’ Georgia says in Lucy’s ear.

She nods. The ball had cost her over seven hundred dollars, and that was cheap by her friends’ standards. ‘White, middle-class extravagance,’ her dad had said, coughing up half the money for her

dress. ‘It really is a crime.’

She’d tried not to feel guilty about it, but it was hard when your father was a perpetual human rights campaigner, with an overdeveloped sense of social justice. The Thrift Shop Ball had been Lucy’s idea – to redeem herself. She’d been surprised by how enthusiastically everyone had embraced the idea.

The music is loud and everyone is moving on the dance floor.

At the first notes of a Miley Cyrus song, Lydia starts twerking. Quite a crowd gathers around her as she shakes and shimmies to the music. Lucy sees the first one fly and land on Isabelle Gordon’s yellow platform boot. She starts laughing and grabs Georgia.

‘Look,’ she says, pointing to where the plastic blob sits like a jellyfish.

‘Oh my God,’ Georgia says laughing. ‘Where’s the other one?’

Lucy shrugs. Given Lydia’s reduced bust, it is clear that the other one has migrated as well. Lydia keeps the twerk up. Everyone is clapping and cheering. Isabelle is still oblivious to the boob on her shoe. Lucy and Georgia are in hysterics and then the

music ends.

A rather dishevelled Lydia approaches them, a smirk plastered across her face. ‘Well, that showed them,’ she says, adjusting her dress.

‘Sure did,’ Georgia agrees.

Lucy is laughing loudly now. ‘Maybe more than you anticipated.’

The second chicken fillet is stuck to Lydia’s beehive. Georgia sees it too and they clutch at each other for support.

‘Whaaat?’ Lydia’s hand flies to her head. Her expression transforms into one of sheer horror as she touches the plastic. ‘Oh my God!’ She pulls it from her hair, her other hand automatically reaching inside her bra.

Georgia and Lucy can’t speak.

‘Where’s the other one?’ Lydia whispers.

Lucy points to where Isabelle is now chatting to JD, one of Carl’s mates. For a fleeting second she wonders where Carl is.

Lydia sees her insert on the shoe. ‘Shit,’ she says, ‘now what do I do? Oh man, why did she have to be talking to him?’

‘Him?’ Georgia says. ‘JD? You got the hots for

him, or something?’

‘No,’ Lydia says, pushing the plastic insert back into her bra and creating a bizarre lopsided effect. ‘Don’t be stupid. How do I get it back?’

‘I don’t know,’ Lucy says. ‘You don’t want to make a boob of yourself.’

Georgia howls.

‘Just act normal,’ Georgia says, attempting solemnity, ‘or they might think you’re off your tits.’

‘No, wait, Lydia.’ Lucy feigns a straight face. ‘You really do need to keep abreast of things.’

They laugh hysterically.

‘You’re not helping,’ Lydia huffs and marches over to Isabelle.

Lucy and Georgia follow — this promises to be a fine Lydia moment.

‘Excuse me,’ Lydia says brightly, ‘sorry to intrude.’

‘Not at all.’ JD is smiling.

‘But I do believe that’s mine.’ Lydia points to Isabelle’s shoe.

‘What?’ Isabelle looks down, horrified. ‘What the hell is that?’

Lydia gracefully reaches down to pluck the boob

off Isabelle's shoe, but she has to tug at it where the adhesive has stuck. 'Hmmm, sticky,' she says to no one in particular.

Georgia and Lucy howl loudly. JD glances over at them with an amused look on his face. Isabelle looks like she has smelled something foul.

'It's a chicken fillet,' Lydia says, straightening, 'although it's not really made from chicken. Thanks for minding it for me.' She pushes it back into her bra. 'Ta-ta.'

She walks towards Lucy and Georgia and grabs their arms. 'Oh my God, oh my God,' she whispers, dragging them to the toilets. 'I have never been so embarrassed in my whole life.'

After Lydia has composed herself, and Lucy and Georgia have used every boob joke they can think of, Lucy looks for Carl. Since arriving, she hasn't seen him once. She is surprised by the irritation that surges in her. He hadn't left her side at the real ball, attentive and interested, wanting to dance with her — every song. Now where is he?

And does she really care?

That last thought surprises her. She has to

admit, she often finds him smothering, so why is she bothered by this neglect? She has had such fun tonight with her friends and it's only now that she's become aware of his absence. What is it that is annoying her here?

'Hey,' she says, finding him still in the corner with Big Al and Ben, 'want to dance?'

He's laughing at something JD is saying and turns to her, wiping his eyes.

'What? Yeah, sorry. In a sec. You go ahead, we're just in the middle of something. I'll catch you in a bit.'

She frowns and shrugs. 'Sure. Fine.' And she walks off. A sudden wave of anger washes over her. What is the matter with him?

As the night progresses, she feels herself becoming more and more uptight. She tries to get back into the mood, but even Lydia's silly antics elicit only a hollow laugh from her. She can't help glancing Carl's way, watching how he sits in the corner with his mates. So blokey and cave-man like. They look like a bunch of stoners, laughing at each other's inane comments. Anger makes her want to stalk over there and demand his attention, but pride stops her.

Suddenly she realises she is on the back foot, the power balance has shifted. He has it all.

Two hours to go and then their last school function is over. It can't end like this – so badly. And besides, she doesn't need the added drama of a complicated relationship now, when she's heading into her biggest challenge ever. She needs to talk to him.

'Hey,' she says brightly, 'want to go for a walk?'

He smiles at her and her heart lifts. As he grabs her hand, he does the most stupid thing. He turns to Big Al and pushes his own thumb into the middle of his forehead. She stiffens. They all laugh, their stupid stoner laugh. He grins at her, with bloodshot eyes. She tries not to scowl as she hears Big Al say, 'Totally pussy-whipped dude.'

It's windy outside as they walk along the deserted verandah. He puts his arm around her, but she is wooden in his embrace. That puerile behaviour he exhibits with his mates is a total turn-off. She feels so confused: one minute, smothered by him; the next, angry with him for neglecting her, for acting 'one of the boys'.

'What?' she says, suddenly realising he's talking.

'You haven't heard one word, have you?' He smiles at her and pushes her up against the wall. 'If it's not my conversation you're after, it must be my body.'

As his mouth descends on hers, she feels like she can't breathe. She feels owned. She pushes him off, more roughly than intended.

'What's the matter?' he asks.

She shrugs. She doesn't know what to say. Truthfully, she doesn't know what the matter is.

He watches her silently.

'What is it?' He grabs her arms, but his touch is too forceful.

She shakes him off. 'Nothing,' she says coldly, crossing her arms defiantly across her chest.

'Sure,' he says.

He's watching her intently. She finds it cloying. The silence stretches. He thrusts his hands in his pockets and takes a step backwards. The distance between them feels like it's growing.

'Lucy?' he says finally. 'Do you still love me?'

She can't look at him. She doesn't know the answer. Maybe she does love him. But what if she doesn't? The consequences of either response seem

unfathomable. And anyway, is there even any point in talking to him when he is in this condition?

‘I don’t know.’

He puts his hands on her shoulders. She doesn’t want to look up. But does.

‘Well, then,’ he says and his voice has an edge to it she hasn’t heard before, ‘I’ll give you time to think about it.’

And then he turns to walk off.

‘Wait, Carl,’ she says, suddenly panicked, ‘don’t go.’

But he doesn’t turn; he just lifts his hand to acknowledge he’s heard her and then enters the school hall.

That gesture angers her again. She feels shaken. This wasn’t meant to be happening. She sits on a bench, thinks she should cry. Did they just split up? She can’t go back inside and face him until she can give him an answer. And she doesn’t know what that is. She watches Carl emerge from the hall again, thinks he’s coming back to talk to her, but then sees JD behind. They head off to the car park. *Where are they going?* He’s supposed to be taking her home.

Lucy remains on the bench for another ten minutes.

She doesn’t want to face Lydia and Georgia and tell them what’s happened. *What did happen?* She shakes her head. But if she stays out here any longer, they’ll come looking for her and then she’ll have to explain. And she just can’t. So she goes inside, puts a smile on her face and pretends she’s having fun.

‘Where’s Carl?’ Georgia asks after the last song has finished.

‘And JD?’ Lydia asks.

Lucy shrugs. ‘Don’t know.’

‘You two had a fight?’ Georgia asks.

‘Carl’s been acting like a bit of a weirdo tonight,’ Lydia says. ‘Not his usual charming self. Do you think they’ve been smoking weed?’

Lucy nods. It’d explain his behaviour.

‘He’s meant to be dropping us off,’ Lydia frowns. ‘Great. I don’t want to walk in these stupid heels.’

‘I’ll call my dad,’ Lucy says, feeling humiliated.

Lydia and Georgia know not to ask anything more.

It's dark.

The wind moans through the treetops. The rain has eased but has left large puddles along the sides of the road, their surfaces still rippling under the insistent breath of the wind. Boughs have broken off in the torrential downpour, and rivulets of sand have run from the soft edges of the road.

The car has stopped at the top of the hill. Its lights, like yellow eyes, cut through the blackness, reflecting off the glossy tarmac. Inside, Carl slaps the steering wheel hard. 'Shit!'

JD watches him, worried, and passes him the joint. In the darkness, the lit end glows a brighter red as Carl inhales deeply. The air thickens with the

heavy smoke and sweet smell of weed. They sit in silence, passing the joint backwards and forwards.

'I can't believe her,' Carl spits furiously.

Instinctively, JD knows not to speak. He watches Carl's hands wringing the plastic steering wheel. He's never, in five years, ever seen Carl so mad. This is Carl the Ultimate Pacifist – the guy who'd risk his own safety to break up a fight. Outside the wind buffets the windows of the car.

'Turn the music up,' Carl says suddenly.

JD fiddles with the iPod and the sounds of reggae music fill the car. They sit silently, listening to the music and the next phase of the storm building outside. The engine is still running, and Carl's left hand grips the gear stick.

'Shit.'

'Lighten up, mate,' JD offers cautiously, as he flicks the butt out of his window. The rain has started up again and spits into the opening.

After a pause, Carl says, 'Yeah, you're right.'

JD feels an immediate lift in the tension.

'Hey,' Carl says loudly over the music, 'I feel the need ...'

'... the need for speed,' JD finishes.

Carl's foot stomps on the accelerator and the V8 roars into life. He revs it hard again. JD's hand automatically feels for his seatbelt clasp. Outside the sound of throbbing engine mixes with the howling wind.

Carl drops the handbrake and the clutch simultaneously and the V8 veers down the road. Rectangles of light from house windows and black silhouettes of trees rush past and then, suddenly, it's the end of the road. Carl pulls the wheel tightly right, but the tyres plane across the filmy surface. The wheels screech. The car spins. Drops from the bitumen into the soft shoulder. Its nose digs in and then it flips. JD automatically reaches for the dashboard as Carl grips the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles popping whitely. Crash! The back end of the car hits the road, the intrusion bars in the doors groaning metallically. JD's head whips forwards. Backwards. The momentum takes them over again. The iPod flies, then snaps back violently. The glove box spews its contents as the car flips again. And again. Finally, it rests on its roof. The wheels spinning.

In the heavy silence that follows, Bob Marley

warbles something about love. JD focuses on random words through his ringing ears: Able ... Cards ... Table ...

Along the street, more windows light up. Doors open. People run towards the yellow car.

JD is hanging upside down, suspended by his belt. He turns his head, but pain sears through his spine and into his ears. Carl is slumped sideways; blood trickles from his nose and ears. Reggae music thuds through the car.

A man shouts to JD through the crumpled and shattered window. 'Hey, you alright?'

JD tries to turn his head again. Each movement causes him to yelp with pain. 'I'm okay,' he croaks.

The man reaches through and turns the music off. The silence is loud. Then the rain comes again. Beating relentlessly against the undercarriage of the car.

'Ring my dad,' JD tries to say, but his throat is choking on sand. He whispers the numbers.

The man punches them into a mobile, while another calls triple zero. A floral breasted woman cries, 'Get them out. For the love of God, get them out.' But everyone ignores her.

Outside the car, JD hears voices and movement. How many people are there? How long will it take to rescue them? He turns his head again and feels the bones rubbing together, like unoiled cogs. The pain makes him stop. But he glances at Carl out of the corner of his eye. Carl, hanging from his seat, unmoving. The blood has trickled around the edge of his mouth and down the sides of his neck.

‘Carl,’ JD manages to whisper through the sand in his throat. ‘Dude.’

Carl doesn’t respond.

It feels like they’ve been hanging there an eternity. JD is aware of the sand down his back. It fills the console of the car, sand everywhere. It’s like they’ve been buried alive. He feels panic rising in his throat. Carl still hasn’t moved at all, and JD realises the truth: Carl is dead. And he is buried alive with him. He yanks at the clasp of his seatbelt, but pain electrifies his body. Then he notices the splintered bone poking through his ripped Levis — grotesque, obscene. And he can’t feel it, can’t feel a thing. He can’t breathe and his heart is racing.

The same man from before appears at the

window. ‘They’re coming, mate,’ he says. ‘I can hear them.’

And JD hears them too, the sound of sirens. The high-pitched ambulance, the long warbling fire truck, the multi-toned police.

Within moments, it seems, they have set up high-powered spotlights around the car. The rain beats down mercilessly. Against the powerful lights, the raindrops glitter like small stars. JD fixes on their straight route to the ground while the car shakes and shrieks as the jaws-of-life slices it open.

A helmeted firefighter sticks his head through the new opening. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Douglas,’ JD whispers, ‘Tan.’

‘Right, Douglas, we’ll have you out in a sec. How’s your mate doing?’

‘I don’t know.’ JD pauses to breathe. ‘He’s not moving, hasn’t since we crashed. I don’t know.’

‘It’s okay, mate. We’ll have you both out in a jiffy.’

JD is strapped to a board, his neck secured by a brace and another strap. He hears someone shout, ‘Spinal,’ and it terrifies him. As they push him hurriedly to the ambulance, he searches out of the

corner of his eye but can't see Carl.

'My friend?' he asks the ambulance officer, but she shakes her head grimly in the rain.

Then he hears Carl's dad. He's here. His voice is loud. As they push JD into the back of the ambulance JD hears him, his voice breaking. 'Carl, oh no ... Carl ... My son.'

4

Lucy has spent most of the night awake, alternating between sadness and anger. Now, in the yellowing light of morning, she gains perspective on what happened. It was everything suddenly becoming real that had tripped her out. School rushing to an abrupt end. Exams looming larger than life – carrying with them all her fears and insecurities. She'd been a little distracted lately; her Lit teacher had warned her to stay focused, with the mocks only two weeks away. She's worked so hard, has spent her whole life preparing for these exams, and she isn't going to let anything derail her. And her relationship with Carl, which at the beginning had been so easy, now seemed complicated. Okay,

maybe she had been a bit melodramatic last night — a bit freaked out — but all he'd had to do was talk to her. Allay her fears. All she had really wanted was some words of comfort. He'd always been great at talking her out of her anxiety. His whole approach to life was to chill out. She knew he would make her feel okay. Relax and not panic anymore. But he hadn't. He'd embarrassed her in front of his mates and then acted like a Neanderthal, groping her against the wall.

As she showers and dresses for school, she remembers when she'd first noticed that Carl liked her. He'd hung out with the same group of mates for as long as she could remember. Big Al — a flaming redhead who towered above everyone in their year. There was Ben, who always appeared so quiet but had classic wit. And JD — probably Carl's best friend, if guys even thought in those terms. JD was smart and academic. He didn't really fit in with the other guys, who were into their sports and not their studies, but JD and Carl worked together at The Cake Shop. An interest in weed and the FA Cup had bonded them tightly. She'd always thought of them as a group of jocks and stoners, had never really paid

any attention to them, until she'd gone to buy a cake for Georgia's birthday.

She stood at the counter and Carl emerged from the kitchen, wearing an apron covered in flour dust. He looked embarrassed when he saw her.

'Hey,' he said, 'how you doing?'

'Good.' She waved her hand in front of her face. The air-conditioning in the shop was broken. 'I'm hot.'

He smiled at her and it was the first time she'd ever really looked at him properly. 'I think you're totally hot,' he said.

She laughed out loud. She'd never expected something so forward from him. After that she always noticed him and realised he was watching her, too. There was a definite tension between them at school. Looks were passed, little comments made, an attraction developed.

Then one day when she was walking past their group, wearing an over-sized flower in her hair, Big Al shouted sarcastically, 'Hey, that's a nice big flower.'

She didn't pause in her stride, just kept walking,

and threw back over her shoulder, ‘Yeah, I bet that’s what people say about you, too.’

The entire group howled with laughter and Big Al went bright red.

Carl found her that afternoon at the bus bay.

‘Want a lift?’ he asked, pulling his yellow Ford against the kerb.

And she thought: why not? She jumped in his car and he roared off, leaving a trace of rubber on the road.

‘Calm down, rev-head,’ she warned.

And he laughed — he had a great laugh — and when he did his brown eyes sparkled. ‘I blame you,’ he said, ‘you get all my engines revving.’

He asked her to the movies that night. She agreed; her own heart was hammering from being around him. He was so hot, and sweet. She’d felt nervous getting ready, but when she opened the door she could see that he liked what he saw. He didn’t try and hide it — ever.

‘Cara mia,’ he said, ‘you are so beautiful.’

Since then, it had been on.

The two of them don’t really socialise at school

— he sits with his mates, and she with hers. But after school and on weekends they always hang out together. He’s always so admiring, telling her how beautiful she is, listening intently to her stories. He’s taken her places, bought her gifts. The attention was flattering, made her feel like the most desirable girl in the world. But lately she’s been noticing more and more how little they have in common, and that attentiveness, once so attractive, has become smothering. She talks of her plans for uni — getting into Law — and travelling; he doesn’t know what he wants to do, or where he is heading. In his typical way, he says he’ll figure it out as he goes along. And that cavalier nature, once so appealing, has been slightly irritating.

‘Lucy!’ Mum calls from downstairs. ‘You’re going to be late!’

Lucy realises she’s been sitting on the end of the bed, staring at her untied shoes. She gives herself a shake. She needs to take some action.

Last night had gone badly but she knows she needs to get her life back on track. Maybe she’d been a bit emotional. But he’d been such a jerk. Suddenly it’s clear. It was the fear of being alone that had

prevented her from saying the truth last night: that she didn't love him. And fear is not reason enough to stay with him.

It's over.

She talks to herself on the bus on the way to school. Sure, things are bad, but she can get through this. She knows she can. She knows what she wants.

When the bus pulls in to the school bay, she is still scared of what lies ahead. Can she really do it — face him and confirm what she couldn't tell him last night? *I don't love you. It's over.* But if she doesn't, what will happen? He is happy with this, plodding along together — no real direction or goal — rolling with it, probably forever. Forever. That's not the vision she has for her future. She has to do it — say those words to him. It's going to be hard to see the pain in his eyes, to listen to him plead his case — because she knows he will. But she has to be strong. She needs to think about the future, what she really wants out of life. Not his vision but hers. Any deviation from that would be a mistake.

Lucy makes her way through the other students heading for homeroom. It's hard to believe school is nearly finished. They have been such a solid group, the last two years bringing them together so tightly. Sharing exam pressure and socialising to let off steam has seen most of the bitchiness and cliques disappear. She loves school — the routine and the safety — but she's looking forward to a new life, too: university.

She needs to find Carl before homeroom. It seems like bad timing, but she tries to reason with the panic in her gut: it is better now than later. She heads for the Year 12 common room, an area with a small servery with an urn, coffee, milk — one of the

privileges of sticking out high school. She knows she'll find him there. She enters the room but it's almost empty. She checks her watch. Last night's dance is no excuse; final assessments are due and everyone needs to be here today.

Big Al is heading her way. He doesn't smile when he sees her, but grimaces. Her stomach flips. He must know about last night. Carl must have told him.

'Lucy ...' He grabs her arm as if to restrain her.

'Get off,' she says, shaking his hand away. Al may be one of Carl's close mates, and angry with her, but she won't be manhandled by anyone.

'Sorry.' He drops his hand; automatically, his cheeks burn red.

She notices his reaction with surprise.

'Wait a sec.' He lifts his hand again, but then doesn't know what to do with it and leaves it hanging loosely in front of them.

'What?' she asks, suddenly scared. Something is terribly wrong.

'Last night, JD and Carl ...' He pauses and looks out the window.

She follows his gaze and there they are, all the Year 12s, gathered in small groups in the courtyard.

Watching their subdued movements, she knows their voices are low.

'What, Al?' She tries not to shout.

'An accident,' Al says softly. 'Carl smashed his car.'

She knows he's not lying by the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice, but despite herself she says, 'Very funny, Al.'

'It's no joke.' His hand reaches out again and stops mid-air. 'I went round to pick up JD for school this morning. His dad had just got back from the hospital. He's in intensive care. Broken neck.'

Broken neck. She's not sure what to do with this information. 'Carl?' she asks.

Al won't meet her eyes.

Her stomach gurgles. She presses against it to silence it.

'Coma,' Al says, really softly. 'He hasn't woken up since the crash.'

'Right.' She speaks so calmly it surprises her. 'Thanks.' And then, ignoring his bewildered look, she walks off to homeroom.

Around her the lower years are rushing through the halls. It must be after the second bell. She

realises she can't hear properly. She feels like she's in a bubble and as she walks on, clutching her schoolbag over her shoulder, the bubble seems to shrink around her. Her ears feel blocked. She tries yawning to pop them, but it doesn't work. A boy from debating calls out to her.

'Hey, Lucy.' He waves.

'Hi ...' — and suddenly she has no idea what his name is, which is odd, as she's been third speaker to his first for three years now — '... there.' She finishes lamely, her voice sounding muted in her head.

He frowns and moves on.

She passes JD's homeroom. Normally he'd be at the back with Ben and Al. She sees most of the 12s are gathered around the teacher's desk. Sarah is crying, which makes Lucy feel angry — Sarah doesn't even know them. She feels a moment of confusion, not sure where to go. Homeroom was her destination, but she doesn't want to talk to anyone — certainly can't handle the details right now. Instead she slips up the walkway past administration and out into the car park.

His yellow Ford is noticeably absent. Her stomach groans again — she feels violently ill. She

pulls out her mobile. The lack of messages from him last night had fuelled her anger even more, but now she knows why: he was trapped in a wreck, or in the back of an ambulance on the way to hospital.

It was her fault. The realisation causes her to gag. If she hadn't argued with him, he wouldn't have left the ball.

She hits her mum's number and it answers almost immediately.

'Just texting you,' her mum says. 'You alright?'

Her mum already knows. Lucy feels herself shaking her head. 'Yeah, but I want to come home.'