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HOLDEN

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Do you know the feeling of walking on a bitumen road barefoot at night after a blistering hot day? It's rough and warm on the pads of your feet.

Do you know the feeling of skipping past people's open windows, the golden glow of their bedroom lamps, the flicker of their televisions, while you're free and unseen? Crickets chirping. The dark sky is calm yet throbbing with life. The stars are the sparkling eyes of animals watching you from the inky blackness.

It's happening to you. Aged fourteen, and finally in love.

Damien is beside you, the new boy who appeared last week. You've promised to share a secret, and he's agreed to follow. You walk in the middle of the street; the whole road is yours to own. You're so full of energy, you could fly over the rooftops. You grin and look at Damien and look away again. When he walks, his angular shoulders tilt from side to side.

You're certain that he will change his mind and ecstatic for every second that he remains.

So where are we going? he says.

Just come with me, you say.

He's taller than you, the only other kid at school who can claim that. Term three, and he appeared out of nowhere – long eyelashes, hands in pockets, and those freckles, covering him like magic dust. He didn't know your name; he didn't know your lore; he saw you as freshly as you saw him. In the school quadrangle during PE warm-ups, your class sprinted from line to line. For the first time ever, you were the fastest, hitting each end first, bending gracefully to tap the ground, barely breathing during the performance.

Look at me, I'm a gazelle.

His eyes tracked you the whole time.

You turn at the gate.

Is this your place? he says.

Yep, you say.

Where is everyone?

Mum's gone out.

What about your dad?

He lives in Queensland. I've got a little sister, but Mum took her with her.

You continue down the dim driveway, get to your tiptoes to reach over the tin fence and wrestle back the bolt. Your long hair sticks to your shoulder blades.

Come on, you say.

Damien follows you through the ankle-high grass. The dirt is like powder between your toes. There's shadow here, but the amber streetlights show the way. Your father's abandoned Holden sits hulking in the weeds. You spent most of today in the front seat with a worn Enid Blyton novel resting against the steering wheel, all the car windows wound down, reading once more about George, Timmy and Ann.

Oh, cool car, Damien says.

That's not the secret, you say.

You heave the boot open. There's a mewling sound, and your eyes adjust to the murkiness inside. It's the same musty smell as always, but with something new and tangy added. You watch as Damien leans forward and stares at the white cat, the wriggle of soft bodies around it.

Kittens, he says. Are these yours?

Yep. That's our cat.

What's its name?

We just call it Puss.

How many kittens are there? he says.

Six, I think.

What are you gonna do with them?

Dunno. Mum will probably wanna chuck them away.

Nah, she wouldn't do that?

She would. She'd chuck them in the bin, she wouldn't care.

We should find homes for them, he says.

Do you want one?

Is that why you brought me here?

No, I just wanted to show ya.

Cool.

Damien straightens, and you're standing almost arm to arm. Everything inside you is screaming to move closer but you hold your breath instead.

Do you need to feed them? he asks.

Don't think so, they just get milk off the mum.

Maybe you should feed her, then?

Okay.

You close the boot again, lowering the wide door carefully. You shut Ellie in here, once. It wasn't mean, it wasn't a trick, she wanted to be in there. Ellie likes hiding; she's always hiding behind doors and under beds. Once, when you were visiting one of Mum's new fellas, Ellie hid in the thin space between his sofa and the wall. It was an old house near the beach; it had the biggest veranda you'd ever seen, with stone pillars that were icy to touch. The paint was peeling off almost every wall. Mum and the fella were drinking for hours, huddled around a glass coffee table that became fuller and fuller of empty cans and cigarette butts. You wedged yourself into a sagging beanbag and read a book you found in one of the rooms: a graphic novel full of cowboys. The fella tried to coax Ellie out, and Mum said to leave her alone, she'd be fine. But the fella wouldn't let it go; he called to Ellie in a little singsong voice, and when that didn't work, he lay flat on his belly and tried talking to her. After a bit, his voice grew louder. He shouted at her to come out, and Mum said he was giving her a headache. He stood up and dragged the couch away from the wall, grabbed Ellie by both her arms and dumped her onto an armchair. The fella was breathing loudly and Ellie started to wail. Your Mum gave you one look; you took Ellie's hand and darted outside.

You walked home that afternoon. It took almost an hour, but you sang a silly made-up song and Ellie joined in.

Damien follows you to the back door now, and waits as you wriggle the key from your jeans pocket. Sometimes you forget the key, leave it in your desk at school, and you have to wait for your mother to get home from the pub. Days like this, they're the good days, when you have the house to yourself, everything is still and silent, even Mum's ceramic figures are smiling at you.

The cement laundry floor is cool beneath your feet. You scoop the cat bowl from the ground and hand it to Damien as if this is a two-person job. His hair hangs into his eyes as he watches you scatter biscuits into the bowl. Gold, maroon, purple, in triangles and stars – prettier than your own breakfast cereal.

Give her heaps, he says. She'll be hungry.

You smile and keep pouring.

The front door slams. Damien drops the bowl; its plastic rim bounces on the floor and biscuits scatter like hail.

Mum's back, you better go, you say.

He turns and is out of the laundry door without a word. You fall to your knees and begin sweeping the food into a pile.

There's Mum's heels on floorboards, the keys clattering onto the kitchen table. Then she's standing with Ellie in the doorway. Your little sister chews on a strand of her hair.

What the bloody hell is going on, Mum says.

I dropped the bowl, you say.

Forget about the stupid cat. Get Ellie something to eat.

You leave the gathered biscuits in the bowl, sprinkled with dust. Ellie follows you as you open the fridge.

Cheese sandwich? you ask, and she nods.

The white bread is days old, so you cover it in plenty of margarine and press two careful cheese slices over the top.

Eat the crust, you tell Ellie. You remove your own piece of cheese from the plastic and fold it into your mouth at the same time as your stomach rumbles. Your feet still smart from the bitumen, your arms glisten from the warm night. Mum has turned the music on in the lounge room. A depressing song, a man singing about a woman casting a spell on him. Always blaming the woman.

You stand and watch Ellie chewing.

What happened? Why are you home so early? you ask.

Ellie shrugs. The skin beneath her eyes looks like a soft, grey bruise.

Was Gordy there? you say.

This time Ellie nods.

Did they fight?

She nods again, her eyes serious.

You sigh. Gordy might appear later tonight. Probably when everyone is bed; knocking on the door and the windows and begging to be let in. And Mum will let him in, but only after he's shouted for a while about how much he loves her.

You creep to your dark bedroom, kneel on the mattress and put your nose to the net curtains. There's a boy-shaped figure perched on the low fence between your yard and the neighbour's. A current courses through your body; you push the curtains aside. Damien stands and waves cautiously and you display the fingers of one hand: five minutes.

Your mother screams your name.

Get your sister in the bath!

Yes, Mum.

You fill the bath deep enough to cover Ellie's thighs, then she sits in the tub and washes a naked Barbie with a flannel while you stare into the speckled mirror. Does Damien think you're pretty? Lots of people say you're pretty. Your teacher said so. You help Ellie from the bath; you're kneeling and drying her brown legs when your mother appears in the doorway.

You little pervert, she says.

You look up at her, her arms folded across her chest. Some of her make-up is worn off; there are dots of mascara over the tops of her cheeks. She turns and stumbles away; you keep drying Ellie. Your sister's mouth has fallen into one of her exhausted pouts. You tug a nightie over her head, steer her into her room and under the sheet. She lies on her side and her eyes shut without a word.

Mum's music gets louder and you close Ellie's door quietly behind you. How long has it been? More than five minutes. You trot through the kitchen, the laundry, and swing open the back door. The air has grown cooler and you gulp it like it's a fresh drink. Slink past the kitchen window, wrangle open the gate once more, and you're about to dash down the driveway but Damien is standing right there.

Sorry, he says, *didn't mean to scare ya*.

That's okay. You're breathing loudly, like you've been running for miles.

Thought we could go sit in the car. Damien nods towards the old Holden.

Good idea, you say.

As you walk through the grass you want to hold Damien's hand but your body refuses to respond. It's always the way; you move around the world in a numb shell, letting things happen to you, unable to grab at the good things.

A sharp stone digs into your heel, you yelp and hobble to the car.

Are you okay? Damien says.

Yep, just a stone, you smile. *Thanks for waiting*.

No worries.

You lean against a car door. Damien moves close, you're toe to toe, your fingers braid together and each linked finger sends sparks through you. You want to kiss him but you're not sure how, you've never kissed anyone on the lips before. It's already overwhelming to be looking straight into his eyes, with him staring back.

Then there's shouting from the front of the house, and pounding at the door. It echoes over the neighbourhood and inside your chest.

Rae! Rae, let me in!

Gordy has arrived. Earlier than expected.

Shit who's that? Damien whispers.

Mum's boyfriend, you say.

You drop Damien's hands, ease open the Holden's back door and you both crawl over the torn bench seat. You keep your heads low, your limbs tangle together for a moment, but then you both kneel neatly and peer through the dirty back window. Damien looks like a spy, you start to giggle; you can't help yourself, and you feel Damien chuckling too.

There's more thumping at the front of the house, then rapping on windows.

Rae! C'mon baby, I'm tired, lemme in.

Gordy is walking the perimeter. Sometimes the neighbours call the police. You've watched a cop grip Gordy by the back of the neck and march him over the yard like a disobedient dog. Mum ran out after them, crying and saying she was sorry, screaming at the cop to let him go.

He'll be wearing his white tank top or his navy blue tank top, silver necklace bouncing over his chest. He sculpts his thinning hair into a gelled mass down the centre of his head. He's shorter than Mum, not by much, but enough so that you can look him in the eye these days. Not that you want to. Gordy moves from affable to irritable to mean. When Mum has been drinking all day and begins to spit venom, he sits by and cheers her on. Lately, his eyes have been tracking you closely. When you're making food, when you're walking through the lounge room after school, he doesn't say a word, he watches, with a tiny smile on his lips.

The back gate opens now, scraping and screeching over the concrete path. You feel Damien shrink beside you. You're huddled against each other, skin to skin. The car is cloying after sitting in the sun all day.

Gordy stomps along the path at the back of the house.

Stop being a bitch, Rae!

You remember the laundry door; you left it unlocked. It opens with a crash and you imagine the look of surprise on Gordy's face.

I better go, Damien says.

You want to tell him: No, don't go. But you stay quiet as he slips from the car.

You sit slumped. Why did your mother come home early? Why did Gordy have to follow her? This warm night, that beautiful sky, your exhilarating freedom. Walking down the middle of the road. Damien staring at you. It's all been taken away.

You lie across the back seat, pull your knees towards your chest.

When you open your eyes, the morning sun is beaming off a car side mirror. You move your sore limbs and walk to the house. You desperately need to pee, and your stomach is growling. You have to get ready for school.

You walk into Ellie's room. There's a bigger shape under her pink blanket – your mother, her arms wrapped around her gut, gently snoring. The air smells stale. You kneel to look under the bed: no Ellie. You check your room but your little sister isn't there either; not on the sofa watching cartoons, not in the bathroom brushing her teeth.

You push ajar the door to the main bedroom. The curtains are pulled tightly closed and it's difficult to see in here. There's piles of clothes over the floor and the stench of cigarettes. Gordy is on his back, mouth open, silver necklace hanging like a hatchling snake. You tiptoe through the mess, crouching and searching. *Ellie*, you hiss.

What's up? Gordy growls.

Where's Ellie?

How should I know?

He rubs his face.

What are you doing in here?

I told you, looking for Ellie.

Really? Weird place to look for Ellie.

She's not in her bed.

Okay. Gordy lifts his chin, smiles. He pats the mattress. *Come here*, he says, *sit down.*

No, I don't want to, you say.

Don't be silly. Sit down. His tone is more forceful.

You feel a burbling anger. You march from the room; you feel like crying. You race back to your mother and prod her arm.

Mum I can't find Ellie.

She keeps her eyes squeezed shut. *Leave me alone.*

Where's Ellie? you raise your voice.

Your mother slaps out at you, but misses.

You run from the room and onto the tiny front porch, where you scan the street.

There's a black crow cawing in the gum tree across the road. Why did you stay in the car all night? Ellie could have been searching for you. She needed you.

You run back into the house and check behind more furniture. It's getting late; Ellie should be eating her cereal by now, dripping milk onto her chin. You'll hold her hand crossing the road while you drop her at school.

In your room, you pull on socks and sneakers. You storm out into the backyard, towards the Holden. There's squeaking coming from the boot. Heart in your throat, you tug it open. Ellie is coiled inside. Hair is stuck to her damp face. The kittens are wobbling about on unsteady paws and Puss has disappeared.

Ellie!

Even though she's nine years old now and her arms and legs are long, you bend and haul her out. You hold her on your lap as you prop yourself on the boot's edge. She watches you crying.

What's wrong? she asks.

You scared me, you say.

Sorry.

That's okay.

Puss lopes out from behind the rainwater tank, high-stepping over the grass, intensity in her almond eyes. She leaps into the space behind you and her brood quickly surrounds her.

Let's name the kittens, you say.

I thought we weren't keeping them, Ellie says.

I reckon we can look after them. Don't you?

Okay. Ellie points to the nearest kitten. *That can be Little Puss.*

You laugh and clutch Ellie. You think about washing this old car, inside and out. You could bring pillows and a blanket, maybe a water bottle and snacks for the glove box.

You already stash books beneath the seats. You marvel at how lucky you both are.

The Holden can be like another house; not every kid has a shelter like this in their backyard.