

Skey

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PANTERA
PRESS

‘You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.’

JANE GOODALL

Chapter 1

‘Watch out!’ I shout as Aunt Paula yanks the steering wheel to the left, swerving to avoid the oncoming truck.

‘You okay, Sky?’ Paula asks.

‘Yeah.’ I roll my eyes, trying to slow my breathing. ‘Great.’

‘Sorry, sweetie.’ She pats my knee. ‘Didn’t see that coming.’ She reaches for another tissue to wipe her eyes. She’s been crying for days, and if she doesn’t calm down she will get us killed.

‘Can I turn on the radio?’ I ask.

‘Don’t you want to talk for a bit?’ Paula blows her nose.

‘Music’s good.’ I return my forehead to its resting spot on the car window. I’m in no mood to chat, especially about Mum.

Outside there is a blue spring sky. The concrete barrier framing the highway whooshes past, occasionally lowering to reveal a poor scraggy gum tree; a lone survivor, like me. There’s nothing interesting to see, but it still beats conversation.

I have nothing to say about my mother and the last thing I feel like doing is talking.

Being fifteen is supposed to be hard. But I wish my problems were nothing more than homework, pimples, bad hair days and boys.

My mum died last week and I'm moving to the country to live with my aunt and uncle, who I hardly know. I'm also starting at a new school in three days, in the middle of the last term. It's a nightmare and I can't wake up.

'What kind of music do you like?' Aunt Paula switches on the car radio. 'We don't get all the Sydney stations out in West Creek ... mostly talkback in our neck of the woods.'

I put my hand on my belly, feeling it gurgle with anger and sadness. A new wave of resentment hits; unless I can find it online, I may never listen to my favourite radio station again. One more thing taken away. At home, I always ate breakfast with the cheerful voices of the radio hosts, their banter and the top ten the soundtrack to my morning routine. Mum left at dawn to work at her bakery, but she always filled me a bowl of toasted muesli and almond milk, put out my B12 supplement and squeezed a shot of orange juice for me in winter to boost my vitamin C. Mum's bestie, a ginger-haired super hippie named Melody, lived with us. But she worked nights and slept in late, so I ate alone.

My eyes sting with the memory. But if I cry that will mean this nightmare is real.

‘Guess I’ve got a lot to get used to,’ I mumble.

‘Sorry, what was that?’ Paula says.

‘Nothing,’ I say.

‘I’m so out of touch with music,’ she continues. ‘Your mum and I always swore we’d never be those pathetic women who only like songs from their youthful glory days, but now I’m just like that.’ Her voice smiles. ‘An old bat.’

You’re not old, I should dutifully protest, but I just don’t have the energy to engage.

Paula brushes a wisp of fine brown hair behind her ear. Mum was the little sister, two years younger than Paula. Ages ago, my aunt married David, a country boy, and moved out to the middle of nowhere.

I study Paula’s face. Almost unfamiliar. Paula and Mum shared the same nose and chiselled chin, but Mum was much prettier, all sparkling green eyes and long wavy hair that she often plaited to one side.

Paula’s barely been in my life for years because of some fight she had with Melody when Melody first moved into our flat. It was so bad that Paula refused to visit after that. Mum stood up for Melody and said it was her home too; even if Paula didn’t like her, Mum insisted that Paula had to deal. But Paula said if we wanted to see her anymore, we would have to drive out to stay with her instead. West Creek is hundreds of kilometres away and Mum worked Saturday mornings, even holidays, which made it totally impractical. I don’t get why Paula hates Melody so much. But I’m her

only niece, she's my only family and their stupid fight affected me too. Just like my useless father, she didn't care enough to stay for me.

But the drama didn't end there. After Mum got sick with cancer, she and Paula had another fight. Neither of them would tell me what that was about either.

Finally, Paula finds a station and turns up the volume. The barrier finishes and the landscape is dotted with garish red and yellow McDonald's signs and those of other fast food chains.

It brings back a memory.

'Let's convince Macca's and those big chains to switch to free-range eggs,' Mum had said a year ago. 'We'll start an online petition.'

'But the free-range egg industry buys its hens from breeders who kill millions of male chicks, remember?' I promptly googled an article from the RSPCA to show her. I turned vegetarian two years ago and for the last eight months I've been vegan. This was one of the reasons I switched.

'I know, but better something than nothing, don't you think?' Although Mum couldn't make the jump from omni (that's what veggos call people who eat animal products) to vegan, she was super supportive. 'But if you want, we can start another petition for them to add a veggie burger. How's that, Sunshine?'

We didn't end up doing either. Too busy, I guess. Now it will never happen.

Mum and I shared a love of animals.

Sky

Our building didn't allow pets, but Mum always pounced on dogs in the street, showering them with cuddles, their owners taken aback by the strange woman with long bohemian plaits interwoven with shells and beads. And I'm the same. When I walk around, I see only one thing. Dogs. I love them all: black, brown, spotted, shaggy and curly, noses long or piggy, eyes bulging or almond. Back home, I knew all my neighbourhood residents through what lay on the ends of their leads. Mum and I dreamed of flying to Indonesia to see the orangutans (her favourite animal) and then to China to trek in search of pandas, which are my favourite. Unlike everyone I know, I've never been overseas, or even on a plane. Now those dreams, like everything else, are shattered.

I notice a piece of cuticle on my thumb and bite it off. All my nails are chewed. The habit started at the hospital during the last weeks of Mum's losing battle with cancer.

Try falling asleep in a squeaky trundle bed with your mum withering away by your side. If you google the opposite of relaxing, that would be it. The beeping and buzzing of machines didn't help; neither did the nurses, their desk outside her room, stirring teas with spoons clanking, squawking about the latest gossip. To pass the time I chewed my nails, wandering the halls, hashtagging reality away and re-reading old books.

I'd check on Mum for the millionth time and eventually drift off counting the seconds, usually four,

between her Darth Vader inhales and exhales. It was almost peaceful, like the yoga class we once went to where we learnt Ujjayi breath that sounds like the ocean. Mum spent a week in that room until the cancer finally ate her up.

Biting my nails passes the time, but really I'd chew my hand off like a dingo in a trap, I'm hurting that much.

'Fancy stopping for something to eat?' Paula checks her watch. 'There's a roadside cafe coming up soon.'

'If you want to.' I pull down the rear-view mirror to make myself presentable. I take off my sunglasses, sweep my hair into a ponytail and inspect the red spot on my nose, clearly visible even among the hundreds of freckles. My eyes, well they're just plain weird. One green and the other brown. The green one matched Mum's and the brown must come from my father, but who's to know since I've never even seen a picture of him. I put the sunglasses back on, pull out lip balm and dab it on my dry and chapped mouth, then try to flatten the frizzy hair on the side of my forehead.

Mum, Melody and her gaggle of girlfriends all swooned and said I was 'growing into a beautiful young woman'. I had a huge growth spurt last year and my legs shot straight up, making a vertical line from my thighs to hip bones to rib cage. No hourglass figure for me. There's barely a curve, especially on my chest where I need it most.

I push the mirror back into place, and Paula puts her hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. 'You okay?'

she asks, her eyes watery again. I nod, shaking her off. But when she returns her hand to the steering wheel, my shoulder feels cold.

We pull off the highway.

‘Here we are, I’m starving.’ Paula parks between a trailer and a truck on a sprawl of oil-stained concrete. She pulls out a purple sparkly wallet that contrasts with her plain jeans and cotton shirt. It reminds me of the violet curtains with hundreds of tiny mirrors sewn on them that Mum described to me once. They hung in her and Paula’s shared university flat. ‘Just imagine it, Sunshine! You would have loved it,’ Mum said, because purple’s my favourite colour and I also love things a little hippie.

University was where Mum met my father, Adam. Mum was studying arts, and Adam, biology.

I’ve overheard enough grown-up conversations to know their gang was a bit wild: skipping class and failing exams. Some of them remained friends, like Melody. One night, years ago, I woke to the sound of her laughter and the clinking of wineglasses, and overheard my father’s name. When I asked Mum to tell me about him, she said it was just a stupid fling. She must have read my mind. ‘Not stupid!’ She hugged me tight, whispering, ‘You were my gift, the best thing I’ve ever done.’ But I pulled away.

Mum told me when Adam found out about the pregnancy he took off—last known working the Alaskan salmon fisheries. ‘His name isn’t worth mentioning,’ she

said. ‘Sorry, Sunshine.’ I tried to get more information from her, but she never told me anything else, not even his last name.

Now I’m mad. How could she have been so selfish? I don’t even know what my father looks like. I tried to find him on Facebook last week after Mum’s funeral, putting aside my fears that he’s not worth it, just like Mum said. Only a scumbag would leave his pregnant girlfriend. And what about his unborn child? He never called to find out how we were? Who does that? But I thought someone should tell him about Mum, imagined I’d miraculously find him with a quick search for *Adam*, *Alaska* and *University of Sydney*, and he’d come and rescue me, all regrets and big love, and we’d head off for a brand new life together. Father and daughter. Without the salmon.

There are millions of men called Adam, and after a few hours I gave up. Keeping me from my father as well as fighting with my aunt? Not okay, Mum. If only she were here, I’d scream at her.

I open the car door and a cold wind smacks me in the face. Shivering, I grab my red woollen poncho. We’d found it trawling through racks of second-hand clothes in our local op-shop; Mum bought a crochet top. Suddenly I hate the stupid thing, too bright and with annoying long tassels. It reminds me how far away I am from my home, from Mum. But I can’t cry; Paula is doing enough of that.

I follow her inside and scan the large takeaway fridge: ham sandwich, chicken salad, sausage roll. I look around

quickly before taking a picture. I post it on Instagram with the caption: *Where are the #veggie choices? #teenvegan #westcreek #westcreekanimallovers*, just in case there's a single soul out there who cares. I can use the photo later on a new guest blog post I'm writing for an animal-lovers website. I've already written two posts and had two comments and a thumbs up. I've been asked to write another but don't know what it will be about yet. Even though I'm nowhere near good, I love writing and it's good to practise.

It also kept me semi-sane during Mum's treatment, as well as feeding my Instagram account. I keep myself anonymous as *VeggieGirl* and my profile pic is a baby panda. A tiny fluffy ball of black and white—literally nothing more adorable on Earth. Except for my second favourite, fawns, or baby deer: long legs, spotty and too cute. And about a million other animals I love; I'm really not that picky. I post about books, movies, cafes, anything veggie and everything animal related. My Instagram is probably the most successful thing I've ever done. It's no easy feat getting people to follow you, but I've become a master at hashtags. I have hundreds of followers, and one, in particular, is a kid called *WildRider*. He's been commenting on my posts for a while and vice versa; his posts are funny, and he's a fan of crazy animal clips. I think he makes them himself with one of the hundreds of apps I haven't yet tried. His profile picture shows only an eye—his dog's nose covers the rest of his face. But I can tell he's really cute.

I find a fruit salad and join Paula at the cash register line.

‘Do you have wi-fi?’ I ask. If she says no I might just die.

‘Of course.’

Phew.

She looks at my salad. ‘Is that enough for you, sweetie? How about a nice steak pie?’

‘No thanks,’ I mutter. Doesn’t Paula remember I don’t eat meat? I had a whole discussion with her at Christmas when I refused the turkey and she had plenty of arguments back. I don’t want to have an entire conversation about it again. And I don’t feel like an argument now.

As we wait, I flick the poncho tassels, contemplating cutting the stupid things off.

‘That’s mine!’ A girl tries to grab a packet of chips from her friend in front of me. The friend pulls it away and laughs, her mouth shining with bright red lipstick, then she throws the packet to another girl behind them. They keep chucking the bag between the three of them until it hits me on the head and bounces to the floor. I pick it up and return it—they don’t even say sorry.

They look about my age and I hope they’re not at my school. My first day is looming and I’ll be the ‘new girl’, the one everyone gossips about. What will the girls be like? At my old school, my classmates came from all over the place: Vietnam, Lebanon, India, even Russia. But country girls? I have no idea what they’re like. And

my old school was all girls; this one is mixed. It's going to be strange.

I remember when Alison arrived in Year Eight from Los Angeles. She'd wooed the girls with the latest bubblegum flavours, tales of celebrity-spotting and a cool accent. She'd stolen my best friend Lizzy and, not only that, made fun of me for being vegetarian. Soon Lizzy became popular and I'd remained on the sidelines, watching with envy.

But I won't be an Alison. I'm a run-of-the-mill city girl and the opposite of bubbly. I feel for the pimple on my nose. Still there. I have a heart full of bitter sadness and nothing to say. I haven't laughed for weeks and I can hardly even handle a conversation with my aunt.

I'm doomed.

'How you feeling, sweetie?' Paula asks as we return to the car. For a second, I contemplate telling her my fears. But only for a second. One per cent of me wants to share all my worries with her, but the other ninety-nine per cent says no way.

We get back into the car and slowly the concrete changes to khaki-green hills cut by fences and spotted with cows. It's still ages to West Creek but the air smells fresh like clean laundry. I have to admit it's pretty, especially when hours later I see the sun brush purple streaks across the sky.

'I'm closing the windows,' Paula says as we're hit by a noxious odour. I see a high barbed-wire fence and a sign: NO TRESPASSING. The setting sun glints off a

metal roof in the distance. ‘The stench from that farm is intense every few weeks.’

We drive past a ‘Welcome to West Creek’ sign, and a minute later Paula pulls into a gravel driveway in front of a small red-brick house.

‘A while since you were here. What, two years?’ she asks.

Whose fault is that? I want to say. If you and Mum hadn’t had some stupid never-ending fight I’d know you better, and maybe all of this would be a bit less horrible.

But I don’t say anything.