

# ONE

I've been having hateful thoughts again.

I wish I could cast them out like an airborne curse or summon a superpower through sheer will. I'd choose telekinesis over flying any day—slam some saucepans, smash a few ornaments, shatter a window. I'd drag my dad across the floor, slide him up a wall, pin him to the ceiling, and laugh like a maniac as I stroll out the front door.

It's this house. Over a year and I still can't get used to it. It's everything we're not: sweet, tidy, *suburban*—a two-storey shoebox with a homemade plaque on the toilet door and the puke-worthy scent of potpourri in every room. It stinks of happy families. We were once a long, low farmhouse with whispering walls; we were

junk and brawling dogs and sprawling yard. Our sun didn't set behind a row of cardboard houses and we never had to play musical cars to get out of the driveway. That was before. Now I can spit from the back doorstep and hit the fence; now I sleep so close to strangers I hear them breathe.

They're the polite thoughts. The hateful ones I mostly keep to myself.

My room is the only thing I like. When we moved in, I claimed the master bedroom, upstairs, far away from everyone—it has a window seat and an ensuite bathroom, shiny fake floorboards and a view down the street over the cloned roofs of the other houses in the estate. The bed was a bribe. I traded my rickety single and hundreds of acres for a king-sized bed that's bigger than our new backyard.

It's balmy tonight. Filthy black outside. The footpath beneath my window is spotted with old chewing-gum; the lace curtains twitch to a faint breeze. I'm sitting on my bed—watching *She's the Man*, painting my toenails, killing time—trying not to think about the things I'm missing. For the past hour, cars full of teenagers have been coming and going. Going, mostly, with the music up and the windows down.

My friends are out there, somewhere. I grip the brush so tightly it slips, leaving a bright red streak on the sheet, and my thoughts go from bad to worse: right this minute, if I had three seconds to make a wish, I'd swap the family I've got for the one I've lost. And I'd erase the

last two years while I'm at it—or maybe that counts as two wishes.

At nine o'clock, Pete texts. I lunge for my phone, and knock over the bottle of nail polish. The streak turns into a puddle.

*Grace? Pick you up?*

I sigh and pause the movie. *Grounded. Again. You know that.*

Straight back: *Pipe challenge!*

I wait until I've finished the toenails on my left foot.  
*Who?*

Downstairs, Dad bellows at the television. The outside sensor light goes on, which means he's let Diesel out for the night and he'll be in bed soon. Diesel is the inside dog, the only one we could keep.

*We're all here. Gummer Mitchell Amber Kenzie Me. You. Come on, it's Saturday.*

Kenzie. I didn't really expect her to stay home in sympathy just because I got caught and she didn't. Wait, no. I did.

Dad never gives me a parole date—he keeps me hanging. If I ask when I'll be allowed out, he adds another week, and if I'm more than five minutes late home after school, he adds two. My brother Cody is twenty—three years older than me—and apparently a grown-up. Dad couldn't save the farm, couldn't stop Cody from dropping out of school, couldn't stop Mum from dying—pulling on my reins is his favourite thing. I'm the one person he still thinks he can control.

Grounded, on a Saturday, the only night anything ever happens in Swanston—Swamptown, if you're a local, and you don't get much more local than fifth-generation Swampy, like me. It was twenty kilometres to town when we lived at the farm, but living in the estate makes it harder to pretend I'm not missing out on anything.

Pete takes my silence as a yes. *Pick you up at the end of your street in 15.*

He knows getting out isn't high-risk—I mastered the roof-to-tree trapeze act a week after we moved in—but getting caught is a problem. Dad's antennae will be twitching. I've never missed a pipe challenge. The last two years I've been the first to cross. I hold the record time, and the only way to keep it is to turn up, go first, and psych out the challengers.

*Make it 30 minutes.*

I wander downstairs in my pyjamas. This house is open-plan, so I can't sneak into the kitchen or raid the fridge anymore without running into whoever's in the lounge or dining-room. Dad is sitting on the couch, watching the late news. I open the fridge and stand in the square of light, letting the air chill my skin.

Dad lowers the volume. He stretches his arms behind his head and shoots me a glance. 'You get your homework done?'

I nod and grab a can of Coke.

If Dad was any sterner his face would crack. He's got a long line running through the middle of his forehead,

as if somebody ironed a perfect crease there. He wasn't always like this: slow to forgive, quick to anger. It used to be the other way around.

'No caffeine before bed,' he says.

'Fine.' I put the can of Coke back and swig from the milk carton.

He switches the television off and stands. 'I'm working tomorrow. I'll be gone early, mending fences all day, so I won't be home until late. Can you cook dinner?'

'On Sunday?'

'So cook a Sunday dinner.'

'I meant that you're working all weekend.'

'I take what I can get,' he says, frowning. 'And make sure you stay in. Don't give me something else to worry about, okay? Cody will check.'

I hide a smile. Cody won't check. 'Night.'

My record will fall tonight if I'm not at the quarry. I can't live with that. Dad makes me feel bad for things I haven't done, so I might as well do them and deserve the punishment.

Back upstairs, I brush my hair and teeth, climb into bed, and lie facing the wall. Ten minutes later Dad knocks, opens the door and says goodnight again to make sure I'm there. I wait another five, then slip out of bed. I put on shorts and a tank, tie my hair in a ponytail, grab my tote bag and slide my feet into a pair of Skechers.

Good grip, no slip, out the window.

Diesel waits below, a bark in his throat. It's a familiar game. He keeps my secrets in exchange for liver treats.

I sneak along the fence next to the neighbour's rose-bushes and step out into the street. Three houses along a man sits in darkness on his porch, cigarette glowing. He barely glances at me as I tiptoe past. In my other life, the man on the porch would have a name; he would have called out to me and I would have waved back. All of these people living in the same street and nobody seems to know each other.

I jog the hundred metres to the corner. Gummer's black Ford 250 is there, tinted windows, engine running, headlights off. Pete's green station wagon is parked behind it.

I open the back door of the wagon, clamber over Mitchell's long legs, and land in Kenzie's lap.

'Hey, you,' she says, smiling. Reluctantly, she lets go of Mitchell's hand and makes space for me in the middle. 'There's more room in Gummer's truck.'

'Nuh-uh.' I fumble for the lap sash and snap the buckle as Pete revs the engine. 'I like it right here.'

Gummer's always wasted. He drives like an old man. Pete's a lunatic but at least we'll arrive this century.

Pete laughs and mumbles something crude about leaving Amber and Gummer alone together.

I flick the back of his head. 'Don't even think about it. If they get together, that leaves me and you, and that's taking this cross-pollination thing too far.'

Kenzie nudges my elbow. 'Stop it.'

'So how come you're allowed out?' I ask her. 'That's hardly fair.'

‘You know I could set fire to our lounge room and my folks would only ask me to move out of the way so they could see the TV.’

Kenzie is fifth-generation Swampy too, but her parents are close to sixty. She’s the youngest of seven. It’s like they’ve run out of patience and don’t really want her around, so they let her run wild. She has a tongue piercing and a belly-button ring, an infinity tattoo behind her right ear and nine studs in her left. I’m a shorter, skinnier, cleanskin version of her: same long, dark hair, hazel eyes, narrow face, high cheekbones. We’re so alike people take her for my older, more rebellious sister. But Kenzie only looks like trouble.

Mitchell reaches across me and grabs her hand. They’re new at this. We all are. Sometimes I think it would be better if we just stayed friends. We’ve been a tight group since primary school, but when it comes to Kenzie and me, Mitch is an extra—he has to know that. It is and will always be Grace and Kenzie, Kenzie and Grace.

I wriggle myself a bit more room.

Mitch drops Kenzie’s hand and shifts closer to the window.

‘Why are you all in the back? What am I, a taxi?’ Pete mutters, taking a corner on what feels like two wheels.

I check the back window. Gummer’s way behind.

‘You scared, Grace?’ he adds, catching my eye in the rear-vision mirror. ‘High stakes tonight. Gummer’s got a

hundred on you beating your own time. Me and Amber put fifty down, each.'

'Double your money, Doughboy, you faithless cheap-skate,' I hiss, and he laughs.

'Grace isn't afraid of anything,' Kenzie says, linking her arm with mine. 'But it's your own stupid fault if you lose. She doesn't have anything left to prove.'

There isn't a corner of Swanston we haven't explored in our boredom. It feels like a big town—four schools, six pubs and over ten thousand people—the heartbeat of surrounding hectares of farmland. Everything comes in shades of brown, beige and grey, with a fine layer of dirt, as if the town was flung to the ground by a passing tornado. During a heatwave it shimmers like a mirage. Swanston smells like old boots, mouldy hay or wet dog, depending on which way the wind blows, and there is a swamp, but it's a joke—a mosquito-infested bog behind the Colonial Museum; it stinks like a sewer during the cooler months and dries to a foul crust in summer.

We pass through the middle of town with its wide streets and heritage-listed buildings. The main shopping strip, Centennial Park and Swanston Cemetery are all in a row. Don't ask me why the first settlers decided it was a good idea to bury the dead right where most people go about the business of living—maybe back then they kept them close because cars weren't invented. Maybe they visited every day.

I don't visit. Dead is dust; only the living care if you leave flowers.



‘So what’s the plan?’ Kenzie says.

‘I’m making it up as I go.’ I wink and she smiles—Kenzie knows better than anyone that Grace Foley is always good for a laugh.

Pete takes the shortest route, zigzagging through the backstreets past the overland train station. He turns onto the freeway. The quarry is about three kilometres out of town—disused now, but it would take a thousand years to fill a hole that big. As we’re turning off the freeway onto Yeoman’s Track, a sheet of lightning illuminates the endlessly flat landscape.

‘Yes!’ Pete slaps the steering wheel and snakes the car.

I slam sideways into Mitch. Dust swarms through the air vents, and I whisper a prayer, thinking a wasted Gummer is looking pretty good right now.

Another flash and the crater shows itself to our left: vast, black, deep. At the western end, the quarry narrows into a steep gully that peters out several kilometres away; where the gully begins, a massive underground bore-water pipe connects one side to the other. Every year they fix the barricades at the entrance to the quarry; every year someone with a bull bar simply drives through the fence.

Pete finds a parking space between two other cars at the edge of the quarry. He licks his finger and holds it up through the open window, testing the breeze. ‘Perfect weather,’ he says. ‘And a decent crowd, but there are more of them than us. They called it late on purpose.’

There are fifty or sixty Year Elevens and Twelves.

I'm guessing at least fifteen or so, including us, are from Swampie Public; the majority are Sacred Heart Private students. Pete's right: they've deliberately called the challenge late so we wouldn't have time to rally our troops. Our schools are next to each other. We have to share their library and their gym, and we're fiercely competitive—in sport, in ethos, in extracurricular everything, right down to who hangs out in which car parks and cafes, and who turns up to which party.

Kenzie and Mitch get out. I stay in the back seat.

Pete opens the boot and passes around a few beers. He won't offer one to me. I don't drink.

He hands me a can of raspberry lemonade. 'You ready to put the scaredy Hearts back in their box?'

'*Omm.*' I cross my legs and pinch my fingers.

'Right. Psych.'

Gummer and Amber haven't arrived yet. I'll need them with this hostile crowd. I hope they haven't pulled over somewhere—I wouldn't put it past Amber to try to seduce Gummer. She has a bad habit of testing our friendship one way or the other. She's probably dazzling him with skin, perfume, legs—in the last year she's changed, transformed into cartoon proportions, and Gummer is clueless.

'You better not fall tonight,' Kenzie says, leaning through the window. 'What's wrong? Are you scared?'

'*Shh.* Psych.' I'm waiting for the buzz I get before every prank, every performance. The only thing that scares me is the dead silence that follows a flat joke.

‘Come *on*, Grace,’ Kenzie beckons.

She wants it to be over. I wonder when this all stopped being fun for her. In the last year Kenzie has changed too—now she’s serious about her schoolwork. And perhaps she’s serious about Mitchell after all? Is everything else silly and juvenile for her now, including me?

Losing Mum, leaving the farm—that was bad enough. Now I’m failing school and my friends are all hooking up.

I summon the hateful thoughts—the unfairness of it all makes me mad, and anger makes me feel like I can do anything—but tonight, as much as I try, there’s nothing. I can’t feel.

Gummer’s arrived. He’s nodding at Pete, but he looks stunned. Amber appears, holding a bottle of cheap champagne. She hovers close to Gummer, glancing at him from beneath her lashes, and I know she’s struck again. It might not be a death blow to our friendship, but it’s close.

I climb out of Pete’s car.

Pete gives a lazy finger to the Sacred Heart crowd and herds the Swampies into a cluster. ‘Thirty-six point five seconds is the time to beat,’ he calls. ‘Sick ‘em, Foley. Show those immaculate conceptions or immature conniptions or whatever they call themselves.’

I get a round of applause and take a bow, but my heart’s not in it.

Kenzie won’t look at me.

I turn my attention to the pipe, my old friend. There

are fan-shaped grilles each end, but they don't stop us. There's a rope ladder underneath, so it's easy enough to scoot down the bank of the gully and climb back up on the other side of the grille. The smallest, like me, can simply slip through sideways. Most straddle the pipe and shuffle along it. A few have mastered the tightrope walk, but I have an advantage: I'm light and quick. It's forty metres across, as wide as a horse's back, and fifteen metres down. When I'm standing in the middle of that pipe, knowing that something terrible happened here, knowing that there's only air between me and death, I feel it: life is sharper, brighter, more intense. It's a delicious kind of fear.

And I'd rather be terrified than feel nothing.

'Wentz is going,' someone says.

Noah Wentz, Sacred Heart's poster boy. He's crossing the pipe like a dog scratching its backside on the carpet.

The record holder *always* goes first. The Swampies start yelling and throwing empty beer cans.

'Let him go!' I yell, waving a hand. 'Some challenger. You dragged me out here for this?'

I ignore the barrage of rude gestures from the Hearts and make my way to the pipe. Wentz has reached the other side, still on his arse, and he's trying to stand to half-hearted applause. It's a crap time.

The gully looks bottomless tonight. Some say Hannah Holt is buried in the gully, her uneasy spirit slipping from crevice to shadow, sniffing for fear, and when she smells it she'll pull you down by the ankles with her

teeth. We all know the stories are spread by grown-ups to keep us away from the quarry, but this is the first time I've ever thought about Hannah Holt, or William Dean, before I've crossed. I can't help wondering whether he closed his eyes when he jumped, or met the rocks with them wide open.

'Over a minute,' Pete shouts. 'Don't bother,' he says to me, but Wentz is coming back, on his feet this time, and he's moving fast.

'Who's timing?'

'I got it.'

'How can he see where he's going?'

Wentz blinks in the glare of a dozen sets of headlights and a haze of dust. Why he would choose to attempt the record on the return is beyond me. But his arms are loose at his sides as if he's going for a stroll around the block. At over six feet, almost a foot taller than me, his steps are longer. He's making it look effortless, and effortlessly walking the pipe takes a whole lot of practice.

The Sacred Heart students, anticipating a record time, swarm the grille.

'Damn,' Pete says. 'I think he's broken it.'

'Is it legal? Can he do that?' Kenzie groans. 'Grace, don't even think...'

'I got this,' I tell her. Now, the buzz.

'Thirty-two flat,' Gummer says, leaning over Pete's shoulder. 'If you're going to beat that, Gracie, you need a death wish.'

It's my turn. I've never really been tested before.

It can be done, two steps for one.

Wentz holds out his hand as I pass. We brush knuckles. We'll never be anything but rivals, but it is an impressive time. The Hearts step away to give me space, but step up their insults to rattle me.

'Practice run first,' I declare. 'I'll challenge on the return.'

Wentz nods to accept and Pete slaps my back, but Kenzie makes a strangled sound and walks away. The image I take with me as I slip through the grille is of Kenzie taking Mitchell by the hand and leading him to Pete's car.

'Be careful,' Amber calls.

The first section of pipe is slick with beer and spit. I kick off my shoes, step across the wetness and begin moving—evenly, but not too fast—feet turned out, arms outstretched. Beneath, the steep sides of the gully drop away. I block out the shouting, stare ahead at the distant midnight sky and keep the pipe in my peripheral vision. The stars give enough light if you trust them, but looking down can give you the sense that you're not moving at all.

I've done this a hundred times, maybe more.

A gusty breeze tugs a strand of hair into my eye. I blink it away. I'm twenty metres out now, almost to the halfway point where *school sucks* and *Jeff loves Denise*. There's a ragged concrete join in the middle that'll trip you if you don't know it's there—I bend and perform a walk-over to clapping and cheers.

There's a sudden hush. Heart speeding, I finish the distance at a jog, all windmill arms and graceless feet, to clutch at the grille on the far side. Just enough to press close to Wentz's time but not quite enough to beat it. Pete calls out my time but I'm not listening; it doesn't matter. I never meant to win first time around.

I set my feet in a starting position and lean forward, squinting. The headlights on the other side are brighter than I expected but I'm ready, sparked with adrenalin, fear at my back. I let go of the grille, moving with the breeze, pulled into a slipstream. The concrete is cool and alive, like a serpent. I run, touching down lightly on the balls of my feet, no thought of slipping, knowing that Wentz's record will fall only minutes after it was set and Sacred Heart will lose again. I laugh and the breeze dries my teeth.

*Don't look down. The pipe is only an inch from the ground. It's not convex, it's a bridge, a mile wide. It's not far.*

My feet are sure, my breathing steady. I try to focus on the faint glitter of stars so I won't be blinded by the headlights—but it's as if they've heard me: one by one, the headlights turn off. The universe disappears. An old scar on the cornea of my left eye—always with me, like a tiny drifting cloud—is all I can see.

I stop, steady myself, blink. Stretch my arms and wait for the edges of the world to come back. Fear is in front of me now, and to the side, above and below.

*Sabotage.*

'Turn on the lights!' If I can just hear a clear voice,

see a single beam of light, I'll find my sense of direction.

*Where have the stars gone? Where is the sky?*

I've forgotten the time—I've already lost—and I'm thinking about falling. A low whistle: something small and hard hits the back of my head. I drop to a crouch, feel for the pipe and straddle it with my palms pressed flat. The concrete hums with vibration.

'Are you crazy? Are you trying to kill me?'

No reply. Another near-miss missile; a beat later, the sound of whatever it was skittering onto rocks.

'Kenzie?' The breeze snatches my breath and blows it back like a ghost. 'Pete?'

After long seconds the stars reappear. Has the sky darkened? A soft blue-tinted mist has swallowed the edge of the quarry, the cars, the people. *Can they see me? Do they know I'm stuck?* I fumble in my back pocket for my phone but it isn't there—it's still in Pete's car. I can barely feel my feet but I dare to look down. They're dangling; they seem far away, and in the dim light my ankles are crisscrossed with welts and scratches.

I call out, gagging on a wave of bile. The fear—I'm dizzy with it. My thighs are numb and tingling from the freezing pipe; my hands are losing grip and sensation. I drop my eyes to the gully below: a dragon's yawn, and the rocks, the rocks like teeth. A lone shadow separates from the rest before the mist snatches it away with cool fingers.

'Grace!'

I hear them now, screaming from the other side, but



I'm so tired. I want to close my eyes and slip into the sweet, powdery blue. I glance down: I can just see my hands. Where they grip the pipe, there's a single looping word and a tiny drawing of a black bird—hundreds of times I've crossed the pipe, but I've never seen it.

*Hannah.*

I trace the word with my finger. It shimmers. A sharp impact near my ribs knocks me sideways and the pipe seems to buckle and twist. My legs lose grip. Close by, someone is sobbing as if their heart could break.

I see a shape through the mist, a hand solid enough to be real. To reach it, I have to let go.