

METAFICTION: A FISSURE OF LIGHT

By Van Badham

I'LL CALL HIM Kev. His name's not Kev, but it's what everyone has known him as since high school. In Australia, once your peers have bestowed a name upon you, you let it stick, or you're 'up yourself'. Kev may be tall and broad with ruddy colours, but he wears glasses and has an inexplicable aristocratic tone of voice. Being thought of as 'up himself' preys on an ancient concern. These days, he calls himself Kev.

Kev and I have been fighting all morning.

We're sharing a two-room beachside hotel apartment with our friend, Hayley, because we're all guests for a midsummer wedding in a small, coastal town. Hayley's asked me to do her hair, because Justin—her recent ex—is going to be at the wedding, and she wants to look nice. I'm doing my best,

but Kev thinks I'm taking too long. Kev has a thing about being on time—specifically, about me being on time. He uses words like 'disrespectful' and 'irresponsible' in curt little blasts while I hold bobby pins in my mouth, trying to fix curls in Hayley's hair.

We're not even driving to the wedding—we're walking because we plan on drinking tonight. I tell Kev that he can start ahead of us and we'll catch him up, but his voice hits an angrier, louder note when he says, 'And just turn up to the wedding by myself—and everyone will ask me where you are anyway—so I can look like the worst person on earth?!'

Yeah, maybe Kev is a bit up himself.

Hayley looks pretty, though, and I'm glad of this because Kev stands in the open door of the apartment, barking updates about how long until the ceremony starts, so I rush my own getting-ready. The best I do with my own hair is two loose plaits and I'm glad it's warm enough to wear a wide-brimmed hat. I'm not sure my makeup matches my dress, either; I feel swollen and awkward and just scoop all my lipsticks and things into my larger handbag, thinking I should have a chance to fix myself later. When I get out the door, Kev slams it behind me. He marches ahead up the road. He's going to be there ahead of us, anyway; Hayley and I are in high heels and this is a country town without pavements. Even road tarmac is hard work in heels.

'He's just in a bad mood,' I tell Hayley, who's quiet. 'Hung-over.'

We all are, of course. We were at the pub in town for a few last night, and then shared a few we brought with us in the flat with Hayley. Kev and I didn't have sex last night. Too tired, too drunk. I wonder, to myself, if this is why Kev's a bit angry, too—we've been too tired or drunk to have sex for a while.

It's a hot walk up the road. Hayley and I stop to smear a little sunscreen on our bare arms and I have to tie my hair back because even plaits are too hot. Finally, we approach Kev, who's standing at the foot of the cement stairs that lead up to the church, waiting with his hands on his hips. His face is shiny with sweat. I think he's trying to keep his armpits dry. I loop my arm through the crook of his but he jumps away from me. 'It's fuckin' hot!' he barks.

The tiny church is old and made of stone. It's only fractionally cooler than outside. Loud fans are turning, the pews are squashed full of guests and the bridal party is handing out bottled water from baskets. The bottles are emptying fast. The bride is late and something on the groom's face suggests that if she takes longer than five minutes he's going to kick us all out, just to lower the temperature. He and a best man are both in suits and they look like they're liquefying. I'm wearing a thin silk dress and even I can feel moisture spreading between the silk, me and the sticky wood of the pew. I can only imagine how hot Kev is in his suit trousers—or how hot his arm is, under the fold of the jacket he's holding, not wearing. 'Do you want me to hold that?' I ask.

‘I’m fine,’ he says, staring straight ahead. A rivulet of sweat runs to his jaw, balls and falls to his sleeve. Seeing the stain it makes on his pale green shirt, Kev says, ‘Fuck!’ In the church.

Music blares. Withered flower girls and bridesmaids enter from the church doors with a burst of pale light. Then the bride’s dog walks into the church, wearing a tartan bow tie. The bride enters behind the dog, holding his leash. She’s barefoot, wearing a strappy cheesecloth gown with her hair up: it’s braided with wheat. She is the only person properly dressed for a wedding on a day this hot, and she glows.

I can’t see over anyone’s head in front of me, so while vows are said (at pace, I reckon, by the groom), I observe what’s around me. Kev is staring ahead. People make concertina fans of their wedding programs. Hayley is watching her ex, Justin, who is one pew in front of us on the other side of the aisle, nuzzling a blonde girl. ‘You all right?’ I ask Hayley.

‘That’s the replacement.’

‘Relax, you look beautiful.’

Kev grunts, louder than both of us. ‘Can you be quiet? You’re really embarrassing.’

When the ceremony ends, I can sense the tension in Kev’s body as he watches the bridal party parade out of the church. The moment the last person passes, he leaps from his seat like a sprung trap. He almost chases them outside. I take my time, squeeze Hayley’s sweaty hand, join in the chat around how hot it is, file out, trying to usher Hayley far away from

her ex and the blonde, who has, I notice, her arm threaded through his.

We're outside. I see Kev is already at the base of the steps, waiting, this time, for a signal that this business is done and we can proceed to the reception. People mill around, the photographer calls for guests to assemble and Kev near runs up the steps, as if his willingness to move quickly will inspire everyone else to do the same. Kev clambers next to me and echoes the photographer's instructions, in less friendly tones, to the people around us. I smile at anyone who looks offended. 'Hangovers in this heat aren't easy,' I say to the woman next to me. Kev snatches my arm and his eyes flash at mine. I am looking at the ground while I hear the camera click.

Then, Kev's off again, collecting Justin and the blonde as he canters across the road towards the community hall and the reception.

'I don't expect Kev to not be friends with Justin because of me,' says Hayley, sad-eyed. When she and I reach the hall, we find the walls heavy with streamers and bouquets of wheat and dried flowers, and doors opening to a courtyard where there are tables set up with umbrellas. Kev's at one of these, smiling and laughing by the time I reach him, a cold beer in his hand, one already on the table for me, and one out for Hayley. That he's sat us with Hayley's ex and that ex's new girlfriend—whose name, it transpires, is Abigail—is not something to which Kev pays much mind. He's praising cold beer and telling jokes and Justin's joining in.

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Abigail looks awkward. I know I look uncomfortable. Hayley looks suicidal.

So I suggest that Hayley and I go to the bathroom to fix my makeup. 'Come on, you look great!' says Kev to me, finishing his beer in a gulp. He smiles and, while my heart beats just at the sight of his white row of teeth, I try to communicate that Hayley's unhappy. All he says is 'More beers? Or sparkling?' But he doesn't wait for an answer. He's already at the bar.

Hayley cries in the toilet, and dabs her tears while I try to redo my eyeliner with what I notice is already a slightly drunken grip. 'Must be the heat,' I explain to Hayley, and it must be the heat that, when we return to the table, has Kev slurring his words as he downs a second plastic schooner of beer.

'Keep up,' he laughs at me, prodding me towards fresh plastic cups and a new jug of beer that's almost empty. Hayley hasn't even sat down when Justin, in front of her, sticks his tongue in Abigail's mouth.

Hayley spins around and walks, directionless, into the hall.

'I have to look after her,' I whisper to Kev, who's pouring more beer.

'She'll be fine,' he says, 'she just needs a drink. It's hot.'

I lean in, whisper close to his ear, 'What about this are you not getting?'

Kev draws away. 'You want to start something, do you? Do you? It's a wedding, we're here to celebrate and you want to kick something off.'

‘No...’

‘You want something to happen because today the attention isn’t on you. Well, it’s not. It’s not going to be.’

‘Please...’ But I stop, because I know Kev’s already into his third beer and that means there’ll be a fourth beer, not a reasonable conversation.

‘I’ll take care of it,’ I say. I walk away.

Hayley’s inside, weeping, talking to another friend of ours, who’s patting her hand. I approach and a discussion about the situation unfolding with Justin and Kev, beers and Abigail swirls into some plastic champagne flutes (full and then emptied) that are brought towards us on trays. The sparkling is dry and I’m thirsty and soon I hear laughter and it’s mine. The hall is full of sweaty men and women and music and loud cheering—the bride and groom have entered the room and he’s kept his trousers but changed into a singlet and thongs. And we all laugh and the music’s loud and the bride screams, ‘Dancing!’ and soon bodies are moving and I lose Hayley and tumble outside.

Justin and Abigail have left the table, but Kev’s there with some other friends. I tap Kev on the shoulder and smile and he smiles and grabs me by the shoulder and pulls me to sit down next to him. He keeps his arm round my shoulders and he kisses my cheek, leaving a boozy, wet stain on my face. And I nuzzle his head and he nuzzles mine.

‘Do you love me, Kev?’

‘You know I do, cabbage,’ he says, and we have a little kiss.

‘Next!’ hollers our friend, Dave, at the table. ‘You’ll be next!’ and I blush and everyone laughs.

‘Not until she gets a proper job,’ Kev says, gurgling into his beer.

Justin comes back to the table. ‘I clearly don’t understand women,’ he says, grabbing for the beer jug and sitting down. He looks flustered—as if he’s removed his shirt and put it back on again in a hurry.

‘You certainly don’t,’ I say. ‘You made your ex cry in the toilets tonight.’

Kev nudges me—hard—in the side, but Justin says, ‘Which one? I think Abby and I have just broken up.’

‘There are plenty of single chicks here,’ says a guy. ‘You could totes have a third ex by midnight.’

‘A project,’ Justin says, sipping his beer.

‘What happened?’ asks Kev.

‘Abbs saw me with Hayley,’ Justin says.

I’m on my feet, I’m through the hall, I’m searching for Hayley and I find her outside, smoking. Her lipstick’s smeared off. The curls have fallen out of her hair.

She kissed him, she tells me, and he kissed her back. And then Abigail found them and Abigail freaked and Justin ran after her. Then whatever Hayley says collapses into drunken sobs, and I hug her, and she sobs, and at least two of our friends tell her that Justin’s a bastard, and then Hayley says, ‘Dave. You have to make Dave dance with me to make Justin jealous.’

‘Dave...?’

‘I can’t ask him. He has to ask me. Ask Dave to ask me to dance.’

And because she’s crying, because she’s my friend, I stagger into the hall and I find Dave trying to chat up someone’s cousin by the back wall. It’s loud in the hall, music blares. ‘Dave!’ I shout at him. ‘Dave, you have to ask Hayley to dance!’

‘You wanna dance?’ he says, forgetting the cousin.

‘Hayley!’ I say, but it’s too late. Dave, who is as drunk as any of the hundred and fifty other dehydrated wedding guests who’ve been drinking free booze for two hours, seizes my hands in his and clumsily drags me onto the dance floor. ‘Hayley!’ I shout again, as Dave whirls me around, stumbling over one of his feet. He leads me forward, he steps back, he decides to grab me and spin me round—and I spin, and he spins, and he trips, and a high heel rolls under my ankle...and then his superior weight brings me crashing to the floor with his full drunken Dave mess on top of me.

I feel two pangs of pain. One in my arm, which collides with the side of a chair. The other as my ankle crunches.

The collision’s cut the music, in alarm. Everyone around tries to remove Dave’s limbs from mine. I try to stand but a building vibration of pain quakes through me as I put weight on my ankle. I lose my balance in an instant—I almost hit the ground again—but people snatch me.

Panic disproportional to the event spreads through the room. Drunken people aggravate the pain in my arm with

bumps and clutches as they try to help me into a chair. 'Someone know any first aid?!' is yelled, and it turns out that the guy manning the bar is not just the only sober person here, but also a physiotherapy student. He's shuffled through the crowd. My arm hurts, my ankle is numb, but the sensation that overwhelms others is the burning in my cheeks. The whole wedding has stopped and it's because of me. 'Please,' I beg him, 'please get the music back on.'

The physiotherapy student speaks to someone, who speaks to someone else and, in seconds, not only is the music back on, but some of the guys are carrying the chair that I'm in out to the courtyard. My body aches with each bumpy step, but they manage to get me there. I expect Kev's still at the table. But he isn't.

The physiotherapy student kneels, examines my ankle. 'I reckon hospital,' he says, 'if you can't stand on it.'

'Hospital?'

'I'll call you a taxi,' he says, trying to smile.

Hayley has found me by now. I explain someone is phoning for a taxi to take me to hospital – but where's Kev? She volunteers to search and runs off. I wait.

I wait and I wait. Maybe a whole hour passes. In that time, the nice physiotherapy student manages to find a bandage and splints my ankle, and I start to sober up.

'Do you want me to come to the hospital with you?' he asks, fixing the pin. My damaged foot is resting on a plastic chair.

'I've got my boyfriend.'

‘Yeah—yeah, you might convince him...’

I’m struck still. ‘Convince him?’ This is the moment I notice that Hayley is here, and she’s looking at the physiotherapy student and shaking her head. ‘What’s going on?’

Hayley hesitates. ‘Maybe it’s better if you go to hospital on your own.’

‘Kev’s drunk?’

Then, I hear it. Mostly swearing. The theme is ‘Fuck her’. No, *‘Fuck her...this is her trying to get attention...Fuck her, this is her making sure no one has a good time...Fuck her, she wants to go to hospital, she can go by herself.’*

‘Honey?’ I try, seeing a couple of our male friends man-handle Kev into the courtyard from a side gate. Kev has dirt up one side of his clothes, and there seems to be mud on one side of his face.

Hayley explains that they found him on the ground outside. Must’ve gone out for a piss and decided to lie down.

‘Not going,’ Kev bellows at me, ‘you can disrespect our hosts, you can disrespect this wedding...’

‘Mate,’ says one of the guys, ‘the respectful thing is to take your girlfriend to the hospital.’

‘And who the fuck are you?’ Kev fires.

My face is burning. Kev is struggling with the guys at his arms. ‘It’s okay.’ I pull on the physiotherapy student’s sleeve. ‘I’ll go on my own.’

But someone has yelled, ‘Taxi’s here!’ and the guys on Kev’s arms are pummelling him in the direction of the road.

The physiotherapy student and Hayley find some help and again I'm borne in this plastic sedan chair to a cab that's waiting outside. I try to ignore the guys yelling at Kev, and Kev yelling at the guys, and the words, 'She's your fucking girlfriend!' which bounce from the taxi chassis against this far edge of the wedding reception.

I'm slid into the front seat by the physiotherapy student, who also gives some money to the taxi driver. My protesting his generosity isn't heard. Hayley jumps into the back seat, and a heave and a slam deposits Kev in the back with her. The taxi starts away.

'This is false imprisonment!' yelps Kev. 'This is fucking false imprisonment and if you drive me anywhere in this cab I'll have your arse in jail!'

The taxi driver has a voice like swamp tar. 'I was told to drive your girlfriend to the hospital.'

'Yes, her, get it? Her and not me. Let me out of this car!' Kev slaps the wall. 'Let me the fuck out of this car!'

'Sir,' says the driver, 'I politely request you desist from activity that could endanger yourself, me, this cab or the other passengers.'

Kev slaps the wall of the cab again. 'I'll—fucking—desist,' he says, 'when—you turn—the fucking—car—around.'

'Calm down, Kev,' Hayley murmurs.

'I will not calm the fuck down!' he blasts. He slaps the wall again. 'Let—me—out!'

'Last warning, mate,' says the cab driver.

‘Warning? Who the fuck do you think you are, warning me? I didn’t ask to be in this cab. You’ve got no authority. You’re some random fuckhead assisting a false imprisonment. You fucking threaten me and I’ll have you in court!’

There’s silence. I am ice-solid. The landscape outside is black.

Kev slaps on the wall of the cab again.

The driver slams down the brake. Everyone is thrown forward.

‘You fuck!’ screams Kev, grabbing the back of my seat.

The cab driver whips around, pointing a finger at Kev’s face. I get a glimpse of a face lined like a dry riverbed. ‘Look, you little cunt, one more word out of you and I’ll not only kick you out of this cab but I’ll kick your arse onto this road so hard you won’t be able to stand up ’til Monday. You can yell all you like at an oncoming semi – it won’t fucking hear you and it won’t miss you, either.’

‘You can make threats...’

The cab driver roars, ‘Shut up!’

And Kev does. I feel him relax his grip from my seat. When Kev has retreated into the shadow of the cab, the driver starts the car.

We drive through the black landscape and noiseless tears are running down my face. By the time some lights on the horizon resolve into the driveway of a casualty ward, my whole face is wet and I feel sober and cold.

We pull into a driveway and, amid ambulances and wheeled stretchers and people, the driver rolls down a window and beckons a nurse. I can't hear what he says.

I can hear Kev tearing at the lock of the car door. 'I think it's childproof, Kev,' says Hayley.

'Shut up!' Kev says.

It's my door that pops open. Kev's arm shoots past my shoulder; he's trying to clamber out from behind me. 'Let me out!' he hollers.

'Don't FUCKING TRY IT,' barks the driver, and he grabs me by the arm. 'You're a nice kid,' the driver says to me, 'please ditch this fucking prick.'

I say nothing. Hands of orderlies reach into the cab and move me into a wheelchair. I can hear Kev behind me as I'm wheeled away. He's calling for police. He's screaming at the driver. He's yelling at everyone.

But I'm pushed through plastic swinging doors into a messy hallway, and pushed through another set of plastic doors and into another hallway. I'm parked. An orderly disappears and reappears with a nurse. They help me onto a wheeled stretcher.

'Where's my boyfriend?' I ask the nurse.

She leans down. 'We're just going to look after you right now, while we try to find you a bed,' she says. 'Your cab driver said that guy you're with maybe needs to calm down. Would you agree?'

I nod. 'He's pretty drunk.'

‘He’s pretty unpleasant,’ says the nurse. ‘Is he always like this?’

‘Only when he’s drunk.’

The nurse doesn’t believe me. ‘If my partner were in hospital, I wouldn’t be screaming in the carpark,’ she says. She pats my arm. She leaves.

On the stretcher, in the hall, I think about Kev. I remember the first hot night we ever kissed, drunkenly, at a party. The naked, frantic sex we then had in a friend’s spare room. The walk we took together the next day into the city; the flower he picked and put in my hair. The text message when he told me that he loved me. The bedsheets we bought together for his bed. Our autumn weekend in Canberra, walking around the lake under a grey sky and yellow trees. The smoothness of his bulky body. What it feels like to hold a clump of his chestnut hair in my fingers.

My eyes overflow with tears because I don’t want to give away these moments. The muscle of my heart yearns for Kev’s white smile to smile at me, like it did earlier tonight. *He’s just drunk*, I tell myself. *Everyone is like this when they’re drunk.*

But as orderlies appear and wheel my stretcher towards the room, I consider that Justin isn’t like this when he’s drunk. And Dave isn’t. And Hayley isn’t, and I’m not—not really, not even when Kev and I are fighting. The stretcher sails around a corner and my brain echoes with the sounds of ‘Fuck her’ and the scene in the cab. That Kev does not want to be in this hospital with me is as tangible to my body as the

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numbness in my ankle, the hardness of the stretcher mattress, the door that opens before me, the room into which I'm rolled. And I beg God that Kev forgives me for whatever has made him so angry, and brings his yellow trees and flowers back to me.

I wait in the room by myself. I'm cold in my thin silk dress. I don't know how long I wait. Eventually, a doctor comes. She checks my ankle, prods it, congratulates the physiotherapy student on a well-made splint. I'm wheeled into a room for an X-ray. They find a cracked bone. I have to stay off it, is the only advice. Take painkillers, rest. They'll give me some crutches. They'll go and fetch Kev.

I'm returned to the first room. I'm sitting on the edge of my stretcher and can feel the heaviness in my damaged ankle. A nurse enters with some crutches – the plastic and tin ones that grip your arm. She adjusts them. I'm standing on one foot, resting my weight on the crutches when Hayley walks in with Kev. 'How's she doing?' Hayley asks the nurse, moving to her.

'Yeah, has she finished her drama-queen routine yet?' Kev demands, staring at me. 'Has she been the centre of attention long enough that we can go back to the bloody wedding now?'

'It's the middle of the night,' starts Hayley.

'I need to rest my leg,' I say.

'Of course you do,' growls Kev, 'because the worst thing that could possibly happen is that I could spend

time with my friends, or have a good time, or do anything at all. No, I have to hang around a hospital ward just to indulge you. Just to make sure you're the centre of everything. Are you happy? You've ruined everyone else's night. Well done!'

Kev's face reminds me of lakeside walks and flowers in my hair—like a taunt. It's the face of the man who tells me he loves me, but sneering, distorted.

'Are we going to fucking leave this hospital or not?'

And because I don't want to see this thing I love so much so twisted, I raise a weak hand with a crutch hanging off it, and with all my strength I shove the face away.

Kev staggers back a step. I drop my gaze to the floor, and my hand is already gripping for the handle of its crutch again when Kev reacts.

The action takes place in slow motion. My eyes lift. Kev's eyes are ablaze, swallowed by a reddening rage, and he rears. I clock the fist he makes of his hand. I watch the hard trajectory it makes for my cheek.

A crack—a fissure of light in my vision on contact, in the seconds before the roaring pain rips across my face. I am pounded by the blow, and fall back against the stretcher. My arms don't leave the crutches—they fly behind me like startled wings, the crutches collecting shelves as they smack into the walls. My shoulders jolt with the impact of the wall as flying metal kidney bowls, and tissue boxes, thermometers and gloves splatter the room with sound. And then Kev is on

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my throat—in the ward, among the flying mess, his hands are around my throat and I can't breathe or scream and already my face is purple; my bruised cheek may even pop.

Screaming: screaming Hayley, screaming nurses, bellowing doctors, the flying hands of orderlies.

'What the fuck are you two doing?' someone howls. A gasp—me—I stumble for air, slip on my broken foot, tumble to the ground. My elbow smacks the floor. Too many pain centres—my lungs, face, throat, elbow, foot, shoulders—everything hurts and my eyes are pissing with tears.

'Get him out of here!' And Kev's hauled out of the room.

'I'll stay with you!' Hayley offers.

I roll on the ground, crying.

'Has she got somewhere to go?' asks a nurse. There's a frantic conversation while I'm checked for cuts and bruises. I'm dizzy with tears and breathlessness and pain. I'm patched and loaded into a wheelchair, and pushed through the halls until I tumble into the soft back seat of a cab.

Hayley's with me. She tells the driver the address of our apartments. We drive away from the white lights of casualty, into the dark.

I am so weak with bruising I float in and out of sleep. In my mind is Kev's gentle dark hair against a white pillowcase. The way he smiles when his eyes are closed.

We arrive at the beachside apartments. Hayley and the driver help me inside. They help me onto the bed. I lie down. The sight of Kev's suitcase in the corner brings new tears to

my eyes. Hayley is paying the driver outside. I call my parents, who are three hours away.

Dad answers, rough with the shock of a call this late. 'What's going on?'

'Kev and I have broken up. I need you to come get me.'

'What's he done?'

I'm shuddering with tears. 'I've broken my ankle and he won't help. I need help. Please come. I've been in hospital.'

'Did he put you in hospital? What's he done? Tell me what he's done!'

'Please...'

And my mother takes the phone. 'What about hospital? Did Kev do something to you?'

'I had an accident. Please just come.'

'It is late. It is a long drive. We can be there in the morning, or do you want us to start driving now?'

I blubber.

'If Kev has done something to you we will be there in three hours and god help him if your father finds him. Tell me what we're doing,' says my mum.

'Come in the morning,' I croak. 'I'm all right. I'm with Hayley. Come then.'

The phone drops out of my hand. My sore body passes out.

But midway through a dreamless sleep, I'm woken. There's someone in the room. There's something at the corner of the bed.

‘Hayley?’

The sheets peel back. ‘Roll over, you’re hogging,’ Kev says.

‘You can’t sleep here,’ I say.

‘Of course I can.’

‘You hit me, Kev.’

‘You hit me first. Come on, don’t be like this.’

‘How’d you get here?’

‘Got a cab.’

He slips between the sheets. He’s naked. He touches me. His warm hands. His soft, burly body.

‘What are you doing, Kev?’

‘I’m going to sleep,’ he says. He smooths his hand around my waist, kisses my shoulder, presses his chest into my back.

‘Come on. We’re all right,’ he says. ‘I love you.’

I’m stiff.

He pats my hip.

‘You love me, too,’ he says. ‘But you don’t need to say it.’

I’m stiff.

‘If you were me, how would you be feeling now?’ I try.

‘Like ice-cream,’ he says. He falls asleep. And, somehow, so do I.

My mum and dad arrive with dawn light. A car horn blares and my phone rings at the same time. Kev groans. For a second, I can’t understand why my mother is calling me. Pangs of pain around my body—against my swollen cheek—are the reminder, but I’m not fast enough to answer the phone.

I hustle out of bed, still in my dress from the wedding. It must stink. Kev rolls over, burrowing into the white duvet. I hop for my crutches. I can't work out how to zip up my wheelie bag and carry my handbag and be on crutches at the same time.

Hayley's at the door of my room. 'Your parents are here.' She sees Kev, sees my suitcase, darts for the bag, zips it closed and drags it out of the room just as my mother starts banging on the door.

I hobble to the door barefoot. Mum is white with tiredness. She doesn't even look at Hayley, who bundles past her and shoves my bag in Dad's car.

'What the hell happened to your face?'

'I fell. My ankle's busted.'

'But what about your face?'

'It was a crazy night,' says Hayley, shuffling back to me. 'But she's all right. Mum and Dad are here, she's good to go. She'll tell you in the car.'

I stumble into the back seat. Mum hands Hayley some money. Hayley closes my door.

My dad is frozen. His fists are white on the steering wheel. His knuckles are more bone than skin. He doesn't look like he's been driving. He looks like he's been strangling the car.

'Where's Kev?' Dad says.

'Not here.'

'What happened?'

'I had an accident.'

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‘Did he cause it?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. He didn’t cause it. I was dancing and I fell. Ask Hayley.’

My mum is in the car. She says, ‘Hayley said to ask you.’

But I don’t speak.

The engine starts. We drive. Silent. Mum, and Dad, and me.

‘I’m going to ask you once,’ Dad says, his voice like a dropped match at a petrol station. ‘Did he hit you?’

Silence in the car.

‘Did he?!’

‘I hit him,’ I say. ‘He was being so awful to me at the hospital that I shoved his face.’

‘And does he look as bad as you do now?’ Mum asks.

‘He wasn’t the one who fell over.’

I’m silent.

We drive. Three hours.

We drive to my parents’ home.

Dad is the first out of the car. He is snatching my bag from the back and I have my hand on the door and Mum says, ‘Wait a second.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I want to talk to you.’

Mum watches Dad slam the door, stagger to the front of the house, tear at the lock, march inside.

'If your father thought Kev had hit you, he would kill him. You know that, don't you?' she says.

I remember Dad's knuckles on the steering wheel. I say, 'Yes.'

'So I want you to tell me what happened last night. Tell me. Not your dad. Did Kev hit you?'

Dad's white knuckles on the steering wheel.

'No.'

'He's never welcome in this house again, whatever he's done.'

'He didn't hit me.'

'Don't mention his name. Don't breathe it. For your sake. For mine. And for your dad's.'

Inside the house, my mum makes me a bed on the living-room couch. I change into fresh pyjamas. She puts my foot on pillows. Rests my crutches by the wall. She makes me a cup of tea. She unpacks my luggage. She brings me my mobile phone.

There's a message.

Come on, don't be like this, says Kev. Whatever happened, I'm sorry. I was just really drunk, says Kev. I love you, cabbage, says Kev. You know I love you, says Kev.

'So up himself,' I think. And I smile.

The lake in Canberra. Yellow leaves. The mad night in my friend's spare room. His hair against a pillow. This morning. Even this morning.

I don't want to give these things away.

FURY

I nurse the mobile phone against my cheek, and my heart throbs. *A couple of days*, I write back to him. *Give me a couple of days, Kev. I'll call you then.*