



Girlfriend *fiction*

the
indigo
girls

PENNI RUSSON



ALLEN & UNWIN

Chapter One

Zara

I spent the whole long drive to Indigo plugged into my iPod and texting Sooz. Sooz wanted to know what my brother, Ivan, was doing. All my friends have a crush on him, he's kind of good looking, I guess. And he's got this whole doesn't-talk-to-anyone thing going on, which girls seem to find irresistible. I try and tell them he's a complete dork but they never listen. Like in the car, Ivan had his PDA out, flicking around the little pen thing that you use to write on the screen. 'Cause you need an organiser when you go camping. As if. Why can't he just have a PSP like a normal person? It bugs me. I didn't answer her texts about Ivan.

Kayla texted me too: *poor baby* – she always calls all of us baby, secretly it annoys me – *two weeks of family torture*. At first

I wasn't going to answer her text either. But eventually I punched in a totally non message. It seemed too rude not to say anything. After all, as far as she knew, we were still friends. Then Sooz again: *See you on the flip side*. The flip side? What did that even mean?

Dad was driving. Mum was just kind of staring vacantly out the window. Dad was talking but he wasn't actually talking to Mum, or to anyone for that matter, it's just this pointless airfill thing that he does, a running monologue about petrol prices and fishing and car accident hotspots and the dangers of roundabouts. Did I mention that my dad is a cop?

About three years ago, my brother Ivan and I noticed that my parents don't talk anymore. Not to each other. They talk to us, of course, and sort of through us. I don't even know if they realise. But Mum will be in the kitchen and she'll say, 'Could you ask Dad to start the barbeque?' and I'll go into the lounge room and ask him even though Mum could lean across the kitchen bench and call through the open door to ask him herself. He's, like, sitting right there! Or I ask Dad if I can go shopping with Kayla and the other girls and he says, 'Well, I don't know, Zara. Ask your mother. Has she got any plans this afternoon?' And I'm like, but you *live* together. And you don't know if she 'has plans'? I don't say this, though. What's the point?

One day, it was just me and Ivan in the kitchen. He was biting into a sandwich, he totally inhales two loaves of bread a day. I asked him, 'What about when they . . . you know?'

He almost spat out his food. ‘Zara! I’m eating here. They *don’t*. Do they?’

‘Well, they’ve done it at least once in your lifetime or I wouldn’t be here,’ I pointed out.

‘You’re so disgusting.’

I snorted. ‘In complete silence, though. That’s sort of spooky. Like *Stepford Wives*.’

Ivan leaned on the counter, his shoulders shaking with laughter. ‘Or they mutter away to themselves. “Oh my, is that the time . . . now I really must . . .” Or like when they’re in the car, “Now, did I mean to go left or right here?” only they’d be saying . . .’

‘Don’t!’ I yelled, alarmed that he would get more graphic. He tried to say more, but he couldn’t get it out he was laughing so hard. I covered his mouth with both my hands, whimpering between laughs, ‘No! Nooooo.’

Mum walked in. ‘What’s so funny?’ she asked, smiling like she was ready to share the joke but with this almost desperate edge, like the girls at school who aren’t popular but want to be.

Suddenly it wasn’t funny anymore, for either of us. The last laugh wheezed out and Ivan took his sandwich into the lounge room to eat it. I picked up my mobile, flicking through the address book like it was suddenly crucial or something, so I didn’t have to look at her face. Do they even love each other? I mean, are all old people joyless like them? Or is it just my parents? Tilly’s parents aren’t joyless. They really like each other, you can just tell. I bet they talk

all the time, about books and movies and stuff. And about Tilly and Teddy of course. Do Mum and Dad talk about me and Ivan?

So anyway, we arrived at Indigo and found our spot near the toilets and the kiosk and we all got out and Dad winched up the caravan, and Mum started setting out the stove and the cups to make tea because that's what they always do. This is, like, their life. And Ivan stayed in the car with his PDA and I looked around for Mieke and Tilly but I couldn't see them. So I leaned against the car, looking bored. It's an art to look that bored. Botox-bored, Sooz calls it. People spend thousands on plastic surgery to look like I did right then.

Mum made tea and these sort of spongy, flabby tomato-and-cheese sandwiches.

Finally Tilly rocked up, waving like crazy out the window of her car and I dropped the bored expression and flipped up a wave.

That was when I got the text message. I almost didn't read it because I thought it was Kayla again, and Kayla was a million miles away, back in Melbourne. But it wasn't Kayla, anyway. It was Mieke – to both Tilly and me.

Just found out yesterday that I got a late place in Drew Svenson's summer class. He's an awesome painter. Happy face but sad face. Not coming to Indigo for another whole week! Oh no. Mieke xx

I read the text through twice. I don't know why, but I felt this heavy pit in my stomach. Part of Indigo, a huge part, was Mieke. Without her it would be . . . different.

I wasn't interested in different. I mean, I was happy for her and stuff, if this painter was so great. But why did she have to go to school in the holidays? It had never been just me and Tilly before. I mean, Tilly's nothing like me. What if it wrecked everything?

I was about to turn my phone off when another message came through. I had my finger on the off button – I nearly ignored it. I should have, because it was another one of *those* messages, the kind I've been getting lately – from 'number withheld'.

This one said: *You are a pricktease.*

'Everything all right?' Mum asked.

'The batteries are running low.' I deleted the message and switched the phone off. When I looked up, Ivan was watching me. The freak. I gave him a look, then stared at my nails. Bored. Bored. Botox-bored.

Chapter Two

Tilly

Summer always seems to start when we get to Indigo. Christmas and December, it's like summer's dress rehearsal. It isn't really summer until we turn down the dirt road, until we see Point Indigo for the first time, until we see the blue sparkling ocean.

Every summer since I was nine years old and my baby sister Teddy was four, we've camped at Indigo foreshore. Teddy and Tilly. Because what my parents really wanted was a pair of golden retrievers. Actually, we're Matilda and Theodora but the only people who call us that are a few stray great-aunts. And Mum when she's livid. And relief teachers who don't know any better.

Dad and I started putting up the tent pretty much as

soon as we leapt out of the car. Mum and Teddy disappeared because Dad and I have firm ideas about tent erection and if they hang about, it all ends in tears. Mum's usually, then Teddy's. It's all about birth order. Dad and I are both firstborns, right? So we organise and we're the boss. Which sometimes means we clash because we both want to be the boss of each other, but usually it works out pretty well when we're both the boss of something else, like the tent, or Teddy.

Anyway, while I was helping Dad I was thinking about Mieke's text message. I was trying not to think of it as a disaster but frankly, I found the whole thing a little unsettling.

You see, it's such a fine balance, the whole Indigo Girl thing. Zara's an alpha, right? Which is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and also another way of saying she's a dominant chick. She's popular. In fact, according to this girl I know, Jess, who used to go to Zara's school, Zara is *the* most popular girl at her school, hands down.

Zara's *amazing* to look at. Golden-haired, golden-skinned. Princess Zara. She doesn't see it like that. She calls herself a meat-and-potatoes girl because she's blonde and tall and easy on the eye, which most guys are into. She says she's just a combination of unchallenging factors – the hair, the blue eyes, the C cup. According to Chris Timms in my Year 8 metalwork class, 'More than a handful's a waste.' He meant me, I guess. Not that he would know, mind you, it's not like he – or anyone else – has tried (is that a smidge of regret in my voice? Not about Chris Timms . . .

but if it was someone else, a particular someone, I might not completely disapprove of the experiment). Anyway, back to Zara's factors: eyes, hair, boobs, tall, thin . . . 'Yada yada yada,' Zara would say, and she'd look bored while she was saying it. This, mind you, is when Mieke and I would throw clumps of damp, smelly seaweed at her, because she's actually really and truly beautiful.

Now me, I'm not an alpha obviously. I'm not, like, omega or anything which is the *last* letter in the Greek alphabet and saved for people like Finlay Ridge who's got this really unfortunate forehead and spits when he talks and reads books about assembling machine guns. I'm more like one of the obscure ones in the middle that no one's ever heard of – omicron or something. Gingery, freckly, a bit pointy in the face – nose, chin, even my cheekbones look sort of excruciating. Sometimes I *feel* sharp. All over, even on the inside, as if there's something unapproachable about me, something spiky and ouchy, though most of the time I'm harmless.

And Mieke, well, she's sophisticated . . . maybe a delta. Fourth from the top, kind of aloof. If aloof was a shape it would probably be a triangle and the Greek letter delta is a triangle. Mieke's cool in an arty, slightly gothic way. Her mum's a fashion designer. Her dad's a graphic illustrator and does these really dark, postmodern, brooding comics. The whole family is steeped in arty coolness. And Mieke is carrying the family torch, only it's more like a family candelabrum, one of those really ornate ones.

Mieke's beautiful too, or I think she is, but in a different way from Zara. You know there are some flowers that look small and delicate, but then when you go to pick them the stems nearly rip your hand in half because they're so resilient and wiry? That's Mieke. Small, but not cute. *She* thinks she's looked nine years old for the past seven years. She says when she hears her voice played back, like on a phone message, she sounds like a kindergarten boy with a lisp (she doesn't have a lisp). And she says she looks like she's always got two black eyes. She's kind of pale.

If Mieke and Zara and I all went to the same school there's no way we'd be friends. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work that out. Alphas and deltas and omicrons, they just don't belong together in the real world.

Especially alphas and omicrons. This is where the fine balance comes in. Mieke, as a delta, is a buffer, a halfway point, a mediator. She knows what it's like to be cool, so she and Zara share a common language even though Zara is cool in a totally different way. But Mieke also respects the pointy brain. So we've got our own thing going on. And somehow it makes me and Zara work too.

I was thinking about this stuff when Zara came over. I stood up and brushed dirt off my hands, suddenly shy. I started off every summer feeling a bit shy, like a part of me worried that this was the summer Zara and Mieke would turn around and say, 'Who do you think you are, Matilda Katherine Dove?' And who *do* I think I am? No one much, not compared to this girl. She leaned down and air kissed

each cheek, as if she were an elegant relative at a funeral and I was a slightly pudgy, stumpy child.

‘It’s so good to see you,’ Zara said. ‘Can you believe Mieke’s not coming?’

‘I know. It will be fully weird without her. Like the two musketeers.’ As soon as I said it, I regretted it. Was it presumptive of me to call us the two anything?

But Zara sailed on smoothly. ‘Yeah, totally.’

‘Omigosh, like Zara! It’s like, so totally rad to see you.’ That was my dad. He’s always making fun of how my friends and I talk.

‘Dad! No one says *rad*. That’s so 80s.’

‘Hi, Mr Dove,’ Zara said. She’s really polite around parents.

‘Call me Julian. Mr Dove sounds so wet.’

‘And yet Julian is so manly,’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ said Dad. And he went back to the tent, obviously pleased that I was talking to Zara so he could be the boss of it all by himself.

‘Where’s Teddy?’ Zara asked. For some reason Zara adores Teddy. I mean Teddy is adorable (ninety-nine per cent of the time) but Zara doesn’t seem the type to like little kids.

‘She’s around somewhere.’ This was my chance. I tried to sound nonchalant. ‘Where’s Ivan?’ I felt momentarily sick, because what if he hadn’t come this year?

Zara rolled her eyes. ‘I don’t know. Sitting in the car or something. He’s such a social reject. Like he’s twenty, and

he's still coming on this lame family camping trip. What's with that?'

I wanted to defend him. But he's a boy-Zara. An alpha. A golden boy. I would die if Zara knew how I felt about him and I would die a million times more if Ivan knew. Besides, I know it really annoys Zara when her friends have crushes on him. And he obviously doesn't give her friends a second thought, because he's three years older than us, which means he's already done two whole years of university and we're only going into Year 12 next year.

Year 12. Sigh. I'm so ready for uni. High school is boring. I have this vision that university is going to be full of other people like me, pointy brain people, and we'll sit around and talk about literature (you know, for fun) and the homoerotic subtext in *Star Trek* (which is one of my favourite things to do 'cause as soon as you decide to make everyone on *Star Trek* secretly gay it gets heaps funnier) and everything will have this learned glow about it, like you can suck up knowledge just walking down the halls.

Anyway, I wanted to defend Ivan and I also wanted to say that family camping trips aren't lame and that I'll probably still be coming when I'm twenty, but then I worried that she would think *I* was lame. So I just nodded, apologising to Ivan in my brain, which was probably the closest I would get to talking to him all summer.

'Are you sleeping in the annexe this year?' I asked Zara. She hated the stuffy annexe. But she hated being inside the caravan with her parents more.

‘Nuh-uh,’ she said, with a grin. ‘Guess what I scored for Christmas?’

We walked up the dirt road to her campsite and she pulled a canvas bag out from the floor of her car. She rolled it out. It was one of those tiny one-person tents that’s almost really a sleeping bag, sausage shaped around the legs but opening out around the head.

‘My own swag,’ she said, proudly.

‘Ugh,’ I shuddered.

‘What?’

‘It’s so small! It looks like a coffin.’

‘No way. I love it. Just me, no one to bug me. Out under the stars.’

See, I don’t get that. Our family tent has three rooms – a sitting type room, Mum and Dad’s bedroom, and Teddy and I share the other room. I like having Teddy there. I like that there’s only a thin canvas separating me and Mum and Dad so I can hear them breathe and snore and turn over in their sleep. Zara would think that was weird. Maybe I am weird. But won’t she be scared, all on her own in the middle of the night? Won’t she be lonely? Or is that just part of being Zara, sleeping out under the stars on her own?

‘I better go back and help Dad,’ I said.

‘Yeah, I’ll put this up.’

That was something I liked about Zara. She wasn’t precious. She wasn’t afraid to get dirty or break a nail. She did stuff for herself.

‘I’ll see you at the rockpool after dinner?’

We always met there on the first night. It was tradition.
'Yep.'

I walked back up to our campsite, which is at the quiet end. Mum and Dad like having lots of trees around us. Zara's mum likes being close to the facilities.

I was still thinking about Zara. You know what my mum's going to say? She's going to say that the upside of Mieke not coming till later is that it will give me and Zara a chance to get to know each other better. But is that a good thing? What if we get to know each other and she realises just how many Greek letters there are between alpha and omicron? What if this *is* the summer she finally says she doesn't want to hang out with me anymore?

'What if it is?' says inner-Mum.

'I don't think I could handle that kind of rejection,' I answer out loud. 'Besides, I like being an Indigo Girl. It's fun. And it's kind of special. Like a holiday from me.' Inner-Mum nods knowingly and takes a memo for later.
Wants to take a holiday from self.

Mum (my real mum, that is, not inner-Mum which is, let's be honest, just me talking to myself) is a psychotherapist, which doesn't mean she's a therapist who's psycho, because that's one of those jokes that gets old fast. She's like a cross between a psychiatrist and a counsellor. She's a trained doctor (like a psychiatrist) but she believes in something called cognitive behavioural therapy instead of prescribing drugs, which means she tries to make you change the way you think. Anyway, I'm sure having a

mum who's a psychotherapist messes with your head because there I was, walking along talking to myself.

And there was Ivan, watching me talking to myself. 'Who's the social reject now?' I muttered.

'Pardon?' he said.

'What?' I said. I know, this is classic material. So worth recording for posterity.

'Were you talking to me?'

'Oh. Um. No,' I said. Monosyllabic much?

He looked around. 'You do realise there's no one else here?'

'I know.' You know there are those girls who can blush a pretty rose colour and boys are apparently enchanted by it and therefore you get away with being a complete idiot? Yeah, well, I can't do that.

Though, bless him, he looked more confused than scornful.

I explained. 'I was talking to myself. You know. As you do.'

'As you do,' he said, quite kindly really. His eyes even crinkled a bit like he was thinking about smiling sometime this millennium.

I walked away grinning maniacally to myself because you know what? I might have been sprung talking to myself, but in other news, Ivan Sutherland and Tilly Dove just had a conversation.

That night we cooked vegies on the barbeque: potato sliced thin, sprinkled with salt, pepper and rosemary, plus

eggplant, zucchini, tomato and asparagus. We argued about whether or not to put salt on the asparagus. I did when Dad wasn't looking.

Zara's dad, Tony, came over and cooked their sausages on the hot plate next to ours. The dads all bonded over us when we were younger and they had to keep an eye on us. They hung out together on the beach while we played. But they don't actually have much in common. Zara's dad is a cop. Mine teaches political science at uni. Not completely unrelated, I guess. Still, maybe it's just me, but conversation doesn't exactly flow.

We were all standing around cooking, Tony doing his sausages, and me and Dad with our stuff – we both like to be the boss of the barbeque too and we were arguing over possession of the spatula due to a difference in technique (much flipping back and forth versus wait, then flip *once*, then wait) – when along came Ivan.

'Hey, Dad,' he mumbled. 'Mum wants to know if you want red wine or white tonight.' Then Ivan turned to my dad and said, 'Hi, Professor Dove.'

'Call me Julian, please,' Dad said waving a barbeque fork around, generally in my direction because I'd won possession of the spatula. He should watch it or Tony will arrest him for being armed and dangerous. Then Dad said to me, 'Ivan was in my Language and Law class last year.'

I looked at Dad. He was? I sent little telepathic dagger points into Dad's brain. How could something like that get by me?

'It was a great class.' Ivan was looking at me when he said that, so I nodded. Smooth.

'Are you going on with Political Science this year?' Dad asked Ivan.

'It's my major.'

'What subjects are you doing?' I asked. It was as if I was two people inhabiting the one body. As long as I was talking to Dad or Tony I was fine, but anything I said to Ivan made me sound like I was twelve years old. Talking underwater. In a second language.

'Love, Family and Sexuality,' Ivan answered. 'World Politics in Transition. Australia in Conflict. And Transforming Terrorism.'

How cool are those subjects?

'Love, Family and Sexuality is one of mine,' said Dad. 'And you'll probably have Nina Rosse for Australia in Conflict. I think you'll like her.'

'*You* teach a subject about love and sexuality?' I said to Dad. 'Eew!'

Ivan looked at me seriously. 'It's about the interaction between public and private realms in terms of legislation and legal practice.'

Well, der. How stupid does he think I am?

'Actually it's all about you and your sister,' Dad said, winking. 'I start every year with a slideshow of baby photos.'

'It's amazing they let you teach it at all,' I retorted, 'considering you couldn't get a date till you were twenty-

five. And then you married the first woman who was desperate enough to go out with you.'

Tony was turning over the sausages with this weird half smile on his face and Ivan was staring at me, looking a bit shocked. Dad's students always take him really seriously, 'cause he's a professor. I reckon he only became a professor because Dr Dove sounded so stupid. Anyway, I don't think the Sutherlands muck around like this with each other.

'Sparkling,' Tony said to Ivan. 'There's a bottle in the esky. Tell your mother the sausages will be ready in five minutes.'

If the sausages are going to be ready in five minutes, you'd think Tony could tell her himself and then Ivan could stay here and talk to me. But Tony was as immune to my telepathic daggers as Dad, and Ivan left, looking longingly behind him. Not at me, though: at our vegetables. Because they smelled, if I do say so myself, pretty damn good. Who'd want to eat nasty suburban mystery bags – lips and bums, Teddy would say – when you can eat friendly organic vegies like these? No animals were harmed in the making of our meal.

Dad and Tony started talking about football. Yawn. With a longing look of my own at the vegies, I left them to the mercy of Dad and went to find Teddy and Mum to oversee the making of the couscous, which we'd left in their incapable hands.

Chapter Three

Zara

I was waiting for Tilly, sitting on the sand, wearing my headphones but my iPod wasn't switched on. I was looking out at the sea. Sometimes you look at the sea and it's this amazing powerful force of nature and sometimes it's just big and blank and empty. It was a blank empty day. There was still an hour or so until the sun set, but the light was already changing into this intensely yellow colour, so everything shone extra bright. Ivan once told me it was the infra-red that made that happen. I don't know about stuff like that, but I love the light like this, long and yellow.

I wasn't actually bored, but I could tell I was making the face. Sometimes it creeps up on me, maybe because I've done it too many times. Like when you were a little

kid and your mum said, 'If you keep making that face the wind will change and you'll be stuck with it.' Which is a totally crappy thing to say. I mean, how freaky! I'm never going to be a mother. But maybe my mother was right and the wind had changed and I was just going to look bored forever.

I couldn't get 'number withheld' out of my head. Was it Marcus sending them? Would he really do that? Part of me was sure he wouldn't, not after all the time we spent together. But if it wasn't him, who would it be? It *had* to be Marcus. I knew he was angry with me. But if anyone should be angry it was me, right? I didn't feel angry, though. Looking out to sea, I felt nothing. I felt blank, empty.

Tilly arrived. She sat next to me on the sand. I smiled at her, it was good to see her.

'I keep expecting Mieke to show up,' I said.

'I know. It's *surreal* without her here.'

Tilly always uses words like that. She's really smart. Not like Ivan, who's just completely nerdy, plugged into his computer most of the time. She's smart in an ordinary everyday kind of way, like when we go to the Indigo cinema she always notices extra things about the story and the characters, symbolism and stuff.

'I even miss their caravan,' I said. It's a corrugated tin A-frame that Mieke's parents made themselves.

'Me too. It's a real Indigo icon.'

After we'd talked about Mieke we were silent for a minute.

‘So how was your year?’ I asked Tilly. We don’t really stay in touch away from Indigo. We don’t email or SMS or anything. And Tilly and I even live on the same trainline. Though it’s a long trainline. I’m out in the ‘burbs, where it’s all cul-de-sacs and families and enormous houses with three lounge rooms and stuff. Tilly’s sort of on the fringe of the city, lots of groovy little terrace houses and cafes and bars and cinemas and designer clothes. My school’s massive and it’s known for sport and computers and science. You know, just regular subjects. At her school they do philosophy. Plus they have this big sound studio and they do dance for VCE. I know because my best friend from primary school, Jess, moved there after the end of Year 6. Jess and I don’t keep in touch either. I tried at first and so did she, but then we just kind of drifted apart.

‘It was all right,’ said Tilly. ‘The usual. You?’

‘Fine,’ I said.

We asked each other all the same questions we ask every year, speaking the universal language of high school. What subjects did you do, what were your teachers like, all that stuff.

Mostly I looked out at the sea, though sometimes I looked at Tilly while she was speaking. She has a strange face. You could almost think she was ugly, I guess, because she has a really pointy chin and nose. She has heaps of freckles and her hair is a gingery brown colour and sort of frizzy and she always wears it in a ponytail, always. She’s far and away the best swimmer of all of us, though

on land she moves kind of slow and heavy. She hides her body shape with loose fitting clothes – big T-shirts and baggy shorts mostly – which is weird because in bathers she's sort of strong looking, solid. Not completely girly, but there's still something cool about her body – like, I remember reading in a magazine once that you don't have to be pretty to be sexy and at the time I didn't get it but looking at Tilly, I realised it's sort of true. Also she has this really amazingly full bottom lip and she always looks like she's wearing lipstick even though I know she's not. And there's something about her face that I like looking at, even though she's not *pretty* pretty, if you know what I mean.

A couple of guys, surfers, were heading out with their boards to use the last of the daylight. I watched them stepping through the waves, calling to each other.

Suddenly I was hanging out for it, the first surf of the summer. I'm not a surfer chick or anything. I don't live to surf, waiting for the next wave. Well, it'd be a pretty pathetic life where we live, a couple of hours drive from the nearest surf beach, and I don't even have a car. It's not like Mum and Dad would take me to the beach just to go surfing.

But a couple of years ago Tilly, Mieke and I went to surf school here in Indigo, which was, like . . . I can't tell you how much fun it was. It's one of the only times in my life I remember being completely carefree. At first we were all really bad at it. But then Tilly knelt up and caught a wave and we were all really excited for her. And then I got to

my feet and stayed standing for a whole minute. It wasn't a competition. It was *funny* and crazy and exciting, getting this skill together, making it happen. We kept bobbing up out of the water, being hit in the face with our surfboards and laughing at ourselves and each other. After that I got a surfboard for my birthday and I was so looking forward to more surf school but Chris, the local guy who taught it, was gone, moved up to the city. We still go surfing every year, Tilly, Mieke and me. Sometimes we see Chris out there, back in town, visiting his folks, surfing home waters, always happy to give us some tips, shouting encouragement to tackle the big waves. There's even surf lifesaving a few times a year at school. But somehow it's never felt quite the same as it did that summer, when none of us were good at it and nobody cared.

When I got back up to camp, Dad was getting the Land Cruiser ready to take the waveskis, paddles and surfboards down to the beach box. There's a row of them down on the beach – old fashioned bathing boxes. Mum reckons they cost the earth, like enough to house a whole family, but Dad bought one anyway a couple of years ago and even Mum's glad he did because now she's got somewhere shady to sit and we can store our table and chairs and umbrellas. For Mum it's almost like she's not really at the beach at all.

'Want to come, Zars?' Dad asked. 'I could use a hand.'

I shrugged. 'Sure.'

Me and Dad don't say a lot to each other. Actually Dad doesn't talk to anyone much, just sort of at the world. Sometimes I think maybe he and I are alike, though everyone always says I'm just like Mum was when she was my age. I know that makes Mum really proud, like we've got this special connection, but I *hate* it when people say that.

I used to really worship Dad. When you're in kindergarten, having a dad who's a policeman is the coolest thing. Well, except maybe if he was a fireman. He'd come to school every year in his uniform to talk to my class about road safety or stranger danger or whatever, and at first I'd be all like, 'That's *my* dad.' And then later I just sort of didn't say anything, and then when I was in about Year 5 I begged him not to come. I remember the look on his face when Mum chimed in with, 'She's right, Tony, it would be complete social suicide. It wasn't so bad when she was younger but she's practically a teenager now.' Like we'd slapped him.

But then he just looked normal again. He nodded once and walked out of the room. Mum smiled at me, one of her big fake 'I'm on *your* side' mother-daughter, go team smiles. I'd walked out too, disgusted with her, disgusted with myself. But still relieved that Dad wasn't coming to my school, convincing myself that Dad didn't care, knowing how much he really did.

It's almost like I can pinpoint it to that very day that I stopped being 'Daddy's girl'. Like he decided that I was my mother's daughter and everyone else sort of agreed, and that was that.

We were heading up the track that wound back out of the campground so we could take the road to the main carpark where the beach boxes were. It was that grainy time of day, the light was going. He turned into the main road.

‘Dad, look out!’

The Land Cruiser stopped with a jolt, veering left. A huge roo stared into the headlights, then put its front paws down and continued crossing with a lazy hop, like of course we should stop for it.

‘Are you all right?’ Dad asked me.

‘I’m fine.’ My nails were digging into my palms. He clutched the steering wheel for a minute, staring at the deserted road. Then he eased into reverse, straightened the car and kept driving.

That night I lay in my one-person tent. Tilly was wrong. It wasn’t a coffin. It was a cocoon. Beyond the mesh of the mosquito net I could see stars. It was warm, the air clear in my lungs, filled with the smell of eucalyptus and the sea. It was good to be away from the city, from the cars that whined up and down all night on the freeway near our house.

Like I did every night, I thought about what it would be like to drive across the country when I finished school, just me and this swag. I’d camp by the side of the road, heading north when winter hit the south, following the sun.

It’s been my thing for a year or two now, my plan, but I’d always imagined someone going with me. For a while

it was Marcus. We even talked about it, in an offhand kind of way (though for some reason I never mentioned the savings in my bank account: the money I earned slinging lattes at the Loveshack, added to the money my grandma gave me a few years ago). I'd thought about taking Kayla, Sooz, Rio and Tang Yi – though seriously, I doubted they could hack it. Anyway, I wouldn't want to anymore. Not Kayla. And if Kayla didn't go, Sooz wouldn't.

Sometimes last year I even imagined Tilly and Mieke coming with me – it made sense, after all. They were already my camping buddies. Mieke might do it too, but I knew Tilly wouldn't, not just heading off for a year or more. She'd be off to uni as soon as she finished Year 12.

Anyway, that's how I used to see it, me and a gang of girls, or maybe just one boy. But when I got the swag the dream changed. Now in the dream I'm alone. Heading for the Northern Beaches or the Red Centre, window down, wind in my face, on an empty, open road. Just driving, really. Who cares where?