

**BEFORE
THE
BEGINNING**

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LOTHIAN

PART ONE
GRACE

‘What good is it for someone to gain the whole world,
yet forfeit their soul?’

- MARK 8:36

‘Then I must also die and float as foam upon the sea ...
Can’t I do anything at all to win an immortal soul?’

- *THE LITTLE MERMAID*

AFTER THE END

Sierra. The whole week lies coiled in her name, like a seashell.

When I think about the week I still see us, all of us, suspended in light, swimming in the waves, surrounded by what looked like fireflies of the sea.

Noah told me all about it, later, the reason behind the bioluminescence: that they're tiny creatures disturbed by movement, and the light is probably a tactic to startle predators.

'It's harder to hide in the ocean,' he said, 'so these guys hide in plain sight.'

It didn't feel like we were a danger to those sparks of light. It felt like they were celebrating us, welcoming us. And her most of all.

But it's funny how now, when I think of Sierra swimming in the waves that night, I can't picture her body at all: only an outline picked out in points of light, with the dark sea in between.

SCHOOLIES

I've never driven this long before on my own. My hands grip the wheel so hard they begin to cramp, and I try to relax. I look at the clock, still over an hour to go. Mirror, side mirror, rear-view mirror, repeat. Each time I look to my left the red P-plate snags in my vision – it's tilting further and further off-centre.

Casper, my brother, sits next to me staring out the window, the road flowing past him easy as notes sliding down a scale. My hands twist tighter around the wheel.

'Could you fix that, please?' I nod to the corner. The car wobbles in the lane and I turn back to the road. 'The P-plate. It's going to fall out.'

'Oh – right.' Casper looks away from the window long enough to nudge the plate with his foot, barely straightening it at all, and I try not to sigh.

'Thanks.'

'How many of these cars do you think are going to schoolies, too?' he asks mildly.

'I haven't seen any other P-plates yet.' Our mum's sedan feels very alone, close to the ground, flanked on either side by trucks that seem to take up far more than their share of the road. 'Just us and these man-spreading trucks.'

Casper lets out a huff of laughter and I feel the glow of surprise I always do when he gets one of my jokes.

‘So you’re sure the others are okay with me joining you guys for the week?’ I’d asked a variation of this question many times over the last few days. I had been so certain of myself when I spontaneously cancelled my trip with Caitlin and the rest of the group from church – but now the elation has worn off. I’m not sure how Casper’s friends feel about me. Well, that isn’t true. I am pretty sure Elsie can’t stand me and that Noah is, at best, indifferent.

Casper shrugs and leans his head against the window. ‘I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

I am about to point out that this is not, in fact, an answer to my question, when the whole car judders with a grinding, scraping vibration – I’ve drifted too far to the left and gone over the safety bumps on the side of the road.

‘Woah, got your rally car licence?’ Casper says, as I pull the car straight, overcorrect, and sway back into the middle of the lane.

‘At least I have *a* licence.’ Casper hasn’t even got his learner’s permit. He says he doesn’t see the need: he can skate everywhere he wants to on his own. I try to refrain from pointing out how often I give him a lift. Most times.

‘So, you going to work on your art portfolio this week? Interview is pretty soon after we get back, right?’ His interview is the day after schoolies. I know this because the letter is taped to the fridge and circled on the calendar by Mum and Dad who don’t trust Casper to remember on his own.

‘Oh, it’s pretty much done, I think,’ he replies.

This is interesting, since when I went into his room yesterday to look for my suspected-stolen headphones to pack (I recovered them) the portfolio submission was open on his laptop. It was blank.

‘I can help you brainstorm the final details if you like?’ I offer.

Casper makes a non-committal noise and looks back out the window. I give up on having any engaging conversation with him

for the rest of the drive. He tends to only appreciate conversation he initiates, which may seem mysterious and charming but, on my worst days, I find it annoying and self-centred.

There are three extremely good reasons why I ditched my friends to join my brother on his schoolies trip, I remind myself. Three great reasons.

What I would really like to do right now, trapped in this tiny metal box shooting along a highway at speeds which feel unnatural and unsafe, is pray. But I am still not sure if not being on speaking terms with my group of friends at church means I'm also no longer on speaking terms with God.

Back mirror, side mirror, rear-view mirror, road. We drive on.

Once we are further out of Melbourne and the road narrows and empties of trucks I can finally relax. I have slid into a new dimension with driving: I am one with the car, it's easy, really, I don't even have to focus on the road anymore, just will the car to keep going. It has been raining and the trees here are still wet – strips of luminous, almost neon, yellow show through the bark.

'Grace! What's that?'

There's something on the road.

It looks like a solid white fog.

'I don't know – I can't go around.'

The thin road is flanked by gum trees on either side, and there's a car coming up behind me. Nowhere to pull over, I'm not even sure if I can slow down safely. Seconds later and we'll be in the middle of it –

'Butterflies,' Casper says in wonder.

He's right – it's not a fog at all, it's a swarm of butterflies. Each one small and white, crowded together like a suspended snowfall. We are about to hit them so I jerk my foot to the brake. I don't

care if it's dangerous, if the car behind me will hit us – I can't run through them. They're too beautiful. I brace myself.

But the butterflies don't smear against the windscreen as I thought they would. They flow over and behind the car, in the slipstream, out behind us. I watch them in the rear-view mirror and I swear for a second they form into a face – a girl, her hair in long white streamers around her.

Her face stays with me until the end of the drive.

THE SHACK

We pull into the driveway at the shack. Something loosens in my chest and my shoulders drop as I turn off the car. Partly it's the relief that I am no longer driving, partly it's the feeling I always get when I arrive here: of time stretching out and slowing, like my feet really feel the ground beneath them. A bit like how praying used to feel.

The shack is just the same – the sliding door with holes in the flyscreen, the deck of grey wood warped by sun and salt. The garage packed full of old camping gear piled against the surfboards lying in the space between the beams and the ceiling. Underneath them, of course, the tinnie. Its seats are strewn with life jackets, even though no one would have taken it out for months.

Casper stands and stretches, looking away from the shack and into the bush.

'Going to help me with the bags, Casper?' I ask, trying to keep my voice light. He still hasn't thanked me for the driving, two hours straight.

'Sure.' Casper wanders to the boot, picks up a pillow and doona – I bite my lip as I take one of the heavier bags and hoist it on my shoulder, reaching for the key from my pocket. Casper trails after me and I can't help wondering what he would have done if I hadn't joined him at the last minute. Would he have even remembered to get the keys from Mum and Dad?

‘Looking forward to the week?’ I remind myself that it may not have been his vision of the holiday to have his sister tag along. ‘Thanks for letting me crash.’

‘Oh yeah, it’ll be fine.’ Casper shrugs. ‘Can’t see the point, really. I would have saved the money and done something more interesting, but it seemed important to El and Noah.’

I walk up the rickety steps and turn the key. A tiny spiderweb spans from the handle to the wall, it tears apart as I open the door. ‘What would you have done instead?’ I don’t mention the obvious fact that we are spending hardly any money, since we don’t have to pay for the shack.

‘You know, a real adventure.’

‘Like what? Travel somewhere?’ I follow his eyeline into the trees. ‘Camp in the bush?’

‘I don’t know. I mean, why is it even this week? We could celebrate any week. And why the focus on alcohol and the beach? It’s meant to be wild but it’s so ... conventional.’

‘Well, it is the week after exams have finished. And it’s summer, so pretty good beach weather. And alcohol is traditionally linked with celebration. So, I can see some possible reasons for schoolies other than mindless conformity.’ I nudge him with my duffle bag, then drop it on the lounge floor. ‘Just because it’s popular doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it, Casper.’

‘And just because it is, doesn’t mean I have to.’ He grins at me. ‘You’re probably right though, I’m sure it will be great.’ Casper, while prone to extreme positions, is too laidback to hold tightly on to any of them. It makes him impossible to argue with.

I open the windows, bracing myself against the protesting scrape of their rollers, and let in the metronome call of the birds outside and the background hum of the sea. We haven’t been here for years, but I recognise everything: same lumpy couch, same stack of old newspapers in the corner, same giant shells sitting on the windowsill full of silver coins and rubber bands.

I'm not sure what to expect from the week. I've been to the shack heaps but I know schoolies will not be like a family holiday. Apparently, the town is taken over for the week and the beach becomes a party each night. Our school had brought in some speakers in Term Four warning us of things to look out for at schoolies, how to protect ourselves and our friends. I had tuned out. My friends weren't doing that kind of schoolies. Now, I wish I had listened.

'Do you know which room Elsie or Noah are taking?' I ask.

Casper doesn't reply. He picks up something from the windowsill and cradles it in his palm. A tiny butterfly, cream white, wings spread out in surrender.

'Are you going to free it?'

'It's dead,' he says, but he walks outside anyway and lays it gently on the ground beside the deck. Casper returns to the kitchen and turns on the tap, which shudders to life and makes a tinny rattle against the sink.

I collect the rest of the bags from the car and pile them in a heap in the middle of the carpet. My new bikini spills out of the top of my bag and I gently push it down so I can close the zip properly.

The bikini: the third and final reason why I had changed my plans at the last minute.

I'd found it at an expensive surf shop in the city, one I'd never normally look in because I knew the prices were too high, but I was early for the movie I was seeing with Caitlin and Bec and it was lying there in the sale bin, flung almost out of the store, like it was trying to get my attention. It was my colour of the moment: gentle, dusty lavender. And it was my size.

I tried it on so quickly, before I could change my mind, that the sales assistant didn't even seem to notice me slip into the change room. It made me wonder how easy it might be to shoplift, if I would ever allow myself. Of course, I wouldn't – but it was a

running joke with my friends: all the rules we could break if we decided we were allowed.

The bikini fit perfectly. I didn't want to take it off straight away, which was a miracle of bikini shopping right there.

I showed Caitlin and Bec as we went into the movie. It looked like a flower, nestled in the bag from the shop: the soft folds of colour against the black tissue paper the woman had wrapped it in for me.

'Oh – did you buy it for schoolies?' asked Caitlin.

'Not really. It was just there and was such a good deal.' But if I was honest, it was nice to think that I'd have swimmers I felt good in for a week that was going to be full of so many new people and uncertainties.

'Oh cool, it's just –' Caitlin stopped and looked at Bec. 'Don't worry. Come on, we don't want to miss the trailers.'

And the next day, a message to all the girls in our church group.

Hey girls. Can't wait to celebrate the year with you and give thanks for all we've been through together. I've just had on my heart lately that we could all make a commitment to do schoolies differently, to be radical. And I think one way we could really love our peers around us – especially the boys – is to not wear anything that leads to unhelpful thoughts. I don't want to make anyone feel guilty or anything but I have been praying about this and feel led to make a pledge – I'm not going to wear a bikini or revealing clothes over the week. And if any of you want to join me, I think it could be a cool way to do schoolies our way. Love Caitlin xxx

If it had just been the bikini, maybe I would have gone and happily worn my school-issued one-piece that had begun to sag. But it was the bikini on top of everything else. In the moment

after getting that message, I realised I couldn't spend a week with that group.

'I guess I'll start unpacking in our old room? Do you want to share with Elsie or Noah? Or we could share, like we used to.'

I'm interrupted by the scrape of the sliding door.

'I am dead. Deceased. Buried. Casper Latif, on *time*? No, *early*?' Elsie pushes the door open wider with her foot. She walks straight to the kitchen and puts two bags of shopping on the counter, as if she's been here hundreds of times.

'I was fully expecting to wait on the deck for forty-five minutes, minimum.' She shakes her head at him in wonder.

'El, hey.' Cas reaches out for a fist bump. I feel the same mix of irritation and curiosity whenever I see the two of them together. How is it that they have such easy intimacy when I never seem to get through to either of them?

Maybe I audibly sighed, because Elsie turns and sees me. And she looks far more surprised than she was at the fact that Casper was on time.

'Hi Elsie!' I say. My voice is way too bright. I smile. Maybe too much. She's still staring at me.

'Casper, wow, you're here already.' Noah walks in, ducking his head to get through the doorway. 'Where should I put these?' He looks around for a place to put down his bags and sees me too. 'Oh. Grace.'

'Yes. Oh.' Elsie repeats.

'Did you drive with Grace instead of catching the train?' Noah asks. 'That would explain how you beat us here.'

'Grace's schoolies is like two hours in the other direction, Noah, remember?' says Elsie. 'That would be an extremely generous lift.'

Her tone is not friendly, despite my theoretical generosity. My smile starts to slip.

‘Grace is staying with us for the week – didn’t I tell you?’ Casper rummages through the bags on the counter, opens a pack of corn chips and throws a few in his mouth. ‘I’m sure I told you. And I never said I was catching the train, just that I could find my own way here.’

Elsie shakes her head. She’s smiling a bit now but at Casper, not me.

Of course he hadn’t told them. I glare at Casper across the room. ‘You said it was fine.’

‘Sure it is. Why wouldn’t it be fine?’ Elsie replies for him, without making eye contact with me. She shrugs her backpack off onto the couch, right next to where I’m standing. ‘Chip please,’ she calls, holding out her hand. Casper tosses one across the room, she snatches it from the air.

I want to apologise for crashing, to explain I didn’t mean to spring it on them, but it feels impossible without turning the whole thing into a bigger deal. Before I can find the words, Elsie starts exploring the room.

‘Wow, what are these?’ She closes the front door, revealing the precarious pile of old newspapers.

‘Uh, yeah, this place kind of collects junk, so many people use it.’ I look to Casper to see if he will join the conversation, but he continues to munch on chips, oblivious. ‘We should throw them out, I guess.’

‘Are you kidding?’ Elsie slides one out from the middle of the pile. ‘Look – this one is vintage: 2002.’ She flops it onto the table then wanders back over to Casper. The headline is something panicky about a teen prank gone wrong. I check the date – yep, December. Just after schoolies week. I guess some things don’t change.

‘Woah, hang on. Someone actually died.’ I scan the article. Something about a drowning.

‘Sure they did.’ Elsie seems to have lost interest in the newspaper, now that I’m reading it. ‘People die all the time, it’s

just everyone blames teenagers during this week of the year. So, this is the place?’

‘Yeah, can we have the tour?’ Noah adds.

‘Well, this is it really.’ I feel oddly defensive, looking at the shack through Elsie and Noah’s eyes. ‘It’s not that fancy, but it’s shared between lots of my extended family – occasionally someone talks about doing it up, but we never get round to it.’

‘Is that why you didn’t reserve it for your church group, Grace? Because it’s not fancy enough? For sure I know there’s no way that Cas would have been organised enough to ask before you.’ Elsie grins at Casper as she says this and I try not to feel the sting. When I had suggested the shack to Bec and Caitlin back in June, they had exchanged glances before hastily saying something about not wanting to inconvenience my family.

‘The shack’s fine,’ Casper says. ‘It’s really just a base for beach visits. Come on, there’s outside too.’

We spill out onto the deck, where the light has turned golden while we’d been inside. The roar of cicadas rises up around us.

‘There’s a boat? We have got to take this out.’

‘Does anyone have a licence?’ Noah asks. ‘You still need a licence, right? They don’t just let everyone out on the water?’

Elsie jumps up on the tinnie’s trailer to examine it more closely. As she does, a bit of paper falls out of her back pocket.

‘What’s this, El?’ Casper asks, as he picks it up.

‘Oh, some guy at the supermarket gave it to me – I think it’s for a party tonight. He was trying to canoe in a shopping trolley, so don’t know how much we want to trust his recommendation. Could be fun, though.’

I can’t think of much worse than a party with complete strangers and three people who don’t want me here, but it doesn’t look like I’ve got many options.