

WILL KOSTAKIS
MONUMENTS

LOTHIAN

ONE

This is my first friend divorce, so forgive me if I'm doing it wrong.

It's probably – definitely – against the rules to text. But it's Monday, 30 March. Olly's sixteenth birthday. I can't ignore that. I won't. We met when the glue we used at school was edible; we have history. Sure, part of that history's him being very clear about not wanting to hang out anymore, but ignoring that little blemish . . .

He thinks I'm boring. I only ever do what adults tell me to. He's wrong. I'm messaging him to meet me on the Founders Block rooftop in seven minutes. I'm not allowed to let anyone else up there. I'm breaking a school rule for him. That's not boring. He'll see that.

I check the text once over for typos before sending it. I set down my phone and exhale. The cafeteria is buzzing. It always buzzes when pancakes are the breakfast special. I look to my plate, my overflowing plate. I told Olly to meet me in seven minutes.

I should have given myself more time.

Whoops.

I dart out of the cafeteria with a folded ricotta pancake hanging from my mouth. I spy Mr Wilson under the jacaranda, chastising students who wear creative interpretations of our school uniform. He's a stickler for presentation and I frankly don't have the time. I can avoid him by taking the back entrance into Founders Block – an offence punishable by stern lecture. I hesitate, remind myself I'm not boring, then sneak inside.

The service corridors of Charlton Grammar are treated like poorly managed backstage areas, littered with props and forgotten artefacts of past productions. I run the gauntlet of rolled carpets, trophy cabinets and framed student artworks. At the end, a door. I pop it open a smidge, check the coast is clear and then leap out into the hallway. This is centre stage.

Founders Block is the oldest building on campus. Once the entirety of the school, it is now the place where the important people have offices and host functions. The ceilings are high and framed by decorative cornices, and the floors are marble.

Ms Rowsey must recognise my frantic footsteps because she's waiting in her office with the keys held out. Nobody knows her exact role at the school, but she has the temperament of someone perpetually interrupted.

I greet her in Pancaklish: regular English spoken through more pancake than any person should have in their mouth at any one time.

She sighs. 'Chew, Connor. Honestly.'

I grin at her and a piece of pancake falls to the floor.

Ms Rowsey arches one eyebrow severely. She doesn't need to say anything. I scoop up the food, drop it in the bin and I'm out of her office before she thinks I'm up to anything.

I scurry towards the disused stairwell. A teacher I don't recognise tells me to slow down. I do, only until I pass him. When I get to the door, I fumble with the keys. They're long and heavy and stained by time, made for locks that should've been changed by now. I separate the one with the more ornate head, twist it in the lock and push. The hinges creak. I slip inside and prop the door open with my shoe, ready for Olly.

There's no railing so I hug the wall on my way up. After six flights, one wall comes to an end. The rooftop stretches the full length of the building. I ignore it and instead climb the cast-iron spiral staircase in the corner. I keep my head ducked until the spiral stops.

Students aren't allowed in the belltower. It's expressly forbidden. Whatever. I'm in the belltower. Sydney stretches out for miles, a patchwork quilt of roads and roofs disrupted by defiant bursts of green. The city marks the horizon, all spiked and silver. I watch the shells of skyscrapers and the cranes that fawn over them. I wonder what the view is like from there, if people in skyscrapers even look this way.

The bell is twice the size of my chest. I reach in and feel around – I've taped a whole world of contraband to the inside. The bell hasn't rung since some bright spark proposed a less tiresome way to signal the end of class than sending some poor soul up a mountain to bash a bent piece of metal. Come to think of it, the poor soul was probably the bright spark. Last week, while brainstorming ways to demonstrate to Olly

how not-boring I can be, I realised the bell was perfect for hiding snacks. Charlton Grammar has waged a war on taste, and certain foods can't be consumed on campus without prompting several petitions from the militant Parents and Friends' Association and a passive-aggressive mention in their newsletter. They want us to live fuller, healthier lives, and I get that, but counterpoint: junk food is incredible. I pocket the peanut brittle for myself, and a packet of chocolate-coated almonds for Olly.

I pull back and soak in the view again – roads, roofs, green, silver, got it – and descend the spiral staircase. I forget to duck and whack my head. My skull throbs.

'Nice one,' I mutter.

At the foot of the staircase, a garbage bag is tucked under a brick. I leave the brick and drag the bag out onto the rooftop. It whips violently in the wind. I stop at the first pole and fish out the correct flag. It's the school's emblem: a black wyvern with its forked tongue poking out, stitched on white polyester.

When students are old enough, the teachers assign us chores so we can share in the thrills of maintaining a centuries-old building. I got off lightly with flag duty. All I have to do is raise the flags of a morning and lower them in the afternoon. Some kids have to mop. And this at least has its perks. Two flags raised in the correct order . . . It's a ten-minute job I can stretch to twenty and miss the beginning of my first class. That's not to say I've ever missed the beginning of my first class, I haven't, but the potential's there.

I rest the brick on the empty bag and return to the rooftop. I lean against the barrier and empty my pockets. I watch my

phone. I swipe one finger across its screen. There are no new notifications.

Olly's late.

Okay, maybe that's unfair. I didn't give him much notice. He has until the bell. That's plenty of time. He's had three weeks to come to terms with the fact that life without me isn't too crash-hot. He'll want to repair things and the door's open. Literally. I've propped it open with my shoe.

My phone vibrates. My heart punches my chest. I assume it's him, but . . . It's Mum. I exhale and answer the call on speaker. 'Yo.'

'You didn't call this morning.'

I wince. It slipped my mind. 'We were running late.'

'Well, run later and call me.' She isn't mad, but she's dangling the fact she *should* be. 'How are you, darling?'

'I'm well thanks, darling.'

A pause. 'It's weird when you say it.'

'That's why I say it.'

'Did your father feed you?'

'He gave me money.'

'That's not the same,' she says. 'Did he wash your clothes or did he accidentally throw them in the bin again?'

Mum's bids to win Best Parent are never subtle. 'He washed them.'

'Not as well as me.' She clicks her tongue against her teeth. 'Am I on speaker?'

I stare at the phone that is definitely on speaker. 'No?'

'It sounds like I'm on speaker.'

'You're not.'

She drops it. 'How was your weekend?'

As far as weekends at Dad's go, it was pretty standard. There was a lot of lounging on the couch, unless Dad wanted to watch sport, then there was a lot of vacating the couch.

I tell Mum the weekend was fine. 'Yours?'

'It was . . . I visited your grandfather.'

I imagine Pappou, his receding grey hair slicked back. He sits upright on a stool in the sprawling backyard of his place in Carlingford. He has an apple in one hand and guides a knife through it with the other. He motions me closer with a tilt of his head. He holds out the slice between his thumb and the blade.

'How is he?' I ask.

She's silent. It's a silence that says too much.

'I think you should see him, Con,' she urges eventually.

That's worse than the silence. I know what she's hinting at.

I sink deeper into the barrier. The patchwork quilt of roads and roofs stretches over the hills to the north. The nursing home is out that way. He moved in after we sold the place in Carlingford. When I last saw him, Pappou was a frail man under wisps of white hair, hunched over on a plastic-covered couch. That was a while ago. Almost a year.

'It's Olly's birthday, isn't it?' It's her attempt to pivot the conversation away from her father, to safer territory. She doesn't know about the friend divorce.

'It is, yeah.'

'Knew it.' Mum's a freak with dates. She can't remember the names of streets or movies, but tell her somebody's birthday

and she'll never forget it. It's usually helpful. But not today.
 'Are you all going out tonight?'

Seeing the biggest, loudest action movie on Olly's birthday has become our annual tradition. He brings his friends, his twin brother brings his, and we almost take up an entire row. It's epic. This is the first time I haven't been invited.

'Yup.' I regret it as soon as I've said it.

'Were you going to tell me or were you going to keep me up till midnight worrying?'

'I was going to keep you up till midnight worrying.'

She stifles a laugh. 'Tell me you bought him something nice.'
 I look at the packet by the phone. 'Chocolate-coated almonds.'
 'Con.'

'They have special meaning.'

'They mean you bought them on special when you should've spent more than five dollars on your best friend,' she says.

'You can pay me an allowance.'

'You can pay your own school fees.'

'I'm going to hang up now.'

'Thought so. Don't be later than twelve.'

'I won't.'

'Be good.'

'Always am.'

The call ends and I breathe it out. I've just committed myself to being out until midnight, and I have nowhere to be. The door might be open, but Olly isn't walking through it.

'He'll be here,' I tell myself, unwrapping the peanut brittle. 'It's his birthday. He'll invite me to the movies. It'll be like these three weeks never happened.'

I finish the peanut brittle and the digital bell rings. The students in the courtyard below begin their slow dawdle to class.

Olly isn't coming. I'm tempted to take a photo of the almonds and send it to him, one final 'I smuggled these in last week to prove I'm not boring', before I accept that sending a photo of chocolate-coated almonds is possibly the most boring way to prove you're not boring.

I tape the packet of almonds back inside the bell. While I'm up here, I look over to the city again. In however many years, when I'm in one of those skyscrapers, Charlton Grammar will be a speck in the distance. I wonder if I'll even remember the taste of the glue we used in kindergarten. Probably.

I descend the disused stairwell. I slide my foot into my shoe, shut the door and . . . linger. In a Connor first, I don't want to go to class on time. I don't want to see Olly. I don't want to walk past the books he's stacked on my old seat so I can't sit there. I don't want to be reminded that my oldest friend doesn't want anything to do with me.

I separate the ornate key from the others, unlock the door, kick off my shoe, and wedge it between the door and the frame. I return the keys to Ms Rowsey. She scowls like I've just interrupted her. 'You've lost a shoe.'

I step over it when I return to the disused stairwell.

I fetch the chocolate-coated almonds I was saving for Olly, and head back down the stairs alone.

TWO

I sit at the bottom of the stairwell, just by the door I've wedged ajar. I'm skipping class and . . . to be honest, it's nowhere near as thrilling as people have led me to believe. At Charlton Grammar, every second of your life is monitored and measured against learning outcomes. I should relish this free time. Instead, I'm spending it worrying about how I'll explain my absence. Mr Cheen will have taken the roll already. He's probably explaining some vital content that will appear in an exam. I'm a truant *and* I'm going to fail . . . I can rush over to G Block, say I'm late because I had a bathroom emergency. Nobody ever wants to ask follow-up questions about those. Mr Cheen will point me towards a spare seat up the back. When I pass his row, Olly will avoid my gaze. Everyone else will notice.

I can already feel the heat of their glares, their pity.

I push the thought down and summon a distraction: catching almonds in my mouth. I start relatively close. Like, I'm literally just dropping almonds into my mouth until I believe in myself enough to start throwing them. I believe in

myself too much. I toss an almond high in the air and open my mouth. The almond rebounds off my cheek, rolls across the room and stalls in a groove.

I sigh. 'Brilliant.'

I suppose I have to retrieve it. I might as well limit the offences I'm charged with when I'm eventually found. I mean, truancy *and* smuggling in contraband? I'll have detention from now until the end of term.

I crawl over to retrieve the rogue almond.

The stairwell floor is tiled with irregular stones, roughly the size of my shoes. They're cold to the touch. I stretch ahead and a stone shifts beneath my palm. It's weird. I check the stone beside it. It rocks with the slightest pressure. I examine the neighbouring tiles. About a metre from the back wall, a cluster of stones hasn't been set in grout. The almond is nestled between two of these loose tiles. I pop it in my mouth and . . . remain. Interest piqued, I raise a stone and set it to one side, exposing a timber panel beneath. I run two fingers across the grain.

Charlton Grammar has its legends. They're scratched into the backs of locker doors, texted between friends, relayed by older students with a flair for storytelling . . . Somebody heard something from some Old Boy about a treasure trove, a secret tunnel or a wartime bunker, that kind of thing. Everyone's heard the myths, but nobody ever admits to believing them. Back in Year Seven, we had peer support every Tuesday. They'd trust a group of us with a Year Eleven student for a period. It was envisaged as a way to help us build relationships, but in reality, it just gave the Year Elevens some impressionable minds

to corrupt. Mark was our peer-support leader. He was a nugget of a guy with a wicked sense of humour. He had us convinced there was something buried beneath the cricket pitch. All we had to do was dig. We had swiped the groundskeeper's shovel before Mark felt bad and fessed up.

But yeah, Charlton Grammar has its legends. They're *legends*. You're not supposed to hang out in a disused stairwell, shift loose tile after loose tile and encounter a wooden trapdoor. I loop four fingers through the latch and pull. The door is exactly as stubborn as I expect. I get it open eventually, revealing steps carved roughly into the school's sandstone foundations.

'Wild,' I mutter.

As foreboding as a stairway descending into darkness is, I'm itching to know where it leads. I'm thirteen again, striding across the oval with the groundskeeper's shovel. I hover my foot over the opening.

What if I get caught down there? I jerk my foot back.

I'm already a truant though. I can close the trapdoor, scramble to replace the tiles, ignore the secret tunnel and still get in trouble. And when guys ask what I did when I skipped first period, what am I going to say? That I binged on almonds to avoid the thought of my ex-best friend?

I wanted a distraction. *This* is a distraction.

After one last glance back at the door and the shoe propping it open, I begin my descent. The steps are uneven; they sink in the middle. It's like they're goading me to twist an ankle. I run my fingers against both walls to keep my balance. The

tunnel narrows. The steps corkscrew deeper. The darkness swallows me.

I reach the bottom. The air is thick. I activate my phone's flashlight. Like a seasoned adventurer, I illuminate the passageway with one sweeping gesture, collide with a cobweb and shriek. I scratch the stubborn silk from my hand.

Right. Take two. I hold the phone close to my chest. The passageway extends past the beam's reaches. Dusty webs hang from . . . I want to say sandstone bricks, but science is my weakest subject so don't quote me.

I march. To what specifically, I have no idea. With every step, tiny anxieties grow more confident. They use their big-boy voices and I begin to wonder if this is wise. There's no mobile reception down here. If something happens, no one will hear my scream – or, more realistically, my dying quip.

I catch a glimpse of a chamber at the end of the tunnel. My pace quickens. I step over the threshold and tumble down two steps with a lack of grace that anyone who knows me will tell you is entirely on brand. I wasn't expecting the chamber to be lower than the tunnel because I'm accustomed to rooms not actively trying to hurt me.

I pull myself to my feet and look around. Ceiling to floor, the room is tiled with tessellated coloured shards that glimmer when I wave my phone in their direction. A naked bulb hangs from the ceiling. Exposed wiring connects it to a wall-mounted car battery and then to a switch. The set-up looks slightly less shoddy than my attempt at an electrical circuit in science. I flick the switch. The bulb buzzes to life. I deactivate my flashlight and soak everything in.

Tiny rhombuses of varying shades of green swirl across the ceiling. They spread down the walls to a point where they meet the tiny blue rhombuses that rise from the floor. I'm standing in a circle of golden tiles. I step back. It's the sun, and the blue is the sky, and the green . . . I'm standing in a room that's upside down.

Its furnishings aren't though. In the centre, there's a dust-coated, wooden chest. To my completely untrained eye, it's roughly ninety centimetres tall and deep, and two metres wide. There are two iron ring pulls on either end that seem way too small to help anyone carry the thing, and not to denigrate artists from the olden days, but the chest looks like it was decorated by a toddler with a knife. Each face features a different crudely carved figure. The longer sides spotlight women; one has a tiny tree sprouting from the palm of her left hand, and the other has a golden chalice hovering above the palm of her right. On the shorter sides, there are young boys; one cups a fireball, the other a large snowflake. Carved into the top of the chest is a bearded, burly man. He lies with his eyes shut and a sword clasped over his body. There's a series of scratches near his head. I brush the dust aside with my sleeve to reveal a message engraved carefully into the reddish-brown timber.

BEVAN WAS HERE

I guess I'm not the first student to find this place. I wonder if Bevan was the one who installed the light.

Countless videogames have taught me that unattended chests in secret rooms contain rare treasures, but alas, I can't get this one open. I try for a solid ten minutes. I'm not strong enough. At one point, I push my whole weight against it out of sheer frustration and it doesn't even budge. The chest is bolted down, which is a bold choice in a room already filled with bold choices.

I approach the cupboard centred against one wall. It's the only other piece of furniture in the room – also wooden and dust-coated. I'm relieved I can actually get the door open. That soothes my bruised ego. The cupboard's empty, save for a leather-bound journal on its sole shelf. I flick through the book's blank, brown-spotted pages until I arrive at the sheet at the end – both sides are covered in a script I don't recognise. I bring the book closer, as if distance was what was keeping me from understanding the language. It's just a collection of neatly arranged squiggles and strokes.

I carry the journal back to the chest and sit up on the edge. I plonk the packet of almonds beside me and pull up a playlist on my phone. It's one of the finest I've curated in my sixteen years. Its aesthetic is boppy Euro electro-pop that sounds fun until you actually listen to the lyrics and realise everyone on the dancefloor has a bad case of the sads. I pass the time mouthing along to one upbeat-yet-depressing track after the other, and then a particular track comes on. I know it from its first bar. It's *my* track. Some songs pass through you; others seep into your soul. They tether themselves to memories, and the moment you hear their pulsing synths, those memories are conjured one after the other like handkerchiefs stuffed in

a magician's sleeve. This is one of those songs. I remember the first time I heard the chorus, the night I pored over its lyrics, and the day I played it for Olly. I told him it showed me who I was with words I'd never thought to use before. His forehead creased. He didn't understand its significance, but he listened the whole way through. He always—

'Nope!' I unlock my phone and skip the track. I'm not letting any of that down here.

Another song starts. It's one that passes through me.

And then the sound of a door slamming reverberates down the tunnel.

I pause the track. That sounded too much like the door I'd propped open with my shoe.

I don't hear anything else. Enough time passes that I believe it's possible I just imagined the sound.

But then I hear footsteps.

Someone noticed the shoe, the trapdoor. They descended the stairs and now they're striding down the tunnel. They're following the light. They've come for me.

I think exclusively in expletives.

I spring to my feet. I tuck the journal into the back of my pants and cover it with my shirt. My eyes dart around the room's dark edges. I need somewhere to hide. I clear the space between me and the cupboard, pull both doors open by their rusted handles, and reorganise my limbs and internal organs to fit under the shelf. I guide the doors shut, and through the crack between them, I see the bright orange packaging on the chest.

I left the almonds out.

My heartbeat thumps in my ears.

I feel my offenses rack up: skipping class, venturing out of bounds, consuming banned goods. Even if they don't find me now, they have my shoe. They can *Cinderella* it, travelling from classroom to classroom to see whose foot it fits.

This isn't a matter of if I'll get caught, but when.

I move a fraction to the left to better spy on the tunnel opening. I hold my breath. A prefect emerges. I recognise the block colours of the senior uniform. Prefects are incentivised with gift vouchers and co-curricular credits, so the school has an army of pubescent monsters willing to improve their standing by throwing younger kids under the bus. There's no appealing to a prefect's better nature – it's impossible to compete with the allure of a gift voucher.

The prefect sets my scuffed shoe down beside the almonds. 'Hello?'

It's not the voice I expect. It's melodic. Then the prefect cap comes off. A brown mane unravels. I peer closer and . . . The prefect is a girl?

She removes the blazer, folds it over the chest and looks directly at the cupboard.

Okay, so this wasn't a particularly great place to hide.

I guess I should say something. 'Hi.'

Her brow creases. She steps around the chest. 'Why . . . are you in a cupboard?'

'I'm hiding.'

'From me?'

I nod. Then I realise she can't see me. 'Yeah.'

‘You uncomfortable?’

‘Little bit.’ My whole body is cramping and my elbow is crushing an organ that feels important. I nudge open the doors and begin the process of unknotting myself. As soon as I’m free, I look back at the cupboard and I’m proud I managed to squeeze in there in the first place.

‘I would’ve just pulled out the shelf to make more room,’ she says.

Okay, I’m less proud now.

She smiles. She has a face full of stars. It’s a constellation of amber freckles.

I don’t get nervous around girls. We tend to have the same taste in music and boys, so there’s lots to talk about, but this still feels weird. Charlton Grammar is a single-sex school and I can count the number of female staff members I know on one hand. Sometimes an English teacher slips through the cracks, but honestly we’d be less surprised to see a gazelle on the oval than a Giselle.

A girl has never snuck into Charlton Grammar disguised as a prefect before. At least, not to my knowledge.

I should probably introduce myself. I extend a hand. ‘I’m Connor.’

‘I’m trespassing, so hard pass on identifying myself, but I’ll . . .’ She checks her hand, wipes it down the front of her pants and then shakes mine.

We pull apart and I have no idea what comes next.

She asks if I’m the only one down here. I nod.

She asks if I come down here often. I tell her I only found the trapdoor this morning.

She asks if I know where *here* is. The way she drills into the word for emphasis makes me wonder if *here* is more special than I think it is. I shake my head.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘I didn’t see you and you didn’t see me, all right?’

It takes me a second to catch on. ‘You want me to leave?’
‘Bingo.’

I don’t want to go, not yet. There’s so much I still—
‘It was nice meeting you,’ she adds.

‘You too,’ I stammer.

‘And next time, remember . . .’ She mimes removing the shelf.

‘Got it.’ I slink over to the chest. I pocket the almonds and grab my shoe as questions tumble over themselves in my mind. Who is she? What is she doing down here? What exactly *is* down here? How can I get out if the shoe I’m holding was propping open the door? ‘Problem.’ I drop the shoe and slip my foot inside. ‘I can’t actually leave.’

‘Why not?’

‘The stairwell door locks when it closes. It can’t be unlocked from the inside without a key. And you closed it.’

‘Just chill out in the stairwell, give me an hour to do what I need to, then bang on the door until a teacher fetches you.’

She acts like that’s the end of the discussion. It’s not. I have an advantage. She clearly doesn’t want anyone to know what she’s up to. If I jeopardise that . . . I mean, I won’t, but if I make her think I *might*, then maybe she’ll be more inclined to keep me on a tighter leash.

‘What if I bang on the door too soon – like, right-away too soon – and a teacher shows up, sees the trapdoor and comes down here?’

Her eyes narrow. ‘You wouldn’t.’

‘But I might. Maybe the best thing for you is to keep me close.’

She makes a face. I know that face. She’s thinking exclusively in expletives.

Eventually, she clicks her fingers. ‘Right then, back in the cupboard.’

That’s not what I was angling for. ‘What?’

‘You heard me.’ She’s biting back a smile. ‘Hop back in and I’ll let you know when I’m done.’

‘If you need me out of the way, I can wait in the tunnel.’

‘But you said it yourself. The best thing for me is to keep you close.’

I open my mouth to speak and she raises an eyebrow.

I will say, removing the shelf does make a big difference. Fitting inside the cupboard requires far less contortion. She props the shelf against the wall and closes the cupboard doors. I watch her through the gap as she tries to open the chest. She struggles with it for some time. I nudge the cupboard door and put her out of her misery. ‘The chest doesn’t open.’

‘Thanks,’ she snaps, before regretting how harsh she sounds. ‘There’s something in there and I’d like to get it out.’

‘Can I help?’

She shakes her head. ‘It doesn’t open. It must be a decoy.’ She sighs. ‘Is there anything about this chamber that seems unusual to you?’

‘Besides the chest that doesn’t open?’

‘Yes.’

‘The room’s upside down, for starters.’

She cocks her head to the side. ‘What?’

‘Look at the tiles.’

She does, and I watch it dawn on her that whoever was paid to lay the tiles held the concept sketch the wrong way up.

‘It’s upside down,’ she breathes.

‘Yup.’

‘We’ve got to turn it the right side up.’

‘Huh?’

Her eyes sweep the room. ‘The chamber must rotate a hundred and eighty degrees.’

I picture the whole room turning on the narrow tunnel like a rotisserie chicken. It’s absurd.

‘I know how strange it sounds,’ she adds, ‘but this room is a puzzle designed to test us.’

‘It is?’

She tries to move the chest. It’s bolted down. It’s *bolted down*.

Either the interior designer was incredibly paranoid about thieves, or they were furnishing a room that . . . Oh my god, the room turns on an axis.

She throws her weight into the chest. It doesn’t budge. She squints over at the cupboard. I know what she wants to do. She asks if I mind. I don’t. I’m pretty certain no matter how hard she pushes, she’s not going to tip over the cupboard with me in it, because like the chest, it’s fixed in place.

She makes three attempts to shift the cupboard and then steps back. ‘It’s fixed to the wall.’

‘Thought so.’

She returns to the chest with urgency. She runs her fingers across the timber. ‘There must be some sort of switch that initiates the rotation.’ She works her way around the chest. She grabs at one of the iron ring pulls. It rattles.

‘It’s loose.’ She yanks it.

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing. It’s just popped out a bit.’

‘Turn it?’

She does. The click, click, click reminds me of a wind-up toy. She releases the iron ring pull and steps back.

The room jolts like an elevator that enjoys reminding you of your mortality. Beyond the walls, a chorus of grinding gears sing their ancient song. Slowly, the entire room responds. The tunnel we walked down remains fixed while the chamber rotates. The pace is glacial.

Until it’s not. I steady myself in the cupboard, my forearms against the sides. The loose wooden shelf slides away. The trespasser is rushing to keep from being swept off her feet, like a hamster in a poorly designed wheel. I’m getting higher, higher . . . And it occurs to me that the wall the cupboard is bolted to is about to become the ceiling. Not ideal.

Then there’s the sound of smashing glass, and everything goes dark.

The hanging bulb has not survived, and to be honest, I don’t like my chances either. I’m very close to being suspended from the ceiling. I can’t see how far I might fall and that makes it a hundred times worse. I press my heels into the timber. My limbs are trembling.

I feel myself level off. The gears' song goes quiet. The room steadies.

That wasn't one hundred and eighty degrees. That was only ninety.

'Why did it stop?' My voice is laced with panic.

'Wait. Wait. We need a light. Where's the shelf?'

'Use your phone.'

'I don't have a phone.'

I'm struggling. 'Who doesn't have a phone?'

'Me. Ah!' There's the sound of timber being dragged against the floor. 'One sec.'

It isn't long before the room glows. She pulls herself to her feet. The end of the loose shelf is now on fire, and she's holding it from the base with both hands like some old-timey wooden torch. The chest is bolted to the wall between us, casting a long, dramatic shadow. The slightest shake of the flaming shelf makes the shadow dance.

Her eyes are wide; her jaw is slack. She's forgotten my little life-or-death predicament. 'I've never raided a sanctuary before. I didn't want to hype it up and get disappointed.' She swings the torch and the shadow stretches elsewhere. 'And then that happened.'

I estimate there are two metres between me and the chest, and another two or so between the chest and the wall-turned-floor. 'It half-happened.'

She laughs and then the seriousness sinks in. 'Right. *Right*.'

'We need to twist the ring pull some more, but I don't think I can climb up to it,' she says.

I have a bad feeling she's going to—

‘You’re going to need to fall down to it.’

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

She adds, ‘The chest will break your fall.’

‘It’ll break my face,’ I spit.

She adopts a gentle if not mildly condescending coo. ‘You’re going to be fine. I’ll talk you through this. I’ll break it into steps.’

I think I already know them.

Step One. Let go.

Step Two. Ow.

My limbs are trembling more severely. She coaches me from below. With her guidance, I shift my forearms so they’re lined up with the front frame of the cupboard. She tells me that so long as I’m strong in my upper body, there shouldn’t be any dramas – problem is, I’m weak, and I live for drama. She explains I’ve got to bring my knees to my chest in a controlled movement, and then extend my legs down.

I lift one shaking foot, chicken out and plant it firmly back. ‘I can’t do it.’

‘You can,’ she stresses. ‘Stop pressing through your feet and bring your knees to—’

I let my legs go limp and my lower body just sort of flops out. I’m dangling from the ceiling. My forearms are pressed against the inside of the cupboard, keeping me from falling the whole way through.

‘And now . . .’

She doesn’t need to tell me what happens now. I know what I need to do. When my body is steady, I let myself drop. I land on the chest, remembering to bend my knees on

impact, because apparently I *have* learnt something in years of compulsory physical education classes.

I peer back up at the cupboard, its doors splayed open. I'm a little impressed with myself. 'I'm annoyed we didn't film that. I could've become one of those hot gymnasts everyone thirsts over online.'

'It didn't look how you imagine it did.'

'Ouch.'

And like that, my feat of athleticism is forgotten.

'If you just reach over the edge of the chest, you should be able to grip the ring pull.' She points with the flaming shelf.

I lower my centre of gravity slowly – I've been in my body long enough to know that if I ever plummeted from a great height, it'd be immediately after celebrating not plummeting from a greater height. I lie face-down and slowly extend one arm over the edge.

'It's the ring pull on your left.'

I move my hand.

'The other left.'

I move my hand the other way and clasp the iron ring protruding from the chest. It's cold.

'Turn it,' she instructs.

I look over the edge of the chest, down at her firelit face. I have another advantage to exploit. She can't climb up here, so she needs me to cooperate. And maybe my cooperation requires something in return.

'Before I do anything, I'd really like to know your name.'

She cackles. 'Well played.'

'Thanks.'

'I'm Sally.'

I honestly expected more resistance. 'Really?'

'What? Do you want to see ID?'

'Okay.'

'Are you kidding?' this supposed Sally asks.

'You could've made up a name.'

'Who'd make up Sally?'

'I don't know.'

She sighs and produces a wallet from her pocket. She flicks it open and riffles through its contents, all with the same hand. She plucks out a card and pockets the wallet once more.

'It's a library card that expired last year,' she says, angling it up to me. 'Sally Rodgers. Not that you can read it from there.'

She's right, I can't. But I can make out enough of it to know there's no photo. I tell her so.

'It's me,' she insists. 'Why would I carry around somebody else's expired library card?'

She has a point. I'm about to turn the iron ring pull when I realise I can get so much more out of her than just her real name. I ask, 'What is this place?'

Sally's face twitches. She's reluctant to tell me. 'It's a sanctuary.'

'For who?'

'No idea,' she says.

I play hardball. 'Well, I have no idea if I can rotate the room for you.'

She groans. 'I have a hunch, but I can't say for certain. There are five of these sanctuaries hidden under the oldest

schools in Sydney, designed to test people. Only the worthy discover their secrets.'

'Are we . . . worthy?'

'Turn the ring pull and we'll find out, I guess.'

I do as she says. I turn it in bursts, and each time, I'm rewarded with a click. When I've turned it as far as it will go, I release it. There's another jolt. The gears' song resumes and the room turns. Shards of bulb glass tinkle. The chest will soon be suspended from the ceiling. I instantly regret not better preparing for my descent. I panic and drop to a floor whose slope is steepening. I follow Sally's lead and rush down the tessellated tiles. The floor is rapidly becoming a wall. I jump.

The room stills and the tessellated green field is beneath our feet.

'What now?' I ask.

The room answers. The wall facing the tunnel collapses. Unsettled dust curls in the air. We're looking at an annex with no tessellated patterns or bolted furnishings. The sanctuary has revealed its secret. A seven-foot statue stands against a bare wall, its grey-stone body scarred by chips and white cracks.

It's the burly man from the top of the chest realised in three dimensions.

Sally holds up the flaming shelf. 'Darroch,' she whispers, taking careful steps into the annex.

The statue's build and beard say the dude was some kind of warrior. The sword hilt poking out behind one shoulder all but confirms it. I still ask, 'Who was he?'

'Is,' Sally corrects me, reaching out to touch the statue.

MONUMENTS

It seems like a silly grammatical point to get hung up on – until the statue swings an arm, grips Sally by the front of her shirt and lifts her to his eye level. Her makeshift torch tumbles to the ground and is immediately engulfed by flames. The statue's expression is wild, half-lit from below.

Sally was right. Darroch definitely *is*.