SMALL SPACES

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WALKER
BOOKS

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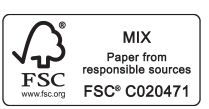
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1

NOW

A lot of people have a fear of small spaces.

Elevators, photo booths, changing rooms in clothing stores. Hedge mazes, enclosed water slides, narrow staircases, walk-in wardrobes. I mean, I get it – I avoid those things too. I can't even lie in a bathtub without thrashing like a netted salmon. But sometimes I think the small space I fear most is the one inside my own head.

"You're freaking out, aren't you?" says my best friend Sadie. She's been in enough of these situations with me to recognise the fidgety hands and repetitive swallowing. She's more than familiar with my foot-to-foot shuffle as my eyes hunt down anything resembling an exit. In the eight years I've known Sadie she's talked me down off the ledge at least a hundred times. She's my own personal claustrophobia negotiator whether she wants the gig or not.

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"I'm not freaking out."

Sadie snorts, suppressing a smile. "Mmmkay. You're gasping like a goldfish there, champ. Deep breaths." She keeps her eyes on the shop's display counter, at the twenty flavours of ice cream underneath. "Hold it together for thirty more seconds, you got me?"

New negotiation tactic: mild threats, apparently.

I close my eyes and work on slowing my breathing. The last thing I want is to hyperventilate somewhere as public as the Seaspray Kiosk. It was practically empty when Sadie insisted we come inside, until a large group of Port Bellamy High girls followed shortly after us. The tang of body odour and coconut oil seeps into the available oxygen like black ink into paper towel.

"I'll have you know," I manage through clenched teeth, "I'm as chilled as your precious mint choc-chip."

Sliding me a dubious look, Sadie struggles to hold her ground as more bodies press in behind us. She's shielding me from them, carving out a small arc of free space, enduring catty elbows and dirty glares for her trouble. Above me, blowflies snap and crackle as they meet their fate inside the insect zapper, and I try to ignore the warm air sliding around my ankles from beneath the Coke fridge by the wall.

Just breathe, Tash.

Hold your shit together.

Mind over matter.

But if we're relying on my mind as a touchstone, we're really in trouble.

"You and your damn crush," I mutter, and we both glance

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at the redhead behind the counter. *Alice*, her name badge tells us. She's willowy and timid-looking with a crumpled apron and flyaway hair, the polar opposite of my strong-shouldered and self-assured best friend of Māori descent. "You know she's probably into guys, right?"

Sadie turns to me in mock surprise. "Natasha Carmody, you are *cold*, woman. Don't be such a spoilsport."

I want to be a good wingwoman, I just wish Alice worked somewhere twenty times larger. The Seaspray is a weather-beaten shack at the end of Port Bellamy Pier, where the boardwalk meets the breakwall. Once well-maintained and a drawcard for tourists, it's now perched here like a discarded toy, salt-chewed and clinging to memories of its heyday. Which, when you think about it, pretty much sums up our entire town. Travel websites call Port Bellamy a hidden gem of the New South Wales mid north coast, with its sandy beaches in close proximity to sprawling national parks. But likening it to a precious jewel is far too generous. A rough diamond more like, with flaws you can spot without squinting.

"Our turn next," Sadie assures me above the din of our classmates, a cluster of Year Twelve girls we've known, and barely spoken to, since primary school. Alice hands change to the girl next to us and finally turns our way. Sadie manages an overeager "Hi!" before Rachael Tan elbows her way to the front.

"Raspberry sorbet in a cup," she says, tapping the glass with a glittery fingernail. "Make sure you fill it to the top this time. Be nice to get my money's worth for once."

Sadie turns to Rachael, shaking her head in disbelief.

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"Yeah, hi? Earth to Rachael? Way to cut in line."

Rachael barely looks at us, and it's difficult to imagine how the three of us were inseparable when she first moved here from Melbourne. We invited Rachael to sit with us at lunch because we thought it must be tough moving to a new school, especially when her twin brother was immediately embraced by the IT club crowd. And while Rachael readily accepted Sadie's chatty confidence, it felt like she merely tolerated my clumsy attempts at conversation. I remember eleven-year-old me feeling so grateful that this pretty girl, with her trendy clothes and plane trips to her grandparents in Korea, forgave me for being so dumpy and small-town.

"I've been waiting forever," Rachael says now, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear. "It's my turn."

"Ahh, no?" Sadie folds her arms. "You weren't even here when we came inside."

Rachael takes a long moment to look Sadie up and down, from her faded Sex Pistols T-shirt to her surgically attached purple Chucks. Alice is already serving somebody else and I'm more than ready to cut our losses and get out of here.

But Sadie, being Sadie, is just warming up.

"Mmm, sorry. What was that?" she says, cupping her ear. "Sounds like somebody owes us an apology."

A groan escapes me because I know how this is going to end. I mean, don't we get enough of this at school? There are only a few days left of summer holidays and I'd planned on slipping into my final school year undetected. If I want to prove to my parents I'm capable of looking after myself, I need this year to be incident-free.

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Yet, I spend all my time with the most confrontational person on the east coast. Clearly, I haven't thought this through.

Rachael's friends press in closer, surrounding us like seagulls at a picnic, waiting for Rachael to throw them a scrap they can scrabble and squawk over. "Oh, I'm sorry," she says, "that was rude of me. I didn't realise there's an express line for dykes and whackjobs."

And there it is.

"Great," I mutter to Sadie. "Can we leave now, Dee?"

The word *whackjob* slips under my skin and sets it alight. I wince at the word *dyke* too, though I know Sadie couldn't care less. She's learned to ignore this town's small-minded gibes about everything from her skin colour to her rainbow pride T-shirts. She's like Teflon and always has been. I'm a sponge.

"Come on, Rachael," Sadie says, leaning in and arching an eyebrow. "I think we all know why you invited me to so many sleepovers."

She winks like she's flirting but there's no humour in it. Sadie's distracting the seagulls away from me by offering herself up as a hot chip. Rachael's not taking the bait. She smiles coolly and drums her fingernails on the counter.

"Well, gee, if we're talking sleepovers–" she glances over her shoulder, ensuring her audience is captive, "–then maybe Tash can explain to us all why she peed in her sleeping bag like a two year old."

Titters ripple across Rachael's posse and the shop's humidity wraps around my throat and clings there. Mrs Tan

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made Rachael promise she'd never breathe a word about my little accident five years ago. It seems promises have expiry dates when Rachael's short on ammunition.

"And the way she talked in her sleep," Rachael says, addressing Sadie but looking at me. "Calling out for her little imaginary friend."

Shut up, Rachael. Shutupshutupshutup.

"Oh, Sparrow," she whines. "Help me, Sparrow! I'm so afwaid of the daaaark."

She scrunches her fists like a helpless toddler, and I want to grab them and ram them into her face.

I never said those things in my sleep. I know I didn't.

Did I?

Sparrow is the last person I'd ask for help. I never wanted him to exist in the first place.

Did I?

I didn't.

I don't.

Never again.

"You're so full of it, Rachael," Sadie says, reaching for my hand. She tugs me towards the exit, ramming her shoulder into those too slow to move. We burst outside through the plastic ribbon curtain, the sea breeze grabbing fistfuls of our hair.

Wriggling free of Sadie's grip, I stride down the pier towards the beach.

"Tash," she calls. "Aww, c'mon. Wait up."

I bristle at her voice, at the boats in the marina with their ropes clanging against steel masts. Somewhere, a fisherman

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has his tinny radio up too loud. The sky is tainted with the brown haze of bushfire smoke from a national park twenty kilometres away. It encroaches from the west like an omen.

Be prepared. Something bad is coming.

Sadie catches up to me where the boardwalk meets the shore.

"Hey, you're okay, right?" she says to my back. "You're out of there now. I'll never drag you in there again."

She thinks this is about my claustrophobia. I whirl around to face her. "We could have just let Rachael order her damn sorbet."

Her mouth drops open. "No, we couldn't. You can't let people walk all over you. You can't say nothing and let them get away with it. Life doesn't work that way."

It does for me. The more forgettable I am, the better. The stigma that's followed me around since childhood is finally waning. Without panic attacks and psychiatric appointments I've become bland and unimportant, another forgettable face in the school corridor cattle drive. Sadie can be brash and provocative and have people talking behind her back, but it's the last thing I want for myself.

"The slumber party, Dee. Did you have to bring that up in front of Rachael?"

She holds up her hands, apologetic. "I wasn't thinking. If I could take it back, I would."

"Yeah, well, you can't. And now I get to kick off my final year with a bedwetting rumour circulating the quad."

I avoid mentioning Sparrow, and Sadie knows better than to bring him up.

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"Come on, Tashie. You know I'd never deliberately draw attention to that stuff."

My sandal bows as I stub it on the boards, my aqua toenails looking like I'm trying too hard. "I know …"

"Carmody–" Sadie looks at me sternly, "–who's got your back?"

Huffing, I glance at the horizon where broody clouds are gathering out at sea.

"Carmody …?"

I sigh and mumble a begrudging, "You."

"Huh? You'll have to speak up. I couldn't hear you over all the sulking."

"*You've* got my back."

"Damn straight, sister." She hooks an arm around my shoulders and bumps me to her hip. "I've also got your front, your sides, those weird knobbly knees and that big complicated head of yours too."

This time it's my turn to snort. "Great. My own best friend thinks I'm a head case. What hope do I have of changing anyone else's mind?"

Sadie waves a dismissive hand. "Let them think what they want. Those douches at school made their minds up about us years ago. It's your parents we've gotta convince, right?"

Exactly. The only chance I have at applying for a photography degree at a Sydney or Melbourne university is if I can convince my parents I'm capable of looking after myself. It would mean moving out of home and living on campus – not exactly something my mum will be doing cartwheels over. I mean, the woman doesn't even trust me

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to load a dishwasher properly. She thinks I can't hear her restacking it after I've gone to bed.

"Listen," Sadie says. "My mum's got us another waitressing gig if you want it. A couple of hours and fifty bucks cash in hand?" She wiggles her eyebrows, wanting to make things right.

There's no denying the money comes in handy for professional photo printing, and I need to save for a smart-looking folio to display my work for university interviews. Plus, it's hard saying no to Sadie's mum, Kiri, who's worked so hard to establish her catering business as a single mum with no help from family back in New Zealand.

I slump against a wooden bollard painted to look like a swarthy seaman. "When and where?"

Sadie's shoulders drop an inch, relieved I'm letting it go. As blunt as she can be, I know it rattles her when she upsets me.

"Next Saturday on Banksia Avenue," she says.

I release a low whistle. Banksia Avenue is where all the old brick bungalows are being knocked down and replaced by modern homes with concrete rendering. Most of them have glossy timber gates and high walls lined with palm trees, not to mention views of the ocean.

"Fancypants," Sadie agrees. "Some big welcome-back party for a family returning to the port."

"You mean they actually got out of here and they're *choosing* to return?"

"I know, right?" Sadie tugs her wavy dark-brown hair into a topknot and wrestles an elastic around it. "Not renting either.

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They bought that two-storey house with the kooky porthole window. Mum says she's catering for a hundred people."

"Popular family."

We wait to cross Marine Drive as cars inch out of the beach car park, reluctant to leave the warm afternoon behind. Across the road, daytrippers linger outside the fish and chip shop, loose T-shirts over damp swimmers and sandy feet in rubber thongs.

"And I suppose Rachael's wangled an invite," I say, "just to make us really earn our money?"

"Probably," Sadie admits. We turn at the milk bar and head up the hill away from the shops. "Has there ever been a party in Port Bellamy that she hasn't got herself invited to? And anyway, Rachael's mum sold this family the house, so the Tans will be the official welcoming committee."

We cut up through Banksia Avenue and I see that Sadie's right: a real estate sign with a life-size photo of Francine Tan in a blue blazer is attached to the wall at number eight. The cream-coloured home, with its sleek plantation shutters and sandstone driveway, has sat empty for almost eight months. Now there are wicker chairs on the deck and matching topiary trees on either side of the front door.

My attention drifts along the driveway where it stretches past the house to a large double garage at the rear. Something ripples in the back of my mind, lurking under memory's surface like a scent you recognise and can't quite put your finger on.

Up on the cream house's second level, a shadow moves across the round porthole window. A sheer curtain hitches up, then quickly falls back again.

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Back again.

Back again?

"Who did you say lives here?"

"I didn't," Sadie says. "I saw the booking on Mum's wall calendar." She squints in a bid to recall. "Beachy-sounding name from memory. Waters or Sailor or something?"

The world suddenly speeds up, then slams on its brakes. My next word is like balancing on tiptoe. "Fisher …?"

"Yeah! Fisher. That's it. You know 'em?"

My mouth goes dry and I don't trust myself to speak. I manage a vague shrug, but my mind is bolting.

"All right, I'd better motor," Sadie says. "Promised Mum I'd help her make seafood fritters." She moves towards the corner where we need to part ways until she realises I'm not following. She takes a hesitant step back, fingering her studded belt nervously. "So, we're okay, right? You still look kind of upset."

"Yeah," I croak, "we're cool."

"Hug it out?"

She comes at me with a hopeful smile and open arms, hooking me around the shoulders the way I hug my little brother when he lets me. I peer across the road to number eight, Banksia Avenue. There's no movement at the window now, but I know she's in there somewhere.

Mallory Fisher.

The girl he took instead of me.

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