
chapter one

He's just Tom.

"Thomas Finch Mackee?"

The everyman with the most overused name.

"Come on, mate. Try to keep awake," the voice says.

Even the Bible was hard on them. The doubter who didn't trust his band of brothers and had to see the proof for himself to believe. He never liked that story. It made the Toms in history look piss-weak.

"Thomas? Is it Thomas or Tom? Come on, mate. Keep your eyes open."

In Year Eleven, the girls knew him as Thomas because it was the name they heard at roll call. Took years to get them to call him Tom. At home, it became a game within the family. Another day, another Tom.

"Tom Thumb, what's the story, little man?" his uncle Joe would ask him.

And when he was seven and they lived down the road from Georgie's place on Northumberland Street, she'd come over for dinner and make him do Tom Jones impersonations in front of the family, twisting with him as she held both his hands while he sang "What's New Pussycat?" in a Welsh accent that always had his

mum, Jacinta, and Georgie killing themselves laughing until they almost wet their pants.

Then came Peeping Tom and *Tom Sawyer* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and Little Tommy Tucker and "Tommy Trot, a Man of Law." The Toms in literary history had let him down and he hated them all. They were all a bunch of Prufrocks. He wanted his name to be Huck. Or Ishmael. Yossarian would do just fine.

"Tom?"

Different voice. A nurse. He can tell because she sounds like Sister Terri from *All Saints*.

"Tom, can you hear me? You're at the hospital, *Tom*. Your friend is here to collect you."

Let it be her.

Has he said those words out loud? Tom thinks he's said her name, anyway. Hasn't seen her for two years, but he prays that she's come to collect him because Tom needs collecting. Because he can't get her out of his mind. Sees her every time he closes his eyes. Sees the thousand things about her that turned him on. There was that lop-sided way she walked because the satchel of her uni books weighed her down, and there was the fringe that covered her eyes, and no matter how many times he looked into them, he couldn't tell if they were green or brown, just somewhere in between. She told him once that the girls convinced her to do stuff with her hair. Foils, she called them, and he didn't understand foils, so she showed him using tin foil and he thought, *How bloody stupid*, until he saw what the foils did to her hair, all gold mixed with brown, and the way it was cut jagged around her chin, making her look scruffy one minute and cool the next.

It amazed him how they went from being best mates and just hanging out to having a bit of eye contact that lasted just a tad too long, turning their relationship into all things confusing. It had happened that time they were watching a band at the Sando with some of his mates from uni. He had stood with his arms around her and his chin resting on the top of her head. Nothing new about that. They were a tactile bunch, all of them. But she leaned back to say something and that was it. Again. And he couldn't let go. Not when they were sitting at the Buzz Bar in Newtown having a hot chocolate and his hands were playing with hers and she was letting them play, and not when they were crossing King Street to go back to one of the guys' houses in Erskineville and he was holding her hand and she was letting him, and he knew that if he tried to kiss her, she'd let him. But he didn't.

He was never afraid when it came to girls.

Unless it was Tara Finke.

When the nurse calls out his name again and he opens his eyes, Francesca Spinelli is sitting there, wearing fifty emotions on her face like she always did when they were at school together. He doesn't tell the nurse that she's lying. They're not friends. He has no idea how the hospital even tracked her down. These days his contact with her is limited to the unavoidable once or twice a week they cross each other's path at the Union, one of those incestuous inner-west pubs where everyone ends up drinking or working. And you know how it happens. One day you pass strangers by and think, *I used to hang out with them*. But that was a world before dropping out of uni and parents splitting and two nights of everything with a girl whose face you can't get out of your head and

relationships falling apart and favorite uncles who used to call you Tom Thumb being blown to smithereens on their way to work on the other side of the world.

Talk of Francesca these days is frequent among his flatmates. Two of them work with her, and most nights Tom is subjected to rants and tirades about the “wack job” in charge of the rosters at the pub. Tom walks away each time because the moment the insults enter his ears, he’ll be an accessory, and he’s never in the mood to come to her defense just because he spent three years almost surgically attached to her and the others. And Tara Finke.

Tom’s always enjoyed being a coward like that.

But here Francesca sits calmly by his bed, clutching his backpack, and he hates her for that look in her eye. Compassion. Empathy. It’s a killer. It disarms you when you least want to be disarmed. After his uncle Joe’s death, two years ago, he hated looking at any of their faces. Tears constantly welling up in their eyes. “How are you, Tom?” they’d ask, and he’d want to tell them to shut the hell up and stop asking questions. It’s what he’s enjoyed most about living with his flatmates this past year. They drink, they smoke their weed, they play their music, they have no ties with whomever they have sex with, and the days pass in a pleasant haze where nobody analyzes how he feels, how he’s supposed to feel, how he’ll feel the next day, how he feels about the present, which is shaped by the past, which will impact on the future. With his flatmates, Tom just exists.

“I’ll drive you back to my place, Tom,” Francesca says. “My parents are overseas, so you don’t have to talk to anyone and you can just rest.”

He doesn’t respond.

“The nurse says you should try to stay awake because they’re worried about the concussion. You’ve got ten stitches because you fell into a glass.”

“I’m going home,” he mutters, holding a hand to the bandage on his head. He stares down at his fingers, which are taped. “But if you can drop me off at the Union, I need to get the key to the flat from Zac and Sarah,” he says, referring to his flatmates.

“They’re not there,” she says quietly.

“Then they’ll be home. Drop me there.”

He still hasn’t looked at her properly. Sometimes back in high school they’d compete over who could stare each other out. Francesca was hopeless. She would fail in the first five seconds, every single time. Tara Finke held out the longest, for three minutes most times, and something always happened between him and Tara in the thirty-third second that felt like a punch to his gut. He didn’t get what it meant back then.

“Stani had to let them go, Tom,” Francesca says. “Both of them.” Her voice is firm as though she’s prepared for his reaction. “They never turn up on time and I always have to cover for them and do double shifts. They didn’t even tell us you had an accident, Tom.”

“Why would they?” he snaps, sitting up. “Are you my next of kin?”

He grabs his backpack from her, fumbles through it for his phone, and rings Sarah’s number. It goes straight to voice mail, so then he tries Zac, but no one picks up.

“And anyway . . .” Francesca continues, but he blocks her out. For someone who was a basket case the first six months they knew her, she turned out to be the most resilient and coordinates the rest

of the girls with an efficiency born of a hidden Fascist gene. “She’s Mussolini’s bastard child,” he once confided to Jimmy Hailler, the only other male in their group at the time.

“. . . the being stoned thing got a bit boring,” she finishes.

He wants to hit someone. “So you sacked them because they smoke dope?”

He’s out of bed and standing over her. Although there’s alarm on her face and a little bit of fear, she doesn’t move away.

“I don’t give a shit what they do, Tom, except when they don’t turn up to a shift and Justine has to come in when she needs to be at a gig,” she says fiercely. “Each to their own. They can stick whatever they want up their nose, down their throat, and up their arse.”

“I live with them,” he spits.

“I don’t care. They’re—”

But he holds up a hand to cut her off and grabs his clothes, which are hanging off the bed. “You’re everything they’ve ever called you behind your back, you stupid bitch,” he mutters.

“If you swear at me again, Thomas . . .”

“What?” he sneers. “You’ll tell Trombal? Where is he now? Last I heard, he was pissing off overseas to get away from you.”

Francesca takes a visible breath in front of him and picks up her bag and pushes past him. But she hesitates for a moment and turns back.

“For your information, your friends call me those names to my face. And they’re thieves as well. So while you guys were hanging out spending the money they were bringing in, take note that most of it came from Stani’s till at the Union.”

She shakes her head and there are tears in her eyes.

“I know you’re sad, Tom. But sometimes you’re so mean that I wonder why any of us bother.”



It's dark outside, but Tom can't see the time on the clock of his phone because the glass face cracked, presumably at the same time as his head. He rings the landline at the flat but is warned by a recorded message that he's almost out of credit, so he hangs up before the answering machine sucks up what's left. He has a hazy recollection of having topped up his phone card and can't for the life of him remember where it's all gone, but nothing seems to be making sense to him at the moment. He stops twice from the dizziness and sits on the brick fence that lines the hospital on Missenden Road, watching an ambulance drive in and offload some drunk that they've probably picked up off the streets. He clutches the phone, willing it to ring. For Zac and the guys to be pissed or high and start belting out, "Ground Control to Major Tom," which got old a long time ago, but tonight he needs to hear it to make sure everything's okay.

The moment he's off the main road, a part of him panics. Although he's close to home, where he stands there are no hospital lights to keep him alive to the world. He doesn't want to collapse in the back streets of Newtown in front of one of these ugly flats, which according to his aunt should have been demolished the moment they were finished. His aunt Georgie has a strange idea of justice. Rapists, pedophiles, and architects of redbrick flats built in the 1970s all belong in the same jail cell. Out here tonight, under the dullest of moons, Tom feels as if he's the last man on earth. Six blocks east from the home he grew up in. Three blocks south from the university he dropped out of a year ago. Four blocks north of the bed he shared with Tara Finke that last night together when life made sense for one proverbial minute, before everything blew up.



Outside his flat, the moon sheds light on the garbage strewn all over the front lawn, and it's not until he's up close that he realizes it's not garbage at all. It's his stuff. There's not much of it, but he can't believe they've left his guitar out here for anyone to pinch. Zac and the gang haven't gone to the trouble of packing or asking questions about allegiance. They've just chucked everything over the balcony. It's what happens when their only two sources of a steady income, notwithstanding a dole check or two, have just been sacked courtesy of someone who belongs to Tom's past. He hammers on the security door, but no one answers and then he steps back to look up to the balcony.

"Sarah!"

Some nights she crawls into bed with him when she's between boyfriends. She isn't one to deal too well with her own company and who's he to refuse if it's on offer with no strings attached. He likes the fact that she can keep sentimentality and emotion out of it. Until now. He makes the mistake of believing that sex between them will make a difference.

"*Sarah?*" he yells, and it almost breaks open his stitches to put that much effort into speaking. When no one answers except the guy on the top floor to tell him to shut the hell up, he goes back to his stuff on the lawn and crams some of his clothes in his backpack and begins to feel around in the dark. All he wants is his guitar and his *Norton Anthology*. But the photos usually tucked inside the poetry anthology are missing, probably scattered all over the grass, so he crawls around until he finds all three. He doesn't know which one's which, but knows he's not leaving until

he has them all. He grabs his guitar and tucks the photographs back into the book and then he heads back toward the hospital, weighing up his options. Georgie is the obvious one, but he knows he can't turn up to his aunt's place in the middle of the night with ten stitches in his head. She'll ring Brisbane in an instant, and then he'll have to deal with his mother's anxiety. And so he realizes, with a lack of shame or guilt born of desperation, that he'll call Francesca Spinelli because after tonight he'll never have to see her again. There'll be no hanging out at the Union now that his flatmates have been sacked. It's a bed she can offer with no questions from her mother and father. He's got enough credit for one more phone call and he rings her because he's a prick. He knows Francesca will come and get him no matter what he said to her tonight. He knows she'll expect nothing in return.

He's outside the front of the Mobil petrol station ten minutes later, and once his body has been stationary for a while, the painkillers begin to wear off and the cold snaps at his bones. At this time of night, Parramatta Road looks like some sci-fi movie. Massive lights from the servos and traffic lights, and not one car to be seen except a ute coming toward him from Annandale. Which means Will Trombal is driving. Mostly Tom's pissed off, except for a sliver of enjoyment in knowing that he's probably disrupted Trombal's night. There's never been love lost between Tom and Francesca's boyfriend. The filthy look that Trombal sends him and the five-minute drive of silence to Francesca's house, while the three are squashed in the front seat, prove it.

When they get to her place, Francesca touches Will's hand, and Tom watches as Will clenches hers. "I'll just go unlock the door for

him,” she says quietly, waiting for Tom to get out first. Will gets out as well and leans against the ute. Tom can’t see his expression in the dark, but he feels the bastard’s eyes drilling a hole into him. Will Trombal was in the next year up from them at school, and Tom can’t believe Francesca’s still with him after five years.

“Thanks.” Tom mutters the word. He doesn’t mean it but says it all the same.

“Don’t,” Trombal says quietly. “You’d still be out there, and I wouldn’t give a shit if you were bleeding all over Parramatta Road, if it was my choice. You know that.”

They have a quick verbal exchange but only get to cover the alphabet from A to F, outdoing each other with the most choice of words. Trombal kind of wins this round, courtesy of having hung out with engineers in Asia for most of the year. Then they’re shoving each other and Tom sees more emotion on the other guy’s face than he has in the years he’s known him. Francesca’s back between them, trying to push them apart, but it’s Trombal she’s facing and they start kissing in the middle of his fight—*they start kissing*—and it’s no longer about Tom, and he makes his way to the open front door, looking back once.

Trombal has her pressed against the door of the ute and they’re going at it like they’ve got no time left in this world together and Tom can hear that she’s crying and any time she comes up for air, Francesca’s saying, “Be careful, Will, *please*,” and Tom’s not an idiot to realize what he’s interrupted. Will Trombal’s some wunderkind in engineering, sponsored throughout his uni years by one of the top companies. Now Trombal’s taking a break from studying and it’s payback time, so he’s had to spend most of the year working offshore in Sumatra.

Francesca's still crying when she comes inside and makes herself busy doing up the sofa bed for him in the lounge room.

"When's he leaving?" Tom asks quietly, more out of the need for something to say than real interest.

"In the morning."

"Go be with him, then. I'll be fine."

She fluffs up the pillow and throws it on the bed before looking up at him coldly.

"As if I'd leave you here with my little brother."

chapter two

Georgie makes a list. Her hand is steady as she writes and she nods and records. It's part of the job description to stay neutral.

flannel shirt

metallic-blue nylon tracksuit pants

wool sweater

Adidas running shoes

gray parka

thin gold-plated chain with the name Sofya engraved on it

A Bosnian woman sits facing her. Georgie can see by the information on the form that they're almost the same age, the woman maybe a year or two younger. The woman looks older, but so would Georgie if she had waved good-bye to her husband with the nylon tracksuit pants and her son with the Adidas shoes and her father with the wool sweater and her uncle with the gray parka and her cousin who loved a girl named *Sofya* and never saw them again. Sometimes the woman takes her hand and begins to weep, and Georgie lets her hold it while she continues to write. And when the woman lets go, Georgie wants to beg her to keep holding on. She wants to weep with her.

She's not doing too well these days, although she's only thrown

up twice today. Earlier, while she was puking up morning sickness that doesn't seem to discriminate between morning or afternoon, she made another list. She wants to stop making the lists, but she can't. It's become her little addiction, list making.

So she tries to call them rules. Ignore the first rule of not getting pregnant at forty-two because of the risks, because it's not as though she planned this and it's too late anyway. First real rule: no smoking. And no alcohol. Not even a glass of wine. Deformities, they say. No stone fruit. Not good for the baby's intestines. And of course she'll breast-feed. According to midwives, nothing beats the nutrients in breast milk because they keep the baby strong. Except if you live in Ireland, where ninety percent of them don't breast-feed, so they must have strong immune systems to start with for some reason. She'll sleep it on its tummy so it won't die during the night from crib death. Or is the rule sleeping it on its back these days? And no pool. According to the stats, backyard drowning is the leading cause of injury for children under five, ahead of violence, poisonings, falls, burns, and motor-vehicle crashes. Of course her baby's not sitting in the front seat because air bags can decapitate young children. She'll vaccinate. She won't give it peanuts. She'll never leave it overnight at a friend's because according to statistics ninety-five percent of all molestations happen at the hands of a family friend. There'll be no Internet. Pedophiles are lurking everywhere. And she'll holiday at home, thank you very much. No tsunamis here, or earthquakes.

And won't he grow up to be the healthiest of young men, all because she kept him safe? Ready for the world. Ready to one day conquer it. To travel. Get on a train. Go to work. Get blown out of her life.

Maybe she should be having that glass of wine and cigarette after all.