

Chapter One

I dunno. Childhood is supposed to be the happiest time of your life. So, how'd mine go so bloody wrong?

'Leroy Jones,' the cop says, looking at me over the top of his glasses and scrunching his nose up like I'm some disgusting street trash swept in off the street. Sure, I'm not your clean-cut city kid. I'm wearing a black T-shirt and jeans and, as far as I know, that's not a crime. But it's not my clothes causing this reaction. It's the whole of me – especially my scruffy, undercut hair escaping from beneath the black Nike cap pulled low to hide my eyes, and my earring that screams out at them: *delinquent*. These cops have made their minds up about me already ... so, game on.

'If you say so,' I reply, tilting back on my chair and crossing my arms. I hate them. They're so full of themselves. Bringing misery to anyone who crosses their path. These guys have a lot to answer for in this sorry mess. It's not all my fault. But I deserve to be punished. I *want* to be punished. As I look at them, a familiar pounding in my ears and a rush of heat up my throat threatens to blow my 'I couldn't give a damn' cover.

Him and another younger dude are sitting opposite me, real serious and real straight like they have metal rods running from their bums to their necks. In front of them, on the table, they have a file with a few sheets of paper sitting on top.

'Now son,' the old bloke continues.

'I'm not *your* son,' I interrupt before he can sermon on. His face creases, annoyed-like, and starts to turn red. His eyes go all mean and squinty.

'Let's cut the crap, shall we?'

‘I’m not the one talkin’ crap, *mate*.’ I look him straight in the eyes and emphasise the word ‘mate’ as I say it.

‘That’s enough!’ he spits, slamming both hands on the table, then standing and towering over me. I instinctively pull away from the table, and him. I’m such an idiot shooting my mouth off. It’ll only make things worse. I know it.

The younger one touches the old bloke’s back and he sits, fuming but quiet.

‘Leroy, you don’t seem to understand the gravity of your situation,’ says the young cop. ‘You’re, what, fourteen, fifteen years old? And you’re facing serious criminal charges. Now, we can’t interview you formally until we have a responsible adult present. We’ve contacted your mum and she’s on her way. While we wait for her, we’ll give you some space to have a good think about your side of the story.’

‘The old lady, Betty. Is she ... all right?’ I can’t bring myself to say ‘*dead*’.

‘Sorry. I can’t tell you anything about her,’ says the young guy. ‘We’re here to get answers from you. So, if I was you, I’d concentrate on what you have to say.’

The two men look across at each other. The young one nods and they both stand, scrape their chairs back, and leave.

The interview room is cold and white. It’s exactly as you see in cop shows on TV. There’s even a two-way window. Bet they’re watching me now. Probably have to, in case I do something stupid and hurt myself. I’m tempted to give them the finger but I don’t. Instead, I stand and walk over to the window. Taking my cap off, I press my forehead against the cool glass and I’m not surprised that I can’t see anything, except for my own pathetic face staring back at me.

They want my side of the story. This story that started a coupla months ago and is ending now with me, their prime suspect, expected to spill his guts. I can’t believe it’s come to this ...

The sound of the door opening signals that things are about to get serious. Mum pushes past the two cops and comes straight at me like a tornado in full swing. I can't be sure if she'll whack me or hug me. You never know with Mum.

Her narrowed, uncertain eyes are opening wider the closer she gets to me. It's as if she can't believe what she's seeing. Her normally neat hair is messy, escaping from her ponytail. Poor Mum. It's obvious she's dropped everything to come racing here. Like me, she is well and truly out of her comfort zone.

Her thin arms wrap tightly around me and my legs buckle a little as I surrender to the hug. I slump against her and breathe in her familiar scent. That quick spray of fresh, clean deodorant she never leaves the house without, even tonight. The lump deep inside me is making its way to the surface. I try to choke it back but I can't. I'm crying. My shitty life has finally worn me down, reduced me to a whimpering baby. I'm crying big blubbery tears that sound disgusting and it's all so embarrassing, but I can't stop. I'm crying for Betty, for Fluffy and for me.

'Leroy, what's this all about?' she asks, prising me off her chest and holding me at arms' length while looking me in the eyes. I turn the waterworks off and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand before shoving my cap back on. I can feel the cops' eyes on me. I bet they loved that display from the tough kid. Probably quietly giving themselves high fives, thinking they've broken me. They haven't broken me. My life broke me.

'Mrs Walker,' says the old bloke.

'It's *Ms* Walker,' Mum says cutting him off real sharp. She's made a few mistakes in her life but keeping hold of her maiden name isn't one of them. She's proud of being a Walker.

'Sorry, Ms Walker. I'm Senior Sergeant Steve Evans and this is Senior Constable

Brett Hughes. We know this must be distressing for you both but Leroy has found himself in some serious trouble.'

'Leroy ... trouble? No way, not my Leroy. You've got it all wrong. He's just a kid, a normal teenager. Maybe a bit surly but he's never been in trouble,' she says, sounding panicked. Poor Mum. She has it tough bringing up three kids on her own. These two wouldn't know the half of what we've been through. I just don't want to drop her in it any further.

'It happens, unfortunately. We just need to hear what Leroy has to say for himself. Please, take a seat, both of you.'

We sit and then all the adults' eyes in the room turn towards me. Mum's are pleading and pooling with tears. The two cops are staring, hard enough to make me uncomfortable. I hate being the centre of attention. It makes thinking hard and fuzzy around the edges, like my brain has turned to cotton wool. The events of the last two months swirl around in my head. I'm trying to work out where to start but my thoughts are all jumbled up. They're a big, tangled mess - just like me. I have no idea how this all got so outta hand. I need to say something 'cos Mum looks like she's gonna start crying. What should I say? What *can* I say?

'Secrets suck!' I blurt out.

'What on earth are you on about, son?' says the old cop.

'I'm not ...'

'Sorry!' He throws up a hand in defence. 'Leroy. What have secrets got to do with this?'

'You should outlaw secrets. The world would be better off if nobody had any,' I say, bitterly. 'I'm just ... *sick* of it all.'

'Honey, what do you mean?' asks Mum. 'I don't understand.'

‘Mum, yes you do. Our life is nothing but secrets. You know - *Let’s just keep that under our hat, eh, love? Best that that stays just between us, eh?*’

Mum blushes. She knows exactly what I’m talking about. I hate myself for doing this to her. She takes my hands in hers and squeezes them.

‘Just tell the truth, Leroy. Like you always have.’

‘Secrets make it hard to tell the truth, Mum. But over the last two months I’ve had a chance to work things out.’

Confusion spreads across her face. I know I’ve let her down badly. I pull my hands out of her grip and turn away.

The truth is plain as day. Lies and secrets go together. Like meat pies and sauce, you can’t have one without the other. Some secrets are about protecting someone, so it should be okay to lie to keep them safe. Only trouble is, once you’ve been told a secret, even though you try your hardest not to think about it, you get a twisty feeling in your guts and it forces its way into your thoughts. All the time.

So, I had two choices when Betty dropped her terrible secret – keep it hidden or act to make it right. Who the hell had I thought I was? Her saviour? I dunno. Did I even do it for Betty or was it all about me? Guilt eats me up. I deserve everything they throw at me.

I feel Mum’s hand on my shoulder, gentle-like.

‘Worked what out, Leroy?’ says Mum.

‘What secrets?’ asks the young cop, impatience creeping into his voice.

Nan, I think to her in my head, you said I’d be a fish out of water in the city. You were kind of on the money. Right now, I’m a beached whale, floundering hopelessly about, gasping and trying like crazy to survive.

Chapter Two

I love music – the louder, the better so I can lose myself, forget where I am. I don't know what I'd do without music. Sinking further into the couch, I pump up the volume as soon as the guitar riff roars into life. I let the music flow through me until I'm a zoned-out zombie.

'Argh!' What the ...? Something whacks me hard in the head and my eyes fly open. Noah's about to re-arm with a wooden block.

'Ya little pest. Put it down, Noah. I'm warning ya.' He giggles and lets fly. I'm a sitting target. I lean to the left and the block misses my head and connects with the wall. For a three-year-old, he has a pretty good throwing arm. Thankfully, he loses interest in me and returns to building his tower.

Rubbing my head, I rip my ear-buds out and ease off the couch. What the hell? The lounge-room looks like it's done two rounds with Danny Green. How'd they do this when I'd closed my eyes for five minutes, at most?

The afternoon is slipping away and dusk is fast approaching. It's five o'clock and Mum won't be home for another hour from her work at the deli down the road. I know she has to work, but this babysitting is doing my head in. Looking after these two ankle-biters is like juggling flaming fire-sticks. 'Bloody hell, you two,' I say. 'Could you make any more mess?'

Stupid question. Just yesterday, Noah slipped off outside, found an old bowl, filled it with water and made himself 'yummy mud-pies'. Of course, he had furry Ted with him and decided to force-feed the toy the pies. Better Ted than me, I thought, until Noah came in howling, clutching his grubby toy and wailing that he didn't like Ted being dirty. Cleaning up the mess took half an hour of my life I'd never get back.

Now Zoe looks at me through narrowed eyes. *'Yeah, we only just got started.'* Even though she's only five years old, you never turn your back on her when she gives you her special death stare. She's her dad in miniature, and Mick is not my favourite person. It's safe to say, I hate him. He's the reason we've been ripped away from our home in Kalgoorlie and holed up in the city in this dump of a place. Kalgoorlie, or Kal to us locals, is the most amazing gold mining town but it's so far away now. Six hundred and fifteen kays according to Google Maps.

Luckily, Zoe's little brother Noah isn't so much like Mick. He is more like Mum in looks and nature. A curly-haired, blonde little dude with freckles starting to dot his face. He's more laid back than his sister, except when he's on the attack with wooden blocks.

'I'm hungry,' moans Zoe, and I know she'll keep at it till I do something about it. Pain in the arse. I surrender.

'Okay, okay. I'll give you a pack of Shapes if you both start cleaning up this mess,' I say, hoping for a miracle. I'm sick of cleaning up after these whirlwinds day after day. Zoe must be starving 'cos she is off and racing, shouting at Noah to help.

I open the pantry, praying that we still have a packet of Shapes left and, hallelujah, we do. I can't be bothered dividing the biscuits into two bowls like Mum does. (I'm not stupid when it comes to minimising work.) Instead, I open the box and stand waiting till I'm happy with their efforts.

'Can we watch TV while we eat them?' asks Zoe, in her sweetest voice. She's perfected getting her way with everyone, except me, unless it suits me. Let's just say, I'm onto her.

'Sure,' I say. 'As long as you sit nice and quiet while Masterchef Leroy gets to work.' Mum's given me the low down on what's for tea before she left for work.

She's already made the meat sauce for our spag bog meal. That's one thing about Mum; she's pretty organised. She has to be. We eat quite a few mince dishes but you won't see me complaining.

Mum knows I'm useless in the kitchen. Mostly I only have to put things in the oven or do the last bit of prep for her so tea is ready to dish up when she gets home from work. I check my watch. Yeah, I may as well get things going. My big job tonight is to cook the spaghetti and grate some cheese.

The two kids jump onto the couch with Zoe firmly in charge of the packet of Shapes and the remote. She flicks through the channels until a singing Peppa Pig fills the screen. I don't know what I'd do without ABC for Kids. It's my go-to distraction when the kids are toey.

They love *Bluey* the best. I wish we had a smart TV so I could play *Bluey* over and over and over. The kids would be in heaven. But we don't. We have one of Nan and Pop's old TVs. I s'pose it's better than nothing. Just like I'm thankful for the old iPhone Nan gave me when I turned twelve. Good old Nan. I shouldn't say old 'cos she's not that old. Mum had me when she was seventeen and Nan had Mum when she was twenty so she is a pretty young Nan. We had a party out bush for her fifty-first birthday earlier this year. It was awesome fun.

Nan always topped up my credit when I was low and, luckily, I loaded up my phone with music before I left Kal 'cos we don't have the internet here. It's an expense Mum can't afford at the moment, but it's killing me to be so totally cut off from the world. No-one my age exists without twenty-four/seven access to the net. Honestly. It's bloody criminal. But adults just don't get it.

When we first arrived in Perth, a month or so ago, I was ringing Nan and Pop regularly. I missed them. It was like I'd left my heart back in Kal and my body rattled

around, empty, in Perth. I've had to cut back on my chats lately as I don't have any cash to top up my phone and Mum won't let me ask Nan for more credit. I'm not sure why, but it means that pretty soon I won't be able to talk to them.

But there's no use feeling sorry for myself, not when it's down to me that we had to escape here in the first place. *I shouldn't have opened my big mouth. If only ... if only ...*

But then I think again. It's not *all* my fault.

I'm only a teenager. Mick's an adult. He should know better.

My mind torments me, returning to the incident so I'm forced to examine it again and again. I'm wound up so tight I become a potential firecracker, in danger of exploding into a million tiny pieces before finally disappearing into thin air. Why do I keep coming back to it? Guilt? Should I have kept my mouth shut? Today, like most days, I try to chase it off by keeping busy.

I grab a saucepan, fill it with water and put it on the stove. No matches. Great. Where's Mum hidden them this time? I begin opening drawers and feeling on top of the shelves. Those little pests get up to all sorts of mischief and matches are one thing that can't land in their hands, especially Zoe's. I'm not a tall kid so I have to stretch on my tiptoes to run my fingers over the top of the fridge. Bingo!

I strike a match, get the gas ring going and return the box to its safe place. I gather the three ingredients needed to complete this meal — spaghetti, meat sauce, and cheese — and put them on the bench ready.

I scan the room which is a kitchen, dining room and lounge, all in one. It's small and dingy. An old, state-housing rental in Hilton is all Mum can afford and this place hasn't seen any love for a long time. Mum's tried her best to clean the floors but the stains and rips in the lino and carpets are as stubborn as. Our furniture is bits and

pieces from kerb sides and second-hand stores. There's been a lot of spit and polish to get everything anywhere near meeting Mum's approval.

The kids are still watching TV and hoeing into the Shapes. Suddenly, Zoe snatches the packet from Noah and I realise there must only be a few left. She's such a brat but Noah's no pushover. He makes a grab for the packet and an all-out brawl erupts.

'Right. Ya can't have any more if ya can't share 'em,' I say, as I wrench the box out of Zoe's hands.

'I'll share,' she pleads.

'Too late. You've had enough and dinner's nearly ready. Watch TV or I'll turn that off, too.' They're so annoying and I've had a gut full of them. They eye me up and realise I'm serious, so they settle back to watching their show.

I put the Shapes packet on the kitchen bench and pick up my phone to drown them out with music while I wait for the water to boil.

Damn! I missed a call about ten minutes ago from Mum 'cos my earphones are still connected. Bummer! I hope she isn't gonna be late. I go into my room so I can hear, and dial her number.

'Hey, how's it ...' Mum's voice cuts out. I dial again but this time all I hear is a continuous, disconnection sound. It's happened. I'm out of credit. Now I can't ring her back, or ... anyone.

My phone rings..

'Hi, my phone's out of credit. That's why it died on ya.'

'That's a pain, mate. Is everything alright at home?'

'Yeah.'

'I have to restock the shelves so I'll be home around six-thirty. Can you sort tea?'

I'm sorry, love.'

'It's okay. I'm cooking the spaghetti now, then I'll throw 'em in the shower.'

'You're a champ. See you in an hour.'

Great. Another hour of controlling the pests on my own.

An almighty crash and a scream, piercing the air, makes my blood run cold. *What now?*

I race into the living area and stop dead. My brain takes everything in. Zoe's screeching head is visible just above the kitchen bench but no Noah ... and *no saucepan on the stove*. Terrifying screams fill the room.

I freeze and my legs threaten to buckle under me. But a raw, haunting cry escapes from deep within me and propels me forward, somehow avoiding furniture in my blind rush to the kitchen.

Noah is laid out on the kitchen floor with the saucepan next to him. He is drenched and screaming his lungs out.

It's bad. I scoop him up, race to the shower, turn on the cold water, full bore, and stand with him under it, wincing at the freezing torrent. Zoe follows me into the bathroom, her words incoherent through her sobs.

'He ... wanted ... the ... packet ... of ... Shapes,' she blabbers. 'He ...couldn't ... see ... and ... grabbed ... the ... handle ... instead.'

'Zoe, shut up! I need to think.'

What a nightmare. I can't run next door to get help or ring 000. They'd learn we are on our own. Mum's terrified of being dobbed in to welfare and Mick then finding out where we are. My phone's useless; I can't call her. Noah is hysterical. He must be in agony.

'It's okay, Noah. The cold water'll help. You'll be right, buddy,' I say, hoping I'm

right.

But will he? I can't remember what I'm meant to do. Am I'm meant to take his top off? All I remember, from watching *Medical Emergency* on TV with Nan, is you have to sit under cold, running water to take the heat out of a burn. But for how long?

Zoe's sitting on the floor of the bathroom, still crying, but more quietly now, her eyes wide and fearful as she takes everything in.

'Zoe, I need ya to run down the street to the shop where Mummy works. You know the one. We've been there to get milk and bread. Do ya reckon you could do that? I can't go; I need to stay here with Noah under the shower.'

She looks back with startled eyes.

'But it's getting dark, Leroy. I don't like the dark,' she says, hugging her knees to her chest. I remember that, brat though she is, she's only a little kid. 'Hey, the sun's still shining a little bit and the moon'll be up soon. How about ya take the torch next to Mummy's bed so ya can see where ya going? It's only one and a half blocks away. I know ya can do it. You're a big girl.'

'I don't want to,' she says, bringing her knees up and burying her face in them.

'Hey Zo, ya could get a lolly there,' I say in desperation. I'm running out of ideas.

She stops crying. Good old Zoe. She's worked out what's in it for her.

'A Chupa Chup?'

'Yeah, why not.'

She stands and heads out of the bathroom. In no time at all, she returns with Mum's torch and her bike helmet on her head. She's a smart one. In her mind, helmets protect you, so now she's protected.

'I'll run fast to Mummy's shop,' she says, and takes off. Once an idea takes root with her there is no stopping her.

Bloody hell! I forgot to remind her which way to turn. She needs to turn to her *right*. Please, please let her be going the right way and for her to stay safe.

I start humming and gently rocking Noah. He's shivering like crazy in my arms, under the stream of cold water. I'm not sure if it's the shock or the fact that it's September and the weather is still warm, not summer hot, but I'm starting to shiver as well. We are like vibrating, wind-up toys who will soon run out of energy and stop working. Noah's face is screwed up and he's closed his eyes to the world, still sobbing his heart out.

Hurry, Mum. Please. I can't do this for much longer. My arms are numb, heavy blocks of ice. Pins and needles zing through my hands and my fingers clamp, claw-like, around Noah's tiny body.

Time stands still. Minutes tick by but they feel like hours. It takes all of my will to control my muscles. They're yelling at me and I'm screaming back at them. *Hold him. Don't drop him.* I lean back against the shower wall and slump carefully to the floor. Noah is still under the stream of water. This gives me a bit of relief. Just moving has helped.

Then, I hear the screeching of the Camry's wheels. Doors slam and a voice calls out.

The look on Mum's terrified face appearing at the bathroom is something I'll never forget. She snatches Noah from my arms and heads for the front door.

'Get Zoe fed and into bed. I don't know how long I'll be. I'll call.'

And, she's gone.

I'm standing at the door of the bathroom, shivering.

I'm cold and empty.

I hate the city. I hate Mick. I hate Mum, too.

I may be getting too old now but all I want is to be wrapped up in Nan's safe arms. To feel her warmth; her love.

I kick the door and head back to the shower. Reaching in, I turn on the hot water, strip off and feel the needles of heat on my numb skin.

Nan, can you hear me? I'm a fragile bubble, floating, going higher and higher, waiting to burst and truly disappear.

Chapter Three

It takes ages to settle Zoe. She wants Mum. I get it; she's scared. I want Mum, too. But, no matter what bribes or threats I give, the little pest won't get into bed. The lollipop didn't happen and she's not happy.

She's getting on my nerves but I can't let her see that. I turn on the TV and let her lie on the couch. She thinks she's had a big win. In the end, sheer tiredness gets her. It's been a big day and, no matter how hard she tries, she can't keep her eyes open. I carry her to bed then return and switch off the TV. My head is thumping and my heart is jumpy. I want some quiet. Something that's rare in this place.

Most of all, I want to rewind the day and do it all differently. I want Mum to call and say *Noah is fine*.

I sit and wait. I stand and wait. I put my phone on charge and wait. I open the front door, look up to the sky peppered with stars and wait ... and wait. I wander back inside and fall on the couch. Can't sleep, though.

Come on, Mum. Call me. The silence in the house is giving me the creeps so I switch the TV back on. I flick through the channels. Nothing but reality shows on the commercial stations. I've never got into watching them. Having lived with Nan and Pop until I was ten years old, I got used to watching the ABC with them. Nan flat-out refused to watch any reality shows. She says they're a load of rubbish and there's enough meanness in the world without having it dished up on the telly night after night. About the only good thing about Mick's place was that Netflix was basically on twenty-four/seven, another thing I can add to the list of what I'm forced to do without in the city. I'm missing all my shows.

I end up leaving the TV on the ABC. Adults talking about things that never

change. I turn down the sound and use their muffled voices for company.

Mum rings at nine-thirty and tells me she's staying at the hospital with Noah. Oh, and if she's not back before school in the morning, I'm to get Zoe dressed, fed and delivered to Pre-Primary with a packed lunch. What is going on here? I have enough trouble sorting me, let alone Zoe, as well. Mum knows Zoe and I don't see eye to eye. We never have. Getting her ready for school will be a bigger battle than any seen on *Stranger Things*.

I head to my room and flop on my bed.

Sleep's impossible. I'm too wired. I'm angry and worried and frustrated – all at the same time.

I put my earphones in and crank up my music to drown out all my crazy thoughts. Not a hope in hell.

Mick. It always comes back to Mick.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Mick and Zoe's arrival changed my world. They turned it upside down. I did my best to keep out of everyone's hair by staying at Nan and Pop's place any chance I could. It suited Mick. Poor Mum, though, she works hard to make us a family, of sorts. She is the glue that keeps us together. Nan and Pop call us the Brady Bunch, whoever they are.

I take a deep breath and let it out, nice and slow.

I'm being selfish. Mum must be going through hell. She's a nurse but can't get hospital work 'cos she can't get childcare for Noah. We don't know anyone in the city. She says she's lucky to get the cash in hand, after-school-hours job at the deli to help us with the money situation.

I'm still feeling pissed off and I know I shouldn't. Then it dawns on me. I know what's bugging me. Mum didn't ask how *I'm* going. How I'm coping.

Is she angry with me? Does she blame me for her world crashing down? She hasn't explained anything about how Noah's doing, either. All she said is that he has second degree burns. What does that mean? With no bloody Wi-Fi I can't google it and no working phone I can't ring and ask Nan to explain it. Are second degree burns really bad?

Nan, I'm a bloody stirred up hornet's nest with my head buzzing with out-of-control, stinging thoughts.

Mum's voice, talking softly, wakes me. I know it's early 'cos the light coming through my window is soft and the air is crisp but not deep night cold. I look out of the dirt-smearred glass and a greyish-blue sky, broken up by streaming, sun-kissed fairy-floss clouds greets me. It's barely the beginning of a new day. My bedroom door is open and Mum's words float their way in. I rise, still in yesterday's crumpled clothes, and move to stand and listen, out of sight, next to the door.

'I know, Ma. The poor little thing is a mess. They say he's lucky to only have second-degree burns.'

I watch Mum on her phone. She's listening to Nan with her back to me while leaning against the fridge. She's made herself a coffee and it's steaming away on the bench.

'It's not like I *want* to leave the kids alone. I have no choice! I need the job. It's a cash job. The government money isn't enough for rent, food and everything else we need to survive in the city. It's so much more expensive than living in Kalgoorlie. Now it looks like Noah will be in the hospital for at least a couple of weeks so I don't know if I'll be able to keep hold of the job, anyway.'

Mum picks up her coffee, takes a sip, puts it back down and drops her head to the fridge, gently rocking it back and forth. She mustn't like hearing what Nan is saying. Nan is a straight talker so you always know where you stand with her.

'Ma, I know it's not good. I don't know what else I could've done. Leroy had one simple thing to do. Cook the spaghetti. How he messed that up, I don't know.'

My heart drops. I struggle to breathe. It's as if Mum has punched me fair in the guts. She blames me. A sting of tears threatens my eyes. I hadn't thought about the blame game but I s'pose it *is* my fault. I slump against the door frame. No doubt Nan'd be in a terrible state. Her and Pop have always been there for us. But they are so far away now.

'Yes, Ma, I know he's been thrown in the deep end but he's not a kid anymore. He's a teenager. At the end of this year he'll be heading into Year Ten. He's old enough to take responsibility.'

So, there it is. I've officially left my childhood behind. I knew it!

'I'll manage this. No, I don't want you leaving your job and coming here to pull me out of another one of my spectacular stuff-ups.'

Mum's angry. With her head dropped and eyes closed, she listens while she bangs her clenched fist against the fridge door. Not hard and aggressive. She's trying to hold in her frustration.

'Look, I gotta go. I have to get back to Noah. I'll call you later.'

I want to rush out and grab the phone from her to talk with Nan. She would make this right. Nan's not a squishy, huggy Nan but she always knows when you need to be wrapped up tight in her arms.

'No, Leroy can't call you. He hasn't got any credit left. I really have to go. Bye, Ma.'

Mum tosses her phone away, folds her body over the bench, drops her head on her arms and cries. Very softly. I've heard Mum cry a lot lately. I don't know what to do.

I'm torn. I'm so angry with her that I want her to feel as bad and miserable as I do. To feel useless and alone. But ... she's my Mum and she's crying. Her soft sobs tug at me. Should I go hug her or should I make some noise so she knows I'm here? I pick the safer option.

'Mum,' I say, as I walk towards her.

She instantly straightens up, turns her back to me and opens the fridge as if she needs to get something out of it. Talk about a cold shoulder.

When she turns around, she is hiding behind a thin smile. No trace of tears.

'Leroy, what a day! What a night!' she says in a breezy voice before drawing in an exaggerated breath and shaking her head as she blows it out.

'Yeah, it was pretty crazy,' I say, expecting (hoping?) that she'd step over and wrap me in a hug.

But, she doesn't. She doesn't even look at me. Instead she stares at her cup of coffee without speaking. An awkward silence fills the room. Maybe she doesn't know what to say. I bet all she wants to do is tear strips off me but is frightened of what will come out once she starts.

This is ridiculous.

'How's Noah?' I ask. My voice sounds thin and hollow in my ears.

Her face creases into a frown and she shakes her head.

'He's not in the best shape. They say he was saved from third-degree burns by being kept under the running water.' She stands up. 'Look, I have to get back. I don't want him to wake and me not be there. I only slipped away to get Ted, change my clothes and check on you two.'

‘We’re alright,’ I say. What else can I say? ‘Can we come to the hospital after school?’

‘Sure. We’re at Fiona Stanley in the children’s ward. Just catch the 999 on South Street and go to reception. They’ll tell you where we are. We should know more by this afternoon.’

Mum sculls the last of her coffee, puts her empty cup in the sink and heads to her room. I can’t read her. I know she is upset and disappointed with me but how does shutting me out help? She says I’m not a kid anymore but she’s treating me like one. I need to talk to her. Explain how hard things are for me.

I start getting our school lunches sorted before the upcoming battle with Zoe starts. Lunch’ll be pretty basic; a Vegemite sanga for both of us. Luckily, there is half a loaf of bread left. I will have to do with only one round today or we won’t have enough once we’ve had brekky.

I grab a banana each from the fruit bowl and ... that’s it. It’s no use putting an apple in for Zoe 'cos she hates them. And then a thought: *Where’s that Shapes packet?* A few biscuits were kicking around in that yesterday. Mum must have thrown it away. I open the bin and there it is. I check inside and there sit five measly biscuits. I throw them into a container and add it to her lunchbox.

I’m buttering the four slices of bread when Mum returns dressed in jeans and a green shirt. The jeans are baggy on her. I know she’s naturally tall and skinny but the city seems to be sucking the life out of her. Her long blondish hair is pulled back, out of the way, in a ponytail. I know others think she’s a bit of a looker. But it’s her eyes that make her special. They are large and an iridescent sapphire-blue with the power to draw you in and hold you captive. They’re Nan’s eyes, usually bright and sharp.

Right now though, her eyes look tired and her face drawn.

She walks over to the bench and picks up her keys. I'm waiting for her to reach out to me, to ruffle my hair or put her arm around my shoulders. Anything to tell me we're okay. She doesn't.

'I'll see you this afternoon. Be firm with Zoe and don't tell anyone about Noah's accident till we can talk later,' says Mum.

'Yeah, okay. Hug Noah for me.'

'Bye,' she says as she heads for the front door.

Then she's gone.

I go back to finishing off the lunches and packing our school bags.

Mum and I were really close once. It was the two of us against the world. This was the before Mick, Zoe and Noah time. Now, she has to divide herself into so many pieces there isn't enough of her to go around. To get her attention, you have to demand it as Zoe does. I don't and I won't.

Argh, Zoe. Time to brace myself for battle. I hope I'm up to the fight.

'Zoe, time to get up,' I shout, as I walk towards her room.

Nan, I need you 'cos I'm a well-used punching bag, about to fall apart at the seams unless someone gives me a little TLC.