

if i tell you



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I started planning my wedding when I was seven. My best friend Lin and I would lie on our backs in the sun, making daisy chains and discussing seating plans. I'd be married at sunset on my parents' farm—land that's been in my family for 120 years—up on the cliff as the sun made the world blush pink and gold. How my wedding party and guests would make the hike was a minor detail.

I would have a maid of honour, Lin, *and* a best man, my oldest friend Justin, and the reception would be held in an old barn that Dad would restore especially for the occasion. My mother would bake the cake and the rest of her Rural Women's Guild mates would cater. It would be the perfect day.

Thirteen arrived and brought puberty and hormones with it. Lin started dating Simmo, a boy two years older than us, and he became the groom in her fantasy wedding.

I cut photos from magazines of brides, decapitated the grooms and kept them in a shoebox with scraps of silk stolen from my mother's sewing tin. I pictured the face of every boy I knew—and some I didn't—waiting at the end

of the aisle, the setting sun glowing on his freshly shaven face as I walked towards him. But all I felt was heaviness, like when you swallow bubblegum and wonder if it might stay in your guts for eight years.

The dreams started just before my fourteenth birthday. It's my wedding day and I'm standing where I'm supposed to be, waiting in the clearing before the cliff. Through the trees, white garden chairs sit in rows and my little brother Zac directs people to their seats while my music teacher Gilly plays classical guitar. Dad appears at my side, asks if I'm ready. Lin passes me my bouquet, kisses my cheek and whispers something filthy about the wedding night. Justin tilts his Akubra and tells me I owe him one for making him wear a tie. I ask Dad where my mother is. He tells me she's not here—says I should know that.

I turn to ask Justin if he's seen my mother, but he's standing in the trees, not gone but not there. Dad tugs my arm and drags me towards the aisle, and I feel my smile slide into place. The person who appears illuminates my world; tall, dark and categorically female.

The first time I had the dream I woke with my heart in my throat. It was three in the morning but I turned on the light anyway and sorted through my box of headless men in suits.

They're headless but they're still men, right?

I told myself it was just a dream, switched off the light and stared at the ceiling until morning.

The dream left me alone long enough to convince me it was just that—a dream. Then it came back again, and again, until I went to sleep most nights expecting

it. *Looking forward to it.* And the dream evolved with my understanding. I knew why my mother wasn't there. Every night I hoped the dream would change and she'd be there in a simple yet stylish pastel pants suit. But that wouldn't be evolution, that'd be a miracle.

Justin stayed in the trees, watching but not wanting to see. Lin's words got filthier. Dad didn't have to drag me down the aisle. Gradually I got closer to the bride, but never close enough.

The dreams teased me for an entire year until at last I woke with the lingering taste of another person's mouth on my lips. I sat up in bed and shared my secret with the dark. *I'm a lesbian.*

I imagined telling my family. Dad would be shocked and confused, but he'd hide it well. He'd hug me and tell me everything would be okay when maybe it wouldn't, because that's the kind of bloke he was. My annoying little brother Zac would be annoying. He'd make a comment that would get him sent to his room and he'd stick his finger up at me as he went. My mother would implode. She would be angry and dismissive and she would *not* hide it well, or at all.

Veronica Summers was everything Two Creeks believed women should be: married to a successful farmer, the youngest president of the Rural Women's Guild in Two Creeks' history and blue ribbon winner for the best Victoria sponge at the show for the past seven years. In her opinion, I should be less like me and more like her; judgemental, obedient and in the kitchen.

Having a gay daughter would be the ultimate failure, and Veronica Summers did not fail.

And I *was* gay. From the moment the words left my lips in the dark, I felt their truth in every cell of my body. I wondered what it would take to convince all those cells they were wrong, to make them something they weren't, like trying to write left-handed. I *could* do it, but I'd have real trouble trying to convince anyone the toddler scrawl came naturally.

When we were in Year Ten, Lucas Cooper called me a lezzo. He'd forced his way on to the seat next to me on a bus excursion to Ngarradan Caves and was sitting with his man-boy body pressed against mine while I hugged the window. He put his grubby hand on the bare skin above my knee and when I bent his fingers halfway back to his wrist, he stood up in the aisle of the bus and announced that I was a lezzo. And in that moment I had a choice. Denial or the truth. I couldn't breathe. The skin on my ears burned despite the freezing aircon on the bus.

"Am not," I said. Lin rolled her eyes at me from the opposite side of the aisle and Justin led the other boys in taunting Lucas about how *all* the girls he tried to get with must be gay because he was still a virgin.

I stared out the window so no one would see the tears that pooled in my eyes. Behind me, Rebecca Thomas put a hand on my shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze, told me not to worry about what Lucas said because he was a dickhead and no one believed him.

But the tears had nothing to do with Lucas calling me a lezzo. It was the first time I'd lied about who I was, *what* I was, and the shame was like nothing I'd ever felt before.

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So I made a deal with the shame that if anyone ever said I was gay again, I would tell the truth.

Almost two years later, no one's mentioned it and I haven't had to find out if I'm capable of honouring the deal I made on the bus that day.

* * *

I dump my backpack on the floor of the staffroom at Fletcher's, one of the last independent supermarkets in the state, where I work with half the high school. As I rummage around for my name badge, Lin bursts into the room.

"Urgh." She flops dramatically into our boss' chair, her shiny, black hair falling over her face. "I'm so hungover I could die."

Lin spends every Friday night drinking tequila shots from Simmo's belly button and every Saturday morning nursing a hangover.

"If I get put in the deli today I'll spew."

"You're early. Simmo wet the bed again?" I toss her name badge into her lap and take a sip from her cardboard coffee cup. It's good—something coffee in Two Creeks isn't. I tilt my head to read the name of the shop stamped on the side.

Lin huffs. "That was one time, Alex, and he had a bladder infection."

Bradley 'Simmo' Simpson is the local muso who plays covers at The Heritage pub on Saturdays. His success is best measured by the fact he lives in the caravan park. About

three pies away from being chubby, he has a face full of orange freckles and curly hair the colour of caramel that springs from under his ever-present black felt hat. When I think of Simmo, I can't help but see my own dreams of making music. But the reality of being a musician is petrifying, because despite living in the caravan park, Simmo's talented. And his talent hasn't gotten him any further than a pub in Two Creeks.

"Where'd you get this? It's good," I say and take another sip of coffee.

"The Green Spoon—you know that place that was opening near the library? Well it's open. Didn't recognise the owner; lots of tats, not from around here that's for sure."

Depending on your view, one of the perks or drawbacks of life in Two Creeks is the fact that everyone knows everyone. You can't fart in line at the post office without everyone knowing five minutes later.

Lin reaches lazily for her coffee and frowns at me when she realises it's empty. "C'mon, we better get to work. Have you seen this month's *Cleo*?"

* * *

Right up to the last ten minutes, my shift is as mundane as you'd expect from a day spent sitting behind a cash register. That's until a girl I don't know walks through the doors. And it's not like I've never seen a hot girl before, never taken a sneaky peek in the change room at the pool, but immediately this is different; the truth in my blood tells me so.

She hesitates in the doorway, then slides her sunnies up her nose and adjusts her backwards cap. Our eyes meet and the corner of her lip quirks into a half smile as she walks out of sight and I exhale the breath I didn't know I was holding.

Something hits me between the shoulder blades and I swivel in my seat to see Lin's pen lying on the floor.

"Who's that?" she asks.

I shrug and hope my face isn't as flushed as it feels. "How would I know?"

Lin returns my shrug and motions for me to throw her pen back, which I do—a little too hard. "Bit late for people here on holidays, school starts tomorrow. You reckon she lives here?"

"I don't *know*," I say, irrationally irritated.

Lin ignores my tone. "You think those tats are real or she's just wearing those fake sleeves you can buy?"

"How would I *know*, Lin?"

"She's hot. The type of chick you could turn for. Not literally, but I bet she could get a girl to give it a go." She whistles through her teeth and I hate her for saying what I can't, but hate myself more for not being able to say what I want.

"Do you reckon she's a lesbian?" Lin presses on. "I mean *look* at her."

"Lin, you can't assume someone's gay because of the way they look."

"Sure you can," she says with a shrug. "Would it be more acceptable if I asked whether you reckoned she was straight?"

Before I can respond, I'm derailed by the sight of the girl coming past the deli. "Shut up. She's coming back."

Lin rolls her eyes, but stays silent and resumes flicking through her magazine.

Converse High Tops, denim cut-offs just below the knee and a simple white tank top. Nice arms and a sleeve of tattoos that ends with the Guns N' Roses band logo on the back of her right hand. Black hair tied into a low ponytail, orange cap, pale skin so out of place among the tans and melanoma scars of Two Creeks. Eyes that make my palms sweaty.

"That'll be \$18.60 thanks," I say with a shy kind of smile I don't think I've ever smiled before in my life. My brain explodes when it catches up to my body. *You're flirting? What are you doing?* I ignore my brain's accusations and swallow hard as she hands me a crumpled twenty from her pocket. I catch a whiff of her perfume; warm and smoky. There's paint on her hands. But it's not paint from helping your parents redecorate. It's the kind Michelangelo would have under his nails from smearing his finger across the roof of the Sistine Chapel. I realise too late that I'm staring and she's watching me with eyes the colour of frost. I know I should be doing something but all I can do is sit here and wait for her to turn me to ice.

"Is tipping compulsory?" she asks and I realise I'm still holding her change.

"Sorry." I dump the coins into her hand with a clumsy clatter and try to recover by adding a generic, "Long day."

If I Tell You

She tilts her head and considers me with an expression that heats my skin from the inside out. “Don’t worry about it.”

As she starts packing her shopping into her backpack, my eyes are drawn to something as familiar as it is terrifying: a small rainbow sticker in the shape of two ♀ symbols. I gasp involuntarily and she follows my line of sight to her bag before bringing her eyes back to mine. Her flawless jaw tightens and she pushes back her shoulders and lifts her chin. She’s waiting for my reaction and my instincts tell me to smile. But my fear and paranoia have me looking anywhere but at her and after what feels like forever, she takes her batteries, turpentine and bags of lollies and leaves the homophobic check-out chick behind her.