

When Rosie Met Jim
by **Melina Marchetta**

It's rained for forty days and forty nights, so when a guy who looks like Jesus in orange SES overalls comes to stand next to her, Rosie thinks it's all a bit biblical.

Up on the meat-raffle stage, the pot-bellied chief of emergency services is trying to get a word in. He's just mentioned the words 'forced evacuation' and the whole place is in an uproar. Some old bloke yells out that the Dawson threatens to flood every year and it's nothing to get their knickers twisted about. The Mayor's all for the evacuation.

'Kev and his people aren't putting their lives at risk for you stubborn mongrels,' he's shouting over everyone. 'Move out of the low-lying areas now or you'll be cut off for at least a week.'

Rosie feels SES Jesus' stare and she makes eye contact. He's a bit older than her, but not that much. Mid-twenties, maybe. Or younger, but he seems like he's been around.

'Jim,' he says.

Crazy eyes. A lunatic. Always the lunatics.

'Rosie.'

'For Rosemary?'

'Rosanna.'

There's a whole lot of shoving around them. The Royal on any given night gets half a dozen patrons, mostly old timers. But tonight it's packed, and no one wants to leave because Maeve from the newsagency's brought along sandwiches and sausages rolls.

SES Jesus' stare is pretty intense. 'You're pretty.'

Rosie wants to hear something more original than that, but she lets him buy her a beer. What else is there to do but hear stories about the last big flood, of '74, from some of the old blokes who haven't spoken about anything interesting since then?

And that's all it takes. A couple of drinks and she's back in some strange guy's room, upstairs at the pub. His calloused fingers find their way between her legs, and she realises that she's going to spend another night of her life screwing a guy she doesn't know. Makes her feel as if she can't climb out of the bat cave, and the bleakness of it all is smothering.

'You're going to have to stop doing that,' she hears him say, and Rosie realises that she's crying. He mutters something, but she doesn't catch what it is.

Prick teaser? Bitch? Luke had an arsenal when it came to name-calling.

The guy on top of her—Jim, she remembers—falls back beside her. She can hear his ragged breathing. Wonders how much time she'll let pass before she climbs out of his bed. The walls are paper-thin and she can hear the muffled sounds of two people having it off next door. She makes her move.

'Stay,' he says. It's with a sigh. One of empathy and she hasn't felt anything close to that for a long time. She turns to face him in the dark, feels the tickle of his beard every time he takes a breath.

The lovers next door are at it. Rosie already knows their names because Stace needs to articulate in the third person everything she wants Roger to do to her.

'Go to sleep,' Jim murmurs.

'While that's going on?'

'It'll be over in less than a minute. Tops. I've listened to this four nights in a row. Roger takes about ten seconds to come.'

A moment later there's silence from next door.
'Told ya.'
Rosie chuckles and he laughs. A warm sound.

He's gone when she wakes in the morning and she's relieved they don't have to do the polite stuff. Outside, it's drizzling and steamy and her tee shirt's pasted onto her with the grime that comes from humidity and sweat. A couple of ute and four-wheel drives pass her by, packed with possessions being taken to higher ground. Rosie wonders if she's left it too late to get out of this town. Wishes Luke was here. Realises she hasn't missed him at all, but he would have been someone to make a decision with. She's been in this town for five weeks now. Has never lived in a place with so few people, not even in her grandmother's village. According to the Tidy Towns sign out on the highway, there are 970 people living here: all wingers, in her eyes. Those she's met, anyway. Rosie hasn't made a friend the whole time so she has no idea what to do when a flood is on the forecast except for what she heard last night from SES Jesus.

At the cenotaph one of the RSL guys is removing the wreaths, probably as a precaution. She's never been into the whole ANZAC thing so it surprises her that she's memorised the twenty-six men who have died in wars since 1914. The name that sticks out the most is O'Halloran. They make up eighteen of the dead and she wonders how many of them are left. She's the last Gennaro of her family and the second last on her mother's side. When Rosie and her grandmother die, there'll be none of them left. So much for big Italian families.

She crosses the low-lying bridge that takes her over the river and out to the old Simpson Road that backs onto the gully. There are half a dozen properties out here. It's where she's been living since Luke did a runner last week. When they first arrived in town after Christmas, she found a job looking after someone who'd just had a hip replacement. Rosie hasn't got any qualifications, but she does the housework, feeds the chooks, cooks, and buys the old woman beer. There's no love lost between her and Joy Fricker, but Luke's departing gift was also nicking off with the money she had saved so if Rosie wants to get out of this town sometime soon she doesn't have much choice.

On the Fricker property she can feel the dampness on the grass. Too much water to have come from the morning drizzle, so she wonders if it's already an overflow from the river. The house is an old two-storey Queenslander on stumps about 70cm above the ground so Rosie's hoping it'll keep them dry.

'Still in the same clothes from yesterday.'

The ironically named Joy is sitting on the verandah. She wears eighty years of bitterness in a lower lip that hangs down in a constant bag of sourness.

Rosie ignores her and walks into the kitchen to fix breakfast. She whistles out for Bruno, but there's no bark of acknowledgement.

'Where's my dog?' she calls out.

Miss Fricker's followed her inside.

'Made a nuisance of himself so I had to tie him up, didn't I?'

Rosie bristles, but holds her tongue. Wants to tell the old woman that if she's strong enough to tie up a kelpie cross border collie, then she can clean up after herself.

They eat in silence before she goes to run Miss Fricker's bath, but there's no water. Last night, head of emergency services was worried the lines would go under water so she figures they've cut the power. Most properties have a generator that kicks in, but no one's looked in on Miss Fricker since Rosie arrived, so she can't imagine a flood plan in place.

She spends the morning with SES Jesus' instructions in her head, because he was a talker and didn't shut up the whole night. Removes anything she can off the floor in the living room and kitchen. The cane armchairs, the rug, baskets and side tables. Any furniture she can lift, she piles onto the table. In the kitchen, she grabs some of the china that looks in any way sentimental and packs it away in a box with the one or two photos on the mantelpiece before taking it all upstairs into the spare bedroom. Miss Fricker watches the whole time, all suspicious eyes. Once or twice Rosie hears Bruno barking and peers outside, but it's not until early afternoon that she's alarmed to see water almost up to the chicken coop, about ten metres from the back steps of the house.

'We need to get up to the evacuation centre in town,' she tells Miss Fricker.

'I'm not going anywhere.'

'We can't stay here, Joy. We could be cut off for days.'

'This is just a way of getting me out of my house and sticking me in that nursing home!'

It's all Rosie's heard for weeks, because Joy Fricker's nephews are pricks, dying to get their hands on the property to sell. The problem for the Fricker boys is that their aunt still has her wits and isn't going to sign anything over to them. But Rosie doesn't have to give a shit about the Fricker family problems, and she's not staying out here if the banks of the Dawson have broken. Once she's retrieved Bruno, she's out of here.

Outside, in knee-deep water, Rosie heads to the goat yard where Miss Fricker's gone and tied Bruno a couple of metres away from the goat. She's thrown by how fast the water's risen. SES Jesus had warned her that when it came, it was intense. He had seen it down south when he was living in Lismore. Was a city boy, amazed by how everything could change in less than five minutes. It takes Rosie more than one attempt to undo the goat and the moment he's free, he nicks off. Rosie wades over to where Bruno is barking. The water suddenly hurls her forward, slamming her into the fencing, winding her. It's only Bruno's whining that has her struggling to her feet to clutch the post and edge towards him, the splinters digging deep into her palm until she feels the wet fur of his coat against her arm. She's frightened to untie him for fear of him being swept away, but can't bear the idea of keeping him tethered in case he goes under and drowns in front of her. Because if he does, Rosie knows she'll let go. Fears she's been wanting to let go for so long now.

Studying the flow around her, she takes a chance. Carefully unties Bruno and wraps the leash around her wrist, but goes under twice and feels herself being swept away. It's only the Hills hoist that she latches herself onto that stops them. She's colder than she's ever been in her life but she doesn't move because the water has a rage beyond anything she's seen, and it wants to snatch them both, wants to fling them against a tree trunk or the side of the house. There's a vengeance to its force and she can't fight it because she's bone tired. Wants to close her eyes, except Bruno is growling beside her and she knows they have to find their way back up those steps. But as cold and frightened as she is, Rosie feels safe staying put. Because in the backyard of the house in James Street, her best memories were of the Hills hoist. Of her mother singing Rosie songs in dialect. Rosie knew them all and she sings them quietly in Bruno's ear until it's her mother's voice she can hear. Clearer than she has for years.

She doesn't know how long they stay. Doesn't know how she finds the strength to let go again, but somehow they make it inside. The entire downstairs is flooded and for an awful moment she thinks Joy Fricker has been swept away. Until she sees the old woman sitting waist deep in water on the stairs, her teeth chattering.

‘Upstairs,’ Rosie manages to say. Miss Fricker shakes her head and Rosie figures that she’s tried to get up those stairs and failed. For once, she feels sorry for her. There’s a vulnerability that Rosie hasn’t seen before, even after the hip replacement when she couldn’t wipe her bum without help.

‘We can’t stay down here, Joy. Let’s go.’

Rosie’s no bigger than Miss Fricker and she buckles under the weight of helping her step by step, Bruno at their heels shoving them forward. She’s worried that she’ll snap Miss Fricker’s arm, but better a broken arm than being found face down in rancid water.

In the musty-smelling room that Joy Fricker hasn’t used since her operation, Rosie removes the old woman’s wet clothing and dresses her. In her own room, she strips off and finds a pair of shorts and a tee-shirt, anything that won’t drag her down if she ends up back in the water. The deluge becomes a phantom in her head, and she imagines it creeping its way up, engulfing them, so she drags a chair onto the landing and keeps watch at the top of the stairs. Has no idea what she’ll do if that water slinks towards them, but needs to know what she’s up against. Later, in the dark, she feels a shudder of the house, picks up the torch and goes to the window, trying to get a glimpse of whatever’s coming downstream to hammer them.

‘My father built this house for me.’

Rosie jumps at the sound of her voice, shines the light towards Miss Fricker who’s standing at her bedroom door.

‘It’s got good foundations.’

Rosie helps the old woman back into bed and then curls up in the tacky velvet armchair close by. On the wall, the glow of the sacred heart of Mary clock taunts her, moving at the excruciating speed meant to punish those who are praying for time to pass.

‘If my father knew what his grandsons were trying to do, it would have broken his heart,’ Miss Fricker says. For her, there still seems to be a greater malevolence than a flood.

Despite the darkness, Rosie can feel herself under the old woman’s bitter scrutiny.

‘You look the type to break your father’s heart.’

‘Yeah, but he broke mine first.’

It’s a voice that wakes them. Bruno is barking at the bedroom door and Rosie untangles herself from the chair, blinded by daylight that snuck up on her while she wasn’t looking. She wipes saliva from her mouth and heads to the landing.

‘Looters,’ Miss Fricker whispers from her bed, because everyone is the enemy in her eyes. Rosie puts a finger to her lips and creeps down a step for a look. SES Jesus is standing thigh-deep in water, wearing only his budgie-smugglers and orange SES jacket. Not quite an apparition, but Rosie feels a hysterical laugh bubble up inside her at the sight of him.

‘Told you to get to higher ground,’ he says.

‘Have you got a boat?’

He shakes his head. ‘The CFA have lent us their truck. Outboard motors are too dangerous. Who knows what’s under this water.’

Rosie helps Miss Fricker out of bed and can feel the old woman trembling. On the mantelpiece, she sees a Mary MacKillop brooch and pins it onto Miss Fricker’s dress before walking her to the door. The old woman refuses to take another step at the sight of him coming up the stairs.

‘Now they’re hiring perverts,’ she mutters.

‘You’re going to have to put your arms around my neck,’ Jim tells Miss Fricker, ‘and I’m going to have one arm around your back and the other under your knees.’

And there’s something about the way skinny SES Jesus hitches Miss Fricker up in his arms and wades through the deluge that makes Rosie think that she’d follow him anywhere.

It’s the town butcher who drives the CFA truck through floodwater. He loses control of the wheel more than once, yelling *Christ* at the top of his lungs. Rosie feels the perspiration running down her brow, undoes her seatbelt, readying herself for the inevitable. They’ll go under, for sure, trapped in a tomb of water. As if sensing her fear, Jim turns in the front seat, catches her eye.

‘Almost there, mate.’

The cottage owned by the Country Women’s Association is perched high on a hill, not a puddle in sight. Standing at the entrance Rosie sees a familiar face, one she’s locked horns with before. A couple of weeks back she had to pick up medication for Miss Fricker at the hospital pharmacy and was put through the third degree by this woman, a local midwife who had come in to deliver a baby. This morning she looks at Rosie with just as much hostility.

‘No dogs allowed, love,’ she says.

Rosie can’t believe what she’s hearing. ‘I’m not leaving him out in the rain.’

‘I’ll take him someplace safe,’ Jim says.

But Rosie’s shaking her head. ‘I’ll keep him in a corner and he won’t move.’

The midwife holds up a finger of warning at Rosie. ‘No dogs allowed,’ she repeats before leading Miss Fricker away. Rosie feels tears threatening, but she refuses to cry in front of Jim for a second time. The butcher’s honking the horn and Jim holds out a hand to her. She lets him take the leash and he walks away.

Inside the cottage there are three large living spaces, all packed with people, most sleeping on solid looking mattresses. Rosie notices a couple of the older evacuees are laying back on comfy armchairs. She checks on Miss Fricker before searching out the midwife who she finds in the CWA kitchen, boiling water on a portable stove.

‘We need one of those armchairs,’ Rosie says.

‘Be patient,’ the other woman says without looking up. ‘Everyone’s gone through a lot tonight, okay. You’re not the only one.’

‘Miss Fricker’s had a hip replacement,’ Rosie argues. ‘She needs to be comfortable.’

‘Sorry love, none left for the time being.’

‘Don’t fucking sorry love me again,’ Rosie says.

The midwife looks up. Rosie flinches because the woman reminds Rosie too much of her mum. They would have been same age, both with long black wavy hair and fierce dark eyes, except the midwife’s an Islander. And the owner of the mothership of dirty looks.

‘You need to change your attitude.’

‘I’ll change it when you get Miss Fricker onto something comfortable.’

Soon after, two teenagers carry an armchair to where Miss Fricker is sitting on a fold-up chair beside Maeve from the newsagency who hasn’t stopped speaking since they arrived. Rosie’s heard Miss Fricker say, ‘Shut up, Maeve,’ more than once.

‘Aunty Min says it’s from the office so you better take care of it,’ the older of the boys says.

Later, Rosie finds Min the midwife watching them from the door. Regrets not looking away before she’s beckoned over by an aggressive hand.

‘What?’ Rosie says.

Another scathing look.

‘Don’t you “what” me, you little bitch. Come and help me with morning tea.’

Handing out tea and biscuits means that people want to talk. Most are worried about their homes. Their pets. Their photos. Their insurance documents. Maeve is in tears.

‘Everything in the shop’s gone,’ she tells Rosie. ‘Everything. What if they won’t cover me?’

Rosie’s grateful that she has nothing to lose.

‘It could be worse, Maeve,’ a woman with a couple of kids hanging off her says from across the room. One of her girls has been crying for their dog all morning because they had to leave him behind.

Later that day, it does get worse. SES Kev and a couple of young guys come in, looking gutted. After that, it’s like the power company’s come in and turned off everyone’s voices. Because down by one of the properties backing the river, a baby’s been swept from his father’s arms, and out by the old mill road, two people are missing. Their car went over the embankment.

Min hands Rosie a documents folder. Tells her to tick off the names from the electoral roll. They need to start working out where everyone is. Most have gone to family and friends on higher ground. Some stayed in their homes and have ended up here. Rosie can’t help thinking that she’s not on the town electoral roll. If she’d got swept away from the Hills hoist yesterday, she wouldn’t have even been considered missing.

Jim comes looking for her later and they just stand around for a while until he says, ‘You want to go somewhere?’

And in his room upstairs at the pub, her legs are wrapped around his hips and there isn’t really that much time for pleasantries or catch-up, but she doesn’t care; for most of it, she’s in her world and he’s in his and it’s fast and she likes the fact that she doesn’t have to pretend with this guy.

Later, she breaks her rule from a couple of nights before and asks where he’s from.

‘Sydney. You?’

She can’t believe it. ‘Same.’

No more questions, she tells herself.

But can’t resist.

‘Where?’

‘Grew up in Waterloo but mainly hang out in the inner west when I’m home. Close to you?’

Closer than she’d care to admit. She doesn’t answer. Rosie doesn’t want to think of James Street and who lives there now.

‘What are the chances?’ he says. ‘You and me from the same place.’

Rosie’s nonna believes in chances and fate. She believes in signs. Rosie doesn’t believe in anything hopeful.

‘What’s your story?’ he asks.

She shrugs. ‘No story.’ Because exchanging misery isn’t her style, and at the moment, even her misery can’t top a baby being swept away.

They talk about Bruno.

‘He’s out on a property off the highway,’ Jim tells her. ‘You know, near the goods train track. The family’s looking after a few other animals. I don’t think he likes goats.’

He glances at her.

‘History of goat trouble in his past?’

She laughs for the second time in days.

The insurance companies arrive the next morning and pitch their tents on the property beside the CWA, along with the Red Cross, RACQ, recovery hubs and state police. The premier visits because she's been up north and the roads there are open. The CWA and St Vinnies people are sorting through the donations that have arrived from the surrounding towns and Min is in charge of feeding whoever turns up. Rosie gets delegated to chopping the onions for the sausage sizzle. It all seems productive and warm-hearted, but beneath the surface it's anything but. Some have it in for the cops and the mayor because the evacuation plans came too late. Others complain they were stranded for more than two days without food drops and blame the SES. One woman comes up and gets in Min's face.

'Your husband's useless!'

'You were told to evacuate,' Min says, calmly. 'And you were told to have a flood plan.' Rosie's discovered that Min's husband is the pot-bellied chief of the SES so Min's pretty particular about how much criticism he gets.

Rosie keeps to herself. She doesn't belong to these people, so the anger and grief isn't hers to own. It stops people talking to her. Confiding. Crying. She sees Jim once that day. Maybe because it's hard to avoid someone you're looking for. He knows how to charm the old CWA women; one hands him a plate of food that he wolfs down. And then he's gone again.

The Red Cross starts working out temporary accommodation and Rosie has to tell Miss Fricker that she'll be staying at the nursing home wing of the hospital from tomorrow onwards.

'That's what you think,' Miss Fricker mutters.

'Well you can't stay here and you can't go back to your place until the clean-up's over.'

'My nephews are behind this, aren't they. Them and those wives of theirs.'

'They have nothing to do with this, Joy.'

Miss Fricker mutters something under her breath.

'Do you want me to set your hair?' Rosie asks. 'They've switched the water back on.'

'What would you know about setting hair?'

'I'm only offering once so it's a yes or a no.'

Rosie had spied a set of curlers and styling stuff in the St Vinnies donations and ends up setting the hair of at least half a dozen pensioners in the CWA laundry.

Even Min wants a wash and hairdry. Rosie combs the woman's hair over and over again, because it's what she used to do for her mum before the chemo got to it.

'Are you staying?' Min asks, eyeing her through the mirror.

'No. So if you know anyone heading south...'

'Have you got anyone down there?'

'I've got a house,' Rosie says, briskly.

Min is still studying her. 'What are you going to do with your life, Rosie? Start thinking of that now or you'll waste good opportunities.'

'Do you like your job?' Rosie asks.

Min nods. 'It means I know every baby and kid in this town.'

Rosie's eyes meet hers in the mirror. Thinks of that lost baby.

'Did you deliver...'

'Yes, I did.'

Rosie sees a glimpse of tears, but before she can say anything else, Min stands up, already composed.

‘There’s something about getting your hair done that makes you feel half decent, doll.’

She’s laying on top of Jim and he pushes her hair off her face. They’re all sweaty skin on skin. She can feel the trickle of sweat between her breasts. Feels his tongue there. She sits up, straddling him, studying his strange face. Not good looking but behind the beard there’s a kind face. Sad crazy eyes.

‘Where are you off to next?’ he asks.

She shrugs. Hopes he won’t ask her to tag along, because right now she’d say yes and there’s something about this guy that would break her if he ends up being a disappointment.

‘You?’

He shrugs. ‘Can’t go home yet.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m on a good behaviour bond so I can’t leave the state for another eighteen months.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Drugs.’

‘Dealing?’

He shakes his head. ‘Possession.’ She feels his stare. ‘Min says you keep to yourself.’

She lays back down beside him, unimpressed. ‘I don’t like people and I don’t appreciate being spoken about.’

His tongue is at work again. Apart from his annoying habit of talking while she’s having an orgasm, he’s pretty generous in the sex department. Makes it last, unlike Roger next door.

‘What’s your favourite thing to do, Rosie?’ he asks when they’re still awake in the early hours of the morning watching the shadows playing on the wall.

‘Going on road trips. With the right person, that is. Can’t stand getting stuck with someone who talks about nothing. Or one who doesn’t talk at all. The best is when you’re with someone who’s comfortable with silence, but doesn’t make you feel lonely.’

‘You feel lonely sometimes?’

Always, she wants to say. Worse is when she feels lonely in the company of others. The ache of it makes her feel weary. Like she isn’t nineteen. More like a hundred. SES Jesus must see something in her eye, because he leans over her, a hand on her cheek.

‘The trick is don’t give into it, mate.’

‘It’s a trick, is it?’ she asks.

There’s nothing held back about him. No cruel games. The yearning in his eyes makes her want to look away, but regardless of the fact that he never shuts up, she feels less alone when she hears his voice so she asks for more.

‘My mum... she was always a bit crazy,’ he says. ‘The type to turn up to my primary school off her nut, you know. I was a bit like that. The Ritalin kid. And then one day when I’m ten she goes to Woollies to buy bread and milk and doesn’t come back.’

‘Ever.’

He shakes his head.

‘It got to me a couple of years ago when my grandpop died and I had to get out of our flat because it was housing commission and someone else was waiting in line for it. And I realised I didn’t have a home so I disappeared for about a year. My friends

aren't the type to let go, which is a good thing, so I ended up back in Sydney, couch surfing. A couple of months ago, I'm living with my best mate's family and she convinces me to track down my mum.'

'Your best mate's a girl?'

'Italian like you.'

Rosie feels herself bristling. 'Did you pick me up because you've got a thing for your best friend?'

'No, I picked you up because you were the hottest girl in the pub and I wanted to have sex with you.'

'Using a very unoriginal line.'

'Can I get back to my story?' he says.

'Go on.'

'Anyway, her boyfriend and I are looking online for a car and we come across some guy who's fixed up a Monaro. You know what a Monaro is?'

'Course I do.'

'Course you do.'

'So where's your Monaro?'

'Mate, let me finish the story. We get to this guy's garage and he takes one look at me and that's it. He has a feeling in his bones. I was meant to own this car. And the more he says it, the more I believe it because he doesn't seem like a fake. But my mate, Will, is cautious. Needs to check it out. Rings his brothers who are car experts. That sort of thing. All the while, this guy is staring at me. 'Why do you want this car?' he asks, which I thought was a strange question, but I tell him the truth. 'Because I'm looking for family.' And he just smiles at me. 'Buy the car and you'll find your family.'

'That's pretty freaky.'

'He had an accent. Even more freakier.'

'Did you find your mum?'

He nods. 'In Lismore.' His voice softens. Rosie likes a guy whose voice softens at the mention of his mother. 'You know how they say people can't turn their lives around? Well my mother did. Hasn't touched drugs or alcohol in eleven years. Married a born-again Christian. Bawled her eyes out when she saw me. Said she loved me, but made me promise to stay away. She's got a ten-year-old boy and eight-year-old twin girls and she hadn't told them about me.'

He turns to her, a flash of vulnerability in his eyes. 'But she did give me the name of my father. Thinks he lives in Bundaberg. So I took off and ended up in this vicinity. Problem is that last week my car got stolen just outside town at a servo while I was in the dunny.'

'You lost a Monaro?'

'No, it was stolen,' he laughed. 'It's how I met Kev. He was filling up his tank and I hitched a ride into town with him. By that stage it was raining hard up north and I knew I was stuck here for a while and that's how I ended up volunteering for emergency services.'

'When are you leaving?' she asks.

'When I can get myself a cheap car.'

Rosie is worried for him. Doesn't know him from a bar of soap, but knows this guy's heading for disappointment.

'Just say... just say your father doesn't want to be found?' she asks.

Jim thinks about it for a moment. 'The man's got the right to know he has a son. Anyway, I'm one of those crossing-that-bridge-when-I-come-to-it people.'

He leans on his elbow looking down at her, a ghost of a smile on his face.

'You listen too much for someone who doesn't like people.'

‘You talk too much for someone who’s just interested in sex.’

By the end of the week, the old Simpson Road is re-opened. Rosie takes Bruno back to Miss Fricker’s place by the gully to check out the damage. The chooks and ducks, and a couple of kittens that had taken refuge in the shed, are all dead and Rosie finds herself gagging. But the goat comes back. Peeks its head through the door to irritate Bruno.

The backbreaking part of the clean-up is the downstairs area of the house, covered in silt. She works the next couple of days hosing down and scrubbing every wall. The mud has crept into every crevice, but she keeps at it. She knows the drill because she’s heard it over and over again this week. Anything made of plastic or wood gets chucked. Disinfect everything. Watch out for snakes. In the kitchen and dining room she pulls up the lino and carpet and drags it out back where the roses are gone and the spotted gum tree has cracked in two and smashed the fence and the hen house. Working this hard reminds Rosie of being with her parents when she was a kid. Of stripping paint and trawling junkyards with her dad for anything of worth. She remembers the derelict building on Lilyfield Road where they found the old floorboards that ended up on the lounge room floor in James Street. Suddenly she’s crying. Even after five years without her mother and a year without her dad, the thought of never seeing them again robs her of breath. She’s relieved to be on her own because here she can scream with rage, with grief, until her throat feels shredded.

And the only thing that gets her through the depression of her days is the thought of lying next to SES Jesus, listening to the rumble of his voice as she tries to sleep. One night he cries and she doesn’t know whether it’s because of the bodies they found in a paddock two ks out of town, or because his car got him as far as a town that’s soaked with despair. She holds him in her arms and feels the shudders.

‘Shh, it’s okay. It’s okay.’

He clings to her and being this needed feels better than sex. It’s when Rosie knows she has to leave this place. Because she could easily love this guy. It’s what Rosie does best. She loves broken people who damage her in return.

‘I just want to warn you that I’m leaving any day now. Min’s helping me find someone who’s heading south.’

It’s the right thing to say to someone whose mum went to Woollies and didn’t come back.

It’s only a couple of days later when Min lets Rosie know about one of the SES volunteers from Newcastle who’s heading home. Two hours from Sydney.

‘Come by the CWA and I’ll pack you a lunch, doll,’ Min says.

Rosie and Bruno track Jim down on the property he’s been helping out on, by the creek. Couple of the younger kids have taken it upon themselves to look after the domestic animals that haven’t been claimed. Jim’s helping them take an inventory, labelling cages and jotting things down. He lets a galah nip at his finger, right opposite a Persian cat that eyes the bird with a disdain and promise of malevolence.

‘What are you writing?’ she asks.

‘Just where we found them and if they have a name on a collar. I’ll put the details up on the noticeboard in the pub.’

He catches her eye. ‘You’re leaving.’ Not a question.

She nods. ‘Can you make sure Miss Fricker gets home sooner rather than later?’

‘Am I breaking her out of the nursing home?’ he asks, mischief in his eyes.

‘She’d like that.’

He takes her hand, linking it with his. 'I'll give you my number,' he says.

She shrugs. 'I don't have a mobile.'

'Take it anyway.' He writes on her palm with the marker. She loves the feel of his knuckles against her palm as he writes, like the sinew of his body against her when they have sex. Rosie feels as if every part of her is stamped by the twists of this guy's bony strangeness.

'First chance you get, copy this down on a piece of paper,' he says.

She knows there'll never be a reason to ring this number. She's not a hello, let's catch up type of girl. And then his mouth is on hers and a part of her feels desolate. Because maybe deep down she thought SES Jesus was one of nonna's signs after all. Except they're both travelling in opposite directions and she can't think of anything powerful enough to place them on the same path.

She goes back to the nursing home to tell Miss Fricker she's leaving. Wordlessly takes the old woman to the toilet, cleans her up, helps her back to where she was sulking by the window. When she pins the Mary MacKillop cross on Joy's collar, she feels something press against the palm of her hand. A whole lot of hundred-dollar bills rolled up. Rosie tries to return it but the old woman's hand is a fist

'Take it. You've wiped my arse and bought me beer. You deserve it.'

Rosie thinks that 'You've wiped my arse and bought me beer' would make a great title to a country and western song.

'Have you seen the house?' Joy asks.

'Been there all week. You'll be ready to go home soon.'

'How are my roses?'

'Dead. Everything outside was wiped out except for the goat.'

'Is the house still standing? Because that's all that counts.'

Rosie nods, goes to walk away but stops herself.

'My father spent ten years of his life building a house,' she tells Miss Fricker. 'He wasn't a builder, just one of those guys who knew what he was doing. Anyone who walked past it would say, 'That's the house Seb Gennaro's building for his family.' But my mum got sick and never got to see it finished and within a year he got remarried. Then he died. And now *she* thinks it's hers. Won't move out. The house my dad built for me and my mum.'

She walks away because oversharing isn't her thing.

'Rosie.' It's the first time Miss Fricker has ever used her name.

Rosie turns back one more time.

'Keep away from good-for-nothings. It's what's kept me alive all these years.'

She walks past the cenotaph and up to the main street where everyone's hard at work. Maeve is dumping stuff into a skip bin. Next door, Rockmans' is all but ruined. If it's not water, it's mud, but it doesn't stop them working. She envies these people. Some have lost everything and for the life of her, she can't get that baby being swept away out of her head. Or those who are uninsured because living so close to a river means the insurance companies won't touch them for less than a fortune. But they belong to something bigger than Rosie's had for a while and as depressed as they all seem, the words, 'Do you want a cuppa?' seems to change everything for a moment. Rosie hasn't belonged to anything for longer than she can remember. Her fault. Their fault, but whoever's fault it is, the bleakness of it all seems consuming. She hears deluge spoken about over again, but deluge can't be that bad. It has substance. Rosie wants deluge. She wants to watch her whole life float down the river so she can do what these people are doing now. Go retrieve it. Put their lives back together again.

She sees her ride pull up outside the pub just as it begins to rain. Opens her hand, studies the name. James Hailler. The phone number's already beginning to smudge like she knew it would. She puts her hands into her pocket. Gets into the truck.

'What about this raaaaain,' a nasal ZZ Top from Newcastle says as if he's the first to notice the weather in weeks. Rosie knows she's going to be a passenger to someone who doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

'You got everything?' he asks.

She thinks for a moment.

And asks for a pen and paper

