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FRANCESCA LEANED FORWARD and peered into the loft's gloom. She traced the initials carved into the wall with her fingers.

'CW, FW,' she whispered.

Carli and Fran. Fran and Carli. Each a carbon copy of the other. Twin sisters.

Fran and Carli had found the loft on the first day in their new home only three weeks before. It was their secret space. Somewhere they could whine about the disaster of moving to the end of the world.

Fran had found the space first. She had noticed a sliding door above her built-in wardrobe. She slid the door back to reveal a dark space inside. At first she had thought it was just a cupboard. Once inside, she'd found a partition at one end that she could squeeze through that led to a much larger space.

Since her sister's disappearance just over a week ago, Fran had spent a lot of time in the secret loft. Fran traced Carli's initials again.

'Fran, can you come down here please?' Fran heard her father call.

Fran moved quickly to the corner of the dark enclosure and crawled out onto her high bed.

'Coming.' By the time she reached the family living room, she was short of breath.

'We've had some news,' he said.

Her father was standing stiffly at the window and her mother was packing a small suitcase. Fran's heart raced as her mind crashed through the possibilities of news.

'Is it ...' Fran chewed at her thumb nail.

'The police received a phone call from Langford,' said her father.

'Langford. Langford? But that's nowhere near home ... our old home,' said Fran.

'We just assumed she would go back there. In fact it's 500 kays in the opposite direction. Which makes

me think...' Her father sat down heavily on a footstool.

'A conductor at the local train station thought he recognised Carli from The Vanishings article in last weekend's newspaper,' said her mother, who was carefully pairing socks and placing them neatly into the suitcase.

'So, is it Carli? Is she coming home?'

'We can't say for sure that it is her, darling,' said her mother. 'But we need to find out.'

'And me?'

'You need to stay here in case there's news. Aunt Mary will be here later this afternoon to look after you. We're leaving in an hour—'

'Aunt Mary! God, Aunt Mary? I'm not a baby. I don't need looking after. Why can't I come with you?'

The silence in the room was finally broken as Mrs Wilson zipped the suitcase and set it upright on its wheels.

'Fran, we know this is difficult. We need you here at home. Someone might ring.'

She means Carli, thought Fran.

'So why can't I stay on my own? Or with the neighbours, the Ashmores?'

'We don't know them well enough. Fran, we have

to be strong. We need to concentrate on getting Carli back. Your father and I feel this is the best arrangement.'

Fran stared out the living room window. Her eyes followed the dirt road that ran alongside a single rail line, over Ballan Road to the old disused railway station beyond.

Sherpa, the family's five-year-old golden retriever, poked his nose around the door and trotted over to Fran.

'Talk to her friends, Franny —'

'Her friends are back home. Our real home. The only person she's made friends with...'

Was Mel. Mel Egmont. Mel's parents owned the only hotel in town. She'd met Carli and Fran at the local milk bar on their second day in Batesford. They'd hung out at the local pool a few times, and Carli and Mel had hit it off really well.

Then Mel had run away.

And two days later, so had Carli.

The police were still checking whether there was a connection between the disappearances of the two girls.

'Ring Carli's friends. Friends of friends. Anyone you can think of who could help,' insisted her mother.

'Mum, I have—'

'Sweetie, I know. But do it again. And again if you

have to. You can be doing as much back here as we can in Langford.'

'You're not really sure that was Carli at the station, are you?' Fran asked. 'Dad?'

'No,' said her father slowly. 'But it's the first real lead we've had in a week.'

'She hated this place,' said Fran. 'So do I. We should never have come here—'

Fran ran out, banging the front door behind her.

As Fran followed the dirt road that ran parallel to the single train track, Sherpa skittered up behind her. Fran ruffled his coat.

'Good boy,' she whispered.

Scraps of conversation and laughter kept coming back to her.

Carli dressed as a scarecrow at Halloween.

The trick they played on their teacher on the last day of school.

They'd shared everything. Their lunches. Their friends. Their secrets.

The occasional annoyance of being a twin. Anyone could see that they were worlds apart, but strangers looked at them and saw one person.

The last fight they'd had... Fran shuddered.

Fran had found Carli in her room, looking for a shirt.

‘Get out of my room!’ Fran had yelled.

She’d been angry with her boyfriend Lochie who’d pulled out of a party because he had a better offer.

‘I was just looking for my white shirt—’

‘Yeah, well why don’t you ask first?’

Carli had looked at Fran in her tired, tragic way.

‘Anyway, why do you want a shirt? It’s not like you’re going anywhere.’

‘What’s wrong, Fran?’ asked Carli. ‘Is it Lochie? He’s such a jerk. Tell me. Tell me everything.’

‘Get a life, Carli,’ Fran had muttered, then slammed the door.

Fran had sat on her bed, pulling at the corner of her doona angrily. She would have apologised to Carli but her phone had beeped. It was another text from Lochie asking if she’d got his message.

Fran had spent the next 15 minutes composing a withering reply. By the time she’d finished, she’d forgotten about Carli.

But Carli hadn’t forgotten their fight. She hadn’t spoken to Fran for days afterwards. There was a distance between them that was new.

Get a life, Carli.

As the fight played a continuous loop in her mind, Fran tried to convince herself she had nothing to do with her sister’s disappearance.

## 2.

FRAN CONTINUED ALONG the road until she came to the old bluestone cottage that doubled as a railway station. The real estate agent had mentioned that it was vacant.

From somewhere behind the station she could hear the sound of wood being sawn. Fran turned right and headed for the main entrance to the property. An old man was leaning against a wooden frame, a pile of sawn wood stacked neatly alongside a fence. He mopped his brow, adjusted the cap on his head, then picked up another long branch.

Fran retreated into the shadows of the house, then walked around onto the platform. The pavement stones were stained and broken. Weeds sprouted between the cracks. She stood on the platform and gazed down the track before it disappeared over a small rise in the distance. Despite the warmth of the afternoon, a cold shiver ran through her as she turned to face the station.

Fran walked over to a small, dusty window facing

the platform. Inside was a bank of metal levers. There was a long wooden counter for collecting money and handing over tickets, two red lanterns and tables with files and folders. One wall held a giant map with red lines snaking across it. Cardboard timetables were piled up on the bench to the right of the window.

Fran shivered again then reeled away, the world suddenly spinning around her. Overhead a crow cried out, but Fran was only vaguely aware of its plaintive call as her world turned dark.

The first thing she noticed when she finally opened her eyes was that she was lying on the platform. The second thing was Sherpa's doggy breath as he licked her cheek.

'Urrgh. Disgusting,' she muttered as she sat up slowly, still feeling dizzy and disoriented. As she hauled herself up on a nearby green bench seat she heard a door slam from inside the bluestone building.

From the trees nearby, some crows flew into the air, squawking and screeching. Inside the cottage a woman shouted, her cries intertwining with the raucous crows that swooped overhead. Fran pressed her ear to the window to make sense of the words. Another door banged, this time from upstairs. Fran

waited for someone to reply but the woman's anger was met with silence.

For ten long minutes Fran held still, listening for the sound of voices. There had been something unearthly about the woman's voice, but now all was silent again. The old cottage felt suddenly empty. Perhaps whoever had been inside had simply left the house.

Finally Fran got to her feet, leaning against the wall to steady herself. She slowly made her way home with a subdued Sherpa by her side. Had she dreamt the one-sided argument?

An anxious Aunt Mary met her at the front gate.

'Darling Francesca,' she said, grabbing Fran in a hug. 'Look at you. Just look how much you've grown. And you look just like your...' Aunt Mary's mouth clamped shut, but not before Fran caught an unsettling waft of mint and alcohol. 'Your parents have left. They said to give you their love. You've been gone for so long, I was getting worried.'

'Hi, Aunt Mary. I couldn't find Sherpa,' Fran lied, untangling herself from her aunt's clutches.

'Well, that's all right, but I was getting a little worried. Now I've baked a shepherd's pie for dinner. How about that?'

'Sounds great.'

Aunt Mary was her father's oldest sister and, to

Fran's eyes, a little odd. Aunt Mary had a reputation in the family for being vague and having big sleeps in the afternoon. She meant well, but, well, Fran could really do without having Aunt Mary around.

'Come inside then. What about a game of Scrabble after dinner?'

Aunt Mary didn't mention Carli.

But the shadow of her stayed with them all evening.