

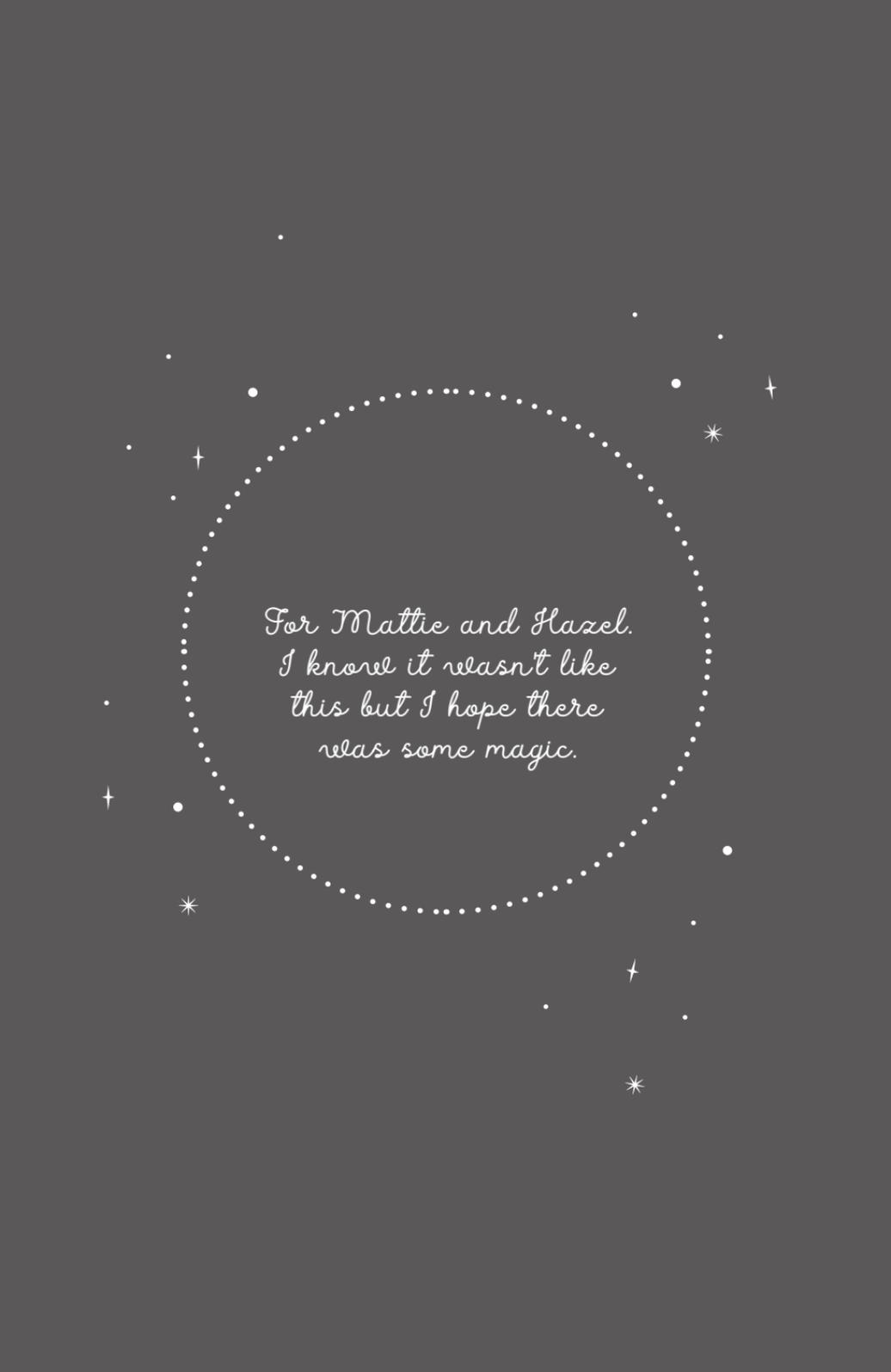


The Secret Library
of HUMMINGBIRD
HOUSE *by* JULIANNE
NEGRI



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*For Mattie and Hazel.
I know it wasn't like
this but I hope there
was some magic.*



.....
Monday
.....



Chapter 1

LIBRARY

I'm in the library. I should be happy. Libraries are great! Free books! Shelves of them to explore! Many good places to hide from Taylor Dellabella. So yeah – I *should* love the library. But the truth is that Freedom Valley Primary School library is one of the most stressful places on the planet apart from sitting next to Taylor Dellabella on the bus to a school camp where you are also sharing her cabin.

The library stresses me out because it is part of Freedom Valley Primary School. Our principal, The Enforcer (you're right, that's not her real name. Her real name is Ms Anthrope), just loves rules. The Enforcer can

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even make rules about rules – in fact, RULE NUMBER ONE is DO NOT BREAK RULES. So it goes without saying that the library has a million rules. Not just the usual library rules. You probably know them:

- Do not return books late.
- Do not damage books in any way, shape or form.
- Do not bring drinks into the library.
- Do not scribble in books – even if you are really good at drawing and use your best textas.
- Do not eat in the library – and that includes cough lozenges even when you have a bad cough and the only way to be silent in silent reading and not have a coughing fit is to suck on a cough lolly.

Some of these rules I have learned the hard way.

The Freedom Valley Primary School library also has some *specific* rules:

- Do not highlight words on a page to make rude messages.
- Do not cut out pictures from a book no matter how much you love them and even if they are pictures of Sailor Moon, your favourite character in the whole universe and negaverse.
- Do not stand on a pile of books to reach the high shelf.

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- Do not pick your nose and wipe your booger on the page – a new rule made last year when Melody McMillan arrived at the school.
- Do not pick your nose and wipe it on the carpet ... or the chair ... or the table ... or the shelf ... or the whiteboard – a rule that quickly followed.
- Do not lick books – still looking at you, Melody McMillan.
- Do not sniff books – which is a shame because I secretly love smelling books. This rule can still be broken on the sly, or to use a vocabulary word from last month, *surreptitiously*.
- Do not read books in the bath.
- Do not read books up a tree.
- Do not let your dog read a book, even if you think she will like it.
- Do not sing in the library – not even the *Sailor Moon* theme song even when it is your most favourite song in the whole universe and negaverse and not even Happy Birthday even when it is your best friend's birthday.

Some of these rules I have learned the hard way.

I'm looking at the list of rules on the wall. Next to it is

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a long list of vocabulary words that Ms Guide, our new librarian, has put there. Because Ms Guide loves lists. And words. And all librarians love rules. So I bet the list of rules is her absolute favourite list of all time.

I'm here at recess because Ms Guide insisted that I be the Library Helper today. It's making me feel a bit on edge, or to use the vocabulary word at the top of the list, *apprehensive*. Ms Guide has only been at Freedom Valley Primary School for a term, but anyone who chooses to work for The Enforcer is probably here to help her to feast on our souls.

'Ah, Hattie. Here you are!' says Ms Guide.

I jump. I open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out.

Ms Guide has straight grey hair that falls to each side of her face like curtains. She always dresses in black, which seems to highlight her very large, intense dark eyes that are staring right at me. 'What's wrong, Hattie? Cat got your tongue?'

I nod and can't help but relax a bit. It's a saying my Nan uses.

'I'm so pleased you could come and help. Let's start with moving these. I hear you are good at heavy lifting.'

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This is true. I am. She shows me a pile of books on her desk. I load them up in my arms.

‘Just come this way,’ she says, and starts walking towards the back of the room. I peer out from behind the pile of books in front of my face. *Oh my god, I think she’s taking me into a cupboard.*

‘Come in. I won’t bite.’

Does that mean she could bite me but won’t? Note to self: must check Ms Guide has a reflection and is not actually a vampire.

She unlocks a door and I follow her with some, to use a vocabulary word from last month, *trepidation*.

But it’s not a cupboard. It’s a room.

It’s small and cosy, lit by two green glowing desk lamps on a large wooden table where piles and piles of old books are stacked next to various brushes, glues and tapes.

‘What are all these books?’ I ask.

‘Oh, they are damaged or discarded. I repair them. This is my book binding tape. And I have special glues and even string to sew some pages.’

I place the books I am carrying in a pile on the floor.

‘I hate throwing things away,’ she says. ‘Just because

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something is broken or old it doesn't mean you just forget it. Things can so often be fixed.'

Lying open on the desk are several books about the moon. I gasp. The moon is my special interest subject. I love how the moon spins but always shows us the same face. Bright and calm.

'Have a look at this, Hattie.' Behind me is a large glass cabinet. Inside is a scale model of the earth, sun and moon, moving and spinning before my eyes. 'It's called an orrery. Do you like it? Here is the moon orbiting earth and the earth orbiting the sun. It's accurate to where they are right now. Today. This minute. This second.'

I watch and I am, to use a vocabulary word, *mesmerised*.

'Did you know it's a special moon this week?' Ms Guide moves closer to the model and points. 'It's a super moon because the moon is at perigee, which means closest to the earth. This is the second full moon we've had in April, so it's a blue moon. And it's a blood moon because on Thursday night, there will be an eclipse – the moon, the earth and the sun will all align, turning the moon red. A triple moon event like this only happens say, twice in a lifetime.'

I watch the model turn. Of course, I already know

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about the upcoming special moon. I'm thinking this could be it. You see, Usagi was just a normal, clumsy, food-loving schoolgirl like me until a talking cat revealed that she was really Sailor Moon, Champion of Justice. Then she was joined by a group of schoolgirls who all turned out to be special Sailor Guardians. *Sailor Moon* is my favourite show in all time and space. Triple moon power? Surely if there is going to be magic, this will be the week.

My hand goes to my *Sailor Moon* necklace which Nan gave me for Christmas. Wearing it is breaking The Enforcer's RULE NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR so I quickly tuck it under my jumper and hope Ms Guide didn't see.

'Here, Hattie. It's your turn to have *The Golden Astrolabe* by Patty Malouf.'

I turn and look at the book she is holding out to me and I can't help but do a double fist pump and dance on the spot. I have been waiting for months to get my hands on this book. All the grade five-sixers are crazy about it.

'I thought our library didn't have any copies left? After the Great Book Tearing Incident of last year?'

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It really was amazing just how quickly small hands could tear a book into a pile of confetti.

‘Yes, I heard about that,’ says Ms Guide. ‘But I have a new one. That’s why I asked you to be monitor today. To avoid any book fights. Make sure you put it straight in your school bag before any of the other students see.’

I hug it to my chest and even manage to lower my head and sniff in the goodness, hoping Ms Guide hasn’t noticed. The bell rings. As I rush to leave, I hear Ms Guide humming. I guess technically she isn’t singing in the library? Is she?



WEEK-ABOUT

‘Are you okay, Hattie? You look kind of stressed,’ Patrick says.

‘I’m waiting for my mum,’ I answer. ‘Why isn’t she here yet?’

‘The bell only just went,’ says Patrick reassuringly. ‘Do you want me to distract you with my latest tap routine?’

I don’t answer but I can hear that Patrick has taken my silence for a yes. I stand on tiptoe to see over the crowd of students and parents. For some other kid, spotting their mum would be easy peasy lemon squeezy. But for me it’s different. I haven’t seen my mum for a whole week. Yep. Seven whole days and seven whole nights. Not since last

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Monday morning, when she dropped me off for school and kissed me goodbye and gave me a really, really, really, really (picture me here squashed in her arms and gasping for air!) extra-long hug. Or maybe it was the other way around – me giving her a really, really, really extra-long hug. I had to flutter my tongue in my mouth and say ‘tra la la la la’ very fast and quietly to myself so that I didn’t cry.

All around me I see other kids getting picked up in a blur, as though time has been sped up. Patrick’s mum is on the other side of the hall. She always wears a big colourful headscarf and in fact I would use a special vocabulary word from last week’s list and say that she is *statuesque*. There are heaps of kids in his family – all boys with black frizzy hair. She makes a big ‘come on’ gesture with her arm and they all flock together like a bunch of birds. ‘See ya tomorrow, Hattie!’ Patrick calls as he high kicks across the hall and is swooped up into the whirl of it all. As I wave back, I can’t help thinking how easy it looks to be in a big family.

I guess you are wondering why I haven’t seen my Mum for a whole week. Maybe you think I’ve been on school camp or sailing around the Bahamas with friends? Or

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on a secret mission to find the Loch Ness monster? Or in Antarctica counting penguin chicks ... or competing in the world stone skipping championship? (It's a real thing okay? Look it up!) I wish. But it's nothing like that.

You see, I do this thing called week-about. That's what we call it – we as in me, Mum, Dad and my little sister, Ivy. Week-about. Because one week I'm at Dad's house and the next week I'm at Mum's house. And if you think that sounds okay, then you haven't really thought it through.

All you are thinking about is the double up of things – two houses, two bedrooms, two beds, two computers, two hairbrushes, two wardrobes, two bookshelves, two trampolines, two TVs, two novelty night lights – two of everything! But the fact is, all that stuff doesn't mean anything. I've only been doing it for a few months and I already know that.

And then there is the rule. The one rule to rule them all. Yes, really. The one rule of week-about is that you can't see the other parent in the other parent's week. Got it? Mum and Dad say this will help us adjust. But I think it is to help *them* adjust. Because for me, it just makes it worse. But I don't know how to tell them that. So I will

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tell you. The cold hard fact about doing week-about is this: I'm always missing someone.

In Dad's week I'm missing Mum and in Mum's week I'm missing Dad. I never miss my sister Ivy because she is always with me. I wouldn't mind missing Ivy. Ivy can be a pain in the neck. But then she's only five years old. And the youngest. So, yeah. You know what that means. I'm always being asked to look after her. And she always gets away with everything.

Mum calls her week 'my week' and Dad calls his week 'my week'. It never seems to be *my* week. Hattie's week. My week would be if we could all be together like we used to, before the Big Split.

But this isn't my week. It's Mum's week. I scan the room. I see lots of blond heads and black heads and brown heads and I realise part of the problem is I don't really know what I'm looking for. I mean, I'm looking for my mum and you would think that is pretty easy, right? Because you always know your mum and recognise her because she is just, you know, your mum. But Mum is an artist and changes how she looks all the time and have I mentioned that I haven't seen her for an entire week? Seven whole days and seven whole nights? Mum

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changes her hair colour like other people change their undies. Her hair could be green or purple or blue ... or still pink like it was last Friday. Her hair could be long or short because sometimes she thinks that it's fun to wear a wig. I know. Weird. And yes, a bit creepy (especially if she slides it off her head in front of you. Yikes!).

I'm freaking out because I'm in a hall full of kids and there is a waft of forgotten fruit and a feeling in the pit of my stomach and I don't even know if it is anatomically correct to say a stomach has a pit – but if it does have a pit, then the pit of my stomach is deep and dark and there is lava at the bottom of it that's hot and bubbly and the lava steam is rising in my throat and bringing with it this feeling that I don't even have a name for but it's like being hungry and being scared. It's empty, empty, empty and lost and then it's tight and stings like when Taylor Dellabella does a Chinese burn on my arm and it's hot, but not in a cuddly hot water bottle way like when Nan gives you a hug – it is a burning, prickly heat. Like when Taylor Dellabella sticks thistles down my jumper.

I know I shouldn't worry so much. Ivy doesn't seem to worry about any of it. She's still in kindergarten and it's just all rainbows and finger-paints for her.

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Peggy tells me that I have to think this stuff through. Peggy's my psychologist. Yep. I have a psychologist. Don't judge me. Peggy tells me to break things down. Identify the worry. To breathe. To be realistic about 'my concerns' and to tackle them one at a time rather than as one big overwhelming bubbling-lava-pit-of-your-stomach worry. So I will try to do that. I will break it down into smaller worries.

Here goes:

It's been a week and for all I know Mum has had an accident and can't pick me up because she tripped over while painting and has been impaled on a paint brush.

It's been a week and for all I know Mum has been abducted by aliens and is now five billion light years away in another galaxy and will never be able to pick me up from school.

It's been a whole week and for all I know Mum was running out the door but tripped on the rollerskates I know I left in the hallway last Monday and she has hit her head and now she can't remember who she is let alone who I am and she tried to call out but she's lost her voice so no one is going to help her and no one is going to pick me up and I'll be standing here and everyone will

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be gone and the lights will go out and the moon will be in the sky and I'll be out in the playground on my own with only floating muesli bar packets for company and the half-eaten sloppy yoghurt that smells like baby vomit and the swings will be swinging creepily on their own. And who knows what will happen to Ivy? I can see all that happening. Peggy calls it catastrophising. I call it life.

Suddenly Taylor Dellabella is right in front of me, waving in my face. 'Bon voyage, Hattie,' she says.

'What?' I ask.

'It's French,' she answers. 'But you wouldn't know that. It's what you say to someone going on holidays.'

'Umm ... but I'm not going on holidays, Taylor,' I tell her.

'Well, you look like you are going on holidays. For like, a year. You've got enough stuff.'

I look around me. I do have a lot of stuff. That's another thing about week-about. Sure, you have two houses, two bedrooms, two beds, two novelty night lights, etc. but a lot of things you only have one of and you have to take those many 'one-of' things from house to house. My school bag is stuffed full with all the 'one-of' things: my reader; my pencil case with my eraser

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collection and special Sharpies of every colour; and my Sailor Moon alarm clock, which is my favourite way to wake up because it plays the theme music from *Sailor Moon* and then says, 'Good Morning! Good Morning!' over and over in a robotic but bright and happy voice. (Although Mum doesn't agree so I keep it under my pillow where it ticks into my dreams like a heartbeat.)

I have a bag for clothes containing another pair of shoes so I'm not in runners all week, my netball uniform and my rain parka because it's autumn and you never know what the weather will be like, which is why I also have my gumboots in there. And in the *third* bag is the stripy blanket that Nan made for me when I was a baby and Pung, my teddy bear. I look down at my bag and hope Pung's ear isn't sticking out because if Taylor Dellabella sees I have him then everyone in the whole school will know I still have a teddy bear at almost 11 years old and that will be social death for me. And now I have my extra-special library book, *The Golden Astrolabe*, which I must not lose or I will be sent to our evil principal, The Enforcer. I had to shove it into the bag with Pung because it didn't fit in my school bag. I hope Taylor doesn't see it. She was the first person in the

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school to read it and she loves to remind you of that by accidentally-on-purpose slipping spoilers.

Oh, and I have my guitar. It is in a special guitar case with a pocket and in the pocket is my capo and guitar tuner and the guitar strap Mum made for me, which is rhinestone bedazzled to say HATTIE in a glittery, sparkly, starry way. Hmm. Looking around me, I can't help but worry that I've forgotten something. I shuffle in front of the teddy bear bag so Taylor can't see it.

'Where's your mum, Hattie?' Taylor asks. 'Hasn't she turned up? She's probably forgotten you. Do you want me to get a teacher?'

I'm not sure if Taylor is being nice or not. Sometimes it seems like she's being nice and then things come out a bit differently than I expect.

The Enforcer. I sense her before I see her. It's the cold chill that surrounds her like perfume.

'Oh look! There's Ms Anthrope. I'll go and get her for you,' Taylor says like she is doing me the biggest favour anyone has ever done for anyone in the history of the whole world since life began with a single cell microbe in a puddle. She waltzes away in The Enforcer's direction – well, when I say waltz, I don't mean in the one-two-

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three-one-two-three ballroom dancing way. I just mean she seems to not have a care in the world and her ponytail sways as she bounces. I see her waving at The Enforcer and dragging her mum, Tara, with her.

Taylor's mum has a superpower. She is always in her active wear but never looks sweaty. When I exercise, I go really red in the face. Not normal pink-cheeks red in the face. I mean bright red. In the whole face. Not just the cheeks. Every last millimetre of my face. My forehead. Nose. Chin. Ears. Everything. When I play netball, Taylor calls me the tomato can. And beetroot face. And cherry cheeks. And watermelon head. Sometimes red dot special.

I see Tara talking to The Enforcer and looking back at me. I'm super careful not to even have the slightest risk of locking eyes with The Enforcer. Instead I look at her crazy wild frizzy hair and her cheekbones that poke out like two knife blades because she is so thin. Her pale skin is almost see-through (or if I was going to use another of last week's vocabulary words I could say *transparent*) and you can make out each bone in her body. She never smiles and seems to have an aura of evil around her just like all the best worst baddies and villains. Just like

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Queen Beryl in *Sailor Moon*. I can feel her eyeballs boring into me.

The Enforcer starts to glide towards me. I swear her legs don't move. My mouth is now so dry it's as if my tongue is made of Velcro. My heart is racing. Then my arms start to tingle. Maybe I will faint. I do the only thing I can think of that might help: the superman pose. I lie down on the floor on my stomach and lift my head and my legs and shoot my arms out in front of me and focus on stretching.

I can feel The Enforcer getting closer and then ... from the floor I see a pair of silver platform shoes and when I look up, Mum is there! She hasn't changed her hair colour after all. It's faded pink and in pigtails. Mum looks a bit pale, but she smells of sandalwood and paint and she is just my mum and of course I would always know her. She crouches down next to me.

'Whatya doing, Hattie?' she asks.

'Superman pose. Peggy taught me.' I tell her.

'Right,' she says, and then Mum gets on the floor and tries it.

'It's a body break. Helps break the anxiety circuit,' I explain.

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‘Yeah ... it’s fun,’ she says, lying on the floor and looking at me. ‘But let’s get up now, hey.’ Mum takes my hand and drags me up. ‘Are you okay, Hattie?’

The Enforcer skims past us and out the door.

‘I am now.’ I turn my frown upside down and I flash my best smile at Mum. I never realise how much I’ve missed her until I see her. ‘I was worried I wouldn’t recognise you!’ I say.

Mum laughs. ‘Don’t worry, Hattie. I’ll always recognise you!’

We load up all our bags and walk out of the hall. Mum pretends the bags are all really heavy and does a funny walk. ‘My sisters always said I would end up a bag lady,’ she laughs.

I don’t really get the joke, but I love seeing my Mum laugh. Especially after what has happened. She still cries a lot, so I do my best not to upset her. Unlike Ivy.

We walk out to the tram stop and I see the signpost has been covered in rainbow crochet. ‘Look, Mum! The Brunswick Bomber strikes again!’

‘Who?’

‘The Brunswick Bomber! Haven’t you seen all the bike racks outside the library? They’re covered in crochet too!’

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It was in the paper. It's called yarn bombing – which is why they say there is a secret Brunswick Bomber. Dad thinks it's really cool.'

'Does he just? Hmm. I think it looks a bit messy.'

I know Mum doesn't really think this, but I also know she will never agree with Dad. If he says something is black, then she says it's white and then the arguing starts again. Thinking about Mum and Dad arguing gives me a headache. I grab the tram stop pole, haul myself up and turn upside down. I love flexing my muscles. The yarn is good to grip. All the blood rushes to my head and my hair hangs down loose and I feel much better. Through my brown curls I can see the busy street with beeping cars and streams of people and then up to the sky through the tram wires and electricity wires, which I imagine walking along like it's a tightrope. The street smells of icing sugar and almonds from the Lebanese bakeries and I think I hear my tummy rumbling ... but it's just the rumbling of the tram, coming to a stop.

'Come on, here's the tram. We'd better pick up Ivy,' calls Mum.

I do a flip and the world is right side up again.