

## Imperfect Postcard

Stella snuck out of the house, she was tired of the rowdy Christmas celebrations her family were throwing. Another holiday away from her home in Jindabyne. She wondered how she could spend the next two weeks with her grandparents at their beach house. She climbed the headland quickly and watched the sun slip under the horizon like a postcard. Deciding she should return before dark, Stella made her way back to the house again, but stopped as something caught her eye.

A German Shepherd was chained up with a large red bow around its neck, staring expectantly at the door. The house looked empty and forgotten amongst the bright holiday cabins. Its dull grey walls were home to a clammy looking man that was known to be a loner. Stella had only seen him once whilst being hastily hustled out of the supermarket by her Mum.

“Surely he would not be in a state to take care of a dog?”

Stella thought.

A few days into her holiday, Stella noticed the dog again, chained up and slightly skinnier, its water bowl dry. She approached the house cautiously. The rusty ute was absent, the man was out. Broad pawprints showed the dog had been pacing, it was now curled up, ears pricked. The dog jumped upon seeing Stella, its brown eyes searching her green ones desperately. It licked her hand and strained at its chain, it had not used its energy in days. Stella bit her lip.

“An hour can’t hurt. He won’t know”

She told herself sternly, releasing the dog, who ran laps around the girl in delight licking her face.

“Well, at least mum can’t say I haven’t made any friends this summer! I’m going to call you Tilly!”

Stella laughed, kicking up sand and watching it fall like rain. Tilly caught it, snapping playfully. The two played like old friends, chasing birds and having picnics in the sea cave, where Stella firmly stopped Tilly eating her sandwich.

Reluctantly, Stella trudged back to the grey house with Tilly. Stella emptied her water bottle into Tilly’s bowl and clipped her chain back on. Stella patted Tilly’s dark back.

“I’ll be back tomorrow”

Stella whispered, hearing the ute pull into the driveway as she left.

The next week passed full of happy days with Tilly. Tilly would whine and bark at night, scared that Stella would abandon her, but stopped after a few days with faith that she would return. Stella started feeding Tilly after noticing the food bowl was full of untouched chicken, its green tinge shining maliciously. Tilly was obedient and loyal to Stella, learning the hardest tricks. Stella thought Tilly was the best dog in the world.

Stella woke one night to a distant yelling. She sat bolt upright as a yelp joined the cacophony, straining her ears in the darkness.

“Ruddy DOG! Run off again did you?! NOT SO HAPPY NOW STUPID MUTT!”

He shrieked angrily. A whip crack and a yelp followed. Stella’s mind flooded with fear and her heart leapt into her throat at the sound of shattering glass. Something in the mans voice made her shudder, a voice that was slightly slurred and dangerous, it was a voice that had never cared. An icy silence followed. Stella lay awake, terrifying conclusions springing into her head. She felt helpless as she prayed that Tilly would be okay.

After hours of lying awake, Stella could not take any more. She bolted to the beach. The grey house came into view and the clammy man appeared in the doorway, clutching an empty bottle. There was nothing but a limp chain on the lawn. Tilly had disappeared.

“How dare you let my dog free!”

He bellowed. Stella knew he couldn’t be reasoned with and ran, escaping the empty bottle thrown at her.

Hope seized her as broad footprints in the sand appeared in front of her. Unlike last time, they were blotched with blood and uneven. The headland cave came into view. Tilly was slumped against a rock, her tail wagging feebly. Stella collapsed onto Tilly, hugging her tight and crying with relief.

“You can stay with my grandparents now Tilly, we have done it. We escaped!”

By Charlotte Croker