

Words don't hurt

Entering the classroom, I can tell I'm in for it. I look down at my scuffed shoes as I shuffle to my seat, praying no-one will notice me. The last thing I need is confrontation. The chatter disperses into a wave of silence as Mrs. Brooks turns to me.

"Nice of you to join us Mikayla," she says sarcastically. "Take a seat."

I put down my things and pull out a chair, trying to ignore the whispering. I've learnt from experience that when trying to stay afloat at school, it can be easy to drown in the sea of faces, slip slowly under a wave of rumours – it's best to simply stay quiet and pretend you don't care. Words don't hurt after all. I busy myself with my papers, knowing the question that's coming.

"Alright class, who's done their homework?" Mrs. Brooks checks each name on a list until she reaches mine. I inch forwards, aware of the pressing faces watching me. Twenty-three teenagers, waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Brooks," I quiver, searching for an excuse. "The dog ate my homework." She looks at me suspiciously and shakes her head.

"Do you think I was born yesterday?" she demands. "What's the story?"

I gulp. A million excuses form in my brain, obscuring the truth like a storm covering the sun. My mind flashes to the events of last night, and a terrible churning starts in my stomach. I stand there, looking at the sea of faces, and two faces emerge inside my head – a man and a woman, my mother and my father. I think back to the days when I did my homework, before the fighting, but now even the thought of my dad makes me tremble. I remember how gentle he used to be, dancing with my mum, but now he is as rough as the waves that throw a boat off course. He used to be a hero but alcohol unleashed a monster. Hiding under my pillow last night it started with shouting. I tried to stay in bed but couldn't. Reason seemed to have left him as I walked out in my pyjamas, seeing my mum pinned to the cupboard. It had never been this bad before, only words exchanged like daggers. As I stood there, I knew the worst was coming. He screamed at me to stay out of it, but when I refused, a blinding pain came over me as his fist flew. Screams from mother followed, and when I stood up, my father was gone.

"Mikayla, I asked you a question," Mrs. Brooks' voice cuts through the agonizing flashbacks streaming through my head. "What's the story, this is the third time this week...." I look down at the bruises on my arms and legs and decide not to respond. The truth is buried deep inside me, and that's where it will stay.

"I told you Miss, the dog ate my homework." I don't even have a dog, but words don't hurt.