Somewhat
Serendipitous
An EXT Novella
J H MITCHELL

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By the Creek

Ant
December 2000 - five years old.

'What're you doing?'

The boy looked up, mud smeared across his face, mixing in with his already dark skin and hair. His eyes gleamed up at Ant and when the boy smiled his teeth gleamed whiter than any teeth Ant had seen.

'Playing,' the boy said. 'Wanna play too?'

Wind ruffled Ant's hair, straining against him. Pushing him toward the boy by the stream. He shifted, glancing back over his shoulder.

Ant's fingers twisted in the hem of his shirt. 'My Mum's waiting,' he said.

The boy shrugged, returning to the sticky mess he was creating now that the prospect of a playmate had passed on. Water trickled across the miniature dam he had built. There was a little ship made of leaves stuck on the other side.

Ant shifted again, edging closer to look. Fingers, though slick with mud from dam building, had no trouble manoeuvring a long thick leaf around a small twig. Ant's feet inched forward through the mud, clean white sneakers coming dangerously close to the watery mud the boy was happily playing in.

A rock, dislodged by Ant's curious feet, tumbled down into the stream.

Dark eyes flickered up and Ant stopped, caught in the gaze of the other boy. He wondered how eyes so dark could look so bright. They were a nice colour. Like melted chocolate. The boy smiled and gestured toward a pile of sticks.

'Grab one of those, wouldja?'

Ant's eyes went wide and he nodded quickly. He took careful steps,

not wanting to disturb the boy's creation. When he returned, he crouched down and held out the stick.

With the little ship finished, Ant leaned forward to watch the boy place it in the water. His face lit up in success as it began to float until the water swept it against a rock and it tipped over. He scowled and sat back in the mud with a huff of annoyance, digging little rocks out of the mud and chucking them into the creek.

Ant stood up and went to salvage the little boat. It was almost right, but Ant thought he knew how to fix it.

The boy's dark gaze tracked him as he crouched back down by the edge of the water to fix the little boat. When he was done, he hesitated, eyes flicking up in uncertainty.

But the boy only watched him, eyes bright with curiosity. Ant held it out to him.

'Want to try it?'

The boy grinned, a dimple forming in his left cheek. He nodded. 'You do it,' he said.

Ant placed the boat steadily in the water. They both held their breaths as the water took the boat out of Ant's hands. A leaf came loose, sending the boat into a spiral, and Ant dropped his gaze down to his sneakers.

'Aw, dang,' the boy said, and he nudged Ant with his elbow. 'C'mon, let's try again. You almost got it!'

'Okay!' Ant said, then he blurted, 'I'm Ant.'

The boy grinned, grabbing Ant's arm and dragging him down the stream, 'Tim.'

That's Your Job

Tim

January 2001 – five years old.

Tim pulled at the itchy black jumper Ma had made him wear. She sniffled, brushing a tissue past her nose as she listened to the boring man up the front of the room. What was he called? A Mister?

Tim glanced at Ma, frowning as she blinked back tears—the way Tim did when he didn't want her to know he was upset for being in trouble—but why was she sad?

Tim thought it was because of her new poofy hairstyle and the long, stiff black dress, and the way everyone stared at them as they came in.

Everyone except the boat boy.

Tim tried to remember his name, swinging his legs as he leaned forward to see the boy better. He was sure it was him. He had that same brownish red hair, like the pennies Tim's Rotten Father used to collect before Ma said Tim couldn't see him anymore.

Tim leaned sideways, trying to catch a better glimpse of the boy's face. A hand came down on his arm, holding him in a vice grip, and Tim winced, glancing at Ma. She peeked sideways at him, her eyes all puffy and red, and Tim got ready to be in trouble. But instead of telling him off, her gaze went all soft and she said,

'Be still, rascal.'

Sheepishly, Tim leaned back in his seat. Ma was tense and he didn't want to make her any sadder than she already was. The puffy red eyes worried him. Ma never cried. Not even when she broke her leg and had to go to hospital.

The absence of his friends—sitting way up front instead of in their usual spot next to him and Ma—made him restless. He wanted to go see them. Instead, he watched the Boat-Boy.

He wanted to play. He wanted to go outside with the twins and make mud pies. Outside the long, colourful windows, the sky was full of clouds. Good weather for mud pies.

When the Mister finally stopped talking about the Better Place, people began to stand up. Tim jumped up and started for the front of the big, domed room.

'Tim!' Ma hissed as he darted off.

He was trying to see his friends, but there was a swarm of people in black surrounding them. Like flies, all buzzing with nonsense words and crying.

He tried to push through the crowd, annoyed that so many adults were in the way.

'Tim!' Ma called. 'I'm so sorry, excuse me. Sorry! Tim! Get back here!'

Someone snagged the back of his shirt, tugging insistently, but when he turned it wasn't Ma, but the boat boy. His eyes were bright blue, like a summer sky, and they stared at him in wide disbelief.

'You can't go that way,' he said, glancing nervously toward the centre of the crowd.

'Why not?'

The boy paused, seeming to think on how to explain. 'It's family first.'

'I'm family,' Tim said, and pointed toward the centre. 'They're my bestest friends.'

The boy blinked again. 'But that's friends, not family. If you go in, you'll get in trouble.'

Tim scoffed. 'That doesn't matter,' he said. 'Trust me. I have to go in. They'll be frightened without me. What're all these adults doing anyway?'

The boy was quiet again, frowning at Tim. Not in an angry way, but with the same sadness as Ma.

'Their Mum and Dad went away.'

Tim frowned. 'Went away where?'

The boy's blue eyes dropped to the ground. 'They went where my Nana went. Somewhere better.'

'And they left the twins behind?'

'Not on purpose.'

Tim scoffed again. 'Well, then I hafta go in. Come on,' said Tim, and pulled on his arm. 'You can meet them.'

'But—'

'Look, Ant' said Tim, and surprised himself by remembering the boy's name. 'Look, when your friends are sad, it don't matter if you get in trouble, you have to go make 'em feel better. That's your job.'

'Tim,' said a surprised voice from above. 'I never knew you could be so insightful.'

Ant's shoulders drooped, eyes flashing up fearfully, but Tim just grinned and looked up into Grandma Belle's softly wrinkled face. Her eyes were the same puffy red as Ma's, but still smiling down at Tim with a kindness that never faltered—even when Tim accidentally broke something.

Ma caught up to them, breaking through the crowd with a flustered and teary expression that made Tim cringe. Grandma Belle looked up, her smile softening just that little bit more. She shook her head at Ma and focused back on Tim and Ant.

'Now,' she said, her cheery voice a little too forced. 'Why don't you and Ant take the twins on outside? They could do with some cheering up, and I think you're just the right person for the job.'

Tim beamed, and turned to Ant with an expectant smile. 'See?' he said.

Ant just stared at him, his mouth hanging open slightly. Tim took Ant's hand and pulled him off toward his friends. It was good to have backup, he thought, as they pushed through to the twins. They looked like they'd need a *lot* of cheering up.

Behind them Ma and Grandma Belle were hugging, and Ma was crying lots now. Tim frowned. He thought about going back...but then, Grandma Belle had said that the twins were sad. She had given him the solemn duty of cheering them up.

'What...what if they don't like me?' Ant said from behind Tim, staggering along clumsily. 'What if I make them more upset?'

'Nah,' said Tim, glancing back with a smile. 'You make those awesome boats, right? They'll like you for sure. 'Sides, aren't we already friends?'

Bullies

Ant
February 2002 – six years old.

Ant winced as Tim examined his palms, a furious scowl etched into his face.

'Next time,' Ant sniffled. 'We should just give them the lollies.'

'Next time I'll kick their teeth out,' Tim said, kicking at the ground. 'Bullies.'

Tears stung Ant's eyes. 'Mum'll be so mad.'

'Stuff that,' said Tim. 'Ma will fix your hands before you go home. C'mon, let's go sit in the sandbox for a while.'

Ant held himself tight, keeping a sharp gaze for the older kids who had chased them. 'What if they come back?'

'They won't,' Tim said simply.

He took one of Ant's hands (careful of the grazes) and led the boy back into the main park where the sandbox was.

Ant pulled his shoes off, placing them carefully out of the pit. With his socks out of the way, he buried his feet in the sand, relishing the coolness that seeped into his feet.

Tim grinned, poking Ant's feet through the sand, 'Why d'you do that?'

'It feels nice.'

Tim looked down at his own feet. He pulled off his shoes and copied Ant's position. He grinned.

'It's good,' he said and pulled out a bag of lollies. 'Where're yours?'

'I ... I dropped them when we were being chased.'

Tim frowned. He put the lolly bag between them, and began counting out the lollies into two piles. When he got to the last lolly, he bit it in half, swallowing one half and placing the other with the pile

closest to Ant.

'There,' Tim said. 'Even.'

Ant's eyes welled up again, and he scrubbed at them furiously, not wanting to be such a baby in front of Tim.

'Thank you,' he said softly.

'Tomorrow,' Tim said, his normally bright eyes glinting with a hardness Ant hadn't seen before. 'Let's steal their lunch boxes and swap their yummy food for acorns!'

The Thing About Love

Tim
March 2003 – seven years old.

'The thing about love,' said the girl at the park. 'Is that you can never really tell if you're in it, until you are.'

'What's that s'posed to mean?' Tim asked.

Ant, standing by his side, tugged on his sleeve again, but Tim shrugged him off. *He* was the one who'd wanted to know about the book in the first place, so Tim didn't know why he was so worried.

The girl put aside the book, laying it open on the seat next to her. On the front cover it had the words *'Love and Life'*, which was the source of their coming to talk to her.

'It means,' said the girl, 'That love is complicated.'

When she spoke, Tim caught a glimpse of something glinting in her mouth. At first he'd thought he'd imagined it, but then he spotted it again. He wanted to ask about it, but figured he should focus on one investigation at a time.

The girl had come to the park halfway through their game of tag. They'd stopped to stare at her as she sat down. She had big hair with streaks of black and pink, piercings in her eyebrows and nose, and big black boots good for stomping on things. When they'd gotten closer, they'd seen the *huge* round earrings stretching holes in her ears, and Ant had panicked, not wanting to go any closer.

'It's alright,' hissed Tim. 'She doesn't look *that* scary.'

'She looks like a witch!' Ant whispered back, his voice shaking.

Tim grabbed his hand. 'It's alright,' he said again. 'I'll make sure you're safe.'

Tim pulled Ant toward the girl not admitting that he half expected her to cast some horrible spell on them and turn them into toads or

something. Or probably snakes.

Except when Tim asked what the book was about, and why there needed to be such a big book about love, the girl had answered. And her voice had been nothing at all like what a voice *should* be from someone so...well not scary, because Tim wasn't scared of girls. Well, maybe except for witches.

'There are lots of different kinds of love,' she said. 'The kind you feel for family. The kind you feel for friends. And the most important kind of love, which is when you're *in* love. But I suppose there lots of different kinds of *in* love as well.'

'*In* love?' Tim repeated.

'You'll get it when you're older,' she said, smiling at them, her voice bright and cheerful, like she was happy they'd come to talk to her—even though she was a bigger kid than them, and usually the bigger kids hated talking to little kids. 'All you need to know, is that when someone loves you, it means that they'd do anything to make you happy.'

'Oh,' said Ant, his eyes going wide in surprise as he turned to look at Tim. 'That's like what you say about being friends.'

Tim glanced sideways at Ant, grinning. 'That's 'cause I'm a genius.'

The girl laughed, holding her book up to cover her face as she giggled, though Tim wasn't sure what was so funny. Ant smiled shyly, and turned to Tim expectantly. He looked back toward the sandpit, but now that Tim had solved one mystery, he wanted to solve another.

'What's that in your ear?'

Lessons in Kissing

Ant
April 2004 – nine years old.

The blankets were tucked around him tight and warm and scratchy. Mum sat on the edge of his bed, dipping down the sides and smoothing down the blankets. He snuggled down, wriggling a little as he wormed his way further under the covers, enjoying the light scratchy feeling along his arms as he moved.

On his bedside table was a collection of bright birthday cards. At the front of them was a handmade card picturing a sandbox and two gummy lollies. He smiled, and burrowed further into his new soft pillow.

'Goodnight Ant,' Mum said, kissing his head with feather light words. 'I love you.'

'I love you too, Mum,' he said, trying not to yawn.

She stood and the dip in the bed straightened out. Her night gown swished back and forth in a familiar comforting sound.

'Mum,' he asked, leaning up on his elbows. 'Why do you kiss me when you say goodnight?'

She paused, turning back to him with a soft little smile. She sat back on the edge of the bed, smoothing back his dark hair.

'Because I love you,' she said, brushing hair behind his ear.

'Do you always kiss people you love?'

She nodded. 'Usually, yes.'

'Why?'

She laughed a little. Light and soothing.

'Why are you asking?'

Ant frowned, fingers playing with a stray thread, 'You kiss Lucy. And you kiss that lady friend of yours.'

'Megan?'

'Yes. Do you love her?'

Mum nodded. Her hand was a warm weight on his chest.

'But Dad doesn't love his friends?'

Mum laughed. 'Because he doesn't kiss them?'

Ant nodded.

'No honey,' she said, smiling. 'Dad loves his friends. It's just a different kind of love to how he loves you and me.'

Ant frowned. 'So ... what's the kind of love where you kiss people?'

'Kissing is for family, or for when you're older and you get a girlfriend.'

'A girl friend?'

'Someone special you want to spend lots of time with,' she said. 'Someone you care about a lot. Like your Dad and me.'

Ant frowned. 'What about my boy friends?'

Mum blinked, her mouth thinning in that way she did when she was annoyed with Dad.

'Boys don't have boyfriends, sweetheart,' she said. 'Boys have girlfriends, and girls have boyfriends.'

'But ... why?'

'Because that's the way love works.'

'But I love Tim,' Ant said. 'He makes me happy. And that's what love is. Right?'

Mum stared at him, her blue eyes big and wide. Ant shrank down in his covers.

'Right?' he asked again.

After a moment, she smoothed down his blankets again, harder than normal, and said in a very quiet voice, 'No, sweetheart. Boys don't love boys the way your dad and I love each other. Now, don't you worry about any of this love nonsense, okay? You're much too young for love. You'll understand when you're older. Goodnight sweetheart.'

She kissed his head again, sweeping across the room in her swishy nightgown to turn off the light and shut the door.

In the dark, Ant's bright blue eyes found the place he thought the birthday cards stood.

The Broken Radio

Tim

May 2005 – nine years old.

Tim sat slouched on the side of the road, nursing a bruised cheek.

Not only had he lost the model plane he'd spent all his pocket money on (not to mention crashing his bike), but Ant's birthday party was in an hour, and now Tim wouldn't have a present.

He sat on the curb outside the convenience store, the wheels on his overturned bike still spinning. The older boy's—who had cornered him on their fancy mountain bikes—had cut Tim off on his way to the party and taken off with the model plane before Tim even had a chance to get back up.

Skin was missing from his knee, elbow and both palms and somehow he'd managed to smack himself in the face as he landed, resulting in the bruise that was now tingling the side of his face.

'You right there kid?'

Tim looked up. The store owner—Shane—was standing over him, arms crossed as he peered down the street after the older boys.

Tim shrugged, pushed himself to his feet and brushed off his shorts. 'I'm alright.'

'You know who they are?'

'Yeah.'

'Know their parents?'

Tim shrugged.

'You shouldn't let them get away with that.'

'Oh, I won't. I'll puncture their tyres at school tomorrow.'

Shane raised his eyebrows, a look of surprise crossing his face. 'How old are you?'

'Nine.'

'Hm. Want an ice-cream?'

'Nah, I'm late for my friend's birthday party.'

'Oh. How old is your friend?'

'He turned ten last month, but he was sick and wasn't allowed to play. He's not at school yet, so I got him a model plane to make. He likes building things.'

Shane nodded. 'That's pretty thoughtful.'

Tim nodded and kicked at the dirt. 'Yeah. But those bullies took it. And I spent all my pocket money on it.'

'Why don't you tell your mum? I'm sure she'd understand.'

'Nah, she don't know I'm getting bullied,' said Tim. 'But that's okay. She hasta work lots cause it's just me and her, so I don't wanna worry her. 'Sides, I can be a bully too. If I hafta.'

Shane grinned, his face twisting into an expression Tim didn't usually see on adults. He gestured back to the store. 'What kind of things does your friend like to make? I got all sorts of things out back, maybe you could give him something from the store?'

Tim perked up. 'He likes broken things best. It's kinda weird, but I guess he likes to fix stuff.'

'Well, I think I can work with that. Hang on a sec, I'll see if I have something that'll fit on your bike.'

An hour later, Tim turned up late to Ant's party. He was panting and red faced and sweatier than he'd ever been. Shane had offered him a ride, but even though he'd helped him, Tim informed the man that he didn't drive in cars with strangers.

With a laugh and a hearty grin, Shane had nodded and said, 'That's a good rule to follow kid. You keep that sense of distrust, alright? Don't forget to get back those bullies.'

Ant's mum opened the door when Tim knocked, her pleasant smile dropping away to the familiar look of distaste she had whenever Tim and his Ma came around. Tim ignored her. She was something Ma called a bible basher. Tim wasn't sure what it meant, except that she was cranky a lot and he didn't have to listen to her.

He leaned his bike up against the front of the house and carefully lifted the heavy cardboard box out of the milk crate Shane had tied to the back of his bike.

Inside the house there were a bunch of kids from school that Tim didn't know very well. Tim hadn't realised Ant had so many friends. A twinge of something nasty stirred in his gut but he pushed it aside and shoved into the room.

'Tim!' Ant called. He was still pale, and he sat on the couch with a blanket around his shoulders. 'You made it in time for cake.'

'And for presents?' Tim asked, hoisting the box.

Ant's dad peered in at Tim's box. 'What've you got there, Tim? Looks pretty heavy? Did you ride all the way here with that on your bike?'

'Course,' said Tim. 'It's Ant's birthday. Or...it was, anyway.'

Ant beamed, his smile making his face seem less sickly. 'What is it?'

Tim shuffled across the room, all but barging some of the other kids out of the way, and refusing help from Ant's dad.

He dumped the box on the ground in front of Ant and said, 'Tada!'

A few kids peered in, and Ant's mum wrinkled her nose.

'It's all junk!' someone said.

'Nah!' Tim snapped. 'It ain't junk. It's just broken. It's a radio. Or...it was.'

Ant peered in at the box, pulling out bits and pieces of broken wires and nobs. In seconds, his hands were covered in grease, and one of the girls from their class giggled nastily.

'What kind of present is a broken radio?'

But Ant was pulling out the main box, struggling as he tried to manoeuvre through the wires, a look of awe and excitement lighting his face.

'It's heavy,' he said, as his dad helped him pull it out.

'Not on the couch!' Ant's mother barked, but even Ant's dad wasn't listening.

'Hey, Tim,' he said. 'This is a *really* old radio. These are the kind they used to communicate on in the war. Where did you get it?'

'Secret,' said Tim.

'Well,' said Ant's Dad, glancing up at Tim and then over at Ant's delighted face. 'I think you have a winner, there kid. You get this thing fixed up Ant, and you could talk to people in other countries.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

The smile on Ant's face made the whole day—messes and all—well worth the effort.

Best Friends

Ant
June 2006 – eleven years old.

They sat shivering at the kitchen island bench as Tim's Ma stared down at them in disapproval.

'What exactly where you doing down by the pond at *two am* at morning?'

Ant glanced sideways at Tim, a flush creeping up his neck in shame.

'We were looking for the Lake Lady,' said Tim matter-of-factly.

Ant wondered when he would get used to Tim's boldness. If he'd said that to *his* mother, they'd have been walloped around the ears.

'The Lake Lady,' said Ms Holt, her brows raising, and her lips twitching. She cleared her throat, crossed her arms and asked, 'At the pond?'

'She's a ghost, ain't she? Why can't she move places?'

'She's a ghost, *isn't* she,' Ms Holt corrected, and Ant recognised the tone in her voice she got whenever she was trying to be mad but couldn't quite manage it.

'It's the middle of winter,' said Ms Holt. 'You're both sodden. What happens if Ant gets sick, hm? What would you do then, Tim? I thought you took care of your friends?'

'I do take care of them!'

'Well?'

This time Tim's face went red. He shot a quick look at Ant, before his gaze dropped to the ground. Ant stared, he'd never seen Tim *ashamed* before.

'Sorry, Ant,' Tim mumbled.

'It's okay,' said Ant. 'I'm alright. Just scared, mostly,' he laughed nervously.

Tim's shoulders hunched even further, and Ms Holt shook her head.

'So then I guess it's safe to assume that this was *your* idea, Tim. Scaring the wits out of your best friend.'

Ant's head snapped up, and he stared at Ms Holt with big eyes. Ant expected Tim to correct his mother. Ant wasn't Tim's best friend. That was Freddie...wasn't it?

'I didn't mean it,' Tim complained. 'I didn't know you were so frightened. Why didn't you tell me?' Tim turned to Ant, beseeching and genuinely upset that he'd frightened Ant.

Ant flushed, 'I...I'm alright. I was trying to be braver, like you.'

'Like me?'

Ant nodded and for some reason, Tim looked startled.

Ms Holt shook her head. 'Alright, off with you. Make sure you change your clothes and turn on the heater. And when I come upstairs in fifteen minutes, the lights better be off and there better be two sleeping teenagers. Tim, do I make myself clear?'

'Yes Ma,' he said, ducking his head.

'Alright, off with you,' she said again.

Tim shot out the door, not hesitating, knowing if he didn't take this chance, his Ma might change her mind.

Ant followed, but paused in the kitchen doorway, one hand on the frame as he looked back at Tim's Ma.

'Don't worry, Ms Holt. I wouldn't let him do anything *really* bad.'

A smile split her pretty face, and her dark, angry eyes softened to a sweet chocolate brown. 'Oh Ant,' she said, leaning on the bench and shaking her head at him. 'Thank heavens for you. You look out for my boy, now. I can trust you, can't I?'

'Yes Ma'am,' said Ant.

With that, he turned and raced back up the stairs after his best friend, knowing that the task was daunting, bordering on impossible, but determined that he *could* look out for Tim. After all, hadn't Tim taught him that it was a friend's solemn duty to take care of each other?

When Hero's Cry

Tim

July 2007 – eleven years old.

The phone rang and rang and rang and Tim wondered if anyone would ever pick up. His hand shook as he held the receiver, while he held a towel with the other, pressing down as hard as he could over the flow of blood.

Ring, ring, ring.

'Pick up...*pick up*.'

'Hello-,'

'Ant? Where's your dad?'

'Tim?'

'Get your dad. I need him now.'

'O-okay.'

Tim waited, glancing down at the reddening towel and the pale face of his best friend's sister. *His* sister, in all but blood. Blood that was pooling around his fingers.

His hand clenched around the phone.

'Tim?' came the deep voice of Ant's father. 'What's wrong?'

For a moment, Tim's mind went blank. There weren't any words to describe what was wrong. What he was going through. What *she* was going through. But his eyes found the towel again, felt the moisture against his palm that was too think and too red for him to pretend it was water. He had to make her better. That was his job. No matter if he got in trouble, he had to make her better.

'Tim?'

'I need an ambulance. And a doctor. And blood. Lots of blood. And, uh, a police car. Lots of police cars. I don't know where he is, but you'll need police cars to catch him before he comes to get her again.'

'Whoa, Tim, slow down. What's happened?'

'He attacked her. He cut her up. You have to come *now*. With a doctor. There's...there's a lot of blood.'

Tim's hand shook. Why did Ma have to be in town *today*? He wanted to cry. But he couldn't because his job wasn't finished until she was better.

There was a pause on the line, and Tim was frightened—*so very frightened*—that Ant's dad wouldn't believe him. That he would accuse Tim of playing another of his pranks and hang up the phone.

'Are you at home?'

'Yes.'

'I'll be there as soon as I can,' said the thick, heavy voice on the other end. 'I've got an ambulance on the way already. Tim, this is very important, is Genie awake?'

'She's quiet. I keep trying to talk to her, but she's not really answering anymore.'

'Okay. I have to hang up now, but I'm going to call again very soon? I need you to answer straight away. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'I'm on my way, Tim.'

'Okay...hurry,' he said.

He looked back down at her pale face. He'd had to drag her inside so he could call Ant. She was so much smaller than him, and yet, she'd been so heavy.

'They're coming, Genie,' Tim said to her, leaning both hands on the bloody towel. 'Ant's dad is a cop, remember? He's coming to help you. Just stay awake a bit longer, okay? Okay Genie?'

'Hm.'

The phone rang, and Tim fumbled for it, almost dropping it with his slick red hands. His heart hammered and the questions came to Tim through a buzzing haze.

When asked about what happened, Tim could only remember the panic. The breathlessness. The lump that stuck in his throat as the longest ten minutes of his life dragged out into an eternity.

He didn't remember the ambulances arriving, or the drive to the hospital, only that they'd tried to put him in a different van. Ant's dad stopped them. He sat with Tim in the back, staring at the small, pale little body in the big stretcher and shaking almost as much as Tim was.

'You did good, Tim,' he said when they got there, laying a big, heavy hand on Tim's shoulder as the doctors wheeled Genie away. 'You did

real good.'

Tim wanted to cry. He wanted to let the panic and the horror crash over him. To curl up into a little ball and scream it all out. He didn't. Not yet. Not until Ant came to find him.

The first thing he remembered clearly was a comforting shoulder pressed against his own. Ant didn't ask if Tim was okay. He knew that wasn't what he needed.

'They got him,' he said. 'Dad got him. He's gonna go away for a long time.'

Tim swallowed. 'So she's okay?'

'She's okay. You did your job. Everything's okay now.'

Another shiver rippled through him. Not fear this time, but relief. Safety. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth to answer. To say something that would show Ant he was okay. Instead, with Ant sitting quiet and solid beside him, Tim burst into tears.

The Horse Whisperer

Ant
August 2008 – thirteen years old.

Ant stared at the hoof prints stamped into the soggy earth.

At the centre of the ring, Tim and Ms Holt struggled with their newest acquisition. A large, cloudy stallion with a long white tail that refused to be bridled. He was the biggest horse Ant had ever seen, and watching Tim and his tiny mother attempt to wrestle with him made Ant's stomach churn.

Tim jerked back as the horse reared, kicking its legs and spraying thick dollops of mud everywhere.

'Just get out of here Tim,' Ms Holt snapped, pulling on the reigns as the horse jerked away from Tim again. 'You're working him up!'

Tim scowled and threw down the reigns, glaring at the anxious horse as if it was purposefully trying to make his day harder. He shook his head and trudged for the fence where Ant stood.

The horse reared again, tossed its head, and yanked free from Ms Holt's grasp. She cried out as the horse charged.

Ant's eyes went wide, his heart stopping, lodging in his chest as the horse ran toward Tim's unprotected back.

Ant threw open the gate, his feet slipping in the mud as he reached out to grasp at Tim's arm. Blood rushed in his ears (along with the sound of heavy hooves). A sound that could crush bone with one steady stomp.

His fingers closed around Tim's arm and he yanked, pulling his startled friend through the gate and slamming it shut.

Tim went sprawling as Ant, slipping in the mud, fell forward onto the gate he had just shut. Air blew into his face and he found himself staring up at the grey stallion.

'Ant!'

The horse stomped its hoof, pawing the ground as it tossed its head, apparently unimpressed by Ant blocking his path.

Ant's heart hammered in his chest, and he took a slow, deep breath, exhaling steadily. He unclenched his hands from the fence and, with an almost painful caution, reached up to rest his hands on either side of the horse's shoulders.

'What're you doing!' hissed Tim from behind him.

'Shhh, easy now,' said Ant, brushing his hands down the course, dusty coat – unsure if he was talking to Tim or the horse. 'He just doesn't understand.'

The horse snorted, but didn't pull away. He turned his head, staring at Ant through one big brown eye.

'I know,' said Ant. 'It can be scary coming way out here, can't it? There's a lot of things you're not sure of. And you can rage. Stomp and fuss all you like. We'll still be here.'

Ms Holt eased up alongside the calming stallion, eyebrows raised in surprise as Ant murmured to the horse.

'Well, I think that'll do for a day,' she said, running a fond hand over the flank of the horse. 'Why don't you put him in his stable, Ant?'

Ant glanced over at her in surprise. The horse blew another breath of air in Ant's face, it was hot and stinky, but no longer full of the impatient rage. Ant nodded. He took the reigns from Ms Holt and, with quiet fortitude, unlatched the gate.

Tim kept a wide birth, scowling as he watched, but Ms Holt only gave them a knowing half smile that made Ant nervous when he came back out.

'Crazy horse,' Tim muttered, brushing off his pants.

Ant rolled his eyes, but kept his tone appeasing as he answered, 'fierce though,' he said. 'He won't back down from the race. Anyway, want to play xbox?'

Tim's irritation eased away and he flung an arm around Ant's shoulders. 'Battlefield?'

Ms Holt's half smile widened and she glanced between Tim and Ant. 'You know, I have an idea,' she said.

Tim's eyebrow arched in suspicion. 'What kind of idea?'

'I think Ant should help out with the horses. He's got a good temperament for it, and I was going to hire a stable boy anyway. What do you think, Ant?'

Ant balked, 'You want me to work here?' he yelped.

'Yeah!' Tim said, releasing Ant so he could face him properly. 'And if you're working here, we'll get to hang out more without your Mum getting mad! We'll pay you of course, right Ma?'

Ms Holt laughed. 'Right.'

'But…what if I'm not good?'

'Of course you'll be good!' Tim said his eyes glinting with excitement and something deeper. 'Right Ma?'

Ant recognised the glint at once. Stubbornness. Tim was about to get his way.

'Right,' Ms Holt laughed. 'After all, if he can tame your wildness, what's a few horses?'

The Storm

Tim
September 2009 – thirteen years old.

The morning began in an orange haze.

Sunlight struggled to filter through the massive dust storm that had descended across the majority of the Australian east coast. From New South Wales, all the way up to Northern Queensland.

Everyone was abuzz with it on the morning bus. The faint orange light cast by the dust storm threw everything into an eerie glow, and people were speculating all sorts of reasons for the phenomenon from the reasonable to the outrageous.

Tim supposed that should have been an omen. He was going to have his work cut out for him that day. His duty was going to be tested.

First the dust storm, then Ant was late.

Ant was *never* late. He was almost always annoyingly on time. Not through any fault of his own, though. No. Ant's perpetual timeliness was entirely to do with his mother.

Yet, today, with the dust storm pervading every nook and cranny of the school, Ant was late. He came to school halfway through the first period, handed the teacher a note, and took his seat in silence.

Tim wasted no time. 'Oi, you break down or something?'

Ant glanced sideways at him, and gave him a one shouldered shrug.

Tim frowned. 'Your Mum don't think the world is ending or something, does she?' he asked, waggling his eyebrows the way he knew made Ant chuckle.

Another one shouldered shrug.

Tim frowned. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, studying his friend with the most serious frown anyone had ever seen

on his face.

That was how it started.

Someone shoved Tim's shoulder, causing his elbow to slip and for Tim to smack himself in the face.

Laughter erupted.

'Maybe you should pay more attention instead of staring at your *boyfriend*.'

Tim didn't even get a *chance* to respond.

Ant's chair toppled backwards and he moved passed Tim's table in a blur of furious speed, his emotionless mask cracked to reveal the rage and pain bubbling underneath the surface.

His fist cracked into the boy's face, loud enough for the entire classroom to hear.

'Anthony Evans!'

'Don't you speak to him like that!' Ant's voice was loud and rough and so, so very wrong.

In an instant Tim was on his feet. He didn't care about the teacher. He didn't care about the boy whose nose was no doubt broken. He didn't care about the girls squealing.

He only cared about Ant.

About his friend.

'What's happened?' he asked, his own voice strangely calm and quiet in the chaos. 'What's wrong?'

Ant turned, surprise etched into his features. The room was filtered in an orange glow. As if someone had put a filter over the sun. It cast shadows over Ant's face, turning his usually kind and gentle features into that of a trapped animal. His normally blue eyes, light as a summer afternoon, made amber in the glow.

'I...' Ant's gaze refocused on the boy. 'He insulted you.'

'Ant,' Tim said, his voice harder. 'What's happened.'

'I think you should go home, Anthony,' said Mrs Parker, her voice softening as she made her way up the aisle toward them. 'I'm going to call your Mother. You need to be with your family right now.'

Tim saw the pity in Mrs Parker's eyes and knew, *knew*, what pain it was that had turned Ant—kind, gentle, caring Ant—into someone...someone like Tim.

Without a word he stepped closer, reaching out to pull Ant into the tightest hug he could manage. He didn't balk when Ant broke. He didn't pull away when the sobs grew loud and uncontrollable. He didn't care that tears soaked his shirt.

He just stood there, forming a support beam with his own body as his best friend clung to him. He held together the pieces of Ant's broken heart until Ant was calm enough to hold them together himself.

'I'll get Ma to pick us up,' he said, when the sobs had died down to hiccups. 'We can have ice-cream, and go to the quarry, and see Shano's cows. He has calves now, did you know?'

Ant shook his head, hands still clenched around Tim's shoulders. 'I didn't know,' he mumbled.

'Want to see them?'

'Mm. Yeah. I don't wanna go home.'

'You don't have to,' said Tim, and he shifted to give Mrs Parker a hard glare. 'You don't have to go anywhere you don't want to.'

Ant nodded.

It was later, after Ma had picked them up and indeed taken them for ice-cream, that Tim learned about the shooting. While Ant was in the bathroom, Ma told him how Ant's policeman father had died in service. There had already been an announcement about the funeral. Ant's father was well known and well loved in town, but his mother was asking people to pay their respects at a later date and allow the family to have a small intimate funeral. A pang of anguish stirred in Tim's gut. He liked Ant's dad.

'We're not invited?' Tim asked, his fists clenched.

'Hush,' Ma said, her eyes darting to the restroom. 'It's not for us to intrude. All we can do is be there for Ant when he needs us.'

'Just not at the funeral,' Tim said. He crossed his arms. 'Well I'm going.'

'You are not.'

'She can't stop me waiting out by the street,' he said, scowling. 'He can't do it by himself. He needs me to be there, so I'm going. Even if it gets me in trouble. That's my job!'

'Timothy—'

'Sh, he's coming,' said Tim, waving at his mother as he plastered a smile over the determined, stubborn set of his expression.

He wasn't going to let anyone get in the way of his job.

Unheard Confessions

Ant

October 2010 – fifteen years old.

They lay sprawled in the field, the beat up paddock basher a dead carcass beside them, it's rumbling, sickly purrs having given out about half hour ago.

They would get it running again, of that Ant was sure. He had a fairly good idea of what the problem was, but fixing it would require parts—which he would only get when Tim had cooled off enough to not try and set fire to the old, rusted out car.

So for now they spread out in the grass, enjoying the late afternoon air.

Ant shifted. He kicked his shoes off. Rolled to one side. Rolled to the other side. Bent his knees and buried his toes in the top layer of soil. Laid a hand over his eyes. Scratched at the spot on his elbow the grass kept tickling—

'For god's sake Ant, stay still wouldja? I can't relax with you twitching every five seconds. Spit it out already!'

'Sorry, I... what? Spit what out?'

'Whatever it is that has you twitching like a cain toad struck on the head.'

Ant winced at the mental image. 'I'm not twitching.'

'Are so. It's driving me mental. Now what is it?'

Tim had his stubborn voice on, which meant that one way or another Ant had to figure out something to say. Why *was* he twitchy?

Well, that was obvious.

Ant was quiet for a moment that dragged out into the summer afternoon silence. He sighed, shifted about in the grass and sighed again. How was he supposed to tell Tim what was wrong?

'I...alright...' he muttered, and he swallowed, deciding to keep his gaze firmly on the lazy white clouds above. 'I...um...I think...see the thing is...I might be...er...That is I *think*, that I might be...well...gay.'

Wind swished through the grass, swirling small, gentle, miniature tornadoes around them. Ant waited for the reaction. Unsure if Tim would laugh at him or rage.

Instead, what he got was a soft, faint snuffle. He frowned. Another beat of silence and...yep, there it was, a distinctive snore. Ant leaned up on one elbow, peering over at Tim just to be sure.

He flopped back into the grass with a sigh. Of course the idiot had fallen asleep.

Rumours and Insecurities

Tim

November 2011 – fifteen years old.

The anti-septic stung, making Tim hiss as it was dabbed onto his bleeding knuckles.

Blue eyes flicked up to his face, a wry smile quirking up the corner of Ant's mouth. 'You know, Genie is better at this than I am,' he said.

'Yeah,' said Tim, wincing as the cotton ball dabbed at a particularly nasty scrape. 'But she always seems so disappointed.'

'I don't?'

Plastic bottles thudded against each other as Ant searched for another cream.

'Nope. You're reliably happy to see me.'

Ant rolled his eyes, but Tim caught sight of the faint flush creeping up his friend's neck and grinned.

'Besides, you don't lecture me.'

'That's because you don't listen, not because I want you to keep fighting.'

'Yeah, well...shit happens.'

Again, that same flick of blue eyes. 'What was it this time? Did someone call the twins crazy again?'

'No,' he said curtly. 'And I haven't hit anyone for that in ages.'

'You put glue in Amy Mitchell's hair three weeks ago.'

'Tch. That bitch,' he sniffed. 'She had it coming.'

Ant rolled his eyes, but Tim detected a hint of amusement. He grinned, knowing he'd gotten away with it; knowing that Ant understood. He always did.

'You still haven't told me what happened,' said Ant, pausing as he studied the gash across Tim's left eyebrow. 'Your mum is going to kill

you.'

Tim wrinkled his nose at the strong, bitter smell wafting from the cotton ball. Careful, as if Tim were a tiny child and not the six foot, athletic troublemaker he really was, Ant brushed the cotton ball across the shallow wound.

Tim sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth. 'Yeah, well, shit happens,' he said again.

Ant pulled the cotton ball away, brows furrowed in concern. 'This is worse than usual, Tim. This wasn't about Michelle's brother, was it?'

Tim barked out a laugh, leaning back on the edge of the bath he was sitting on. 'You heard about that, huh?'

'You getting caught with your girlfriend's brother? Yeah, the whole *school* has heard about that, Tim.'

Tim pretended not to notice the undertone of jealousy in Ant's voice.

'I couldn't help it. He was flirting with me.'

'Put this on,' said Ant, thrusting a box of bandaids at him.

'Oh, c'mon Ant, you ain't mad at me are you?'

'Why would I be mad?'

Tim sighed, thinking of at least a dozen reasons why—half of which Tim was the cause of. Still, angry or not, Ant was as gentle as he ever was.

'There's been a few comments at school about it. About you and Ben.'

'Didn't notice.'

'Everyone knows that Ben is gay but...'

'Now they think I am?' Tim asked, flicking Ant a grin.

Ant frowned but nodded.

Tim shrugged. 'Let them think what they like. It doesn't bother me. 'Sides, I got my eye on Betty Mills next.'

Ant sighed and rolled his eyes. 'Mmhm.'

'This had nothing to do with Ben,' Tim insisted, feeling the coil of anger unwind in his gut as he thought about what had set him off. 'They can say what they like about me but if they call my friends—' he cut himself off sharply, dropping his gaze to the small, well used first aid kit Ant always kept handy.

Ant sighed. 'It *was* about the twins. Why didn't you just say so?'

Tim paused. He didn't want to lie to Ant, but he also didn't want to cause the hurt he knew the truth would inflict.

He gritted his teeth, feeling the echo of adrenaline and fury tingle along his skin. His fists clenched, remembering the scene again. The

words still rang around his head. He hadn't been looking for a fight—especially not against three of them—but he just couldn't hold it back. Not after what they'd said about Ant. Even *he* didn't say things like that.

The thing that really got him, though, was that he'd never noticed the truth behind their words. Oh the nastiness was all crap, but the rest? The fact Ant had never had a girlfriend. The way, now that Tim thought about it, Ant's gaze lingered on Ian Brown in English.

'There,' said Ant, zipping up the first aid kit. 'That's all done. I can't hide the bruises like Genie does, but you can hang out here 'til your Mum goes to work if you want?'

'What about your Mum?'

'She has some church charity thing on. It's just me 'til later tonight. I was gonna catch up with Freddie on the x-box.'

Tim grinned, bouncing up to his feet as if he hadn't just gone two rounds with three beefed up losers.

'You're on, what're we playing?'

The next day at school there were about twenty new rumours about Tim's sexuality but none—not a single one—involved his shy, insecure best friend.

To Tim, that was all that mattered.

The Loft

Ant
December 2012 – seventeen years old.

'Hey Ma...can Ant stay here a while?'

Ms Holt glanced up from the magazine she'd been reading. Ant stared at the front cover as she surveyed them, his hand tightening around the handle of his suitcase, clutching at it so hard his knuckles turned white.

He could feel Tim next to him. Felt the heat that resonated outward from the angry burn he was somehow keeping under wrap for once.

'How long is a while?' she asked.

Tim made a slight noise that was something like a growl. 'Forever?' he muttered.

She frowned, and Ant felt her scrutiny and shifted nervously. 'Sure,' she said, turning her attention back to her newspaper. 'He can stay in the loft if he likes? It was meant for the stable boy after all.'

Ant's gaze shot up with disbelief. She was no longer looking at the magazine and when she saw his face, those dark eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched in a familiar stubborn set.

'Why don't you boys see if you can clean it up a bit, eh?' she said, reaching for her phone. 'I have a few calls to make, then I'll come out and help you. See if the mattress is still any good and if it isn't, take the one out of the spare room.'

Ant couldn't believe his ears. Was she saying—was she *really* saying he could stay? Did she really give him his own bed, his own *room*?

Tim's fury burned out and he turned to Ant, grinning—*beaming*—and gestured toward the back door.

'C'mon,' he said. 'Let's go see your new room!'

As they left, Ant heard Ms Holt's angry voice, 'I thought I should let

you know you're son is safe at my house, though judging from the state he was in...'

Tim pulled him out of the room before he could hear the rest and Ant wasn't sure if he should be annoyed or relieved. He didn't know who was going to come out on top of that conversation. Tim's stubborn, independent mother, or his righteous, traditionalist one.

The loft stairs creaked as they made their way up the steps at the back of the barn. Ant had been in the loft many times. Tim held frequent slumber parties and gaming nights out in the barn. Now, though, it was his.

Tim bounced on the mattress, throwing himself backwards and wriggling about—no doubt under some pretence of making sure it was "still good" but really just making a mess.

'Seems alright to me,' he said, sitting up and grinning at Ant.

The grin faded as his eyes settled onto Ant's left cheekbone.

'I'm fine,' said Ant, and he turned to put his suitcase in the corner of the room.

He would unpack it later—so long as Ms Holt was still okay with him staying there—but for now at least it was out of the way.

'Are you going to tell me what happened?'

'I already—'

'What *really* happened, not that bullshit you told me on the phone.'

Ant stared at the faded, auburn rug on the floor, his fists clenched by his side. In truth, his jaw ached, but worse were the pangs of guilt and shame that churned together in his gut.

'Did you leave, or did she throw you out?'

Ant sighed, and shuffled toward the bed, sinking down on the end. The springs creaked in a drawn out groan.

Tim wrinkled his nose. 'Well,' he said. 'We'll have to fix *that*.'

Ant snorted, which turned into a chuckle and then, like a dam easing out flood waters in order not to burst, he started to cry. Soft little sniffles as he laughed at the absurdity of it all.

Tim, of course, panicked. 'Jesus, don't cry! It's just a bed!'

Ant tried to brush away the tears, but more kept replacing them.

'Seriously, there's no need to get emotional. I mean I know it makes things awkward if you bring a guy up here but, hey, I'm sure we won't hear you from the house.'

Ant's sniffles cut off and he gaped at Tim, a few stray tears trickling down his face. 'A...a *guy*?' he blurted, and terror engulfed him.

He sucked in a sharp breath and found it wasn't enough. He needed

more air. More...except the memories begin to rush back in, filling his head, making him relive the last twelve hours. The date his mother had fixed. A sweet girl, and kind, but oh so not his type. The resulting blowback from his mother when he refused to go out with her. The argument they'd had. His confession.

God, what a fight it had been. He'd never heard his mother scream like that. Never heard her curse like she'd cursed him. And that was *before* she'd begun to throw things.

Ant gasped, sucking in air that was going no where. The room was too bright and suffocating.

'Oh hell.'

A hand grabbed his shoulder and Ant was yanked into a hug. It was gruff, rough and awkward, yet…comforting. Tim patted him on the back, one arm around Ant's shoulders as he rested his chin on Ant's head.

All Ant saw was darkness, but Tim smelt like coffee, freshly turned earth and oil and it was somehow soothing in that combination. The panic in his chest subsided.

'You stink,' he mumbled into Tim's chest when he could breathe again.

'Yeah well, some idiot put a hole in his fuel tank and guess who had to fix it?' annoyance made Tim's voice rumble deep in his chest.

A faint smile curled at Ant's lips. After a moment longer of Tim's clumsy attempt at comfort (the too-hard patting of Ant's back wasn't even in rhythm), Ant pulled back.

He scrubbed at his face, offering Tim a faint smile.

'Well,' said Tim, crossing his arms and leaning back to glare at Ant. 'I can't believe you freaked out.'

'I know. I was just surprised.'

'So was I! You know I'm not good with spontaneous tears. I need to be prepared to comfort.'

Ant's smile broadened. 'I think you're getting worse at it.'

'Hey!'

'I appreciate the effort, though.'

Tim rolled his eyes, flopping backwards. 'Well what else was I supposed to do. You're my friend. It's my—'

'Job to make me feel better,' Ant finished. 'I know. Like I said, I was...surprised.'

'What...that I know you're gay?'

Ant shrugged one shoulder. He flopped back next to Tim, letting his

legs dangle off the end of the bed as he stared up at the wooden rafters above.

'You know I don't care, right?' Tim said, his voice suddenly serious.

'I...know.'

'Tch. Yeah, *that* was believable. You know, I'm hurt that you thought I'd care. I mean, seriously this is *me* we're talking about. I've dated *everyone*.'

'Yeah, but you have no standards.'

Tim spluttered and half a second later a pillow came flying at Ant's face.

'Hey!'

'I have standards, thank you very much. I just don't happen to care what people think, and you shouldn't either. Who gives a crap that you're gay?'

'My mother.'

'You're mother's a bitch,' said Tim, and then added as an afterthought, 'No offence.'

Ant sighed. 'I guess.' He put his hands behind his head and tried to remember a time before his mother had become so overbearing. 'Besides, you don't understand. *You're* still interested in girls. I never have been. Boys aren't supposed to love boys the way Mum loves Dad.'

Another pillow to the face.

'Cut it out, will you!'

'*You* cut it out!' Tim said, sitting up and glowering at Ant.

It was no longer a game. No longer funny. Tim was actually angry, and Ant shrank in the face of that stubborn expression.

'You can love whoever, wherever, whenever you bloody well like, alright? Ain't nobody got the right to tell you otherwise. You wanna screw boys, fine! Screw boys. So long as *you* know there ain't nothing wrong with it. There'll be plenty of people lining up to throw shit at you for how you feel, so don't you dare add to it. You got that?'

Ant flushed. 'Right, sorry. I didn't mean anything by it.'

'Yes you did,' said Tim, still scowling. 'You never give yourself credit and it pisses me off.'

'I...sorry. I'll...try harder.'

'God, don't try. Just...I dunno...don't judge yourself. There's enough of that shit from everyone else. *Especially* your mother.'

Ant let out a dark chuckle. 'Tell me about it,' he muttered. 'She threw a bible at me.' Ant gestured to his face. '*That's* what happened.'

Tim sat up, his eyes wide as he gaped at Ant. 'She threw…*seriously*?'

Ant flushed and stared at the ceiling as he added, 'She called a priest too. Said that I'd been possessed.'

'What'd she think was going to happen, that you'd burst into flames?'

'Probably...'

Tim fell back onto the bed, cackling like a mad man. Ant glared at him.

'You know this isn't exactly fun for me.'

Tim waved a hand at him. 'You're fine, you're fine. You're here aren't you? Oh, man, I can't believe she threw a *bible* at you, hehehe.'

Despite himself, Ant began to grin. Tim may have been rough and course and reckless; but he was here and he made Ant laugh, and for a little while things didn't seem quite so hopeless. After all, wasn't it Tim's solemn vow to make his friends feel better?

'All you need to know, is that when someone loves you, it means that they'd do anything to make you happy.'

'What're you smirking about?'

Before Ant could answer, he heard footsteps on the stairs outside.

'How's it looking in there?' Ms Holt asked, peeking her head inside the door.

'Bed springs could do with replacing, but it's alright. Sturdy,' said Tim, bouncing on the bed in demonstration. 'Oh, and I'll need some supplies to rig up the new sign.'

'Sign?' Ant and Ms Holt asked at the same time.

'Yeah,' Tim grinned, a wicked glint entering his eye. 'We're gonna call it "The Poof's Palace".'

Ant barked out a surprised laugh. 'God, you're an asshole, you know that?'

Ms Holt snorted. 'If anyone else called Ant that you'd have knocked their teeth out.'

'Course I would,' said Tim, slinging an arm around Ant's shoulders. 'But I ain't anyone else.'

Ant grinned. 'No, you're not.'

'And anyway, he's my poof, so I can say whatever I damn well please.'

Ms Holt sniffed. 'If you say so,' she glanced at Ant, her expression softening. 'Feel free to throw him out whenever he annoys you.'

Ant wasn't listening, he was too busy trying to keep his face from turning bright red. It didn't matter that it was a joke, or that Tim was

only trying to cheer him up, Ant still couldn't help the little flutter of pleasure in his chest.

He said I was his.