

**Photo Finish**  
*(a novel)*

and

**Too high, too low, just right:**  
*Defining Australian young  
adult literature through  
metaphors of social class*  
*(an exegesis)*

by

Sam Franzway, BA (Hons), MA

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Department of English and Creative Writing  
Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law  
Flinders University

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## Abstract

This thesis examines social class as a metaphor to suggest a new way of defining Australian young adult literature. It comprises a young adult novel with class as one of its main subjects and an exegesis that uses recent definitions and discourse on young adult literature to examine representations of social class in a selection of novels published in Australia over the last thirty years. This research produced two seemingly contradictory findings: first, that young adult fiction presents growing up as a generally positive experience; and second, that it regularly depicts powerful characters as negative. Given these findings, this thesis asks: how can young adult characters grow up and gain power in a positive way?

The key to answering this question lies in analysing how the novels under discussion arrange social class into three simple, yet identifiable tiers – upper, lower and middle – by regularly characterising the upper and (to a slightly lesser extent) lower tiers as largely negative, and the middle tier as the most positive. This analysis reveals similarities between the representations of social class and other hierarchies based on power. This power can take the form of popularity, attractiveness, sporting prowess, cultural knowledge or any other attributes that young characters recognise as advantageous and use to begin identifying themselves as adults. Characters in the upper tier of any power hierarchy receive the same, negative portrayal as those who are upper class. Having established how the powerful are depicted, the exegesis shows how young adult protagonists grow up and gain power in a positive way: through labour. This labour can take the form of paid work, in which time and effort can result in movement between

social classes. Within the fictional narratives analysed, the term ‘labour’ can also be applied to any time and effort resulting in movement between the hierarchical tiers described above. Young adult literature abhors power without labour, hence the generally negative depictions of those characters who appear in the story already imbued with power. However, those who work to achieve whatever position they occupy, whether it be a successful career or simply a realisation about growing up, are not only depicted positively, but are usually the protagonists of the young adult story.

The creative component of this thesis, the novel *Photo Finish*, puts these findings into practice. Eighteen-year-old Jacinta attempts to raise her social standing by insinuating herself into the upper-class life of the precocious student she tutors, thirteen-year-old Henry. Henry attempts a similar manoeuvre, lying about his relationship with Jacinta to bluff his way into the most popular group in his high school. Both main characters attempt to gain different forms of power and social position without performing any labour and each ends up in a negative situation, one which can only be rectified through individual labour. With their recognition of the need for labour, each protagonist begins their independent journey towards adulthood and this is a defining characteristic of the young adult narrative journey.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Sam Franzway





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# Photo Finish



## *Part One*





# 1

## **Paxton Academic Coaching** ***Get the results you deserve***

Jacinta McDonald, QC, waited silently in her office. She had instructed her secretary, Carol, not to disturb her until the letter arrived. She took a sip of organic fair trade espresso and stood at the window. Her law firm occupied the entire floor of one of the tallest buildings in Sydney and the late-afternoon view of the harbour from her corner office was nothing short of magnificent.

It had been a tough year, and long, but it had been worth it. The latest round of cases was over, their remnants lodged in dozens of colour-coded boxes over in storage. Her tickets to Bali sat on her polished mahogany desk under the keys to her new Mercedes. All she needed was that official confirmation letter before she could begin her holiday. That one last minor formality before starting the next chapter of her life.

She heard Carol thanking the mail courier in the outer office. That would be it then: the last piece. Everything was finally in place. *Hello, glorious future.* She finished her coffee and drank in the fabulous gleam of the water far below. The door opened.

‘It’s here.’ Carol held up a large white envelope.

‘Thanks. Just leave it on my desk.’ Jacinta continued gazing out of the window at one of the most expensive views in Australia. One that she had fought

and slaved and, quite frankly, worked her arse off for since Year Twelve to become the youngest—

‘It’s your uni results, love!’ Carol rattled the envelope in Jacinta’s face.

‘You’ve got to open it!’

Jacinta gripped her coffee mug tight and tried to picture herself over Sydney Harbour just a few moments longer. ‘Mum, don’t lay an egg. I know I got in.’

‘Don’t be so sure, missy – I don’t think you worked nearly as hard as you say you did.’

‘Mum! Why do you always say that?’ Jacinta watched in dismay as the fabulous office dissolved before her eyes. The leather chair, the designer desk, Sydney Harbour and the espresso machine all faded like breath on a mirror. Jacinta looked quietly around her little pink bedroom in Salisbury Hills Estate. The only trace of glamour was the chubby silver law firm pen that she stood in a cup because the ink dried up easily. She took the envelope. It shook a little bit in her fingers. ‘I worked my arse off for this.’

Carol just nodded.

‘Fine!’ Jacinta tore open the flap and a small sheaf of papers fell onto the desk. She found the Transcription of Results and traced her finger down the column of numbers.

Her heart crumpled.

‘Seventy-two.’

‘Oh, love, that’s great!’ cried her mother, embracing her. ‘You got into uni! That’s just high enough isn’t it? Gary!’

‘No, Mum, it’s not enough.’

‘What do you mean? It said seventy-two on the website.’

‘I told you already: that’s for up-front fee payers.’

‘But I thought you could put off your fees.’ Carol squinted at the letter again. Her glasses hung in the pocket of her blue nurse’s uniform, but they hardly ever came out.

‘You can put off your fees,’ explained Jacinta. ‘But there’s a limited number of places in Law for people who can’t afford it up front, so they make the scores higher.’ She sucked in a deep breath through clenched teeth. This was the bit she hated having to explain to her parents over and over again. ‘You can’t *get* those high scores because you’re competing against kids from better schools and better areas. Kids who can afford to go to holiday courses and hire tutors.’

‘Like Clara did?’

Clara’s name stung like a paper cut.

Carol had found her glasses and was squinting through them at Jacinta’s acceptance pack. She didn’t see Jacinta bunch her fists in anger. Jacinta and Clara were best friends, a team. Wispy, elfish Jacinta was the brains; quick-witted and imaginative, good marks arrived with barely a lifted finger (and the occasional late night). Brash, buxom Clara was the heart; gorgeous and popular, she slaved for weeks over Bs and Cs. They complemented one another, each making up for what the other lacked. But in Year Twelve, Clara’s mum had declared that Clara would get into whatever uni course she wanted and had taken out a loan to pay for expensive private tutors and holiday study schools. It had been hard watching Clara’s marks soar past her own. It became harder when Jacinta’s own parents had decided at the same time that paying off an ex-housing trust shitbox was a bad retirement plan and it was time they moved up in the world.

Jacinta snatched the letter back, anger bleeding into her voice. ‘*I* could have gotten a tutor too, *if* we hadn’t moved here.’

‘Not this again, sweetheart. You know how dodgy Paramount is. We had to move away. We don’t want Jayden growing up around there. Or you.’

‘That’s crap, Mum! Paramount is just across the highway and we’re still miles from the city. Miles from uni.’

‘What’s going on?’ Gary McDonald entered, filling the little bedroom like a fridge wearing a singlet. ‘Did she get in?’

‘Yeah,’ Carol smiled. ‘But just not the course she wanted.’

‘Hey hey!’ Gary patted his pouting daughter on the back. ‘Well done!’

‘I didn’t get into Law,’ Jacinta grumbled, plonking herself on her bed.

‘Well ... look ...’ Carol glanced at Gary. ‘How much are these up-front fees? Maybe we could work something out.’

Jacinta snorted. ‘Sixteen grand a year, up front, every term, for four years.’

‘Oh.’

‘*Yeah*. “Oh”.’ Jacinta looked out of the window at the dead garden of prickly yellow grass and skeletal shrubs. The housing estate’s gardening service wasn’t included in the McDonald’s new mortgage. ‘I’ve got the marks to take a fee-paying place in Law. If we hadn’t moved here, I could afford to get in.’

‘What did you just say?’ Gary’s voice was molten steel.

‘Nothing.’

‘I asked you a question.’

She faced her parents, scrunching up the offer letter in their faces as she spoke. ‘*I said*: if you guys hadn’t wasted all your money on moving to this stupid

estate, I could have gotten a tutor or gone to holiday courses like Clara and I'd be getting into Law right now!'

'Jacinta!' gasped her mum.

'What? It's true! This estate isn't better than Paramount! It's surrounded by Paramount! It still takes an hour to get into the city. We didn't move up in the world; we moved sideways. We moved *backwards*.'

'But this is an estate ...' Carol began.

'This is landfill!' yelled Jacinta.

'That's enough!' Gary's fist banged on Jacinta's desk, making her Sydney Harbour coffee mug jump. The room fell quiet. Gary sighed and looked questioningly at Carol, who nodded at the floor. He bent down and picked up the scrunched letter, smoothing it out as he spoke. 'Jaz, look, we weren't going to tell you this until you'd gotten settled in at uni, but you're eighteen now. We've been paying for your petrol and giving you a bit of dough for going out and that ...' Gary seemed to lose his thread for a moment. He flattened each rumped corner between his steamroller finger and thumb and handed her the smoothed out letter. It was almost good as new. 'Jaz, it's just that with this mortgage ... well, we want you to get a job.'

Jacinta stared. 'But that's ... I can't ... I have to start uni!'

'You can also start a job. Clara's got two.'

'Yeah, at a packing factory or something! She does that in the day and works in the café at night. I never see her these holidays.'

'Perfect. Ask her if they're any jobs going. You can work together.'

'It'll be fun!' chirped Carol.

For a future lawyer, Jacinta had walked straight into that one. Good thing Clara had already told her that the factory was full for the summer and she smugly passed this information on. Gary was not impressed.

‘If she can get two jobs, surely you can get one. You’ve got to admit, Jazzy: you’ve had it pretty easy.’ He threw a massive arm around Jacinta’s shoulders. ‘There’s plenty of Peggy Sue jobs out on the sites: picking up garbage, getting lunches and that. It’s about time you got off your arse and learned what it’s like to work for your money.’ He kissed her on the head, as if to seal the deal. ‘specially if you’re gonna complain about living here!’

Jacinta squirmed. ‘Come on, Dad, I’m really sorry I said that stuff. I didn’t mean it.’ She put her arms around her father’s broad chest. ‘I’m really sorry. I know what you and Mum went through to get us here. I don’t want to sound like a brat, I just don’t want to ruin my chances of getting into Law.’

Gary deflated a little. He breathed in to speak but she cut him off.

‘The thing is: if I study *really* hard this year, I can get second year entry to Law. Just one year of really concentrating on getting the right grades.’ She looked up at him. ‘But if I have to get a job then I might not be able to.’

He sighed. ‘I’m sorry sweetheart. Fact is, we can’t really afford not to have you paying your way anymore. Your mum’s doing nights and I’m taking on all the labourer jobs I can find just to cover this mortgage.’

Jacinta let go of him and slumped at her desk. A large hand ruffled her thin hair.

‘Sorry, Jaz. I know it’s tough, but them’s the breaks. Welcome to the real world, I suppose.’

*The real world.*

Jacinta slouched into her thin office chair and took a deep breath, imagining the stagnant Paramount air oozing into her lungs. Air which filtered like cigarette smoke through the plastic carpet, curled around her parents' work-stained bodies and leaked through the gap in the single-glazed window. Air which crawled across the dirt-patch yard and the fresh concrete housing estate, flowing like a lazy, hazy tide through the treatment plants, the junkyards, the abandoned farms and the interstate highways which engulfed Salisbury Hills. Air which swallowed the entire suburb like storm water over a blocked drain. Jacinta's oxygen didn't come from trees. It was breathed out by the hundred million weeds clawing their thorny, heathery way up through the brown sand of a thousand building sites. No one rich and powerful breathed this fuggy, dirt-flavoured air. No lawyers fell asleep and ate their breakfast to the guttering rumble of the freight trucks – a constant, Kenworth-powered reminder that this was somewhere you travelled past, not somewhere you arrived at.

She turned the Sydney Harbour mug over in her hands.



## 2

Learning.

Responsibility.

Success.

### Tranmere College Junior School

Henry watched as the sun dipped low behind the spindly plastic struts of the jungle-gym, spreading orange and grey stripes over the Junior School common play area. It had been less than two years since tall, thin, twelve-year-old Henry had loped around that rubberised playground, vaguely looking for someone to talk to. Middle School couldn't come fast enough then, but he had lasted exactly one year on the other side of the fence before the same boredom set in. Mr Jones, the Dean of the Middle School, had very quickly lost patience with Henry's elaborate extra-curricular projects (the terms 'engineering achievement' and 'cyber-vandalism' had been used in equal measure).

'Henry's apathy in class is due to very high intelligence,' Mr Jones had said to Henry's parents at a meeting in his office. Henry had thought they were there to discuss why Henry didn't do homework that just repeated what they had done in class that day. 'Children of Henry's ability can have a tendency not to do well when surrounded by their age group.'

Henry had squirmed in his chair. He didn't like the idea of not doing well.

‘They stuff around,’ continued Mr Jones bluntly, tapping his pen on his tie clip. ‘They see the regular class work as boring and beneath them, don’t you Henry?’

Henry didn’t know what to say. Mr Jones was normally quite nice, but now he seemed to be accusing Henry of something. He nodded, unsure if he was incriminating himself.

Mr Jones smiled. Henry’s mother, Myra, began to say something, but Mr Jones cut her off. ‘You’re right, of course. It is beneath you. It is boring!’ The whole family looked confused. Mr Jones came around and perched on his desk in front of Henry. ‘Henry, I know what gifted children are like. I’ve worked with many over the years. I’m sorry to say this, but it’s often a frustrating experience.’

‘Gifted?’ asked Myra.

‘Gifted is the way we educators like to put it, yes.’ He tapped his pen on his tie clip again. ‘Although sometimes a high intelligence can seem like less of a gift, if it’s not identified.’

‘What can we do?’

Mr Jones had taken a deep breath and began to explain how Henry’s life would be different.

The rest of Year Eight had rolled by in a blur: the extra homework, the meetings with his parents, the hushed conversations about being skipped ahead, the cringe-worthy Gifted and Talented Children’s Association barbeques/dork forums (‘dork *fora*’, Henry had realised later). Whatever they were, he didn’t want to hang around a bunch of precocious brats working out how to throw an egg over a wall without it breaking using just a shoebox and three balloons (while

the other nerds had been drawing crayon blue-prints on butcher's paper, Henry had half-inflated the balloons, packed them around the egg, thrown the shoebox over the wall and texted Myra to come and take him home). He just wanted to be with people like him. People he could talk to and who understood him. People with whom he could actually make friends. There had been no one like that in Junior School. To Henry's increasing frustration, he had found no one like that in Middle School either. And despite all the extension work Mr Jones piled on, Henry still didn't feel like he was working out the answers, so much as just typing them out. Even the Year Ten syllabi seemed like mostly busy work. Henry liked the word 'syllabi'. Actually, he didn't really care for that word in particular, he just liked using it and ones like it around his classmates because of the scrunch-faced expressions they made when he did. Because Mr Jones could understand. And now that Henry was taller than everyone, the bullies had stopped knuckle-punching him in the ribs for being a smartarse. Now they just gave him dirty looks. *Idiots.*

The happy, primary colours of the Junior School sank deeper into the blue-green shadows of the summer evening. Henry leaned against the fence which separated the Junior and Middle Schools and looked up at the window to Mr Jones' office. Myra and Terry had been in there for ages, talking to Mr Sloan the principal and working out what he was going to do next year.

Year Nine with his classmates was out of the question.

Even Year Ten seemed equally pointless.

Year Eleven seemed about right.

‘It’ll give you the grounding for Year Twelve the year after,’ Mr Jones had pointed out.

‘We take Year Twelve very seriously at Tranmere,’ Mr Sloan had added gravely. ‘Our results consistently top the state. We don’t want to put you under that kind of pressure without preparing you.’

Mr Jones nodded his agreement. ‘Gifted children who try to skip too far ahead can actually find themselves even more isolated.’

‘Oh dear,’ Myra had said, putting an arm around Henry’s shoulders. Henry had been asked to go for a walk while the adults ‘ironed out the details’. He had made it as far as the locked gate to the Junior School common play area. He couldn’t even have a shot on the swings for old time’s sake. He shrugged and took out his phone. The game he had been designing sparkled to life with a loud burp. It farted when turned off, like a ‘beginning and end’ motif. None of his classmates had noticed. He wished someone would. He was only a couple of minutes into the game when Mr Jones appeared.

‘Hey Henry. What are you playing? Tetris? Har har.’

‘No.’

He waited for Henry to elaborate. He didn’t. Mr Jones sighed and rubbed his eye with an index finger. ‘So what is it then?’

‘L.O.L. 360’ He sneaked a sideways glance. Mr Jones was regarding him with a raised eyebrow.

‘Laugh Out Loud 360?’

Henry grinned sheepishly.

‘Nice try, but I have actually worked with teenagers before. Seriously, what are you doing?’

‘Playing *Zombie Nation*.’

‘Is it good?’

Henry nodded modestly.

‘Did you just download it?’

Henry shook his head. ‘I designed it.’

Mr Jones frowned. ‘What?’

‘I got bored with all the other games, so I got some game app software and just started making my own. It’s pretty easy, once you know how.’

Mr Jones stared at him. ‘That’s amazing, Henry. Really. It’s quite amazing.’

Henry shrugged bashfully and pretended his ear was itchy. He never knew what to do with the admiration he craved; it made him feel like the dog who finally caught its own tail. He changed the subject. ‘Are Myra and Terry ready yet?’

‘No. They’re catching up with Mr Sloan. He and your dad went to Tranmere College together.’

Henry paused the game. ‘Were they in the same year?’

‘I think so.’

‘And now he’s the principal at the same school?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Terry’s a professor of engineering.’

‘Being the principal of such a prestigious school is a pretty important job, Henry.’

‘Did you know that Terry is on the board of directors of an engineering company?’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Did you know that Terry has four different patents?’

‘I knew that because you told me once.’

‘Did you know that Terry’s written two text books?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve read them.’

‘I know. You’ve mentioned this before. Did I tell you Mr Sloan has a  
Doctorate of Education?’

Henry un-paused the game and played on, fingers swiping, music playing, zombies exploding on the screen. The sun had almost disappeared behind the Junior School drama centre.

Mr Jones leant against the fence next to Henry. ‘It’s a big thing, you know: going straight from Year Eight to Year Eleven.’

Henry nodded.

‘You don’t have to if you don’t want to. You can still go into Year Nine or Ten with other kids your age and get Year Eleven work. It wouldn’t be difficult to organise.’

Henry hit pause again and looked up. ‘But it would be boring.’

Mr Jones nodded thoughtfully. ‘I just thought it might be easier for you to find some kindred spirits.’

‘In Year *Nine*?’ Henry rolled his eyes.

‘Senior School’s a very different place, Henry. Especially at Tranmere. It’s not like Junior and Middle. Kids are growing up, trying new things – adult things – becoming new people. The pressure’s on to do well and it’s important to

have a peer group you can relate to. Year Elevens are a very different crowd to Year Eights and Nines.’

‘I know. That’s why I’m going to Year Eleven.’

Mr Jones sighed and glanced up at his office window. ‘Henry, what do you think about getting a regular tutor? Other than your mum, I mean?’

Henry rolled his eyes. ‘Myra’s not my tutor, she just bugs me about doing homework.’

‘That’s not entirely the case, Henry.’ Mr Jones tutted. ‘Your mum’s been instrumental in getting you to the educational level you’re at now. You’re lucky to have a mother who’s a high school teacher.’

‘She hasn’t taught high school for years. She’s been too busy getting her PhD.’

‘Nonetheless, we were thinking of getting a Year Twelve, someone who knows the ropes. Someone from Tranmere might be ...’

Henry cut him off. ‘Someone from uni would be better.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Henry sighed and reminded himself that things that were logical and obvious to him weren’t always that way for others, even Mr Jones. ‘A tutor from uni would have *finished* high school, and so they would actually be *smarter* than a Year Twelve and so *therefore* they would be a better tutor.’ He paused the game and looked up at Mr Jones. ‘You wouldn’t get someone who hadn’t got their driver’s licence yet to teach you to drive, would you?’

Mr Jones frowned, obviously unconvinced. ‘I must say, I hadn’t thought of it like that.’

Henry went back to his game as the last rays of sunlight disappeared from the tallest posts of the jungle-gym.



### 3

University

Industry

*Career*

Krane-Billington Engineering Scholarships: Preparing mining engineers today for industry tomorrow.

**Clause 1c.** Scholarship candidates will be short-listed from invitations based on Year 12 results and required to sit an exam. Successful candidates will be chosen on the basis of a subsequent interview and project set by the Krane-Billington scholarship committee.

**Clause 2b.** Less than a 75% or Distinction average during the term of the degree means that the Scholarship holder forfeits payments and must return all Krane-Billington sponsored study materials.

Jacinta had pictured uni Orientation Week as a sausage sizzle and a couple of information sessions hosted by the super-helpful students trawling for friends. ‘This is a library, this is a computer and the toilets are over there. Hey! Let’s all go get a snag and bread!’ She was right about the sausages and wrong about everything else. O Week was like a rock festival. A DJ pumped music through the flocks of brightly-dressed students who were drinking beer, playing hacky-sack, milling around flyer-covered trestle-tables and, as it turned out, eating sausages.

Jacinta spotted Clara and her boyfriend, Mattie, standing in line for the engineering pub crawl. They looked tired. Clara leaned sideways to balance the weight of a heavy satchel. The black cords of her work apron dangled from the bag like the strands of loose hair floating from her otherwise immaculate ponytail. Mattie had both thumbs hooked under the straps of his backpack, shirt sleeves

tight around his tanned biceps. Jacinta always noticed his footballer's body first and his handsome country-boy features second. She wasn't the only one. He gave a grin and nod to a group of girls sitting nearby and Clara rapped his elbow with her knuckles.

*Never too tired to act like a dickhead.*

Clara and Mattie had been Paramount High's golden couple. Looks and brains, they had it made. They were like real-life celebrities walking the halls. But something had happened after Year Twelve exams and suddenly they were moving out together. They rented a little orange brick house in a neighbourhood packed with warehouses and workshops. Jacinta had only visited her best friend once because the golden couple were always working. Clara waited tables and packed boxes and Mattie stacked shelves. When Jacinta had asked about support from the parentals, Clara's 'Do Not Go There' glare had cut the conversation short. That had been a fun visit.

At least she and Clara were both doing Arts together. Clara had finally told her what course she was doing over a rushed phone call the week before uni started.

'Arts?' Jacinta had replied, after catching Clara between her factory day shift and café night shift.

'Yeah, you know: something to do.' The rattle of Clara's make-up bag told Jacinta that her friend was only half paying attention. She hung up, secretly smug that all Clara's study and summer schools and private tutors had left them level pegged.

A tired scowl pulled down on Clara's genetically perfect face and Jacinta was suddenly reminded of her own mother after a nightshift. Clara normally held

herself like a dancer: broad-shouldered and sure footed. Today she slouched under the same saggy weight that Carol McDonald carried around her shoulders when she shuffled through the door at nine a.m. on the way to bed.

It looked like moving out and starting uni at the same time was starting to take its toll.

‘Clara!’ She waved and joined them in the line. ‘How’s work?’

‘Sucks. As usual. They’re being real arseholes about changing my shifts around for uni.’ Clara worked at the kind of café that prided itself on its expensive coffee and the tight t-shirts of its female staff. Clara got a lot of hours. ‘You got a job yet, Jaz?’

‘Nope. Mum and Dad were cool about it for a while. I reckon they felt guilty, asking their own kid for help with the mortgage. But Dad’s starting to get stuck into me.’ Jacinta hung her head and the line shuffled forward. ‘Anyway, how are you going to go at night-fill with all the engineering homework, Mattie?’

Mattie gazed down at Jacinta and turned on his rising-sun smile. Mattie was her best friend’s boyfriend, but his smile had always affected Jacinta. Broader than it should have been, lop-sided if you really looked, pale blue eyes behind dark lashes. A smile that promised to share a secret.

‘I quit.’

‘Eh?’ Jacinta gawped. That was just the kind of irresponsible thing that Mattie always got away with, using his looks to make it okay. ‘Quit? Why? How are you going to pay your rent?’

Mattie just grinned his glorious, smart-arsed grin and said nothing. Clara answered for him.

‘Didn’t I tell you? He got an engineering scholarship.’

‘Oh yeah!’ Mattie gave himself two large thumbs up.

Jacinta frowned. ‘In first year? How?’

Mattie puffed out his chest. ‘This mining company headhunted me ‘coz of my Year Twelve score. I get a stipend through my degree and a guaranteed job at the end. And while I study there’s internships, placements, all sorts of goodies.’ He brushed back his blond mane, t-shirt riding up above his navel, showing a set of abs you could trace with your finger. Jacinta was definitely not staring. ‘So, I’m pretty much set.’

‘As long as you keep your marks up,’ added Clara, playfully slapping his exposed tummy. Jacinta looked away.

‘Oof. Yeah, they check your results pretty often. And we have to do a fair bit of extra work with one of the professors who works with the company.’ Mattie slumped down and looked troubled. ‘You only get one warning and you’ve got to keep a distinction *average*.’

‘How much do they give you?’ Jacinta was still stuck on the ‘Paid To Study’ angle.

He winced. ‘Enough to live on. Just.’

Clara cut in. ‘It’s bugger all, actually.’

‘It covers my rent.’

‘*Most* of your rent.’

‘They pay for my textbooks and give me a laptop, though.’

‘Which you have to give back if your grades drop.’

‘They do pay my fees.’

‘When you finish the degree. Otherwise you’re paying off your study debt, just like the rest of us.’

‘Don’t forget the—’ Mattie began, but Clara cut him off.

‘I’m going to keep working so Mattie can keep studying and earning his scholarship. If he drops a single assignment then bang goes the money.’

‘And the internships. And the job at the end. And everything else.’ Mattie added.

‘What will you do for rent if that happens? Won’t you still have to study heaps?’

‘That won’t happen.’ Mattie took Clara’s hand. ‘This is a massive opportunity, a golden ticket. We’re not losing this chance.’

The line shuffled forward and Jacinta fell in behind them. She wound a strand of hair tightly around her finger and yanked it out. She knew Mattie had a science brain, but a free degree? A free job? It wasn’t fair. No top law firm would do that for a lowly first year, let alone someone who wasn’t even *in* Law yet. Jacinta didn’t plan to stay in Arts with Clara. She had decided to go for second year entry into Law, and that meant a distinction average, for the whole year. Clara might be upset at being left behind, but this was Jacinta’s career. The line moved forward and Jacinta regarded the back of the Golden Couple’s beautiful heads. Sure, they were doing it tough now, but Clara’s mum had dropped the price of a new car on getting her daughter into uni and a mining company was bankrolling Mattie’s study. Jacinta’s parents were neck-deep in a massive mortgage and so she had to find a job, get distinctions for every assignment and still drive two hours a day to uni and back.

They found a spot on the university lawns among the hundreds of other students and sprawled out in the sun with their dollar sausages and cans of free energy drink.

‘So, when do you start paying rent?’ asked Clara.

‘Soon as I get a job.’

‘I know a Coles that needs a night-filler.’ Mattie chuckled, lying back in the grass.

‘Yeah, why don’t you go for that?’ said Clara.

‘I don’t want to work through the night *and* try and study.’

‘I had to,’ Mattie pointed out helpfully.

Jacinta sneered. ‘Yeah, but now you don’t.’

‘So? I’m still studying for my money.’

Mattie and Jacinta eyed each other across Clara’s satchel.

‘Give it a rest, you two,’ said Clara in a bored voice. ‘Jacinta, just go get a job. The student employment office is next to the Humanities building.’

‘Prime location,’ sniggered Mattie.

Jacinta scowled. Clara loved to be the organiser and Jacinta had always played along. It reminded her of Jayden as a little kid, making up rules for his car games. But now that Clara’s organising had levelled out the difference between their Year Twelve marks, it was suddenly a lot harder to swallow. Jacinta resolved *not* to look for a job that day. Just because.

Clara didn’t notice Jacinta sulking and poked Mattie in the stomach with a sharp finger. ‘Mattie. Lectures start in ten minutes. I’m taking the car tonight for work. Get going.’

Jacinta groaned. ‘Jeez, Clara. This is O Week. O for *Orientation*? Proper lectures don’t start until *next* week.’

‘Jaz ...’ began Clara, but Jacinta cut her off.

‘Come on, Clars! Just slack off once in a while. Enjoy the sunshine, eh?’

The other two stared at her in surprise as she flopped back on the warm grass and closed her eyes. Sometimes Clara needed a bit of straightening out herself. That’s why they had remained such good friends – Jacinta was one of the few people who didn’t hold up Clara as the Goddess of Everything. She didn’t idolise Mattie either, but that was mostly because he was so full of himself, rather than her ability to ignore his dusky blue eyes and football-sculpted body. She began to idly wonder what he got up to during his night-fill shift, unchecked in a big empty supermarket, lifting heavy boxes, muscles straining against a thin, white shirt ... but it just reminded her of having to look for a job.

It would be okay. She wouldn’t have to work stacking shelves in the silent canyons of a closed Coles. She would hold out for a better job, one that actually pointed towards a legal career. Clerical work, or tutoring maybe. Something brainy with paperwork. There were bound to be law firms that needed office girls. She could make coffee, do the photocopying, maybe even help out with small cases.

‘Jaz.’

Somewhere prestigious, but still down-to-earth.

Somewhere she could put on her application for second year entry into Law.

Somewhere they would recognise hard work and determination. No helping hands, no private tutors.

‘*Jacinta.*’ Clara poked her in the ribs.

‘Ow! What?’

‘Lectures start *this* week. Don’t tell me you haven’t been to any.’

The generous law firm evaporated.

‘Eh?’

‘You are unbelievable. Lectures start *this* week. This is when they outline the semester for you and give you preliminary readings and ...’ Clara trailed off, staring at her in disbelief. ‘Jesus! How could you not know?’

Mattie gave a braying laugh.

‘What are you talking about? This is just the orientation week, isn’t it? I thought proper lessons started next week?’

“‘Proper lessons’? What are *you* talking about? Have you even checked your timetable?’

‘Sort of. They sent me an email.’

‘Did you check *that*?’ Clara was not letting go.

‘*Yes,*’ huffed Jacinta. ‘Our printer just ran out of paper is all.’ *And toner. And whatever the flashing orange light means.* ‘I wrote all the dates on my offer letter, but I’m pretty sure they start next week though ...’ She trailed off and began digging through her bag, hoping Clara would drop the subject. To her horror, she realised that she was digging through reams of glossy brochures from the Law School induction. It was the only session she had been to that week. Her fingers scrabbled around shiny, successful graduates shaking hands with shiny, handsome lawyers as she searched her bag for the crumpled piece of paper with the Arts office letterhead. It was probably where she had last seen it: face down on her desk among her collection of law firm stationery. Taking study notes on



letterhead paper was like going to the Law induction: just a good motivational technique. Most firms were quite willing to send out stationery samples.

Especially to a motivated young women from an underprivileged area. Who had a troubled family. And a disabled brother. Who had cancer. Even though just being fifteen wasn't *technically* a disability. And Jayden didn't have cancer. It wasn't like those big firms got where they were by not stretching the truth, was it? She dug further and her phone beeped. Speak of the technically-not-disabled devil.

**'Jaz Ive got a big essay to do can u help me 2nite'.**

Feeling a pinch of guilt about the cancer-disability-stationery thing, she texted back **'ok but start it yrself'** and began emptying her bag, careful not to spill any incriminating brochures. 'It's in here somewhere ...'

'Use my laptop.' Mattie held out a small, sleek computer with a mining company logo on it. She grimaced at him and opened her email.

'Well? When do your tutes start?'

There was no getting around it. 'Now. In ten minutes.'

Mattie gave a self-satisfied chuckle as he took his computer back and stood up. 'That makes two of us. I'll see you ladies later.' He shot Clara with imaginary pistols and blew her a kiss. Clara smiled and Jacinta caught the briefest question and answer flit between them. 'You're a freak. See you tonight.'

Mattie nodded and left. Jacinta watched his tanned calves flexing in the sun as he walked away. Yes, he might have been very attractive if he weren't so full of himself. Very attractive indeed. She pushed away the thought and stood up to go.

'When's your tutes, Clara? Have you got English now too?'

Clara remained sitting. She pushed back her thick hair and smoothed it with the palm of her hand. ‘Jazzy, I’ve got something to tell you.’

## 4

# **GT POWER**

## **You've gotta get one**

Jacinta McDonald, QC staggered from the courtroom in shock. The judge (a part-timer no doubt on loan from traffic court) had savaged her in front of the jury and the defence. Accusing Australia's youngest QC of poor preparation – the very idea! Jacinta's pre-court cram sessions were already the stuff of legend and the results spoke for themselves. No, it was the judge at fault, allowing the case to wander in all sorts of nonsensical directions, bringing in evidence of questionable relevance and permitting all kinds of wild conjecture and hearsay.

She had been made to look a fool, there was no arguing there. Even the best young legal mind in the country couldn't avoid the mud in a pig fight. She could, however, take significant steps to neutralise any further impediment to her career.

She strode off with steely resolve. She would fix this today or she wasn't J. McDonald QC. Her phone rang. She hoped it was Clara, ringing to apologise. It wasn't.

'Mum.'

'Hi love, how's your big first day?'

'Shit. I just went to the first English tute and it turns out we're supposed to have read the whole book already! And people had!'

'Oh. Bugger. How come you didn't know?'

Jacinta plucked a strand of thin hair from her forehead. ‘Apparently there was some intro lecture I missed – but that’s like, two hundred and fifty pages in two days or something. It’s complete crap. And we’re supposed to read that much every week!’

‘Well ... it is uni, Jaz. It’s not like high school.’

‘I’m changing classes anyway. The tutor was a total prick and made me feel like an idiot. I’ll never get second year entry into Law with someone like that after me. You know he asked me questions even *after* I said I hadn’t read the book?’

‘Jaz. What’s so important about this Law thing?’

Jacinta slowed her pace. It began in primary school. Games of When-You-Grow-Up played under a torn pergola.

*I’m gonna be a lawyer.*

Always the same mantra.

*What are you gonna be?*

*I’m gonna be a lawyer.*

She wondered what pretty, little, nine year old Clara would have said. Probably florist, or primary school teacher. Certainly not ‘lawyer’. Lawyers were the richest, most powerful people anyone had met in real life. They could save your house or destroy your family, and they always got paid.

Since her parents were neither divorced nor criminals (or divorced criminals, which sometimes happened), Jacinta didn’t see a non-TV lawyer until Year Nine. For Careers Day, the sweaty careers counsellor/woodwork teacher, Mr Dolan, had found an ex-Paramount student who was a real life barrister. Jacinta had expected a middle-aged man in a gangster suit with gold rings and sweat-

stains. The woman who strutted to the front of the class was barely thirty. She had curly, blonde hair, a smart charcoal suit, red high heels and a whistle-thin gap between her perfect white teeth. She had a deep, breathy voice and talked like a check-out chick on smoko.

‘I used to live north of here,’ she drawled. ‘Got the train to Paramount station, before they closed it.’ She talked about studying hard and getting into Law. Jacinta still got a tingle when she remembered hearing her speak. Up to that point, Jacinta had known she was destined for more than a shift work bad back, like her parents. But she didn’t know how she was going to get to wear a suit and be respected. This glamorous career woman from Paramount was the answer. She and Jacinta had walked the same streets, caught the same train, shopped at the same Coles! And look what she had become. As the woman talked about hard work and dedication, Jacinta saw herself in those high heels and that suit, striding out of Paramount all the way to those buzzing legal firms and packed courtrooms.

‘Anyone got any questions?’

Clara had put her hand up. ‘You don’t talk like a lawyer.’

The woman gave a great bellowing laugh. ‘Ha! You’re right about that. There’s a lot of formal things you gotta say in court, but, as a girl, it’s amazing what you can get out of people when they reckon you’re just a blonde bimbo.’ She and Clara grinned at each other. Jacinta winced at the memory.

‘How much do you get paid?’ someone had called out.

‘Sensible questions!’ roared Mr Dolan. ‘If you’re not—’

‘It’s fine, Mr Dolan.’ The lawyer’s friendly voice was suddenly the biggest in the room. ‘I’m used to the boys shouting out – wouldn’t be a good

lawyer if I wasn't!' She flashed her brilliant smile and Mr Dolan almost apologised for interrupting.

She was good.

Not missing a beat, she turned back to the class. 'Let me put it this way: you can earn a lot, but you'll always work more than you earn. Always.'

Someone else called out. 'What kind of car do you drive?'

She grinned her sassy gap-toothed grin. 'Cherry-red GTS. My little toy.'

The boys at the back murmured with admiration.

The control. The confidence. The power that woman transmitted like radio waves. That's what drove Jacinta. She had only been about ten years older than Jacinta was now, but drifting through crowds of chattering first years, it seemed like a lifetime away.

'Jaz? You still there?'

'I always wanted to be a lawyer, Mum.'

'What's wrong, Jazzy? You sound upset.'

'Nothing,' she lied, grinding a sob between her teeth. She wanted to let it all out, but there was nowhere to cry in a university. Everywhere was public. She kept walking, along corridors, down stairwells, through courtyards.

'All right, love. If you say so.' Her mum sounded tired. She must have just woken up from her post-nightshift nap. She would be sitting out the back in her grey bathrobe, smoking and tutting at the state of the garden. 'This garden's a bloody tragedy,' she said, right on cue.

'Mum, I've gotta go. Did you want something?'

She heard the quiet pop of Carol puffing on her cigarette before she answered. ‘Oh, yeah, I forgot: your dad’s started asking around about jobs for you.’

‘I don’t want to be picking up garbage and getting pies! Dad always said those Peggy Sue jobs were for retards who can’t work a hammer.’

‘Then go to the uni employment office or something. He’s getting pissed off about you not working yet.’

Jacinta rolled her eyes. ‘Yeah, okay. I gotta go. Bye.’

Carol’s tired smile faded from the phone screen. Jacinta looked around and found herself beside a building she thought she recognised. She approached a group of students her age gathered for a lecture and instantly retreated. It was the Law School. The same place she had gone to that stupid induction and picked up those stupid flyers. The same induction Clara had gone to later the same day.

Because Clara had gotten into Law.

‘Why? How?’ Jacinta had spluttered, forgetting about being late for her first tute.

‘It was confirmed last week,’ said Clara snippily. ‘Sort of a final round offer.’

‘Since when have *you* wanted to be a lawyer?’

‘Since always. I just never thought I could until last year. I even got an unpaid internship.’

‘Where?’

‘At a place run by this woman who used to go to Paramount.’

‘The blonde one? Who came to careers day in Year Nine?’

Clara nodded. Jacinta was shaken to the core. It was like watching Clara morph into a grown up right in front of her. It wasn't right. Jacinta was the driven career woman; Clara was the sassy, salt-of-the-earth best friend who Jacinta would save from an unfulfilling early marriage. Something else suddenly occurred to her. 'When?'

Clara dropped her eyes. 'Over the summer.'

'But you ... oh.' Jacinta frowned and gnawed a sliver of skin from her cuticle. 'Why did you tell me you were working in a factory? Why did you lie to me?'

Clara stood up and brushed the grass from her pants. 'I didn't want to tell you because I knew you'd be like this.'

'Like what?' Jacinta threw her arms out. 'What am I being like?'

'Jaz, I just told you that I got into one of the hardest courses in uni and you haven't even said congratulations.' And with that, Clara heaved her bag over her shoulder and stormed away. Jacinta wanted to chase after her, shove her aside, take her stupid textbooks and sit in the chair in that first law tutorial that was rightfully hers. Instead, she turned and scurried off to her own tute, late and unprepared, the feeling that she had been wronged jammed into her like a three-corner jack.

She wasn't allowed to switch tutes. Even after she spent five straight minutes explaining to the shiny, ponytailed office lady how her learning style wasn't compatible with her current tutor. She tactfully left out the fact that he reminded her of an albino praying mantis.



‘Sorry!’ trilled Ponytail. ‘But the only one you can make it to is over-enrolled as it is. Hello, Craig! You’ve scared one off already!’

Jacinta’s tutor stalked into the office, eyes bugged, Adam’s apple bouncing. He stared evenly at Jacinta as she turned red with embarrassment. ‘Ah,’ he said at last. ‘I see.’

‘There aren’t any other spaces. I told her already,’ said Ponytail helpfully. She seemed to think that this was wonderful.

Craig nodded as though she had just shared something very intellectual. He laid a reassuring hand on Jacinta’s shoulder ‘Not to worry,’ he said with fake concern, ‘you’ve got a whole week to read the next book.’

‘Plenty of time!’ added Ponytail.

Jacinta shrugged Craig’s hand away and rushed out, crashing straight into a woman carrying a tower of folders.

‘Sorry!’ cried Jacinta, trying to catch the avalanche of paper tumbling around them. The woman stood very still for a moment, her arms held out where she had been carrying the folders. She appeared to be counting. Jacinta dove to the floor, scrambling to pick up the mess. ‘Sorry!’

Craig picked up a folder that was blocking his route to the door and placed it in the woman’s still outstretched hands. ‘You should invest in one of those hand trucks, Myra. I hear they’re quite “handy”!’ He laughed at his own joke and left. The woman seemed to come out of her trance and rolled her eyes as she stooped to pick up the rest of her papers.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Jacinta repeated. ‘I didn’t see you.’

‘It’s fine.’ The woman gave Jacinta a small smile. ‘At least you’re helping.’ She glared in the direction of the departed Craig. She was actually a lot

older than Jacinta had first thought. She wore a long, colourful dress and her auburn hair looked styled and expensive, but her eyes gave it away. They were like Carol's: tissue-paper wrinkles at the corners that didn't go away when she stopped smiling. As the woman bent close to gather some papers, Jacinta smelled her perfume: a faint, floral tang, like a garden you couldn't quite see into. She thanked Jacinta for her help and stacked the folders on the counter. Ponytail looked slightly miffed at the invasion of space, but before she could speak, the woman held up a sheet of paper.

'Do you mind if I put up a notice about Henry's tutoring?'

While Ponytail hemmed and hawed and mumbled about approval, Jacinta pretended to be looking for something in her bag. She would wait until the notice was pinned up and take down the number.

She was going to be a tutor.

## 5

Designed for power.

Engineered for prestige.

Tranmere College was a collection of heritage-listed buildings built from red bricks and pale slate. They spread through the school's gardens and playing fields like jewelled fingers sliding through a bear-skin rug. Its students wore tailored navy blue blazers and arrived in cars worth double Terry's annual salary.

In Junior and Middle School, Henry had arrived at the back of the grounds. He had drifted along, part of the blue and grey swarm funnelling into the classroom buildings and award-winning playgrounds which bore the names of the old scholars who paid for them.

The Senior School entrance was around the front and a very different affair.

Myra's Mercedes crawled along Tranmere Avenue towards the looming arch of the front gate. Through it, Henry could see the paved driveway curve around the pristine football oval towards a majestic castle glowing in the morning sun: the Senior College building. Henry could count the number of times he had been near it on one hand and still have fingers left to count the number of times he had actually seen its wood panelled corridors. Today he was being welcomed inside. He watched the young men and women strolling past his window, all

tailored blazers and confidence, and he felt a spark. For the first time ever he felt as though he belonged.

As the Mercedes reached the archway, he turned to Myra. ‘Let me out here.’

Myra dithered at the wheel, unsure whether to pull over or go through the gate. ‘Don’t you want me to drive you up?’

‘No. I want to walk.’ Behind them a car tooted. Henry clenched his teeth. Some of the senior students were looking. ‘Myra, stop! Just let me out!’

Myra huffed and swerved out of the drive entrance, bouncing over the gutter and coming to a stop. ‘You could have told me a little earlier.’

‘Sorry. I just want to walk up. Get my bearings. Clear my head.’ He opened the door, but Myra stopped him.

‘Excuse me. Kiss.’

He quickly shut the door and pecked her on the cheek.

‘Do you remember your homeroom?’

He rolled his eyes. Myra ruffled his hair. ‘I’ll pick you up here at 3:30.’

Henry’s heart dropped. ‘But I can just catch the bus!’

Myra gave him a kindly smile. ‘I arranged my teaching this semester so I could pick you up – save you the walk. I’ll be driving right by here anyway.’

Henry looked at his shoes. Kids who caught the bus made friends. He knew this. Kids who got picked up had to stand in the loading zone, waiting for their harried parents. That was just in Year Eight. This was Year Eleven. The school carpark was full of P-plates. Henry would be the only Year Eleven whose mum still picked him up while his classmates took themselves home. The spark

flickered. The feeling of belonging wavered. Henry got slowly out of the car, not saying goodbye.

As he followed the school drive around to the Senior College building he heard a low rumbling. In the car park next to the oval a dark grey sports car was inching its low front spoiler over a speed hump. It looked like a shard of polished granite fired from a catapult.

*What sort of teacher drives that?*

The thundering exhaust echoed around the school buildings as it prowled slowly into a parking space. The kids who weren't studiously ignoring it were openly staring, elbowing each other and nodding approvingly. Henry drifted over for a better look, as interested in the driver as the car. In his experience, teachers drove boring cars. What teacher would drive this machine to the first day of school? Maybe Year Eleven was going to be a challenge after all.

The car cruised to a halt directly in front of him and Henry admired its form as its specifications scrolled deliciously through his mind. The rumbling stopped when the engine switched off, but a breezy whirring continued to emanate from the bonnet.

Henry nudged a boy next to him. 'That noise means that the fans are still cooling the engine down so that the change in temperature doesn't damage the turbo-chargers.' The boy frowned and walked off. Henry peered through the windshield.

The door opened and a tall, blond man got out. He wore a white shirt and a pale blue tie, just like Henry's.

'Hey cock-knob!' he yelled to a boy with a pale, sharky face and blistering acne who was striding up the carpark. 'You owe me fifty bucks!'

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Shark Face, clearly impressed. ‘They actually bought you a Supra for your birthday!’

‘Yup. And I drove it to school on the first day, so pay up.’

‘Do you even have your Ls yet?’ The boy slapped a crumpled fifty-dollar note into the man’s outstretched hand.

‘I’ll get ‘em in a month. After my sixteenth.’

Henry frowned. *Sixteen?* The boy looked twenty. He was enormous. A full head taller than Henry, with a dark shadow of stubble around his chin and a voice deep enough to sell four-wheel-drives on television. *Muddy* four-wheel-drives.

‘You’re gonna totally get busted by the teachers, or the cops, or *someone*.’

‘Yeah right!’ the boy scoffed. ‘How about a photo for The Wall?’

‘Oh yeah, totally. Totally Wall-worthy.’ Shark Face took out a camera phone and stood back to get the whole car in. ‘How’d you get it past your parents anyway?’

‘They’re away, duh! Remember?’ The giant posed giving a double thumbs up. ‘Mum’s back for my party, but Dad’s gonna be in Canberra heaps this year. I reckon that’s why they got me the car.’

‘Guilt-trippin’?’

‘You know it.’

‘Score!’ The two high-fived.

‘I’m shitting myself about driving it home in uniform though. I reckon I might put up some P-plates or something.’

‘What are you looking at?’

Henry suddenly realised that he was standing three feet away from the pair, staring as though they were a museum exhibit and not two fellow classmates. Two classmates who now stepped forward and towered over him with looks of utter bemusement on their faces.

‘Let me guess,’ smiled the larger boy, tapping his chin thoughtfully. ‘First day, buddy?’

‘Yes. First day.’ Henry relaxed. He was starting a conversation. Year Elevens weren’t as far ahead as Mr Jones had made out. They even had common interests. He nodded at the car. ‘So is the engine a stock GTE or a —’

‘Looks like you’re lost,’ interrupted Shark Face. ‘Middle School’s around the back.’

‘What?’ Henry frowned. ‘I’m —’

Suddenly a hand the size of a wood vice gathered up the skin around Henry’s sensitive nipple, squeezed, twisted and pulled down. ‘Nipple Cripple!’ cried the giant. Henry buckled over, keening and clawing uselessly at the human rabbit trap clamped to his chest.

‘Welcome to Tranmere, newbie!’ laughed his attacker, striding past Henry’s crumpled frame. ‘That’s one to me,’ he said to Shark Face. ‘Most fresher titty-twisters before home-time wins.’

‘You’re on. Girls count double.’

Henry watched through tears as they walked away laughing. He clutched his throbbing nipple and ground his teeth, trying to swallow the sob. ‘I’m not a Junior,’ he groaned. ‘I’m a Year Eleven.’

They didn’t hear him.





## 6

### ***Get home safe:* City Cross Taxis**

Jacinta knew it was a pub-crawl, but she had imagined that a crowd with some of the highest Year Twelve scores in the country would at least be a *weeny* bit sophisticated. Instead, the hundred or so yellow t-shirt-clad engineering students skulled and puked their way through bar after bar with no sign of slowing down. Not exactly the elite upper-crust.

Jacinta would have suggested leaving after the first pub, but she had never seen Clara so agitated. Even the weather seemed like a touchy subject, let alone Clara's secret internship. Jacinta still wasn't sure whether it was entirely Clara's fault for lying to her all summer, or if Clara had a point about her reacting like a jealous cow. The way Jacinta saw it, she had been completely shafted. Clara's extra marks had been paid for by her mum's credit card, as simply as if she had ordered a law degree from the menu at the Year Twelve results office. But tonight didn't seem to be the night to bring it up. Four hours in, Clara was yet to leave Mattie's side. She barged into every conversation he was part of, loudly counted every drink and introduced herself to every girl they met, bumped into or walked past as 'Mattie's girlfriend'.

The crawl finished in a sports bar crammed with massive aquariums, trophy cabinets and televisions. Caricatures of square-headed sportsmen grinned toothily from the walls between signed cricket bats in glass boxes. Mattie muttered something about needing a leak and slithered off into the crowd, leaving Clara and Jacinta to buy the first round.

Clara remained on high alert, scanning the packed bar for her boyfriend as they weaved through a forest of yellow t-shirts, looking for a place to sit. ‘Could he take any longer?’ she shouted over a song that had been a number one hit nine years ago.

‘It’s only been five minutes!’ Jacinta laughed nervously and Clara glared. ‘There’s a booth.’

They sat under a framed green and gold bikini which was signed on the right cup by someone who punctuated the ‘i’s in her name with love hearts.

‘I’m calling him.’ Clara plonked her drink on the table and opened her handbag. She wielded her mobile like a tetchy ninja – out, dial, listen – all one fluid, violent motion. ‘Where the hell is he?’

Jacinta bit her lip. This was beginning to get serious. ‘Clara.’ Clara ignored her.

Jacinta gently pulled the phone away from her friend’s ear. ‘Clara, is everything okay?’

Clara frowned absently and tried to listen again, but Jacinta carefully squeezed the red ‘Hang Up’ button.

‘*Clara.*’

Clara looked up. Her elegantly made-up eyes looked red and tired. She sighed and dropped the phone back into her handbag. ‘Sorry, Jaz. I just ...’ She pushed back her thick hair and smoothed it with the palm of her hand as she scanned the drinking, dancing, stumbling crowd again. Men who looked like Mattie were everywhere, but Mattie himself was nowhere to be seen.

‘Hey. Stuff Mattie, he can look after himself.’ Jacinta stretched out along the booth and gave a relaxed sigh. ‘Good to be sitting down, eh? Weight off the feet?’ She slipped off her shoes and tossed them on the floor.

‘We shouldn’t be here,’ said Clara, almost to herself. ‘Mattie’s got this training induction thing all day tomorrow. If he drops an assignment because of this pub crawl ... we’re in trouble.’

‘He’ll be fine,’ said Jacinta, suddenly feeling stupid with her bare feet on the seat. ‘He always is.’

Clara took a deep breath and picked up her drink. ‘Bloody Mattie. I feel like I’ve run a marathon.’

‘Heeeyyy, that’s the way. Cheers!’ They clinked glasses and Jacinta took a long sip. An uneasy truce hung between them like a fragile curtain. ‘Did I tell you I got a job? I’m tutoring – helping this lecturer’s kid with his homework.’

‘Is he a bit slow or something?’

‘Nah, he’s supposed to be really smart. Skipped from Year Eight to Year Eleven.’

Clara frowned. ‘Why does he need help with his homework?’

‘Apparently he spends most of his time buggerising around and coasting on his natural talent.’

‘Sounds familiar.’ She gave Jacinta a meaningful smile.

‘Yeah, yeah, who better to tutor him, eh? Anyway – they wanted someone to coach him a bit, teach him a few study habits.’

‘And they hired *you*?’ Clara’s laughter failed to cover her amazement. The truce wavered.

‘Shut up! I know how to study! You’re not the only one who knows what tutoring’s like. I’ve helped Jayden with his homework for years!’

‘Yeah, but, Jaz, come *on!*’ scoffed Clara. ‘You *never* studied! You were always the one giving me shit for starting assignments more than a day before the deadline!’

Jacinta rolled her eyes. ‘Fat lot of good it did you! You never even started to—’

The two friends locked eyes. The truce frayed at the edges. This was the first time Jacinta had even come close to putting it into words. Before the private tutor and holiday classes, Clara was just the popular bimbo who tried hard. Her dad was a minimum support payment drop-kick who had left when she was ten and so, at the beginning of Year Twelve, Clara’s mum had taken out a loan. Within six months Clara was the poster child for academic success. While her mum worked evenings at a DVD store, Jacinta’s parents chuckled about ‘signing their lives away’ on piles of mortgage papers and housing estate contracts. Clara’s marks climbed and Jacinta’s stayed the same.

Jacinta sipped her drink and looked away. ‘Sorry.’

Clara sipped her own and looked in the opposite direction. ‘It’s okay.’ The truce held. For now.

‘Besides, I don’t think it’s all about the homework. I got the impression from talking to his mum that she’s worried about him skipping ahead. They kind of want someone to – I dunno – keep an eye on him. You remember what Year Eleven was like. I don’t reckon his parents have a clue.’

‘Fair enough.’ Clara took another sip of her Coke and her eyes wandered over the crowd.

‘I start tomorrow.’

‘Cool ...’ Clara checked her phone. Jacinta rubbed her eyes. Her dignity still hurt, but she was desperate to ask Clara what a real law firm was like. She knew they weren’t really packed with wealthy supermodels trading witty insults and making tough speeches, but surely there must have been *some* glamour, some juicy power struggle. The Paramount lawyer woman must have stabbed a few backs to get where she was. At least they would have taken Clara out to a fancy cocktail bar on the company tab once or twice. That’s what Jacinta would do when *she* was a top-flight lawyer: take the piss-poor intern out for a taste of the better things to come. The only thing Clara had talked about since uni started was how *hard* she was working and how she had so many *responsibilities*: her *job*, her *readings*, Mattie’s *scholarship*. All with a knowingly raised eyebrow, as if Jacinta had no idea what hard work was all about. This from the girl living off her boyfriend’s scholarship and studying first year Law courtesy of her mum’s credit card.

*Let Clara make the conversation, she thought sullenly. See if she wants to find out what it’s really like to work for your rent.*

Clara rose from her seat and squinted around the room. Any second now she would run off and leave Jacinta with nothing but her sweaty flats and watery Coke for company.

‘So how’s it going in the new place?’ Jacinta blurted angrily.

Clara beamed like a teacher calling on a favourite student. ‘Oh, we’re going great – excellent. *Really* excellent.’

Twenty minutes later, Jacinta was sorry she had asked.

Clara's home life was great. Of course it bloody was. Better than great, it was *fantastic*. Perfect And On Track. Since moving in together, she and Mattie had both worked their arses off to pay the rent and save up money. And they desperately needed money.

'Your mum cut you off? Why?'

Clara rolled her eyes and put on the high, squeaky voice she used to mimic her mother: ' "I didn't pay all this money for you to hitch yourself to some *man!*" Just 'cause her marriage ended in tears.'

'Didn't your dad cheat on her?'

'Yup,' Clara said, matter-of-factly and put on her mum's voice again, screeching ' "That's the thanks I get! Twelve years of marriage and saggy boobs!" ' She juggled her chest and made Jacinta giggle. ' "They're all the bloody same, Clara! Don't make the same mistake I did!" ' She gulped her drink, enjoying the performance. 'Too right I won't. She gave up *everything* to support my Dad. She supported him so much that he traded her in for someone younger. Now look at her: child support and internet dating. That's her life.'

Jacinta poked at her melting ice with a straw. The darkness on Clara's face hinted at why she never talked about her parents' divorce.

'Now it's just internet dating.' The bar seemed to fade around Clara as she spoke. 'On my eighteenth he sent me fifty bucks and mum this horrible letter. Told her she was a leach, living off his child support, all this awful crap.' She moved her glass around in its puddle of condensation, spreading it slowly wider and wider, staring at the wet circle, not speaking. Jacinta wanted to reach out to her, but suddenly the music became louder, breaking like a wave across them and Clara was alone in her trance.

‘Will she be okay?’ shouted Jacinta.

Clara blinked and smoothed her hair back with the palm of her hand. ‘Pf. Yeah. Listen to this.’ She recounted how, after she had suddenly moved out with Mattie, her mother had declared the entire arrangement “crazy” and had presented Clara with a bill for the tutors and holiday schools for the previous year. Stapled to the hand-written bill was a lawyer’s business card.

‘What?’ gasped Jacinta. ‘She’s going to *sue* you? But she’s your mum! She doesn’t expect you to actually *pay* it, does she?’

Clara rolled her eyes. ‘Nah. It’s a bluff. She forgot who she’s dealing with. I know an entire law firm. I told her I’d pay her with interest when I started my first job. Then I went around the firm and got every senior partner’s business card and sent it to her with a little ribbon tied around them. That shut her up.’

Jacinta gulped. Clara and her mum had always fought, but this was different. Out of character.

‘What about Mattie’s parents?’ she asked without much hope.

Clara groaned and gestured dramatically towards the ceiling. ‘Windreed and Crystal Bell have travelled far into the north.’

‘What?’

‘Trevor and Gayl shot through to the east coast for the summer festival season.’

‘When?’ Jacinta couldn’t believe how much stuff she had missed out on while Clara had been interning.

‘As soon as Mattie found out about his scholarship.’

‘That was ... organised of them.’

‘Yeah. I reckon they were thinking about it for a while because they got this campervan almost straight away. Painted it purple for Christ’s sake. They reckon they’re going to set up a mobile “healing” service, like an ambulance but for people who need their chakras fixed.’

Jacinta snorted with laughter.

Clara groaned. ‘I’m glad you think it’s funny. I heard them talking about following the psychic fair circuit full time.’ She put her chin in her hand. ‘They said they’d be sending “support”, but who knows what that means. Probably more crystals. Did I tell you what they got Mattie for his seventeenth?’ Jacinta nodded. She knew. ‘I mean, I know they chanted over those rocks every night for a month, but ...’

The pair sipped their drinks, each wondering, not for the first time, how a square-jawed, science-brained, football hero like Mattie could have grown up with Windreed and Crystal Bell as parents. These were people who gave their son a shoebox full of karmically-enhanced pebbles from the beach for his birthday.

‘Anyway, whatever. I don’t need them. Or my mum. We don’t need anybody.’ Clara set her jaw and folded her arms defiantly. ‘I work heaps and I support Mattie so he can keep his scholarship. That’s our golden ticket. We’re all set.’

‘Why can’t Mattie get a part-time job as well? It doesn’t seem fair.’

Clara sighed. ‘Jaz, Mattie has thirty-two contact hours a *week*. That’s before all the extra scholarship stuff. It’s more than a full-time job and it’s *so* much pressure. He doesn’t get that much money and our rent takes up so much of our income and oh my god he is *not* talking to that *slut!*’



Jacinta blinked and turned around. She could just make out Mattie standing behind a huge aquarium holding a bulbous green cocktail and talking to a girl with long blonde hair. Clara charged towards them, ploughing through the crowd like a lawn mower. People tumbled left and right in her wake, juggling spilled drinks and nursing wet t-shirts. When she reached them, Mattie waved hello and held out the cocktail. Clara slapped it away and it exploded against the aquarium in a thick, green splash. The Golden Couple disappeared from view.

Jacinta bit her lip and gathered up Clara's handbag as a hippo-sized security guard glided towards the arguing couple. Enough of the green liquid had dribbled down the side of the tank for Jacinta to just make out Mattie reassuring the bouncer and coaxing Clara away from the aquarium. The blonde girl had disappeared.

Jacinta wished she could just leave them to it, but she only had enough cab fare to take her from Clara's house to Salisbury Hills. That was if she got a good cab driver who was fast, friendly and obeyed his GPS.

'Jacinta. We're going.' Clara and Mattie suddenly towered above her like Roman statues; beautiful, silent and cold. She slipped her shoes back on and followed them out to the cab rank.

An ice age came and went before they finally pulled up outside Mattie and Clara's little orange house. Mattie got out without a word, slammed the door and marched into the house.

'Hey!' The driver yelled after him then twisted around in his seat, glaring at the two girls. 'Nineteen bucks eighty.'

‘I–I’m going on from here,’ Jacinta stuttered. Clara checked the meter and thrust a ten-dollar note into Jacinta’s hand. ‘I’m working all weekend. Call you later.’ She gave Jacinta’s arm a squeeze and followed Mattie inside, kicking up little puffs of dirt as she trudged through their dusty little yard. Jacinta and the cab driver watched her gather her thick hair away from her slim neck with the same post-nightshift heaviness that Jacinta had seen at O Week.

‘Where you going?’ The cabbie drummed the steering wheel with his chubby thumb. Jacinta slumped back in her seat and rubbed her eyes.

‘Home.’

‘Eh?’

‘Thirteen, Russell Crowe Road, Salisbury Hills.’

The driver raised his eyebrows. ‘Long way. You got full fare? I can ask for advance.’ He tapped a sticker on the dashboard which said exactly that. Jacinta scowled and handed over Clara’s ten-dollar note.

The jet-black limousine floated through the crisp night, carrying Jacinta McDonald, QC, back to her country estate. It had been an extravagant evening: dining at the city’s most expensive restaurants and swanning about behind the velvet ropes of every VIP club in town. She really should have taken advantage of her inner-city loft apartment, but her two interns were using it at present and they were really beginning to grate on her nerves. Not that anyone could grate steel, mind you. The country’s top litigator didn’t get annoyed; she solved problems. And yet, she didn’t *feel* like sharing the apartment she had earned through all those years of hard slog. Certainly not with those two young pups. They still had so much to learn.

Yes, the country estate would be most suitable lodgings for the night.

Even if the help were becoming a little belligerent of late, demanding pay raises for less work, disturbing her at all hours. Even this driving service was getting a bit above its station, what with his little wages clock up the front there. J.

McDonald, QC, didn't think in wages any more, she thought in terms of rewards, possessions, treasures, items of desire that she had dreamt about since her school days when she was ... she again looked at the dim glow of the fare meter. It had just ticked over thirty dollars. She scrabbled in her handbag and found her purse. Scattering scrunched receipts and five-cent coins, she thankfully dug up her last twenty dollar note and looked out of the window to see where they were.

Salisbury Hills was still at least ten bucks away.

'Excuse me!' she blurted. 'All I've got is this twenty, we're not too far away, do you mind? I don't think it's that far now!'

The brakes gave a scratching 'eek' as the cab pulled over. They had stopped beside a long hedge of dry, hollow bushes, meant to obscure a collection of grey warehouses and doing a terrible job of it. The driver turned and looked indifferently at the note she held up. Suddenly he nipped it out from her fingers.

'Hey!'

'That all you got?' His voice sounded younger than his stringy hair made him appear.

'Yes!' She shook her purse upside down to prove it. 'Please! It's not that far! I've got a two-dollar coin!'

He shook his head. 'Nuh. I wasted enough of my time out here. Bloody long distance fares. You know I don't get paid for the way back to the city?' He looked her up and down. 'Is that really all you've got?'

Jacinta slumped back in her seat and folded her arms. ‘Yes.’

‘All right then ...’ The cabbie turned the engine off and got out. Jacinta tried not to watch as he strolled around to her side; a headless tummy wrapped in a thin blue shirt cruising past the windscreen, the front passenger window, filling her own window. He opened the door with a soft clunk.

‘Come on. Out. No free rides.’

‘What!’ Jacinta backed into her seat. ‘You can’t just leave me *here*.’

‘If you wanna go to Salisbury Hills, that’s another fifteen bucks. Rules are I can ask for advance.’

‘I don’t have any more *money*,’ insisted Jacinta. *Stupid Clara, cheap-skating me on the fare.*

‘Okay, but I need fifteen bucks,’ said the stomach, shuffling closer to the open door where Jacinta sat. ‘Fifteen bucks worth of *something* ...’ He slid his thick thumbs inside his belt and drummed his pale, hairless index fingers along his hip pockets. Jacinta gazed at the fingers. They seemed to be waiting, pointing ...

‘Oh *fuck you!*’ she screamed, bolting across the back seat and out of the driver’s side door. ‘Fuck off! You fucking pervert!’

The cabbie shrugged and got back in the cab. A squeak of rubber and a roar of engine and he was gone. Red tail lights faded back towards the city, leaving Jacinta with a long, lonely walk home.

An hour later, Jacinta limped through the vacant lots, building sites and reclaimed bushland which surrounded the brand new estate of Salisbury Hills. As she drew closer, the gated suburb rose like a darkened hulk from the industrial

northern plains. Its tightly twisted *cul de sacs* were sprinkled with dull, yellow streetlights glowing like the last bulbs on a January Christmas tree.

The place was a dump. Literally. The first rubbish the city had ever thrown away was buried deep under Jacinta's feet as she kicked through clumps of brown grass and iced coffee cartons. For decades, the junk of a city expanding like mouldy steroids had all been trucked out to Paramount Flat. There, it was spread around by increasingly over-worked bulldozers until someone had finally declared it full and covered the entire place in dirt, rocks and plants too ugly to die of malnutrition so that the grown-over scab of an ex-dump would 'blend in' with the surrounding native bushland.

Then, ten years ago, a deadline had passed, a law was changed and property developers descended in a cloud of earth-movers and condescending billboards. 'Designer' housing had sprung up along twisted streets that weren't in the directory yet, and her parents had fallen in love. Not in a squishy, romantic way with each other, but in a devoted dog way, with brochures. They simpered over the panoramic billboards photographed in a different state. They slobbered over the CD-ROM mortgage calculators they received as junk mail, tapping in their tiny wages and wagging their tails. Her mum loved the potential for a huge garden and her dad loved the double garages and heating efficiency. They both loved the fact that it wasn't Paramount.

'There's so much crime here,' her dad would grumble every time Paramount was mentioned on the telly, even if it was another story about the local car factory.

‘Just once I would like to come home without seeing an upside down shopping trolley,’ her mum would chirp at no one in particular every time she came home.

‘Tell Jayden to stop nicking them then,’ Jacinta would reply. Her little brother would pinch her on the arm for that and scamper away before she could catch him. He never got in trouble though. Both parents were too busy worrying about how he was starting to return later and later from such fictional places as ‘Footy In The Park’ and ‘The Movies With Friends’. They knew he was lying, but, to Jacinta’s outrage, they turned a blind eye.

‘Boys need to play up a bit.’

‘At least he’s with friends.’

Then there was the first night they had opened the front door to find Jayden dangling from the hand of a stone-faced policeman. Jayden was the youngest and the slowest of a bunch of kids who had been throwing rocks at the freight trains.

The night after the magistrate had issued a first and final warning, a commercial for Salisbury Hills Estate came on during dinner. Inspirational country music played while a family of supermodel millionaires lounged around outside a house the size of an aircraft hangar, enjoying lunch from their sixteen burner barbeque. When the supermodels had finished running middle-distance marathons across their lounge room, scuba diving in their bathtubs and mountain-climbing to bed, Carol turned to her children squeezed on the couch next to her.

‘We’re thinking seriously about moving.’

‘Not *this* again,’ Jacinta had groaned. ‘Salisbury Hills is a building site!’

‘Not the places we’ve looked at!’ Her mum’s voice got squeaky when her authority was challenged.

‘Great. So you’ve already started looking for houses without us.’

‘No, I mean, well, you’ll only be there a couple of years and your father and I are thinking of our futures too. It’s just getting too dangerous in Paramount, sweetheart. You’ve only got to watch the news. And besides, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to live somewhere nice, the place we’re thinking about is really lovely, the garden’s got heaps of potential—’

‘You’ve already got somewhere picked out?’ Jacinta sat up.

‘Watch your tone, Jaz,’ Her dad had grunted without taking his eyes off the TV. Jacinta had slumped back and appealed to Jayden for support. He had shrugged sympathetically.

*What can we do?*

And that had been that.

A month later the entire contents of the house she had lived in her whole life was packed up and moved five minutes away into a house made of Gyprock and Lego built in the middle of a maze of other identical houses made of Gyprock and Lego (“A Selection of Unique Architectural Designs!”). A reclaimed rubbish tip recycled into a walled suburb with only one exit (“Future Road Links are already in Approval Stages!”). Salisbury Hills hung off Paramount Flat Road like mistletoe off the sickly gum trees that were slowly being gouged out to make way for more Gyprock and Lego (“Plenty of Parks, Great For The Kids!”). You entered and exited Salisbury Hills Estate via a double-laned boulevard that fed directly onto an interstate trucking route used as a racetrack by tough, young men with cheap, fast cars (“Fast Access to the Urban Centre!”). The interstate road

wasn't part of Salisbury Hills though, oh no. *That* was still Paramount Flat:  
hoons, pollution and housing trust shanties.

Jacinta trudged to the top of the boulevard and passed the dusty monolith which meant that she was almost home. The monolith was a red-brick wall the size of a shipping container with brushed-steel capital letters screwed into its bulk: *Salisbury Hills Estate*. It looked like the entrance to a government detention facility. Underneath, some urban planner had decided that the sign needed a little extra something. So, this person who would never have to live in Salisbury Hills or anywhere near it, had taken more brushed steel letters and, in a font borrowed from a fifty-cent postcard, added, "*Welcome Home*".

Jacinta glared at 'Welcome Home' and ground her teeth. Her feet felt as though they were about to start bleeding through her stupid going-out shoes. She kicked an empty chocolate milk carton which turned out not to be very empty at all.

After having a good scream, she continued home, dripping a trail of tepid, sour-smelling chocolate milk all the way to Russell Crowe Road.

The place was a *dump*.



## 7

# Heritage Real Estate

## *Homes of distinction since 1934*

Jacinta yanked the handbrake and turned off the juddering engine. She checked the address scrawled in her diary again. The street was right and this was definitely number twelve. She flipped through her disintegrating street directory and traced her path from Salisbury Hills (shown in her out-of-date Gregory's as a grey, streetless rectangle marked 'Planned Future Development') down through six pages of maps to the green squares and lollypop cul-de-sacs of Loxton Park.

She was at the right address but it *couldn't* be.

Normal people didn't live in these kinds of places.

She peered up through her dusty windscreen. Massive plane trees stretched over the ticking Corolla and Jacinta felt as though she had accidentally parked in a towering green cathedral. All around were grand gates and high fences beyond which far off mansions and castles rose from soft lawns among majestic trees. It was hard to believe these palaces shared a city with the air-conditioned boxes of Colorbond-dappled, mortgage-riddled Salisbury Hills.

This *couldn't* be the place.

Only it was.

The unusual wrought-iron fence was just as Myra had described it: the only modern sculpture in a street full of thick, angular hedges and weather-worn brick walls. It even looked familiar, somehow.

‘It was designed by an artist friend of mine,’ she had explained. ‘We wanted something that would complement the pepperina trees in the front yard.’

It did that all right. Two tall trees shrouded the front garden, their long, drooping fronds like misers’ fingers, touching everything they owned. The fence was a long mass of tangled green metal, designed to look as though the trees’ trailing branches had dipped into a flowing river, swirling and ripping in fast-moving water.

Jacinta was sure she had seen it somewhere before. She puzzled it over and stepped gingerly out of the car. Her feet were still stinging from her overland death march the night before and she tried to stand on the sides to give her soles a rest. It didn’t work. She slammed the door and wondered if she should bother locking her tin can in street full of luxury four-wheel-drives. The old thing would probably be towed as litter before she came back.

She limped towards the fence and it suddenly came to her: *Backyard Bonanza*. The ‘Inspirations’ segment. Her mum studied the reality gardening show almost continually and the family had rarely missed an episode. ‘Inspirations’ was a time-filler for showing off the designer fountains and in-built stereos from some rich snob’s mansion so that the viewers at home could have something to marvel at. Or puke in their dinners over.

‘That fence is unbelievable!’ Carol had scoffed when it had appeared. ‘I can’t even see where you get in!’

‘Mum,’ Jacinta had tutted. ‘It’s *supposed* to be arty and different.’

Now Jacinta had to admit that her mum had a point. It took her as long to find the gate hidden among the green metal twists and curls as it did to work out how it opened. She finally found the latch hidden under a metal twirl, pressed it gently and an entire section of curly fence swung noiselessly open on well-oiled hinges.

She walked gently between the pepperina trees, glad of the soft green grass on her aching feet, and pressed the shiny brass doorbell. Somewhere deep within the house she heard a series of chimes that she recognised as the post office clock tune.

The heavy timber door was opened by a tall, thin boy with a long nose and dark hair that grew in about a dozen directions. He smiled nervously and half-shuffled behind the door.

‘Hello.’

‘Hi! You must be Henry.’ Jacinta held out her hand. The boy looked at it for a moment and almost seemed surprised. He reached out slowly and shook it.

‘Hi. Yes. Nice to meet you. I’m Henry.’ He kept hold of her hand and shook it more firmly. He seemed to be enjoying it. Jacinta smiled.

‘Hi Henry.’ She glanced at their clasped hands. ‘It’s nice to meet you too.’ She waited for him to let go, but he kept on shaking her hand.

She laughed. ‘So ... can I come in?’

‘Oh!’ He jerked his hand back and leapt behind the door again. ‘Yes. Sorry. Come in. Sorry.’

Jacinta stepped inside. ‘Is your mum here?’

Henry nodded and pointed down the long, dim hallway. ‘She’s out the back.’

Jacinta followed him down the passage. Despite his height, he still walked lightly, like a little kid. Like Jayden used to before he hit high school and began shuffling everywhere in his broken-laced skate shoes.

‘What have you been up to today?’ she asked as she peered around.

‘Making models.’

‘Really? My little brother makes models!’

Henry nodded shyly and squinted as though trying to work something out.

‘Bit of a mess though,’ Jacinta continued. ‘Tiny bits, glue everywhere. Drives Mum crazy. He’s pretty handy though, he even paints them himself.’

‘Oh, um, no. I mean *computer* models.’

‘Like programming and stuff?’

‘Yes!’ He suddenly became animated, gesturing with his long hands and describing dungeons, beta-testing and space stations while Jacinta’s eyes adjusted to the light. The more she could make out, the wider her mouth hung open. Inside the house was even more beautiful than out. Everything was made of honey-coloured wood and there were rooms and hallways in all directions stuffed with bookshelves, antique furniture and artwork. The Persian carpet which ran down the middle of the hall was almost as soft and thick as the grass in the front garden.

‘This is a bloody nice house we’ve got here, eh!’

Henry squinted at her again for a moment and gave her a small smile as they reached the back area. ‘Thanks.’

The back of the house opened into a wide kitchen and lounge room area made of granite, stained glass and dark wooden pillars. The garden beyond was a jungle of curly ferns, mossy tree trunks and ornate wooden furniture. Jacinta could see Myra in the garden sitting at a wide wooden table surrounded by papers

and books. She looked around for a place to put her handbag and gave up.

Anywhere but over her shoulder would be like dumping garbage in an art gallery.

‘What’s wrong with your foot?’ Henry asked suddenly.

Jacinta had been trying to forget why her feet hurt. The city-wide pub crawl, Clara and Mattie’s argument, the dodgy cabbie and the long, long walk home. It seemed a bit much to explain on her first day as a responsible tutor. Jayden would have understood at his age, but this kid seemed more innocent.

‘Long walk, wrong shoes.’ She showed him her scuffed flats.

‘Sneakers are good for walking,’ he replied.

‘Uh ...’

‘Jacinta!’ Myra glided across the patio to the sliding glass door. She wore a fitted cotton shirt and a loose, patterned skirt. Her auburn hair was casually done up in a thin silver clasp and glowed briefly in the sun as she paused at the doorway. It was like an ad for a department store. The kind where lawyers bought perfume from the peach-lit counters on the ground floor.

‘How are you?’

Jacinta just stared, lost in a world of scent, sparkle and chrome. Henry answered for her. ‘Jacinta’s feet hurt.’

Myra’s eyebrows knitted for a moment. ‘Oh, you poor thing! Come and sit down!’

Jacinta started towards the herd of plump, white couches in the lounge area, but Myra stood at the kitchen counter, patting a tall wooden stool. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

Jacinta eased herself onto the wooden stool and let her aching feet swing loose. Her gaze settled on the coffee machine nestled at one end of the counter; a

sculpted chrome block bristling with nozzles, dials and switches, like an astronaut's helmet from the future.

‘Woowww!’ she gasped. ‘Look at your coffee machine!’

‘Oh yes,’ Myra coughed and seemed embarrassed. ‘Silly old thing. More trouble than it's worth. I was just going to boil the kettle, actually ...’

‘Make her a mochaccino, Myra!’ chirped Henry. He turned to Jacinta. ‘Myra used to be a barista when she was young – she makes the best mochaccinos!’

‘A barrister?’ gasped Jacinta. ‘A lawyer?’ This was too good to be true.

‘No, a *barista*.’ Myra turned quickly away, busily filled a kettle from the sink. ‘You know, making coffees in a café. That was a long while ago, before I met Terry.’

‘But you're still really good!’ insisted Henry. ‘Do you like macchiatos, Jacinta? Myra, do one of *those*.’

‘I don't think so, Henry.’ She produced a couple of mugs and teabags. ‘Anyway ... the machine's been a bit funny lately anyway. I think it needs a service, the gauges are all out of whack or something. Is English Breakfast all right?’

‘I can do it!’ Henry began unscrewing nozzles and knobs. ‘I looked up how! The hoses just need a flush and then we can make mochaccinos! It even comes with its own toolkit!’ He was almost jumping in the air with excitement. ‘It's really cool, Jacinta. You just press a button and it pretty much—’

‘It's okay, Henry. Tea is fine,’ Jacinta lied. She was dying for a coffee. She turned to Myra. ‘Tea is fine.’

Henry paused, holding up a large chrome bolt. He looked at them both as the kettle began its quiet roar on the other bench. ‘I’ll still give it a service.’ He continued detaching other parts of the machine.

‘Henry, no! It doesn’t ...’ Myra shot Jacinta a smile which didn’t hide her gritted teeth. ‘Fine. Just don’t make a mess.’

Myra and Jacinta sat quietly on the cloud-sized couches looking out into the deep green garden, while Henry tinkered happily with the semi-dismantled coffee machine. Every so often they were interrupted by a burst of steam and a delighted ‘Whoops! So *that’s* how that works ...’

‘I must apologise for Terry,’ Myra said suddenly. ‘He did want to be here, but he has a training course to run.’

‘On a Sunday?’

‘Yes. It often happens like that, unfortunately. He’s a professor of engineering, but he consults and lectures too. This year he’s running a fascinating partnership program for first years, brave man.’

Jacinta made an impressed laugh noise, in case that had been a joke about him being brave. Myra seemed pleased.

‘That sounds ... exciting!’

‘Oh well, it’s quite innovative, really ...’ Myra began explaining about the scholarships and Jacinta tried very hard to keep up with all the talk of headhunting and performance-based stipends. ‘Enough about Terry. How’s uni treating you?’

‘Oh, yeah. Great. I’m really getting the hang of it with all the lectures and tutes and work and stuff.’

Myra made a polite ‘mmm’ noise. ‘You mentioned on the phone that you’ve had lots of tutoring experience? Tell me a bit more about that.’

Jacinta froze. She hadn’t expected an interview. When she phoned the number torn from the help-wanted notice, Myra just told her to come to the house. Surely she wouldn’t make her drive for an hour across the city if she wasn’t going to get the job? Her natural lawyer’s brain kicked into gear. She needed to buy time to gather evidence. She needed some bluster, a distraction. Fortunately, just as she was beginning a speech about her own humble beginnings in Paramount, Myra interrupted.

‘Sorry, I suppose I should tell you Henry’s situation. *Our* situations, really.’

‘Er, okay.’

‘Henry is a gifted child.’ She smiled at the teenager sorting through the pieces of her expensive coffee machine. ‘I’ve always been able to devote time to his development because I’ve been studying and teaching part-time. We’re lucky that Terry’s work has let me focus on Henry and building my own career for the last few years. But that’s meant that we’re both very busy all of a sudden.’ She made it sound as though the family had heaps of dishes to put away. ‘This year we skipped Henry ahead two years into Year Eleven, and that’s taken some getting used to. Normally, I’d be there to support him, but just after we decided to move him ahead, I was offered a full time job in the English department. It’s one of those things you can’t really say no to.’

‘Like the mafia!’

‘I suppose.’ Myra nodded as though Jacinta was serious. ‘Anyway, that’s where you come in. As I said: Henry is very bright and he doesn’t really need



help understanding the subjects he's being taught. He just soaks up new information and concepts like a sponge.'

'Highly intelligent,' added Jacinta, hoping she sounded knowledgeable.

'Exactly,' said Myra. There was a loud hiss of steam by the kitchen counter and a delighted giggle from Henry. Myra continued. 'No, Henry's ... *issue*, is more in applying and focusing what he's absorbed within the set timeframe.'

'Deadlines,' Jacinta offered. Myra nodded. It was working.

'He tends to over-extend and overload his projects. Instead of, say, completing a worksheet, Henry will design a full-colour brochure; instead of writing an essay, Henry will hand in a DVD with original music and voice-overs.'

'I built my own wooden bicycle for science!' called Henry.

Myra smiled calmly. 'He just needs direction and guidance. This is something I've been working on with him for a long time now, and we love it, but my workload this year is ...' She trailed off, looking at a tall stack of books and folders on the table outside. 'Well, let's just say it's busier than it should be. That's why I'd like to get a tutor with a bit of broad experience with different students, just to cover all bases and give him the best chance.'

'A helping hand,' said Jacinta kindly. This was in the bag. Jacinta sipped her tea, but Myra just looked at her expectantly. She wanted more. Jacinta swallowed very slowly. She needed this job. She needed to pay her dad rent. If she could do it without having to stack shelves, all the better. She could be here, relaxing on their couches, exploring their garden and helping their son with his homework. She could escape from Salisbury Hills to this royal palace for a few hours a week. It was even close to uni. Maybe she could do her homework here,

use it as a halfway house. But that would all depend on how well she played the next move. Her lawyer's brain shifted up a gear. *Think success, think power, think freedom. Case for the defence. Go!*

'I've had *plenty* of tutoring experience. Obviously there's my brother, who's in Year Ten himself this year. He needs special help, but it's nothing too strenuous. The tutoring I'm most proud of is last year in Year Twelve I got given this pretty difficult case to manage: this girl with heaps of potential who was actually in danger of dropping out.'

Myra looked concerned. She was buying it. Jacinta's phone beeped. She ignored it. *Go for the kill.*

'Basically I tutored her for the whole year and we covered everything, not just her subjects, but her attitude, her dedication, everything. I gave her extra homework and practise exams and really made a go of it. I was like a big sister. She went from pretty much a drop-out to top of the class. I'm keeping in touch with her this year, to make sure she goes okay, but, yeah, she's gonna *ace* Year Twelve. She's going to be a lawyer. Next year, I mean, when she gets into uni.'

Myra seemed impressed. 'She must be extremely grateful.'

Jacinta shrugged and tried to look modest. 'Well, you know, I did sort of turn her life around.'

'Do you think her parents would mind me calling them? Just as a reference?' Myra smiled at her, unblinking, waiting for an answer. Jacinta understood. She didn't have the job yet. She pictured Clara's mum and the little stack of lawyers' business cards. She might not be the best person to call. Not to worry, Jacinta had a little lawyer's trick up her sleeve. She leaned forward and put on a serious voice:

‘To tell the truth, part of the reason this girl was in so much trouble is because of her parents.’

‘Oh!’ Myra sat up, embarrassed.

‘Yes,’ Jacinta nodded. ‘She’s had a real tough time of it. The thing is: she’s not actually living at home anymore.’

Myra actually put her hand over her mouth. ‘Oh dear.’

‘I can give you the girl’s number though. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind talking to you.’

Myra nodded enthusiastically. ‘Yes, yes, that would be fine. That would be *great*.’

If Clara could pull off ‘tired factory worker’ for an entire summer, she could easily manage ‘grateful Year Twelve’. She owed Jacinta that much.

Myra called over to the kitchen. ‘Henry, could you leave that for now and organise your work ready for Jacinta, please? We just have to discuss a couple more things.’

Henry groaned and stomped off to his room. Myra cleared away the cups and Jacinta snuck a quick look at her message. She hoped it would be Clara inviting her over so she wouldn’t have to drive all the way back to Salisbury Hills. It was Jayden. Again.

**Jaz can u help me wit hwork its due 2moro prty pls sis I started the first bit by myself I jus need help**

Jacinta sighed. She should probably encourage him to finish it by himself, but it was just easier to help him. **Ok i’ll help u when I get home**

*Another long night.*

Myra checked that Henry was gone and shifted next to Jacinta. ‘The other thing is—’ she lowered her voice. ‘I know that he *seems* mature in some ways, but in others he’s just a child. A year ago he was in primary school. In two years he’s going to be starting uni. We couldn’t hold him back, but this ...’ She checked again that Henry was out of earshot. ‘I know you’re not here to play counsellor or anything like that, but ... if you could just keep an eye out for him?’

‘Um ... okay?’

‘I suppose what I mean is: you’re closer to his age and so you would have an understanding of what kids are like these days and know what to look out for.’

‘My little brother’s starting Year Ten.’ She pointed to Jayden’s message on her phone. ‘I help him *heaps* with school and stuff. He’s doing okay, but it’s still pretty tough.’

Myra seemed encouraged. ‘Yes! Your younger brother! Exactly. So there you go. That’s the kind of thing I mean. We just want a sense of how he’s doing, that he’s okay. I think he might find it a bit difficult because he is just that much *younger* than his classmates ...’ She trailed off, swirling the last dribble of tea in her cup.

‘Don’t worry, Myra. I’ll keep an eye out.’

Myra smiled. ‘Thank you.’

A hush fell over the packed auditorium. The head Law professor walked slowly up to the stage and was handed a white envelope.

‘The prize for Year Twelve Legal Studies is very prestigious.’ The professor was used to mesmerising juries with his authoritative baritone and the audience at the Paramount High Year Twelve prize night was no different. ‘It is

often a hard-fought competition, as the winner receives a full scholarship to study and personal tuition with my good self. This year's highest score for legal studies came down to two very closely-placed individuals, each has trodden different paths to their own success. But there can only be one winner, and this year it is ...'

He opened the envelope. None dared breathe.

'... Jacinta McDonald.'

The crowd exploded with applause. The whistles, whoops and cheers were deafening as Jacinta rose from her seat, gasping back tears of joy. She paused briefly to hug her handsome private tutor, without whom she wouldn't be ascending the stage into the blazing spotlight ...

... except that Clara had been the one to win the prize for legal studies. And it wasn't presented by a law professor. An ex-Paramount footballer gave out the prizes after reading a speech he had copied from a baseball movie. It wasn't a scholarship either, not even close. It was a book voucher and a certificate printed on nice paper. Clara's tutor was there though. She had hugged Clara with a proud tear in her eye while Jacinta looked on with a bitter tear in hers. The only thing Jacinta brought home that night was the footballer's autograph for Jayden. Jayden had scrounged some Blu-Tack from under a Bathurst poster and proudly stuck the autograph above his latest Holden model. Henry didn't need Blu-Tack. His car posters were block-mounted, hanging from unseen hooks around his large bedroom. The largest, hanging above his desk, was an x-ray of a sports car's impossibly tangled innards. Jacinta squinted up at its writhing complexity, thinking of Jayden's little paint pots and tubes of glue.

'You know my parents just have you here as a baby-sitter.'

Jacinta turned back to Henry. He was supposed to be showing her his school work, but watching him blaze through his assignments on his futuristic laptop was putting her in danger of an epileptic seizure. Every time she made him stop and explain something, he would heave a dramatic sigh and tap the mouse button loudly. He was a lot less cute when he was showing off.

‘Myra and Terry know I can do all this work, they just want someone around looking over my shoulder. Making sure I don’t “overreach myself”.’ He mimicked Myra’s air-quotes.

‘Well, it’s not as simple as that. Tutors are more like sport coaches. They don’t *do* the work, they like, *help* you do the work better.’

He frowned.

‘At my high school heaps of kids had tutors. They all got the best marks. It’s like the competitive edge or something.’

‘Whatever.’

‘It’s true! I’d be doing Law if my parents had been able to afford to get *me* a tutor.’

‘Maybe you’re just not good enough to get into Law.’

Jacinta scoffed. ‘Hey — I got a 72, all right? That *is* good enough. If you’ve got the money for a fee-paying place.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Okay – basically, if you’ve got enough money to pay the sixteen grand a year for a law degree, they let you in on a 72. But if you *don’t* have the money, then you have to fight for a deferred-fee place with all the other povvos and they make the cut-off super high so that only a couple of people can get in.’

‘So ... you’re saying that the only way to get into one of those high cut-off places is if you get a tutor to help with your work.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But you can only afford a tutor if you’re rich.’

‘Right.’

‘But if you were rich you wouldn’t need a tutor because you could just pay for a fee-paying place anyway.’

Jacinta blinked. She had never heard it put so simply.

Henry continued. ‘So you’re saying it’s only rich people who get into uni.’

‘Into the good courses, yeah. Huh. No wonder you skipped ahead.’

‘That’s why I don’t need a tutor. I can get the high marks on my own.’

‘That’s what *I* used to think, until everyone else started hiring tutors.’

Henry clicked a few more windows and set something to load. ‘I still don’t need a baby-sitter. Myra and Terry are so over-protective. They treat me like a little kid.’

‘Well, you *are* only thirteen.’

‘*I’m almost fourteen!*’ He pouted. ‘I hate it how everyone thinks I’m still a baby! There are kids in my year who drive already and everyone’s acting like they still need to hold my hand to cross the road.’

‘I know. Look, it must be frustrating, but it’ll get better. Trust me.’

‘How?’

‘I dunno. You’re in high school, I’ll be here once a week, they’ve gotta loosen the reins sooner or later.’

He thought about that for a moment. Then he rose and began theatrically pacing up and down, pinching his chin like some mad professor. ‘Because they

think that at least I'm getting looked after by someone ...' He turned slowly to her, finger raised as though he'd just invented sliced bread. 'and *that* means that Myra won't be barging into my room all the time and coming with me everywhere!'

'I don't know about that,' Jacinta said doubtfully. 'I'm mostly here to help with school stuff.'

'But the more you help me, the more freedom I'll have!' He got up and launched himself backwards onto his huge bed. 'Yesss!' he hissed. 'It's brilliant!'

'Henry, I'm only here a once a week. I'm not going to start taking you to the bloody playground or whatever.'

He propped himself up on his elbows. 'Yes, but we just need to change their minds about letting me go places by myself. Did you know I've never caught a bus?'

'It's overrated.' Jacinta patted his desk chair. 'Come on, let's get this homework on the go.'

Henry stayed on the bed. 'I've never even been to a party by myself.'

'So? My little brother's fifteen and Dad still drops him off and picks him up.'

'Does he stay for the entire time? And join in the party games?'

Jacinta pictured Myra plonked in a circle of horrified primary schoolers holding a parcel wrapped in newspaper, waiting for the music to stop before tossing it to her mortified son. 'Yeah, that would kind of suck.'

'One of the popular guys is having this big party next week,' Henry said quietly.

'You're invited?'



He nodded.

‘Really? That’s pretty cool.’

He shrugged. ‘It’s not that special. Everyone’s invited. It’s like a catchphrase around the school.’ He pointed two fingers like pistols at Jacinta and put on a nasal ringmaster’s voice: “‘Ev-ery-one’s in-*vited!*” Peter Anderson and his friends having been chanting it all week for some reason.’

‘Are you gonna go?’

He shrugged.

‘Do you wanna go?’

He gave a small nod, as though he were admitting to stealing a chocolate bar.

‘But you don’t want your mum there.’

He shook his head.

‘Other kids’ parents will probably be there. It’s not such a big deal.’

He looked at her. ‘I’m not *that* naïve. I know the kind of stuff Year Elevens do at parties. Smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. I’m not into it, but I don’t want to be the only one who wasn’t there.’

‘You could still go. Just kind of hint to your mum that she should just hang with the other parents.’

‘Myra would take one look and drive straight back home. I just don’t want her there at all.’

‘What about your dad?’

Henry rolled his eyes.

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll sort something out. It’s early days yet.’ Jacinta sighed and checked the time. Jayden would be in his room, painstakingly painting

a tiny engine in the correct colours. He would hunch over his models for hours, working, concentrating, waiting for her to come home so she could help him with the assignment stuffed at the bottom of his school bag.

‘All right. Look. Let’s do this homework and then we’ll try to think of some way to go to your mate’s party without your mum embarrassing you.’

Henry got up and sat at the computer again. ‘Okay. He’s not really my mate though.’

‘Whatever. We’ll think of something.’

Henry said nothing and opened up an essay. She looked at him from the corner of her eye. He was hunched almost motionless at the computer, frowning, concentrating. He seemed pretty weighed down for a thirteen-year-old. She didn’t remember Jayden being that stressed out when he was that age.

*I suppose that’s what being extra smart does to you.*

## 8

*No more dead money!*  
*Own it with no money down!*  
Talk to *Delta Homes* today!

The auto-unlock echoed with a robotic ping through the cool evening air of Loxton Park as J. McDonald, QC, strolled up the avenue to her pride and joy. A top lawyer's salary kept her in more than comfortable accommodations, but her fee as a highly-sought-after consultant-mentor enabled her to travel on leather seats in a cocoon of German metal. Voice recognition, satellite tracking, personalised paint and custom interior — her car was more than just a car: it was a carriage, a statement, a display. The evidence of a powerful, successful woman. She regarded its sleek lines briefly before opening the door and settling herself into the sumptuous leather seats.

She turned the key.

Nothing happened.

‘Shit.’

She flicked on the Corolla's overhead light and nothing happened again.

Nothing happening was a little theme her car had adopted. Calling it a lemon wasn't really fair because lemons were useful. Originally bought for her mum cash-in-hand from a builder mate of her dad's, the McDonald family Corolla wasn't so much a hand-me-down as a put-me-down. It had had more owners than

a dollar coin and was easier to steal. Jacinta prayed that it was just the loose ignition wire. The last person to nick it for doughnut practice before dumping it in a supermarket carpark hadn't been very professional. Instead of using tools to bypass the ignition, they had just yanked the wire out and now it never stayed in place.

She groped under the seat, located the screwdriver she always kept handy and used it to lever the steering-wheel column open. Sure enough, a frayed wire dropped from the plastic housing like a dead snake. She smoothed the shrivelled copper ends with her fingernail and tucked it back into the spot that her dad had shown her. It would start the car, and almost definitely drop out again when she stopped, but it would get her home.

Most of the way home.

Hopefully.

She turned the key again. The sound of a flu-ridden zombie devouring a blender full of gravel echoed around the heritage fences. *The Corolla lives.*

Jacinta headed north, pattering along under the plane trees, admiring the wide roads lined with double-storey houses and inky-green parks. She crossed a main road and the trees and slate rooves melted away, replaced by low-roofed cafes and low-rent shopping villages. Soon, she was stretching fourth gear up the main truck route out of the city, climbing past the corrals of used cars and gleaming fast-food palaces. The first Westfield SuperPlex marked the southern border of the far northern suburbs: a belt of rezoned farmland, treatment plants, endless warehouses and cheap housing that Jacinta called Commodore Country. True to its name, two rhino-sized Holdens thumped past her, bristling with

chrome and spoilers. Her car rocked in their wake as they roared up and over the hill, stereos pumping, exhausts thundering.

‘Dickheads!’ yelled Jacinta at the fading tail-lights. *That’ll probably be Jayden in a couple of years*, she thought sadly.

*For all I know, that probably is Jayden.*

She flipped her indicator on and moved to the far-left-hand lane, ready for the 400 metres of 100km/h zoned highway that came before the Salisbury Hills Estate turn off. Around here if you slowed down in a 100km/h zone it was like flying backwards through a meteor shower. V8s bumped and roared past, horns howling, drivers screaming true blue murder because they couldn’t pump their engines up to full bore.

She turned off the interstate highway and onto the road she’d limped up the night before: Bert Newton Boulevard.

At first the street names had been funny, but now Jacinta cringed. The streets in Salisbury Hills had all been named after ‘Living Aussie Legends’ and were meant to give the place some style and class. The result was like flicking through four decades of TV Week. She turned left onto Paul Hogan Drive, passed Jason Donovan Street, which lead up to (confusingly) Dannii Minogue Park, creaked around a tiny roundabout that fed onto Nicole Kidman Drive and Daryl Sommers Avenue and drove up Delta Goodrem Street.

‘I always wanted to go up Delta Goodrem!’ Jayden had hooted when they had first arrived. Dad had clipped him over the ear for that. There were plenty more opportunities for hilarious immaturity on the way to the McDonald’s house: Delta Goodrem Street turned into Jennifer Hawkins Road and then you took a sharp right over the hill, up Elle Macpherson Grove. The gags dried up at Hugh

Jackman Street, turned to respectful silence across Peter Brock Boulevard and were long-forgotten by the time you reached number thirteen, Russell Crowe Road.

Jacinta turned the ignition off and the loose wire fell out again. She twiddled the wire with her finger and rested her head on the steering wheel. *I'll fix it next time.* It had been a long drive, but worth it. She had a free, relaxing evening and money in her purse.

Money that would go straight to her dad for rent.

That he would remind her about while she was working on the tute assignment she hadn't started, which was due tomorrow.

That she would have to do after helping Jayden with whatever homework he had been texting her about.

Which she would have to fit in after writing her mum's *Backyard Bonanza* letter.

Free and relaxing evening indeed.

Carol McDonald had always wanted a nice garden. But shift work, water restrictions and Jayden's footy had seen to it that she only ever managed a yard full of dead dirt and expensive twigs. So instead she wrote letters to *Backyard Bonanza* every week.

The *Backyard Bonanza* team secretly remodelled your back garden into a suburban paradise while you were tricked into being away for the weekend. You weren't supposed to know that your backyard had been *Bonanza'd* until you came back from a couple of nights at a bed'n'breakfast that your family had suddenly won for you in a raffle. But Carol didn't have the patience for dropping hints. She

composed the nomination letters herself and made Jacinta help her by hand-writing and signing them. Every single week. She wasn't sure when the show was made, so she and Jacinta sat down together to write the letter almost every Sunday night of the year.

They didn't just write a short note on a single piece of paper. Email wasn't even considered. Carol reckoned that the producers would take more notice of a full care-package sent by a loving daughter complete with glitter, sticker stars and texta drawings. They included photos of her mum standing on different tufts of yellow grass looking brave, stories about how her granddad always had the best greenhouse and carefully pathetic drawings that Jacinta would do left-handed of her mother standing next to a wonky gazebo.

After five seasons, they hadn't heard a thing, but Carol insisted they keep trying. She actually seemed to enjoy the ritual of sitting down after tea on a Sunday night, gluing photos, sticking stickers and dictating to her daughter. Jacinta had begun to find it embarrassing, like still having to sit on the shopping centre Santa's knee for a photo every Xmas. But, like perching on that sweaty old man's lap, it was worth it to see her mum with a happy face.

Jacinta opened the front door, wondering how long their little collage sessions would last for.

'Jacinta!' Her mother leapt into the hall. '*Bonanza* is getting cancelled this year!'

*Not too much longer then.*

The news that *Backyard Bonanza* was in its final season shook the McDonald household. Jacinta pulled out the stationery box right after tea and

Gary cleared the table so they could get straight to work. Even Jayden hovered around, giving useless suggestions.

‘Why don’t you mail them some of the garbage we dug up when I tried to make you a pond!’

‘Jayden! Don’t be disgusting!’

‘I’m just tryna help.’

‘Did you start your homework?’

Jayden’s broad shoulders slumped into a sulk. Twelve-year-old Jayden would have jumped up and down, pestering them for hours, making jokes and hugging their arms. Fifteen-year-old Jayden just stuffed his hands into the bucket-sized pockets of his baggy jeans and shuffled off to his room. He came back every ten minutes, looking over their shoulders, bumping their chair legs and muttering ‘Can you help me now?’

Finally Jacinta had had a gut-full. She slapped down her blue crayon.

‘Jayden! I’ll come and get you when I’m done. Did you even start anything?’

He kicked the table leg again and muttered something under his breath.

‘What?’

‘Can you help me?’ he mumbled. ‘I can’t do it.’

Jacinta looked at the clock. It was getting late and she was going to be up for ages writing this stupid tute paper. ‘Think of it as a *mini-essay* about each reading!’ the philosophy tutor had said, rubbing her bony little hands together. ‘Just a couple of hundred words for each reading, and try to include what each *writer* was saying and then whether *you* think they are right or wrong!’ The woman was almost unnaturally upbeat and Jacinta wondered if someone so ditzy-looking could be so serious about each week’s paper being worth five percent.



‘Absolutely!’ the tutor had laughed when someone had been brave enough to ask her just that. ‘These classes are about *discussion! Thought!* They are a journey we take *together!*’ She was clearly crazy and that meant Jacinta would clearly be pulling a late one. She picked up the blue crayon again. Her mum put a warm hand on her shoulder.

‘Go on, Jaz. Go give him a hand. We’re pretty much done here I reckon.’ Carol carefully sprinkled green glitter into the large envelope they always mailed the package in. ‘Don’t forget to sign your name! Not too neat, though, eh? Just make it look like you’re really *trying* to be neat.’

Jacinta gripped the pink pencil hard in her left hand and printed her name slowly, making big loops on the ‘a’s and drawing a love heart for the dot above the ‘i’.

‘That’s great, love.’ She gave her daughter’s hand a squeeze as she stood up from the table. ‘Thanks, Jaz. This year’ll be the one, eh?’

‘Sure, Mum.’ Jacinta kissed her cheek and checked the time. 10:30. Hopefully Jayden’s homework wasn’t too difficult.

Jayden’s room was covered with Holden posters and smelled like wet socks, bong smoke and model glue. Jacinta actually coughed and covered her mouth and nose when she walked in.

‘Jesus, Jayden! How can you live in here? It reeks!’

Jayden shrugged. He slumped on the bed and dragged a dog-eared graph book from his backpack. He picked something crusty off of the cover, opened to a fresh-ish page and handed Jacinta a crumpled worksheet. She took it and sat awkwardly on the edge of the mattress.

‘Can’t we sit at the desk?’

He shook his head. His desk was covered in a white tablecloth, upon which perched the naked chassis of a complicated-looking Holden model surrounded by miniature car parts. ‘I don’t want to move it and lose something.’

Jayden spent most of his pocket money on model cars, saving up for months and building them slowly and carefully. Broken or missing pieces were a nightmare of a tragedy wrapped in a headache and smothered in rich, creamy tantrum. The last time she had seen him cry was over a broken gear lever the size of a match head. That had been just three weeks ago. She sighed. It wasn’t going anywhere. ‘It’s looking good, mate.’

Jayden grinned. ‘Thanks. I’m thinking of modding it up, but I want to get all the basics in place first.’

‘All right, but next time, I’m not sitting on this stinky bed. You’ve got to clear off your desk. All right?’

He scratched at a pimple. ‘Orright, orright. Can we do this now?’

Jacinta wriggled, trying to get comfortable. ‘Righto, let’s start with question one. When’s this due?’

He shifted the exercise book so that it rested on both their knees and began to slowly rule a margin down the side of the page. ‘Tomorrow.’

‘How long have you had to do it?’

The book buckled slightly between them, but he pressed on, tongue jammed into the corner of his mouth. Finally he answered ‘About a week.’ He finished the margin and wrote the number ‘1’ in the top right hand corner.

‘Why did you wait so long to—’

‘You always did it at the last minute,’ he said quietly, and put a full stop after the number one.

‘Yes, but I ...’

‘I just need your help, okay?’ He wrote the date at the top corner, not looking at her. After a moment’s thought, he underlined the date.

‘Okay. I’m ready.’

Jacinta took a very deep breath and imagined Henry fetching her a fresh cappuccino while they scrolled through a multimedia presentation. She opened her eyes. ‘Let’s write out the problem first.’

As Jacinta watched him slowly transcribe numbers and letters, she shuffled her bottom off a bedspring and thought about Henry’s ergonomic office chairs. Jayden’s sauce-stained worksheet was a long way from whizzing spreadsheets and computer animation.

She wasn’t even getting paid.

Jacinta left her brother to check his working out and turned on the family computer. She left the dusty box grinding and buzzing and went to make a cup of coffee. Henry’s laptop was like a sliver of ice. The only noises it made were quiet clicks and chimes as Henry tapped on the soft keys. Even Clara had inherited her mum’s old laptop which she could just flip open and start typing. The McDonald family computer had been haggled out the door of Cash Converters on 10% Off Tuesday. Jacinta had time to fill the jug, boil the water, make a coffee and tidy everything away before it had finished turning itself on.

11:15pm. She took a big gulp of coffee and sat down to start her tute paper.

The legal profession wasn't all glitz, glamour and unlimited shopping trips. There were the hard slog moments. Like tonight. Big case. Opening statement. Convince the jury or lose them completely. Sydney Harbour twinkled like the Milky Way stretching out beneath the high-rise corner office of J. McDonald, QC as she prepared to hit another home run. All the research in the world couldn't beat the inner magic that came out when the country's youngest QC was under pressure.

But first, she would ring Clara.

'Hey.'

'Hey.'

'Where are you?'

'Law library. Studying. I've got a massive presentation for Torts on Thursday. I've got to come up with something like ten sources. It's insane. And this place is half full of people – you wouldn't believe it's almost midnight.'

'Is everything okay with you and Mattie?'

'Yeah. He was at that scholarship thing all day. His professor's given them all these group projects to do *on top* of their regular assignments. It's like a full time job where they don't pay you overtime.'

'Oh, cool. I sort of meant, you know, after last night.'

Clara didn't seem to hear. 'Oh! And can you believe that the extra project is tied to their marks? I swear they *want* people to drop out. It's like a weird reality show. Did I tell you that Mattie's the only one in the whole group who didn't go to some mega-posh private school?'

'No. Huh.' Jacinta tried again. 'I actually meant you guys had that ... argument, last night. Is everything ...'

Year Twelve Clara would at least have paused from exam revision and admitted that she and Mattie had a fight. Year Eleven Clara would have already gone through a box of tissues and a block of chocolate on Jacinta's bedroom floor. First Year Law Student Clara was like a stranger. She talked about the fight like it was just another assignment: complete and in the past. When Clara began talking about how *important* Mattie's scholarship was, Jacinta butted in:

'So what if he drops out of this program? He got the marks, he can still be an engineer. And you won't have to kill yourself paying his rent.'

'Then I'd lose my—' The line went quiet.

'Hello?' Jacinta checked her phone. A photo of Clara pulling a silly face for the caller ID picture gurned up at her. 'Hello? Lose what?'

'Nothing. Don't worry about it. Where are you?'

'Home. Studying.'

'Let me guess: word count zero, due tomorrow?'

'No. I'm just tidying up the last bits.' Jacinta typed "qgqerbqerb" on the blank screen, so it wouldn't be a *complete* lie.

'Right. So that's Jacinta code for: you've at least done the readings. You would not *believe* how much reading we have to do.'

Jacinta drew a strand of hair from her head and plucked it from her scalp. In the background she could hear quiet murmuring and the ruffling of pages. She had been to the law library, right after she went to the induction lecture. It was the same as the regular library, only a bit smaller and a bit nicer. Future lawyers with their designer clothes and private school haircuts moved about purposefully, as if they were on rails. Watching them, it occurred to Jacinta that they sort of were. Rails which lead straight to suburbs like Henry's, courtrooms like on TV, views

like the one on her coffee mug and bank accounts which filled up minute by minute. Now Clara was on those same silver rails, moving away from Paramount, rubbing it in Jacinta's face as she pulled out of the graffiti-covered, urine-scented station. Jacinta doodled a square around the letterhead on her Perlman Frost Sweetman notepad. She would be on those tracks. Next year.

'I guess I just wanted it to be my thing. Can you understand?'

Jacinta realised that Clara had been talking while she had been picturing the long, straight rails to success. 'Sorry, you dropped out – what was that last bit?'

Clara sighed and lowered her voice, as though someone were listening. 'I was just saying: I'm sorry I wasn't straight with you about working with Kate over the summer.'

*Kate! They were mates now!*

'There was just so much so going on with Mattie and my mum and moving out and I knew you'd be pissed off, so I just did it and didn't tell anyone. I didn't even tell mum. Well, I sort of did, when I sent her all those business cards.' She sounded pleased with herself.

Jacinta thickened the border she was drawing and began adding a row of dots around it. 'Yeah, I'm still pretty pissed off. I mean: you're my best friend and you lied to me.' She made every second dot bigger so that it looked like a row of flashing lights.

'Jaz, look, I'm really sorry.' Clara was whispering now. 'I should have just told you, but I found out about the internship on Year Twelve prize night and you were pissed off then too. Then everything went to shit. It just made sense to just tell you later.'

‘On prize night? Was that lawyer there?’

‘Nah, Dolan told me. He put my name down for the summer intern program before exams. Lots of firms do it. They usually want the legal studies prize winner, but anyone can apply.’

‘But why didn’t he put my name—’ Jacinta stopped. She didn’t want to hear the answer to that question. Not from Clara, perched on her law library train tracks, sliding further away from Jacinta’s Salisbury Hills outpost. The distance seemed huge, but Jacinta reminded herself that, in reality, it was only the size of a credit card statement. ‘Anyway, you’ve told me now.’ She began sketching little ribbons through her lights. She had a plan worked out. Clara might be the one sitting in the law library, but natural talent wasn’t something you could buy.

‘That’s *something*.’

‘I’m sorry Jaz. I know you would have been excited for me.’

Jacinta narrowed her eyes. Maybe you could buy a little bit of talent. She would have to strike now. ‘Yeah, it’s really great. Clara, could you do me a favour?’





## *Part Two*

## 9

**LEGAL CLERK** A clerk of laws position exists at Anderson Bentley Wellings for a fifth year law student with a strong commitment to corporate law. This exclusive firm accepts one suitable candidate per year. The opportunity to work closely with the partners is an invaluable step in the career path to corporate law. The successful applicant will be expected to complete their studies while assisting on a full range of cases.  
Some after hours and weekend work expected.

‘Clara seems like a switched on girl.’ Myra moved gracefully about the house, getting ready to go out while she tapped emails on her laptop. Occasionally she would mutter things like ‘I swear some of these people have no lives’ and ‘I really should have a PA for all this.’

Jacinta followed her around, reminding her where the make-up and the computer were when she put them down. ‘Yeah. Clara’s great. She’s been through so much.’

Myra nodded sympathetically and fastened a sparkling blue earring. ‘Oh I *know*. Particularly all that business with the bullying!’

*Bullying?* That wasn’t part of the plan. Clara had agreed to gush about Jacinta’s tutoring skills and bravely hint at her evil mother throwing her out. Nothing about bullying.

‘And I can’t believe that so-called best friend of hers!’ Myra appealed to Jacinta, who nodded dumbly. ‘Girls can be such bitches to each other!’

Jacinta’s fingertips went numb and she chewed a sliver of skin from her cuticle while Myra carried on. ‘You know, before I met Terry, I used to relief teach in high schools all over the place: the city, eastern suburbs, even way up

north, and it was the same everywhere.’ She patted her perfect hair in the antique mirror in the hallway. ‘Nasty, jealous, judgemental, belittling bullshit. As if that poor girl doesn’t have enough problems without that horrible piece of work trying to drag her down.’

*All right, Clara. You’ve made your point.* ‘What did she say about me?’

Myra put her hand on Jacinta’s shoulder. ‘She said that you were excellent. Like a big sister. And you obviously know your stuff where tutoring is concerned. She said you were intelligent, imaginative, inspiring. She was quite effusive.’

‘Quite what?’

Myra gave a loud laugh. ‘Very good, Jacinta. Very good.’ She turned back to the hallway mirror, arranging a blue silk scarf about her tanned shoulders. ‘And thanks so much for taking Henry to this party-thingy, I know it’s probably an awful bore for you.’

‘No worries.’ Jacinta was glad they had stopped talking about Clara.

‘Henry mentioned that you were interested in earning some extra money, so I thought you wouldn’t mind a little babysitting. Terry is launching his industry partnership with the university tonight and they tend to be so formal about wives and partners.’ She dabbed at an invisible lipstick smear. Apart from Kate the lawyer, she was simply the most glamorous person Jacinta had ever seen.

‘You look nice,’ she said.

Myra rolled her eyes. ‘Honestly, all I can think about is the ton of admin I have to get through tomorrow with a hangover.’ Before Jacinta could register her surprise that a uni lecturer would be getting drunk, Myra turned on her business voice. ‘Obviously we’d prefer that one of us go to these high school parties, but

this was short notice and Henry's assured me that other parents will be there. And you'll be there, just to keep an eye on things.'

'Don't worry, Myra. He'll be fine. It's just a big party with all the kids from his year.'

She nodded. 'I know, I know. "Everyone's in-ited".' She sang the phrase and wiggled her fingers for air quotes. Jacinta tried to look sympathetic while Myra worried on about rotten eggs and bad apples. As she talked, Jacinta noticed Henry's door open slowly behind her and Henry peer around the corner. Jacinta gave him a surreptitious wave. He looked utterly mortified and shrank back into his room.

*Poor kid, she thought. All he wants to do is muck around with his mates and his mum still thinks that catching the bus is a big deal.*

'The thing is ...' Myra lowered her voice, '... obviously there are going to be *girls* at this party. I know Henry gets nervous around girls his age, and I don't blame him. The only girls he's interacted with are usually *threatened* by his intelligence, but I'm sure that will sort itself out. I'm more worried about how the older boys will behave; I'm sure you know what sixteen-year-olds are like at parties. I don't want him to get mixed up in ... in all that.'

Jacinta smiled warmly. 'Don't worry, I'll look out for him.'

Myra suddenly reached and held Jacinta's arm. 'I don't want to be the un-cool mum, but ... if you see any alcohol or cigarettes, just come home. He's too young.'

'Don't worry about it.' Jacinta patted Myra's hand. 'There'll be parents there. Everyone's going to have a good time.'

Myra gazed blankly at Jacinta.

‘He’ll be fine,’ repeated Jacinta.

‘He’ll be fine!’ Myra nodded, coming to. ‘Yes. It’ll be fine. There’s other school parents, it’s at someone’s house, you’ll call me and take him home if there’s any alcohol.’

‘Right. Straight home.’

‘Or any kissing games.’

Jacinta caught a glimpse of Henry staring in horror. ‘Or kissing.’

Myra picked up her keys and continued talking as she made her way out the door. ‘Okay: get Henry to set the magnetic security lock thingy on the front gate. It’s a timer and a keypad or something; he knows what to do. Home by 11:30. There’s money on the counter, and thank you and sorry again about your Saturday night.’ Myra called to Henry from the doorway. ‘Do I get a kiss?’ When no answer came, she smiled knowingly at Jacinta. ‘See? Shy.’

Jacinta watched Myra reverse the Mercedes out of the driveway.

When she had finally driven away, Jacinta shut the door and breathed a sigh of relief. *Kissing games?*

She called down to Henry: ‘It’s over! You can come out now!’

He stood sullenly at his bedroom door. ‘See what I mean?’

‘She just worries about you.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘We have to leave in forty-five minutes or we’ll be late.’

‘Whatever’s cool by me. You rock up whenever you want.’

He stared at her and walked quickly off down the hall. Jacinta found him in the kitchen looking inside the fridge, holding an empty glass.

‘Thirsty?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘What’s with the glass?’

He didn’t answer. He took out a bottle of mineral water and poured some into his glass. Jacinta watched as he took a sip and wrinkled his nose.

‘Tasty, huh?’

‘Leave me alone.’

‘Settle down. Remember, I’m doing you a favour taking you to this party.’

He chewed his lip and looked lost.

‘Are you nervous about going?’

He shook his head and loped back to his room. Jacinta shrugged and flopped down on the couch.

*Let him sort it out himself.*

She stretched out on the massive white pillows to get a good view of the sun setting over the garden. It was like watching something exotic cooking in a huge oven; roasting slowly from green to gold to purple as the light crept lower and lower through the tangle of trees and hanging plants. Soon there was just the navy blue glow of the early night sky. Jacinta felt herself sinking under a warm tropical ocean in a submarine full of books and vases.

‘It’s so I know how to drink stuff.’

The overhead light flicked on and Jacinta sat up with a start.

‘What?’

The ocean was gone and she was back in the Clapham’s lounge room. It was dark outside and she could see her reflection in the windows. Her head looked like a little black mushroom poking up from the couch.

‘I’m practising so I don’t choke or anything.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Jacinta rubbed her eyes and smoothed down her tousled hair.

He came and sat next to her, still holding the empty glass. He looked so worried that Jacinta almost put her arm around him before remembering that he wasn’t Jayden.

‘People are going to be drinking there. I don’t like the taste – beer’s yucky. But I don’t want to look stupid so I’m practising drinking the worst thing in the house so that I’m ready.’

‘What about the scotch?’ She pointed to the dusty liquor bottles in an antique cabinet.

‘Dad marks the bottles.’

‘So? Just take a slug and then top it up with water, no one will be able to tell.’

He stared at her, amazed. ‘What do you mean? Does that work? Have you ever done it?’ He peered over at the cabinet.

Suddenly Jacinta was fully awake. Teaching Henry how to nick booze probably wasn’t what Myra had in mind. ‘Hang on a minute — what the? You shouldn’t be drinking anyway! You’re like, *thirteen!*’

‘I’m nearly fourteen.’

‘Whatever. Stay away from that stuff. And forget what I said about topping it up with water.’

‘Does it work?’

‘No. I don’t know. I’m not telling. Just go and get ready.’

‘Okay.’ Henry hung his head and shuffled back to his room. The door closed quietly. Jacinta felt a prick of guilt in her throat.

‘Henry!’ There was no answer. She found him on his bed with his laptop on his knees.

‘Look, what’s this drinking thing all about?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Come on, I can’t believe there’s going to be alcohol at this party. Aren’t there parents around? You’re only thirteen!’

‘Thirteen, ten months and fourteen days.’

‘Well, a thirteenth birthday party won’t have alcohol, will it?’ Jacinta pictured a bunch of Year Eights clutching beer cans and making fart jokes.

‘Peter’s turning sixteen.’

‘Oh right. I forgot you’re skipped ahead and everything.’

Henry said nothing and continued gazing gloomily at his laptop.

‘Still, it’s pretty awesome to be invited to a sixteen-year-old’s birthday party, isn’t it?’

He pointed his fingers at her like pistols. Jacinta remembered and pointed her own.

‘Ev-ery-one’s in-*vited!*’ they chanted in unison and Henry squeezed out a lop-sided smile in spite of himself. Jacinta sat down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and she was suddenly acutely aware that they were alone together in this wide, wealthy house. She took her hand away.

‘Look, forget about all this drinking crap: you’re too young. Just go to the party. Have a good time. It sounds like there’ll be heaps of kids there. It’ll be cool enough you just rocking up. Like, the young star partying with the older kids.’

‘Really?’



‘Hell yeah! I used to think it was cool when younger dudes turned up to parties, like they were mature enough to handle it and stuff.’

Henry seemed encouraged.

‘Come on, get your party shirt on. Let’s go.’

Jacinta and Henry followed Kyme Anderson down a long, wide hall with a low, track-lit ceiling. Jacinta felt as though she had wandered into an art gallery; a place where one unguarded body-movement could end up costing thousands of dollars. She tucked her elbows close and weaved past the gleaming Chinese vases and thorny African carvings. They arrived in a kitchen and lounge area which could have easily swallowed Jacinta’s whole house. A granite bench-top the size of Jacinta’s bedroom was covered with bubble gum-coloured Tupperware piled with party-food. Jacinta stared open-mouthed at the expanse of wealth before her. The tennis court and speed boat on the way up the tree-lined driveway had been impressive, but this room alone made her feel as though she were breathing cash and privilege into her lungs.

‘You have *such* a nice house!’ Jacinta gushed without being able to stop herself.

‘Thank you!’ trilled Kyme as she glided across the spotless slate floor. ‘It’s a bit of a brothel at the moment, but that’s a teen party for you! They’re all down in the rumpus room.’

They entered another sprawling wing of the house which wrapped around a wide, kidney-shaped swimming pool like the arm of a greedy kid protecting sweets. Music thumped louder as they turned each corner, finally arriving in what seemed to be a nightclub. A DJ stood at a set of turntables while blonde girls

danced in front of him. Couches and beanbags were strewn across the floor in between pool tables, arcade games, a smoke machine and a ball-crawl. Most of the people in the room looked older than Jacinta. The girls wore low-cut brand-names while the boys preened their perfectly ruffled hair-styles. It was like stepping into a Coke commercial.

A tall, muscular blond boy rose from the centre of a group of couches and strode towards them. A group of girls reminded Jacinta of sideshow clowns as they watched him walk past. He could only have been Peter Anderson. Paramount High had Mattie. This was Tranmere College's Golden Boy.

'Look who's here!' Kyme ushered Henry forward.

Peter laughed, but he didn't sound happy. 'What are *you* doing here?'

Jacinta could smell the alcohol fumes on his breath.

'Hey!' someone yelled. 'It's Clappo the Clown!'

Henry didn't react. He mumbled 'Happy Birthday' to Peter's chest and handed him a card in an envelope. Peter ignored it.

'I don't think I invited you, did I, Clappo?' They were almost the same height, but Peter's broad shoulders towered over Henry's hollow-chested stoop and he had to lean down. 'Did I, buddy?'

'But you said that *everyone* was invited ...' Henry trailed off.

Peter laughed again. 'Yeah. "Everyone" from *my friends*. Everyone in the *group*.' He shot an incredulous, get-a-load-of-this-guy grin to a dark-haired boy with a pointy, pimple-covered face who had appeared beside him.

'Oh Peter, stop being silly.' Kyme interrupted. 'There's plenty of party to go around!'

‘Mum. I only invited *certain people*.’ He gestured to the forty or fifty kids packed into the room behind him. ‘I didn’t invite *you*, did I, Clappo?’

Kyme’s patient smile tightened like a bear-trap. ‘Peter. We’ve talked about this. You will be a good host, or I will shut this party down. Clear?’

Peter looked at her for a moment and then beamed the same broad, sunny smile that Mattie used like a weapon. ‘I’m just mucking around, Mum!’ He flashed a row of perfect teeth and gave a cocky wink. He threw a muscular arm around Henry’s neck and snatched the card away. ‘It’s all good! Clappo knows I’m kidding, dontcha, Clappo?’

Henry nodded as best he could from the headlock. Kyme smiled, satisfied. ‘Lovely. Glass of wine, Jasmine?’

‘It’s Jacinta, actually. Yes, that’d be great, please.’

As they walked away, Jacinta saw Peter release Henry with a light shove and leave him standing in the doorway. She made to go back to him, but Henry shook his head. As Jacinta watched, he took a deep breath and plunged into the booming darkness.

‘So what do you do?’ asked Kyme, slopping some pink wine into Jacinta’s balloon-sized glass.

‘I’m a student. I study.’

Henry’s stony face as he disappeared into the party room still hovered in Jacinta’s mind. She knew how it felt to turn up to a party without an invitation. A lot like going to a law school induction without an offer.

‘What is it you’re studying?’

Jacinta felt as though the enormous house fell quiet for a moment, waiting for her answer. She looked Kyme in the eye. ‘I’m going to be a lawyer.’

‘Mmm.’ Kyme made an interested noise through a gulp of wine. ‘My Donald’s a lawyer.’

Jacinta almost bit a chunk out of her glass. ‘Oh?’ she managed. ‘What does he, erm ... practise?’

‘Corporate law. He works mostly in Sydney, so he has to commute a lot. I don’t know how he does it – it’s a terrible strain. That’s where he is now.’ She gestured at the huge kitchen as though Jacinta might not have noticed that he wasn’t there.

‘Does he need, like, an assistant or anything?’

Kyme let out a brassy guffaw. Jacinta, mortified, forced herself to smile along.

‘Good to see law students haven’t lost their go-gettem attitude!’

‘Are you a lawyer?’ asked Jacinta, ears still ringing with Kyme’s laughter.

She stiffened slightly at the question. ‘No. I manage investment portfolios.’

‘Ah.’ Jacinta sipped more wine. Her head buzzed from the knowledge that this house, this *mansion*, was a *lawyer’s* house. A lawyer who worked in Sydney. He probably had the view from Jacinta’s coffee mug. This would be her, she promised herself. This would be her. She could do it.

She was about to ask Kyme when her husband came back from Sydney, but she was interrupted by a cooing from the hallway.

‘Hi Pat!’ Kyme left Jacinta sitting at the bench to air-kiss the woman who had just arrived. ‘You’re early! Time for a moscato?’

‘I thought you’d never ask!’

Both women laughed as though it were a terrific joke. Jacinta wondered if she should check on Henry, but Kyme turned to her. ‘This is Pat, Bonnie’s mother.’

Pat said hello and gave Jacinta a firm handshake.

‘I’m Jacinta.’

‘*Jacinta,*’ gushed Kyme, sounding as though she had just remembered.

‘When Jacinta’s not playing chaperone, she studies law.’

Pat’s face lit up. ‘Another one! Excellent!’

The three laughed and Kyme poured Pat a large glass of wine. Jacinta decided Henry would probably be okay for a little while longer.

Jacinta washed her hands in the deep white basin and decided to have a snoop in the other rooms. Pat had finished two fish bowls of wine before declaring that it was time to take her daughter home. She and Kyme had drifted away to the rumpus room, while Jacinta excused herself to the toilet. If she knew high school parties, then it would be some time before Bonnie agreed to leave, giving Jacinta the perfect opportunity to get better acquainted with the kind of house she could probably expect to end up in as a lawyer.

‘I’m definitely getting one of these,’ she whispered to herself as she marvelled at the huge oil paintings of bushland in the formal dining room. She leaned in for a closer look and saw the faint outlines of the glossy daubs on canvas. *This is real. It must be worth an absolute packet.*

‘Hello-oo!’ trilled a voice from the hall behind her.

Jacinta leapt back from the painting and quickly exited the dining room. Standing at the front door was a woman who looked exactly like a plumper version of Pat peeping in the front door. She saw Jacinta and stiffened up, raising an arrow-thin eyebrow.

‘Hello? Are you with the catering?’ she asked in a high, breathy voice.

‘No, I’m here with one of the kids.’

‘Oh?’ The woman’s hand closed around the mobile phone sitting at the top of her purse.

‘I’m Henry’s ... I’m a chaperone,’ said Jacinta, pleased to remember Kyme’s word.

‘Mm. And where are the rest of the children?’ The woman’s hand was still resting on her mobile.

‘In the rumpus room.’ Jacinta pointed towards the rest of the house, just as Pat and her daughter Bonnie appeared around the corner, moving at top speed. Pat’s face was purple with rage and the tendons stood out of her thin neck like trampoline springs. She gripped Bonnie’s arm and was growling in her ear: ‘I have *never* been *so* disgusted in all my life! You should be *ashamed* of yourself, you disgusting, *stupid* girl!’

Bonnie’s face was a similar colour to her mother’s, not from anger, but from fright. The girl was so scared she was hiccupping.

They stopped briefly next to Jacinta and the woman.

‘Hello Raelene,’ Pat managed to breathe through her teeth. Raelene just gawked.

‘What’s happened, Pat?’ she quivered. ‘What’s wrong?’

To say that Pat smiled a thin-lipped smile would be over-using the words ‘lip’ and ‘smile’. She answered with the sing-song venom of a headmistress.

‘Oh! Let’s just *say* that Bonnie won’t be going to any more parties if what *I* just saw is the way children behave these days!’ And with that she frog-marched Bonnie out the door and down the gravel driveway. As Bonnie got her breath back, a string of stuttering curses floated back over the porch.

‘You fucking (hic) *bitch!* I *hate* you, you stupid (hic) old ...’

‘Oh just shut *up*, you *idiot* girl! Get in the car!’

Raelene stared after them, her eyes almost as wide as her mouth. Without another word she hurried down the hall to the kitchen. Jacinta heard Kyme ask where Pat had gone, but she was cut off by Raelene’s panicked warbling:

‘What’s going on? What’s going on? Pat just dragged Bonnie out! I want to know what’s happening!’

Jacinta shook her head and smiled. *If they didn’t know what to expect from a sixteenth birthday, I’d hate to see what they’re like at an eighteenth.*

She continued down the hallway, avoiding the ancient artefacts, and found herself in a sumptuous office. It was like the Clapham’s house, but all condensed into one room made of carved wood and brown leather. A wide Persian carpet appeared to shine under the soft light from various wall lamps. There was a sideboard with a collection of thick crystal bottles and heavy tumblers and one wall was entirely covered with shelves full of colour-coded, leather-bound books. In the centre of the room a translucent white computer screen perched next to neatly-stacked folders and piles of paper on a massive writing desk. Behind the desk, a wide window looked out upon a valley of pale gum trees.

*A real lawyer's office.* Jacinta gulped. *This is what I'm going to have when I graduate.*

She drifted to the centre of the room and breathed deeply. It smelled of book dust and eucalyptus. From there she noticed a smaller desk in one corner with a laptop nestling among a nest of cords and folders. *This is where his assistant sits.* She sat at it, running her fingers over the keys and imagining herself as an intern, plucked from uni to work for Mr Anderson on a big case. They would stay up late, going over notes and drinking espresso coffee that Kyme would bring on a silver tray.

Jacinta leaned back in the small chair. It felt right. *This is where I'll sit.*

'Jacinta!' squeaked Henry.

She jerked forward, almost losing her balance. 'What? What is it?'

Henry scampered into the room, looking like a smacked puppy: eyes wide, scrambling limbs forgetting what to do. 'Help! You have to help me! Promise! Promise you'll help me!'

'All right! What happened? What did you do?'

'Promise! You have to promise!' His dark eyes trembled with tears.

'Okay, fine. I promise. What's going on?'

'They—' his head jerked around to listen, and then continued in a harsh whisper. 'They're after me!'

'Who?'

'The others!'

'What? Why?'



Henry began hopping from foot to foot and looking around. ‘I have to hide!’ He dove behind the desk and ducked down. Jacinta dragged him to his feet and he hung from her hand like an old coat.

‘Henry. Stop. Tell me what’s going on. Why are they after you? Did you break something?’

He chewed his lip and said nothing.

A voice yelled from somewhere outside: ‘I reckon he’s cut back and gone into the house!’

Henry’s eyes quivered with tears as they met hers. ‘I told them you were my *girlfriend!*’

Jacinta dropped his arm. ‘What?’

‘They were all talking about Bonnie going off with Caleb and Hunter said what did I think they were doing and I didn’t want to say, but he kept asking and shoving his phone in my face and then Peter asked if I ever got with the babysitter and I said that you weren’t my babysitter and Hunter said oh what is she, your girlfriend and I don’t know why but I said yes. Then Bonnie’s mum came in and started yelling at everyone and so I ran outside and hid. But I think Hunter saw where I went!’ He took a deep breath. ‘I don’t know what to do!’

Jacinta stared. ‘Well ... you shouldn’t have said I was your girlfriend.’

The sound of chasing footsteps rumbled into the living room.

‘Where are ya, Clappo?’ yelled a voice.

‘He’s gettin’ with his sugar mumma!’ yelled another, followed by braying teenage laughter.

‘He *will* need a nappy then!’

More laughter.

‘Check the bedrooms!’

Henry made a crying sound. ‘Oh no!’

‘Come on, Henry, they’re just mucking around. What are they gonna do?’

‘Have you still got his nappy?’ called a voice.

‘Hunter! Get the camera ready!’

‘This is gonna be hilarious!’

The jogging feet thumped on the carpet of the front hall. ‘Hey! Maybe he shat himself already and we’re too late!’

Jacinta looked at Henry. ‘They’re going to put you in a *nappy*?’

Henry nodded.

‘Jesus! What little shits!’

‘Did you check the office?’ The crowd of kids sounded seconds away.

Henry hunched in agony, trying to disappear into his shirt, his voice a desperate squeak.

‘I hate this! *Jacinta*! Help me! Do something!’

Jacinta looked down at him. *Poor kid*, she thought. *Jesus. A nappy? What a bunch of little arseholes! What happened to just getting a kid drunk?*

She shook her head. ‘I can’t believe I’m doing this. Come here. Stand still.’ She placed herself between Henry and the open door and wrapped both arms around him. The ‘Pretending To Make Out’ gag was a bit Year Nine Tragic, but it usually fooled people if they weren’t expecting it. She wriggled her shoulders and made exaggerated ‘Ooo’ noises as the gang of tipsy teenagers tumbled through the door.

‘Here he is! Get the na ...’

The silence was beautiful. Henry stood stiff as a tree trunk, staring rigidly at Jacinta's mouth as she made quiet, slurpy kissing noises. Someone behind her whispered, 'Oh my God!' and Jacinta held back a snort of laughter. It was working perfectly.

She turned around and took an aggressive step towards the group. 'Oi! Piss off, you little perverts!'

There was a slight pause and then the whole group reversed out of the door and back down the hall, bubbling with incredulous chatter.

'I can't believe it!'

'What a little scammer!'

'Clappo's a pimp!'

Jacinta snorted with laughter. 'Did you see their faces? That was hysterical!'

Henry was still hunched over, staring at Jacinta. 'Um, thanks,' he mumbled.

'Oh come on.' She poked him in the ribs. He flinched and laughed with relief. 'It wasn't that bad was it? You totally showed them up!'

'Yeah.' He smiled.

'Come on, enough practical jokes. It's time to go home anyway. Let's go say goodbye.'

They walked into the lounge room to find that most of the party had gathered there, giggling and nudging each other. Kyme and Raelene sat in the centre, looking silently at Jacinta.

*Shhhit. Those little bastards dobbed me in.*

Jacinta tensed her stomach. This was the biggest test of J. McDonald's legal career. The difference between stacking shelves and corporate law. She gave a winning smile and opened her mouth to begin her defence ...

... but Raelene did it for her. 'I knew it!' she humped. 'I *knew* you were just one of the kids being silly!' She turned to Kyme, wagging her head like a righteous nanny. 'She was poking around in the dining room when I came in. Didn't you say the front of the house was off limits?'

'Oh sorry Rae'! I forgot to introduce you.' Kyme was warm as ever.

*She doesn't know.*

'This is Henry's chaperone, Jacinta. She's been keeping me company tonight.'

'*Hiii*,' drawled Jacinta, stretching out the bitchiest smile she could muster.

Raelene twitched her jowls in acknowledgment.

'Anywaaa-ay,' drawled Jacinta, milking it for all it was worth. 'We had better get going. I'm taking this one home to bed.' She threw a friendly arm around Henry's shoulders and every kid's chin hit the floor. The ones who weren't gasping with laughter were choking with disbelief. Kyme and Raelene looked around, startled.

'Oh, grow up, you lot!' Kyme laughed. She held out a hand to Jacinta, who shook it firmly. 'It was lovely meeting you, Jacinta, and good luck with your studies.'

'Thanks, Kyme. Henry, do you want to say goodbye before we go?'

Henry grinned a sheepish grin and waved at the gaping crowd. 'See ya, guys. I ... uh ... I have to go home now.' He pointed a thumb at Jacinta. 'With her.'

The crowd loved it and let out a cheer. Girls chorused ‘Bye, Henry!’ and boys chuckled like polo-shirted hyenas, lining up to slap him on the back. The boy with the pimply face took a photo and Peter gave him a handshake-hug and Jacinta heard him whisper ‘Very nice work, Clappo’. He smiled his perfect smile at her and she felt her cheeks redden.

Kyme and Raelene’s puzzled expressions followed them out as the lounge room chorused with cheers and laughter.

## 10

Get into a BRAND NEW COROLLA for just  
**\$15,999!**

Includes stamp duty, three-year warranty and 24-hour road-side assistance.

Henry wriggled with pleasure. They had left the party but the feeling of the group's admiration still swam warmly in his stomach, as though he had just eaten a big helping of butterscotch pudding with caramel sauce. He wanted seconds. He hugged himself and wriggled again. 'Nice work, Clappo,' they had said. They had all approved of Jacinta. Now they approved of him.

At first, he had dismissed Jacinta as an immature student; one of the 'kids' Myra complained about from behind piles of essays. Technically, she and Myra were both adults, but with Jacinta's wispy brown ponytail, girlish face and slim body, they seemed to be from different worlds. But now, seen through the eyes of the boys at the party, there was obviously something he was missing.

Jacinta caught him looking and gave him a friendly punch on the arm. 'That wasn't so bad, eh?'

Henry smiled. 'Nah.'

They were still making their way down out of the hills and the clutch on Jacinta's car whirred like a vacuum cleaner caught on a rug. They pulled up at a

deserted traffic light with a long squeak of brakes. ‘You know you’ve got to tell your mates that it was all just a joke, right?’

The warm pudding turned into cold porridge. ‘Why?’

‘It’s just not right.’

‘Why not?’

‘God, Henry. This isn’t something I should have to bloody explain.

Listen—’ And off she went, going on about morals and rumours and employment prospects. Henry was disappointed. He had begun to think that she was an adult who would treat him like a person, rather than a prodigy. But this whole speech about wrong impressions and being a child in the eyes of the law just reminded him of Myra. Even Mr Jones didn’t explain things this much.

*Henry* was the one who should have been explaining how things worked to *Jacinta*. She didn’t know any of the people at the party, she was never going to bump into them at the shops. They were in Year Eleven and she was in uni. They lived in the eastern suburbs and she lived way up north in some housing development. What did she care what they thought?

But worst, *worst* of all, she talked in that bossy, mothering voice that people used to teach toddlers to cross the road.

‘... so I know it might seem like a bit of fun,’ *Jacinta* continued, ‘but you’ve *really* got to make sure that you explain to everyone that it was *just a joke*.’

‘But what do you care?’

‘Just tell them that it was a joke, okay?’ She spun angrily to face him, her eyes reflected the dull orange of the streetlights. Henry shrank into the crumbling foam seat. A spring poked his leg.

‘Don’t get mad.’

Her face softened. ‘Sorry.’ She patted his arm. Her palm was quite soft.

‘Henry, you’re a smart kid. I know you can understand why I don’t want that bunch of spoilt brats thinking that I hook up with thirteen-year-olds.’ She looked at him pointedly. The traffic light changed to green.

‘The light’s green.’

She didn’t take her eyes away from him. ‘Henry, you do understand, don’t you?’ The green light hovered.

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ She jammed the car into first gear and took off. There was a jerk and a bang and the engine stopped.

‘What happened?’

Jacinta groaned. ‘Nothing. It just stalled.’

‘I think you released the clutch too fast.’

Jacinta smiled an unfriendly smile and turned the key. The starter turned over slowly a couple of times, sounding like a beagle dying of pneumonia. The green light slid to orange. The final cough echoed around the empty street and the pale splash of headlights faded and went out. Orange climbed to red.

‘You should turn the lights off when you start the engine because it drains the battery.’

‘I know!’ snapped Jacinta. She fiddled violently with the fan vents and carefully rapped the steering column a few times with the heel of her hand. Henry held his tongue. He was pretty sure he knew how to start it, but he didn’t want her to snap at him again. She thumped at some loose panels and turned the key again. The starter groaned out a final, expiring bark and was silent. Jacinta turned the



key again. The only sound was the jangle of her keys and the dull, crunching click of the ignition.

‘Shhhhit.’ She banged her fist on the steering wheel. Henry sat facing forward, saying nothing. Jacinta yanked the handbrake on, pulled the bonnet release and got out.

Henry checked his watch. They were going to be late. Jacinta leaned over the engine bay and fiddled with the radiator cap.

‘I’m supposed to be home soon,’ he called out.

‘I. Know. That.’ Jacinta sounded as though she were talking through her teeth.

Henry looked around. They weren’t in the hills anymore, but the street they were on still had a gentle slope in the direction they were facing. He got out and watched Jacinta squinting at the dipstick with the light from her mobile phone before fiddling it back into the belly of the engine. She didn’t look pleased to see him.

‘Okay, genius. Any ideas?’

Henry bit his lip. ‘Do you promise to stop treating me like a little kid?’

‘What?’ She shone her phone at him. He squinted.

‘I’ll tell you how to fix the car if you stop treating me like I’m some baby who can’t look after himself.’

Jacinta pinched the bridge of her nose. She did it for a long time. ‘Henry, I’ve got to get you home by, like, *now*. I *don’t* want to call your parents to say that my car died in the middle of nowhere because they’ll think I’m unreliable and sack me and I *need* this job, so, *yeah*, if you know how to start this stupid thing,

you can *drive it* home.’ She smacked the fender with the palm of her soft hand and shone the mobile back into the dark engine bay.

Henry’s heart leapt. ‘Really?’ *She was going to let him drive!*

‘Sure. Whatever.’ She tweaked the oil cap delicately between her finger and thumb.

‘Cool! Okay, I think the battery’s flat. But we can easily push start it on this hill.’

She stared up at him. ‘Push start?’

‘Yeah.’ Henry’s heart pounded. ‘It’s easy.’

‘How do you know how to push start a car?’

Henry had been asked this type of question before. The short answer was always best: ‘Internet.’

‘Eh?’

‘I read it on the internet.’

‘You’re a strange kid.’ She lowered the bonnet slowly before dropping it shut with a clang. ‘So how does this work?’

Henry’s heart pounded. She was really going to let him do it. He cleared his mind and dozens of tutorials and videos explained each step as though they were playing in front of him. A chorus of authoritative, knowledgeable voices spoke instructions and as Henry watched, the whole process unfolded. This is what Mr Jones meant when he talked about applying what he learned.

‘Put it in neutral and turn on the ignition.’

Jacinta turned the key and let the handbrake off. The car rocked a little.

‘Now what?’

‘You go around the back and push and I’ll push from here.’ Henry leaned casually against the open driver’s side door as Jacinta heaved against the boot. The car began to roll, tyres crunching down the street’s gentle slope.

‘What happens now?’ puffed Jacinta from behind the car as her shoes slapped along the tarmac.

‘I get in!’ Henry swung into the driver’s seat, banging his knees on the steering wheel.

‘Henry!’ screamed Jacinta. ‘What are you doing? Stop the car! Put your foot on the brake! The middle pedal! *The middle pedal!*’

The car picked up speed and the slapping of Jacinta’s feet became faster and more frantic. ‘Henry!’

He ignored her and gripped the wheel, holding the car in a straight line. The simplicity of a car engine calmed his mind. He saw which pieces were spinning and which pieces needed to. He pressed the clutch pedal all the way down with his left foot and put the lever into what he hoped was first gear. The authoritative tutorial voices continued: ‘When you’ve got a bit of speed, slowly release the clutch pedal and the weight of the car will turn the engine over.’

‘*Henry!*’ Jacinta slapped his window as she ran beside the car. ‘*Stop!*’

Henry let his foot off the clutch. The Corolla lurched and jumped as though it had stumbled on its shoelaces. The engine gargled into life.

‘Give it a little gas to keep it running ...’

Henry tentatively poked the accelerator and the car banged forward, jerking Henry back in the seat. Jacinta was slapping and squealing at the back window now.

‘... and put your foot on the clutch again and give the car time to charge up.’

He jammed his foot on the clutch pedal and stomped on the brake. The whole car bumped to a halt, but the engine was still going.

‘And there, you’ve push started your car!’

Jacinta yanked the door open. ‘*What are you doing?* Get out!’

‘The car’s running!’ Henry tried to sound cheerful as Jacinta dove across him and yanked on the handbrake. She reached for the keys, but he grabbed her hand.

‘Wait. Don’t turn it off. You’ve got to let the battery charge. When the engine runs it operates the alternator which ...’ He trailed off. Her hand was a rigid claw. He let go.

‘What did you just do?’

‘I stopped you from turning off the engine.’

‘No, I mean, *this*.’ She gestured to the car. ‘When have you ever had to start a conked out car?’

Henry thought about the Mercedes. It hadn’t broken down once. Nor had the one it had replaced. He shrugged. ‘Never.’

Jacinta spluttered. ‘Then how did you—’

‘I just like engineering, okay?’ He looked her in the eye, not budging from the driver’s seat. She looked down at him and drummed her fingers on the roof.

‘So, can I still drive home?’

A gust of wind blew traces of exhaust smoke away down the deserted street. Jacinta seemed to be thinking about it, when suddenly a house light went on, a dog barked and she shook her head.

‘Come on, shove over. You’ll get busted.’

Henry was about to protest that she had promised, when the house’s door opened and the barking become louder. Jacinta shooed him over and reluctantly he climbed into the passenger seat.

Very few cars travelled through Loxton Park. The small suburb was bordered by a belt of parks and *cul de sacs*, making it a poor thoroughfare. Henry watched the familiar gates and trees drift by as the car pattered along the wide, smooth streets towards his house. Two blocks away, Jacinta pulled the car over.

‘All right. Look. I’ve been thinking. We both did each other a favour tonight.’

Henry looked at her quizzically.

‘You got my car started. I got you out of trouble with those dickheads at the party. Right?’

Henry nodded.

‘I know you think you’re hard done by, having to set those guys straight when you go back to school, but I’ll do you a deal.’ She turned to him and made sure he was looking. ‘If you promise to tell your mates what the deal is, I’ll give you a driving lesson. Right here.’

She put out her hand. Henry thought about it for moment and then shook it. ‘Deal.’

The Corolla bunny-hopped, stalled, coughed and moaned. It reminded Henry of trying to rodeo-ride a grumpy goat. But sitting in the driver’s seat, with

all the machinery working in harmony under his finger-tips, he was buzzing.

Thanks to Jacinta, he was finally being trusted to do something he was capable of.

He was finally in control.

## 11

*Your gifted and talented child may also prefer the company of older children and even adults to that of people his own age. This can create its own problems, especially during upper primary and early high school when 'fitting in' with one's peers takes on a great deal of importance.*

The front gate of Tranmere College was a high, wrought-iron arch that rested on heavy sandstone pillars. The arch held the school's brightly painted crest: a green wreath of laurels and berries embracing the ribboned initials 'TC'. There had never been a day that Henry had not dreaded walking beneath it.

But this morning, something was different.

Two Year Ten girls, a grade behind and a year older, chorused 'Hi Henry!' as they sauntered past. Boys who had bullied him in primary school gawped from their computer games as he walked towards the senior school wing.

Suddenly, a huge hand clamped on his shoulder and he found himself staring into the piercing blue eyes of Peter Anderson himself. Caleb and Hunter loomed on either side, engulfing him in a cloud of testosterone, sports deodorant and power. All three grinned expectantly.

'Is this him?' asked Caleb. Shark-faced Hunter got a good angle with his camera phone. Henry's nipple tingled and he hunched his shoulders protectively.

'Yeah,' said Peter, 'Don't you remember we were all there when he was leaving with that chick?'

'Nuh. I was still hiding in the garden from Bonnie's mum, hey?'

Peter and Hunter nodded their understanding.

‘How old are you?’ Hunter held the phone to Henry’s face like a magnifying glass.

‘Thirteen,’ murmured Henry.

‘*Thirteen?*’ exclaimed Caleb, slapping a meaty hand on Henry’s shoulder-blade. ‘And you’re pulling that quality already? I couldn’t even *find* my dick when I was that age!’

‘You can’t now!’ laughed Peter.

‘Yeah. *Hilarious.*’ Caleb landed a playful punch on his friend’s shoulder that would have knocked Henry flat. Peter barely noticed.

‘Were you really gettin’ on with that chick? How old was she? Twenty?’

They all leaned forward, waiting for his answer. Hunter’s phone’s zoomed closer to Henry’s face.

Suddenly Henry realised what was happening. Time stopped as his brain saw the entire situation and his clear path through it. For only the second time in his life since Saturday night, people older than him were treating him as something other than a curiosity. The kings of the popular group were treating him like an equal.

Because of Jacinta.

She was the reason he was allowed to go to a party without Myra.

She was the reason these gorillas were interested in him now.

Her involvement could finally allow him to be treated like a mature individual.

He had to hold onto it.



A blank piece of paper appeared in his mind and a flowchart of different actions and outcomes sprang across it like tumbling water.

He was popular because of Jacinta pretending to kiss him. Unfortunately, he had promised Jacinta that he would explain about ‘the deal’. This would put him back where he started: an outsider. Not a preferred option. He could grab this chance with both hands and let them think what they wanted. The risk was that if Jacinta found out, then she might quit.

On the other hand, if he came clean now, the ridicule from his classmates would follow him around for the rest of the year. For the rest of *school*.

He needed to solve this.

A thought occurred. He ran it through his mind on a fresh piece of paper, playing out the various permutations. It just might work. If he timed it just right.

‘No,’ he answered. His audience deflated in disappointment. He paused, just long enough for the answer to hold true.

‘She’s *eighteen*,’ he said confidently.

Their cheers echoed around the quadrangle. The timing had worked.

‘I told you!’

‘Legend!’

‘What a champ!’

Peter grabbed Henry’s right hand in a thumb-hooking, arm-wrestle handshake and squeezed it firmly. ‘You’re the *man*,’ he said, his voice full of admiration. ‘Hey, listen bro, I’m sorry about all that mucking around with the nappy and stuff.’

‘That’s okay.’

The warm butterscotch of satisfaction flowed back into his stomach. He and Peter connected. They would be friends. They could discuss cars and engines and swap tuning magazines. Henry gave the handshake a final squeeze and let go at the just the right time. Peter grinned and slapped him the shoulder. Hunter put away his phone.

‘Nice one.’

They all slapped him on the back a few more times and strolled off laughing, thumping each other and occasionally grinning back at Henry. He gave a nonchalant wave, restraining himself from jumping up and down, windmilling his arms and yodelling, which is what he felt like doing.

He had done it.

He hadn’t lied. He had answered all of their questions truthfully and in the correct order.

Question 1: Was he getting on with the girl?

He had answered truthfully: no.

Question 2: How old was she? Was she twenty? Technically, they had moved on. Technically.

He hadn’t lied (technically). He had explained ‘the deal’ (technically). It wasn’t his fault if they thought he had kissed an eighteen-year-old girl. He smiled broadly and strutted off to his locker.

Strutting around feeling smug had made Henry late for homeroom. He hated being late. It meant that he had to walk into the room in front of everyone. Kids would jeer. Objects would be thrown. Feet would stick out as he shuffled to his desk.

The worst bit was his nickname: Clappo the Clown. He didn't know where it came from or how it related to him, but it had caught on horribly well. Some of the children had begun to imitate ringmaster voices or simply tootle circus music when he walked by.

He stopped just outside the classroom. His plan was to just walk in quickly and calmly, step over feet, sit at his desk and ignore everything. That was the only way. He was too weak to fight back and his intelligent retorts went straight over their heads. He drew in a breath, held it, pictured himself walking unmolested to his desk, let the breath go and entered.

The entire room stopped and stared. Henry forgot his plan and froze. The teacher wasn't there. Something was about to happen. To him. Something bad.

'Clappo the *Pimp!*' yelled a voice. Every boy in the room took up the cheer. 'Clappo the Pimp! Clappo the Pimp!'

Peter Anderson bounded towards him, fists clenched. Henry flinched and clamped his eyes shut. All he got was a friendly drumming on the arm and his second arm-wrestle handshake of the morning. Caleb joined Peter, pretending the strum an imaginary bass guitar.

'Bow-chicka-bow-chicka-wow-wow!'

Everyone laughed and Henry allowed himself to breathe. He was all too aware that this could still turn bad. Even as Caleb humped his imaginary bass at Henry's feet and the other boys slapped him on the back, a wrong turn or a moment of boredom could still have him scurrying to his desk with his trousers around his ankles.

What made him feel safe was the girls. They were neither ignoring nor scowling at him. Some were laughing with the boys, but many showed him an

expression he had never seen. Eyes open and intent, brows raised, lips set slightly apart. They leaned towards one another, communicating in that short distance telepathy that girls could do. But this time there was no laughter, no mirthful pointing. Just curious frowns and flashes of perfect teeth.

He finally let out his breath as he was allowed to sit at his desk.

‘Clappo the Pimp! Clappo tha Pee-*Yump!*’ cried Peter, twirling a chair around and straddling it backwards, legs spread. ‘Hunter, are you filming this?’

Hunter nodded silently from behind his camera phone.

‘Mate, you’re a bloody legend!’ enthused Peter. ‘You gotta tell us: who is this chick? She’s a little hottie!’

Hunter drifted closer, pushing the phone towards Henry’s face. He had to be careful here, especially in front of that dark little camera lens. He must think about what he was doing and saying or they would jump on him. He cleared his mind and reminded himself that he was twice as clever as the lot of them. He could still come out of this alive. He just had to answer their questions in the right manner, just as he had done earlier.

‘Oh, you know, she’s just my tutor.’

‘Tutor?’

‘As if you need a tutor!’

‘Aren’t you skipped ahead?’ Peter sounded genuinely interested.

‘Sure.’ Henry shrugged. ‘She’s more like a learning coach than a tutor though. You know, to help with study techniques and time management. And stuff.’

‘Ha! Yeah – “and stuff” all right!’ Someone gave him a friendly jostle and everyone laughed.

Henry joined in the laughter and casually straightened his shirt collar.

‘Yeah, well ...’ He added a non-committal shrug. This was fun.

‘Where did you meet her?’ asked Bonnie, the girl who Henry had last seen being dragged kicking and screaming from the party by her apoplectic mother.

‘She comes around to my house. She’s a uni student.’ It was still the truth. It was just that no one had asked if she was a surrogate babysitter.

‘Wow,’ smiled Bonnie. ‘A uni student! What’s she like?’

‘She’s pretty nice. She’s fun. She likes practical jokes and stuff.’

‘I *knew* it!’ scoffed Hunter. ‘I knew she wasn’t really giving you gobbies!’

‘Not like some people!’ A nasty snigger passed through the crowd and Bonnie blushed.

‘Yeah, we were just ... you know, fooling around,’ said Henry. ‘You know, having a bit of fun.’

Peter whistled, impressed. ‘Wow, she doesn’t mind fooling around, eh? You’re onto a winner there, Clappo.’ Everyone else nodded.

‘Thanks,’ nodded Henry.

Hunter looked up from behind the camera. ‘So how did you two—’

‘What’s going on here?’ The teacher had entered the classroom. ‘For god’s sake! Leave Henry alone and get back to your chairs! Hunter, if that phone isn’t off and away, I am *keeping it*.’

The crowd of people tittered conspiratorially as they moved away, giving Henry thumbs up and chanting ‘Pimpo! Pimpo!’ under their breaths. Peter massaged Henry’s shoulders on his way past.

‘See you at recess. Under the tree.’

## 12

# Careers at Macca's

*Your chance to get ahead.*

‘Car start all right this morning?’ Gary McDonald lowered his bulk onto the squeaky dining chair as Carol piled more steamed beans onto his plate.

‘Yeah.’ Jacinta slid a small knob of Lite-Start margarine onto her starchy mashed potatoes. Her mum never put enough butter in.

‘I put it on the charger. Cleaned the terminals too.’

Jacinta smiled and stirred the yellow oil into the mash. ‘Thanks, Dad.’

‘S’all right.’

‘So, how was overtime on Saturday?’ Carol winked at her daughter and began serving herself. ‘Jayden, hat off at the table, please.’

Jayden pretended not to hear. Gary pointed a thick finger. ‘*Hat.*’ The cap disappeared.

‘Yeah, good,’ replied Jacinta. ‘I got a few extra hours out of it.’

‘Did ya get double dollars?’ asked Jayden through a mouthful of sausage.

‘Dogga reckons he gets double dollars if he works a Saturday night.’

‘No. She just paid me ‘til midnight when we got home.’

‘But you didn’t get home until one a.m.!’ Carol’s voice cracked with indignation.

‘It’s a long drive, Mum. I was taking it easy on the car.’ Jacinta looked to her dad who grunted approvingly at his sausages. He didn’t like the Corolla being mistreated.

‘You need to get a job closer by.’ Carol waved a skewered piece of sausage at Jacinta. ‘You shouldn’t have to drive for an hour to get home. It’s just ridiculous.’

‘It’s all right, Mum. It’s not that far. It’s a good place to work.’

‘She just likes hanging out with the richies!’ Jayden flicked a bean at her and made a cash-register noise: ‘Cha-ching!’

‘Watch it, mate.’ Gary never had to shout. A slight raise in tone was all he needed.

Jacinta’s cheeks flushed and she chewed a sliver of cuticle from her finger. ‘The Claphams are really nice.’

‘They don’t pay you nothing extra for working there late.’ Jayden’s husky voice was beginning to develop his father’s deep growl.

‘I got fifty bucks extra!’

‘Looks like tonight’s rent night, then!’ Her dad grinned and Jacinta rolled her eyes.

‘Why couldn’t one of his parents take him?’ sniffed Carol. ‘Too lah-di-dah?’

‘His folks were both going to some science industry thing and she wanted him going with an adult.’

‘*You?* An adult?’ Jayden laughed. ‘Didja bring him home in time for beddy-byes?’

Jacinta speared a piece of carrot. ‘Pretty much.’

‘Did you change baby’s nappy?’ Jayden elbowed his dad to share the joke. Gary raised a single, bushy eyebrow and continued chewing.

‘Ha ha. Actually, you wouldn’t believe it: those little shits at the party were picking on him for being younger and they were really chasing him around with a nappy!’

Jayden almost choked on his mash. ‘Really? That’s hilarious!’

‘Jayden, don’t be mean,’ said Carol. ‘What little bastards! He’s only young!’

‘How old is he?’ asked Gary.

‘Thirteen. Well, fourteen in a couple of weeks. But he’s in Year Eleven, so, you know, he’s in with all fifteen and sixteen-year-olds.’

‘Oh, so he’s just the little bub in with the biggies then!’ Carol reached over and ruffled Jayden’s hair. ‘Did you tell his mates to lay off?’

Jayden ducked away and smoothed his hair. ‘Yeah, Mum, I’m sure *that’d* work. Getting his babysitter to defend him.’

‘What did you do, Jaz?’ Carol loved it when her kids did responsible family-type things.

‘Well actually we—’ Jacinta stopped. The Pretending-To-Make-Out prank didn’t really translate to the family dinner table. Her mum wouldn’t understand, her dad would probably explode and Jayden would call her The Kiddy Fiddler for years afterwards. ‘I mean, yeah, I pretty much told them to piss off.’

Even her dad was impressed. ‘You really told those spoiled little shits where to go?’



Jacinta nodded and focused on her plate, suddenly feeling as though her family could see the image in her head: her embracing Henry and making groaning noises.

‘Good on you, love.’ Carol patted her hand. ‘Those spoilt brats need to know that they can’t just push people around. Good looking out, love.’

Jacinta took a big mouthful of sausages and mash to cover her embarrassment. As she chewed, she pictured the two of them in that luxurious study, moonlit gum trees spreading pale branches in the dark night, their arms wrapped around each other ...

‘So what did his mum say when you brought him home late?’ asked Jayden, grinning.

‘Well, I *tried* to call her to say that the car got a flat battery, but we figured out how to push start it.’ She tried to focus on her dinner, but the other three looked at her expectantly.

‘So?’ asked Carol. ‘What did she say when you brought him home?’

Jacinta stirred her mash. The Claphams probably had real butter for their mash. They probably didn’t eat mash. They probably had those fancy little Jamie Oliver potatoes instead of mash.

‘She was pretty pissed off.’

‘I’ll bet she was!’ Gary said around a mouthful of sausage and beans. ‘Bringing home their thirteen-year-old at one in the morning! I’ll bet she was about ready to slit your throat!’

Jayden joined in. ‘You’re lucky she didn’t call the cops!’

‘She’s all right. Besides, it was more like a bit before twelve,’ mumbled Jacinta and pushed a salty forkful of food into her mouth. Her mum’s cooking

always left a starchy layer on the roof of her mouth. She chewed and listened to the silent throb of her family chewing and thinking of other smart-arse things to say. Just as her mum swallowed, Jacinta's phone tweedled from her bedroom and she leapt up thankfully to answer it.

'Jacinta!' Carol called after her. 'What have I told you about answering that bloody phone during dinner?'

Jacinta was already in her bedroom, madly digging through her cluttered handbag. 'It might be Clara!'

She looked at the phone's screen. A photo of the Clapham's front yard at sunset pulsed as it rang. It was Myra.

'Hi Myra, how are ya?' Jacinta brushed aside the compost pile that had ruptured from her handbag and sat on her unmade bed.

'Hello, Jacinta. I'm well. Uh, Jacinta, do you have a moment? I wanted to have a quick chat.'

Jacinta knew this tone. The only guy she had asked out in Year Eleven. Law firms with no internships or free stationery. Sorry, polite and distant as a mountain-top. She stood up and quietly closed the door.

The chrome espresso machine. The fluffy couches. The beautiful, magical garden. They all faded as Myra talked. '... and it would probably be better for everyone if we both found something a bit closer to home. Don't you think? For you as well?'

Jacinta bit her lip. Hard. She tasted blood and felt nothing. 'Okay.'

'I'm sorry to have to stop this when it was just getting going, Jacinta, and we really do wish you all the best.'

'Okay.'

‘I’ll probably see you in the corridors, anyhow,’ Myra continued as though they were old pals. ‘So, good night!’

‘Bye.’

She dropped the phone on the bed and stared at the floor.

This was the lowest of the low.

Fired for a cause she believed in.

The youngest QC in the country, sacked by the old guard because they were terrified of what Jacinta McDonald could do to their so-called established order if she were given free reign. So they had conspired against her and she had been escorted from the building. They had bad-mouthed her to every other influential firm they could worm their way into and given her clients away, but Jacinta had her supporters. She knew she was right.

She raised her head.

She was ready to take them on. Those saggy-cheeked old duffers wouldn’t know what hit them. They had messed with the wrong woman. She had power, intelligence and tenacity on her side and when she sold her story to *A Current Affair*, she would have the nation too. She would let the bastards stew for a while, oh yes, then start her own law firm. Other dissatisfied-yet-brainy lawyers would flock to McDonald and Partners to help out on the firm’s first case of unfair dismissal as it went all the way to the Supreme Court. She would take them for everything they had.

Australia was on her side.

She strode back out to the dinner table, head held high.

‘Who was it?’ asked her mum, still annoyed.

‘Henry’s mum.’

‘Did she give you the sack?’ Jayden chuckled. Jacinta gave an involuntary little yelp. *How did he know?* Suddenly they were all staring at her.

‘Jacinta?’ said Carol. ‘What’s wrong?’

Jacinta couldn’t answer. Gary set down his fork. ‘Jazzy?’

She just looked at him and hoped she wasn’t crying.

‘Jaz?’

It was Jayden who said it: ‘Did you? Did you just get fired?’

Jacinta nodded.

‘Ho!’ Jayden’s jaw dropped. ‘Serious? They fired you for *that*?’

‘Shut up, Jayden,’ growled Gary. ‘Eat your dinner.’ He reached out and rubbed Jacinta’s shoulder. ‘What was it, sweetheart? The late thing?’

Jacinta nodded and her dad gave her shoulder another squeeze. ‘Never mind, love. I’m on a bunch of sites in the next few weeks. One of ‘em will need a Peggy. How about that, eh?’ He gently pinched her cheek. ‘Eh?’

Jacinta nodded again, biting her lip against the sting of tears. Carol got up and embraced Jacinta to her chest, cooing and stroking her hair. ‘Oh sweetheart, oh those buggers. What a load of crap.’

Jacinta didn’t hug back. She was barely in the kitchen. All she could think of were the silver rails which had led straight from Salisbury Hills to Loxton Park. While Carol twittered on about spoiled brats and fairness, Jacinta watched the rails bending and twisting away into the building sites and the factories and the darkness beyond.

## 13

Contains sex scenes and nudity.

Not suitable for people under the age of 18.

Henry sat with the group all week. It was bliss. He could stop striding around the schoolyard, pretending he was on his way somewhere important. He could finally cancel the extended run of his one-man show: “Boy who suddenly remembers he has forgotten an important book in his locker and will have to return for it”. It was almost a shame. His “I can’t believe I left it behind *again*” forehead slap was almost Oscar-worthy.

Now he simply strolled out of the lesson and made his way past the Nintendo-battling, football-kicking Middle Schoolers to where the golden group of Year Elevens sat under a tall jacaranda tree at the very boundary of the Tranmere College grounds. There, he was welcomed with hearty ‘Yo’s from the boys and cheery ‘Hi Henry!’s from the girls. People shuffled aside to give him a place to sit and offered to fetch him things from the shop. He could talk about classes and help the others with their homework. When they asked him about Jacinta, all he had to do was give broad answers and nod knowingly and that seemed to do the trick.

For the first time since Peter had nipple-crippled him, Henry relaxed. He could concentrate on his school work. He even thought about having an actual birthday party this year. One without hand-written invitations on coloured notepaper. One which people would actually attend.

‘What are you doing for your birthday, Pimpo?’ asked Peter one lunchtime, tossing Henry a Snickers bar.

‘Yeah, Henry,’ said Hunter with an unfriendly smile. ‘What fun have you got planned?’

‘Oh, um, well ...’ Henry pictured the family wall calendar. The square containing his birthday had been decorated with Myra’s loopy teacher’s lettering: ‘*Henry’s Birthday Zoo Picnic!*’ He imagined a careful strip of white-out tape rendering the box empty again. ‘Nothing,’ he answered. ‘I don’t know, really.’

‘Is Jacinta doing anything for you?’ asked Bonnie. Peter and Caleb sniggered and nudged each other. Bonnie sighed. ‘You boys are so dumb sometimes.’

‘Jacinta?’ Henry hadn’t thought of that.

‘Yeah. You know: your girlfriend.’ Hunter said pointedly.

‘Yeah!’ Peter chorused. ‘Is she taking you out anywhere? A night on the town?’

‘Well, yeah, she was, I mean, I was planning to go out anyway and, you know, invite the group as well.’

Around the circle, people looked up.

‘Good idea, Pimpo!’

‘Totally!’

‘A night on the town, eh?’

‘When?’

‘Is this for the festival street party?’

Henry remembered that the annual arts festival street party was a week from Saturday because Terry had been complaining about it blocking off access

to his lab on that weekend. The plan filtered into being. The blank box containing his birthday filled with the words ‘*Henry’s Big Festival Parade Birthday Street Party!!!*’

Jacinta could take him. Myra said she was sick, which was why she hadn’t tutored the night before, but nothing serious. She would be better by the weekend. She would take him to the street party. The whole group would meet there and having an adult accompany them would allay any parental fears. He could pull off an unsupervised party!

The Things To Do List was surprisingly short:

1. Tell Myra and Terry.
2. Hire Jacinta for the night.

Easy.

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘The festival street party. Jacinta will take us.’ He addressed the group. ‘Tell your parents an adult is taking us. Everyone’s invited!’

He drew his finger-pistols from their holsters. ‘*Ev-ery-one’s in-vited!*’

The group laughed and dissolved into happy chatter. Henry felt the same warm butterscotch glow he had felt after Peter’s party. All because of Jacinta. Somehow this immature-looking surrogate babysitter from a far-northern housing estate had helped him to ingratiate himself with the coolest group in school. It was only after seeing her through the appreciative gaze of the boys at the party that he began to understand her intrinsic appeal.

He bit into his Snickers bar.

In fact, she was an excellent piece of corroborating data for his theory about popularity. The theory was rudimentary as yet; so far it was just a set of rules:

**Rule #1. Popularity is conductive.** If you connect to someone more popular than yourself, you become more popular.

**Rule #2. Popularity is gained by possessing certain traits.** For girls to be popular, they had to be as mature as possible without actually being too mature for the group's boys. For example, the more facial traits a Year Eleven girl shared with a pre-pubescent girl (larger eyes, small teeth, round cheeks), the more attractive she was perceived to be. Breasts were another good example (one Henry was particularly interested in). Small or underdeveloped breasts were just as much a source of ridicule as large or overdeveloped ones. Henry had observed that the closer a girl got to matching this set of almost paradoxical traits, the more desirable she would be. Or, as Peter Anderson put it: 'a hottie'. Jacinta ticked just about every box: slim body, pretty hair, clear skin, small, white teeth and rounded chipmunk cheeks. In short, she looked young and immature, but went to university. To put her over the top, her performance at the party proved that she was clearly able to perform adult activities. Such was the power of her popularity that she had catapulted him from Clappo The Clown, ridiculed outsider, to Clappo The Pimp, top of the school, right next to Peter. He took another bite of Snickers.

'Hey, Henry,' Peter whispered in his ear. 'Check this out.' He held out his hand to Henry, palm down, thumb tucked under. Was this another handshake that he didn't know about? Henry carefully tucked his own thumb into his palm and took Peter's hand.

Peter jerked away. 'Whoa! Ew! Hand-love!'

Hunter frowned at them. Caleb leaned over. 'Did you get him with the Tickle Palm, Pimpo?'



Henry smiled and nodded slightly. ‘Heh.’ He had no idea what a Tickle Palm was.

‘Nice one!’ Caleb laughed and gave him a high-five.

Hunter punched Peter in the arm. ‘You homo.’

‘Shut up, dickhead,’ groaned Peter, sounding genuinely peeved. He turned back to Henry and showed him the mobile phone he had been attempting to pass over.

‘You saw Bonnie get musted at mine, right?’ Peter leaned in close, almost breathing on Henry’s cheek.

‘Bonnie get mustard?’ Henry’s brain whizzed into high gear. He had been hanging around the group for less than a week and already there were too many things that he couldn’t deduce by himself or learn from the internet or a book. A unified theory of popularity was all well and good, but so far two measly rules couldn’t help him work out the meaning of the word ‘mustard’. He tried the problem-solving technique that Mr Jones had showed him last year. He pictured a blank sheet of paper and wrote the words ‘mustard’ and ‘Bonnie’ on it.

Around ‘mustard’ he wrote the first things he thought of when he imagined mustard:

*spicy*

*gloopy*

*made from seeds*

*goes on sandwiches*

*steaks*

*potato salad*

*mild*

*hot*

Around ‘Bonnie’ he wrote a corresponding list:

*girl*

*woman*

*small teeth*

*blonde*

*breasts in popular size range*

*friendly*

*angry mother*

*Caleb*

Nothing seemed to fit with mustard. He tried the mustard list again. The only word that seemed to fit with any of the ‘Bonnie’ words he had come up with was ‘hot’.

That was it. Girls were hotties. Mustard was hot. That had to be it.

Problem solved. Easy.

‘Yeah, she got mustard,’ he said casually. ‘She was really hot.’

Peter frowned. ‘What? Nah: “must-ed”. As in “Mum-busted”? Busted by her mum?’

‘Duhh,’ droned Hunter.

Henry imagined his useless diagram crumpling in flames. ‘Oh, right, yeah. Uh ... totally.’

‘Well ...’ Peter offered Henry his phone again, glancing around furtively.

‘You wanna see *why*?’

He wasn’t sure why they were behaving as though national secrets were on offer. It was common knowledge that her mother had caught her with Caleb.

He didn't see why that was worth whispering about. Nonetheless, he straightened his shoulders and glanced around casually like Peter was doing. 'Okay.'

He took the phone and pressed 'Play'. A chunky video flickered on the screen. Blurry lines of dark and shade arced and scrambled and Peter reached over and turned the volume down. Henry held the phone closer and Peter sniggered and leaned in to watch it with him. All Henry could make out were dark blotches and the creaky static sound of a covered microphone. He was about to ask what was going on when Peter jabbed him in the ribs.

'How's that for a gobster?'

Henry suddenly understood what he was watching. His mouth filled with saliva and his throat seemed to close up. He didn't want to look. 'Nice one,' he croaked.

'Shit yeah,' hissed Hunter in Henry's other ear. 'Caleb sent that to me too. Totally Wall-worthy.'

Henry looked up across the group at Bonnie. She was idly drawing a set of stars on her ankle with a blue pen and laughing with the girl next to her. She waved away a fly and bit into a muesli bar. Henry quickly turned away, acutely embarrassed.

'Get your phone, Pimpo,' whispered Peter. 'I'll wireless you.'

'Wait wait! Shh!' hissed Hunter. 'This is the piss-funniest bit!'

The two boys leaned eagerly over Henry. The fleshy, unfocused shapes suddenly resolved into an image of Peter's garden, just outside the rumpus room where the party had been based. On the screen was Bonnie's mother marching towards the camera. She yelled at Caleb before dragging Bonnie away by the

wrist. Tiny screams and shouts echoed from the phone as Peter and Hunter stifled guffaws behind their fists.

‘Nice one,’ he said again.

## 14

# ~ The Whole Nine Yards ~

## ~ Cleaning Services ~

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The moment he walked into the kitchen, Henry realised that he should have closed his bedroom door while he was talking on the phone. Myra and Terry were silently preparing their dinners and avoiding each other's eye. They did this so to make it seem as though they had just been discussing him. It was embarrassingly obvious.

'So ... who was that on the phone before?' Myra was so casual about pouring glaze over the lamb chops that she almost poured it over Terry's shoes.

'Sounds like you were having a nice long chat!' Terry put a knife and fork on his dinner tray. He almost always took his dinner to his study. That was on the occasions when he was actually home from his lab.

Henry rolled his eyes like he had seen Peter and Bonnie do and got out the mineral water.

'Henry. Your father's speaking to you.' Myra watched him pour her San Pellegrino into a coloured glass tumbler.

'I was just organising my birthday party.'

'Oh?' squeaked Myra. 'Birthday party?'

*Casual as a woman on fire*, thought Henry.

'I thought we were going for dinner at the zoo, like we decided!'

‘No, I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to the festival opening parade with some of my friends from school. It’s a good chance to organise a party for everybody.’

‘Everybody?’ asked Terry, one hand on his tray. ‘Have we ... ever met them?’

‘Of course not.’

Both parents stared while he carried his plate to the lounge area to watch television. He knew they were both expecting a big science presentation about the whole thing, but instead he just flopped on a sofa, eating with one hand and programming the TV with the other. It felt good to be in charge.

He just wanted to hang out with people on his level and have a birthday party that didn’t involve fairy bread. Or his mother. He was tired of the child-genius monkey-dance. He wanted to be a normal person.

He heard Myra set down the tongs. She and Terry would be looking at each other with concerned expressions, deciding who should talk first.

‘Can Jacinta take us?’ he asked over his shoulder before they could begin. ‘My friends really like her. You can just pay her a bit extra, can’t you? Like the other night for Peter’s party?’

Myra sat down next to Henry and the plate on his knees wobbled. ‘Henry, Jacinta won’t be tutoring you anymore,’ she said evenly.

Henry sat bolt upright. ‘What? Why?’ A couple of baby potatoes bounced off his plate and rolled under the coffee table.

‘Henry! Watch what you’re doing! Pick those up, please.’

The panic was like a punch in the stomach. He couldn't go without Jacinta. 'Why isn't she tutoring? What happened?' He could feel his popularity draining already.

Terry came and sat calmly on the couch next to Henry. 'We decided that Jacinta probably wasn't suited to be your tutor.'

'You just *said* that! But why? Why did you fire her? Why didn't you ask me?'

They shared a glance and Myra spoke: 'She just wasn't having the best time getting to and from here and we decided it would probably be better if we got someone a bit closer to home.'

Henry glared at her. She wasn't a good liar.

'That's not the reason.'

Myra glared back at him, going pink in the cheeks. 'Well, what do you—'

'You don't think she's smart enough because she's from Paramount.'

'That's not true!' she said too loudly.

'Why did you fire her then?'

'Henry.' Terry tried out his Soothing Professor voice. It was the one he used on students who rang the house sometimes, panicking about their projects: a measured, patriarchal tone, emphasising the important words. 'It was just that she lived so far *away* and we didn't like to see her *travelling* so much for one *little* tutoring job ...'

'Saturday night,' Henry said quietly. 'This is just about last Saturday night.'

Terry stopped droning. Henry pointed his finger at Myra. 'Her car just stalled! You don't even care that I could fix it! I fixed it!'

‘Now look,’ Myra met her son’s eye. ‘That was a *very* dangerous situation you two were in on Saturday. Anything could have happened.’

‘*It was a deserted street!*’ Henry bunched his fists. ‘She’s an adult! *I fixed the car!* Why can’t you believe that?’

Myra sat stunned and Terry frowned, puzzled. ‘Henry, this isn’t really about the car, it’s ...’

‘You *have* to hire her back! I’m sick of being treated like a little kid! I get no say in anything! She’s *my* tutor!’ Tears beaded in his eyes. If he didn’t have Jacinta, he was out. Out of the group. Out of any group. A lost little Year Nine drifting the corridors again making up stories to himself, fitting in nowhere, stuck in Peter Pan limbo ...

They looked up at him like a pair of sad beagles.

‘Do you really like her that much?’ asked Myra, unconsciously reaching out to Henry. He stepped back and folded his arms.

‘Yes, actually. I don’t suppose you’ve noticed, but I’m actually making friends now.’

Myra sat forward. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, really! Who do you think I was on the phone to before? Who do you think is coming to my birthday party? It’s because of Jacinta. She’s helping me.’ He sat down again next to his mother and let himself be hugged. ‘Hire her back. Before my party. She did a really good job looking out for me on Saturday. My friends really like her.’

Terry coughed. ‘What would a group of *thirteen-year-olds* have in common with—’



‘They’re *sixteen*, Terry,’ Henry said dismissively. He turned to Myra. ‘Get her back. It’s not too late.’

Myra sighed and hugged her son closer. ‘Well. Okay. I didn’t realise that—’

‘And ask her to take us to the parade on Saturday?’

‘Henry, listen, we have to compromise a little here. You know, it’s not that we just don’t trust her, it’s just ... uh, well, her car isn’t the best. You’ve seen it, sweetheart. It could break down at any moment. It did!’

‘I can fix it! I know how!’ He wriggled and squeezed his mother around her waist.

‘I know, I know. That’s not really the point. It’s just that—’

Henry squirmed from her arms. ‘She could borrow your car!’

‘I don’t think that’s an option.’

‘Why? It’s just to the city and back and if you don’t want her driving me around with her own car, it’s only fair that she drives yours.’

Terry spoke slowly, as if he had been working out a complicated formula in his head: ‘But Henry, what do *you* have in *common* with a *university student*?’

Henry had been ready for that one since he had started winning the argument. ‘She knows how mature I can be.’

## 15

**HOMETTE** 2 bdrms, kitchen/lounge,  
curtains, separate bathroom, laundry.  
Spacious yard.

Jacinta McDonald, QC's first class action suit would be to represent uni students everywhere against universities who made every assignment due on the same day. It really was beyond a joke. And the way her bug-eyed English tutor, Craig, had laughed his stupid snorty laugh when she had requested an extension was surely some sort of harassment.

“‘Fair’ doesn't have anything to do with it,’ he had said when she had protested. ‘You just need to manage your time efficiently. I assume you have read all the set texts, have you not?’

At that point Jacinta had rolled her eyes and stormed out of his office. She was the girl who, in Year Eleven, had gotten a twenty out of twenty for an essay she had done in the sick bay while faking period cramps on the day it was due. *Of course* she had read enough of the books. Plus, the essay wasn't due for two more days. She had plenty of time now that she didn't have a job. She would show *him* time management. So she got in the Corolla and went to Clara and Mattie's for the evening.

The ex-Golden Couple of Paramount High lived in a semi-industrial area where the air always had a chemical smell that Jacinta could never quite identify, like plastic melting over burnt toast. Their house reminded Jacinta of her family's old place in Paramount. Yellow brick on the outside, cream-coloured plaster walls

on the inside and a yard of prickly brown grass. A yard which made Jacinta's mum so depressed that she forced her daughter to impersonate an obsessive twelve-year-old for a garden make-over reality show.

When her parents were selling the old house, her dad called in a favour from a landscape contractor. After a week of being woken up by pimply apprentice gardeners blasting breakfast radio and spreading around piles of woodchips, the garden gleamed green and gold. Her dad reckoned the mossy roll-out lawn, fuzzy wax bushes and specially-bred greenhouse flowers added ten grand to the asking price. He was probably right.

Jacinta sat on the back porch with Clara and Mattie. Clara had a text-book open on her lap and Mattie drank a beer while he tapped on his mining company-logo laptop. Jacinta's essay plan was about as well-developed as the dusty square of dead grass that was supposedly their back yard. She kept finding herself thinking about the last time the family had left the old Paramount house and the way her mum had crouched down to rub her palm across the soft, fuzzy lawn. The garden had never looked so nice or her mum so sad.

Clara and Mattie weren't thinking about their garden, they were too busy arguing about the rest of the house. Clara was accusing Mattie of picking up the porch furniture they were sitting on from the side of the road on hard rubbish day and Mattie was vigorously denying it.

'I told you: it's Dogga's mum's ex's stuff! There's nothin' wrong with it!' He slapped the sun-weathered armrest of his own chair. A puff of disintegrated orange foam floated into the warm evening breeze.

Clara narrowed her eyes and pointed at him as though she were skewering a fly in mid-air with her pen. ‘I swear: if I find out you picked this stuff up off the side of the road, I will kill you.’

‘I *promise*, babe! No one’s pissed on it, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

‘Yes, actually. That’s exactly what I’m worried about. You don’t know what sort of weird stuff people do to that rubbish. I heard that someone got AIDS because they sat on a mattress that junkies had been shooting up on.’

‘Don’t worry, I checked it for needles and bombs before I picked it up.’

‘So you *did* get it from the side of the road!’ Clara sprang up in disgust, frantically wiping the seat of her skirt. ‘Mattie, you better—’

‘*I told you!*’ Mattie exploded. ‘I never get anything from the side of the road! Ever!’ He glared at Clara.

Clara glared back, but nodded as though she understood. ‘All right. Fine. Sorry.’

‘S’orry.’ Mattie swigged his beer and turned to Jacinta. ‘So how’s the babysitting? Been fired yet?’

Jacinta sat very still, staring at Mattie. *How does everyone know?*

‘Jaz?’ Clara forgot the dodgy furniture. ‘What’s wrong? You *have* been fired?’

Jacinta looked up at her friend and nodded. Mattie winced and looked away.

‘What for?’

‘I brought him home too late on Saturday night because my car conked out.’

Clara put an arm around her. ‘Oh my god! That’s terrible! Those bastards! I only spoke to that woman last Saturday! I laid it on really thick too – she was totally convinced.’

Jacinta looked up. ‘Oh yeah. Thanks for all that stuff about the nasty best friend, by the way.’

Clara shrugged innocently. ‘What? You said to make it a sob story. I told her about mum and she asked about friends and I just repeated the facts in a new setting. You’re the one with the imagination – not me!’

‘Not like it matters now anyway.’ Jacinta sniffed and nodded. ‘It’s not like I wasn’t doing them a *favour* or anything. *They’re* the ones who couldn’t take their dumb kid to a party.’

‘I thought you were just babysitting?’ Mattie frowned.

‘I was *tutoring* him.’ She wasn’t having that taken away from her too.

‘Then why were you taking him to a party?’

Jacinta went through the whole story, swapping the details of the kissing prank for the version she had told her parents where she had told the rich, spoilt brats to bugger off. Clara and Mattie were so impressed by Henry starting the car that she forgot to leave out the part about the driving lesson.

‘You *what?*’

‘You let him *drive?*’

Jacinta waved away their incredulous looks. ‘It was on the back streets. He’d had a tough night.’

‘Are you retarded?’

‘Come on, Clara. You would have felt sorry for him too, getting bullied like that.’

Clara shook her head, but said nothing. Jacinta turned to Mattie. ‘And I know you drove when you were fourteen.’

Mattie open his mouth to respond, but shrugged in concession. He had achieved legend status in Year Nine by doing doughnuts in someone’s older brother’s car on a rival school’s footy oval.

Jacinta nodded at the Golden Couple’s silence. That was how a real lawyer did it.

Clara turned a page in her textbook. ‘Have you started looking for a new job yet?’

‘Yeah,’ Jacinta lied. ‘There’s a few things around.’ She propped her feet up next to Mattie’s textbooks and tried to decide what kind of outfit she would wear for her first day in court.

As the sun set, the mozzies moved in and the chemical smell came drifting in on the evening air.

‘Are you sure it’s not just your neighbours burning their dinner?’ asked Jacinta, still tossing up between the classic black pants suit and something that showed a bit more leg.

‘Every night at the same time?’ Mattie flicked a bottle cap out into the dark dry grass. ‘Nah, it’s like a manufacturing plant or one of the workshops around here.’

‘I swear it’s going to give us cancer.’ Clara slapped her textbook shut. ‘Let’s go inside.’

Clara rang for a pizza, Mattie opened another beer and Jacinta promised herself a charcoal-grey number with a sky-blue shirt and high heels for her first

day in court. She remembered seeing a thing on *Today Tonight* that reckoned that all successful women in the last fifty years had worn high heels. That was good odds. She wondered if Clara had any high heel shoes she could try on. She was about to ask when Mattie's phone vibrated as it received a message. The tone was a cowboy gun-fight and Clara swept the phone off the coffee table before the last bullet had finished echoing.

'Hey!' growled Mattie, grabbing for the phone. 'Don't read my texts!'

Clara fended him away, holding his frustrated arm back as her eyes hovered up the message on the screen. 'Don't snatch,' she tutted, tossing the phone on the couch. 'What does Dogga mean about Saturday night? First I've heard of it.'

Mattie scooped up the phone and began madly tapping it with both thumbs. 'Nothing. We're goin' out to his uncle's farm or something for a boys' night.' His eyes remained locked on the screen.

'Exactly. First I've heard of it.'

'That's because he just sent the text, babe.' Mattie shoved his phone deep into the cargo pocket on his shorts and did up both buttons.

'That text didn't say anything about a boys' night, or a farm.' Clara scowled and put on a caveman voice. '“Saturday night iz gonna be HUGE” it said.' Mattie's friends weren't exactly her biggest heroes.

'Yeah, he sent another text telling people about it.'

'Well, why didn't you tell me?'

'Coz it wasn't definite then. He was just asking around.'

'Really.'

'Yes.'

‘And you said you could go?’

‘Yeah. Course.’

Jacinta bit at her cuticle and turned away to examine Mattie’s movie collection. He had walked straight into that one.

‘And so you’re just going to go off and get pissed, without me, *with* Dogga and the rest of your footy bogan mates and God knows who else, without *telling* me? Without even asking if we might already have something planned?’

‘No, I told you: he was just asking around to see if people were *interested!*’ He clenched his fists in frustration. ‘Jeez! It wasn’t definite or anything, he was just asking if people were keen and I said I’d be keen if it was happening.’

‘Let me see the message.’

‘Why?’

‘Let me see.’

‘I deleted it already.’

The couple glared at each other across the couch. Jacinta carefully read the blurb on the back of *Tomb Raider*.

‘Why’d you delete it so quick?’ spat Clara.

‘Communication management,’ Mattie answered instantly. ‘The Prof taught us about it. Anyway, what was I going to tell you? “Dogga feels like having a boys night”?’

‘Well it *would* it be nice to be at least be kept in the loop.’ Clara dropped the ‘would’ on Mattie like a brick on a frog. ‘Especially when it’s something that could affect ...’



They both looked at Jacinta, who glanced up from her careful study of a *Fast and Furious* box set. ‘What?’

Clara’s lip twitched once and she continued, forcing out a more polite tone like the last smear of toothpaste. ‘Especially when it might affect your study.’

‘Well, what *are* you doing on Saturday night that I *have* to come to?’

Mattie asked patronisingly.

Clara looked expectantly at Jacinta. ‘Jaz. What are we doing Saturday?’

It was like having fighting parents; no answer could make anyone happy. She wanted to think of something. She wanted to patch things up with Clara. She also wanted to avoid spending a girlie Saturday night with her best friend pretending to have *too* much fun while a trapped Mattie got drunker and angrier.

She wanted the senior partner at her law firm to know that she couldn’t get away with treating her like a personal secretary. She was the most—

‘Yeah, Jaz. What *are* we doing Saturday?’ Mattie leered over his beer.

Jacinta opened her mouth to make up some story about doing something with her family that only Clara was invited to, but, for the second time that week, her phone rang and saved her.

‘Sorry!’ she trilled, digging frantically through her handbag. ‘Gotta take this!’

For the second time that week, it was Myra.

Jacinta hurried out to the back porch, leaving Clara and Mattie glaring at each other. She pressed ‘Answer’ and took a deep breath.

‘Jacinta, I have something of a revised proposition for you.’

As Myra explained that it had suddenly turned out that it *was* okay for her to tutor their little prince, the burnt plastic toast smell disappeared and Jacinta felt

as though she were sinking into a warm, bubbly spa. The images and smells and feelings that had locked themselves away since Myra’s last phone call all came flowing back. Chrome kitchen appliances, heated bathroom tiles, sofa cushions that hugged you with the scent of cotton laundry powder. Leather armchairs on silky Persian rugs over amber-coloured floorboards next to carved oak shelves squeezed tight with rainbows of books. Paved garden paths and mossy rooves and art on the walls. A future.

‘I’d love to,’ she sighed.

‘Oh! Excellent. I’m so glad. I think he’s quite fond of you, actually.’

Jacinta opened her eyes. ‘Really?’

‘Yes. I think he enjoys having someone closer to his own age to go over his homework with him. I think he’s getting to the age where mums just aren’t “cool” anymore.’

‘Oh. Right.’ Jacinta put her feet up on Mattie’s chair. ‘So when do you want me to come around next?’

‘Ah, yes. About that, here’s the thing: we do actually have a favour to ask you, and it is quite a large one.’

Myra explained about Henry’s idea to have Jacinta as a chaperone to some street party that Saturday night. Jacinta couldn’t believe her luck. The perfect way out of being the football kicked between Clara and Mattie.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Jacinta.

‘Oh. Are you sure?’ Myra seemed genuinely surprised.

‘Yeah, no worries. That sounds great!’ Jacinta kicked her feet in pleasure.

Pieces of crumbling seat cushion fell on the ground.

‘Oh, thank you! Oh, good. Now, there are a few things ...’

While Myra twittered about safe parking spots and kids who took drugs, Jacinta suddenly thought of the perfect way she could even the score. They had fired her without due cause. It was compensation time. Her lawyer's blood was really pumping on this one.

'There is one thing,' she said casually.

Myra stopped talking about bedtimes. 'Oh?'

Jacinta engaged full lawyer tirade-mode. 'My parents don't really like me driving home so late, you know, with my car and all? Especially since the other Saturday night. So if I take him and his friends out and bring them home again, it'll be quite late and so the only way to do it is: I'd have to sleep over at your house that night. In the guest room or wherever.'

'Oh. Um ...'

'You know: so I'm not driving home through Paramount late on a Saturday night.'

Myra was obviously giving this offer some serious thought. Jacinta could almost hear her reminding herself to lock up the jewellery and hide the good coffee.

'You don't ... uh ... have a friend's house you would prefer to stay at?'

*Nice try.*

'They're busy.' Jacinta smirked. She could hear Myra shifting ears and sniffing.

'I suppose that would be fine. Yes. Yes, of course you can stay here. That would be fine. What a good idea. We'd be happy to. I'll just have to clear out the spare bedroom a bit.' Myra continued talking about travel arrangements for the

night while Jacinta tucked herself up in the luxurious guest room with her own TV and a midnight snack on the nightstand.

‘Sorry for all the bother, Jacinta,’ Myra was saying. ‘I just think we hadn’t really planned it through as carefully as we might have, and if you’re still glad to tutor Henry then ...’

‘Yes! That’ll be great. Okay, see you on Saturday arvo, bye!’ She pressed ‘End Call’ before Myra could change her mind and skipped back inside. They would cook her breakfast on Sunday morning and then the family would all sit in the garden, eating gourmet bacon and eggs and reading the Sunday papers and talking about politics and pointing out which houses were for sale in the neighbourhood.

Back in the lounge room, Mattie was grimly giving Clara a foot massage. The argument about Saturday night had obviously been a compromise. Maybe Clara was going with Mattie on his boys’ night.

‘Who was *that*?’ Clara didn’t sound as though she was going anywhere on the weekend. The massage was probably part of some plea-bargain deal where Mattie could go out in exchange for hundreds of carefully tallied foot rubs. Jacinta bit her lip. That meant Clara would expect to come to the street party with her. If that happened, then Jacinta wouldn’t be able to sleep over and tip-toe around the Clapham’s huge house, sitting in their ergonomic chairs and eating their boutique pestos. She would have to think of something.

‘I got my job back!’

Mattie stopped massaging. ‘The babysitting job?’

Clara gave a grumpy whinge and poked him with her other foot.

‘It’s not babysitting, I told you ...’ Jacinta stopped.

Babysitting.

That was it.

‘Yeah, I mean, it’s tutoring, they want me back tutoring, but this Saturday night, they just want me to be in the house while they go out.’

‘Why?’ This was Clara gathering evidence to talk her way into Jacinta’s night alone in the mansion. *No problem. J. McDonald QC on the case. Prepare to be dazzled.*

‘Well, he’s having a bit of a birthday party and his folks are going out (again) and so he’s just having a few of his school mates over for like movies and chocolate and stuff and they don’t really want to crowd him, but they do want someone there in the house, just to ring the police if it catches fire or whatever. You know: responsible adult. And they’re paying me for it! How wicked is that?’

*Dazzling.*

Clara turned to the TV. ‘Sounds pretty crap if you ask me.’

Jacinta breathed a small sigh of relief. ‘Oh no, it’ll be all right. We’ll just watch some dodgy movies and eat chips and pizza all night!’

Mattie continued rubbing Clara’s foot with one hand while he drained his beer with the other. He set it down next to a stack of folders and looked at Jacinta as though he were a bouncer trying to work out what was false about her ID.

‘What’s so great about spending the night with a bunch of nerdy thirteen-year-olds?’

Jacinta relaxed into the beanbag. ‘They’re *sixteen*, Mattie. And Henry’s very mature anyway. He’s a good guy.’

She turned to the TV and didn’t see the puzzled look that passed between Mattie and Clara behind her.



## 16

# Glenromin Single Malt

At this age, you don't need a reason.

'Is this *your* car?' Peter asked Jacinta from the back seat. 'What do you do again?'

Henry answered for her. 'It's my mum's.'

Peter, Hunter and Bonnie were lounging in the back of Myra's Mercedes as though they were waiting for the chauffeur to serve champagne. 'We can't go in Jacinta's car because—'

Hunter interrupted, uninterested. 'So this festival opening thing is like a ... what? A concert or something?' He stared defiantly at Henry as he picked at a seam of leather in the door with his fingernail. Henry didn't like Hunter. He didn't see his function. He was the only group member who didn't fit into his rapidly unifying theory of popularity. Henry had begun working on a chart which assigned each of the group members a value according to attractiveness, access to wealth, sexual experience and overall connection with other group members. When added together, they could determine a person's position within the group's hierarchy.

For example: an attractive person could be forgiven their low sexual experience, so long as they were wealthy and well-liked. Thus an *unattractive* person would have to be *very* wealthy *and* well-liked by everyone in order to

maintain a similar position within the hierarchy. Peter and Bonnie maxed out all attributes and thus, occupied the top positions. However, Hunter barely registered:

<b>Popularity type</b>	<b>Hunter's attributes</b>	<b>Points scored</b>
<i>Attractiveness</i>	Face like a tomato-splattered shark. Smelled like the canteen food he was always eating.	Even the bruise-faced, head-shaven footy players had at least one girl who would look them in the eye without wincing. <b>Zero points</b>
<i>Wealth</i>	Never bought anyone anything. Never went to the shop. Always first to shove his long fingers into a bag of chips.	Others were openly chastised for not regularly sharing their snacks, but Hunter enjoyed immunity. <b>Zero points</b>
<i>Sexual experience</i>	Even Hunter's own mother would probably just settle for a handshake.	While it was technically not impossible that Hunter was secretly entertaining a lot of girls, it was certainly implausible. Highly implausible. <b>Zero points</b>
<i>Connection with other group members</i>	Oddest of all. Only Peter ever spoke to him directly. Sometimes Caleb would too, but only when the three were together.	Other group members actively avoided Hunter. Maybe they didn't like being filmed all the time. <b>Zero points</b>

Hunter's presence didn't make sense. Yet he was always there, in the middle of the action, camera phone in hand, laughing away.

He was annoying.

He was unnecessary.



He was starting to ruin the leather on his mother's door.

'No, it's not a concert,' said Henry, watching Hunter's fingernail scrape along the door lining. 'It's a parade.'

'A parade?' Peter frowned. 'Like the Christmas Pageant or something?'

Hunter stopped picking and sneered. 'So there's going to be all little kids and families and shit there? This is a kiddie thing?'

'I went with Mum a few years ago,' said Bonnie. 'There were clowns and big floats and jugglers and stuff. It was really pretty!'

Henry saw Peter and Hunter wince at each other. They thought he was a baby. As Bonnie yakked away about how much she had loved the streamers and balloons and fairy floss, Henry cringed into his seat. He wanted to tell her to shut up, but it was too late. He was a little kid again.

'It's actually more of a massive street party,' said Jacinta suddenly. Bonnie stopped talking. Jacinta steered with one hand and adjusted the rear-view mirror to look at the three in the back. 'I went last year and there were DJs and light shows and breaking demos and everything. They even had people bungee jumping from cranes. It was awesome; it went on all night.'

The three in the back were rapt. Jacinta told them how famous bands had played at cafes while TV stars danced drunkenly in the street and the whole thing had gone until three a.m. Suddenly they were all talking about partying and getting into clubs and how wicked the night was going to turn out. Henry could have hugged her. Maybe he should have? Although he wasn't sure that guys were supposed to hug their girlfriends out of excitement.

Of course, this reminded him that he was still pretending Jacinta was his girlfriend. He would probably have to mention it soon, or it could all go very

wrong very quickly. While he listened nervously to Bonnie and Hunter one-upping each other over how easily they had managed to buy alcohol, Peter caught his eye. He tilted his head at Jacinta, made a confusing multi-fingered gesture and mouthed something that looked like a swear word. Henry gave his well-practised subtle grin and knowing nod. Peter's mouth opened in a quick, impressed smile and he gave Henry a thumbs-up. Henry winked and turned back in his seat.

He had no idea what that hand gesture meant.

He just knew that he couldn't come clean. Not yet.

The parade was a long procession of grotesque floats, circus performers, dancers, clowns, flatbed trucks carrying rock bands and huge puppets travelling slowly through the blocked off streets of the city centre. The smell of kebab meat and sparklers drifted through the crowds of onlookers. Periodically someone dressed in a gorilla costume would jog past, tossing promotional goodies from a large yellow bucket. Caps, wristbands, glow-sticks, sweets, stickers and streamers rained upon Henry, Jacinta and the rest of Peter's group as they laughed and took photos with their camera phones.

Since "everyone" was invited, the entire group had turned up. These were the same people who, only a few weeks earlier, had been chasing Henry around Peter's house with a nappy. Now they were snatching presents from the air and draping them over him and Jacinta.

'Happy Birthday!' cried Peter, placing another cap on Henry's head like a crown.

'Happy Birthday! Happy Birthday!' sang Bonnie, cracking a fistful of glow-sticks and looping them around Jacinta's wrists.

It should have been the best birthday ever, but Henry felt nothing but pressure. Being popular was difficult, being the centre of attention even more so. Keeping up the pretence of an eighteen-year-old girlfriend in front of his new friends, in her presence, *without* her realising what he was doing was almost impossible. He had managed so far, but his grip on the situation was tenuous.

He only had two effective techniques for pretending to be Jacinta's boyfriend without her realising. Both were wearing thin. The first was standing very close beside her in the hope that proximity would equate to intimacy. The second was patting her on the back. Both techniques had earned him a round of nudges, thumbs-ups and the same confusing, multi-fingered gesture that Peter had used in the car. Both techniques also made him feel exceedingly uncomfortable. It had been just over a year since he had last been accused of carrying girl germs and the embarrassment of touching a girl still squirmed in his chest.

'Are you okay?' Jacinta asked, after standing on his foot for the third time.

'Yes, fine!' He leapt back, bumping into Hunter.

'Well, be careful. I keep standing on you.'

Hunter watched their exchange with his blank, dark eyes. Henry's palms were sweaty.

'Sorry.' He wiped his hands on his shorts and patted her quickly on the back. His hand bumped a chunky bra-strap and he instinctively wiped it on his shorts again.

'Sorry,' he repeated. Jacinta gave a tolerant twitch of her lips.

Hunter smiled nastily and turned away.

The parade finished and the crowds followed the final float towards the beginnings of the street party. Sound systems thumped into life and people spread out across the road. Cafes set up trestle tables across the street and buskers yodelled within crude chalk circles.

The group gathered around Henry and Peter.

‘So? What now?’ asked Jacinta. ‘You guys want to get some food?’

Henry turned to Peter. ‘Shall we get some ice cream or something?’

‘Let’s go sit in the park, eh?’ Peter lifted his t-shirt slightly and wiggled his eyebrows at Henry. A few of the other kids suddenly chuckled and began nudging each other.

‘Nice work, Pete!’

‘Yeah, I’m in!’

‘Whoa, hang on.’ Jacinta stepped forward. ‘Look, I don’t think so. I’ve got to drive some of you guys home to your parents and I don’t want to deal with any mess.’

Henry frowned. He didn’t understand the problem. Sitting in the park while they ate sounded perfect. *Myra probably told her to be careful about grass-stains in the car.*

‘It’s *fine*, Jacinta,’ he scolded. ‘Don’t worry about it! We can go to the park!’

Jacinta raised an eyebrow, saying nothing.

‘What? We’ll be okay!’

‘Yeah! We’ll look after him!’ Peter threw an arm over Henry’s shoulder and spoke to Jacinta in a calm, grown-up voice. ‘Seriously. We’ll be sensible. We won’t get you in trouble.’

Jacinta took a deep breath and lowered her voice. ‘All right, fine, whatever, let’s go.’

The group gave a small cheer and headed towards the darkening parklands at the end of the street, led by Peter and Henry. Henry felt a rush of relief at being herded away from Jacinta and the threat of exposure.

‘Henry.’ Jacinta caught his arm and pulled him to one side. ‘I’m getting us falafels from this stall, okay? You should eat something too.’

He ground his teeth. He may as well have stayed at home with Myra. *Can’t she just let it go?* ‘Yes. Fine. Get me one then. I’ll meet you in the park.’

‘Don’t worry, Jacinta!’ said Peter, popping up between them and throwing an arm around their shoulders. ‘We’ll take *good* care of him for you!’

‘That’s what I’m worried about.’ She shrugged him off. ‘Henry. Come and get some food first. Trust me.’

‘Jacinta, I’m not a kid! I’ll just eat when I’m hungry!’

Jacinta stopped walking. ‘Whatever. See you in a while.’

‘Yep.’ Henry marched away, furious.

*Getting me food. Treating me like a baby. Worrying about grass in the car for crying out loud. I may as well just go home now and play with my Lego.*

‘Henry!’ called Jacinta.

He stopped. ‘*What?*’ he hissed.

‘Just ... don’t start until I get there, okay?’

He frowned. *Don’t start what?*

‘He’ll be fine!’ Bonnie waved to Jacinta and looped her arm through his.

He saw Jacinta roll her eyes and join the queue for falafels.

‘That is a cool girl you’ve got there, Pimpo,’ said Peter as they strolled through the dark trees, away from the crowds and the lights.

‘Thanks,’ said Henry. They were quite far from the street party. ‘Do you reckon she’ll be able to find us here?’

Peter laughed. ‘Yeah, I reckon!’

‘Come on, Peter! What did you bring?’ said Bonnie.

‘Yeah, Ando, break it out.’

Peter leaned against a tree and folded his arms. ‘Don’t tell me I’m the only one carrying.’

Henry leaned beside Peter and looked around. They really were quite far from everything. It seemed like a stupid place to eat dinner. No one had bought food. They couldn’t even see the rides properly.

‘I got bourbon and coke.’ Someone produced a large plastic bottle filled with black liquid.

‘I got a couple of Breezers from my sister.’

‘Anyone feel like a Baileys?’

Suddenly almost everyone was holding up a different shaped bottle.

‘What did you bring, Pete?’ asked Bonnie.

‘Nothing but the best, of course.’ Peter lifted the hem of his t-shirt as he had done before, but this time Henry looked down. Tucked in Peter’s waistband was a large silver hip flask. Henry felt ill with panic.

‘Twenty-five year old Scotch, courtesy of Dad’s private collection.’ He took out the flask with a flourish and spun open the silver lid. It swung open on a hinge and the fumes floated up Henry’s nose. Peter took a deep sniff of the bottle and gave a relaxed sigh. ‘Ahh. That’s the stuff.’

‘Give us some!’ Hunter grabbed at the flask, but Peter snatched it away.

‘Uh-uh! Birthday Pimp goes first!’ He thrust the bottle under Henry’s nose. ‘Happy Birthday, Pimpo!’

The tight crowd of encouraging grins faced Henry.

‘Here’s to Pimpo!’

‘Happy Birthday, Pimpo!’

Henry took the flask. It was as solid and heavy as a brick. A sharp, chemical odour of alcohol pushed slickly up his nostrils and straight into his stomach. He was going to vomit. He looked around, hoping Jacinta would arrive and stop him, tell him off, tell them off, knock the flask to the ground, make a scene, *save him*.

But they were all alone among the black trees and faint flashing lights. He had no option. He held his breath and took a gulp.

The warmth on his tongue almost instantly turned into an active, caustic burning all the way from his tear ducts to his tummy. He saw his body in cross-section, the whisky scorching through his digestive system; pharynx, epiglottis, oesophagus and stomach, splashing its heat up through his sinuses and scouring his bronchi. He fought the urge to vomit. He tried to make the cough sound like laughter.

‘Hmmm-cgh!’ he croaked. ‘Good stuff!’

Everyone cheered. Peter slapped him on the back and took the flask from him.

‘Go Pimpo!’

‘Cheers to Pimpo!’

Peter took a long swig from the flask and the others all followed suit.

‘Pretty nice, eh?’ asked Peter. ‘These other idiots drink theirs with mixers, but hey: twenty-five year old Scotch, you gotta have it straight. Right, Pimpo?’

There were a few jeers and Hunter swung a punch at Peter as he gulped from a coke bottle.

‘Right, Pimpo?’

Henry realised that Peter was holding out the flask again. By now the scotch felt like it was chewing on his stomach lining, dissolving his mucosa, infiltrating his nervous system and tickling his brain. He took the flask.

‘Yes. Right.’ He spoke slowly, holding onto each word before he drank again. Burning, acid, poison. He couldn’t vomit. He wanted to. But he just couldn’t. Not here. Not now.

‘I better go and find Jacinta,’ he found himself saying.

Peter nodded, approvingly. ‘Oh yeah! See if she wants some birthday scotch!’

‘Tell her I’ve got another Breezer if she wants to share!’ called Bonnie.

Peter pushed the flask into his chest. ‘Have a traveller, mate.’ Henry took another swig. His throat felt numb and his guts squirmed. ‘I should go find Jacinta,’ he repeated.

‘One more? Scotchy scotch?’

If he said no, he was just a kid. If he said yes, he would vomit or faint. He was a child either way. His only hope was Jacinta.

She would save him.

Somehow.

She always had so far. He needed his fake girlfriend.



Henry smiled and nodded. ‘I better go and find her.’ He turned and lurched back towards the lights and music of the street party.

‘See if she wants a bit of private time, eh Pimpo?’ called Peter. A few chuckles followed.

Henry turned. ‘Yeah!’ he yelled, and performed the confusing multi-fingered gesture that the boys had been flashing him all evening. The entire group erupted, howling and whooping as he made his way through the blurry trees.

‘Legend!’

‘What a dude!’

‘Did you see that? Little Pimp!’

The walk to the falafel stand took a very long time. Henry didn’t *feel* drunk, just nauseated. He just wanted to curl up in bed with hot milk. Crowds of people bumped into him and he walked straight through a busker’s show without realising, veering away as a man balancing on a ladder taunted him to the laughter of the crowd.

‘It’s just a stage you’re going through!’

The audience parted and he found himself outside the canvas-walled falafel stand. And there was Jacinta, paying for two white paper packages. Henry almost fell on her.

‘Jacinta!’

‘Hey.’ She regarded him sceptically. ‘You finished with your little tantrum yet?’

‘Yes! Yes! I’m sorry!’ Henry grabbed her by the arm and pulled her behind the canvas stand.

‘Henry! Watch it! Don’t tell me you’re pissed already! How much did you drink?’

He gulped. She knew. She could see it. Everyone could see it. Like the time Myra had let him run around naked at the beach when he was four, even though he *knew* he was too old. The bright sun, everyone looking at him, his hand clamped self-consciously over his privates. The same sickly feeling that he wanted to move beyond it all ...

‘No! I’m not drunk. I just had ...’ *How many? Two? Three?*

‘Jesus, Henry. I can smell it on your breath.’ She held her nose. ‘Fwoof! You stink! Were you just drinking it straight or something?’

He gaped. She knew everything! ‘Yes,’ he answered and hung his head. ‘I didn’t know what else to do.’

‘You’re bloody silly then. I *told* you to wait until I got there.’

He nodded. His brain felt tight and floaty, like an egg squeezed between two balloons. He rubbed his eye with his palm.

‘What are you doing back here, anyway? They’re not chasing you with a nappy again, are they? I’m not bailing you out this time.’

Henry found himself talking over keening sobs that leaked around his words and rattled in his chest. ‘No, no they’re not. But they’re going to find out. They’re all drinking. I don’t want to, but they’re going to make me and I’m going to throw up and they’ll just laugh at me and that’ll be it.’

Jacinta put her hand on her hip and made a ‘tsk’ noise. ‘They’re not going to make fun of you if you don’t drink. And if they do, well, they’re not very good friends then, are they?’

Henry looked up and wiped his eyes. ‘It doesn’t work like that. These are the only friends I’ve got.’

Her shoulders slumped. ‘Yeah, I know. Sorry. My parents used to give me that line when I was your age. I always thought it was bullshit too.’

He sniffed again and smiled.

‘That’s the way. Here.’ She handed him a napkin and he blew his nose. ‘Look, everyone gets nervous at their own birthday parties. You’ve had a few, and that’s enough. I’ll be there. I’ll help you laugh it off.’

Henry couldn’t help but marvel at her. She knew what to do in every situation and but she didn’t try to control it like Myra did. She let him do it himself. She actually treated him like an adult.

At last.

‘Thanks, Jacinta.’ He wrapped his arms around her neck and felt safe.

‘Uh ... no problem.’ She patted him on the back. ‘Henry.’

He sighed and looked up at her. The panic was gone.

‘Henry, that’s enough.’ She levered herself away and pushed a falafel at him. ‘Come on, let’s get back to the others.’

‘Thanks, Jacinta,’ he repeated. ‘You’re the best.’

‘Uh-huh.’ She steered him around a flock of mothers and prams.

‘You just fix everything. You know everything.’

‘Huh. That’s more like it. Maybe you should drink more often.’ She held a finger up. ‘That’s a joke, by the way.’

He smiled. ‘I know. You just know how to fix me not having friends, you know how to stop people laughing at me, you know how to stop Myra and Terry treating me like a baby all the time.’ Henry felt incredible. His life was

crystallising in front of him: fun night, popular friends, higher achievements, graduation, he wouldn't be alone any more. 'You knew about the nappy, you knew about the flask, you knew about the alcohol, you knew about being my girlfriend ...'

Jacinta's hand suddenly clamped around his arm. 'What was that?'

'Nothing.' Henry tried to squirm free, but she held on tighter, fingers digging in like a claw.

'You said you would tell your friends that was a joke!'

Henry screwed his brain tight. He could lose it all here. 'Well, I didn't *actually* say that I would ...'

She leant her face in close to his. 'I don't give a *shit* what you said! I told you to tell them it was a *joke*. That was the deal.' She let him go with a shove.

He rubbed his arm. 'Um, that wasn't actually the deal.'

'What? Yes it was. I let you drive my car and you said you would tell your friends that that whole thing was a prank.'

Her voice was still poisonous. Henry knew that he would have to speak calmly and keep the upper hand. He took a long breath and recalled the events after the party in his addled brain, laying them out in his mind like a spreadsheet.

'The deal was that you would give me a driving lesson and I would tell everyone "the deal".'

Jacinta clenched her jaw. 'What was that about being your girlfriend, then? Where does that come in?'

Henry shuffled his feet. 'I didn't say you *were* my girlfriend.'

'Henry. Do those kids think I'm your girlfriend? Yes or no?'

She had him. He nodded. Jacinta jabbed him with her falafel. ‘You’re going to tell them the real story right now. Or I will. Doesn’t make a difference to me.’

She marched away towards the park. Henry followed, brain cycling desperately through the problem’s permutations. He needed her. Not just to help him keep his new friends, but to save him from being dragged back into childhood: PG movies, weekends with Myra, kids who divided their attention between computer games and sport. But now she wouldn’t take part willingly and in a minute she would destroy everything. It would be worse than Clappo the Clown. That was just words. They would make him wear the nappy at school. He would be lucky to keep his uniform underneath. He had lost his leverage. The rest of his high school career would be spent reading books in the sick bay.

He trudged after Jacinta down the crowded street, the falafel going cold in his hand. He hated being a kid.

His mobile buzzed a message in his pocket. It was from Peter.

‘Jacinta! Wait!’

## 17

Smell.  
**Febreze.**  
Clean!

Jacinta knew what she was looking at, but she didn't want to see it. She didn't want it to exist. On the wide, bright screen of Henry's phone was a clear photo of her and Henry embracing against the taut canvas wall of the falafel stand a few minutes ago. The photo didn't show the reality of her awkwardly patting Henry's back; it looked exactly as if she was pulling him in close.

It didn't show him blabbering like a tipsy teenager, it just showed his mouth slightly open, eyes slightly closed, tongue extended towards her own parted lips.

It showed her holding him gently, looking into his eyes, sympathetic, interested, caring.

Ready.

It had been taken on the single hundredth of a second during which she had actually felt something other than disgust and pity for that devious, snott-nosed, spoilt little bastard. It looked as though they were doing exactly what they were pretending to do at Peter's party.

It made her sick.

Something about the way they stood together in the picture was so intimate, so intrusive, that it made her feel as though she had actually done what it looked like they were doing. She felt interfered with.

She snatched for the phone, but Henry was too quick. He jumped back, jamming it in his pocket. ‘Uh-uh! I’ll send it to Myra.’

‘So? She’ll just fire me and that’ll be it. I’m definitely telling your friends you cried like a baby now.’ She turned to leave.

‘You’ll go to gaol.’ Henry’s voice was calm, defiant.

Jacinta stopped.

‘I’m still thirteen, you know: a minor. You’re eighteen. You’re an adult. That’s paedophilia. That’s illegal.’ He had a pleased little smile on his moist lips. He sounded just like the little kid who dobbed on you for everything.

He *was* that little kid. She wanted to choke that smile right off his face.

‘You don’t scare me. I’ll just say you had a crush on me.’

‘Myra will believe me. She’ll hire the best lawyers and take you to court. You saw her when I came home late from the party. What if I told her it was because we were *doing it*? What if I told her that’s why you wanted to sleep over tonight?’

Jacinta clenched her teeth. ‘Give me that phone.’ She lunged at him, but he sprang back and held up the phone again. The large screen glowed: ‘**Send to Myra?**’

Henry’s long, pale thumb hovered over ‘**Send**’, but his voice came out small and worried. ‘Please don’t say anything. You’ll keep your job, I’ll keep my friends. No one has to see anything.’

Jacinta shook her head. ‘Isn’t this prostitution?’

‘No.’ Henry lowered the phone. ‘You’re not doing anything. Just behave like normal. I don’t want to have to send this picture.’

He sounded so genuine. She frowned.

‘I just want everything to stay like it is now. I don’t want any of this stuff.’ He waved the phone. ‘All I want is for everyone to stop treating me like a little kid. Just for once.’

The street party flowed around them, vibrating with noise and the warm night of the city. Jacinta felt cold and alone. She thought about the rent and having to explain why she couldn’t pay it, why she’d been fired, *again*. Her mum and dad would be furious. She’d have to take a job getting the lunches on Gary’s work sites. That would look great on a resume.

‘We’re not really looking for a tea lady,’ the future law firm would say. ‘Maybe if you had experience tutoring or even working as a personal assistant for an English lecturer, then we might consider you.’

She could put up with a few rich brats for that. And besides, she could spend more time in the Claphams’ house, hanging out in their garden, studying there after uni. Getting on the ground level. Just for the sake of letting a few fifteen-year-olds get the wrong impression.

She didn’t even have to do anything.

‘All right then. Whatever. Fine. I won’t give it away.’

He put the phone back into his pocket. ‘Thanks.’

‘But I’m not holding your hand or any of that shit. You can just pretend I’m your secret girlfriend who doesn’t do anything in public. Ever.’

‘Okay.’ Henry nodded at the ground. He seemed almost ashamed.



Jacinta sighed. ‘Let’s go back and see what state the others are in. Eat your falafel.’

She took a large bite out of her own and a warm stream of white garlic sauce flowed down her arm.

Jacinta smelled the alcohol on the breeze before she could properly make out the group under the dark tree. They watched her and Henry arrive like wary animals: heads all turned, glow-sticks motionless. The only movements were small shuffles as bottles were hidden in bags.

*They must be pissed if they can’t tell who it is, she thought.*

‘It’s Pimpo!’ cried someone.

‘Yeah!’

‘Hey everyone,’ said Henry casually.

There were some rowdy cheers as they sat down in the grass with the others.

‘Nuvva drinko, Pimpo?’ Someone pushed a huge plastic coke bottle towards Henry but Jacinta gently steered it away.

‘I think the birthday boy has had enough for the moment!’ She tried to sound jokesy. It came out sounding like a teacher. ‘Let him eat his dinner at least.’

‘Awww, booo!’

‘Yeah,’ slurred Henry. ‘Lemme eat!’

The group laughed and the mood softened. Jacinta watched them while Henry munched away at his dinner. They reminded her of the drinking crowds from her own school. The loud bragging about fake IDs and the other times when

everyone had gotten totally trashed. The tipsy pretenders forcing their laughter, the early-run bingers with stomachs on countdown to launch. The ‘oops I fell over’ girls and the ‘let me help you up’ guys lying in ‘ha ha we both fell over’ piles. Everyone checking to make sure everyone was watching.

She smiled. It was all part of the fun, just like when she was an underage drinker. The only difference was this lot were getting picked up in four-wheel-drives and she had to walk home avoiding main roads.

*Good times*, she thought, wiping garlic sauce from her arm.

‘All right, you lot, we’ve just got time for a quick stop at the 7-11.’

Myra’s curfew loomed and Jacinta still had to somehow force four tipsy teenagers into the Mercedes without damaging the car or stinking it up with alcohol. Fortunately, she knew how Mattie had managed to drink and drive in his parents’ car for years without being suspected. He had a secret weapon.

‘Febreze?’ Peter frowned, standing crookedly in the aisle of the 24-hour City Supermarket.

‘Yup,’ Jacinta answered, proudly holding up the pink can. The other kids wandered idly up and down the aisles of the brightly-lit store, moving around the porn magazines and shoplifting lollies.

‘What is it?’ asked Henry.

‘It stops your mum’s car smelling like a drunken teenager. And it also ...’ she popped the lid off, ‘stops *you* smelling like a drunken teenager.’

‘How does it work?’ asked Peter.

‘Like this.’ She blasted him with the aerosol while he flailed about. ‘There you go.’ She sniffed him. ‘You smell normal again, like fresh linen.’

Peter stared dopily at his t-shirt. ‘Yeah?’ He was quite drunk.

‘Amazing.’ Henry gazed at her like an adoring puppy. ‘You’re brilliant, Jaz.’

‘You two are so cute!’ Bonnie sighed, popping up behind them and squeezing them in a hug.

‘Huh.’ Jacinta blasted her with the spray. Bonnie squealed.

‘What are you doing?’ She staggered back into a shelf full of toilet paper.

‘It’s Febreze!’ said Peter, cheerfully. ‘Stops you smelling like alcohol and getting *mumbusted*.’

‘Again.’ Henry smiled nervously and Peter snorted with laughter and high-fived him.

Bonnie nodded slowly. ‘Do my shoes!’ she said, pointing to her expensive pink sneakers. Jacinta gave them a spray and Bonnie giggled. ‘Does it really work?’

‘Sure. My best friend’s boyfriend did it for years and never got caught.’

The three nodded approvingly. ‘Cooooool.’

Jacinta took the can to the front counter. Henry said something but Jacinta couldn’t hear over the sound of the group tumbling outside.

‘What?’

‘I said: you’re really cool, Jacinta.’

She looked over at him. His face was pure child-like love and trust. She almost forgot the blackmail picture he had in his pocket.

‘I’m serious,’ he continued. ‘You’ve just been so cool and great and helpful tonight. I never realised how much help you would be when we first met.’

Jacinta paid the bored cashier. ‘Thanks, Henry. That’s nice of you to say.’

‘I mean it!’ He shook her arm. ‘I’m really going to make sure that you keep working for my parents as long as possible.’

Jacinta smiled. The Clapham’s tranquil street, quiet gardens and expansive bookshelves floated around in her head. Maybe she would be able to move in some day, like a live-in nanny. Maybe Myra really would hire her as a personal assistant, or maybe they would sponsor her through law school, as a thanks for being so good to Henry. She had even heard about nannies who got given cars and put in the family inheritance.

‘You’re a nice kid,’ she said. ‘Sometimes. Come on. We’re gonna lose the others.’ She grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the supermarket and into the street.

And walked straight into Mattie.

They each stared, for a moment neither recognising the other.

‘What are *you* doing here?’ they asked simultaneously.

The people Mattie was with saw him stop, but moved on up the street out of earshot. A few glanced back at Jacinta, but she didn’t recognise them. A blonde girl hung back for half a stride, shooting Mattie a quick look before joining the others. Jacinta frowned at her. She looked familiar.

‘Well!’ Mattie smiled and took a step forward, boxing Jacinta between himself and a newspaper stand and engulfing her with the sweet stink of rum and coke. He took a drag on a cigarette and let the smoke crawl slowly from his mouth and up over his face. ‘Not babysitting then?’ He looked down and Jacinta realised that she was still holding Henry’s hand. She dropped it immediately.

‘Um, actually we decided to go out for the evening. For Henry’s birthday.’

Mattie turned his red eyes slowly towards Henry and smirked. ‘So *you’re* Jacinta’s mature little ... friend.’ He gripped his cigarette between his lips and thrust out a muscular red hand. ‘Happy birthday, bro.’

Henry shook it silently.

‘How *old* are you, Henners?’

‘Thirteen, uh, fourteen on Tuesday.’

‘So.’ Jacinta folded her arms. ‘Not going out with what’s-his-name tonight? Doggy? Up bush?’

Mattie’s cheeky expression turned cold and ugly. He threw the cigarette down and it burst into a scatter of sparks. Jacinta tried to move back, but she bumped into the wall.

‘Dogga. No,’ he answered. ‘Went there. It fizzed. Came back to the city.’

‘Who are those people then?’ She nodded to the group up the street. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever met them. They’re not Dogga’s friends, are they?’

‘Scholarship crowd.’

‘How come Clara’s not here? She *loves* going out to the city.’ Jacinta gave him her super-lawyer bitch stare. This had ‘Cheating Mattie’ written all over it. She couldn’t wait to tell Clara and sort the bastard out.

‘It’s a last minute thing. Anyway, what are *you* doing on “movie night”?’ How come you didn’t invite Clara?’ He grinned at Henry. ‘Or would she have been interrupting something?’

Jacinta gave what she hoped was a dismissive scoff. ‘Pf! As if! Henry invited all his friends to go out to the street party for his ... that is, instead of watching movies.’

Mattie looked around at the thinning crowds and then up into the fluorescent gleam of the supermarket. ‘Aren’t you a bit *old* for imaginary friends, little fella?’

Jacinta realised that the herd of drunken sixteen-year-olds was nowhere to be seen.

‘They’re here!’ squeaked Henry. ‘They were just here! They went up there!’ He pointed towards the remaining crowds from the street party and shuffled in closer to Jacinta. She tried to shove him back surreptitiously, but they stumbled awkwardly together. Mattie snorted with laughter.

‘Oh right!’ he chuckled. ‘I see them! They’re right here! Good to meet you guys!’ He started shaking imaginary hands and hanging his arm around imaginary shoulders. Henry scowled at the ground.

‘Don’t be an idiot, Mattie,’ spat Jacinta. ‘Anyway, why don’t you introduce me to *your* friends?’ She nodded towards the small group who were still waiting up the street, not talking, glancing back at Mattie. She could just see the blonde girl chewing her lip. ‘Who’s that girl, for starters?’

Mattie slapped his hand against the wall beside Jacinta’s head and she shrank back. He was almost as big as her dad. The fume of sugary alcohol and cigarette smoke covered her face like a wet rag. When he spoke, he ground every word between his teeth as though he were eating something alive:

‘These are my Friends From Uni. Clara hasn’t Met Them Yet. You Aren’t Going To Tell Clara you saw me here because You Know How She Gets. She doesn’t need that kind of Stress And Worry. Especially if she finds out that her Best Friend Lied To Her about Going On A Date.’

‘Mattie!’ Jacinta gasped. ‘I’m not on a bloody date! I’m looking after Henry’s friends on his birthday!’

Suddenly Peter tumbled through the doors of the supermarket, clutching a packet of chewing gum and another can of Febreze.

‘Heeyy Pimpooow!’ he cried, throwing an arm around Henry’s shoulders. ‘Jacinta tha Febreze Lay-deah! I just asked this chick if she could smell alcohol on me and she said no! Who’s this?’

‘Oh, *hi*, Peter!’ Jacinta smiled a bitchy smile. ‘Mattie, this is one of Henry’s friends, Peter. Peter, this is Mattie. Mattie’s the guy who invented the Febreze trick.’

Peter straightened up and held out his hand. ‘Dude. I’m impressed. You’re a genius.’

Mattie gazed frostily at Jacinta. ‘Here with all your mates are you, Pete?’

‘Eh? Yeah, sure! Round here somewhere, bastards.’ Peter waved up the street and attempted to unscrew the lid of the hipflask under his t-shirt. ‘You wanna swig, mate? Twenty-five-year-old gold!’

Mattie ignored Peter and rested his arm heavily on Jacinta’s shoulder. He spoke slowly, his moist, pouting lips almost touched her ear: ‘Don’t you say a fucken thing.’ He turned and walked away up the street. Peter followed him, chattering away and brandishing the Febreze can. ‘Mate, how did you get onto this stuff?’

Jacinta watched him go. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘Was that your friend’s boyfriend?’ asked Henry quietly.

‘Mattie. Yeah.’

‘He was really drunk, wasn’t he?’

Jacinta shook her head. ‘That was just him after a few beers. You should see him *really* pissed. He once kicked in a car windshield.’

‘Was he angry?’

Jacinta laughed. ‘That was just for fun!’

‘Fun?’

‘Yeah, he’s pretty stupid sometimes.’

Henry stopped. ‘We should wait for Peter. I mean we *are* taking him home.’

‘Oh yeah.’ Jacinta turned and called out to Peter, who was still talking with Mattie. Mattie lit a cigarette for him and Peter jogged back, smoking and spraying puffs of Febreze as he went.

‘Jacinta!’ Mattie had his hand raised in the air. He held up a small dark object with a shiny, glowing face.

It was his mobile phone.

He put his finger to his lips.



## 18

### Telemode Web Hosting

Choose your own domain name, forum hosting, file sharing, chatrooms, tons of web space! First month is free!

Henry waved to the friendly librarian. He had told the group that he was going to stay in the library to hack their intranet and use it to video chat with Jacinta. In actual fact, he wanted to finish his presentation on Henry Ford on his laptop because the school computers were slow and annoying. They could barely edit video, let alone render anything in 3D, so he had tucked himself away in a quiet corner and set to work.

Jacinta was so handy now. He could use her as an excuse for anything. He almost felt bad about not deleting that strange photo of them hugging. When he had copied it to his computer, he reasoned that it was more for him than for her. She would never see it again and so, logically, it couldn't *really* affect her. But if *he* deleted it, then there was no longer any concrete evidence for his relationship with an older woman, and hence, no real reason for a shy, intellectually precocious fourteen-year-old to be associated with the coolest, richest, most popular group in school. His unified theory of popularity did not need to account for IQ. It was his supposed high sexual experience which removed him from the Nintendo-playing Year Nines in the quadrangle and placed him by Peter Anderson's side under the jacaranda tree at the school's perimeter. It all came down to that photo. He set another animation to render and opened up his notes on the Model-T Collectors Club.

He would keep the picture. Just one copy, on his phone.

And one stored safely in his laptop.

Just in case.

‘Girlfriend not home, Clappo?’ Hunter slithered into the chair opposite and Henry slapped his laptop closed. He had been studying photos of vintage piston heads. Not exactly the naughty webchat he had been implying as the group left for lunch.

‘Um. No. Yes. We finished chatting.’ Instinctively he placed his hands flat on top of his computer. Hunter didn’t seem like someone who had been taught about not snatching.

‘So, what did you “chat” about?’ Hunter stared intently across the table. His dark hair and red acne gave him an unhealthy, vampirish look.

‘Nothing. You know, stuff.’ Henry packed his laptop into his bag.

Hunter tilted his head, like a reptile examining a rodent. ‘Yeah? What kind of “stuff”?’

Henry coughed. The librarian should surely eject Hunter for not having any work out, but when he glanced around he saw that they were completely alone. He had chosen a quiet corner indeed.

‘What “stuff”, Clappo? You can tell me. Did you talk about your big sleepover on Saturday? What’s she into? Come on, gimme a clue.’

‘I don’t think I really ...’ Henry coughed. He un-capped and re-capped a pen. He wasn’t prepared. He had to get out. He zipped his bag and stood up.

‘Well, I should—’

‘Where you going?’

‘I actually want to get some lunch before—’

‘Siddown.’ Hunter’s voice was deep and dangerous.

Henry sank back into his chair. He could hear the lonely blip of the librarian scanning books at the front counter. They were totally hidden.

Hunter leaned back and clasped his fingers behind his head. ‘How long have you two been going out?’

‘Well, er, not that ...’ He could work this out. He just needed his mental blank page to work it out on.

‘How often do you ...?’ Hunter made the complicated hand gesture and wagged his tongue. Suddenly Henry understood what it meant and his lips turned numb.

‘Your parents ever catch you? What’s her favourite? Where do you do it?’

Henry’s mind became a mess of diagrams and scrambled flowcharts. Nothing Hunter said fit anywhere. For the first time in Henry’s life, he couldn’t think his way out. And that scared him. He couldn’t hold onto one idea quickly enough to examine and make it fit the problem. All he wanted to do was run. He stood up again.

‘Sit’ Hunter said quietly, ‘*down.*’

Henry sat.

Hunter unclasped his hands and leaned forward. ‘I know you’re full of shit.’

‘What?’

‘You’re faking it. That chick isn’t your girlfriend. You’re only fourteen. You’ve never gotten a girl in your life.’

Henry’s mind stopped scanning. The hugging picture. This is exactly what it was for. ‘Oh no?’ he replied, trying desperately to affect a casual superiority.

‘Maybe you haven’t seen the *photographic evidence*?’ He opened his bag and rummaged for his phone.

Hunter smirked. ‘I’ve *seen* the picture. We all have. The others reckon you’re getting it on, but I can see you’re not doing shit. I reckon you’re crying like a baby.’

Henry fell silent again. His brain scrambled for everything he knew about Hunter, cross-referencing it with Jacinta, Peter, Bonnie, everyone. Hunter regarded him with his blank, hooded eyes. Henry swallowed.

‘Yeah. Well I-*we* have. We have.’

The corners of Hunter’s lips twitched. ‘Sorry? Have what? Eh?’ He cupped his hand dramatically to his ear. ‘What did you say?’

Henry had to push the words out. ‘M-making out. Made out.’

‘You can’t even *say* it.’

‘We made out. We make out!’

‘Right. Sure. Bullshit.’

Henry felt as though he were being pinned. How could you talk and reason your way out of a situation with someone who used neither talk nor reason? Suddenly, that made it easy. If Hunter wouldn’t accept reason, then Henry wouldn’t have to bother using it.

‘We make out. We have sex. We do it all the time.’ Henry’s heart was racing. All of his logic and deduction crashed into each other. He had never lied like this before and the true meaning of blasphemy became suddenly clear. It was as though he were wetting his pants on purpose. He felt as though he might laugh or scream or vomit. But it was working. Hunter seemed impressed.

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘A bit of this?’ Hunter held his fist to the corner of his mouth and jammed his in tongue into his cheek, making it bulge grotesquely on the opposite side. He made some squelching noises. ‘Eh?’

Henry nodded, hiding his confusion.

‘Got any proof?’

‘What?’

‘You ever film it?’

‘No!’

‘Why not? I know *I’d* want evidence, if I was with a hottie like that.’

*You’d never be with a girl like that either*, thought Henry, and the comparison made him pause. Looking across the table, Henry suddenly realised how similar he and Hunter were. They were both tall for their age; they both were skinny; they both had thick black hair that grew in dozens of different directions. They could have been related; even their faces were similar. But where Henry’s was still round and child-like, three years of unkind puberty had pulled Hunter’s into a shark-like muzzle: aggressive nose, receding chin and a broad brow. Then there were the pimples. Henry had sprouted one or two, but Myra had carefully swabbed them away with anti-bacterial fluid on a cotton bud. Hunter looked as though he had picked and gouged every single scarlet welt with a greasy fingernail. The more Henry looked at the boy scowling across the table, the more he felt as though he were looking into a mirror of what might be.

‘You don’t have the guts, do you?’ Hunter mimed snapping a photo and made a ‘click’ noise with his tongue.

‘I don’t want a picture of me having *sex!*’ Henry hissed.

‘You’ve done it before, you’re practically half way there.’

‘What do you mean?’

Hunter gazed silently across the table. The ‘ping’ of a book being scanned echoed from the front counter and Hunter’s thin lips stretched into a nasty smile.

‘That picture’s on The Wall, you know.’

‘What wall?’

‘We’re all waiting for something better, of course. Especially from the guy with the older girlfriend. The young star: Pim-po.’ He popped the last syllable from his large, dry lips as though he were spitting a cherry stone into Henry’s lap.

‘What wall?’

Hunter smirked. He reached into his bag and pulled out a stained note pad and a chewed biro. ‘It’s private,’ he said as he scribbled on the pad. ‘You can only view it once I’ve sent you the encrypted password.’ He glanced up to check that Henry was listening. ‘The password will change when you log out and you have to email me again to get a fresh one.’ He finished writing, tore the piece of paper away and slid it across the table to Henry. On it Hunter had written an internet address in a messy, but legible scrawl:

<https://transmearcakesandcookies.net>

Henry tried to pick up the piece of paper, but Hunter’s fingers held it tight to the table as he continued talking. ‘Use your own computer. Don’t try to use the school’s network or any other public internet. Make sure no one can see you using it. *Don’t use Mummy or Daddy’s computer. Got it?*’

Henry nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘What are the rules?’

‘Only use my laptop at home. You send me a password. One use only.’

‘Huh. Smart kid.’ Hunter nodded and Henry tugged at the piece of paper still nailed under Hunter’s fingers.

Hunter frowned. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Can I have the address?’

Hunter’s eyebrow twitched. ‘You think after all that I’m going to just *give* you the address written on a piece of paper?’

‘Er ...’

‘I take it back. I don’t even know why they skipped you ahead.’ He stood and craned over the table, his sharp nose centimetres from Henry’s. ‘You *read* the address and *remember it*. Then I tear it up and make you fucking *eat it*.’

Henry let go of the paper and jerked back.

‘You read it?’ Hunter’s breath smelled like a cold meat pie.

Henry nodded shakily.

‘You remember it?’

Henry nodded, praying the librarian would magically appear.

‘Good.’ Hunter quickly and efficiently tore the piece of paper up into small pieces and gathered them in his fist. ‘Hungry?’

Henry gasped and shoved his chair back. Hunter laughed; a nasty, braying laugh that honked through the quiet library. He put the pieces of paper in his pocket and strolled away, leaving Henry hunched in his chair, hands clamped over his mouth.

## 19

# POWELL DRILLING

Wells, bores, aquifers.

Full geological surveying and soil testing.

Jacinta could hardly wait to get home. She parked badly and bounded through the front door. The central air-conditioning washed the outside heat from her skin like plunging into a cool mountain lake.

*'Backyard Bonanza! Backyard Bonanza!'* she called excitedly down the hall.

'Jacinta? Is that you?'

She skipped lightly through the lounge room and out the back. 'We got *Backyard Bonanza!*' she cried as she threw herself into the hammock. Even though the day had been bright and hot, the vines over the veranda kept the house in a cool shade.

*I wish I lived here.*

Sitting at the wide wooden table, Myra looked up from her tiny laptop. 'What's that? What did you get?'

'Our house got chosen for the garden make-over in *Backyard Bonanza*. You know that TV show that did your fence?'

'Our fence?' Myra removed her hair from its bun and shook her fingers through it, releasing a faint smell of apricots. Jacinta suddenly realised that she



had never told the Claphams about her other life spent duping a reality gardening show.

‘Yeah. Er, I saw it on telly once, a while back. My mum watches it a fair bit.’ She chewed a sliver of dried skin from her knuckle.

Myra nodded, slowly remembering. ‘Oh yes. The man who designed it was an old uni pal of mine. He was going to be an art teacher, and I was going to do English and Special Ed. (this was all before I met Terry). We stayed in touch, but I guess we all ended up doing different things ...’ She trailed off, idly twirling a lock of her lustrous hair around a pencil and suddenly Jacinta didn’t know where to look. Then Myra blinked and the memory was broken. ‘Anyway – he’s quite a renowned sculptor now. Good at “the business” too, obviously. That’s how he organised the promo stunt for the TV. They remodel your garden or something, don’t they?’

‘That’s the one.’ It seemed odd that Myra wouldn’t understand how the show worked if her own house had been on it.

‘And they’re going to do your house?’

‘Yeah, they’re *finally* going to do Mum’s poor old dirt patch. We’re gonna be on telly!’

Myra wound her hair back into a perfect bun and smiled at Jacinta. ‘How lovely! So when does that happen?’

‘Not for a while yet. Mum’s not actually supposed to know, but she was the one who took the phone call. She puts her number on the entry forms and says it’s Dad’s.’

‘Doesn’t that spoil the surprise?’

Jacinta snorted. ‘No. We’ve been applying for years. Mum makes me write an application every week.’

‘How does that work?’

Suddenly it all came tumbling out. Despite the twinging embarrassment, she found herself telling Myra all about the years of Sunday nights she and her mum spent with glitter and glue sticks, forging letters written by an increasingly-obsessed primary schooler. Myra listened with the calm, open-faced patience that now reminded Jacinta of a Special Ed. teacher.

‘Mum’s idea is that they can’t ignore them forever. I guess it finally worked. It’s their last season this year and so they’re going to do this whole finale special on us.’

‘Because of the letters you wrote?’

‘The letters that Mum made me write, yeah. Turns out someone at the station actually kept a lot of them. Instead of doing the whole “Surprise, we did your garden while you were away for the weekend” thing, they’re going to do a big mother/daughter special and use all the letters. Have photos of us in crappy gardens, growing up together, all that cheesy stuff.’

‘And your mother gets her garden remodelled?’

‘Yup!’ Jacinta sat up in the wobbly hammock. ‘She’s talking about getting all these bushes and native flowers and stuff, but I reckon we should go for something more like *this*.’ She waved her arm at the Claphams’ leafy garden.

Myra laughed. ‘This old place?’

‘Yeah, totally!’ Jacinta swung out of the hammock and walked down the slate path. ‘I *love* this garden. You have big trees and secret paths and beautiful bushes and old buildings and this little veggie patch and a herb garden and *this!*’

She stopped and knelt by the large mossy waterfall that ran over a series of dark, rocky steps before entering a short creek that fed a lily pond next to the shed. ‘We are definitely getting one of *these*.’

‘You’ll have to get a bore,’ called Myra from the veranda. ‘We really started using ours a few years ago when the water restrictions came in. We were just lucky that this suburb used to be a farm, or part of one.’

Jacinta frowned. ‘A *farm*? But it’s all mansions and stuff.’

‘It was before there were houses here. Actually, Henry knows more about it than I do. He did a project on it last year for school. Spent *hours* in the council library and found out all sorts of wonderful things, didn’t you Henry?’

Jacinta suddenly noticed that Henry had come out of the house and sat down at the table. ‘Oh *hi*, Henry! Nice of you to say hello!’

He waved a long hand, not looking up at her. ‘Hi, Jacinta,’ he mumbled.

Jacinta returned to the veranda table. ‘What’s this about a farm?’

Henry’s eyes stayed fixed on the table while he talked. ‘Loxton Park used to be a big property owned by this one family and they had heaps of cattle and sheep. And a quarry. Around here was where they kept orchards and stuff that needed water and so they sank heaps of wells into the water table. They sold off all the land, but lots of the wells are still there and so people have been reopening them and using them to water their gardens and keep their lawns green. The end.’

Jacinta looked at Myra, who was smiling proudly. ‘Wow. How did you find all that out?’

‘Library,’ he said to the table.

‘Henry, why don’t you quickly show Jacinta the well and then you two can get to studying.’

‘Okay.’ Henry stood up and slouched into the garden. He motioned for Jacinta to follow him. ‘It’s back here.’

Jacinta followed him to a circular platform of old red bricks covered by a red metal lid. He undid a shiny bolt and opened the hatch. ‘Myra and Terry put this on in case anything fell down there.’

Jacinta put her hands on the warm bricks and peered down into the hatch. A fresh, earthy smell rose from the well and Jacinta’s arms prickled with gooseflesh.

‘If you get a torch you can see the bottom, but it’s just water. The pump for the sprinklers is back here.’

‘Is it deep?’

Henry shrugged. ‘I think so.’

‘I’m gonna take a photo for Mum,’ said Jacinta. She pulled out her phone and flicked on the camera. Henry’s mouth dropped open and their eyes met. Jacinta shook her head and looked away. She didn’t want to think about Henry and camera-phones. Not just yet, anyway. She had a plan which her lawyer’s instinct would tell her when to hatch. Instead, she concentrated on taking a photo of the well. The time would come. Henry closed the hatch and slid the bolt back.

‘Myra, I’m just going to take a few more photos before we start. Is that cool?’

‘Yes, yes, whatever you like.’ Myra waved from behind her laptop.

‘I just want to at least *try* and show Mum how nice her garden can be.’

Myra said something about bore water, but Jacinta didn’t catch it. She took a photo of the waterfall. ‘We’ve got to get one of these too.’

Going over Henry's homework was an almost silent exercise, interrupted only by the bleeps and music of Henry's presentations. Jacinta couldn't believe how difficult Year Eleven was.

*Jayden is going to be screwed next year. This stuff looks impossible.* A series of slides whizzed over the screen in front of her and she thought of her little brother's homework. It would be scrunched at the bottom of his grotty school bag, while Jayden painstakingly applied confetti-sized stickers to his car model, waiting for her to get home.

'Do the teachers like all this stuff, Henry?'

He shrugged. 'Yeah. Isn't this the kind of thing you do in uni?'

Jacinta thought of her wonkily stapled, last-minute essays and the terrifying cascade of Credit and Pass grades they had earned her over the last term. The magical Distinction average wavered in her mind and she reminded herself that the mid-year assignments were the ones that mattered. She would ace those ones, just like she did in Year Twelve, no fancy-dancy multimedia crap necessary.

'Nah. You just need to do essays.'

'Oh. I thought ...' He poked glumly at the screen. 'I don't know.'

'This is all great though.'

He said nothing and took out a Tranmere-branded folder from his Tranmere-embroidered school bag.

'I mean it, Henry. You should be proud of yourself. For this at least.'

He looked up and met her gaze for only the second time that evening.

'Jacinta, I'm really sorry about Saturday, I didn't mean for it to turn out like that, and it just ...'

Jacinta held up her hand for him to be quiet. It was lawyer time. She got up and listened at the doorway. Myra was cooking in the kitchen and Terry wasn't home, but then again, he was never home. She sat facing Henry and whispered 'Listen, I want you to delete that picture off your phone. Right now.'

He looked at her thoughtfully. 'Okay. I will. I'm sorry.'

Jacinta was surprised. She hadn't expected him to give it up that easily, especially after the fuss he had made.

Henry rummaged in his bag and took out his mobile. 'It's a stupid thing to have anyway. I'll delete it off my phone now.'

He quickly tapped at the phone until the picture of the two of them embracing appeared. They looked at it for a moment. The image of their bodies wrapped around each other stood out clearly against the white canvas of the falafel stand.

'It doesn't look like anything anyway,' Henry muttered. He tapped a button and a large banner flashed over the photo: '**Delete?**' He tapped again and the picture dissolved into a pale blue screen. 'There, gone off the phone for good.' He looked up at Jacinta. 'I'm sorry.'

'Good on you, mate.' She ruffled his hair. And tightened her grip. She wasn't done yet. 'Now what about the other one?'

Henry instinctively jerked back, but she kept a firm hold. 'What other one?' he asked in a high, wobbly voice.

She almost felt bad, but she didn't let go. The country's youngest QC had the defendant right where she wanted him: over a barrel and into her trap. Kate the lawyer was right. You could get away with a lot more if they thought you were a dumb girl.

‘The original picture. You didn’t take that photo. Obviously one of your stupid mates did. I want you to make it your mission in life to make sure every copy of that photo is deleted. Got it?’ He began to talk, but she put a finger to his lips. She felt powerful, in control. She was going to be a great lawyer. ‘I don’t care what you tell them, you make sure that photo gets deleted, okay? Or I’m going to turn up to your school at lunchtime and bust this whole “girlfriend” thing wide open.’ She let him go and gave his head a quick rub with her fingertips. ‘Sorry, mate, but it’s just gone a bit too far. You understand, don’t you?’

He nodded. He wasn’t such a bad kid really.

Now there was just the photo on Mattie’s phone.

## 20

# No Doz

100mg caffeine

Jacinta reported to Myra on Henry's excellent progress (Terry still wasn't home) and drove straight to Clara and Mattie's. Their industrial estate cottage was almost exactly half way between the wide, smooth roads of Loxton Park and the tangled dead ends of Salisbury Hills. She didn't know how she was going to delete the photo on Mattie's phone, but she had to start somewhere.

Mattie answered the door wearing a tight, white singlet and running shorts. Dry air oozed past him into the still, sweaty dusk. 'Hey.'

Jacinta gulped. Last year he had been just a boy; brash, immature and all too aware of his looks. Now, something had changed. He was still handsome, but his glowing future gave him a power that hadn't been there before. Instead of jogging in footy shorts, Jacinta saw him in a broad-chested polo shirt and hard hat, directing towering mining trucks and building horizon-filling factories; moving mountains with his sturdy, brown hands.

'Jaz, I'm kind of studying, I can't really hang out ...'

'Is Clara around?' She tried to see inside, but Mattie's tanned, muscular frame filled the doorway. The house was quiet except for the grinding tick of a rotating fan in the front room.

'She's at uni. Studying.'



‘Oh. Okay. Tell her I dropped by and I’ll send her a text or whatever.’ She backed slowly off the porch, groping for the keys in her handbag. ‘Seeya.’ Every lawyer experiences setbacks, she reminded herself. The photo on his phone would have to wait.

‘Jaz.’ Mattie stayed leaning against the doorway. ‘Thanks for not saying anything about Saturday night.’

She reluctantly stepped back onto the porch and lowered her voice. ‘Whatever. You should tell her what you do and not keep secrets. She *is* my best friend you know. You blackmailing me with that stupid picture doesn’t help. It isn’t even real.’

He absently rubbed his hand up his toned arm. ‘It looks pretty real to me. What were you doing, anyway?’

Jacinta threw up her hands. ‘Oh, for crying out loud! The kid was having a big sook about something and then he just grabbed me!’

He smiled, dimples creasing his unshaven cheeks. ‘Really? It looks pretty – I dunno – intimate.’

Jacinta went on the offensive. ‘You better delete it,’ she growled, jabbing a finger into his hard chest. With that, she marched away across the yard, dry three-corner jacks crackling under her thongs. At the front gate she turned around and called out ‘Coz if you don’t, I’ll just have to tell her about Saturday night with your engineering buddies, won’t I?’ What a performance. That would wipe the stupid flirty smile off his stupid handsome face. She was going to be *such* a good lawyer.

Mattie said nothing. His pale blue eyes locked on hers across the dusty yard.

‘You’re not going to delete it, are you?’

He beckoned her inside and, reluctantly, she obeyed.

There was nowhere to sit. Most of the furniture was covered in rumpled clothes and text books and they had to squeeze awkwardly together on the couch. He drummed his fingers a few times on a notepad, deep in thought.

‘Do you know why we had to move out?’

‘Clara said her mum wants her to pay her back for all the tutors and stuff last year. Apparently she was going to sue for the tutoring bill.’

Mattie nodded, looking grim.

‘Plus ... well, your parents, I guess.’

Windreed and Crystal Bell were their own explanation. Jacinta found herself embarrassed to bring them up and Mattie looked glad that she didn’t.

‘Will someone from that law firm really help fight Clara’s mum in court?’

‘Eh?’ Mattie looked up, confused. ‘Court?’

‘Yeah ...’ Jacinta wondered if what Clara had done was a secret. But if she told him about the lawyer’s business cards, drawing him into her trust, he might be more likely to delete the photo. It was a risk, but, she reminded herself, good lawyers take risks. ‘Mattie, I don’t know if I should be telling you this, but ... you know where she did her internship?’

He nodded, curious. This might just work. ‘Well, she sent her mum the business card of every lawyer there. I guess her mum knows to back off now, but—’

‘Oh *that*.’ Mattie rolled his eyes. ‘Yeah, that, and a big fat cheque.’

‘What?’

He grinned, pleased in spite of himself. ‘The scholarship gets you these awesome loans. It’s so prestigious that plenty of places take one look at the average graduate salary and sign you up. You know when I start working I’ll be able to pay off a new house in three years?’

Jacinta reeled. Even top flight lawyers didn’t make quite that much. Certainly not straight out of uni. Something wasn’t right. ‘What cheque?’

‘I got a loan and sent her mum a cheque. She cashed it too, the bitch. Paid off the loan she took out for Clara’s tuition.’

‘Clara said she was going to pay her mum back when she got a job.’

Mattie shrugged. ‘Nah. Her mum went ballistic when she moved out – told Clara she was stupid, hitching herself to a bloke, getting into debt. The old cow reckons I’m just using Clara and I’m gonna dump her when I finish, just like what happened to her.’

‘What’s to say you’re not going to?’

Mattie looked genuinely hurt. ‘I *need* Clara. She’s the only way I’m going to stay on this scholarship. Every other kid in the program lives with mummy and daddy, no talk about rent or food. The scholarship isn’t even supposed to be a living allowance, more like pocket money. So Clara studies *and* works so we can pay off our loans and our rent. If she shoots through, I’m homeless.’

‘But what about Windr–what about your mum and dad?’

‘They’re deadbeats. Total losers.’ The distance in Mattie’s voice gave Jacinta goosebumps. It was so matter-of-fact, so final. Jacinta found herself defending them.

‘But they’re your parents.’

‘As soon as they found out that I could get those loans and pay for Clara’s uni, they were like “our son’s a millionaire!” and they got in their stupid purple van and bugged off up the east coast.’

‘Clara said they were looking to stay up there and start their business.’

Mattie rolled his eyes and twirled a pen between his fingers. ‘Emergency chakras? Gimme a break.’

‘But aren’t they going to send you ... support, or something? Surely they’re—’

‘Stop. Just stop.’ He held up his hand. ‘You’ve got no idea have you?’

‘What do you mean? I was just ...’

‘Jacinta, I know you always reckoned you had it tough; parents doing the hard struggle and all that. But you haven’t got a clue.’

Jacinta hadn’t been ready for this. ‘Well, Paramount’s a pretty tough place.’

Mattie almost laughed. ‘Jacinta, your parents have *jobs*. They bought a *house*. My folks don’t even believe in *possessions*. Do you understand the difference that makes?’

Jacinta pictured Windreed and Crystal Bell. She had met them a few times at Mattie’s house in Para Vale. They had dreads and weird art around the place, but they weren’t out chaining themselves to a KFC or anything crazy like that. ‘They still supported you. How did they live?’

‘They reckon the Earth’ll look after them. That and Centrelink.’ He twirled a pen furiously in his fingers while he spoke. ‘Every time they’d score something like food or clothes, they’d show me how Mother Gaia or whoever was looking out for us. I used to believe that shit too, until I was about ten.’ Suddenly

he gripped the pen hard in his fist. ‘Then one day I get up and there’s nothing but these rubbery carrots. Whole bag of ‘em. “The Earth has provided” says mum. And I go to school with these rubbery carrots in a paper bag and everyone else has got cheese sandwiches and chips and that. So I’m there chewing my way through these soft carrots and someone goes “I saw your mum get those from the bins behind Woolies”.’ There was a loud snap as the pen shattered in his grip. He looked disinterestedly at the crushed pieces and tossed them onto the table. ‘And that’s when I realised: my folks aren’t transmitters for good karma here on Earth or whatever they were on that week. They’re just dirty, jobless hippies who live in a shack and call digging food out of dumpsters “living freegan”.’

‘Jesus, Mattie. I ...’

‘Everything we had was bloody recycled. Not just clothes. Food, furniture, toilet paper. Did you know there’s a place that makes toilet paper where you can go and get the offcuts for free? Do you know what it’s like to make your own toilet paper?’

Jacinta shook her head.

‘Our mattress in there is the first one I’ve ever had that hasn’t been used by someone else first. Clara and I ate baked beans for a week because I spent my first scholarship cheque on a new one. Did you know that?’

Jacinta remembered how Mattie had reacted when Clara had accused him of getting the porch furniture on hard rubbish day. She shook her head.

‘No. No you bloody didn’t know. That’s why I work my arse off. ‘Coz I don’t want to be like them.’ He brushed away the last bits of pen from his hands. ‘I’m glad they’re gone. They couldn’t help us, even if they tried.’

Jacinta gazed around the cramped little lounge room and Mattie and Clara's swirling lives became a little clearer. 'So let me get this straight: you're in debt, which you're paying off with your scholarship. If Clara leaves, you'll have to get a job on top of your study and your grades'll drop and you'll probably lose the scholarship.'

Mattie nodded glumly. 'There's no probably about it.'

'And if you lose the scholarship, you'll lose the massive pay cheque at the end.'

'And be in tens of thousands of dollars debt with these loans, plus my uni fees. But if we just keep working, stick to the straight and narrow, then it's a golden ticket.'

The fan ticked back and forth, washing dry, chemical-scented air over them.

'We're not stupid, you know,' said Mattie, quietly. 'We've talked about living together. We know it could work or not. But even if we break up, or grow apart, we're not going to let these careers go. We owe it to each other. We're going to stick it out together, no one's gonna help us.' He recited each sentence like a slogan he practiced in the mirror. 'It's going to be tough, but we're going to make it. This is really it. We're gonna get out of here. We're on our way. This is our golden ticket.'

A truck downshifted in the distance, its dull, growling vibration resonating with the ticking fan. They were definitely closer to Salisbury Hills than Loxton Park.

'Mattie, look. About that picture—'

‘You’re jealous of Clara, aren’t you?’ His pale blue eyes were suddenly piercing her. ‘Aren’t you?’

Her lungs tightened. Suddenly everything pushed in: the textbooks, the dented walls, the dead grass, the static hush of the fan, the tangy chemicals in the air, the belching building machinery grinding over baked concrete for miles in every direction. In four years, Clara and Mattie would live in a cool, golden palace like Henry’s house, but today they were still deep in a coal mine. Jacinta sucked in a poisoned breath.

‘No.’

‘Come on, Jaz, admit it: you always thought it’d be you in Law with Clara trailing behind.’ He threw a casual arm across the back of the couch and looked her up and down as he spoke. ‘Now she’s in Law, she’s got a career, a solid boyfriend, she’s got everything going for her that you don’t.’

‘I’m *not* jealous.’ She didn’t have to take this. ‘I’m going. You should tell her where you were on Saturday night.’ She went to stand up, but Mattie put his hand on her bare leg.

‘I *need* my scholarship, right?’ His warm palm felt massive on her thigh. ‘Right?’

Jacinta nodded.

‘Clara *needs* my scholarship. Right?’

In spite of her fear, her inner thigh twitched and blood rushed to her cheeks. ‘So? What’s that got to do with the picture?’ she half-whispered.

‘Our lives aren’t that easy, are they?’ He gestured around the room. Jacinta didn’t disagree. ‘So, if you start yapping on about Saturday night to Clara,

what do you think that'll do to her head, if she thinks I'm out with the richie-rich scholarship kids?'

Jacinta was frozen. She knew there was a lawyer trick behind this, but Mattie's fingers curling around her thigh muscle was making it hard to concentrate. She shook her head. 'I don't know.'

'Jacinta!' Mattie raised his voice. 'She's going to leave me! It's going to ruin everything! I know you've got nothing at stake, but to us this is everything! And Clara will do it, too! She swore she'd never turn out like her mum, and if she thinks I'm doing the dodge on her, she'd have nowhere to go but back home. Then she'd hate her life, and you, and me. You want that?' He took out his phone and scrolled through it. 'Not to mention, you'll have cost each of us hundreds of thousands of dollars income. Just because you think you know how our relationship should go!'

He stopped scrolling and shoved the phone in Jacinta's face. Her and Henry embracing against the falafel stand.

'What do you want, Mattie?'

He stood over her and folded his sinewy arms. 'I want you to be a good mate to Clara. Every time you think you know what's best for her, think about the kind of life you would have if this photo got out. If Clara saw it. If your mum saw it. If the cops saw it.'

*'It's not real,'* hissed Jacinta.

'But it looks real. That's all that matters.' Mattie slipped the phone back into his pocket. 'I don't want us to break up. I'd be stuffed. But if I feel like you're not doing your best to help us out, then it's "Send to All". Got it?'

Jacinta glared at him.



‘Good. Well, I’ve got a ton more work to do. I’ll tell Clara you dropped  
by.’

Jacinta stood stiffly and walked past him out into the muggy evening, the  
air thick with the smell of burning chemicals.

## 21

Content on this website is  
**not suitable for minors.**  
Do not enter if you are under the legal  
age of consent in your country.

Henry waited quietly in his room for Terry to go to bed. Hunter had sent him his password. His computer was on past bedtime. All he had to do was wait for his father to stop tinkering around in his office and actually go to sleep for a change. That evening, as usual, Terry had come home late from work, eaten some cold dinner and mumbled something about preparing a few things before bed.

That had been two hours ago.

So far, Henry had heard him make two phone calls and use the printer three times. Often Terry would stay up all night, reading articles, writing reports and falling asleep on the soft leather couch in his office. It wasn't unusual for Henry to open the door in the morning and see him fast asleep at his desk, a book held upright in his hands. Henry would cough and Terry would snort, snap his head back and pick up a pen to write down a note as if he had never lost consciousness. Then he would comb his thin hair, make a very strong coffee and go straight back to work.

Henry hoped fervently that tonight wouldn't be one of those nights.

Just as he had decided to go out and put on a show of complaining about being kept awake on a school night, he heard his father's computer power down

and the study door close. It was followed by the sound of lights being turned off and Terry's loping gait tromping off to bed.

Henry was finally alone and awake. The empty internet window gleamed from his laptop. He took a deep breath and typed in the address.

Instantly, a box appeared demanding a password. Henry carefully copied in the scramble of numbers and letters that Hunter had sent him and clicked 'Okay'.

A black page loaded, displaying a single line of text in large red letters:

## **THE WALL**

Underneath the heading were two smaller buttons marked in red lettering. One read 'Fun Stuff' and the other read '*Really* Fun Stuff'. Henry clicked on 'Fun Stuff' and the screen filled with two columns of various photos and videos. The videos were of kids in Tranmere uniforms beating each other up, vandalising cars and putting fireworks in letterboxes. He pressed 'Copy' and instantly a box appeared showing a picture of Hunter's grimacing face next to the words '**Fuck off. These are mine.**' As he scrolled down the page, he recognised Peter and Caleb and a few of the other boys from the group. They were younger, around Henry's age, with pudgy childish faces and bird-like, breaking voices. In one, Hunter flitted past, looking more like a pimply Henry than ever. Many of the videos were filmed at Tranmere College; some were even taken at night, recorded in ghostly, monochromatic, infrared greens and blues. Henry tried a few different methods for copying the videos, but each time, the obscene message popped up. He shrugged and took out his phone. As he worked his way down the page, the

kids grew older and the activities became more extreme. One showed Caleb super-gluing a series of lockers and doors closed around the school. Another was a fully-grown Peter flushing some younger boys' heads in the toilet, gripping their necks inside the bowl and laughing. These were interspersed with various stills and clips of group members vomiting, pouring things on people and urinating on public property. It culminated in a video of Hunter himself, trousers unbuckled and open, sniggering while he sprayed an entire shelf of books in the school library, like a territorial feline. Henry replayed that video and made special note of which shelf.

At the end of the page was Peter Anderson driving his new car into the car park on the first day of school. It was accompanied by Hunter's photo of him sitting on the bonnet grinning at the camera. The last and most recent video carried the title 'Fresh Meat' and showed a montage of Hunter and Peter's hands crippling the nipples of various Year Eights, accompanied by the sound of the older boys' raucous laughter and the younger boys' squealing and panting. Henry recognised the victims from the boys who watched him from their computer games as he made his way to the jacaranda trees at lunchtime.

Now he understood what The Wall was: an illicit repository of the pranks and mischief that Peter and Hunter and the rest of the group engaged in. Like a reality TV show, but starring themselves. He also understood why Hunter was so protective of it. Most of the things depicted in the videos were enough to earn expulsion or even arrest for most of the group.

*No wonder they tolerate him.*

He went back to the homepage and clicked on 'Really Fun Stuff'.

As the page loaded, Henry's stomach clenched. It was like a House of Horrors, but peopled with faces he knew. He had seen pictures of naked women before, but seeing the girls he knew from school with their shirts off and their pants pulled down was like looking at some sort of surgical procedure or taxidermy textbook. Parts of the body that should have been protected were exposed and Henry had trouble understanding what he was looking at. In some photos the girls were smiling and even laughing as they pulled at their own misaligned clothing.

He scrolled down the page and it became worse. These were the faces and lips and mouths he had seen at school every day talking about equations and homework and clothes. Henry could barely look.

The videos were worse. Caleb's video of Bonnie was there, accompanied by many others like it. As he watched, clicking each movie with a shaky finger, Henry noticed two things. The first was that they all featured girls from school. These were no pouting, plastic porn-stars; these were girls Henry recognised from his own classes and from the years above and even below. Many were from the group itself.

The second, more subtle, characteristic was that most appeared to be filmed without the girl knowing. From the scrambling, blocky pixels captured with shaky mobile phones to the blurry webcams perched across bedrooms to the luminous green stab of night vision from a high-resolution camera, none of the girls could possibly have been aware that she was being recorded.

There was something else about this collection which made it different, but Henry would have to force himself to watch every single video to see if he was right. By the time he reached the bottom of the page, his blood burned

through his veins like steam. His ears felt hot and itchy and acidic bile mixed with the toothpaste in his mouth. He had an uncomfortable erection squashed under the laptop and he felt ashamed. Scrawny pale bodies wrestled and grabbed at each other. Tiny grunts and squeals emanated from the little speakers under his wrists and he hit ‘mute’.

Then, at the very bottom, surrounded by a flashing yellow box, was the image Henry had carefully deleted from his phone for Jacinta that afternoon, all the while knowing that it was safely stored on his laptop’s hard drive. Shown full-size on his screen, Henry could see that his face wasn’t one of manly lust, but childish confusion. Jacinta wasn’t overcome with desire, more like resigned tolerance. Their arms didn’t embrace so much as tangle around one another.

At best it could be seen as a bored moment during a romantic one, rather than an accidentally suggestive moment during a panicked one. At least it was debateable as to what was really happening. He could still hold onto to his group status.

Just.

He scrolled down. Beneath the photo in the same flashing yellow box was one more video. It was taken at Peter’s house during his birthday party and showed Peter holding a large white nappy in the rumpus room at his party.

‘Where’s Clappo?’ he shouted. ‘Let’s get him! Make him a Wall star!’ The video then followed Peter, with the group in tow, as he prowled around the house, searching for Henry. As they neared the study where they had finally found him with Jacinta, the video faded to black. Crude titles scrolled over the black screen: **‘Is this the only video Pimpo will ever star in? Will he earn his place on The**

**Wall? Or will he stay *on the rag?***’ The last question scrolled over a slow motion shot of Peter waving the white nappy.

The video finished and Henry jumped as an instant message popped up in the corner of the screen. It was Hunter.

**SO r u gonna make a contribution??**

Henry’s heart pounded. He stared at the little grey box with Hunter’s message in it. Before he could type anything, it flicked up another message.

**i know u jus watched the vid I made 4 u**

**u gonna liv up to it or r we gonna put u bak in nappiz?**

**u got 2 choices = prove the photo is real OR star in the next nappy vid**

**I know ur full of shit an if u dont front up soon everone els will 2**

Suddenly the page full of videos disappeared and a program window popped up: ‘**Session Ended. New password required.**’

**All gone. C u at skool tomorrow PimPO.**

Henry began to type a reply.

**O yea nice try copyin the vids I got the best anti-copy \$\$ can buy**

And with that, Hunter logged off.

Henry turned his computer off and lay back in the quiet darkness and thought. With the relaxed clarity of the twilight mind, he realised what was different about the ‘Really Fun Stuff’ videos.

Hunter wasn’t in a single one.





## *Part Three*

## 22

**6b.** While all reasonable efforts will be made to avoid costs and/or liabilities to the undersigned, the undersigned hereby absolves Backyard Bonanza and Suburban Media Productions of any costs and/or liabilities incurred by the undersigned arising from or relating to

- the production of the Backyard Bonanza television series;
- any building, landscaping or renovation activities occurring on The Property as agreed to in clauses 4a to 4d;
- any subsequent alterations to the building, landscaping or renovations as agreed to in clauses 4a to 4d; or
- any regulations, codes or statutes applying to The Property.

In the weeks following the festival parade, the hot, dry summer mellowed into an early autumn. Jacinta's car arrived in Loxton Park coated in dirt and dust from the unsold lots in Salisbury Hills and returned dappled with large brown leaves from the plane trees along Henry's avenue. After the success of Henry's birthday, the weekly tutoring turned into a twice-weekly exercise (at Henry's request). The second session had then become a regular night in the Claphams' spare room, after a strategic negotiation by Jacinta to keep herself in midnight snacks.

*Backyard Bonanza* became a real reality show as they were visited by producers and lawyers and landscapers. Dates were set, contracts were signed and the garden measured and photographed. 'Before' shots were filmed of Carol and Jacinta walking sadly around the dead backyard, crouching to shake their heads at brown-leaved plants and looking thoughtfully out across Paramount Flat. The story of a devoted daughter and her garden-deprived mother was to be the big, tear-jerking finale to Australia's favourite gardening-design show. All the old hosts were returning to 'chip in' and there were even a few hints that the new 'make-a-wish' angle might even be enough to keep the show on the air.

‘Or if not actually save the show in its current format,’ explained Kristen the Production Manager, ‘then at least give us a platform for something fresh.’

Kristen the Production Manager had become a frequent visitor to the McDonalds’ house as the *Backyard Bonanza* filming date approached. She wore tailored shirts, had porcelain-perfect make-up and tied her dyed-blond hair back so tightly that her brush-stroke eyebrows were always slightly raised. She reminded Jacinta of the bimbos she and Clara had hated all through high school; the blonde brigade who went on the ski trip every year and had private school boyfriends. They were bitches to Clara for dating Mattie and bitches to Jacinta for being Clara’s friend. Jacinta called them The Bim-bots, until Year Twelve, when Clara suddenly turned into one. Clara and the Bim-bots became study-buddies: cramming in the library and going to holiday revision courses. The way Kristen the Production Manager briskly sorted through her leather folder reminded Jacinta of the strange, sterile way that Clara and the Bim-bots had of studying: everything labelled and sorted in perfect order. It was like they had all bought the same brain implant that made you obsessive and efficient. Kristen took out a contract and Jacinta realised that she had probably done Law as well. They probably didn’t let you do contracts for a national TV station without a law degree.

*Bitch.*

‘I want to plan the garden,’ said Carol, pen poised above the dotted line.

Kristen the Obsessive Perfectionist Lawyer Cow blinked. ‘We actually hire the very best in landscapers to come in and consult on the best ways to—’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ said Carol. ‘I’ve watched every show, remember? Sometimes you do a good job, sometimes you don’t. I’m not taking that chance if I have to live with it. I’ll be choosing how my garden looks, thank you.’

Kristen, Stuck-Up Solicitor to The Stars, gave them a TV smile, said ‘Excuse me a moment,’ and left the room, phone to her ear.

‘Love, are you sure you want to fight them on this now?’ asked Gary quietly. ‘They’re bound to do a good job.’

Carol folded her arms. ‘I want a very big say in what goes on. I don’t want them putting in some god-awful rockery that I end up having to pay to pull up.’

Gary nodded. ‘Okay, love.’

Kristen, Bossy Broadcast Barrister, returned, this time with a proper smile. ‘That should be fine!’ she beamed. ‘We’re restrained by a limited budget, of course, so just keep that in mind when you’re thinking about what you would like. There are also bound to be some issues with local regulations and that sort of thing, but our legal department will do what it can to make it all happen for you.’

‘Your legal department?’ Jacinta stopped thinking of clever nicknames. ‘Aren’t *you* in charge of the legal stuff?’

Kristen seemed pleasantly surprised. ‘Me? Do all the legal wrangling? No thanks! Leave that to the experts!’ She gave a brassy, infectious laugh and everyone else laughed along with her.

‘Oh.’ Mattie’s words echoed in Jacinta’s head: ‘*jealous of Clara*’.

‘Right then. I’ll draw up some ideas and send them on over,’ said Carol. She patted Jacinta on the knee. ‘Jacinta will help me!’

‘Awesome!’ trilled Kristen. She smiled her TV smile again and Carol and Gary signed the contract.

## 23

From our high speed wireless network with SafeGuard™ content filtering to our national standard gymnasium, here at Tranmere College we pride ourselves on our world-class facilities set among our heritage-listed buildings and gardens.

As the glory of Henry's birthday party faded, so too did his popularity. He still sat with the group, but not as often under the protective wing of Peter Anderson. He bought more sausage rolls than he received. Only Hunter showed real interest in Henry's casual hints that Jacinta was now a regular overnight guest. And this was the only kind of interest that Henry was anxious to avoid.

Removing the photo of him and Jacinta from the group's phones was a relatively easy task. He simply asked for everyone's wireless passwords so that he could transfer some amusing prank videos he had found on the internet. Once granted access, he just found the photo and deleted it remotely until only three people still had a copy: Peter, Caleb and Hunter. Only now the picture was the least of his troubles.

The Wall was a much bigger problem.

Now that Henry knew of its existence, he saw the power of its silent presence upon the group. On the Mondays after weekend parties, mobile phones loaded with illicit pranks and secret photos would be passed quietly among sniggering boys while Hunter grinned his jagged, greasy grin at Henry. Every time Henry leaned over to look at a dark, blurry screen, Hunter would say in a low, mocking voice, 'Pretty good, eh, Clappo?'

Henry would nod and attempt to behave as though they were all appreciating an artistic masterpiece, rather than some fuzzy amateur pornography.

‘Does *Jacinta* ever do that?’ would come the inevitable whisper. ‘You should film it.’

At first Henry had been able to wiggle out of it. He became an expert at hand gestures and subtle, knowing nods.

Then Caleb had begun to ask.

The day that Peter asked was the day it began to spiral out of Henry’s control.

The group was migrating along Tranmere’s oak-paneled corridors, plowing through the rest of the between-lesson tide like an Arctic ice-breaker. Henry always marveled at the way the group fell into formation when they moved, as if by pre-arrangement. The boys always walked at the front, clearing the way with elbows, wedgies and nipple-cripples. The girls cruised along behind in the clear wake, past the students who squeezed against the walls, nursing sore rib cages and bruised egos. Peter often travelled in the centre, the well-protected king, free from the argey-bargey dirty work, but quick to lend a decisive slap or an outstretched foot when a Year Nine found an inexplicable surge of confidence.

Henry had begun to take notes on the group’s travel mechanics and had even drawn some rudimentary diagrams to incorporate into his now quite extensive Unified Theory of Popularity. The theory had grown and expanded during his time with the group and was now no longer just a collection of notes, lists and tables. It was at least the length of a book, complete with chapters, a thick glossary, detailed charts, dense equations and dossiers on each group

member. As his own popularity had waned, he had worked harder and harder to complete the theory and use it to find a way to secure his position.

He trotted along near the back of the group, trying to simultaneously work out a geometric equation that could explain the physical positioning of group members, and keep up with the muttered conversation between Peter and Caleb about hidden cameras, when suddenly, Peter threw his arm around Henry's shoulders.

'You should totally do one, Pimpo!'

'Do what?' Numbers and letters dissolved in front of Henry's eyes, replaced by a sheen of pleasure.

'Yeah!' Hunter chimed in, giving Henry a less-than-friendly punch on the arm. 'You're a bit of a bloody whiz on the computers, aren't you, Clappo?'

Peter glanced back, checking that no girls were within ear-shot. 'You know,' he said conspiratorially, 'something for The Wall. Meet us after school.'

Henry's adrenalin glands injected panic through his body and he began rambling. 'Oh, uh, well, I don't really have the equipment and you know it's always pretty difficult to—'

Hunter cut him off as they filed into the classroom. 'No excuses, Clappo.'

Before he could think about it, Henry blurted out 'You've never done one, Hunter. Why don't *you* do it?'

Suddenly Hunter wedged Henry into an alcove, hidden from view. He leaned his elbow into Henry's ribcage and stared down with a hungry hatred, his black eyes dull and hard as scorched steel, framed by his acne-macerated skin. He had never looked more shark-like than he did at that moment. When he spoke, his quiet voice almost shook with anger: 'Shut your fucking mouth or I'll *kill* you.' A

teacher's footsteps tapped towards them and he let Henry go, pinching the thin skin on the back of his arm as he scuttled into the classroom.

'Tree. After school. Don't be late!'

Henry squinted through the thin drizzle of rain as he trudged past the sports complex. The spot where Hunter had pinched him still stung. He swerved around a group of Year Twelve girls as they bustled through the gym doors, swinging heavy sports bags and complaining about the weather. He made his way carefully across the slippery mown grass towards the group's jacaranda tree. He couldn't see Peter, Caleb, Hunter or any of the group. He checked his watch. It was just before three thirty.

He sheltered under the jacaranda and wondered sadly if he had been stood up. It wouldn't be the first time. He had arranged to meet 'friends' after school before. Perhaps he was being secretly filmed at that very moment, about to become the victim of some Wall-worthy prank. He looked up, but there was no suspended bucket of water or similar implement of hilarity.

'Psst! Clappo! You blind idiot!'

Henry turned around, still seeing no one.

'He can't see us,' whispered Caleb's voice. Henry peered towards the privet hedge that separated the school from utility sheds and suburban houses. He had always assumed that it was entirely dense and mostly impenetrable, but peering closer he could just make out three navy blue shapes hidden within its bulky camouflage.

'There we go,' chuckled Peter's voice. 'Now the boy's got it.'



Henry walked over and pushed his bag through a hole covered by a few well-kept branches and then crawled through. He found himself in a cavity carved between two bushes, just large enough to fit three large teenagers sitting on their schoolbags.

‘About time,’ grumbled Hunter. They were huddled around Caleb’s open laptop, like some blazer-clad tribe contemplating their sacred idol. Henry crouched uncomfortably next to them. He didn’t want to sit on his bag.

‘Hi,’ he said, trying to be casual. ‘What’s going on?’

Peter put his finger to his lips and pointed to the laptop.

‘They’re going in!’ hissed Caleb excitedly. ‘I *knew* this would work!’

On the screen was an image of the change rooms in the gym. Henry hated those change rooms. They were the place he felt well and truly behind his classmates, all chest hair and muscles where he had just a flat white space.

‘Are you recording this?’

‘Yep.’ Caleb angled the screen towards the others. The image looked as though it were coming from a security camera; a slightly fish-eyed lens angled towards the long benches on which the Year Twelve girls were now dumping their sports bags.

‘Mate, you are a fucking *genius*.’ Peter clapped Caleb appreciatively on the back as the girls began taking their clothes off.

‘How are you getting this?’ Henry murmured.

‘Check out *Thunder Tits!*’ blurted Hunter in a breathy voice that made Henry’s stomach churn.

‘Wireless security camera,’ answered Caleb, not taking his eyes from the screen. ‘Told my dad it was for a tech project and he got me a shit-hot one from the U.S. He owns a security company.’

They watched the girls take off their school uniforms and put on the navy blue Tranmere sports uniform. Henry joined in the expressions of approval and enjoyment, copying the grunts and pleased laughs until the last girl had dressed and left the change rooms. When it was over, Caleb pressed a few buttons and the image disappeared.

‘I can’t *believe* that worked!’

‘I’m totally Walling that tonight!’

‘How did you get the camera in there?’ Henry asked.

The three turned to him. The boisterous admiration for the legend that Jacinta had helped him create was gone.

‘Made myself a copy of the master key.’

‘Oh, cool. So ... what happens if someone finds the camera?’

Peter and Hunter’s silence was making him nervous.

‘I’m gonna bust in later tonight and get it back.’

‘Cool.’ Henry smiled and gathered his bag up to leave. ‘Anyway, I’ve got to go. My mum’s—’

Hunter grabbed a fistful Henry’s blazer. ‘You can have it next, Clappo.’

‘Yeah, man.’ Caleb turned his laptop to face Henry and showed him the recording program. ‘It’s really easy to set up. Battery lasts for ages; it’s small, easy to hide.’

‘It’s got night vision,’ said Hunter in Henry’s ear. He still had a hold of Henry’s blazer, twisting it slightly in his hand. Henry tried not to look. Instead, he

turned to Peter, his last hope for reprieve. Peter gave him a friendly punch. ‘Come on, Pimpo. You’re always saying how awesome Jacinta is in the sack.’

‘Totally, Pimpo! She’s a little hottie, eh?’

‘Yeah, everyone does it, what’s the big deal?’ Hunter patted Henry’s lapel and Henry glanced down. Hunter had secured a large, blue safety pin through his blazer, just below his Tranmere badge. It was just the kind of thing one would use to do up a large nappy. Caleb laughed.

‘No big deal,’ muttered Henry.

‘Cool. I’ll give it to you tomorrow,’ said Caleb. ‘Only keep it for a week or so though, my dad gets kind of sus.’

‘That’s all he’ll need.’ Hunter flashed Henry a vivisecting smile. ‘She stays over a fair bit, doesn’t she, Clappo?’

Henry nodded.

‘Whoa! Nice!’ Peter gave him another friendly punch.

‘Nice,’ repeated Henry.

Outside, the rain fell a little more heavily.

## 24

Go with the landscaper you can trust

# *Valentini Landscaping*

— *Our experience says it all* —

The sad fact is that even lawyers have to work some weekends. The Supreme Court Archives wasn't Jacinta McDonald QC's favourite place at the best of times. But on a gloomy winter Sunday with a ghastly *pro bono* consultancy about to steal her entire evening, an afternoon with her landscaper should have been a welcome break, something to look forward to away from the constant grind. However, it wasn't working out that way.

*She* was the lawyer.

*She* was the one who called the shots.

*She* was the one who could truly realise the creative potential of the country estate. But the pleb gardener blocked her at every turn, saying 'no' to everything and talking in mole-hills where J. McDonald saw mountains.

She gazed sternly across the concept diagrams for the back yard laid out between them on a piece of A2 card. Her sketches of wetlands, waterfalls and greenhouses had all been cheerfully rubbed out in favour of a patio and a tacky cactus garden. Honestly, if the gardener weren't family, she would have been fired long ago.

'Jaz, love, I don't want a herb garden. *Backyard Bonanza* is going to be here next weekend and I'm not going to start umming and ahing about this kind of stuff.'

‘But look how pretty they are, Mum!’ Jacinta scrolled through the photos of the Claphams’ lush green garden on her phone. ‘You get this bunch of leafy little plants and they smell awesome!’

‘Darl, I couldn’t keep them alive, what with mulching and water restrictions. Herbs need a lot of water.’

‘I told you: get them to sink a bore! The Claphams have got one; they just pump water out of the ground.’ Jacinta flicked her phone back to the shot of Henry and the brick well. ‘See? This is at the back of their garden and it’s deep enough to get groundwater out.’

‘Didn’t you hear Kristen say that we’re running to budget? Those things cost thousands.’

‘Mum, they can afford it. They’re a bloody TV station. And besides ...’ She took a pencil and drew a small circle on the yard plan in front of them. ‘If you don’t ask, you won’t get it.’ She labelled the circle ‘Bore’. ‘Just go for it. They can only say no.’

‘Jaz! I don’t want a bore! I don’t want a bloody herb garden!’ Carol picked up the sooty eraser and dragged it over Jacinta’s bore-circle, rolling it into little rubber worms and brushing them aside to join the rest of Jacinta’s erased suggestions. ‘I want a proper, nice garden that I’m going to like. A place where I can relax without having to worry about whether or not the herbs are about to cark it or if someone’s going to shop me to the wallopers for wasting water.’

‘How about a duck pond?’

‘No.’

‘An aviary?’

‘No!’

‘An orchard?’

‘Jacinta.’ Carol picked up a brochure full of latticed gazebos and colour-bond garden sheds.

‘At least have a water feature.’ Jacinta held the photo of the Claphams’ miniature creek in front of her mother’s frowning face. ‘It’s *beautiful*, Mum! And it’s *so* relaxing out in their garden, just to sit there and hear the all the trickling water. See how it’s got the rocks here?’

‘*Jacinta.*’ Gary’s voice boomed from the kitchen where he was washing up. ‘That’s *enough.*’

‘It’s okay, love,’ called Carol. She began drawing a path from the back veranda to the octagonal gazebo in the centre of the yard. ‘Jacinta, you’re right. Those things are lovely, but they just won’t go here. That lot can have a big fancy garden because they can afford a gardener and they’ve probably been building it up like that for years.’ She finished drawing the path and slowly wrote ‘Garden Path’ on it. ‘Fact is: their place is bigger than ours. A lot bigger. We couldn’t fit half of that stuff in, even if we wanted to.’

Jacinta slumped back in the chair and watched her mum pencilling in yet another native bush. It was unbearable. It was like she had won the lottery and had decided to spend it on a life-time supply of baked beans. Carol yawned and began idly shading the grass around the gazebo.

Jayden shuffled in quietly, holding an exercise book covered in Holden stickers. ‘Are you on late shift tonight, Mum?’

‘Yes, love.’ Carol smiled and rubbed his back through his baggy t-shirt. ‘I’m going to head off once I’ve finished this.’ She erased the remnants of the

orchid house that Jacinta had drawn in and wrote ‘Lemon Gum’ in the middle of a wobbly circle.

Jayden leaned against the table beside her. ‘Jacinta, can you help me with my homework? I tried to—’

‘Oh, flamin’,’ gasped Carol, looking at the upside-down watch hanging from her shirt pocket. ‘I’ve got to go. Can you finish this up for me, Jaz? Just go over those outlines in pen and make sure the trees are in dark green so they don’t get confused. Maybe just write ‘trees’ over here and point to them.’

Jacinta put a reassuring hand on her mother’s shoulder. ‘Mum, I know what to do. I’ll make it good for you. I’ll put it in the Postpak and take it to the post office tomorrow. They’ll get it this week and it’ll all happen on the weekend.’

‘Thanks, love.’ Carol smiled and rubbed her eye. She looked as though she was just finishing a ten-hour shift, not about to start one. ‘Okay then, off to another Sunday night special.’ She gave them both a dry-lipped kiss on the cheek and left.

‘Jaz, can you help me with this thing I have to do for design?’ Jayden brandished his rolled-up exercise book.

‘Can’t you do it yourself?’ Jacinta began gathering up the stationery and the garden plan to take into her room. Jayden mumbled something about ‘trying’ and Jacinta sighed. ‘Well, keep *‘trying’*, and if you’re still stuck in an hour, I’ll come and have a look. But I’ve got a massive essay due this week too.’

It was true. The list of multiple-thousand word essay topics lurked at the bottom of her own uni bag, awaiting her attention. Choosing wouldn’t be difficult, considering she had only read two of the books. Jayden unrolled and re-rolled his

exercise book and tapped it half-heartedly on the table. ‘I *have* been trying. It’s too *hard*. I don’t *know* what to do.’

Jacinta realised that he was muttering because his teeth were clenched. She peered under the peak of his cap and saw his sharp jaw-line rippled with tension. The chubby nine-year-old crying in her lap over a skinned knee was almost gone, but not completely. She touched his bony cheek.

‘Just try to make a start, okay? I’ll come in and help you later.’ She picked up the box of stationery and tried to squeeze past, but he blocked her path.

‘Look out, kiddo!’ She gave him a friendly bump with the box, but he grabbed it and held tight. Suddenly she found herself staring at him face-to-face.

‘Jaz, *you gotta help me*.’ He sounded angry, scared. His grey eyes shone from under his cap and he pushed against the box. Jacinta found herself trapped against the wall.

‘Jayden!’ she squeaked. ‘What are you doing?’ She shook the box between them and he quickly let go, jerking back and looking surprised.

She heard him mumble ‘Sorry’ as she hurried to her room and shut the door. Putting the box down on her desk, she sat down and tried to catch her breath. They had always fought, but this was different. There was a fear in his thin face. The same fear that she had seen on her own face in the mirror after getting her Year Twelve results. The same fear that was on Henry’s face as she had marched away from him at the street parade and on Mattie’s face as he brandished that incriminating photo.

She pushed away the memory and began tidying her little homework desk, stacking her law firm stationery under the Sydney Harbour mug to make room for the garden plan. There was a knock on the door.



‘Piss off, Jayden!’ she yelled, unrolling the sheet of card. The door whooshed open. It was her dad.

‘What the bloody hell’s going on here?’ He had washing-up water splashed on his shorts.

‘Nothing. Sorry, Dad.’

‘Why won’t you help Jayden with his homework? Can’t you see he needs a hand?’

She shuffled a few pens and opened a blank exercise book. ‘I’ve got my own homework to do.’

She expected an explosion, or at least some minor threats, but Gary lowered himself onto her creaky single bed. ‘Jaz, look, I know you’re tutoring that other kid and that’s great. You’ve been real responsible, working your way through uni and that, and we’re proud of you. But it seems like, I dunno, you’re acting funny lately. We haven’t seen you much. We’re a bit worried.’

He leaned forward and cupped his chin in his huge hand. He had the same shiny grey eyes as her and Jayden, but his hard skin was rusty red from a life spent working outside. She looked at him across the small strip of bedroom floor and he reminded her of the bulldozers and tractors that dotted Salisbury Hills. They were both hulking, powerful machines, scarred from work and use, ready to transform the next vacant lot from a paddock of mud and fennel grass into a neat, curly little cul-de-sac, packed brick-to-brick with tidy, boxy houses, plastic gardens and the same two roof colours. When he stood up, she half-expected clouds of diesel exhaust to pump into the air.

‘You don’t know what I mean, do you?’

Her mind full of buildings and bulldozers, Jacinta blinked. ‘What? No. I don’t know. Dad, I’ve got work to do.’ She turned to her desk and busily began spreading out rulers and pencils.

‘Jaz.’ Gary rested his heavy hand on the stationery box. ‘*This* is kind of what I’m talking about. You still live here and you’ve still got responsibilities.’

A future pillar of Australia’s legal community did *not* have to take this kind of talk. ‘Dad! I work for my rent, I go to uni, I do my chores! I help Jayden out every other week! I’ve got plenty of responsibilities! Tell him to do his own bloody homework for a change.’

She felt her blood rushing. She was ready for whatever he gave her. She hoped that he *would* start a fight. That would give her a good case for moving into the Claphams’ spare room. She would get her own space, her own computer, coffee every morning, the connections, the money ...

He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. ‘I know, love, I know. But the poor kid’s in a bad way over something and he won’t talk to me about it. Just when you’re done, could you give him a hand? Get him started, at least?’ He turned his large body around to leave, and stopped. ‘Oh, and take it easy on your mum over this *Backyard Bonanza* thing, eh? It’s only a week away and it’s pretty important to her. Do a good job on those plans won’t you, love?’

Jacinta nodded and he closed the door behind him. She picked up her Sydney Harbour coffee mug and closed her eyes. She wasn’t breathing in building sites anymore; her lungs filled with high-rise, sea-fresh air from the top of a sparkling city, bathed in light, rich with power. She was going to make it. Starting now. She smiled and opened her eyes. Then she unrolled her mum’s tidy, tedious little garden plan and began colouring the trees and bushes just like Carol wanted.

When she was finished, she surveyed her work. It was more like a median strip than a garden, all neat bricks and tidy plants. Gardens were supposed to be magical, beautiful, *inspiring*. Carol's dream garden, the best thing she could imagine, was basically a miniature bowling green with some native shrubs around the edge. They might not even do it. The designers at *Backyard Bonanza* would take one look and chuck it in the bin. 'This? On our final show? No way!'

She would have to spice it up. Just a little. Make some magic happen.

She took out a pen and carefully drew a small circle in the middle of the back yard. In the circle, she wrote 'Wishing Well'. Then in smaller writing, she wrote in brackets underneath '(Bore)'. It was just the kind of cheesy, tear-jerking stuff the show thrived on. They had done it before, disguising a big, ugly pump with a cute little wishing well that the family would all gather around and toss coins into.

She was drawing a second wishing well in the front yard for good measure, when there was a quiet knock at the door.

'Just a minute!' She quickly rolled up the sheet of card and slid it into the cardboard postage tube. 'Yeah?'

Jayden opened the door quietly. He was still holding his car-sticker exercise book. 'Jaz, I really tried and you said you'd look at it.'

'Jayden, it's getting late – you should be in bed.'

He shrugged and held out the warped book. The anger and fear had gone. He was almost a sad little kid again, sniffing on her lap.

'All right. Come on, let's have a look.'

She flicked open the cover. The front page was a collage of different cars all circling the graffiti-style title ‘A History of Design – Holden Commodore’. The next few pages had pictures of cars cut out of magazines with different headings in texta at the top of each page. Half-finished sentences in blue biro were engraved into the paper by the force of Jayden’s attempt at neat handwriting. The last two thirds of the book were blank. It wasn’t a multi-media presentation, that was for sure.

‘It’s a start!’ She tried to sound positive. ‘When’s it due?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Jacinta laughed out of surprise and immediately felt guilty when she saw Jayden’s expression. ‘Jayden, I can’t help you now. I’ve got to go to bed. I’ve got uni in the morning.’

He rolled and unrolled the book for the hundredth time. ‘I got an extension.’

‘That’s good. When for?’

‘Friday.’

‘You’ll be okay then.’ Jacinta began tidying away the stationery box.

‘Can you still help me?’

J. McDonald QC’s eyes narrowed. *Pro bono* was one thing, but this was intrusive. It wasn’t as though she spent all of her time lounging around in her office, gazing out at the Harbour Bridge and waiting for more freeloaders. Landscaped gardens and espresso machines cost real money from real work.

‘I’ll have to see when I’m available,’ she said coolly.

‘Jaz!’

This was getting a bit much. She toyed with the idea of calling security, until she looked up and noticed real tears in Jayden's eyes.

'Hey, what's wrong?'

He coughed away the sob that was threatening to interrupt his voice. 'I really *really* need help with this project!' he whispered through his clenched teeth. Jacinta almost went to him, but the memory of the grown man who had just shoved her against the wall kept her in her seat.

'Why? What's so important?'

He closed her bedroom door and sat quietly on her bed, gripping the rolled up book to his chest as though it was a bar of gold. 'If I don't do really well on this project then I'm going to *fail*.'

She was honestly surprised. She knew that Jayden was a muck-around kind of kid, but she didn't imagine that he would ever actually fail. She put an arm around his broad, bony shoulders.

'What do you mean?' she asked. 'It's only the middle of the year.'

He nodded shamefully. 'I've already flunked a couple of others, but they're like core subjects and so since Design is one of my electives it gets weighted more. So if I fail this then I have to repeat because it's like I don't have the base to pass the second half of the year.' He rubbed at a tear. The dark, teenaged scarecrow was gone. He was just Jayden, her scared little brother. She gave him a squeeze.

'Do Mum and Dad know?'

'I dunno. I don't reckon.'

'I'll see what I can do,' Jacinta said. 'But you have to keep going yourself and we'll go over it together some time later this week.'

He opened his mouth to complain, but Jacinta was too quick. ‘I just have to fit it around uni *and* work *and* helping Mum with *Backyard Bonanza*.’ She gestured to the stationery and the Postpak tube on her desk. ‘Look, just get some sleep, don’t worry about it tonight. I can’t help you anyway – I’ve got this huge English essay due; my tutor’s such a tool. “No extensions. Death or due date”.’ Jayden didn’t laugh at her impression. Jacinta rolled her eyes. ‘Work on it tomorrow and I’ll help you later in the week. You’re not going to fail.’

He hunched on her bed, staring at the floor. ‘Okay,’ he said, eventually. ‘But you gotta help me, you know. You help that other kid.’

‘Henry?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s my job, I get *paid* for doing that. This is different.’

He shook his head and stood up. ‘You still gotta help me,’ he said again and he closed the door behind him.

Jacinta rubbed her eyes and dug out the crumpled essay topics. It was lonely at the top, but Jacinta McDonald, QC, was used to the quiet grind of late-night work; just her, a Swedish desk lamp and the twinkling stars of the Sydney Harbour lights. It was moments like this that she remembered what that small-town lawyer had said to her at Year Nine careers day: *you earn a lot, but you’ll always work more than you earn*. Gazing out from the top of the castle, with one client squared away before midnight, and a big case looming later in the week, she knew she had earned every cent. She had gotten rid of the client on the pretext of beginning work on this new case, but it could wait until tomorrow. Her legendary last-minute magic would save the day yet again. She smoothed out the

essay topics and put them on her desk, under her Sydney Harbour coffee mug for inspiration.

For now, she had earned her rest.

## 25

### ROSSITER SURVEILLANCE SYSTEMS

#### Security, Safety, Assurance

Henry stared at Myra. She was preparing fish for dinner and occasionally talking to herself. Not single words, but long, mumbling, happy-sounding sentences that he couldn't make out because Caleb's wireless security camera didn't have a very sensitive microphone.

He had placed the tiny black box on a high shelf in the kitchen and was now sitting with his laptop at the bottom of the garden, marveling at the little camera's capabilities. The transmission was clear and the connection secure. It had motion-sensitivity, night vision and a zoom function. He could film almost anything or anyone he wanted.

Except that he didn't want to.

He wished that he had never taken the little box from Caleb, or shared winks and hand gestures with Peter, or blithely brushed off Hunter's taunting skepticism. Somehow he would have to film some kind of impossibly icky sex thing with Jacinta in it. And himself.

The possibilities were as numerous as they were flawed.

He could try to re-create the hug at the falafel stand from his birthday party, but getting the same result from a hidden camera would be beyond impossible. It wouldn't even be a video.

He could stage some kind of performance that involved him rolling around with a few pillows under his bed covers in his darkened bedroom. If the night



vision were poor enough, he felt certain that he could make it look like the grainiest and most difficult-to-see videos on The Wall. Even in those, you could still tell that there were two people involved.

The longer he thought about it, the wilder his ideas became.

He could apply his image-retouching skills to a video downloaded from the internet, somehow replacing the actor's heads with his own and Jacinta's. The only small problem there was that making something believable was beyond a professional special effects lab, let alone an inexperienced schoolboy with a time-limit and assignments due.

He thought about blackmailing her with the original photo.

He thought about just plain asking her.

He even thought about forcing himself upon her. He was her size and probably equal to her strength. The violent thrashing from some of the worst videos on The Wall would no doubt be replicated, and he could edit it in a certain way to make it believable.

He shuddered, ashamed.

The only thing he could think of was filming her in the shower. It was a compromise, but it would buy him time to work out another way to increase his popularity. He could concoct a whimsical story about sex taking place in the wrong room and offer the shower video instead.

This solution was still risky, however. Jacinta sometimes did not shower when she stayed the night because she was running late for her morning tutorial. He guessed that he had one chance at it before the questions and taunting began. Hunter had already begun sending him messages asking whether he preferred cloth or disposable.

As he contemplated Jacinta's next visit, the telephone rang and he watched Myra pick up the cordless handset on the screen. He guessed that it was Terry by the way she smiled. She moved out of view and he heard her open the back door to the garden, where he was perched on the well with his laptop on his knees.

'... I'll just ask him,' he heard her say. 'Henry!'

He flicked off the image.

'What are you doing back there?'

'Nothing.'

She came outside, still holding the phone. 'We're going to go to the shack this weekend. Do you want to invite someone from school? We'll leave on Thursday night because Terry has a training forum out at the function centre on Friday. We thought you might like a day off school.'

Henry bit his lip. 'But that's the night Jacinta comes.'

Myra walked further into the garden, smiling. 'Oh, I think we can cancel on her just this once.'

Henry closed his laptop and rubbed his head. He took a deep breath. This was all going wrong.

No.

Wait.

This was perfect.

Myra put the phone to her ear. 'He's just thinking about it ... I know ...'

'I want to bring Jacinta,' he said decisively.

Myra stopped mid-sentence. 'Jacinta?' She spoke into the phone. 'He said he wants to ask Jacinta. Henry, what about one of your friends from school?'

He shook his head. ‘Jacinta. As a thank you for tutoring me. I don’t think she gets to go on holidays much. It would be a nice thing to do and we get along really well.’

Myra gave him a puzzled look. ‘Well, I suppose so.’

‘I’ll just ask her. Just to be polite.’

She smiled and spoke into the phone again. ‘He’s going to ask her, just as a nice thing to do ... yeah, I know. I will. Okay, bye.’ She hung up.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to invite someone your own age? I mean, someone from your class?’

Henry shook his head. ‘I’ll call Jacinta this evening.’

Myra gave him a small smile. ‘Okay, darling. Be careful out there with your laptop.’

## 26

# *Headstart Model Kits*

**As close to the real thing as you're gonna get!**

J. McDonald, case-winner, high-flier, legal legend, was going on a holiday. To hell with the planning for trials and the meetings, she deserved a break. A weekend away in a sumptuous seaside resort was just what the doctor ordered (all expenses paid, of course). Best of all, she was to be chauffeured up the coast in the company limo. It was strictly business, of course – a bonding exercise which would strengthen her ties with a lucrative client and his well-paying organisation. But it would still be a load of fun. All she needed to do was swing by the estate for a few incidentals (bikini, cocktail dress, fabulous new sunglasses) and she was away. An escapee from the daily grind of high-stakes legal battles.

She turned up the sound system and gunned her fabulous German coupe down the boulevards of home. This was the beginning of a perfect few days. She was singing along with the radio so loudly that she didn't notice her phone ringing until she pulled up outside number thirteen, Russell Crowe Road.

She answered joyously, not checking caller ID. 'Hello!'

'Hey. It's me.' Clara sounded tired. Study and work were obviously taking their toll.

'Hey, Clars! I haven't heard from you in a while!'

'I've been studying. What do you want to do this weekend?'

‘Huh?’ Jacinta skipped inside the house, not really listening. Her parents’ cars weren’t in the driveway, so it looked like a trouble-free getaway.

‘Mattie’s going away for a study weekend or something, so do you want to do a girls’ night? Movies and chocolate?’

‘I can’t, sorry. I’m just about to go away for the weekend myself.’

‘What?’ Clara’s tone snapped from tired to angry. ‘Where? Who with?’

‘Henry’s folks are taking me to their shack for the weekend.’ She poured uni stuff out of her backpack and began filling it with clothes.

‘You’re going away with Henry for the *weekend*?’

‘Yeah. And we’re leaving tonight.’ Something in Clara’s tone made Jacinta pause. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

Clara said nothing.

‘Why can’t I go away for a weekend? Their place sounds *awesome*. He said it was a shack, but it’s double-storey! It’ll be total luxury. He asked me the other night.’

‘Jacinta, I think it’s weird that you spend so much time around this kid’s family. You’re always talking about them. I mean, I know he’s like a child prodigy or something, but still, he’s *fourteen*.’

‘So what?’ Jacinta pushed a going-out top in with the rest of her clothes. ‘He’s just a genuinely nice kid.’

‘Yeah, I know. You keep saying that too.’ Clara fell silent again.

Jacinta sat on her creaky bed. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Jaz, don’t take this the wrong way, I won’t judge you or anything, but is anything ... *going on* between you two?’

‘*What?*’ Jacinta almost gagged. The image of her and Henry on Mattie’s phone blazed in her mind.

‘Well, you know: he’s rich, intelligent, lives in that house, you two spend a lot of time together, teacher and student, I’m sure it’s crossed *his* mind ...’

‘I, uh ...’ Jacinta’s mind flushed with the heady images of Henry’s life: the beautiful, sprawling house; the silver Mercedes; the heritage school; the glowing computer; the sparkling espresso machine; the straight rails to wealth and success, wide enough for two. She tried to laugh off the suggestion, but it came out more like a guilty cough. ‘No way. He’s just a little kid.’

‘Okay, I’m just asking. You’ve got to admit: he’d be perfect. If he wasn’t fourteen.’

The regular sleep-overs. The weekend away at the double-storey shack. Jacinta gulped. ‘*Clara*. You’re being dumb.’

‘Still, it does happen. People make weird decisions sometimes. You know you can tell me, right?’ She sounded so relaxed and friendly that Jacinta almost let her guard down and told her about the picture. Then she remembered who was the QC and who was in first year.

‘Yeah right!’ She tried to sound amused. ‘Ha! As if! Thanks a lot.’

‘I had to ask.’

‘It’s just a way of saying thank you for the tutoring. He says his folks are really stoked about how well he’s fitting in too. Some of his mates are right little shits, but trust me, if it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have any friends at all.’

Clara jumped on that one. ‘I thought you just helped him with his school work?’

‘Yeah, that too.’ Jacinta gripped the phone in her shoulder as she zipped up her backpack. ‘I’ve earned this, Clars’. I’ll call you Monday and tell you all about it.’

‘All right. Have a good weekend then. Think of me studying my brains out in between shifts while you’re living it up in your “shack”.’

Jacinta laughed. ‘I will! Don’t get square eyes!’

‘That’s for television.’

‘Right. Gotta go.’

For the first time, Jacinta was glad she hadn’t gotten straight into Law. If she had, she would be right there next to Clara; glugging bad coffee, eating vending machine dinners, bitching about how tired she was and missing out on a weekend down the coast at the Claphams’ two-storey beach house.

*Next year, she promised herself. I’ll nail this distinction average, I’ll get into Law, I’ll keep tutoring Henry, I’ll be on my way. On my way out of here to somewhere great.* She picked up her Sydney Harbour mug. She could feel the city beneath her feet, the city she had fought and worked and climbed to reach the top, looking down at everything below. It all started here, in her cramped little bedroom in the Salisbury Hills housing estate. She put down the mug and noticed the crinkled sheet of essay topics.

*Oh shit.*

It was due tomorrow. She hadn’t even started. The biggest essay of the year. She could almost sense Craig the tutor’s satisfied smirk. If she wanted to have any hope of getting into law next year, she needed to sit down and write the most brilliant essay of her short university career. Anything less than a high

distinction would set her average so far back that second semester would be a prison sentence of study.

She chewed a sliver of dried skin from her cuticle.

Jacinta McDonald, QC, faced tough decisions like this every day: strengthen her business contacts, or get her hands dirty in the trenches working a case? When it was boiled down like that, the choice was simple. Clients this lucrative didn't come along every day, but the case would be there when she returned from her working holiday. And, most importantly, she was the greatest legal brain in the country. She would bend the judge and the courts to her will, dazzle them with her brilliance and come out a winner.

And it was all beginning here.

She put the essay topics back under the Sydney Harbour mug for Sunday night and walked out of her room and straight into Jayden.

'Where are you going?' His exercise book was rolled up hard as a night-stick.

'Away for the weekend.' Jacinta felt guilty for some reason, but couldn't think why. 'Tell Mum and Dad I'm back Sunday night.'

Jayden scrunched his rolled-up book in his fist. 'But you're supposed to help me with my project! It's due tomorrow!'

*That'd be it.*

She looked at the time. She didn't want to be late to the Claphams'. Henry had told her that they liked to leave early to beat the traffic and she would be fighting it all the way to Loxton Park as it was. She squared her shoulders. She imagined herself holding a briefcase full of important documents rather than a bag



full of t-shirts and spare undies. This *pro bono* stuff had its limits. Time for J. McDonald to serve up a dose of reality.

‘I’m sorry, Jay, but I just haven’t had time this week. You’ll have to do it yourself. Get stuff off the ‘net. Pull an all-nighter.’ She tried to pat him on the shoulder but he roughly shrugged her hand away and stalked into his room. Jacinta poked her head into the doorway and found him slouched at his desk, cradling his now-complete Holden model.

‘Hey, Jayden, look, if you just—’

‘What about *Backyard Bonanza*?’

‘What about it?’

‘Aren’t you supposed to *be* here? Isn’t it like a mother/daughter special thing? They come on Saturday.’

Jacinta shook her head. ‘They’re just bringing bobcats and cranes and stuff. All the actual garden building starts on Monday. I don’t think they’re even going to film it. Just tell Mum and Dad I had to go away on a work thing and I’ll be back on Sunday.’

Jayden shook his head. ‘You said you’d help me. You *said* you’d help me. Now I’m gonna *fail*.’

Jacinta stepped into the room. The light fuggy smell of sweat and model glue was now mixed with deodorant. Maybe he had taken her comments to heart and tried to de-stink the place a bit. She softened. ‘Hey, look, it’s not that hard. You just have to really knuckle down and work through the night.’

‘What do *you* know about working hard?’ He lurched up in his chair like a snake. ‘You never study! Not even for Year Twelve, you didn’t study! You just rely on what you got and what people give you!’

Jacinta threw up her hands. ‘Right, fine then. See ya later. *Good luck.*’ She walked out and there was a loud bang behind her. He had thrown his precious model car at her so hard that it had punched a hole in the thin Gyprock wall. It balanced for a moment, wobbled, then slid out and smashed to pieces in a scatter of red and white plaster, metal and plastic.

‘Oh fuck you, you little shit!’ yelled Jacinta, running for the door. ‘You can tell Mum and Dad who made that hole too!’

She slammed the front door and ran for the car as Jayden howled with rage.

## 27

Romance Thriller Detective Adventure 50¢ ea  
Bric a brac \$1  
Figurines prices as marked.

Jacinta was late and Myra was agitated. She paced around the front garden, briskly adjusting hoses and setting sprinkler timers, all the while checking her watch and peering down the street. Terry sat in the car, calmly tapping on his laptop for the training forum the next day. Henry had pretended to be helpful by setting the magnetic security lock on the gate before retreating to the back seat to descend into his own quiet panic. If Jacinta didn't come, he would have nothing to present the others with. He would have to attempt to pass off a video of himself humping pillows under his stripy doona as proof that he wasn't a ridiculously out-of-his-depth fourteen-year-old. It was either that or become a star victim on The Wall for the next two and a half years. His phone buzzed.

**Dirty weekend Clappo?**

Henry quickly deleted the message but his phone buzzed again.

**I know you got nothing soon everyone else will too**

Suddenly Henry found himself furiously tapping out a response: **I know you got nothing either. When I show my video everyone will know that it's one more than you ever made**

Just as he decided he would delete it, Myra wrenched open his door, and his thumb hit the **'Send'** button. His blood ran cold as he watched the text whooshing up and out of the screen.

‘When did you say she was coming?’ Myra didn’t notice him staring in fear at his phone.

‘About now-ish,’ he mumbled.

‘I don’t want to get peak hour traffic,’ she sniffed. ‘Terry, are you *sure* you can’t drive? I hate this time of day.’

Terry didn’t look up from his computer. ‘Sorry, I need this time as it is. We’ll just have to get hamburgers on the way.’ He winked at Henry, putting in his fathering effort for the day. ‘What do you think of that, eh? Hamburgers?’

Hunter would be receiving his threat right now. If Jacinta didn’t arrive, it would all be over before it had begun. Henry’s Adam’s Apple felt like a block of wood.

‘Henry? Hamburgers?’

Henry smiled and nodded. The lump in his throat could have been vomit or just fear paralysis, but he didn’t want to risk finding out by talking. He checked the time on his phone. Jacinta was still late.

Suddenly, the sound of a twenty-five year old Corolla with a hole in the muffler buzzed around the end of the street and Myra breathed a sigh of relief.

‘She’s here!’

Jacinta pulled up outside, yanked the handbrake and jumped out, carrying a backpack.

‘Sorry I’m late! Traffic was unbelievable!’

Henry carefully turned off his phone.

They arrived at the shack after two hours and fifteen minutes of Myra steadfastly refusing to overtake anything. Myra and Terry stretched wearily as they got out of the car, but Jacinta stopped dead in her tracks.

‘Wow!’ she cried, gazing up in rapture. ‘It’s huge!’

Myra and Terry gave polite smiles and went inside, but Henry felt obliged to stay outside with Jacinta.

‘I call it The Cube,’ he said. ‘It only has four sides.’

‘It’s *so* nice. I don’t know why you guys don’t come here all the time!’

‘We used to, but they both work a lot more, especially Terry. We’re only here now because he has a conference in town.’

‘Like a work thing?’

‘Yeah. It’s some engineering training thing. A special group comes down and works on some project. I think being away from the city is supposed to help the team focus or something.’

‘Cool.’ Jacinta looked around the yard. ‘So where is everybody?’

‘Who?’

‘The group. Doesn’t everyone stay here?’ She waved her arm at the house. ‘It’s big enough.’

Terry’s colleagues were people Henry had only ever seen in lab coats or ties. Or both. The idea of them staying at the shack was like inviting a teacher over for dinner: utterly bizarre. ‘I think they just stay at the motel in town.’ He carefully took his computer bag with its nerve-wracking contents out of the boot. Jacinta continued gazing around in wonder.

‘This place is *awesome*. I can’t believe you call it a “shack”! It’s bigger than my whole house.’

‘It used to *be* a shack,’ said Henry, stomping up the broad verandah steps. ‘But Myra and Terry knocked it down and built *this*.’ He prodded open the sliding door with his shoe. ‘I’ll show you your room.’

Henry had loved the old shack. It was a fibro shed that Myra and Terry had bought before he was born for roughly what their current lounge suite had cost. It had been like a castle, with all sorts of funny add-ons, like a widow’s walk and even a semi-detached cubby house that Henry could climb in and out of through a special trap-door in his bedroom. All hand-built by Terry when he still had time to come up on the weekends and put together projects with his old theodolite and power tools. Before he had gotten the really big promotion, before he kept winning grant after contract after consultancy and Myra and Terry had decided to bulldoze ‘the old mess’ and get an air-conditioned brick instead.

He showed Jacinta her bedroom. Apart from the squeaky fold-out cot in one corner, it was basically a store room for the books that Myra couldn’t fit at home, but couldn’t quite bear to throw away.

Jacinta tossed her bag on the floor and ran her finger along a shelf of wrinkled spines. ‘This has more books than my room at home.’ She glanced quickly at Henry. ‘My room at your home, I mean.’

‘Bathroom’s downstairs,’ he said, suddenly remembering what her being in the bathroom meant. ‘We don’t get any TV reception here, but we sometimes watch DVDs. Although probably not tonight because Terry has to finish his work for tomorrow.’ He gestured to the rows of books. ‘You could always read.’

Jacinta wasn’t listening, she was frowning at her phone. ‘No signal!’ She shook it and then tried holding it above her head, then closer to the window.

‘No. We’re on the wrong side of the headland. There’s some reception in town, but that’s in town. There’s a landline in the kitchen downstairs, if you want to call someone. Bathroom’s downstairs too.’

‘Uh-huh,’ she said, still absently fiddling with her phone.

He hung at the door. ‘So ...’

She looked up. ‘Mm?’

‘Nothing.’ He fled to his own bedroom and locked the door. He shouldn’t have mentioned the bathroom twice. That would have aroused suspicion if she weren’t distracted. His computer bag lay on his bed, Caleb’s tiny video camera nestled in its side pocket. It was like a malignant tumour, waiting to be removed.

He took a deep breath and sat up straight. Get it over with. That’s what he would do. That was the best way. He took out his computer and the security camera. The battery was fully charged. He turned on motion-sensitivity and the video screen flickered on, showing an image of a small red pimple on the underside of his chin. He picked up the camera and aimed it around the room. The image was crystal clear.

He sighed, put the camera in his pocket and went downstairs.

The bathroom always reminded Henry of a spaceship, decorated with dark tiles, huge mirrors and frosted glass. It also featured a set of display shelves in which Myra kept shells, sea-smoothed twigs and a growing collection of other little trinkets, gathered during her frequent raids on the local thrift stores. Henry sometimes used to pretend that he was a space explorer, examining samples gathered from distant galaxies and making spacey ‘blip’ noises in the echoing bathroom. He hadn’t played that game in a while. He placed the little camera,

among the loosely-arranged ornaments, snuggled up beside a Hawaiian hula-girl ashtray. He wished that he had the laptop with him so that he could see where it was pointing, but it would have looked too strange to be carrying a computer into the bathroom. He stood back to check if it could be easily detected by someone who was not expecting a hidden micro security camera.

Just as he had decided that there was a small danger that Jacinta might both see the little box and understand what it was for, the doorknob twisted and rattled and he almost leapt out of the window in fright.

‘Henry? Are you in there?’ Myra rattled the doorknob as though it were jammed rather than locked.

‘Y-yes!’ he called, voice strangled by adrenalin.

‘Are you having a shower?’

‘No!’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Nothing! Go away!’

‘Are you ...’ She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘Are you ... *having some alone time?*’

He actually flinched. ‘*What?*’

‘It’s okay! I’ll just leave you to it!’

He opened the door. Despite the glamour of her new satin pyjamas and matching bathroom bag, she still looked a little forlorn.

‘Mum! I’m just ...’ He glanced back at the bathroom. ‘Washing my face. I had a pimple. Have a bit of respect for other people’s privacy, can’t you?’

Myra looked glum and adjusted her hair-band. ‘Sorry. Mind if I go in?’



‘No.’ He moodily brushed past her. Terry was in the dining room, silently focused on his laptop, papers spread all around him. He hadn’t moved since they had arrived. Henry watched him for a moment. He didn’t look up and Henry stomped upstairs. Jacinta was examining one of Myra’s detective novels as though it were written in a foreign language.

‘What are all these?’ she asked, showing him the yellow cover. It had a picture of a woman in a cocktail dress holding a handgun and a rose behind her back.

‘Myra’s been collecting those for *years*. She always said she was going to write a paper on trashy novels.’ Henry took the book. It was about a private detective who fell in love with his client. He quickly gave it back. ‘I think she just likes going to op shops.’

‘Oh.’

He left Jacinta puzzling over the rows of flaky old novels and went downstairs to say goodnight. Terry was still working at his laptop and still didn’t look up, even when Henry kissed his cheek. Myra gave Henry a hug that smelled of shampoo and asked if Jacinta was okay.

‘She’s looking through your second hand books.’

‘Oh wonderful! What’s she reading?’

Henry shrugged. ‘I don’t think it’s her thing.’

Myra suggested an author and went back to her own detective novel.

Henry went back upstairs and closed his bedroom door.

Henry heard Jacinta thump downstairs and a moment later, his laptop switched itself on. The security camera had auto-activated and he found himself

looking at Jacinta entering the bathroom downstairs and turning the lock. He grabbed the computer and faced it away from the door. He did not want Myra coming in to wish him an extra good night and discovering that her little darling had become a super spy pervert.

The camera was in a perfect position. The slight fish-eye lens and his parents' penchant for mirrors combined to give Henry a perfect view of almost every corner of the room. And of Jacinta, right in the middle.

It was a perfect shot. He would only need one chance. She took the family toothpaste from the porcelain holder next to the sink, squeezed an enormous glob onto her brush, turned the tap on and began brushing her teeth, leaving the tap running. He felt like going downstairs and telling her that the entire house ran on rainwater, which only came in finite amounts from the tank outside. When she had finished, she began rifling under the sink, examining Myra's creams and Terry's pills. She flossed her teeth, clipped her nails, pumiced her feet and cotton-budded her ears.

*I am going to have to edit this down,* thought Henry, checking the timecode in the corner of the screen. *I don't think The Wall is the place for dental hygiene.*

When he looked back, his throat closed in shock.

Jacinta was staring directly into the camera.

She had her finger pressed under her chin and head cocked to one side, as though inspecting fine art. Henry knew that he should shut the computer down right that second. Pack it away, stow it under his bed, take it out to the car if possible, so that when Jacinta burst in, brandishing the little security camera and screaming the house down, he would at least be able to deny that it was on, or

working, or his. On the screen she suddenly reached out and her hand covered the lens. Henry held his breath as the picture went black. Maybe she was breaking it, stomping on it with her shoe. He wondered where he would get a replacement. Suddenly she appeared again, holding the hula-girl ashtray. She muttered something he couldn't hear and turned the ashtray over, inspecting it on all sides. She raised an eyebrow and replaced the hula-girl, bumping the camera as she did. When the image stopped shaking, he could only see her head and shoulders.

The video was ruined.

Henry watched in dismay as Jacinta pulled her shirt off and ducked in and out of view as she got undressed and turned on the shower. The footage was worse than useless. He switched off the camera. He would have to reset and try again the next night. No, wait. What if she showered in the morning? He would miss it. What if he ended up filming Myra or Terry in the shower?

Myra.

She had gone into the bathroom just after he set the camera.

He quickly switched to the saved files. Sure enough, there were two; one from a few minutes ago, and one made at the time Myra would have gone into the bathroom. He deleted both files and slapped his laptop shut in disgust.

Problems and questions and solutions buzzed around in his head, crashing into each other.

*Filming*

*Showers*

*Jacinta*

*The party*

*Homework*

*Nappy*

*Seniors*

*Myra*

*The Wall*

He tried to arrange everything in his mind, but he couldn't hold onto one thought for long enough before another crashed into it. He scrunched his eyes to try to make them stop.

*Clappo the Clown girlfriend Tranmere babysitting exams never home  
accelerated learning mineral water wireless security extracurricular Tickle Palm  
lonely Pimpo scotchy scotch driving lessons give me a kiss falafel stand eat the  
password*

Henry gasped for air and scrabbled for his computer, his phone, anything to focus on, to distract his flailing brain. He clicked on his phone and loaded *Zombie Nation*. A loud, raucous burp echoed around his room and he laughed. He had completely forgotten about that bit. The tweedly banjo music he had chosen when he was still in Middle School plinged from his palms and he could breathe again. The smell of the straggly eucalypts and saltbush which hid the shack from the road wafted through the open window. It was the same fragrant, dusky smell he had known all his life, a smell which meant holidays and exploring and staying up late. The last time they had come here, Henry had just finished his boring first term at Middle School. They had come to the shack, for a conference this time, and Terry had bought Henry the game design software 'so that he would have something to keep him busy'.

Henry paused the game.

That's when he had started making *Zombie Nation*. He had almost forgotten. Ever since starting Senior School it had been nothing but porn, lies and cameraphones. He tapped the screen again, slaying zombies and trying not to think about school. The group. His completely useless Unified Theory of Popularity. Peter and Caleb. Hunter.

Shark-faced, jealous, dangerous Hunter.

Once he got that message, there was no guessing what he would do. Henry had to protect himself, but the group's power would follow him everywhere. Even if the nappy torment stopped, he would always be 'that kid'. He blew up a couple more zombies and noticed that the music was a little repetitive. At least *that* was something he could fix. He opened the laptop and began working on the music files, Hunter's leering face hovering over everything as he shifted around tunes and added sound effects.

Suddenly, he had an idea.

He closed the music program and opened the video program.

## 28

**Big block.** Lots of potential. Perfect opportunity for the right investor.

*Conditions apply*

It was one thing to work your way to the top alone, but to do it within the well-connected help of the old-money firm, well, *that* was something extraordinary.

Being taken on an all-expenses-paid trip to a private resort was an activity J. McDonald, QC, decided that she could *definitely* get used to in the future.

The car they had travelled in was beyond luxurious, like a first class train carriage, complete with designer leather seats and glorious scenery flickering past the tinted windows.

The private chalet was large and elegant. The kitchen was lifted straight from an Italian design catalogue and the bathroom was more a work of modern art than somewhere you went to clean yourself. Even her rustic little bedroom had the sumptuous, cosy feel that only sleeping in your own library can have.

Yes, she had definitely earned this break. She *deserved* it.

Breakfast in the morning continued the theme of rest and recuperation. Diced fruit, bio-yoghurt and holiday espressos sat pleasantly in Jacinta's stomach as she leafed through a glossy magazine on the veranda in the warm winter sun. As the international forum was due to begin at the convention centre, the senior partners suggested a jaunt through the village beforehand. That struck J. McDonald, QC, as being a capital idea. The client was working quite feverishly

on his laptop and looked as though he had been for most of the night. He would hardly talk to anyone, let alone leave the chalet, so Jacinta stretched out alone in the back of the limo.

The village was as quaint as it was beautiful. Little family-owned shops sold scones, crafts and homemade jams. Even the sandstone post office advertised farm-fresh eggs. Jacinta expressed a desire to do some exploring of her own and the partners dropped her off outside a large antique store, promising to pick her up after the executive director had been properly introduced at the forum.

The little streets were lined with cottages and fruit shops and book stores; there were even restaurants and a modern café or two. Jacinta lingered outside the real estate office, taking note of prices and calculating how many properties she would need to make a proper return on her investment. As she moved about in the bright morning sun, she almost skipped with delight at what her future held. The connections she had forged over the last six months, culminating in this company holiday, would surely equate to further involvement, further benefits. Proud as she was of her rough and humble beginnings, this could be the final step up and beyond them that she had been aiming for her entire life. She could leave behind all that thankless *pro bono* bullshit and rid herself of exhaustive house maintenance and iffy property values. She could move in right where the action was. These senior partners must be extremely well-connected to afford the kinds of opportunities they seemed to possess. All she had to do was make sure she served their star client well and her own future with the Claphams would virtually be assured.

She would bring up moving into their spare room on the way home.

She admired a row of old mansions that had been converted into bed'n'breakfasts, complete with vine-covered trellises, hand-painted signs and picket fences. They would be a perfect little base to work from on future real estate acquisition trips. The lush green park across the road, bordered by rose bushes, would be a perfect place to relax in the sun until the senior partners returned to pick her up.

She sighed happily and strolled over the road. No one was about on a wintry Friday morning, despite the unseasonably sunny weather and J. McDonald, QC, decided to indulge a little while the opportunity arose. She headed for the swings.

And froze.

There, sitting ten metres away with the blonde girl from the cocktail bar and the festival opening parade and every one of Clara's nightmares, was Mattie.

Jacinta dove behind the nearest tree. She caught her breath and slowly peeked out. They hadn't seen her. They were sitting on a park bench with a white box bearing the name of the town's bakery. As she watched, Mattie brought out two large takeaway coffees and gave one to the girl.

'This is so nice,' said the girl. 'Let's hope the coffee's decent.'

'Yeah!' Mattie smiled and sipped his coffee. 'May as well make the most of it, eh? Cheers!'

They clinked cups and laughed together. Jacinta quietly took out her phone and switched it on. She set it to camera-mode and carefully looked around the tree again. They were still facing away from her, but Mattie had draped his arm along the back of the bench, behind the girl. Jacinta narrowed her eyes and



ground her teeth. That bastard had used Clara for long enough. She didn't care if he still had the blackmail picture. It didn't mean anything, compared to this. Right now, Clara was either slaving at work to pay Mattie's rent or slaving at home cleaning Mattie's mess and here he was on some sleazy weekend. Jacinta didn't care if he did have to give up his stupid scholarship. Clara would rather live at home with her tragic mum, than live her mum's tragic life in that chemical-poisoned house with Mattie. He had even said it himself: he needed her. Six figures and a free house, indeed.

Let *him* see what it was really like to support yourself and study.

Let *him* actually work for once.

Clara might have to move home, but at least she would still get to be a lawyer. It was time to end it. Jacinta took photo after photo and bundled them into a single message. With it she wrote **Im sorry Clars look what I just saw its that girl from the pub crawl in case u cant tell I dont have good signal will call you later they didnt c me**. She found Clara's number and pressed 'Send'.

Almost immediately her phone starting pinging and beeping as it received all the messages she had missed by being out of range at the Clapham's shack. The noise pierced through the quiet park like a fire alarm at a funeral. Jacinta scabbled to turn the phone off and stuff it into her pocket, but it was too late. Mattie stood over her, blocking out the sun, heaving with fury. He grabbed her by the arm and she smelled the bitter coffee on his breath.

'What the fuck? What are you doing here? Are you following me?'

She twisted and wriggled but his hand barely moved. 'You cheating *bastard!*' was all she could manage. She looked around for help, but the park was

deserted and they were hidden from the street by the row of rose bushes. She struggled again. His hand squeezed tighter.

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’ His muscles seemed to swell with the rage in his voice. ‘Did you *follow* me here? You’re fucking crazy!’

Jacinta felt sick with fear. She couldn’t even get her arm free. From the bench the blonde girl watched with curiosity. Jacinta took a deep breath and focused on his dark face. Calm came over her. She was the future lawyer. She was going to own this town. He was just a scared little boy, like Jayden, throwing his toys around. Except that Mattie’s toys were women. She fumbled for her phone with her other hand and flicked it on. It showed a photo of Mattie laughing while the blonde girl’s hair shone in the morning sun.

‘Too late, asshole. I already sent it to Clara.’

His hand went limp and he let go. The red fury drifted from his features, leaving white fear. ‘Oh. *Shit*,’ he whispered. ‘What have you *done*?’

‘Your cheating days are over, you scumbag.’ Jacinta stepped back, out of his reach. ‘Your days of sponging off Clara are *over*.’ She waved the phone at him. ‘And it serves you right!’

Out on the street, a car horn tooted. Myra pulled up at the park entrance, waving happily.

‘Gotta go. Enjoy your “study weekend”, dickhead!’ Jacinta trotted off to the waiting Mercedes. Game, set and match. She *did* have a bright legal future ahead of her. She might even tell Myra about it on the way back to the shack. Start ingratiating herself further into the family by sharing her personal problems.

‘Jacinta!’ Mattie was still standing by the tree. He was holding up his own phone. ‘I’m not just sending this to Clara, you know!’ he shouted. ‘I’m sending it to *everyone!*’



## *Part Four*



*Her forehead pounded with the stinging pain of the impact. She touched her bruised face and her fingertips came away with droplets of blood. Her arm ached as though it had been wrenched in its socket. It didn't matter. She was home. The rails rolled forward beneath her feet.*

*She held out her good arm and let the long tendrils of the pepperina tree tickle and sting the broken skin on her hands. The front light welcomed her as she limped up the wide slate steps onto the porch where she had stood six months ago, waiting to meet her new family.*

*She was going to make it.*

## 29

*This week, in the Backyard Bonanza Grand Finale, the team face their biggest challenge yet.*

*All devoted daughter, Jacinta, ever wanted for her mum, shift worker Carol, was a beautiful garden. So we've called in a few old mates ... and a lot of help ... to make our final show ever, the best one yet.*

*Will the team succeed on their final Bonanza and make Jacinta's dream come true? Will they finish the job before Mum gets home?*

The weekend worth of messages after coming back into range from the corporate retreat were the usual friendly banter J. McDonald QC had come to expect from her staff.

**Where r u??**

**Call home as soon as u get this**

**U R A FUCKING BITCH** (The *pro bono* client, apparently still dissatisfied with the level of service his zero dollars was buying).

There would, of course, be the usual spot-fires to put out; hands to hold, arses to kick. There always were when she let everyone fend for themselves. That was no trouble. She was most looking forward to seeing the landscaping overhaul. In the end it had been a regretful compromise, but J. McDonald QC knew the value of give and take. Especially as she would be moving from the regional office to the inner-urban centre where the lucrative client was based. It only made sense that the remaining staff be allowed a hand in designing their own space. But for the country's youngest QC, it was simply time to take a step up in the world, and she couldn't do that from her current firm.



The city firm had been ... receptive to her suggestion for a merger. Not enthusiastic, but still open to the concept. Unbridled enthusiasm might have been a little optimistic, given the hectic nature of the weekend. Particularly that confrontation with a previous client – a most uncomfortable situation. But, as usual, J. McDonald had come out on top, and on the side of good. She was certain that her star would continue to rise. The city partners would approve her proposal, and she would come to reside at their high-end Loxton Park chambers. The matter of leasing versus what retainer she would negotiate for her services as in-house QC might still be up for compromise, but again, she was willing to be flexible.

Her German coupe purred to a halt outside the regional office for one of the last times. The full-moon brushed everything silver black and J. McDonald QC got out to inspect the completed landscaping.

And staggered in shock.

Number thirteen, Russell Crowe Road looked as though it had narrowly escaped a missile attack. A massive crater gaped open where the front yard used to be. A heap of dark rubble was piled next to the crater on what was left of the mostly-dead front lawn. Muddy tyre tracks zigzagged under pieces of earth-moving equipment and the letter box had disappeared.

This didn't make sense.

*Maybe they only did the back.*

Jacinta crept up the side of the house, past piles of dirt and stacks of planks. She squeezed past a few pallets of wilting plants and stepped into the back yard. In the harsh glow of the moonlight, it resembled a bombing range. There wasn't a tree, gazebo, bore or wishing well in sight. All that was left of the hard, brown square of back yard were huge, dark holes sunk into the ground, bordered

by shrivelled orange flags and the same mysterious rubble that had been in the front yard. She bent down and picked up a piece of it. The dirty clod unravelled in her hand and she was left holding an ancient, stringy plastic bag. She examined another piece. It was a squashed Coke bottle; the red label bleached a creamy white.

It was all garbage. The piles of rubble were made up of twisted, congealed, dried up garbage.

She crept over to one of the holes and gazed in. The moon was high enough so that she could just make out the first, thick layer of dirt upon which the house was built. But beyond that lurked the decaying, greyish mulch of the old garbage dump that Salisbury Hills was built on.

‘Jacinta?’ The back light clicked on and Jacinta almost tumbled into the pit of rubbish. ‘Where the hell have you *been?*’

Gary moved surefooted over the destroyed garden like a man who had spent his life striding across building sites.

‘What happened, Dad? Where’s *Backyard Bonanza?*’

The slap bit her face before she had even registered that he was close enough to reach her. She stumbled backwards and he grabbed her shoulder. His hand felt as though it could have crushed her entire neck as he dragged her away from the house.

‘Dad!’ she rasped. ‘What are you doing? Let go!’

He marched her over mud, tools and old garbage to the back fence. There, he released her with a flick of his wrist, as though he were tossing aside a bottle cap. He stared at her for a moment, his moonlit face draped in angry shadows.

She rubbed her neck. ‘What’s—’

‘Shut it.’ A finger the size of an axe handle quivered inches from her face. And wavered. And fell by his side. Suddenly she was being crushed in a smothering embrace.

‘Bloody hell, Jacinta.’

‘Dad,’ she muttered into his curly chest hair. ‘What’s going on?’

He released her. ‘Jay showed us that picture on his phone, Jaz. You with that little kid. It’s ... it’s bloody disgusting what you’re doing with that boy.’

*Mattie* ... Jacinta realised what his threat had meant. He didn’t just mean Clara and his mates. He meant *everybody*.

‘It’s a fake!’ Jacinta managed. ‘It’s just a trick of the—’

‘Your mother’s beside herself. I don’t know what the bloody hell you’re doing with that kid, but you’d better find somewhere else to go tonight.’ He folded his arms.

Jacinta stared. ‘What do you mean? I wasn’t doing anything! This is my house!’

‘Not tonight. Go to Clara’s. You’re not staying here.’ He bent down so that his face almost touched hers. The smell of beer and sweat floated up her nostrils. ‘This get rich quick rubbish has gone far enough. Carol and I bloody killed ourselves working to get us all out of Paramount. I thought we were setting a good example, teaching you about paying your way. And now look what’s happened. You’re ... well, I don’t know what they’re paying you for, but it doesn’t seem like just babysitting.’

‘Dad.’ Jacinta clenched her fists. ‘There’s nothing going on! I’m really his tutor. That’s just a stupid picture that one of his stupid mates took.’

Her dad shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. ‘It’s not just that, is it, Jaz?’

Jacinta frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You take this job, an hour away from here, just so you can hang around with some rich family.’

Jacinta began to defend herself, but Gary cut her off. ‘You hardly tried in Year Twelve, spent the whole time whinging about private tutors or whatever, then you acted like it was our fault when you didn’t get into your course. You wouldn’t even help out Jayden when he started flunking.’ He shook his head and gestured at the dark craters strewn across the back yard. ‘And then there’s this.’

‘I don’t get it. What happened to *Backyard Bonanza*?’

He took a deep breath and rested his beefy hand around Jacinta’s shoulder. She felt the faintest of shudders and realised that her cast-iron father was sobbing.

‘Carol doesn’t *blame* you, Jazzy. This probably would have happened eventually, even if you hadn’t drawn that bloody wishing well.’ He squeezed her shoulder, almost too tightly. ‘But you did. And it did happen. And coming on top of everything else and that *bloody* picture, it’s a slap in the face.’

Jacinta’s face throbbed where he had hit her.

‘I thought getting a job would sort you out. Make you see you’ve got to work for what life gives you.’ He looked sadly at the craters in the yard. ‘She feels like you betrayed her, love. You’re our kid, and we love you, but it’d just be better if you weren’t here tonight.’ He nudged her gently in the direction of the street. ‘Go on. Don’t let your mother hear you leave.’

She heard her father sniff and sigh as she stumbled slowly back across the silvery rubbish-strewn yard.



## 30

... regarding your son ... It is school policy that ... students experiencing  
the level of difficulty ... however, Jayden ... repeated opportunities ...  
certification regulations require a minimum of ...  
Therefore, it is in Jayden's best interests ...

She didn't notice the dark figure standing behind the Corolla until it was too late. She didn't have time to scream before the shadow grabbed her with steely arms and dragged her into the car.

'You fucking bitch! You fucking *bitch!*' hissed Jayden, pushing her against the inside door handle. She tried to kick at him but her legs were tangled around the steering wheel. He slammed the driver's door and knelt on top of her twisted body, gripping her wrists with his wiry hands.

'Jayden!' she choked. 'Don't! Get off me!' She thrashed around, but the days in which she could out-wrestle her little brother were over. In the darkness it was like being pinned by an angry crab as his spiny knees and pointy knuckles dug into her flesh. She tried to scream, but all that came out was a terrified moan. Jayden stayed perched over her, the silhouetted brim of his cap the only visible shape.

'You said you would help me!' he yelled. 'My final project was crap and now I'm gonna fail!' He shook her roughly, rocking his weight onto her chest.

'That's your fault, you dickhead!' She pushed against him, trying to force him back. 'You're the one that should have done the work! I actually have a *job!*'

He squeezed her wrists, his claw-like fingers digging into her soft flesh. ‘You selfish cow! *You’re* the one who blamed your marks on not having help! *You’re* the one who complained about the rich kids having tutors while us poor kids get nothing!’ He paused, sucking in the edges of his anger. ‘Then you go off and *be* a tutor for some rich kid and your own brother gets *nothing!*’

She felt the warm drips of his tears falling on her neck. He breathed in a deep, shaky breath and climbed roughly off her, slumping in the driver’s seat. Jacinta warily sat up.

He turned on her again. ‘Now I find out you’re slutting it up for this rich little fucker? What’s *wrong* with you? Don’t you know he’s thirteen?’

‘How dare you?’ Jacinta growled. ‘Calling me a slut? I’m *not* sleeping with Henry!’

‘Dogga plays on Mattie’s footy team. He sent me the picture *and I bloody called Mattie to defend you*. Stupid me!’ He gulped in a loud sob. ‘He *told* me about seeing you guys together at that parade. He *told* me what you do when you sleep over there. He met that kid’s rich mates and they all know you’re doing it.’

Jayden broke down and cried. She reached out to him but he slapped her hand away. They sat in silence.

‘I’m moving out, Jay’.

He sniffed and rubbed his eyes. ‘Good. There’s no room for you anymore anyway.’

Jacinta’s scalp tingled. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘This whole place is fucked now.’ He turned to face her. A shaft of moonlight caught his thin, hollow cheek and he suddenly looked ten years older. Bounding, chubby, happy Jayden was gone. ‘And it’s because of *you*.’

‘Dad said it wasn’t! He said Mum blames me, but—’

‘Whatever. If you hadn’t drawn that stupid wishing well, we could still live here.’

‘What are you talking about?’

He wiped his nose on his baggy sleeve and jerked a thumb at the piles of dirt and garbage in their front yard. ‘They came to dig the hole and started pulling garbage out of it straight away. The council came and checked it out and it turns out the whole place, all Salisbury Hills, is built on a rubbish dump.’

‘We knew that. But they’ve covered it with tons of dirt and stuff, haven’t they?’

‘Nuh. They dug out the front yard too, just to check, and they reckon we’re all lucky our houses are still standing. There were all these news reporters here talking dodgy property developers and toxic poisoning. They reckon we’re all gonna have to move.’ He suddenly smashed the steering wheel with his fist, making Jacinta jump. ‘You and that stupid wishing well! If you weren’t so up yourself about the garden, none of this would have happened!’

‘Jayden, they would have—’

He smashed the steering wheel again. ‘*And* I’m gonna repeat Year Ten. Do you know how shit that is?’

‘Jayden, you should have—’

‘Shut *up!*’ He banged the steering wheel again and again, making the whole car shake. ‘I asked you so many times for help! And all you did was tell me I should bloody work harder!’ He balled his fist and raised it to her face, gasping through clenched teeth. ‘Well what the fuck would *you* know about that?’ And



with that, he crashed his fist into the dashboard. Pieces of plastic tumbled onto the floor of the Corolla and Jayden flung open the door and ran.

Jacinta listened to his footsteps fading into the distance and slowly lowered her arms from around her head.

## 31

Take 3 times a day with food.

**DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES** suddenly discontinue use except under the guidance of the prescribing psychiatric physician. May cause drowsiness, headaches, anxiety, itching and dryness.

The front door to Clara and Mattie's house was wide open and the lights were all on. The chemical burnt toast smell was sharp and strong in the cold evening air as Jacinta stepped onto the porch.

The place looked as though it had been freshly burgled. Clothes, books and papers were scattered everywhere. Nothing was where it should be. All of Clara and Mattie's possessions seemed to have jumped from their shelves and drawers and engaged in furious battle across tables, chairs and floors. The kitchen was strewn with smashed crockery, a boot-sized hole gaped in the plaster wall next to the bathroom and the bedroom door hung on one hinge like a loose tooth. Jacinta took out her phone. She tried not to look at the smear of blood on the small tiles of the laundry that led outside. Jacinta opened the back door and began to dial for the police.

And stopped.

Clara was sitting hunched on the crusty orange couches outside with Mattie crouched in front of her, hands wrapped around her wrists. She had a long cut on her forearm and Mattie's shirt was torn. When they looked up, Jacinta felt a physical blow from the pain across their faces.

*'You!'* they both cried.

‘Jacinta!’ yelled Mattie as Clara grabbed his arm and screamed. Jacinta didn’t wait to see what was happening. She had gotten lucky with her dad and Jayden. She didn’t need Mattie putting her in hospital. She bolted inside, slipping, tripping and sliding over five years of her friends’ relationship. She heard heavy feet pounding behind her and blindly sprinted through the house, kicking *Maxim* magazines and textbooks as she went.

She made it to the car, slamming her body into the driver’s door, cursing herself for not having her keys ready. The front door to the house crashed open and a dark shape came bowling out across the yard as her shaky hands finally found the key-hole.

She somehow opened the door and flung herself inside, looking up to see the porch light blotted out by the charging figure. She found the ignition and jammed in the key.

There was a small click, and then nothing.

The thin, frayed wire dropped from the steering wheel column.

Jacinta slammed her fist onto the door lock button, but was too late. The door wrenched open and Jacinta screamed as a powerful hand grabbed a fistful of her hair, dragged her head down and held it against the doorsill. She opened her eyes in time to see the door swinging closed on her head.

But there was no final thud.

The door hovered centimetres from her nose and slowly opened again.

‘You selfish, jealous bitch.’ Clara let Jacinta go with a jerk. Jacinta straightened up. Her neck muscles pulsed with pain where Clara had forced her head down. ‘Get out of the car.’

Jacinta did as she was told. Clara's broad-shouldered form was silhouetted against the single naked porch light shining from across the deserted street. The cold air was dense with acrid chemical fumes, cutting Jacinta's heaving lungs like razor blades. 'Clara, I saw Mattie with that girl.'

'She's from his scholarship group. They were all there together.'

'Oh.'

Clara's shoulders rose as she took a deep breath. 'Yes. "Oh". I know that now. I didn't when you texted me. I really thought my life was over then. I thought the same thing that happened to Mum was happening to me. Look where that got us.' She pointed at the destroyed house.

'I'm sorry, Clara.'

'Don't.' She held up a rigid hand. 'Don't call me that.'

'Sorry.'

Clara whipped out and grabbed Jacinta's hair again. The pain was like a hammer blow. Jacinta tried to struggle free, but Clara's arms were too strong. Jacinta suddenly had a powerful image of Clara at the cafe, lifting heavy plates and full drink trays, arm muscles working and hardening.

'I always thought you were my *friend*,' Clara hissed, shaking Jacinta's head. 'But you always thought I was a bimbo, didn't you?'

Jacinta sniffed and tried to look around. Surely someone would come. But even through her welling tears, she could see that Clara and Mattie's street was utterly deserted, populated by empty car parks and shut businesses.

'But when I started getting good marks for Year Twelve, you couldn't wait to blame anyone but yourself because you didn't get into Law. You don't even want to be a lawyer! You just want to be rich!'

Jacinta flopped like a helpless kitten in Clara's grasp. 'I ... I *did* get into law,' she managed to whisper. 'I got seventy-two.'

'Yeah, well ... you know what?' Clara let her go. For a moment Jacinta thought she saw her smile. 'I did too.'

Jacinta forgot the throbbing pain in her head. 'What?'

'I got seventy-two. Just enough for a fee-paying place. So I took it.'

A sleek, gleaming office rose up around a business-suited Clara. The brilliant blue of Sydney Harbour shone through floor-length windows.

'How?' whimpered Jacinta. 'How can you afford it?'

Clara glided around her leather-topped desk and reclined in her designer office chair. She put up her feet, crossing her thousand-dollar high heels next to her first class plane tickets and German car keys. 'Mattie just extended the loan we got to pay back our parents. He's got a guaranteed job. It was easy.'

'But he ... what if he ...'

'Jacinta, we're not *going* to break up.' Clara's sumptuous office expanded around her, oak panelling and rows of books and original artwork sprouted on the walls, an espresso machine nestled in an alcove next to a bespectacled secretary perched at a little desk. 'We *have* to make this work.' An entire law firm fluttered into existence around Clara, populated with chisel-jawed male colleagues, high-fashion female lawyers and kindly, handsome, grey-haired senior partners in suspenders and bow-ties. 'We need each other too much. We haven't got anyone else. I used to think I had you, but you're never around, you never call me.' The gleaming, glittering rails curved away from under Clara's feet, past the swanky meeting rooms and the buzzing reception, past Clara's shiny red sports car in its private space and the double-storey house she lived in with gorgeous, muscular,

mountain-building Mattie. On and on the rails rolled, back past the internships, the final exams, the years of study and waiting tables. All the way back past her polluted house and her debt-ridden boyfriend, and starting with her mum, sitting in a bank signing a loan agreement, bringing those straight rails to success into existence. The rails which were just as real as Clara's future high rise office and the pounding ache on the side of Jacinta's head. It wasn't fair.

'As soon as I stopped being ditzy old Clara and getting better marks because I actually worked hard, you didn't want anything to do with me. You're just a jealous bitch.'

'That's not true,' said Jacinta. 'I'm not jealous of *you*.'

'Rubbish, Jaz! You're jealous of me being with Mattie, you're jealous of me getting into law, you're jealous of anyone who gets anything that you want, but you would *die* before you lifted a finger to work for anything because you think the world owes you a living.'

Jacinta shook her head. '*That is not true.*'

Clara nodded melodramatically in response. 'Yuh-huh! It *is* true! You do as little as possible so that if it turns out, then oh-my-goodness, it was meant to be. But if anything goes wrong, then you're not the one to blame.'

Jacinta McDonald, QC, felt her blood rushing. Whoever this young upstart was, she was no match for the greatest lawyer in the country. Let the fireworks begin: '*I have worked and slaved my entire li—*'

Clara cut her off. 'When was the last time you worked more than a day on anything? Your whole family's the same: your brother's failing Year Ten because he's never done his own homework, your mum'd rather write letters than actually do her own garden and your dad just sits there and lets it all happen!'

‘Oh yeah?’ retorted J. McDonald, QC. ‘You’d be nowhere if your mum hadn’t paid for those tutors. And even then you didn’t get the marks, you had to get your boyfriend to pay your way into uni!’

Clara arched a fine, dark eyebrow. ‘That might be true, but at least I worked to get where I am. All your hard work got you an Arts degree and shagging a thirteen-year-old so you can hang around in his rich house and pretend it’s yours.’

*‘We are not sleeping together!’* Jacinta screamed in Clara’s face.

The slap echoed around the dark street and Jacinta staggered sideways with the impact. Clara stepped forward, pointing a sharp finger in Jacinta’s throbbing face.

‘I’m sick of you and your condescending, slack-arse bullshit. Don’t ever talk to me again.’

It took Jacinta fifteen minutes to repair the loose ignition wire with her shaking hands. When the Corolla’s motor finally turned over, it was the best sound she had heard all weekend. Just before she drove away, she caught a glimpse of Clara and Mattie through the front window. Mattie was stacking books and writing on a note pad. Clara was picking up clothes around him and folding them onto a pile on a chair, a heavy weight sagging around her shoulders.

## 32

# *Desiderio Espresso*

## *Ground to perfection*

The cool, dark tunnel of plane trees swallowed the Corolla whole as Jacinta neared Henry's house. Warm lights glowed from upstairs windows across the wide, soft lawns of Loxton Park. Lanterns perched on sandstone gate posts threw their dim yellow gleam on long silver cars parked on curved cobbled driveways. The scent of wet grass and wood smoke trickled through the cold night air.

She stopped the car outside the Claphams' twisty, tangled fence and took a deep breath. She had made it. She was home. The last few hours since she had left had almost been proof that she belonged nowhere else but here.

Her parents seeing that stupid fake picture and Jayden telling them every rumour going around.

Her dad kicking her out.

Her brother attacking her.

Her house sinking into a mountain of ancient garbage.

Clara turning psychopath.

It was time to escape. She gazed across at the Claphams' welcoming porch light and the faint, silver rails slowly extended out, down the slate steps, across the grass and up to the rusty door of the Corolla.

The door Clara had almost crushed her head in.



Jacinta opened it and walked towards the Claphams' house. She would be safe there. Her future was safe. She pulled the now-familiar hidden latch and leaned thankfully on the gate.

It stayed firmly shut.

She peered down in the dark. The pepperina trees blocked most of the porch light and the latch was hidden in shadow. She could feel it moving smoothly, but the gate was stuck. She shone her phone up under the sweep of metal that hid the opening mechanism. There was a small square panel beside the latch that she had never noticed. It had six numbered buttons and a little red light next to it, and she could just make out the words 'Magnatite Security'.

This was the magnetic lock Myra had mentioned. The one Henry knew how to program. It was obviously set to lock later in the evening and now Jacinta couldn't get in. Surely the lock wasn't to keep *her* out. No. She had to get inside and see the family. There were things to discuss. The straight rails gleamed as they stretched across the grass and under the gate to Jacinta's aching feet.

She just needed to get past the fence.

Jacinta slung her bag over her shoulder and looked for a foothold among the tangled metal. By day the fence resembled a running creek, the long green strips which made up its length curved and flowed and twirled around each other. But at night it was a black torrent of metal and shadow and Jacinta kept losing her footing on the slippery bars. After a lot of scrambling, she managed to clamber to the top and drape herself over the spindly prongs that were meant to be reeds. She paused there in a half push-up, half-straddle, panting with the effort and trying not to get skewered. *Almost there*. Unsteadily, she swung her leg over and began climbing down, but as she did, her handbag strap slipped and caught on the fence,

fastening her arm to her side. With her hand tied, she tipped forward, headfirst into space and swung down like a doorknocker. She tried to catch herself with her other hand, but it went straight through a gap in the fence and she crashed upside-down into the bars. The strap broke and she flipped over, landing bum-first on the ground.

Jacinta let out a whimper. It would have been funny, if it hadn't been so painful. Something felt broken, but she couldn't tell what. Her arm was still caught in the fence above her head and she slowly extracted it and got to her feet.

*Made it.*

Her forehead pounded with the stinging pain of the impact. She touched her bruised face and her fingertips came away with droplets of blood. Her arm ached as though it had been wrenched in its socket. It didn't matter. She was home. The rails rolled forward beneath her feet.

She held out her good arm and let the long tendrils of the pepperina tree tickle and sting the broken skin on her hands. The front light welcomed her as she limped up the wide slate steps onto the porch where she had stood six months ago, waiting to meet her new family.

She was going to make it.

She rang the bell and listened happily to the post office clock chimes from deep within the house. The hall light flicked on and Jacinta could see the antique mirror where Myra preened herself before going out. Soft footsteps clicked up the hall and the front door opened to the rest of Jacinta's life.

Myra stood in the doorway, tall and graceful, framed by the glow of the hall lamp. The slightest expression of disgust flickered across her perfect, heart-

shaped face. Jacinta self-consciously touched her lip. More blood. She needed a tissue.

‘Myra! I’m sorry to come to you like this but—’

‘*Get out,*’ Myra whispered.

Jacinta looked up and flinched. Myra’s eyes were huge with fury. ‘*We trusted you.*’ She took half a step onto the porch, hissing like a snake. ‘*We trusted you with Henry.*’

Jacinta shook her head. *Not this. Not here.* ‘The photo. Myra, it’s not real. It’s just a mistake!’

‘*Keep your voice down. I don’t want Henry to hear you.*’ She pointed a talon in Jacinta’s face, her voice a venomous whisper. ‘*You get out of here now. Don’t you ever come back. If I ever see you near Henry or this house again I will call the police. Got it?*’

Jacinta nodded, shaking.

‘*Go. Now.*’

Jacinta stumbled back across the lawn, Myra’s eyes drilling into her back. There was a faint ‘click’ as the gate lock released, and another locking it again after she stepped onto the street.

As she looked at the Claphams’ house for the last time, the porch light flicked off and the straight, silver rails disappeared into the inky dark.

## 33

### Krane-Billington Engineering Scholarships

**Clause 2d.** The administering academic advisor has the final approval on whether an under-performing student can continue to receive the scholarship.

**Clause 2e.** The administering academic advisor may, at his or her discretion, choose to increase the amount of scholarship received.

Terry perched sadly on the edge of the couch in his office while Myra answered the door. Next to his feet on the carpet was a stack of review articles requiring his feedback for a meeting the next day. He pushed them away with his toe. Not too far, or something else would creep in and take their place.

When Myra returned she was still upset. She sat next to him, leaning into his long, lanky body and not for the first time he wondered what a glamorous, young woman like her ever saw in a funny old grasshopper like him. Certainly there was the comfort his work brought them, but it can't have been easy to be married for fourteen years to a man who spent his whole life absorbed in work. Still, she had made their house a home and kept their small family going, all while completing her studies. She even insisted on working herself, even though, financially, she didn't have to. He respected her for that, where he knew other men wouldn't. He understood a few other board members' wives had jobs, but nothing important enough to discuss. He found himself looking at the stack of articles again and he made himself look away. They sat in silence for a few minutes, each thinking in their own ways about work, and about Henry.

'What makes *me* furious,' said Myra, at last, taking a small handkerchief from her blouse, 'was the fact that she was here, in our house, every week!'

‘The important thing is that Henry’s okay,’ said Terry.

‘And there she was all weekend! In the shack! Across the hall from him!’

‘We caught it before it went too far.’ Terry pushed his sturdy fingers through Myra’s thick auburn hair. A faint, floral tang sifted into the air and she relaxed. ‘He said that nothing happened and I believe him.’

‘Yes. Yes, I do too.’ Myra tilted her head back so that Terry’s strong engineer’s hands could massage her scalp all the way back.

‘It’s just proof of how young he really is,’ she murmured after a while.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Boys that age, at fourteen, even *I* know they’re going stir-crazy with hormones, thinking about sex all the time. But Henry’s not like that, is he? I mean, there she was, hanging around for six whole months, pretending to be his girlfriend and he actually seemed quite squeamish about the whole arrangement.’

‘He probably gets that from me.’

Myra looked up, confused.

‘I’ve always been shy of girls. Old bookworm Terry, you know that. He and I would both rather be designing and building something that works, that we understand, rather than attempting to brave the female race.’

Myra poked him playfully in his paunch. ‘It’s a good thing I nabbed you when I did then. Or you’d be married to some gold digger, I’d still be catching the bus to teach high school English and Henry wouldn’t exist at all!’

‘A good thing for all of us.’ Terry hugged her. ‘All the same, I’m glad we got that photo when we did. There’s been something odd about her for a while. I do believe she was edging towards asking to live here on the trip back this morning.’

Myra rolled her eyes. ‘I know. Over my dead body. Who sent the photo?’

‘He’s that scholarship student I was telling you about: Matt. The gifted one from up in the sticks. He knows Jacinta and knew that she was tutoring my son. I’m not sure how he came across the picture, but he said he had to let me know straight away.’

‘Good for him.’ Myra nodded thoughtfully. ‘Is there some way we can thank him?’

‘I’ve thanked him personally, but it won’t be hard to put him forward for a scholarship upgrade in the mid-year review. The boy works like mad; harder than anyone else in the group.’

‘He deserves it.’

Somehow the stack of articles had ended up resting against Terry’s foot again. There was no ignoring them. One more go at diversion before he got back to work. ‘Who was at the door?’

‘No one. Just someone wanting money.’ She didn’t elaborate and so he stroked her hair again, and they sat together in silence. In Terry’s mind, he was already back at his desk, skimming the articles and drafting a report. In Myra’s she was catching a bus to a high school far up in those sticks, late-twenties career claustrophobia squeezing in at her from all sides.

‘Do you think he’ll be okay without a tutor? Should I have taken such a big load this year, just when he’s going to high school?’

‘Myra, he’s very intelligent. He’ll be just fine. It’s like he said: he’s got to grow up and do it on his own.’

# 34

## LashuCo Transit

*All over the city  
We'll get you there!*

Henry waited alone under the jacaranda tree after school. He patiently watched Peter, Hunter and Caleb sauntering across the grounds towards him, taking their time. The alphas of the group did not like to be summoned, even for what Henry had promised to be the juiciest addition to The Wall yet. He hoped they wouldn't arrive too late.

'Henners.' Peter nodded as they arrived. The high fives and thumb-wrestle handshakes were long-gone. 'What have you got for us?'

'It better be good.' Hunter's skepticism dripped with malice.

'Couldn't you just wireless me?' whinged Caleb. 'Why do we have to meet here?'

'I guess I just wanted you guys to be the first to see. It's pretty big.' Henry tried not to overplay his pride. 'It took me a while to cut together, but, check *this out*.' He held out his phone to Peter and the three young men crowded around. Music started playing and Peter laughed at the opening title sequence: the words "Black Male Productions" in whooshing red letters. The video began with a series of quick-fire clips of Hunter, Peter and Caleb as Year Eights, vandalising the school and assaulting people. Caleb laughed, recognising himself. The following clips were longer and showed the boys growing older, their pranks becoming more illegal. Caleb stopped laughing when the video of himself hiding from Bonnie's mother at Peter's party flickered across the screen. It was followed in

quick succession by scrolling shots of the smuttiest videos Henry had been able to bear looking at. The music rose to a crescendo and the words ‘**But where is Hunter?**’ flashed on the screen and froze as the music faded and the video stopped.

The three boys turned on him, faces dark as murder.

‘Did you like my trailer?’ asked Henry innocently.

Hunter grabbed a fistful of Henry’s school jumper. ‘Where the *fuck* did you get those?’

Henry’s voice wobbled, but he wanted to stick to his script. ‘It took me ages to edit. And obviously that’s not the full thing. All together, it’s like a feature-length film! Sort of like a documentary of the group growing up.’

‘Where’s you in it?’ Caleb asked, still genuinely puzzled. ‘Where’s you and that chick?’

‘I’m not in it,’ answered Henry from behind his bunched up uniform. ‘I’m not going to be. I didn’t film anything. I don’t want to be in the group anymore.’

Hunter slammed Henry against the tree. ‘You tell me how the fuck you got those videos!’ Peter looked around nervously and muttered to Hunter to take it easy.

Henry took a deep breath. He pictured his script on a neat white sheet of paper. Hunter was interrupting. He referred to his mental notes on interruptions and stared Hunter square in the eye. ‘You can let go of me now.’ Hunter didn’t move. ‘NOW!’ shouted Henry. Hunter jumped back, staggering into Caleb and Peter.

‘How did you rip that video?’ Hunter was almost hyperventilating. ‘It’s uncrackable! I know it is!’



Now it was Peter's turn to grab Hunter by the shirt. 'He got that off *The Wall*? How? You said it was impossible! If that gets out, we're all expelled! Do you know what my Dad'll do?'

Henry wanted to watch the melodrama unfold, but he had a schedule to keep. 'I'll tell you. Pass me my phone.'

Hunter and Peter stopped squabbling and Peter handed it over as though he would have preferred to stomp it under his shoe. 'Like this.' Henry clicked on the video camera. 'I didn't have to crack your website. I just had to record every video off the screen with my phone. The interlacing is a bit funny, but you can still see what's going on, and that's the important bit, right?' He hadn't expected an answer and didn't get one. He continued. 'There is a much longer video, with everything included, but I'm not going to show anyone. Yet.'

'You got that right,' said Hunter and he suddenly slapped Henry's phone to the ground. It struck a rock and the screen cracked. Peter and Caleb stared, backing away. 'Shit, Hunter ...'

'Whoops.' Hunter smiled and drove the heel of his shoe into the phone. He did it over and over until it was just mangled plastic and glass.

Henry stared at the mess under Hunter's shoe. That wasn't on his plan. 'Uh-oh.'

Hunter took this for fear and beckoned to Henry. 'Come on, Pimpo. We're going to hang out at your house now. Watch you delete everything.'

Henry shook his head. 'No, there's no time!'

'No time for what?'

Suddenly three separate message sounds pinged in three separate pockets. Hunter, Peter and Caleb looked confused, then pale. Peter scrabbled for his

phone, almost in tears. It was Hunter who got his out first, his sharky face a fishy grey. He glanced at Henry in a panic as he read the message.

‘You didn’t ...’

“‘Hi guys’,’ read Hunter aloud, voice shaking. ‘ ‘I’m starting a video blog. Check out my first effort ...’”‘ He thumbed the video file. The same music for the trailer began playing and Hunter held his hand to his mouth.

‘This isn’t the same video ...’ Caleb sounded more puzzled than ever.

‘This is just you waving at the camera ...’

‘Where’s the other video?’ Peter looked worriedly at the pile of phone pieces on the ground.

‘It’s on my server. At home.’

At that, Hunter grabbed Henry by the arm and began dragging him towards the car park. His anger gave him strength and even when Henry tripped, Hunter still pulled him along. Peter and Caleb jogged behind him, bleating questions.

‘What are you doing? A teacher will come!’

Hunter turned on them just before the car park. ‘Do you guys want to get expelled? We’ve got to go to his house and delete those fucking videos!’

‘It’s too late,’ murmured Henry. No one heard.

‘Go get your car, Peter. I’ll stay here and make sure he doesn’t run off.’

Hunter turned on Henry as Peter jogged off. ‘We’re coming to your house and I’m borrowing your computer. You fucked with the wrong guy, Clappo.’

This *was* in Henry’s plan. He shook his head. ‘It’s too late. There won’t be time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I had my phone set up so that I could stop the next video sending if you guys agreed to leave me alone. Now you’ve smashed it.’

‘What next video? The one with everything in it?’ Caleb was finally catching on. Henry nodded.

‘When is it sending?’ Hunter’s panic returned.

Henry looked at his watch. ‘In about five minutes, if I don’t get to the internet.’

‘Use your laptop!’

‘I left it at home. Just in case you tried to do something to it.’

‘Caleb! Give him yours!’ Hunter was shouting now.

Caleb winced. ‘Battery’s flat.’

‘Mine’s all the way in my locker! Shit! Peter!’

Peter roared up in the beautiful grey sports car that Henry had admired on his first day. With Peter at the wheel, it just seemed like a toy now. Hunter bounded for the passenger door. ‘Give him your laptop! Give him your laptop!’

Peter began rustling in his bag, but Hunter yanked it through the open window and poured its contents onto the roof of the car. Books and pens cascaded onto the ground and Hunter held up Peter’s shiny aluminium laptop. ‘Here!’ He almost slammed it on the bonnet of Peter’s car and opened it roughly. ‘Clappo! Get here! How long do we have?’

‘About four minutes,’ replied Henry.

‘You scratched my car!’ shouted Peter, getting out.

‘Fuck your car!’ hissed Hunter. ‘If this little shit doesn’t get online in the next four minutes, we’re all getting expelled! Henry! Get here now or I’ll smash you!’

Henry folded his arms. This was in his plan too. He surreptitiously checked his watch. ‘First, I want some things. I need to install some software on Peter’s computer, so you’ve got about two minutes to agree.’

Hunter lunged, hands reaching for Henry’s throat, but Peter and Caleb held him back.

‘What?’ said Peter, after threatening Hunter with a menacing look and a clenched fist. ‘What do you want?’

‘I don’t like hanging around your group. I want out. I want to be left alone. I want everyone to be left alone. Have your parties or whatever, but if you bully me or anyone I make friends with, then I’m sending that video to the group. And maybe the police.’

Hunter bunched and unbunched his fists. ‘I’ll get it,’ he growled. ‘I can find out where you keep it, what copies you’ve made, everything. I’ll get it.’

Henry shook his head. ‘That’s what I’m talking about. If you talk to me like that, or steal my computer, or anything nasty, then I’m sending the video.’

Peter yanked Hunter back by the collar. ‘Don’t you fucking touch him. Henry, can you *please* stop it from sending? Do whatever you got to do. I promise. Whatever you want. It isn’t worth it. *Please*.’

Henry checked his watch. Two minutes to go. He crouched at Peter’s computer. Within a minute, he had installed his remote software. In another thirty seconds he had entered the first password. He looked up at the huge boys who had towered over him on his first day. They were giants then, ogres who lorded their power over him, over everyone. Now they were just as he had been: scared, helpless teenagers whose lives could be ruined if Henry didn’t enter the second password within the next fifteen seconds.

‘So, Peter, Caleb. You’ll make sure that nothing bad happens to me, right?’

‘Right.’ Peter held out his big, sinewy hand. It was no thumb-hooking, hand-slapping, finger-clicking handshake. He just looked Henry in the eye and nodded. ‘Henry. Please.’

Henry typed in the second password. The screen popped up a message:

**Sending Cancelled**

The boys puffed their cheeks with relief. Henry uninstalled the program and wiped all the trace logs to be safe from Hunter. He handed the computer to Peter, who took it back and grimaced at the thin, white scratch on his car bonnet.

‘See you guys tomorrow then.’

No one said a word and Henry walked away, towards the school gate. When he looked back, the three were still standing around Peter’s car. Peter was talking to Hunter, prodding him in the chest.

‘Hunter!’ called Henry. Even over the distance, Henry could feel the hate radiating from Hunter’s deep black eyes. ‘Don’t forget to buy me a new phone!’

Henry stepped onto the bus, fumbled out his student card and gave the money to the driver. The bus pulled away and Henry grabbed a pole to steady himself. He grinned, enjoying the surge of movement as the bus built up speed. This wasn’t so hard. And, in ten minutes, he’d be at the end of his street, walking home alone for the first time ever.

## 35

# UniCaf

Now open from 7:30am!  
Get your morning fix!

Pale light crept across the Corolla's ceiling. Morning. Jacinta sat up. Through the fogged up windows she could make out a couple of other cars already parked at uni. Her joints ached with cold and her body felt covered with hard bruises. Her fingers were cramped from nervously gripping her phone all night. She tried to shake the pins and needles from her legs and kicked a half-crumpled water bottle. There was still a mouthful at the bottom.

*At least that's something,* she thought, tipping it down her dry throat.

*Eugh. Plastic.*

The rear vision mirror showed a purple egg on her forehead and a dark ring of dried blood around her nostril. She plucked her fringe over the egg and started to scrape away the gritty flakes of blood from around her nose. She almost did herself a fresh injury when someone suddenly knocked on the window.

Craig, the bug-eyed English tutor, peered through the condensation as though the Corolla was a zoo exhibit. Jacinta shoved away the old towel she had been using as a blanket and wound down the window. Cool air flowed into the stuffy car, carrying the faint smell of exhaust and Craig's aftershave. She shivered.

'Handing in your essay?'

The essay. Just when it couldn't get any worse. She shook her head glumly.

'Made a good start?'

She shook her head again. Craig hitched up his laptop bag and made a 'tsk' sound. He looked at her for a moment and then asked 'Jacinta, did you sleep in this car last night?'

Shame filled her chest. She nodded and wiped her nose on her sleeve. He checked his watch and made another 'tsk' sound.

'All right. Come on. Come with me.'

Morning sun washed over the noisy cafeteria like a gleaming waterfall. Craig led Jacinta to a corner table and bought her a toasted cheese sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper and a strong coffee in a black cardboard cup. He sat patiently while she gobbled down the sandwich and gulped the coffee as though a vacuum had suddenly opened up inside her.

'Is everything okay?'

She shook her head and took another gulp of coffee, warmth pouring into that cold space inside. He waited for her to go on. Defiantly, she took another bite of toasted sandwich.

'You know, if you need someone to talk to, there's a counselling service on campus. They have information about emergency accommodation as well.'

Jacinta swallowed. 'I need to get a distinction average for the rest of year so I can get into Law. And that's probably the least of my problems.'

Craig nodded. 'Well, that seems achievable.'

Jacinta frowned at him over the white plastic lid of her coffee. He had never missed an opportunity to point out her failings, but he had never been untruthful either.

‘But I’ve already bombed a couple of assignments.’

He shrugged. ‘I know. I marked them.’

‘But that means my average drops.’ She gripped her coffee cup. ‘I need distinctions to get into Law! How can I get the grades now?’ The lid popped off and coffee slopped over her fingers.

Craig smiled and passed her a serviette. He seemed to think it was all quite amusing. ‘You’re smart. Just do the work!’

‘But I *do*.’ She put down her dripping cup, ready to explain exactly how hard she worked, but his laughter cut her off.

‘No, you don’t, actually.’ He seemed to think that buying her breakfast gave him the right to tell her off. She opened her mouth to defend herself, but he cut her off again. ‘You’re a good writer, you can string an argument together, you’ve got a good imagination. You’re obviously fairly smart.’ Jacinta looked at the table. This was the weirdest telling off she’d ever had. He continued: ‘But it’s also pretty clear that you don’t try too hard. It’s always obvious when intelligent people don’t try.’

Sun flooded into the cafeteria. All around them people were drinking coffee and moving forward into the day. Clara and Mattie would be on their way to class. Her mum would be on the morning round. Her dad would have already been on site for an hour. Even Jayden would be trudging off to school, his scruffy exercise book filled with whatever he had managed to stick in it over the weekend



without Jacinta's help. Jacinta took another sip of her charity coffee. She didn't even have any contact hours on Monday. Craig stood up and gathered his things.

'I've got to get some things done before class. Have a good think about going to the counsellors.'

'I will. Thanks for the coffee,' she said.

He nodded. 'Two things before I go. One: your essay was due last Friday. It's Monday now. You can have an extension until Wednesday. Two: you can have an extension until *Friday* if you can give me a satisfactory answer to an important question.'

Jacinta raised her eyebrows. 'What is it?'

'Why do you want to study Law?'

She rolled her eyes. 'To be a lawyer.'

'And why do you want to be a lawyer?'

Sydney skyline. Late nights. Fancy cars. Family on the phone. Beautiful clothes. Long hours. Big house. No friends. Glamour. Big empty office. Money. Power. Study study study.

Jacinta was still thinking of an answer as Craig hitched his bag over his shoulder. 'Five o'clock Wednesday, then?'

She drained her coffee and watched his head bob along above the crowd as he left. She could get the book from the library and work on the essay in the computer suite. Then she would go home to Salisbury Hills. Or whatever was left of it.

She walked out into the blazing morning sun.



**Too high, too low, just right: Defining  
Australian young adult literature through  
metaphors of social class**



To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence. And in childhood and adolescence they are, in moderation, healthy symptoms. Young things ought to want to grow. But to carry on into middle life or even into early manhood this concern about being adult is a mark of really arrested development. When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.

C.S. Lewis (1966, p. 25)

## Introduction

The research for this exegesis began as a way to develop an Australian young adult novel that was specifically about social class. There is very little critical research on class in Australian young adult literature and this thesis will address this gap in the knowledge through its two components: the novel *Photo Finish* and the exegesis *Too high, too low, just right: Defining Australian young adult literature through metaphors of social class*. The exegesis will demonstrate how the Australian young adult novel's depictions of social class can be directly compared to the way in which it presents all power relations in its stories. As these stories are based around growth, development and the attainment of power, the findings of this exegesis provide an important tool for defining the literature itself.

*Photo Finish* and the exegesis developed side-by-side, each informing the other. *Photo Finish* tells a story about growing up and gaining power, and the exegesis will demonstrate how these aspects are used in many Australian young adult novels by charting the development of both the novel and the research itself. The exegesis follows a progressive structure and is arranged into five chapters, each building upon the previous to further refine a definition of Australian young adult literature. This discussion is pyramidal in structure, with the first chapter forming a broad base upon which each subsequent chapter builds and narrows its scope. The final chapter forms the functional pinnacle of the argument and demonstrates how the research was integral to the development and completion of both the creative work and the exegesis' conclusions regarding the use of social class as a metaphorical tool for defining Australian young adult literature.

**Chapter 1 – Young adult literature** breaks down the literature into its component parts. A historical study of this still-emerging category reveals that it is as much a marketing tool as it is a specific area of literature. The category is a broad church and the definitive boundaries of content are as amorphous as those attempting to corral the intended readership. Because much of the debate on young adult literature concerns itself with its suitability for the intended audience, it is the realistic portrayals of young adult life that receive the most attention. Therefore, the majority of texts examined here fall into the category of social realism. By examining these sources, this exegesis attempts produce a working definition of young adult literature. In doing so, this chapter identifies two opposing critical positions on the way young adult literature has the potential to

affect its intended readership. One position frames its arguments with the assumption that young readers can come to some type of indistinct harm from reading certain kinds of young adult books. The other assumes a critical and analytical readership who are capable of processing and learning from the books they read. This thesis agrees with the latter, and will focus on analysing the literature, rather than making generalisations about those who consume it.

**Chapter 2 – Young adult literature in Australia** narrows down the frame of reference to a national one in order to place some practical boundaries on the research. While this is partly to reduce the exegetical scope to a more manageable size, Australian young adult literature has its own distinct characteristics and the critical discourse on the subject reflects this individuality.

As long as young adult literature has existed, so too has the debate about the suitability of its subject matter for its intended audience. In Australia during the 1990s, it was given particular media attention because a perception emerged that it unduly focused on subjects that were somehow detrimental to its young readers. In particular, the issue of ‘hope’ was commonly cited as an essential ingredient lacking from this nascent genre (Legge, 1997, p. 13). Chapter 2 outlines the development of the literature in Australia and explores how its negative depiction in the Australian media formed part of the impetus for three major studies which sought to critically analyse both the literature and the discourse surrounding it.

Australian young adult authors tend to set their novels in Australia (Comber and Nixon, 2000, p. 187). Chapter 2 examines the city/country binary explored by

much of the critical discourse on landscape, as well as analysing the importance of a third place relevant to much contemporary fiction for young people: the suburbs. Suburbia's location as an 'in between' space – not quite city, not quite country – makes it the ideal metaphorical setting for young adult literature because the protagonists themselves occupy this very position (Pennell, 1997, p. 42). They are also 'in between'; not quite a child and not quite adult.

The importance of setting is explored a step further in **Chapter 3 – Class in Australian young adult literature**. Setting can be defined not only by geological location, but also by social class. Two characters may occupy the same landscape, be it a country town or the suburb of a capital city, but it is their class location which will dictate the path and outcome of their story.

Much of the research concerning class and Australian literature pertains to the place and function of artistic writing within social class structures, rather than representations of class within any specific genre. There is a gap concerning discussions of class representation in Australian young adult literature. This exegesis will address that gap and use its findings about class to further clarify the definition of Australian young adult literature. Chapter 3 examines the boundaries of this gap. It addresses the problems of defining social class in a way that is useful to Australian young adult literature and also suitable for an exegesis-length analysis. The solution was to simplify the discussion of social class by dividing it into the three categories utilised by the small amount of literature on the subject: 'working class', 'middle class' and 'upper class'.



As we shall see in **Chapter 4 – Class as a metaphor for power in Australian young adult literature**, this simplification of social class into three strata did not limit the depth of this thesis' analysis. Rather, it was this three-tiered structure which lent itself to the development of a metaphor applicable to Australian young adult novels. This metaphor ultimately serves to describe not only the power relations within the literature, but the journeys of development that define their narrative structure. Accordingly, Chapter 4 is divided into two sections: **Very Classy: Definitions of social class in Australian young adult literature and Movement**. **Very Classy** uses examples from young adult novels and the academic discourse to identify and define each of the three social class strata described in the previous chapter. This chapter goes on to demonstrate how the characteristics that define each of the three social class strata can be applied to other hierarchical power structures present in many young adult stories. This comparison can be made because each stratum is represented in the same way. Put simply: the upper stratum – those of higher social class or who possess more power – tend to be represented negatively, while those of lower standing receive more positive representations. Also common to both social class and comparable power structures is the way in which the novels examined represent characters moving between each level. The section on **Movement** discusses how this transition occurs, either up a level or down, and how this is either positive or negative, with down generally being 'good' and up 'bad'. However, this analysis identifies a paradox in the literature. When protagonists grow and develop, they take on responsibility and power, and, as stated above, characters who gain power move 'up', attracting a negative depiction. How are young adult protagonists to complete their narrative journey without becoming 'bad'? This thesis will show

how young adult protagonists both gain power and maintain a positive representation throughout their stories: by moving ‘up slowly’. This chapter presents this slow, upward method of inter-class, inter-strata travel as the defining characteristic of Australian young adult literature. It describes the way in which young adult characters gain both individual power and the knowledge to use it responsibly.

**Chapter 5 – Writing *Photo Finish*: a narrative journey into the production of a young adult novel** discusses how the creative work, *Photo Finish*, was written by integrating the research on class representation and young adult literature set out in this exegesis. In order to interrogate how the developmental structure of the Australian young adult novel is based around growth and development, *Photo Finish* was deliberately conceived lacking those elements in its protagonists, thirteen-year-old Henry and eighteen-year-old Jacinta. By placing Henry and Jacinta at opposing ends of the developmental spectrum in terms of age and class, the novel was able to explore the aspects of power and class addressed by this thesis. This chapter describes how the novel developed around two young adult characters whose narrative paths were written to specifically challenge the literature’s common developmental narratives. This incorporates a discussion of how the creative work was completed by adhering to this thesis’ findings regarding class representation and its metaphorical applications in Australian young adult literature.

## Chapter 1 – Young adult literature

### Introduction

Young adult literature is very much like the young adults who populate its pages. It is as difficult to definitively separate from children's literature, with which it is often grouped, as it is from adult literature, towards which it is always facing. Definition is problematic because the term 'young adult' itself is problematic. It is not a legal term (like 'adult' or 'minor'), nor is it simply another word for 'teenager' – itself a marketing term 'coined by Madison Avenue in 1941' (Quart, 2003, p. xvi).

The critical literature is just as confused, with researchers assigning the term 'young adult' a range of meanings. '[It is] sometimes a synonym for teenage, sometimes implying a subset somewhere between the senior teenager and the junior adult, and sometimes referring to a new kind of financially dependent adult infantilised by economic rationalism' (Scutter, 1999a, p. 280). American author and literary historian Marc Aronson demonstrates young adult literature's resistance to definition by describing it as 'an agglomeration of instabilities ... [which require] us, simultaneously, to define three inherently unstable terms: what are young adults, what is literature, and what is the literature that has some special link to those readers' (Aronson, 2001, p. 31-32).

In order to draw together these instabilities into a useful entity, it may prove helpful to imagine young adult literature as a lanky youth attending a dinner party

at which children are welcomed, but sat to one side at their own table.

Researchers, publishers and authors are often inclined to place young adult literature at the children's table, among the plastic crockery and fart games. There it sits uncomfortably among its companions, children's literature and teenage literature, its knees and elbows jutting out at odd angles. It might seem that our young adult would be more comfortable at the adults' table with the real cutlery, the leg-room and permission to try the wine. However, the conversation there will be just as exclusive. Young adult literature needs its own table and its own company. While it may bear comparisons with and share the characteristics of literature specifically aimed at other age groups, it is distinct enough to require its own definition and set of characteristics. Contemporary research points towards a set of features which, while not unique to young adult literature, are certainly instructive in creating a methodological space within which its analysis can take place.

## History

In the 1920s and 1930s most publishers carried books for younger people alongside their adult works; this section of the market was referred to as 'juvenile' (Donelson and Nilsen, 1989, p.13). The emergence of this juvenile market corresponded roughly with the extension of adolescence as a time during which one remained in education and so was dependent on one's parents for a longer period (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p.5).

The emergence of a useful term for describing this section of the literature came about partly as a need to further define the market for ‘youth’ literature and partly as ‘a recognition that the habit of calling the fiction for that part of the population between zero years and twenty, children’s literature, clouded more issues than it illuminated’ (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 14). Young adult literature as it might currently be understood can be traced to the publication of a number of novels in the American market in the late 1960s. Kenneth Donelson and Aileen Pace Nilsen’s 1989 study *Literature for today’s young adults* is a very well-cited source in this regard. They refer to the development of what can still be identified as young adult writing as ‘the new realism’ (p. 114) and name S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) as the first work published in this new style. Much of the literature devoted to tracing the development of young adult literature agrees with this statement (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 5; Owen, 2003; FitzGerald, 2004, p. 68; Heuschele, 2007, p. 11).

While it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to further analyse young adult literature’s origins, it is important at this point to mention the much earlier novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951). Originally written for adults, it was immensely popular with young people and it contained many of the elements of a young adult text: it was written from the perspective of a teenager and dealt with a range of confronting issues not previously imagined to be suitable for a young audience (Heuschele, 2007, p. 10; Scutter, 1999, p. 2). While *The Catcher in the Rye* did precede the rapid emergence and popularity of Donelson and Nilsen’s ‘new realism’, the fact that it stood alone for so long weakens the case for it to be

referred to as the beginning of a genre and it can be thought of as an anachronous anomaly.

Young adult literature is often celebrated for its broad scope and ability to tackle almost any topic. Indeed, it is hailed as a pioneering literature, one which does not just explore subjects of relevance only to teenagers. Boyd Tonkin writes of this scope:

More remarkable than the upfront passions and terrors is its ability to win and keep readers with an amazingly wide range of forms and genres – from the grittiest kinds of “dirty realism” through every possible brand of fable and fantasy. Alongside its exploits and experiments, much of mainstream adult writing looks stuck in a drearily naturalistic backwater. (Tonkin, 2005, p. 15)

Attempting to restrict the young adult novel to a selection of themes or subjects may prove futile. Young adult literature is a ‘genre full of genres’ (Jones, 2000, p. 24) and, like children’s literature, it is ‘a field which takes in every genre of writing’ (Hunt, 1991, p. 5) and its pioneering nature resists definition by any one aspect. There are some features, however, which can assist in identifying a young adult novel. For the purposes of this exegesis, the following characteristics will serve as the common identifiers for the novels examined and also of the creative component to this thesis, *Photo Finish*.

### Intended readership: who are young adults?

Before attempting to answer this question, it must first be acknowledged that young adult literature is not produced for a singular type of reader. Authors are not only writing for the young people who are meant to enjoy the book. Authors and publishers are all too aware of the ‘ “schizophrenic” nature of its readership’ (Sheahan-Bright, 1997, p. 6) and that texts must pass the scrutiny of parents, teachers and librarians. Robyn Sheahan-Bright demonstrates how young adult texts must appeal to these distinct groups if they are to be successful, or even published in the first place. She identifies the three approaches which an author of young adult fiction must undertake if they are to appeal to the above groups:

- The *protective* approach, in order to appeal to and even appease parents;
- The *didactic* approach, in order to appeal to teachers and librarians, who can often be responsible for a large market share; and
- The *empathetic* approach, which must, of course, appeal to teenaged readers themselves and encourage a base demand for the book. (Sheahan-Bright, 1997, p. 6)

These three approaches will be utilised in the subsequent section on the need to protect young readers: **Won’t somebody *please* think of the children?**

To build on the above point about authorship, most books for young people are almost always written *for* their intended readership and almost never *by* them.

Perry Nodelman explains this gap in his discussion about reader response in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*.

Whether baby books or young adult novels, what all the different kinds of texts described as children's literature have in common is the gulf between their writers and their intended readers. They are written by adults for people younger than themselves. (Nodelman, 1996, p. 15)

Young adult novels have occasionally blurred this boundary. Notable exceptions include: Sonya Hartnett, whose first novel *Trouble All The Way* (1984) was published when Hartnett was fifteen; Alexandra Adornetto, whose novel *The Shadow Thief* (2007) came out when she was fourteen, with two sequels following in 2008 and 2009; and Steph Bowe, whose writing career began with *Girl Saves Boy* (2010) at age sixteen.

To take one further step in discussing the intended readership of young adult fiction, there is the concept of the crossover novel. This phenomenon was popularly recognised at the beginning of the twenty-first century as 'the adult reader choosing to read children's fiction, not (or not only) for a child's sake, but her- or himself' (Falconer, 2009, p. 7). The emergence of this new readership of books for young people was not without its detractors. Jonathan Myerson wrote of *Harry Potter's* older readers: '[t]o read a children's book is not escapism – it's evasion, it's retreat, it's surrender' (Myerson, 2001, p. 10). However, the discourse around crossover fiction tends to focus more on its dual readership and 'the amorphous nature of the corpus of literature ... in view' (Falconer, 2009, p.



27). As such, it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to incorporate a proper analysis of crossover fiction into a definition of young adults or young adult fiction.

Despite these difficulties, a common starting point for critics discussing young adult literature is some attempt at definition. However, this is often accompanied by the recognition that any definitive attempt to declaim young adult literature's boundaries with any exactitude is an ultimately fruitless exercise. When definitions appear, they are usually qualified and framed as approximations and left deliberately imprecise. The discourse on definition throughout the critical literature almost always reflects the dual concerns of young adult literature in general: when a critic is discussing young adult literature, they must analyse both its content and its intended audience. Who young adult literature is for is often considered to be just as important as what it is about. Kathryn James provides an example of the former with her definition framed around intended audience (who it is for). She refers to young adult novels as 'those fictive texts which have an implied teenage audience; that is, books which either feature protagonists of secondary school age ... or ... would be read by those in this age group' (James, 2009, p. 5). On the other hand, Marc Aronson emphasises the use of content analysis, arguing that young adult novels should be treated specifically as art works and that they can be viewed as such and examined for form and success of endeavour. He defines the literature through its content thus: 'YA novels seek to capture the intensity of adolescence, where truth is a pure value, exposure and secrecy are constant themes, and readers feel alienation with first force' (Aronson, 2001, p. 20). Despite the existence of these two modes of definition, many critics

writing about young adult literature will work using its intended audience as the primary consideration of the two. Interestingly, when a critic sets out to examine young adult literature or an aspect of it, it is difficult to argue that they are incorrect in their selection of texts. Once a text has been anointed as ‘young adult’, it is usually a label that sticks.

In their book *A Path to Peace: Violence in Literature for Young People* (1994), Nimon and Foster adopt a ‘pragmatic, rather than theoretical approach’ (Nimon and Foster, 1994, p. x). They begin their study by stating their intention to use ‘informed community judgment as a guide’ (p. x) and they defer to the specific, practical experience of publishers, teachers, reviewers and librarians in helping them decide which books are young adult literature and which are not. This practical approach may not be exacting enough, particularly for shorter critical texts where definition is not the primary focus, and many critics go so far as to set out an age range. Nadia Wheatley observed that the goalposts for the young adult have been placed as wide as the ages of nine and thirty, but for most publishers and librarians the range is between twelve and twenty (Wheatley, 1994, p. 11). It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to speculate whether Wheatley, Nimon and Foster consulted the same publishers and librarians in reaching their definitions. Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni identify the typical young adult reader as being ‘between the ages of 12 and 20’ (Bean and Moni, 2003, p. 638). Mary Owen (2003) and Kathryn James (2009, p. 5) narrow this down to between twelve to eighteen. The 2012 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature agree with this range (Arts SA, 2011), and while the Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) does not stipulate a specific age range, its ‘Older readers’ category, traditionally

the purvey of young adult literature, asks for books which are ‘appropriate in style and content for readers in their secondary years of schooling’ who possess ‘a degree of maturity to appreciate the topics, themes and scope of emotional involvement’ (Children's Book Council of Australia, 2013a). Young adult specialist librarian, Deborah Taylor, divides the cohort into two further groups: eleven to fourteen and fourteen to eighteen (quoted in Aronson, 2001, p. 9). Mary Owen cites this age as ‘the group for whom [young adult literature] is written and to which it has its greatest appeal’ (Owen, 2003). As this stage in life is one best defined by change, it may serve more useful, rather than setting out ages as the above critics have done, to identify the readership by those very changes.

Marc Aronson’s method of defining young adult literature by content is again a useful starting point. He discusses the young adult novel in terms of a ‘coming-of-age’ text, and instead of limiting his definition of the young adult reader to a specific age range, he identifies this as the time ‘when children begin to sense the layers of human existence, experience the desires, and work out the ideals that will add depth to their character and provide them with a road map on their journey’ (Aronson, 1997, p. 1418).

### **Not a teenage novel**

This ‘looking forward’ characteristic can be utilised to gain a clearer definition of the young adult novel. At this point it becomes necessary to differentiate it from what shall be referred to as the ‘teenage’ novel. A weakness in the critical literature is that the two terms ‘young adult’ and ‘teenage’ are sometimes

interchangeable, one referring to the other. Kathryn James states that the term ‘adolescent’ is more frequently used in the field of psychology, while ‘young adult’ is more often employed by the literary community. James avoids excluding either term by using each interchangeably, as well as using the term ‘children’s literature’ ‘to refer to texts produced for audiences aged between infancy and late adolescence’ (James, 2009, p.179). Books labelled ‘young adult’ often contain and are read by teenagers (Nieuwenhuizen, 1992, 1995). Likewise, the characters in and readers of teenage novels can also be described as young adults and any difference between the two might seem insignificant. However, their separation is important to arriving at this thesis’ definition of young adult literature. Novels that fall into the ‘teenage’ category seldom depict in any great detail the characters’ journey towards the responsibilities and freedom juxtaposed in adult life. Paul Jennings’ books are fine examples of young characters (often teenaged, but not exclusively aged thirteen to nineteen) focusing on ‘what matters most to average children in the developed world — the humiliations and terrors that confront them at home and at school, the inevitable trials of puberty’ (Kroll, 2002, p.277).

### **Not adult either**

If young adult fiction is to be separated from its younger, less experienced sibling, teenage fiction, then it would be useful for this exegesis to ensure that it is also distinguished from what shall be described as ‘adult fiction’. Given the exegetical scope of this thesis, ‘adult fiction’ will be defined only by what distinguishes it from young adult literature, for it is also ‘a genre full of genres’ (Jones, 2000, p.

24). The fine line between young adult and adult literature is evident in the ease with which one can be marketed as the other. It is at this upper-age end of the market (Deborah Taylor's fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds) that the line is at its most blurred and where controversy exists over where a text ceases to be 'young adult' and is simply 'adult'. Books which straddle the young adult/adult marketing fence include Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) and Karen Foxlee's *The anatomy of wings* (2010). As of December 2012, *The Book Thief* had spent over 272 weeks on the New York Times Children's Paperback Best Seller List (New York Times, 2012),<sup>1</sup> but is marketed in Australia as an adult title (Pierce, 2005). Conversely, *Anatomy of Wings* was published in Australia by UQP as an adult title, but is published in the US as young adult (Kelly, 2009, p. 29).

Ruth Starke's letter to the editor of the young adult literature-specialised magazine *Viewpoint: On books for young adults* makes another pertinent case study. Starke wrote to *Viewpoint* concerning their review of Meme McDonald's *Love Like Water* (2007) which was published in Australia by Allen and Unwin for 'readers of around 16 to 30 and older' (Allen and Unwin, n.d., p. 2). Starke argues that the novel's main characteristics are rarely, if ever, included all together in a single young adult book: the protagonists are well into their twenties and deal with established relationships and romantic and sexual entanglements. Rarest of all for (if not unique to) a young adult novel, the photograph on the cover is a chest-shot of a hand resting between naked breasts. While the novel may be read,

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of 2012, the New York Times Children's Best Seller lists divided into Picture Books, Middle Grade, Young Adult and Series. *The Book Thief* is designated as Young Adult and as of the 16<sup>th</sup> of May, 2013 had spent 23 weeks on that list.

understood and enjoyed by young adults, classifying it among other examples of young adult literature is, according to Starke, a bridge too far (Starke, 2007a, p. 28). Christopher Bantick makes a similar case in his review of Sonya Harnett's *The Ghost's Child* (2007), stating that it is experiences like the negotiation of long-term emotional, romantic and sexual relationships that move a novel from the young adult to the adult category:

This is no young adult novel. One has to have lived life, loved deeply and lost completely to hear the movements of Harnett's requiem for a longing heart. (Bantick, 2007)

Bantick's argument sets a boundary on what can begin to define young adult literature. Rather than showing those who have already undergone these adult experiences, the story of how those experiences began – the first inklings of Aronson's 'layers of human existence' (1997, p. 1418) – is often an identifiable characteristic of young adult literature. Emily Jenkins sums up the importance of these initiations in her description of Judy Blume's *Forever*: 'More than anything else, *Forever* is a book about firsts, a distinction that is critical when defining young adult literature' (Jenkins, 1999).

## **Content**

There is much variation between young adult novels in terms of style, genre, theme, plot, setting, characters, etc. Young adult literature appears to resist definition in this sense. However, examination of the novels and the critical literature identifies a number of similar characteristics that can help to place a

book within the area. To begin with broad strokes: the characteristic shared by almost all young adult novels is that the protagonist is ‘almost always a young person’ (Owen, 2003; Bone, 2005, p. 5). Mary Owen states that the average age of the protagonist is ‘about fifteen’ (Owen, 2003). Margaret Heuschele’s study of twenty years of Australian young adult literature confirms this, although she notes a trend in which protagonists’ ages increased from between twelve and sixteen at the beginning of her study to between fourteen and eighteen at the end (Heuschele, 2007, p. 204). All research done in the area of young adult literature deals with works in which this is the case.

Ruth Starke suggests that in order to identify a work as specifically young adult, an important question must be asked of the themes and subject matter experienced by the protagonist:

[D]o they directly connect with a teenage readership or do they concern themselves with matters not yet of much interest to this group (marriage, parenthood, commitment, mortgages, climbing the career ladder, etc)? (Starke, 2007b, personal communication)<sup>2</sup>

While adult literature can have young protagonists, young adult fiction tends to live the life of its young heroes, rather than examine them. It ‘reflects and interprets’ (Owen, 2003) their experiences and, as discussed in the previous section, often contains the first taste of adulthood. Or, to carry on the

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<sup>2</sup> For another example of the afore-mentioned interchangeability of the terms ‘teenage’ and ‘young adult’, note Starke’s use of the word ‘teenage’ when discussing young adult literature.

introduction's dinner party motif: activities which would be more suited to discussion at the adult table rather than the children's.

### What experiences?

Scholars of young adult literature repeatedly cite a specific group of activities and issues which feature in the texts under examination. A quick perusal of discussion within the mainstream media regarding young adult fiction might seem to indicate that contemporary young adult literature is simply a digest of 'issues previously thought "too hot to handle" in schools: sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling, racism, prejudice, poverty, abuse, violence, and so on' (Comber and Nixon, 2000, p. 187). In her discussion on the limitations and difficulties in publishing and disseminating young adult literature, author Emily Jenkins adds that 'AIDS, emerging homosexuality, teen parenting, inner-city gangs, and depression appear to be on the pulse of teen issues today' (Jenkins, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

These previously taboo activities and issues are often important to the narrative, but are not usually the main topic. For example, Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992) is not about suicide or a historical family mystery as much as it is an exploration of cultural identity. Confronting and topical subjects are often used by young adult authors to convey a sense of realism as well as to specifically address those issues within the text. Just as adherence to a certain age range is not required for a text to be regarded as either young adult or not, nor is there a specific set of issues that authors must select from in order to have their work

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<sup>3</sup> Again, note Jenkins' use of the word 'teen' and elsewhere 'teenage' in an article about young adult literature.



anointed as such. (Margaret Heuschele's 2007 study does set out a reasonably exhaustive list of 58 issues dealt with in young adult novels. This list is reproduced in Appendix 1). However, young adult novels do tend to feature, at least superficially, issues which are relevant to the curiosities of a young adult audience. Some young adult texts use these issues as metaphors or images through which to tell their story, while less sophisticated texts will simply tell the story of that issue. Examples of the latter include Allayne Webster's *Our Little Secret* (2007) which is about sexual abuse, and Chrissie Keighery's *Whisper* (2011) which describes the difficulties of coming to terms with a disability. Both stories simply show how their respective issues affect their characters and do not expand their boundaries beyond this 'cause and effect' mode of storytelling. Georgia Blain's *Darkwater* (2010) is more complex. It uses the issue of environmental change (a seaside community protesting a large property development) to convey its themes of irreversible change and loss of innocence. In the more simplistic examples, young adult literature can skate closer to the didactic tendencies of the pre-1960s. This shall be discussed in the subsequent section, **Let's not 'should' this fellow to death**. As for novels which make more sophisticated use of young adult issues as thematic metaphors, there are many examples of how far the young adult genre can stretch in this direction. Kevin Brooks' *Killing God* (2009) is an excellent example.

[*Killing God* is] a very real and modern young adult novel combining at least four different stories and narrative techniques: the precisely-styled character study, the whodunit, the *bildungsroman* and the philosophical quest. Each element could easily stand alone as a very readable and

intelligent text for a young adult reader, but Brooks' method of folding them all together is revelatory as it is marvellous. Young adult books do not have to be easy or fun to read to retain their quality and their readers. (Franzway, 2009, p. 19)

Contemporary young adult literature offers readers 'sophisticated books that accurately represent their high school world, reflecting this potent period of their lives and offering literary challenge' (Wilde, 2007). The challenge for authors of young adult fiction is a dual one of both reflecting and addressing the issues of concern to a young adult audience — portraying 'heroes in search of answers' (Jenkins, 1999) — and presenting the story in a way that will appeal to that audience.

Critical literature dealing with young adult writing makes much of its ability to take on tough subjects and topics previously regarded as taboo (Donelson and Nilsen, 1980; Macintyre, 1994; Legge, 1997; Scutter, 1997, 1999a; Bourdieu, 2000; Cart, 2000; FitzGerald, 2004; Tonkin, 2005). Indeed, a cursory glance at the research published on young adult literature might suggest that this 'agglomeration of instabilities' (Aronson, 2001, pp. 31-32), this 'genre full of genres' (Jones, 2000, p. 24), exists only to expose its intended young audience to subjects which their parents can't or won't discuss. Young adult books can range in content from 'Debbie-Goes-to-the-Prom' to 'I'm Bombed-Stoned-and-Getting-It-On-with-My-Best-Friend' (Vasilakis, 1985, p. 769). Nimon and Foster identify a shift beyond these two roughly defined (yet reasonably simplistic) phases in their work on the adolescent novel in Australia in 1997 and posited that

a staple of adolescent fiction has consistently been ‘questions affecting the individual’s role in the community and relationship to its institutions’ (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 58). Marc Aronson agrees:

Classic YA novels describe a great crossing, where a person whose values and character have been formed in the smaller world of family, school, and native social environment enters a wider world ... As characters measure the public world by the values of the family and reexamine the family in light of new truths found in the world, they begin to work out their individual sense of identity; they “come of age.” (Aronson, 2001, p.20)

It is the role of the young individual and their relationship to society’s institutional structures which will form the basis of this thesis’ discussion of young adult literature and will be examined in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **Let’s not ‘should’ this fellow to death**

Myth No. 5: Teenage Books Are Didactic or Preachy

In this list of myths, this is the one that comes the closest to being true.

(Donelson and Nilsen, 1980, p. 17)

... my central despondency about working as a writer for children and young adults [is] the way in which children’s books are continually judged

on the basis of their subject matter, not on the writing itself. (Pausacker, 1999, p. 40)

Much critical discourse exists about what young adult literature should and should not be, do and depict. The days when juvenile literature was designed as little more than an instructive text have long passed. Elizabeth Strain's analysis of pre-Second World War texts for young people discovered a marked didacticism within the narratives and that their 'main purpose was to enculturate young readers through narratives of romance, successful enterprise and virtue rewarded' (Strain, 1998, p.5). Young adult literature which encourages adherence to convention and status quo have been identified in British young adult texts up to the 1980s (Ray, 1977; Kutzer, 1998).

John Stephens asserts that '[e]very book has an implicit ideology ... usually in the form of assumed social structures and habits of thought' (Stephens, 1992, p. 9), although he allows for variance in the strength and type of ideologies contained in books for young people. This will be discussed further in the section **Young readers can think**.

The 'new realism' (Donelson and Nilsen, 1989, p. 114) of the 1970s changed young adult literature into a source in which young people could read about themselves. Although Wendy Parsons is referring to a collection of Australian young adult novels, she could easily be discussing contemporary young adult literature as a whole when she states: '[t]hese are the books that young adolescents read furtively for information about growing up' (Comber and Nixon,

2000, p. 191). Mary Owen agrees: ‘YAL offers teenagers something that adult literature does not. YAL is created especially for YAs, hoping to give them a more mature understanding of self and the world’ (Owen, 2003).

### What is said

Much critical discussion of young adult literature runs along similar lines and, like Comber, Nixon and Owen above, acknowledges a genuine educational dimension to the category. Marc Aronson’s *Exploding the Myths: The Truth about Teenagers and Reading* (2001) is an example of how the instinct to educate and protect is a particularly deep-rooted one in the critical literature, even in texts whose arguments and findings are framed as liberal and progressive.

As discussed in the section **Intended readership – Who are young adults?** criticism of literature for young readers is often underpinned by twin concerns: its success as art (content) and the appropriateness of the message being transmitted to its readers (audience). In *Exploding the Myths*, Aronson states: ‘It is treated as a branch of arts and of moral or intellectual education’ (Aronson, 2001, p. 19). He points out that this concern implicitly assigns a great deal of power to art (pp. 79-80), making the case for the unsuitability of books that actively and obviously preach their message. He certainly appears to argue for removing controls over what young people read. Not quite. He recommends instead that young readers be given works of art ‘that we cannot control’ and goes on to declare: ‘We are handing over unstable works of art to unstable kids. That is a risk, but a worthy one’ (p. 83). While this appears to be a positive and progressive statement, it still

possesses the protective attitude, shared by much of the contemporary critical literature. Even though Aronson advocates higher quality artistry in young adult books and gives precedence to “‘real” reality’ over ‘phony realism’ (p. 81), he leaves the power to make these distinctions in the hands of parents, librarians, teachers and adults in general. These adults are still the conduits, the gatekeepers and, therefore, arbiters of what young adults will read; the ‘we’ does not include young adult readers. ‘That is a risk’ (p. 83), he says of handing a teenager a copy of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but he never stipulates what the risk is, beyond the initial assumption that young readers might in some way come to harm under the influential power of high quality art.

Aronson is not alone in this regard. He and other critics appear reluctant to take the next step that would allow young adult readers to engage with this supposed risk on their own terms for acceptance or rejection. Messages, both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, are regarded by many critics as being contained within young adult literature and easily transmitted to and adopted by their intended audiences. The literature rarely posits a scenario in which young adult readers have developed their own critical capacity and are able to independently assess the relevance, believability and quality of a text. Much of the criticism appears to work from the base assumption that young adult readers do not have the capacity for critical reading. What follows here are three examples taken from the works already cited above.

In the first example, Mary Owen’s definitive and well-cited article on young adult literature makes the case for its audience to be held back from ‘real reality’. Owen

suggests that young adult books act as a sandbox or testing ground for the thoughts and opinions of their target audience.

... YAs still need time to distance themselves and reflect upon the positives and negatives of their immediate community as well as wider society. Opportunity for such meditation is possible through the reading of YAL. (Owen, 2003)

Using literature to reflect on one's community can be an activity which fosters independent thought. However, in the second example, Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni analyse multicultural young adult novels and their suitability for 'initiating discussion based on critical literacy' (Bean and Moni, 2003, p. 638). Bean and Moni assume that young people experiencing 'racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice' (p. 638) will be able to turn to young adult books to provide 'a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life' (p. 638). Aside from playing the role of social worker/political muse, Bean and Moni suggest that young adult novels can also encourage their young readers to consider and appreciate different cultures. 'Literacy, especially through multicultural young adult novels, provides a forum upon which to build cosmopolitan world-views and identities' (Bean and Moni, 2003, p. 642). There is no room in this discussion for the further suggestion that multicultural books could also be examined for deficiencies of representation and the potential this might have for the cultures depicted.

Critical reading by young readers does not feature largely in the critical literature. This third example shows how Barbara Comber and Helen Nixon suggest that young readers will be more adversely affected by John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series than the *Harry Potter* novels because one uses more realism than the other.

The fact that [John Marsden's novels] are written in a realistic manner makes it easy for readers to forget that the world that Marsden has constructed is just as fictional as [J.K.] Rowling's world of playful magic and monstrous evil. (Comber and Nixon, 2000, p. 190)

Even adults who enjoy John Marsden's work are value-judged and, along with them, young readers and the potential quality of young adult fiction:

It is interesting that significant numbers of adults are also reading Marsden's adventure books. It may be that the stylistic complexity of much modern fiction for adults may have alienated readers who want the action and realism that Marsden provides. (Comber and Nixon, 2000, p. 190)

These are potentially extreme examples and could be seen as taking the point about critical concern for the malleable young adult mind too far. Comber and Nixon aren't literally suggesting that John Marsden's writing is so hypnotic as to convince his young readers that it is non-fiction. Nor are Owen, Bean and Moni saying that young adults pick up a book and have their world views programmed into them from the page (nor are Elizabeth Bullen, Robyn Sheahan-Bright or



Heather Scutter, for that matter). However, each example contains an unsubstantiated assumption about how young readers are going to react to a certain book, and its discussion continues as though this assumption was plain fact.

### What is not said

This is a more in-depth analysis of an adult critic making a decision about values on behalf of young readers. Dianne Wolfer's *Choices* (2009) is a dual-reality narrative following the same girl on opposite sides of the abortion choice coin. Reviewer Roie Thomas praises the novel for its careful research and '[c]onvincing arguments for and against both decisions' (Thomas, 2010, p. 22), as though the novel might play some educative role in a real-life situation. Thomas then discusses the refreshing and even-handed way in which the issue is handled, with input from all stakeholders. Whether *Choices* was written in this way so as to avoid controversy from either side of a sensitive issue is beyond the scope of this exegesis and essentially unclear. There are two intertwined issues arising from Thomas' article. They exemplify the critical attitude towards the way in which young readers are thought to be able to deal with, firstly, the information in the books they read and, secondly, the way in which that information is presented.

The first issue, how young adult readers deal with the information in their books, is more often an area in which concern for the theoretical young audience comes to the fore. In the review, Thomas draws attention to the gentle even-handedness of the novel, marking this as a positive: '[the novel] acknowledges the necessity

for moving on with hope, for forgiveness of self as well as others’ (p. 22). One could conclude that an uneven outcome, with one choice depicted as more positive than the other, would draw a negative review from Thomas, based on the concern for young readers being delivered a message that they may be unable to resist.

Thomas’ review praises *Choices* for making good cases for and against abortion. As mentioned above, this form of protective concern within young adult novels is difficult to assess as far as authorial intent is concerned, but important to observe and acknowledge within the context of this exegesis. Mary Nixon (1977) and Margaret Heuschele (2007) state that, to a certain extent, young people do react to and are influenced by the media. However, Thomas’ implicit assumption that a reader’s (real-life) decision might be influenced by biased information about abortion in a book is a demonstration of the presumptuous attitude present in young adult literature criticism. While young adult novels do partially function as repositories of information about growing up (Comber and Nixon, 2000), they are not the only source of information. In Mary Nixon’s words ‘... to assume that the media, individually or collectively, will transmit a homogeneous message to homogeneous receivers is to ignore ... individual differences between children’ (Nixon, 1977, p. 182).

As Nimon and Foster have recognised, it might seem as though the critical literature had moved far beyond viewing young readers as a singular group (1997, p. 14). Or, to press the dinner party image into service again: young readers, particularly young adult readers, are not all sitting at the same table, eating the

same meal. They are choosing for themselves what they will eat and where they will sit; they know what they want to read and why. This exercise in choice is, however, often overlooked and contemporary examples abound.

Michael Cart has won the American Library Association prize for the Best Book for Young Adults and is a past president of the Young Adult Library Services Association in the United States. Cart coined the term ‘the new Golden Age of young adult literature’ (Cart, 2000, p. 1370), referring to the emergence in the United States of a series of high quality novels, on par with the first ‘Golden Age’ which (according to Cart) occurred for the US in the 1970s and centred around Robert Cormier’s 1974 novel *The Chocolate War* (Cart, 2000, p. 1370). Nimon and Foster use Peter Hollindale’s agreement with the concept of an American Golden Age (Hollindale, 1995, p. 83) to note the development of the quality of young adult literature in the early 1970s (Nimon, 1997, p. 11). In Cart’s report on the first Michael L. Printz award (the premier award for young adult literature in the United States), he begins by congratulating the judging panel on successfully choosing the winners and runners-up based ‘solely in terms of literary merit’ as though there were other, less-valuable qualities for which books are chosen by judging panels, or young readers themselves. He moves on to categorise contemporary young readers as ‘the offspring of a visual generation, and ... before their imaginations can be engaged by the contents of a good book, their eyes must first be engaged by its look’ (Cart, 2000, p. 1370). Cart appears to be suggesting that young readers won’t (or don’t) have the capacity to choose a book based ‘solely on its literary merits’ (which abound, according to his declaration of

a ‘new Golden Age’) and that their eyes must be torn away from computer screens before they will grapple with the complex pleasures a book has to offer.

Cart’s observations on the necessity for visually interesting books may be true in some cases, but they will require further clarification and refinement if they are going to become useful in the discourse on young readers. As it stands, Cart appears to be laying blame at the feet of these readers for succumbing to the flashier, shallower world of in-home entertainment. While he exhorts publishers to compete with computer games, the internet and movies, an Australian study of young readers aged between ten and eighteen conducted at around the same time in 2000 provides a different perspective.

*Young Australians Reading: from keen to reluctant readers* (2001) discovered that Cart’s instincts were correct: ‘the appearance of book covers is very important to attracting [the attention of today’s young adults]’ (Nieuwenhuizen, 2001, p. 8), but the underlying assumption, however, was not. Young people were not being dragged away from books to other entertainment media because of a preference for cover over content (an assumption which again implies that young people are not capable of choosing the ‘right’ media to consume). Instead, the report discovered that young people complained specifically ‘about the appearance of books which are made available to them being dated and old-fashioned.’ (p. 8). The report goes on to suggest that publishers not try to compete directly with highly visual, electronic media, as has been attempted in the past (Franzway, 2006, p. 32). Instead it encourages publishers to ‘ensure the covers

work as hard as possible in encouraging a further look at the books’ and create ‘an image that is contemporary and relevant’ (Nieuwenhuizen, 2001, p. 8).

Marc Aronson goes a step further. In an article about the history of young adult novel cover design, he is quoted suggesting that young adult books can be viewed as accessories, demonstrations of individual style and personality, open for judgment in the same way that clothes are. ‘It has to sit comfortably next to all the other objects in the reader’s world, their magazines and clothes and music’ (Bengal, 2008). Amy Pattee, professor of library and information science at Boston’s Simmons College, quoted in the same article, reinforces this impression, identifying various design styles which can date a book and render it unattractive in itself. ‘If the cover looks lame,’ she says, ‘then it’s all over’ (Bengal, 2008).

### **Won’t somebody *please* think of the children?**

[W]e now have a vast array of books ... that [cater] for a wide spectrum of readers – babies, toddlers, adolescents and young adults; the able and the disabled; the eager and the reluctant. Never has there been such an abundance of riches, and never has the responsibility of those who care for the young been so great. (Saxby, 1997, p. 101)

Roie Thomas’ review (2010, p. 22) is not alone when, rather than limiting discussion of a novel to content, structure, use of metaphor, publishing context, etc., it includes some analysis regarding suitability for the intended audience based on the potential for benefit or harm. Here is where much of the critical

discourse on young adult literature can be placed into one camp or the other, depending on whether it assumes that young readers are capable of critically assessing what they read and have ‘effective thinking skills and possess the ability to brainstorm, discuss and experiment with solutions ... [or if] ... these skills are deficient or non-existent’ (Nichol, 1997, p. 10).

For critics whose work assumes ‘deficient or non-existent’ analytical skills, it is as though instead of analyser (reader) and analysed (text), there is always a third party: the analysed-on-behalf-of young adult reader. Elizabeth Parsons provides a typical example in her critical essay ‘Capitalism run wild: Zizou Corder’s *Lion Boy* and Victor Kelleher’s *Dog Boy*’: ‘As an academic discipline, we endeavour to understand not only how representations of current socio-cultural shifts manifest themselves, but perhaps **more importantly**, the ways in which the issues at stake are being presented and mediated to children’ (Parsons, 2006, p. 30 – emphasis mine). Here, protection comes before understanding.

Class and gender discussions particularly take this stance, criticising and de-valuing texts which re-enforce the ideological hegemony and the status quo, as though teenaged readers will absorb a text’s implied assumptions, adopting its ideological representations and reproducing these practices in their own lives (Scutter, 1999a; Pope, 2001; Bullen, 2006). As Nimon and Foster put it: ‘Literary judgments are made, but generally of greater weight in determining a book’s acceptance throughout the adult community are the values and attitudes which readers believe the book to be advocating’ (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 20-21).

In 2000 Kathleen Bokey, Garry Walter and Joseph Ray conducted a study of 94 novels listed as ‘Notable Texts’ in the Older Readers category of the Children’s Book Council of Australia from 1996 to 1998. Their findings, published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, were that

[y]oung people in contemporary Australian teenage literature are beset with trauma, loss and psychiatric disorders. Even when help is obtained, the outcome is seldom positive. This nihilistic view may increase hopelessness and pose a barrier for teenagers seeking help. (Bokey, Walter and Rey, 2000, p. 625)

Despite the fact that these researchers were largely concerned with the psychological impact of reading texts with negative messages, they were not able to find a link between reading about these issues and experiencing them. Their conclusion consists of many leading, answerless questions about reading’s effect on an individual’s psychology. For example: ‘will a character’s decision that suicide is the best or only option tip the scales for teenagers going through a rough patch?’ and ‘how can one safely expose a teenager with a psychiatric illness to a book in which the principal character (who also has a psychiatric illness) is bad/mad, consummately devilish and incurable?’ (p. 628). Hidden among these musings, Bokey *et al.* concede that ‘data are lacking on the effects of reading literature on psychopathology and suicide’ (p. 628). Undaunted, they continue, asking further questions about the responsibilities of authors of young adult fiction:

Do medical professionals have a valid role in encouraging accurate and therapeutic content in teenage literature, without becoming “thought police” or encroaching upon “artistic freedom”? Do authors feel that responsibility for the well-being of their readers is compatible with the right to such freedom? (p. 628)

Kathleen Bokey’s study as a whole will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, but the article, and in particular its conclusion, exemplifies the essential flaw with this type of critical attitude towards young adult literature. That is: the assumption that its content will directly influence its readers. This implies that authors, parents, teachers and librarians have a duty of care to young readers to prevent any harm or ideological brain-washing from occurring. Bokey *et al* provide no conclusive evidence that supports the overall premise of their argument: that contemporary Australian young adult literature could be harmful for young readers at risk of or living with psychiatric disorders. Many of the critics discussed above are working from a similar assumption; that readers of young adult fiction cannot critically analyse media to at least some extent and that they cannot control how they deal with information once it has been transmitted to them.

A more simplistic approach to the critical analysis of young adult literature is to examine the text like any other work of art: worthy of analysis in and of itself, regardless of intended audience. This approach carries its own problems because, as previously discussed, one of the most important characteristics of young adult literature is the nature and position of its intended audience. To ignore this in an



analysis can prove reductive and produce reviews which are limited in scope and their understanding of a young adult text.

The following section will examine a middle ground of criticism and analysis in which young adult literature keeps its intended audience in mind, but without the protective, didactic concerns outlined above.

### **Young adult readers can think**

The response of adults as literary gatekeepers is to worry that youthful readers will lack the intellectual and emotional maturity and the skills of literary and moral discrimination and judgement necessary to assess the options presented. (Stephens, 1999, p. 184)

The most effective analyses within the critical literature are those which do not attempt to occupy a gatekeeping role and which treat young adult literature as a unique body worthy of examination – free from Helen Lovejoy-esque hand-wringing and cries of ‘Won’t somebody *please* think of the children!’

Margaret Heuschele represents one of the few, clearer voices in the discourse when she describes the role and function of young adult literature thus: ‘[it] has the potential to function as scaffolding to assist teenagers in the struggles of adolescence by serving as an important source of information about the world and the people in it’ (Heuschele, 2007, p. ii). The difference between this statement and Bean and Moni’s previously-cited discussion of a ‘forum upon which to build

cosmopolitan world-views and identities’ (Bean and Moni, 2003, p. 642) is that Heuschele regards young adult literature as merely a source of information to be accepted or rejected, rather than a recipe to follow. Heuschele’s study will be examined in further detail in Chapter 2.

These types of critique recognise that they are still speaking on behalf of young readers, but assume a cognitive power in these readers sufficient to analyse the texts as texts. John Stephens notes that this critical approach assumes ‘a reader who knows how to interpret a fiction’ (Stephens, 1992, p. 10). Bean and Moni’s article works from assumptions about the worthiness of certain pieces of young adult literature to act as components of a ‘cosmopolitan identity’. However, the main content of their argument is in making a case, not just for the development of identity, but for the power of critical thought in young adult readers. They ‘[assume] a sophisticated and intelligent reader’ (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 4) in the texts’ intended audience. John Stephens shares this assumption when he discusses Peter Hollindale’s exploration of ideology in children’s fiction (Hollindale, 1988). Stephens notes that ideologies in children’s fiction can be both explicit and implicit and their identification requires ‘sophisticated analytical ability’ (Stephens, 1992, p. 10). Hollindale moves beyond identification and asserts that the ability to read and analyse a text exposes the reader to ‘the individual writer’s unexamined assumptions’ (Hollindale, 1988, p. 13). Hollindale states that ‘all children’s literature is inescapably didactic’ (p. 13) because of the ‘[u]nexaminated, passive [and] widely *shared*’ (p. 13) values unconsciously communicated by its authors. He concludes that although author and reader may share these ideologies, the power of a text to reinforce them is not reduced,

regardless of the reader's analytical ability. Bean and Moni readily acknowledge that, to some extent, readers will recognise and perhaps absorb some ideologies delivered via media, books included. They do not, however, estimate young adult books to be so influential that it is necessary to base their entire argument upon concern for their target audience and they move away from Hollindale's critical position on the didacticism of children's literature. Instead, Bean and Moni recognise that young readers are able to analyse and critique young adult books and the 'choices made in the creation of the text' (Janks and Ivanic, 1992, p. 316): 'Through discussion of such choices, students may also better understand how they are being constructed as adolescents in the texts and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities' (Bean and Moni, 2003, p. 639).

It is critiques such as these which view the intended audience of young adult books as not simply receptacles for anything carrying the label 'young adult'. The discerning nature of young readers is demonstrated by the quality of books they consume. Marc Aronson writes of *Edge* (the multicultural hardcover young adult imprint of publisher Holt): 'the greatest single determinant in sales has not been the age level of the book or the characters in it but rather how good it is, how well reviewed, how it stands as art' (Aronson, 2001, p. 9). He reports that this has also been the case for the young adult lists of several other publishing houses.

## Young adult readers develop

The critical incarnation of Sheahan-Bright's 'protective approach' (Sheahan-Bright, 1997) are those critics who argue for a filter between young readers and young adult books. These critics usually present one of two outcomes for these readers: without a filter they could be damaged or brainwashed in a variety of ways, and with one they will simply read and enjoy the book. Consequently, those dutiful young readers who do enjoy it will only enjoy it in the context of the righteous enrichment it provides, free from unsound ideologies. However, they will only have read it in the first place after a protective, responsible adult has deemed it fit to pass into their hands.

On the other hand, scholars of young adult literature who assume a robust, critical young reader, one capable of making up their own mind, begin producing different kinds of reactions in their hypothetical intended audience. Here are three short examples of non-protectionist, non-didactic critiques, each allowing for a varying level of engagement:

Roger Sutton, editor of *Horn Book*, discusses readers who can tell the difference between John Marsden and the news headlines:

These books are melodramas and kids read them that way. Take the child abuse books for example. They're read by girls who have relatively happy families, who love dramas and can believe them – but only as fairy tales,

as heightened, exaggerated versions of their own small conflicts with their parents. (FitzGerald, 2004, p. 70)

Critics from both sides acknowledge that young readers use books for vicarious experiences, but Frances FitzGerald, writing in *Harper's Magazine*, takes Sutton's statement a step further and assumes that young readers are able to not only read works, but reflect upon their worth. She examined book reviews left by children on Amazon.com and discovered that even when children had slipped past the gatekeepers and selected 'unworthy' books, regardless of the message contained within them, '[o]n the whole kids seem to prefer books that don't throw the moral in their face' (FitzGerald, 2004, p. 70). Sixteen-year-old Robyn Dixon fits into this very category of young adult reader. Responding to the 'alarmist' (Janks and Ivanic, 1992, p. 266) concerns regarding Australian young adult literature in the media, she states

... so much adolescent literature seems devoted to this moral education and so many adult critics love it! The truth is, books that are critically acclaimed (for example, the Children's Book Council Awards) seem to be what adults want us to read, rather than what we want to read. (Dixon, 1998, p. 47)

Jeri Kroll writes about young readers who are capable of mature textual analysis in her article 'Gillian Rubinstein's *Beyond the Labyrinth*: A Court Case and its Aftermath' published in *Para\*doxa*. The article discusses the media attention directed at *Beyond the Labyrinth* because it contained the word 'fuck' (twice). For

example, a group of Year Nine students defended the book ‘explaining that swearing is not approved of, but condemned; they insist that reading *Beyond the Labyrinth* did not encourage them to swear themselves’ (Kroll, 1996, p. 340).

The analytical ability of young readers is, for some critics, a separate issue to their capacity to appreciate quality. Australian literature critic Peter Craven, cited in *Right Book, Right Time: 500 great reads for teenagers*, states that Sonya Hartnett ‘is “too good” to be a writer for young people’ (Nieuwenhuizen, 2007, p 219).

Nieuwenhuizen refutes this implication by providing a comment from Jesse, a Year Ten reader, about Hartnett’s *Of a Boy*: ‘The style of writing in this book is so exquisitely exact, with every sentence, phrase and paragraph formed so perfectly as to form a true page-turner’ (p. 219).

This shows how a non-protectionist approach in the critical literature can be a more progressive tool for analysing young adult literature than the didactic, protectionist model of the passive young reader. Robyn Dixon, Jesse and the young reviewers on Amazon.com show how young readers can be thoughtful, critical, dynamic, analytical and be in little need of protection. Roger Sutton notes that ‘[O]nce kids acquire the reading skills, they read just like adults, and therefore there’s always a disparity between the precautionary or therapeutic intention and the result’ (FitzGerald, 2004, p. 70).

It is the assumption of a level of analytical power in young adult readers which truly sets this type of critical analysis apart from the didactic, protectionist critiques discussed above. The overall difference between the two camps is trust. The non-protectionist critic trusts, not that a young adult reader will read

something the ‘right’ way or that they will make the ‘right’ decision about what to do with the information they have just read, but that they are able to make that decision for themselves in the first place.

If a teenager who has never read a book in his or her life comes across *Mein Kampf*, we might be in trouble. But if the teenager knows what texts are and what they can do, what is quality and what is not, I do not think we have any reason to worry. And if kids are used to using books to imagine with, they might be able to use the bus ticket as the trigger for an imaginative journey of their own. Or they might be able to imagine the kind of scared, hating, small human being that created a book such as *Mein Kampf* and decide that they never want to become or support such a person. All we have to do as adults is give them the tools to fire the imaginations that already exist, and let the children take care of the rest.  
(Lawrinson, 2004, p. 9)

## Chapter 2 – Young adult literature in Australia

This exegesis has attempted to define young adult literature as succinctly as it is possible to do within the confines of a single chapter. Since its focus will be primarily on young adult literature produced in or about Australia, at this point it becomes necessary to narrow the scope. The image of the dinner party might be useful here once again. Imagine a subsequent party. Young adult literature has stomped its large feet and demanded separate treatment. It *will* be having its own table. It *won't* put up with the plastic cups of cordial on one table, nor the mortgage conversation on the other. It finally has its own space, its own friends and conversations. However, just as young adults are not a homogenous group (indeed, young adults might be grouped only by their shared quest for individuality), so too does young adult literature belong to a range of genres and groupings, existing in each, exclusive to none. As discussed in the previous chapter, young adult literature is found across a range of genres (Jones, 2000; Tonkin, 2005), but for the purpose of this exegesis, the focus will be on Australian young adult literature and the critical literature that examines it. However, since the majority of Australian young adult novels that include useful representations of social class tend towards social realism, the majority of works cited belong mostly to this genre.

In the context of this exegesis, Australian literature refers to that which is set in Australia or written by an Australian. Agnes Nieuwenhuizen notes that often an Australian setting will denote an Australian author and that 'curiously only a notable few Australian writers set their stories or take their characters outside Australia, into non-Anglo cultures or to the world's hot spots' (Nieuwenhuizen,



1995, p. x). Some exceptions to this rule include: Lucy Christopher's *Stolen* (2009), which was set in Australia, but written by a Briton; Penny Tangey's *Clara in Washington* (2011), about an Australian visiting the United States; Rosanne Hawke's *Marrying Ameera* (2010) about an Australian whose Pakistani father sends her to Pakistan to be married; and M.J. Hyland's *How The Light Gets In* (2004), which is written by a London-born British novelist who lived in Australia and Britain, and is about an Australian, but set in the United States.

The critical literature examined will be that which analyses Australian young adult texts or the authors of those texts.

### **A brief history of young adult literature in Australia**

Before the term 'young adult' came into use, Australian publishers used terms like 'juvenile', 'children's', 'teenage' or 'adolescent'. The first instance of the term 'young adult' to describe the intended audience of a novel in Australian publishing can probably be traced to the mid-to-late 1980s. Young adult author and critic Nadia Wheatley interviewed Barbara Kerr Wilson in 1993 about her time at the University of Queensland Press. Wilson was there in 1986 when the publisher decided to name a list of books that 'should be able to engage the reader beyond 14 or so' (Wheatley, 1994, p. 6) 'Young Adult Fiction'. In 1987 they published three titles with a special logo and the words 'Young Adult Fiction' printed on the cover (Wheatley, 1994, p.6-7). That same year the Children's Book Council renamed their 'Book of the Year' award 'Book of the Year: Older Readers' (Children's Book Council of Australia, 2013b). The 'Older Readers'

category states that readers need to possess ‘a degree of maturity to appreciate the topics, themes and scope of emotional involvement’ (Children’s Book Council of Australia, 2013a).

The short-lists for the CBCA Older Readers category provide a who’s who of Australian young adult writing. These are the authors with whom most critics are concerned when they examine and discuss Australian young adult literature. The consistency of names in the shortlists has created a canon of sorts, the restrictions of which have not gone unnoticed by both authors and readers. In a 2000 article on the state of young adult fiction in Australia, Wendy Parsons, a lecturer in librarianship at the University of South Australia, was asked by the editors of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Barbara Comber and Helen Nixon, to discuss ‘What’s hot right now’ (Comber and Nixon, 2000, p. 187). Her leading examples were the *Tomorrow* series by John Marsden, which was entering its seventh year of publication, and the then eight year old *Looking for Alibrandi* by Melinda Marchetta, which was enjoying a resurgence in 2000 owing to the release of a feature film in the same year (Comber and Nixon, 2000). Marchetta and Marsden are both winners of the CBC Book of the Year: Older Readers award. James Moloney, speaking at the 2002 Children’s Book Council Conference, reported a long standing joke among Australian writers for young people about the marketing plan for their work by Australian publishers:

Plan A – get short-listed.

Plan B – there is no Plan B. (Moloney, 2002, p. 95)

Moloney believes that the Children’s Book Council has a direct influence on what gets published in Australia, even if it is not necessarily positive. Robyn Dixon’s previously cited comments on the CBC Awards bear this out: ‘books that are critically acclaimed (for example, the Children’s Book Council Awards) seem to be what adults want us to read, rather than what we want to read’ (Dixon, 1998, p. 47). The protectionist critical stance exists in the Australian context and is often concerned with the transferral of hegemonic ideologies, specifically those relating to traditional constructions of family, race, gender role and social class (for examples see Scutter, 1999a; Bradford, 2001; and Bullen, 2006). The concepts surrounding these protectionist critiques have already been outlined, but will be applied with reference to particular Australian critics working in the field of young adult literature.

### **Broad studies on young adult literature in Australia**

Given the limited canon provided by the winners and shortlisted books in the CBC Awards for Older Readers, it is necessary to take a broader look at the literature available in order to gain an accurate picture of where Australian young adult literature has come from and how it is developing.

Six major studies into various aspects of Australian young adult literature have been conducted within the last twenty-one years. Four of those studies were authored by Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, founding director of the Australian Centre for Youth Literature (CYL). Two of the CYL studies are reading guides, designed to assist parents, teachers, librarians and even young readers themselves to choose a

‘good book’. Fittingly, they were titled *Good Books for Teenagers* and *More Good Books for Teenagers* (Nieuwenhuizen, 1992, 1995) and each carried the subtitle *A comprehensive reading guide*. Each comprises a collection of summaries and reviews of books which were deemed suitable for young adult readers. While they also encompassed international titles, the very publication of a guide to young adult literature indicates the novelty and even wariness with which this relatively new literature was regarded in Australia at the beginning of the 1990s. It wasn’t simply a new area for young people to explore; it was a place that could be made safer with the guidance of experts. This is not to say that there wasn’t also a great expansion in the range and level of positive interest. The beginning of the 1990s saw the establishment of the CYL in 1991 and the first publication of the review magazine *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* in 1993. *Viewpoint* was solely devoted to reviewing and discussing young adult books and is still in circulation. However, the demand for guidance was apparently such that *Good Books for Teenagers* required an updated edition in 1996. The prevailing attitudes towards young adult literature in Australia during the 1990s will be discussed in the following section.

In 2007 Nieuwenhuizen published *Right Book, Right Time: 500 Great Reads for Teenagers*, which may reflect a changing mission in those with an interest in young Australians reading. While still essentially a collection of summaries written by Nieuwenhuizen herself, *Right Book, Right Time* encourages young people to read by directly addressing the intended audience for the young adult books suggested. There are no warning labels or signals to adults choosing books for children. It contains a section on ‘Extreme and Edgy’ books (Nieuwenhuizen,

2007, p. 51) and, ten years previously, its introduction might have addressed adults choosing books for children, warning them about content. Instead, Nieuwenhuizen addresses anyone with a developing enthusiasm for reading, eschewing the protective attitude common in much of the previous decade's critical literature: 'Writing about extreme situations can produce challenging, edgy fiction because the writer's imagination, control of language, empathy and craft can lift the book above the merely bleak and grim and beyond any single 'issue'' (p. 51).

These guides form only part of the picture of young adult literature in Australia. The CYL conducted a major study into the reading habits of ten- to eighteen-year-olds in Australia. Titled *Young Australians Reading: from keen to reluctant readers*, its purpose was to investigate their 'reading habits, experiences and attitudes' (Nieuwenhuizen, 2001, p. 1). It was commissioned, at least in part, to investigate the veracity of perceptions that young people were swapping books for digital entertainment media, such as computer games and the internet. This type of perception may go some way to demonstrating the mistrust with which literature for young people, particularly teenagers, was held in the 1990s in Australia. The report found that this perception was largely incorrect and that '[y]oung people claim to read for pleasure no less frequently than they play computer games or use the Internet' (Nieuwenhuizen, 2001, p. 6). In 2009, a subsequent report was commissioned by the CYL entitled *Keeping Young Australians Reading* and it found that 'young Australians today are reading just as much as they ever did, if not more' (Kelly, 2009, p. 2). Barriers to and competition for reading were more clearly spelled out in the 2009 report and it

was found that, far from being a generation trading the joys of literature for allegedly shallow, non-beneficial screen media, young readers are finding that ‘[t]ime is the enemy’, with extra-curricular hours being filled with the increasing demands of study, sport, music and employment’ (p. 5).

The data for *Keeping Young Australians Reading* was obtained by a library specialist who conducted an ‘attitudinal piece of research, interviewing key people in the youth literature world and talking to young people and parents through focus groups’ (Kelly, 2009, p. 8). The CYL’s focus on helping ‘inform teachers, librarians and the organisations involved in encouraging young Australians to read for pleasure’ (p. 8) has not provided any deeper conclusions related to young adult literature in its reports on the reading habits of young adults.

For a critical analysis of the literature, this section will discuss three major, broad-based critical studies using the parameters of Australian young adult fiction as set out at the beginning of this chapter.

### **From Karrawingi the emu to Care factor zero: Mental health issues in contemporary Australian adolescent literature (2000)**

Kathleen Bokey examined ninety-four Australian young adult novels published over a three-year period from 1996 to 1998. The selection comprised only the books selected as notable works in the Children’s Book Council Awards from those years. The study was done as a dissertation for the final requirement of the

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)

Fellowship Exam and was published with Gary Walter and Joseph Rey as a shortened journal article. Already there are apparent problems emerging, not the least of which is why a psychiatrist should be qualified to examine and draw conclusions regarding fiction. Julie Lawrinson lists some others:

... why the psychiatrists consider young adult fiction a genre; how realism, a category used to describe a form of art, film or writing, can somehow become nihilism, a belief system; and why the psychiatrists have confused fictional characters with real patients. (Lawrinson, 2004, p. 6)

Leaving aside these issues, the study still deserves critique, if only for its size and scope. The design of the study is instantly problematic: nominating CBC Award nominees as representational of what young adults read and of young adult literature in general runs into the issue of canon formation and its flaws have already been outlined above. While it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to critique the tools developed to analyse the chosen works, the stated aims of the study — that it ‘*might* influence teenagers’ understanding of mental illness and ... *may* provide insights into societal attitudes towards adolescents’ (Bokey, Walter and Rey, 2000, p. 625 – emphasis mine) — seem both assumption-laden and flimsy. The authors of the study themselves admit that:

A limitation of our study is that we have no data on the instruments’ reliability and validity. For instance, we do not know whether the

assessments of the rater (a senior trainee in child psychiatry) about issues such as “humour” would concur with those of a teenage reader. (Bokey, Walter and Rey, 2000, p. 628)

The aim of the study was to examine the attitudes towards mental health represented in young adult literature, with a view to applying these findings to the attitudes of real life young adults towards mental health and mental health care. This is based on the theory that consumers of media, specifically young consumers, will be adversely affected by that media. This presents a more pronounced version of the protectionist discourse discussed above and in the context of a medical journal, it carries with it the weight of real-life applications. Bokey *et al* cite three articles from medical journals which ask the same question: can media consumption be linked to behaviour? In each case, the authors of those articles were forced to conclude that while there are correlations between mental health effects and media, more study was needed and no conclusions could be drawn (Centerwall, 1992; Martin, Clarke and Pearce, 1993; Hassan, 1995). Bokey *et al* reach the same conclusion.

The contribution that this study makes is, however, significant. While the article is quite short, its premise flawed and its conclusions inconclusive, at the time of publication there existed no other study into Australian young adult literature as comprehensive and far-reaching (Heuschele, 2007, p. 6). It is also significant to the critical discourse on Australian young adult fiction that it sought to answer a specific question about this body of national literature, rather than provide an overall guide. It is important at this point to question why these researchers would



conduct such a broad literature review without the aim of further understanding Australian young adult literature as a body of work worthy of consideration, even when the existing medical literature suggested that such a study would be inconclusive. The answer lies in the attitudes towards literature for young people which prevailed during the 1990s. Young adult literature's authors were increasingly being viewed as unwelcome hooligans crashing into the bookish family homes of their readers. Journalist Kate Legge set the negative tone for much of the discourse when she wrote 'Young adult fiction is carving up the literary nature strip and hanging wheelies on the hard-baked bitumen of realism' (Legge, 1997, p. 10) in a widely-cited *Australian Magazine* article. Bokey *et al* move beyond concern for the well-being of Australian young adult literature, focusing their study on the well-being of Australian young adults themselves.

[T]his report describes how contemporary writers (and those who selected the books) view growing up in Australia at the end of the 20th century.

What image of the times do these books project? The past decade appears to have been a time of trauma and loss for youth, unrelieved by humour or hope. (Bokey, Walter and Rey, 2000, p. 628)

It seems like a simple error to conflate the sum experiences of Australian young adults represented in a selection of Australian teenage fiction – according to the study, 78% of the novels were set 'principally in Australia' (Bokey, Walter and Rey, 2000) – with the actual lived experiences of Australian teenagers. However, this assumption was not isolated to one study. Many critics of young adult literature in Australia during the 1990s viewed it as being synonymous with

nihilism and despair. This will be investigated further in this chapter's section

### **The Australian Dark Ages: The Nihilistic Nineties.**

#### **The Construction of Youth in Australian Young Adult Literature 1980-2000 (2007)**

Margaret Heuschele's study examined one hundred and eighty-six books for young adults and teenagers published between 1980 and 2000. Submitted as a doctoral thesis in 2007, Heuschele acknowledged that Bokey's study was the only 'comprehensive study of the portrayal of youth in Australian young adult literature' (Heuschele, 2007, p. 6). Instead of studying titles which were selected by a specific group of people – the CBC Award committee – the books studied were selected at random. This was done because Heuschele's aim was specifically to work from an unbiased sample, rather than titles which would only serve to reflect the nature of the CBC, as the Bokey *et al* study did. Heuschele felt that the wide-spread criticism of young adult literature during the 1990s was due, at least in part, to the media singling out particular books to criticise what young adult literature as a whole was presenting to young Australian readers (Heuschele, 2007, p. 2).

The breadth of Heuschele's study meant that she was able to identify trends in young adult literature over a twenty-year period beginning in 1980 when, according to Maurice Saxby, young adult literature emerged as a genre in Australia (cited in Heuschele, 2007, p. 78). Heuschele had also noticed that '[d]uring the 1990s in particular, Australian young adult literature was heavily

criticised for being too bleak, too dark, presenting a picture of life that was all gloom and doom.’ (Heuschele, 2007, p. iii. See also Legge, 1997 and FitzGerald, 2004). Instead of accepting this premise, Heuschele’s study took a step back from the prevailing media climate to see if it was in fact true; if young Australians were being given a disproportionate amount of bleak, depressing literature.

The findings of her longer-term study contradicted the prevailing perceptions and representations of young adult literature and the results of Bokey’s preceding study. Heuschele’s research concluded that ‘[Australian] young adult literature delves into the entire spectrum of teenage experiences, both the good and the bad’ (p. 216). This regards young adult literature in Australia as a specific area of literature which is not purely educative, nor existing purely for entertainment value. It is an area designed for a specific audience group, but an audience united and defined by its diversity. Australian young adult literature itself therefore requires a diversity of analyses and responses, from the positive to the critical. One of those necessary, critical voices is Heather Scutter.

### **Displaced Fictions: Contemporary Australian Books for Teenagers and Young Adults (1999)**

Despite large sections of the media essentially demonising young adult literature (or perhaps, because of it), Heather Scutter stated in 1999 that it was ‘actually very hard to get a negative review of a children’s or young adult novel published in Australia’ (Scutter, 1999a, p. 294). She blamed the mainstream media for allocating only a small space to writing for young people with the result that reviewers were loath to waste precious column inches on recommending books

that people should avoid. If this theory is to be tested, it will require re-examination in light of the increasing shift to on-line news media delivery, but that is beyond the scope of this exegesis.

For an example, Scutter singles out *Viewpoint* magazine and in particular, Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, who resigned over the *Viewpoint* board's decision to publish Scutter's negative review of Gary Crew's *Angel's Gate* (1993). She reports that Nieuwenhuizen, as Youth Literature Officer, had given up reviewing children's books because 'it disturbed her relationships with publishers' (Scutter, 1999a, p. 295). Scutter goes on to state that Nieuwenhuizen's job is funded by eight different (unnamed) publishers, all but accusing someone who is, according to Scutter, 'perhaps Australia's best known literature consultant' (p. 296) of self-censorship and compromised integrity. Scutter's review of *Angel's Gate* was published unchanged, challenging Scutter's assertion that negative reviews cannot get published in Australia, even if they only appear in specialist review magazines. But perhaps there are limits: *Viewpoint* editor Pam MacIntyre commissioned a second review of John Marsden's *Dear Miffy* because the first, by New Zealand author William Taylor, was 'so scathing' (Legge, 1997, p. 12).

This is the flavour of discourse in *Displaced Fictions*, the book that put the 'critical' into the critical debate on young adult literature in Australia. *Displaced Fictions* was not written as a response to the negative media attention being given to young adult fiction in the 1990s – quite the opposite. As will be discussed in the subsequent section, it is true that young adult fiction was criticised in the mainstream media for being too bleak and dark. However, Scutter felt that the

discourse emerging from critics and academics was too narrow and one-sided, and that anyone involved with young adult fiction, from writers to publishers to reviewers, was responsible, at least in part, for a low standard in the relevant critical discourse in Australia. In her study of some forty Australian young adult titles Scutter attempts ‘to open up some important issues that [she] felt were being discussed too narrowly, without information from new cultural studies and critical literacy approaches to the teaching of fiction’ (Scutter, 1999b). *Displaced Fictions* is a highly critical work, singling out various popular young adult titles for intense scrutiny and using these critical literacy approaches. Scutter judges works for their representations of ideology and their use of hegemonic stereotypes.

The book caused a great deal of controversy, both praised for the courage of its convictions (Starke, 1999) and criticised for being ‘bitchy’ (Pausacker, 1999, p. 39). Author Jenny Pausacker notes that Scutter’s methodology is not as complete or sound as it should be when making the types of claims that Scutter does, that “‘complex and powerful forces have constructed a strangely malign context” for Australian young adult fiction’ (Pausacker, 1999, p. 39). Scutter’s opinions are indeed powerfully argued, but Pausacker is correct: the texts appear to be selected at random and the issues and themes covered are largely un-connected, eg. comedy in Chapter 3 and mothers in Chapter 6. However, *Displaced Fictions*, unlike *Karrawangi* and *Construction of Youth*, does not claim to be an exhaustive, representative study. Its mission was to open the debate on young adult literature in Australia and to do this it needed titles which were ‘well-known and well-promoted’ (Gleeson, 2004, p. 16). Author Libby Gleeson suggests that ‘while the

sample may be deemed to be non-representative, it is a sample that could be deemed significant' (p. 16).

Scutter's intentions are honourable as she argues for a young adult literature that does not rely on old narratives, instead building new ones which break boundaries and work on fresh ground. Her desire for a critical landscape which was actually critical is also laudable, although many publishing in the area of young adult and children's fiction were already using different methods of literary criticism (Macintyre, 1994; Nieuwenhuizen, 1994; Nimon and Foster, 1994; Aronson, 1997; Sheahan-Bright, 1997; Beckett, 1999; Sheahan-Bright, 1999).

There is also an ideological flaw in campaigning for more rigorous scrutiny within the critical literature to identify and question the ideologies within young adult literature. It is the same flaw inherent in criticising the literature's outdated and hegemonic stereotypes (particularly those relating to representations of gender and the family) as this implicitly argues for the production of narratives which avoid these stereotypes. The flaw is this: each argument assumes a passive young adult readership.

Firstly, broader, more in-depth research in young adult literature is always welcome, but Scutter's criticism that a lack of rigorous examination allows the transmission of undesirable ideologies to young readers is presumptuous. This attitude has *Displaced Fictions* waving its protectionist banner high above the same young readers it seeks to liberate and enlighten.

Secondly, as can be seen from the inconclusive results of Kathleen Bokey's study, teenage readers are not simply going to absorb and reproduce the outdated stereotypes they find in books. While having yet another text in the media in which the traditional nuclear family is held high above all else (Scutter, 1999a, p. 215-222) isn't going to directly assist in breaking down traditional institutions of oppression, books for young readers cannot attempt to set ideological examples if they are to retain their credibility and avoid the charge of didacticism.

### **The Australian Dark Ages: The Nihilistic Nineties**

The 1990s in Australia saw an expansion in the popularity of young adult literature. Margaret Heuschele lists indicators of this growth as including:

- The establishment of the Centre for Youth Literature;
- The inception of *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*;
- State literary awards beginning to carry youth divisions; and
- The publication of seminal works such as Maureen Nimon and John Foster's *The Adolescent Novel: Australian perspectives* and Heather Scutter's *Displaced Fictions: Contemporary Australian Fiction for Teenagers and Young Adults* (Heuschele, 2007, p. 19-20).

The CYL's publication of the afore-mentioned reading guides: *Good Books for Teenagers* and *More Good Books for Teenagers* could also be added to this list.

The development of young adult literature in Australia during that time also saw the rise of local authors who worked in the area, for example: Margaret Clark, Gary Crew, Sonya Hartnett, James Moloney, Melina Marchetta and Gillian Rubinstein. None were more popular or successful than John Marsden, owing largely to the success of his *Tomorrow* series. Agnes Nieuwenhuizen noted in 1995 that ‘... at times [Australian authors] seem both more willing and determined to grapple with the big questions of our times’ (Nieuwenhuizen, 1995, p. xi).

Increased popularity meant an increased media focus. As early as 1994, both the mainstream media and the critical literature began raising concerns about the subject matter of the books that teenagers were reading. This was partly because of the language they contained (Kroll, 1996), but a broader concern centred loosely around the issue of ‘hope’ (Heuschele, 2007, p. 33). Arguably the most influential source regarding the issue of ‘hope’ was the article ‘Life Sucks, Timmy’ published in *The Australian Magazine* in 1997 by journalist Kate Legge. Legge did not specialise in young adult literature, or literature research in general, short of the research done for the piece, and obviously *The Australian Magazine* is not a peer-reviewed source. However, her nationally published article received wide-ranging attention from many researchers and academics within the field of children’s literature and is cited in numerous research papers, books, articles and theses (including this one). Both Bokey and Heuschele refer to it in their theses. Its influence on the landscape of Australian young adult literature is undeniable.



Legge, and others who would follow her lead, focused in particular on John Marsden and his ‘tougher’ novels *So Much To Tell You* (1987), *Checkers* (1996) and *Dear Miffy* (1997), all of which have realistic settings and bleak outcomes. Legge cites many statistics regarding youth suicide and quotes publishers Walter McVitty and Pam McIntyre discussing the state of contemporary writing for young people:

I have been in this area a long while and the writing is just so much tougher. (Pam McIntyre cited in Legge, 1997, p. 12)

For a lot of kids the world is a pretty terrible place, but why rub their noses in it? Writers with experience ought to be able to say, ‘Life sucks but you’ve got to pull yourselves out of this mess’. It is almost unheard-of for a book about a family to win an award these days unless Dad is bashing up his de facto, the daughter is on drugs, and the son is a homosexual with AIDS. (Walter McVitty in Legge, 1997, p. 12)<sup>4</sup>

Legge set something of a template for concern about young readers which conflated reading with experience and this (read) experience with long-term, real-life, negative effects arising from an inability to deal with unhappy and difficult themes (Nichol, 1997, p. 10). Young adult authors like Gillian Rubinstein and Margaret Clark and researchers like Maureen Nimon found themselves defending the literature in both the mainstream media (Parry and Clark, 1997; Rubinstein, 1997) and specialised literary publications (Nimon, 1997, p. 266-267). In a letter

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<sup>4</sup> It is unclear which book or books McVitty might be referring to in this instance.

published in *The Australian*, Rubinstein makes the simple point that Legge's article and its supporters were simplifying young adult literature by reporting on a few examples: 'not all young people read John Marsden' (Rubinstein, 1997, p. 20). Margaret Clark wrote: 'This year, 11 of my books will be published, 10 of which are humorous and one, *Care Factor Zero*, which is concerning mental dysfunction, teenage suicide and sexual confusion' (Parry and Clark, 1997). That same year Maureen Nimon wrote in *Orana* that *Dear Miffy*, as singled out by Legge, drew attention because it was atypical of young adult literature and teenage experience in general (Nimon, 1997, p. 266), a fact Heuschele's study would later confirm (2007).

## Landscape

Australian authors ... are particularly likely to foreground place. (Comber and Nixon, 2000, p. 187)

An important factor that has helped to differentiate Australian young adult fiction (indeed much Australian art in general) from its international counterparts is the unique Australian landscape in which it is set. Whether the landscape plays a large or small role in a novel, the critical literature devoted to examining setting makes clear an indisputable dichotomy: 'country versus the city, rural versus urban, nature versus society' (Turner, 1986, p. 25). This bush/city binary has framed a great deal of critical discussion regarding representation, with particular reference to gender and post-colonial theory.

While this chapter will not attempt to cover the breadth and history of the discourse on landscape in Australian literature, there are two key facets which are necessary to cover in the context of this exegesis: the bush/city binary and the suburban setting. This thesis' creative component relies on the contrasts between these spaces and upon metaphors of setting to convey its themes of desire and power.

## Bush

Nimon and Foster (1997) go into some detail about the particular effect that the Australian continent has had on the national imagination over the previous 220 years. They point out that colonialism as a historical experience can be generalised to other predominantly white, English-speaking nations such as New Zealand and the United States, as well as Australia. But Australia's harsh landscape and distinct lack of wealth (especially in comparison to North America) threw a dark shadow of disappointment, failure and death over our colonial history. In describing pre-colonial Dutch voyages, Nimon and Foster could also be discussing most attempts to explore the Australian interior in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries:

Voyages of months or even years revealed sun-scorched rocky plains disappearing into the shimmering heat haze of the horizon, or equally unpromising, if more fertile areas, defended by hostile natives. (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 32)

Australia's unique landscape and fauna have historically been staples of its children's literature. Nimon and Foster speculate that market forces and a need to differentiate Australian publishers and authors may have had at least some influence over the proliferation of place and its animal inhabitants in Australian children's literature (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 30). A point at which Australian authors begin to distinguish themselves is by the skill with which they incorporated these uniquely Australian settings into their work. '[T]he physical dimensions of Australia were seen as challenges to the maturing individual' (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 30). These challenges came ready-made for the *bildungsroman*-style tales that characterise young adult literature.

The natural Australian environment (as opposed to the unnatural, built city, which will be covered in the following section) has been used in the fiction produced for young people since the market first emerged. A predilection for rural or bush settings in Australian young adult fiction can be identified by a cursory examination of early Australian titles for young people.

Margaret Heuschele's study examines the trends for rural settings in more detail between 1980 and 2000. While overall only 33 percent of the books sampled were set in a mainly rural location, in 1980 and 1981 every book sampled had a rural setting. The story of the protagonist encountering and dealing with the rural landscape has often been used and critiqued in Australian young adult fiction, although Maurice Saxby has also observed a recent decline in young adult novels with traditional rural settings: 'The land itself as a symbol of endurance, with humanity pitted against relentless bad seasons, endures only in novels such as

David Metzenthen's *Johnny Hart's Heroes* (1996)' (Saxby, 1997, p. 367). Further contemporary examples of the Australian rural landscape include John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series (1993 – 1999), David Metzenthen's *Stony Heart Country* (1999), Tony Shillitoe's *Caught in the Headlights* (2003), Lucy Christopher's *Stolen* (2009) and Deb Fitzpatrick's *90 packets of instant noodles* (2010). Each of these narratives use the rural landscape as a useful setting for the characters to work with, rather than conquer.

Critical literature that discusses these “hero versus nature” texts often codes the rural landscape as feminine, submitting to a dominant, colonialist force (Pennell, 1997; James, 2009). In *Death, gender and sexuality in contemporary adolescent literature*, Kathryn James discusses the role of the ‘hero’ narrative in constructing texts for young people:

The valorisation of the “Australian legend”, even in contemporary historical fictions produced for Australian youth audiences, suggests that the myth is an especially enduring one. At least in part, this trend is due to the tendency of the genre to invoke past systems of meaning, and to use the hero as a pedagogic device for teaching children about history. (James, 2009, p. 54)

## City

For over one hundred years Australian youth literature was set in the bush, on stations, and the ‘outback’ was a testing ground for young manhood

and womanhood. The vast majority of teenage books now have urban settings, reflecting the move away from the country to the cities. (Saxby, 1997, p. 367)

Saxby may be slightly guilty here of hyperbole when he says ‘vast majority’. At the time he published *Books in the Life of a Child: Bridges to Literature and Learning*, just over 71 percent of young adult books published were set in urban areas (Heuschele, 2007, p. 351). Heuschele observed this change as it occurred over the course of her twenty-year study and 1997 and 1998 were identified as the years in which urban settings in young adult novels were at their highest. After this, the balance settled somewhat to approximately 60/40 in favour of urban settings.

This tendency to divide Australia into two convenient areas pervades much of the research. Heuschele also includes the urban/rural distinction, but her study differs from other critical works by including a third location: coastal. However, she does not give a reason for the addition of this third category.

Defining a setting as either ‘rural’ or ‘urban’ may be useful at the macro level, but in order to accurately examine setting it is necessary to identify some sub-divisions. Heuschele’s ‘coastal’ setting goes some way towards this. She takes her definition from the Macquarie Dictionary: ‘occurring on the land next to the sea, including small to medium towns situated on the coast’ (Heuschele, 2007, p. 236). However, this is not distinct from her definition of a ‘rural’ setting: ‘relating to or characteristic of the country, including small to medium country towns where the

rural culture dominates’ (p. 236). This definition was taken from Kathleen Bokey’s thesis, which has already been identified as a less-than-reliable source.

No further definition of ‘rural culture’ is offered and it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to deduce its meaning here; suffice it to say that ‘rural culture’ appears to be anything which can be defined as ‘not urban’. However, books with coastal settings, such as Phillip Gwynne’s *Deadly, Unna?* (1998), Tim Winton’s *Lockie Leonard* series (1990 – 1997) and Sue Whiting’s *Get a Grip Cooper Jones* (2010) are, by definition, ‘not urban’ and many, particularly those like *Deadly, Unna?*, could be defined as containing strong elements of ‘rural culture’. This points to a flaw within attempts to generalise the non-urban experience of young adults.

What Heuschele’s research does show is that after 1989, urban locations dominated the books in her sample. After 1995, the number of books set in predominantly urban locations was at least double that of those which took place in a rural setting (Heuschele, 2007, p. 351). Generalisations aside, the stories in young adult books are now more likely to take place in cities, towns and built-up areas. In order to make better sense of this move, it is now necessary to break out the zoning permits and council boundaries: suburbia beckons.

### **The suburbs**

Beverly Pennell examines the ‘urban’ setting in her article ‘Post-Colonial Resignification of Domestic Spatiality in Australian Children’s Fiction’ (1997) and finds it an insufficient and inaccurate descriptor, particularly when discussing

the contemporary young adult novel. She begins by examining the traditional, rurally-located origins of the Australian young adult novel, which sprang from the pastoral idyll/adventure or the outback disaster adventure: ‘The dialectic of these two contending paradigms of spatiality within the Australian cultural context offers an explanation for the suppression of the suburb as the spatial framework for Australian children’s fiction.’ (Pennell, 1997, p.39)

The central problem is that the contemporary young adult experience is not a typically ‘urban’ one, set among the built up cityscapes and business districts, rather, it takes place in suburban settings. Suburbia appears to be a much more suitable place in which to set a contemporary young adult novel because the ‘suburbs are hybridised sites with many cultures’ (Pennell, 1997, p. 42). Chris McAuliffe, writing about the development of Australian artists in the early 1980s (the period during which a defined young adult literature began to emerge), also notes that the suburbs are ‘rich, complex and inviting symbolic form’ and that they were becoming a space in which identity could be explored (McAuliffe, 1994, p. 110). Suburbia provides an environment in which much of the contemporary young reader’s identity is formed – whether in reality, or through the discourses to which they are subjected; the stories they are told about themselves. This relatively modern space can move away from the restrictive binaries of ‘bush/city’ against which the protagonist must struggle to emerge as the grown up hero of their own story.

Pennell identifies a duality in contemporary literary representations of suburbia which allows it to serve as both foil and mirror for complex, modern stories of



young adults constructing their emerging adult selves. Suburbia can be both an “actual place” and “always in a state of transformation”, as well as “an imagined place” largely constructed from memories’ (Pennell, 1997, p. 42). The hybridity of suburbia allows for a multitude of different narratives which do not need to rely on setting for their form. Pennell outlines the ways in which colonial and post-colonial narratives have shaped the way that the landscape is used in Australian fiction as a ‘spatial framework where archetypal myths were enacted’ (p. 39). Suburbia is not a space which requires conquest or submission.

Pennell further examines the development of young adult subjectivity through the ways in which young adult author Simon French uses suburbia as a dynamic metaphor for the change and development of young adult protagonists:

Spatiality and temporality are represented as intertwined and it is suggested that every place is invested with joys, sorrows and secrets by those who have known it both in the past and in the present. Most certainly, too, every place, like every person, will suffer change. (p. 46)

The Australian colonial landscape, once derided for its natural inferiority to idyllic England and represented as a place of contest and conquest, has developed into the contemporary Australian landscape. It is now made up of ‘hybridised sites with many cultures’ (p. 42) and has become a positive, multi-faceted setting, eminently suitable and identifiable for Australian young adult readers.

## Chapter 3 – Class in Australian young adult literature

### Introduction – Why class?

A study of social class representations in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish romance novels should not produce the same results as a study into class representations in contemporary Australian young adult novels. The stereotypes depicted may share similarities, but each are received and understood by their intended audiences in different ways. A young adult audience is at the very stage in their lives where they are beginning to experience the limits of their agency and where societal oppression and the barriers to power for themselves and others are very real; for example, the laws governing schooling. These systems of control are in place regardless of whatever class position they occupy by dint of birth. Regardless of whether the young adult table is set up in the drawing room of a Toorak mansion or out the back of a Dubbo caravan park, those sitting around it will only be able to eat and drink what they've been given. They are not welcome at the adults' table and attempts at interloping attract generally negative reactions. Young people don't begin to successfully break through these barriers until the firsts and changes of young adulthood begin to fade into the past. Nodelman and Reimer provide a useful milestone here, observing that 'triumph-of-the-underdog' stories for young people almost always conclude in the same way:

... (1) that in every situation there always has to be a winner and a loser, so that a happy ending requires not just someone's triumph but also

someone else's defeat; (2) that the best way to win is to have the individual power to take control and win by one's own action; and (3) that a truly happy ending occurs only when a person who was oppressed achieves a position in which it's possible to oppress others. (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 157)

Since, as outlined in Chapter 1, young adult literature comprises some form of transformation from a child to an adult (or an underdog position to an oppressive one), this idea can also be applied to the young adult's experience of their own subjection to power and class structure. Young adults can be said to have moved 'up' when they themselves have the opportunity to oppress others; an experience analogous to moving to the adults' table and deciding what the younger guests will have to eat.

Young adults are subject to the effects of oppression, as is any member of contemporary society who aspires to a higher position within it. It could be argued that young adults experience this oppression more keenly, because they experience the oppression imposed by the social structures of which they are a part, while also being subjected to the oppressions visited upon them by members of their own societal group. These are the powerful players of the young adult world: the physically strong, the aesthetically gifted and the faceless, mediocre majority, often embodied as peer pressure. These actors, along with others, are all in some way oppressors of the contemporary young adult. Placing these actors and conditions within young adult stories requires a definitive understanding of what tropes of power and oppression they represent and exactly how they operate.

### Why Australian class?

The fact that there has been a great body of work published as adolescent or young adult literature in Australia since the late 1960s and early 1970s establishes the claim that there are Australian novels for adolescents, but does not demonstrate *per se* that there has been a specifically *Australian* contribution to the adolescent novel. (Nimon and Foster, 1997, p. 19)

Nimon and Foster observe no particular distinction between the Australian young adult novel and any other nationality. Young adult literature from the United Kingdom, North America and New Zealand all deal with many of the same essential issues and themes relevant to readers of that age and so examining a particular facet from one nationality (in this case, representations of class) could therefore be pointless. This is not necessarily so. Social class plays a particular role in Australian young adult literature and the limited research into the area does not attempt to differentiate from or compare it to other national literatures. In most cases, critical texts on class published by Australians refer only to Australian young adult publications. Although Australian young adult literature shares some facets of class representation with other national literatures, there are characteristics particular to Australian young adult novels that are worthy of examination.

### **Definition – A problem of scope**

The previous section has already mentioned the relatively small amount of broad-ranging studies into Australian young adult literature. Examples of research into certain aspects of the literature are more plentiful, even if much discussion of young adult literature still falls under the banner of ‘children’s literature’. One aspect lacking from the wide range of published research is a significant body of work examining social class in Australian young adult literature. Only three articles have been published on the subject in the last ten years and all were published in the same journal: *Papers: Explorations into Children’s Literature*. Other sources and studies make reference to social class, but often no more than a paragraph or two as part of a discussion of some other aspect of young adult literature. While it may prove worthwhile to examine the reasons for this lack of research, again it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to do so in any conclusive manner. This chapter will examine the three articles mentioned above, along with the sections of various publications which discuss social class in Australian young adult literature.

### **Definition – First things first: which one?**

An attempt to discover a useful definition of social class in contemporary Australia would require its own thesis. Works discussing class in young adult literature will often use the language of class discourse without providing any guidance or context. The journal articles mentioned above contain no conclusive definitions of variously: “lower class”, “working class”, “middle class” or “upper class”. The meanings of these phrases are assumed knowledge within the

literature and it is necessary to look to other sources for an insight into what these social class terms mean and how they can be applied in the context of Australian young adult literature.

Context is important in this instance because the intended audience of young adult literature will not necessarily ascribe to any definition of class which positions them anywhere within the traditional structures governing Marx and Engels' 'means of production' (Marx and Engels, 1972 [1924]). Raewyn Connell demonstrated in her 1977 study on class attitudes in children that young people have an awareness of class, but not enough to be able to define and then conflate the experiences of a fifteen year old child in a working-class family with those of his thirty-six year old mother (Connell, 1977, p. 145).

Daniel O'Hara comes closer to a useful definition for use within young adult literature when he discusses Jon Elster's pronouncement on the essential futility of attempting to reach a modern definition of class. Elster, working to define Marx's theories on class, stated that 'We shall not find what we want in any single criterion, but discussion of them will enable us to construct a notion that appears fairly adequate, even if also quite complex' (Elster, 1985, p. 322). This fluid definition with its emphasis on complexity is useful when discussing class in contemporary young adult literature because it agrees with the fluidity of the area itself. O'Hara expands upon this notion of negotiable class meanings for individuals and groups, placing this fluidity in the context of story-telling and literature:

[A] class emerges to select one of several real options in a symbolic setting in which its members reciprocally recognize their rational, self-interested, and necessarily mutual respect because of overlapping intentions to keep possession of and/or significantly enhance their “endowments”. This symbolic setting or recognition scene is the story, the narrative that the members of a class tell and repeat, with revisions, about themselves and their group in-(re-)formation. (O’Hara, 1995, p. 416-7)

Using the idea that young adults, as a societal group, have their own experience of class, it is possible to imagine, therefore, young adults ‘telling and repeating, with revisions’ (p. 417) this experience among themselves and recognising the value in doing so. The value is in the discursive activity which creates ‘symbolic settings’, ‘recognition scenes’ or, most importantly for discussing literature, stories. Young adult literature thus becomes a site for the discussion and reproduction of social class experiences. Criticism which recognises the role that a text plays in this discussion, construction and reproduction (Elster, 1985) will be more effective than that which does not. This approach is better suited to addressing representations of class without speaking on behalf of young adults, as discussed in Chapter 1.

### **An Australian definition of class in young adult literature or As If This Couldn’t Get Much More Complicated**

An Australian definition of class in young adult literature is, as mentioned above, a difficult prospect because of the scarcity of literature which mentions the

subject, let alone examines it in any detail. A stretching of boundaries is required if this exegesis is to approach something which can be considered useful in a young adult context.

Research that discusses class in the context of Australian literature can be a valuable place to begin as these texts do offer definitions. In *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind* (1990) Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra identify the complicated beginnings of Australia's colonial history as a basis for the complicated process of defining class two hundred years later: '... it is significant that even today middle-class Australians accept a definition of their national identity represented in terms that derive from radical working-class ideals' (Hodge and Mishra, 1990, p. xiii).

Hodge and Mishra argue that the displacement of class structures inherited from Britain, coupled with the alliances that arose from conflicts with both that distant seat of empire and the more immediately threatening traditional landowners, produced a refreshed set of class rules which 'were reflected in everyday experience as well as in ideological forms, and they entered into text under both guises' (Hodge and Mishra, 1990, p. xiii-ix). R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving agree with this portrayal and provide a detailed account of this development in *Class Structure in Australian History* (Connell and Irving, 1992).

Identification and discussion of class in Australian literature, particularly in sociological texts, will often focus on the working class. A common and simplified representation works from Marx's original principle: 'The history of all



hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ (Marx and Engels, 1848 [1970], p30). Diane Fieldes, using Marxist analysis to write about class struggle in the 1990s, examines the working class role and behaviour and gives a definition of the working class thus: ‘We understand the working class to be those who do not own or control the means of production, who must therefore sell to employers their ability to work, and who exercise no substantial degree of control over their own labour or the labour of others’ (Fieldes, 1996, p. 22).

Author Emily Maguire refines this definition of the working class, placing it within a modern Australian context. She maintains a focus on labour and this provides some context for the conditions which produce a working-class existence and from where it draws its contemporary narratives: ‘The new working class comprises not only factory workers and labourers but retail workers, data entry operators, cleaners and all kinds of workers who are paid by the hour, who have minimal job security and little to no bargaining power in the workplace’ (Maguire, 2009, p. 12).

Her definition was left deliberately broad to accommodate the wide range of contemporary gradations in class structure. Connell and Irving discuss the tendency of contemporary discourse on class towards gradation. They go into some detail about the possible methods of identifying Australian classes, from the dichotomous ‘elite’ vs. ‘mass’ to the almost as inadequate ‘continuous scale’ which may also result from on-going attempts to categorically define different classes. Ultimately, they, like Elster and O’Hara, find that rigid categorisation is

an ineffective method of discussing representations of class because of the necessary omissions which occur.

Categorical theory ... is intrinsically unable to explain historical changes. It can *map* some changes (e.g. social mobility or the ‘circulation of elites’ over time) but cannot account for them, especially those changes which reconstruct the categories themselves. (Connell and Irving, 1992, p. 4)

In terms of literature analysis, this mapping of change may be useful for looking at a particular text, but any set of rules arrived at would require endless recalibration and explanation to adequately address the differences of narrative, author, voice, character, etc. which exist between two different texts. Broad definitions and acknowledgement of the categories’ fluidity seem a comfortable fit for talking about the genre-spanning area of young adult literature.

### **Class outside of the text: the book as symbolic product**

A great deal of research into class and literature does not delve into the literature itself. While researchers like R.W. Connell and Terry Eagleton examine literature through the lens of class, this is just one of the subjects on which they publish work. They examine the conditions under which literature is produced because literature is viewed as one of the analysable products of class struggle: ‘To understand literature ... means understanding the total social process of which it is part’ (Eagleton, 1976, p. 5-6). In this context, literature is viewed as a measure of real-world class experience. Heather Scutter agrees with this link between

society and literature, putting forward the idea that art represents a picture of society: ‘That picture might be selective, distorted, exaggerated, demonstrably false, but analysis of what is foregrounded, what is suppressed, what is omitted, even misrepresented, tell us a great deal about the ideological forces operating in that society’ (Scutter, 1999a, p. 161).

An example of the deficiencies inherent in this ‘literature-as-product’ approach is Robin Morrow’s examination of the worlds created in Australian children’s picture books. Her analysis identified a range of class representations, but not a wide one. She concludes that the texts were missing the lived reality of the working-class existence, characterised by ‘unemployed parents or frantically busy ones with real jobs, the absence of cheek-by-jowl living conditions, the lack of such realities as family day care or child care centres, of fast food, of litter on the streets’ (Morrow, 1999, p. 72). Here, her analyses took the rare step (for criticism of Australian literature for young people) beyond the textual to the producers: the authors (ignoring the publishers – itself a telling omission). She surmised that the lack of representations of the working class was the result of the limited milieu from which Australian authors and illustrators arise, and that these artists depicted ‘what they know and most, although not wealthy, know a world of tastefully restored furniture in chic neighbourhoods or on rural hobby farms’ (p. 72). This concern regarding authorial origin appears to mirror the concern regarding authorial intent discussed in Chapter 1. It assumes that the limited (which, in this context, means ‘sheltered’ and ‘middle-class’) experience of authors can only translate into limited (‘sheltered’, ‘middle-class’) representations of class experiences in literature for young people. This concern that authors cannot help

but create texts which transmit their own class experiences and ideologies parallels the concerns outlined in Chapter 1 that young readers will be unable to resist them. Daphne Kutzer joins Morrow here in the protectionist camp, stating quite definitively: ‘Writers, including writers for children, have political ideologies that, perhaps unconsciously, creep into their work’ (Kutzer, 1998, p. 196). While Morrow’s article is useful for its identification of the voices and stories lacking from children’s literature’s, making baseless assumptions about the origins of its producers is less so.

### **Enough of what it isn’t. Tell us what it is.**

This final section of this chapter will examine and define representations of social class in Australian young adult literature. This will provide a basis for the final two chapters of this exegesis to demonstrate how social class can be used to define this unique literature and how this understanding was used to produce the creative work.

To this end, this chapter will now examine two texts which specifically deal with representations and questions of social class within Australian young adult literature. Some parts of each text are unsuccessful for various reasons, whether they are methodologically unsound or otherwise, but each is an important guest at the dollhouse-sized dinner table around which the voices of discourse on class are gathered.

### **Robin Pope – Class Matters in Some Recent Australian Literature (2001)**

The introduction to Pope's article is a prime example of the almost apologist stance taken by Australian critics when discussing class in young adult literature. She begins the article, not by outlining her argument or introducing her subject texts, but by acknowledging and speculating upon the minor attention given to discussions of class: '... late twentieth century explorations of social class, especially as it is represented in Australian children's texts, are indeed infrequent' (Pope, 2001, p. 38).

Pope selects two works for discussion and analysis: Margo Lanagan's *The Best Thing* (1995) and David Metzenthen's *Stony Heart Country* (1999). They are identified as suitable because the growth of each text's protagonist is directly linked to 'the influences of social class' and each has clearly delineated class sections: blue and white collar, working and middle (Pope, 2001, p. 38). Pope uses Marx's divisions of bourgeoisie and proletariat, but notions of fluid class markers are either elided or ignored. This could potentially be due to limitations of space, but the actual reasoning is unclear.

Originally presented as a conference paper and subsequently published in the journal *Papers*, Pope's article is one of a handful which directly examine the issue of class in Australian young adult literature. Its existence is almost as important to the discourse as what it says about class representation. However, Pope's analysis still retains elements of the protectionist attitude covered earlier. For example: 'Much has been written ... about how texts position their readers, encouraging

them through various narrative strategies, to occupy particular subject positions’ (Pope, 2001, p. 38). While it may be the case that texts do encourage their readers to occupy a subject position, Pope goes on to compare this encouragement with the influence of a range of other factors.

This experience is very much part of childhood experience as a whole, when children learn from family, friends, school, and perhaps church or other institutions (the State ideological apparatuses of Marxism as defined by ... Althusser), the various subject positions they are able to occupy in relation to the rest of their society. (p. 38)

The implication here is that the experience of reading a book is just as influential as the experience of growing up in a family or attending school. Books can indeed be powerful tools, but Pope’s article accepts their implied influence and contains no notion of a sophisticated, critical young reader who is able to decide what effects a text will have upon them. Pope’s argument conflates the occupation of a subject position in the narrative with the occupation of that position in real life. As with the protectionist literature discussed in Chapter 1, Pope provides no evidence to show the causal link between reading about oppression and experiencing its effects.

The remainder of Pope’s article focuses on the representations of class in two Australian young adult books, rather than the results of reading about these effects. She ultimately concludes that ‘for *all* readers ... the naturalisation of social hierarchies offers only continued acceptance of social class divisions as

fundamental to Australian economic and social structures ... [and that] readers will find it difficult to perceive such hierarchies as anything but inevitable' (p. 43). The concern that readers will absorb the ideologies represented within the narrative and accept them unquestioned is quite plain. The idea that young people will enact the oppressive ideologies they consume through media restricts Pope's article as a useful source of analysis.

**Elizabeth Bullen – A sporting chance: Class in Marcus Zusak's *The Messenger* and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (2006)**

Bullen's article is one of the few examples of class critique which does not attempt to discern authorial intent or audience reaction from the content of the text. This is a practice which, as discussed, results in readings like Morrow's or Pope's which draw sociological conclusions about class from a single literary text. Instead, Bullen acknowledges the success of Zusak's novels in presenting the stories of class which they set out to depict. This approach subsequently illustrates their success as young adult texts. The novels examined realistically present the young adult experience neither didactically nor gratuitously, and leave the intended audience to draw their own conclusions. Bullen writes of both novels: 'Neither celebrating nor demonizing the worlds their characters inhabit, they reveal the interrelationship between positional suffering and agency' (Bullen, 2006, p. 49). Here, Bullen is using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of positional suffering, or '*petite misere*' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 4), to describe 'the ordinary everyday suffering which produces disappointment, disaffection, and low-self-worth' (Bullen, 2006, p. 46). *La petite misere* arises from one's experiences from

within one's own class position as well as being related to one's position in society: 'people who, like the bass player in the orchestra, occupy an inferior, obscure position in a prestigious and privileged universe' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 4). A broader point can be made about the function of class representations within young adult literature and this is that 'literary texts are able to provide insight into positional suffering via point of view, focalization and reader positioning' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 46). Bullen's is one of the very few voices that recognises the inherent importance of insight in itself to a young reader, rather than the presumed function of such insight (ie. to indoctrinate, convert or cause trauma).

Bullen also emphasises the need for and presence of multiple viewpoints in Zusak's novels, ones which do not simply contain an implicit acceptance of the primacy of the insular middle classes (Saxby, 1997; Morrow, 1999; Scutter, 1999a). Bullen identifies the success of the two novels in solving this problem of middle-class glorification: '*Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *The Messenger* avoid stigmatizing the classes they represent by proposing ways in which the characters might overcome positional suffering within their own class location' (Bullen, 2006, p. 50).

It should be noted that even Bullen goes on to speculate whether Zusak, in providing his characters with an alternative to success or failure measured purely in terms of class ascension, has simply encoded a 'passive acceptance of the existence of hardship and the "unfairness" of the class "game"' (p. 50). However, instead of making this assumption, Bullen leaves this question unanswered, allowing for social class representations which do not rely upon a range of



narratives limited by their critically perceived effects upon young readers. These narratives of class will be examined further in the context of Australian young adult literature in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4 – Class as a metaphor for power in Australian young adult literature

Narratives using class in Australian young adult literature are largely variations on the subject of oppression. Characters are either subjected to class oppression, as is most often the case, or are its proponents. These characters experience this oppression from within a limited number of class positions. The section of this chapter entitled ‘**Very Classy: Definitions of social class in Australian young adult literature**’, will define these positions using examples from contemporary Australian young adult literature and from the creative component of the thesis. These examples will then be used to demonstrate how, although this range of social class positions is not particularly diverse or nuanced, its hierarchical structure reflects the structure of many power-based hierarchies in the literature.

Each class position described in this chapter is represented as a static position which can be occupied by a character at different times on their narrative journey. As has been demonstrated, young adult literature’s narratives are dependent on growth, development and change. Therefore, even more important than how a character’s position is depicted at a particular stage of their narrative is the representation of movement between those positions. The second section of this chapter, entitled ‘**Movement**’, will demonstrate how the depiction of movement between both class and power positions defines the very form of the Australian young adult novel. This will also be demonstrated using examples from contemporary Australian young adult literature and from the creative work.

## **Firstly, an introduction to social class as a metaphor for power hierarchies**

Australian young adult literature depends on narrative journeys in which characters travel from one level of a power hierarchy to another. Social class is the key to understanding how these journeys are constructed and the ways in which they function within these stories. This chapter will show how social class can be used as a direct metaphor for the power structures in Australian young adult literature.

There are three levels of social class depicted in the Australian young adult novels examined in the thesis: ‘lower’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’. The following section will define each stratum in terms of its identifiable characteristics and discuss the way each is depicted. This three-tiered structure will then serve as a template for other power hierarchies. Once the static positions in these hierarchies are understood using the metaphor of social class, the movement between each hierarchical tier can be understood as a metaphor for the developmental journeys which define the literature.

## **Very Classy: Definitions of social class in Australian young adult literature**

Representations of social class are rarely a major feature in Australian young adult narratives. If a character’s class position is mentioned, it is usually as a component of the broader setting and must be inferred from the experiences of the characters. This is because most stories take place within a single stratum of

social class (most often the middle class) and movement up or down is not a feature of the story. This makes practical sense. Characters do not need to acknowledge or discuss their middle-class status any more than their Australian residence, unless moving between classes (or, indeed, countries) is an important aspect of the story. In Vikki Wakefield's *All I Ever Wanted* (2011) the main character, Mim, is focused on moving classes and, while she definitely has class awareness, it is never expressed in such dry terms as 'working', 'middle' or 'upper'. Instead she explains her class position and associated desire for movement in practical terms:

It's not that I hate poor people. Or people who are having shitty luck. I hate *being* poor ... I hate that I have to fight to get out because nobody holds the door open and wishes you a good trip. (Wakefield, 2011, p. 114)

The following sections will further examine the ways in which the literature depicts each class position. A useful place to begin is by defining the three terms 'working', 'middle' and 'upper'. This will outline the practical differences between each stratum and put in place the structure for working with other hierarchies of power.

### **Poor = good: The sentimentalisation and glorification of the working class**

Social class may be a determinant of housing and other possessions, the author is pointing out, but not of happiness. (Foster, 1995, p. 98)

Working-class narratives are often identified as being told from within a working-class setting and will generally emphasise the simplicity, comfort and even honour attached to a working-class existence (as outlined by Hodge and Mishra in Chapter 3). Working-class characters are often depicted as satisfied with their societal position, especially when the story does not develop around aspirational components. Examples of these comfortable, simple portrayals in young adult texts are the workers and renters in *The house that was Eureka* (Wheatley, 1984); the factory workers in *Stony Heart Country* (Metzenthen, 1999); Cameron and Ruben Wolfe in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *Getting the Girl* (Zusak, 2000, 2001); Ed in *The Messenger* (Zusak, 2002); and the semi-monastic Jim and Hemi in *Wavelength* (Betts, 2010). In each case, the working-class characters are portrayed without serious aspiration for upward class mobility. Again, this makes practical sense because including this aspirational component would change the focus of the story. As Bullen notes, this may de-emphasise the practical hardships attached to a working-class existence (Bullen, 2006).

A different representation of the working class occurs when it is depicted from a middle-class point of view. This paints the working class as being happy, safe and loving in comparison to the staid, conservative middle-class home: ‘... the humbly happy poor and the miserable middle-classes’ (Scutter, 1999a, p. 211). Heather Scutter uses Robin Klein’s representations of the desirable mayhem in the working-class family to observe not only attitudes towards class, but also gender. This type of representation might appear to be more favourable in comparison to the simple, working-class characters discussed above, devoid of class aspiration and largely unaffected by the experiences that define a low socio-

economic status. However, both these characters and those who are represented as not only satisfied with their lot, but who have actively chosen their class position, assume an encoded oppression designed to resist class elevation and maintain the *status quo* (Scutter, 1999a; Bullen, 2006). This thesis has already dealt with the presumed effects of consuming media that contain specific social, political or cultural messages. However, the existence of this middle-class gaze, both within texts and assumed by them, is broad-reaching across young adult literature and, as will be demonstrated, intrinsic to its structure. Examples of this trope include Erika Yurkin's home life in *Hating Alison Ashley* (Klein, 1984; Scutter, 1999a); Lockie Leonard's family in *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo* (Winton, 1990); Jack and his father's masculine, caring relationship in *My Private Pectus* (Thamm, 2009); Tala's smiling Samoan family in *Headgames* (Lever, 2010); and Pug as initially viewed by Mel in *The Best Thing* (Lanagan, 1995). Robyn Pope describes how the middle-class gaze operates when focused upon the working class in her discussion of *The Best Thing*: 'Working-class lifestyle is represented through Mel's observations as diegetic spectator of Pug and his family, the Magninis, whom she sees as noisy and argumentative (to the point of being chaotic), but loyal and family oriented (they shower her with gifts for the baby)' (Pope, 2001, p. 39).

A convergence of both of the sentimental and glorified depictions of the working class can also be found in the neat, happy ending of Wakefield's *All I Ever Wanted*. Mim spends the entire book despising her low social class and desperate for escape. She sees everyone around her as both the victims and proponents of the worst aspects of working-class existence: violence, laziness, hunger, fear,

crime, drugs, sex work and low self-worth. By the book's ending, these impressions are mostly revealed to be the products of her own misunderstanding or lack of knowledge. Instead of an environment worth escaping, Mim discovers multiple elements of familial love and personal strength which she had wrongly assumed to be absent. The nasty neighbour, Mrs Tkautz, hissing 'godless child', is in fact a kindly old stroke victim, whispering 'god *bless* child' to a girl she considers family. Her own mother, the very picture of the slovenly criminal matriarch, is arranging for Mim's dreams of escape to come true, in conjunction with the preparations to adopt a child. These characters who exist below the poverty line are both reflective about and mostly satisfied with their lives.

The completion of Mim's narrative journey with the crucial step towards adulthood and self-realisation is firmly connected to a sentimental portrayal of the working class. Her desire for escape from the practical negatives of her working-class experience is entirely replaced by the knowledge that her situation, and that of those around her, is satisfactory and even preferable. As the story winds towards its conclusion, Mim's elderly neighbour asks her 'Have you ever considered that some people here are exactly where they want to be? What if we're not all stuck?' (Wakefield, 2011, p.166-7).

These and other working-class characters lead proud existences rather than dissatisfied ones. Their lack of social power corresponds with the lack of agential power that the viewpoint character of young adult literature generally possesses. In order for a young target audience to identify with a character, it is usually important that they are not alienated by negative portrayals of the weak and

powerless. Thus, working-class characters with low levels of agential power generally receive positive portrayals, in spite of the practical hardships they would certainly experience because of their societal position.

**Middle = nice: Positioning the reader just where they are, or it's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there**

In 1995, John Foster wrote that a comparatively small number of young adult novels were being set in and about the middle classes. He speculated that this could be due to the relative dullness for authors and readers to be writing and reading books about their own lives (Foster, 1995, p. 90). In 2012, this has ceased to be the case. Of the 103 books submitted for the Young Adult section of the 2012 South Australian Festival Literary Awards, over seventy percent of the non-fantasy titles were identifiable by either their middle-class setting, or the middle-class gaze.<sup>5</sup>

Each time a young adult novel depicts its characters in terms of the class strata outlined in this chapter, it bolsters the latent assumption that the middle class is natural and preferable. The upper and lower classes have some positive aspects, but compared to the middle class they are ultimately undesirable. As discussed in

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<sup>5</sup> As a judge for the Young Adult section of the 2012 South Australian Festival Literary Awards, I received a copy of each of the 103 books submitted. In order to perform this study I removed the books which did not contain at least some realistic depiction of society. Some books, although mostly fantasy or speculative in nature, eg. *Mammon* (Thomas, 2011), *This is Shyness* (Hall, 2010) and *Thyla* (Gordon, 2011), did use the real world as a base and these were included. There were a total of 77 eligible books. To determine whether a book contained a middle-class setting for its main characters, each text was examined for the absence of either a working-class setting defined by Bourdieu's 'positional suffering' (1999, p. 4), or the upper-class experience of wealth and power over other characters. Determining the middle-class gaze was a similar process of ascertaining whether the upper and working classes were both visible in the text and portrayed as ultimately undesirable.



the previous section, those in a lower-class strata have their Aussie battler pride, but are never free from Bourdieu's *petite misere* (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 4). Even the hopeful, positive climax of *All I Ever Wanted* won't persuade readers that Mim's social position is preferable to a middle-class one; the hardships associated with a working-class existence remain. Readers can project a character's experiences, both positive and negative, onto their own lives (FitzGerald, 2004, p. 70), but it would be unreasonable to expect the same level of identification with the full spectrum of Mim's life. The supposed glory and nobility of a story set among working-class characters (Maguire, 2009, p. 12) fades when compared to the consistency of a middle-class existence because their lives are defined by exclusion and hardship. Negative examples of a working-class existence abound: the abused, self-harming Megan in *Caught in the Headlights* (Shillitoe, 2003); Calma's slaving, absent mother in *It's not all about YOU, Calma!* (Jonsberg, 2005); Riley and Amelia's abusive pasts in *Dreaming of Amelia* (Moriarty, 2009); and the domestic violence and crime in *All I Ever Wanted* (Wakefield, 2011). A narrative that includes these elements cannot retain its believability if it does not include some aspect or acknowledgment of a desire for escape, no matter how positive the story. As working-class characters, this escape will usually be in the direction of the safe, secure middle class.

The negative way in which higher classes are represented also naturalises the middle class. As will be demonstrated in the following section, higher-class characters possess either wealth, power or both and are designated upper class because they are more wealthy or powerful than the protagonist. An upper-class character's power is usually inversely proportional to their humanity; the more

powerful they are, the less empathetic, kind, generous, warm or familial they will be. Conversely, the more of these positive characteristics a character has, the more likely it is that they will be working class or less powerful. This is how social class structure can be applied as a metaphor to other hierarchical power structures. A middle-class character occupies the social class position above the working class and below the upper class. This describes the middle tier of any structure where, like social class, power is unequally distributed between each stratum. In young adult fiction, this power can be expressed as strength, sexuality, age or any of the dozens of other qualities which characters struggle for and against.

When middle-class narratives depict a lower- or working-class lifestyle, it is usually a sympathetic portrayal, in keeping with the Australian cultural tendency to identify with a working-class existence (Hodge and Mishra, 1990; McSween, Hubbard, Johnson, McKenzie-Smythe, DeMilo and Jayfox, 2010). These stories generally conclude with some kind of retreat back to the middle-class home from a working-class space in which the protagonist has completed some or all of their young adult narrative journey. There are many examples of a character experiencing an aspect of working-class hardship before returning safely to the natural, desirable middle class. In the *Wayne* trilogy (McRobbie, 1989, 1991, 1993), Wayne performs actual manual labour before his eventual retreat back to family-approved schooling. In *48 Shades of Brown* (Earls, 1999), Dan vicariously experiences the rock'n'roll university lifestyle in a crowded share-house while his parents go to Geneva for a year. The danger of the working-class existence is demonstrated to Megan when she overhears the obscured, yet looming domestic

violence when sleeping over at Perdita's house in *Walking Naked* (Brugman, 2002), and to the lawyer's children snooping their way around the criminal underworld in *Noah's Law* (Abdel-Fattah, 2010). In *90 packet of instant noodles* (Fitzpatrick, 2010), Joel crosses over and perpetrates a crime, but three months of self-reflection and growth in his dad's bush shack are an affirmation of the importance of a retreat from a working-class existence to a middle-class one. In *Six Impossible Things* (Wood, 2010), Dan and his mother are firmly relegated to the working class; they have no money and almost nothing but their labour to exchange for it. However, the convenient discovery of a collection of 'priceless paperweights' (TV Tropes, 2012) accidentally willed to Dan's mother, rescue them from bankruptcy and casual hospitality work. It is rare for any middle-class character to happily conclude their narrative journey at a working-class level. The mythology surrounding the middle-class' natural desirability in Australia is too strong to ignore.

### **Rich = bad: The shallow, cold, wicked upper classes**

The wealthy and powerful, on the other hand, receive almost the inverse treatment.

The social setting of most young adult fiction is that of the middle and lower income earners. The wealthy, when they feature, may well be decadent or corrupt ... Very few titles look kindly on the life of those in the upper income brackets. (Saxby, 1997, p. 367)

Saxby's evaluation continues to hold true. It is a rare Australian young adult novel which does not portray its upper-class characters in some negative light. Conspicuous wealth and power are two of the primary indicators of a negative character portrayal and are used repeatedly. This negativity stems from the upper-class character's power to enact oppression over others. Narratives usually present oppression in one of two ways: directly from a specific entity (for example, the landlord in Wheatley's *The house that was Eureka*) or, more commonly, as generalised oppression where a character is simply a member of the upper class in a stratified society. By existing in a class which gains and maintains its power from the oppression of those below it, even via the symbolic oppression of the have/have-not binary, these characters are designated as the negative 'other'. Their higher social position relies upon and is defined by the oppression of those below. The spectrum of upper-class characters can range from indifferent to selfish to abusive to outright evil. Indifference is exemplified by Dan's wealthy, art-collecting great aunt in *Six Impossible Things* (Wood, 2010) who dies and, apparently without a second thought for her relatives, leaves a fortune to the National Gallery and the Historic Homes Trust, and nothing but a box of sewing trinkets to her own family. Moving up the spectrum, in *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta, 1992), Carly is not only nasty and shallow but also wealthy, in stark juxtaposition to Josephine, the scholarship kid. Wealth, beauty and power converge when Candice, the Queen Bee (Wiseman, 2003), from *Walking Naked* (Brugman, 2002) is revealed as a bitchy manipulator while standing outside her perfectly restored three-storey house. Pure malevolence takes the form of the blockade-busting policemen in *The house that was Eureka* (Wheatley, 1984):

faceless, soulless and violent, they exist purely to enact the desire of the wealthy landowners to protect their property.

On the rare occasion when the upper class is specifically mentioned, it is most often in the negative. In Fiona Wood's *Six Impossible Things*, Dan lives among the elite, attending an expensive private school, but he does not entirely belong. Like Josephine Alibrandi, he is a scholarship kid, and this interloper status guarantees their lower-class young adult credentials and the attendant positive portrayal. Dan begins the novel being refused a full scholarship after his family goes through a breakdown and can no longer afford the school's fees.

The headmaster said they'd only be able to give a full scholarship to an all-rounder. He may have been referring obliquely to my lack of sporting prowess. Also, private schools are big on you contributing to 'school life' stuff like music and debating. And I don't talk that much at school.

(Wood, 2010, p. 25)

When Dan arrives at his new public school, the divisive, poisonous taint of the upper classes is depicted in his eagerness (and failure) to avoid any association with them:

... my plan to avoid nerd and private school refugee status is ... dismantled by one careless comment from the teacher.

'Your academic record at Gresham is very impressive, Mr Cereill. Let's hope your presence in math today provides some inspiration to us all.'

... I scowl and slouch lower in my chair. Someone behind me kicks the back of it so hard it rattles my spine. (p. 29).

Wood uses the Australian distaste for the upper class as a way of quickly setting up Dan as not only an outsider, but an unpopular one. Wealth thus becomes a shortcut to furnishing a central character with outsider status in a non-upper-class setting.

The same cultural distaste for the upper class was used to create blond, wealthy, powerful Peter Anderson in *Photo Finish*. In order to contrast with Henry's family's wealth and position, Peter needed to be both wealthy and powerful; conspicuously above Henry in all measures of power. Peter's family's opulent house is stuffed with the trappings of wealth, his sixteenth birthday present is a sports car and for his party the enormous rumpus room is transformed into a private nightclub. Peter is physically strong, sexually attractive, top of the high school heap, and he has used that power to oppress those weaker than himself. He has secretly videoed girls with whom he has engaged in sexual activity and shared the recordings with his friends. Even petty vandalism is not beneath him. He enacts oppression without responsibility or consequence and represents 'all that is wealthy, shallow, and conventional' (Scutter, 1999a, p.207) in Australian young adult fiction. His characterisation was drawn from a range of representations of the upper class, all of which share the same basic negative portrayal. These include: the landowners, both present and past in *The house that was Eureka* (Wheatley, 1984); the *nouveau riche* Streetons in *Lockie Leonard*, *Human Torpedo* who are superseded by the factory owners in *Lockie Leonard*,

*Scumbuster* (Winton, 1990); and the nameless narrator's entire family and pre-breakdown peers in *Checkers* (Marsden, 1996). The Scutter quote above describes Abby's grandmother in *Playing Beattie Bow* (Park, 1982), but could be a blueprint for any of the powerful characters in this section.

Aside from their wealth and power, these characters all share the same narrative trait: they have not obtained their power via any kind of effort, let alone the developmental journey required of the young adult protagonist. Each wealthy, powerful character enters the narrative at the top rung with little or no back story – they are simply wealthy or powerful. When a back story is present, it is usually more of the same, reinforcing their representation as completely negative entities. This feature begins to explain why the powerful are consistently represented in these negative ways: they are the antithesis of the young adult journey. Australian young adult fiction requires a depiction of the first step towards the independence, responsibility and power of adulthood. At our metaphorical dinner party, it is the story of the young person standing up from the kids' table, looking at the adults' table and saying 'Here I go'. The personal, internal change required to make that decision lies at the heart of every narrative as an inevitable, natural, positive step. Powerful characters do not undergo this change and stubbornly hold onto their class position. They are inflexible, obstructive and, above all, negative; the teenager who, upon arrival at the party, immediately sits at the adults' table, feet on the tablecloth, and begins chugging champagne from the bottle.

These are the characteristics used to identify the wealthy and powerful when they are used in Australian young adult literature. The function of an upper class

within a story can be categorised in two ways: passive or active. A passive powerful character does not play a large role in a young adult story. They can simply act as a negative example within the narrative, creating a space with definite moral boundaries within which the viewpoint characters carry out their journeys. No young adult character concludes their narrative journey perceiving these negative characters as attractive, admirable or worthy of emulation, thus their story avoids a similar outcome. This unearned power can be embodied as a person or people, eg. Vicki Streeton's parents in *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo*: 'All money and no taste' (Winton, 1990, p. 65); or Jordan Mullen in *All I Ever Wanted*:

...I wish I never got mixed up with you people.'

That stings. *You people*. Like I'm one of the servants downstairs.

(Wakefield, 2011, p. 87)

They are all necessary characters and their upper-class position is relevant to the story, but the protagonist does not have to struggle directly against the boundaries that their power constructs in order to complete their narrative journey towards adulthood. They are as much a part of the story's setting as the oppressive splendour of the private school grounds in *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta, 1992) and *Photo Finish* or the faceless companies destroying small towns in *Darkwater* (Blain, 2010) and *Stony Heart Country* (Metzenthien, 1999). The protagonist themselves can be part of a passive upper class and this adds an extra dimension to their narrative journey. In John Marsden's *Checkers* (Marsden, 1996), the narrator's entire world is set in the rarefied air of the upper classes and



material wealth defines her entire experience. This class position is coded as negative by the narrator's confinement to a mental institution as a direct result of the corruption of wealth and power. The corruption of power is evident in *Walking Naked* (Brugman, 2002) when Megan proudly introduces herself as second in command of the popular group. This position's negativity soon becomes apparent as readers realise that she is clinging to her position 'by the skin of her perfectly orthodontised teeth' (Ridge, 2002, p. 69). Here again, social class can be used as a metaphor for the social power structures based on popularity present within Megan's school. The completion of Megan's young adult narrative journey comes down to a choice between the group (the negative upper class) or Perdita (the positive working class). She chooses the group, thus failing to complete her narrative journey and the consequences are dire. The upper class plays a passive function in *Walking Naked* because its existence is constant and the hierarchical structure remains in place, despite Megan's revelation about its negative qualities. She does not try to change the structural hierarchy itself; only to negotiate her position within it. This negotiation concludes with Megan settled into the school's middle class.

An upper-class or powerful character is active when they embody the literal force which the main protagonist must struggle against in order to complete their journey of growth and development. To do this, the protagonist must overcome the boundaries presented by the upper-class within their particular power hierarchy. For example, the despot in *The house that was Eureka* (Wheatley, 1984) has to be literally subsumed into the socialist, working-class lifestyle before her son and grandson can complete their narrative journeys. Sometimes these

boundaries are represented by more than a single character, but they must still be overcome in order for the protagonist to complete their narrative journey.

Examples of these larger entities are the polluting factory that Lockie and his friends fight against in *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster* (Winton, 1993) and the Pakistani culture of arranged marriage in *Marrying Ameera* (Hawke, 2010) that Ameera must overcome in order to gain freedom.

When upper-class, powerful characters play an active role in the story, it becomes more apparent how the consistently negative portrayal of these entities is integral to the structure of Australian young adult fiction. Elizabeth Bullen uses Nodelman and Reimer's statement regarding 'triumph-of-the-underdog stories' to make a broader point about how young adult stories involving team sport reproduce the hegemonic values of mainstream society. She states that it is irrelevant whether a character wins or loses, because both winning and losing rely upon being subjected to the rules governing success and failure (Bullen, 2006, p. 48).

Australian young adult literature adheres to this convention because young characters take on power and responsibility, but only in the manner approved by mainstream society. Characters who attain power in order to oppress others are depicted as negative because they do not adhere to the ideology which holds the middle class as the only truly desirable state. In Victor Kelleher's *Dog Boy* (2005), 'the excluded and embittered dog boy of a tribal past is seduced by the thrills of building his own corporate enterprise' (Parsons, 2006, p. 29). His narrative journey is only complete when he divests himself of the power and possessions he acquired improperly, displaying humility and maturity,

‘bestow[ing] forgiveness on all those who reviled him’ (Parsons, 2006, p. 29), thus descending to the middle class.

It is here that a paradox in young adult literature becomes apparent. At its centre is the ‘underdog’; the powerless, main protagonist who isn’t an adult yet, but soon, inevitably, will become one. In order for them to achieve this, they must engage in two diametrically opposed power struggles: the struggle against the influence of external power, and the struggle to attain individual power. Success in both struggles fulfils Nodelman and Reimer’s three conditions for triumph, all of which result in oppression (Bullen, 2006, p. 29). While these conditions are identified as problematic, Australian young adult stories imply that for a protagonist to successfully complete their narrative journey, they must, in some way, change from the oppressed, looking up, to the oppressor, looking down. The protagonist need not finish their story having overcome their own oppressor, but the development of individual agency means that they are able to oppress someone. This is the paradox: the literature requires oppressive power to be both negative and positive within the same story.

How the powerless protagonist can attain oppressive power, thus becoming an oppressor themselves, and yet maintain a positive representation depends upon the way in which they have moved from one position to the other. This will be explored in the following section on movement.

## Secondly, a development of social class as a metaphor for power hierarchies

Australian young adult literature presents the middle class as the natural state of being for its characters. This relies upon representing both the upper and lower classes as negative or undesirable positions. The upper class or powerful are negative in the short term, and the lower class or less powerful, while often initially positive, are unattractive long-term propositions. Neither provides an attractive or plausible destination for middle-class characters as they grow and develop.

As stated in the previous section in this chapter on metaphor, social class is just one form of power hierarchy. Other hierarchies exist within each social class, as well as separately from them and their defining characteristics have been mentioned (eg. wealth, strength, sexuality and age). The simple, three-tiered structure used to define class in the previous sections can be applied to these characteristics, as shown in the table below.

<b>Social class hierarchy</b>	<b>Power hierarchy</b>
Working class	Less powerful than the viewpoint protagonist
Middle class	Stronger than the weak, yet weaker than the strong
Upper class	More powerful than the viewpoint protagonist

Each position in a power hierarchy is represented in the same way as its class-based counterpart. Those weaker than the protagonist are treated with sympathy and care, but, just like the working and lower class, the weaker state is avoided as an outcome. Those more powerful than the protagonist are treated with caution and even fear. Power in a young adult context can be simply a matter of natural advantage used for personal gain without humility. Those who are athletically and aesthetically gifted can often fulfil this role; eg. the intimidating footballer<sup>6</sup> Thumper in *Deadly, Unna?* (Gwynne, 1998), or cover-girl Carly from *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta, 1992). These two common forms of power imbalance are often focused around gender and can exist alone as signifiers of an upper-class or powerful position, but when they are combined with wealth (as in Carly's case), the trope is complete.

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, defining power and class structures by static categories ignores the fluidity and ongoing change inherent within and between these categories (Elster, 1985; Connell and Irving, 1992). If '[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx and Engels, 1848 [1970], p. 30), then the narrative of Australian young adult literature is the narrative of power struggle. Just as the ongoing movement of power is critical to the stories of society, so too is it essential to the stories of young adult characters.

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<sup>6</sup> Although this trope exists within Australian young adult narratives, it is more commonly identified in American teenage literature and film (Coville, 2010).

## Movement

In young adult fiction there are two ways in which power travels: out of an entity or into it. This means that a character will either rise through a hierarchy as they accumulate power, or descend as they are divested of it. For a middle-class, middle-tier character, this appears to provide only two options: up or down and neither has a satisfactory outcome. However, there is a third method of travel used in Australian young adult literature. This third, desirable method defines the literature and sets it apart as its own unique genre.

## Down = good

As demonstrated in the above section **Poor = good**, the weak and powerless are usually represented sympathetically, as humble and good. However, weakness is not an attractive proposition and young adult characters who lack power or agency do not collect positive experiences. The weak are oppressed by the powerful and their existence is defined by both this oppression and the need to escape it. In *Walking Naked* (Brugman, 2002) ‘desperate’, ‘terrified’, ‘hopeless’, ‘gawky’ (p. 21-2) Katie Gattrell is inducted into the cool group, and placed firmly at the bottom. However, she quickly claws her way up; the group’s sympathy is not an impetus to remain static and her character would not be believable if she were satisfied with her subjection. In *Six Impossible Things*, the audience sympathises with Dan because of his plunge into poverty, rather than his location within it. This descent occurs in the first three pages and the story begins as the dust settles.

Even in a place the size of ours I could hear the fights. Our apparently comfortable life was an illusion propped up by some massive overdraft. It was all about to come tumbling down. And we to come tumbling after.

(Wood, 2010, p. 3)

Most significant about this fall is not where it ends, but where it begins. *Six Impossible Things* is a humorous book, but the humour would fail if he had already been living in the natural, desirable middle class and had ended up the child of a single, unemployed parent, living in a borrowed house. Comedy would turn to a hard-scrabble tale as Dan attempted to return to the prescribed middle-class enclave. However, Dan has not been living a middle-class life. The private school, the taken-for-granted international travel and the casual awareness of his own privilege in the phrase ‘Even in a place the size of ours’ all position Dan above the middle class and into the negative space reserved for the upper class. Dan’s swift journey down from above guarantees his positive representation because of his new lower-class positioning. Young adult literature’s naturalisation of the middle class means that any downwards movement from an upper-class or powerful position results in a positive or at least sympathetic representation. As a character descends to the middle and lower classes, their oppressive power and its attendant negativity also recedes. Thus, Dan’s swift descent is no cause for concern.

Descent from the middle class is common enough, but, as discussed in the previous section, ‘**Middle = nice**’, this descent has a time limit. A satisfactory

ending is dependent on a retreat from the working- or lower-class existence, regardless of its depiction as a site of growth and development. *90 packets of instant noodles* (Fitzpatrick, 2010) begins as Joel lands with a thump in the police station after being arrested for theft. In place of incarceration, his father negotiates a three-month stay in a secluded shack where he is to be self-sufficient and reflective and complete his young adult narrative having accumulated power and agency through gradual growth and development (this last part is not made explicit in the book). He is successful and ends the story as the quintessential young adult protagonist; safely back within the middle class. His friend and partner in crime, Craggs, remains in the lower power strata throughout: ‘His dad didn’t have a shack in the bush to send him to. His dad didn’t do anything much to help him at all’ (Fitzpatrick, 2010, p. 13). This throws Joel’s retreat to the middle classes into further relief when Craggs is returned to gaol at the story’s conclusion.

It could have been so much worse. He’s written a couple of times and it’s been pretty evil reading, me sitting at home while he’s out there in the sticks doing hard labour. It gives you some serious perspective, that’s for sure. It’s awful to say, but there’s nothing like seeing how bad things can be to make you appreciate what you have. (Fitzpatrick, 2010, p. 306)

In John Marsden’s *Checkers* (1996), the narrator is upper-class, but her story is recounted from the completely powerless position of a psychiatric patient. Her descent mirrors Dan’s descent in *Six Impossible Things*, with an important difference: Dan’s descent occurs at the beginning of the narrative, whereas the



narrator's descent occurs in the final chapters of *Checkers*, completing her narrative journey. Her descent into a psychiatric ward might not seem positive, but such is the low regard with which Australian young adult literature holds the upper-class existence that any lower position is deemed more suitable. A hospital is, after all, a place of healing. *Checkers* emphasises the desirability of a middle-class position through the narrator's unhappy ending in which she does not foresee any chance for ascent from her powerless position. The final sentences of the novel read:

I might be the first permanent member of the Patient's Committee. Safe in here, safe and secure, protected from the piranhas, not having to think about my family and my friends and how I killed my darling dog,  
*Checkers*. (Marsden, 1996, p. 123)

While she has managed to 'escape' the moral void of the upper class, in order to properly complete the young adult narrative journey, she must attain some form of personal agency and power. However, the narrator is resigned to an unsatisfactory, undeveloped life in a psychiatric ward and left with no safe middle-class position to which she can retreat. Her father is imprisoned and her mother is 'not capable of looking after herself, let alone anyone else' (Marsden, 1996, p. 123). Her remaining option, boarding school, is depicted with all the negativity expected of the upper class: despite her family's troubles and subsequent break-down, 'It's two months since I heard from anyone from my school' (Marsden, 1996, p. 123). By denying the narrator both a satisfactory

ending and a middle-class location, Marsden demonstrates the importance of the latter in achieving the former in Australian young adult literature.

### **Up quickly = bad**

As characters grow and develop, they slowly acquire power. This power can take the form of social class or any of the more specific types of power important to young adult characters. The acquisition of power and agency through the experiences presented within a story forms the backbone of Australian young adult fiction and will be discussed fully in the subsequent section. However, if characters acquire power without undertaking this specific narrative journey, the text will represent them as negative. The amount of effort a powerful character expends in order to achieve their agency directly informs how they are depicted in the text.

A great number of powerful characters enter young adult narratives already imbued with power. This power is a marker of negativity and these characters will often remain in their upper-class or upper-strata position. Characters who gain power quickly, or who desire a less circuitous path to the young adult narrative goal of independence and personal agency, also do not receive a positive representation. However, anyone attempting to shortcut the narrative journey is usually regarded as immature at best, and that is assuming that they correct their wayward path. If they do not correct it, then they become indistinguishable from other powerful characters. Katie Gattrell in *Walking Naked* (Brugman, 2002), discussed above, walks just this path. She enters the upper strata – ‘the group’ (p.

2) – albeit on probation, but carefully out-manoeuvres protagonist Megan’s attempt to lead her excommunication. Katie reveals just the kind of clever political nous which allows her to leapfrog into Megan’s position alongside Queen Bee Candice, smiling and oozing fake sympathy all the way. Katie’s third and final appearance in the novel has her looking down at Megan’s descent from her newly powerful position within the group. Her swift ascent to the nexus of power, previously occupied by Megan, results in a loss of humanity and empathy as she is completely subsumed into the wicked upper class. This is demonstrated as she turns the words Megan used in her own attempted excommunication against her.

[Katie] put her hand on my arm and told me how dreadfully sorry she was that I’d been on detention and couldn’t come to the meetings.

‘You know, Megan, even if we don’t spend time together we still care about you. You told me that once, remember? I have never forgotten what you said to me that day, and I never will,’ she said with a saccharine smile.

*Katie Gattrell two, Megan nil.* (Brugman, 2002, p. 72)

Elizabeth Bullen identifies sports narratives as providing fertile ground for the ‘power, competition and rivalry’ (Bullen, 2006, p. 48) of young adult literature to play out. Megan’s grim tally of Katie’s victories over her as each compete within their strictly self-stratified social group takes Bullen’s use of sport as a metaphor for the social game a step further: the social game becomes the sport. Megan is outplayed and literally keeps score.

Megan's descent is almost complete as she grows into someone unwilling to use her power to subjugate the weak, embodied in the story as Perdita, the vulnerable school outcast. But when the narrative provides one final opportunity for Megan to quickly ascend to her previous position within the powerful upper class of the group, she takes it. The negative message about swift ascent and unearned power is unambiguous: 'Re-entry into the group was not without its price. I had to make a visible commitment. I made it.' (Brugman, 2002, p. 151). Megan re-enters the upper-class and powerful group, but at the bottom rung, just as Katie Gattrell does at the beginning of the story. However, Megan hasn't worked to earn back her upper strata position, quite the opposite. She rejoins the morally empty group because '[m]aintaining integrity is such hard work' (Brugman, 2002, p. 150). Megan is unwilling to labour for her position and the narrative rewards her 'laziness' (p. 150) accordingly as she is subjected and oppressed to the point of abuse:

... I bore it. I laughed at Jessica's dumb jokes. I flattered Dara, even though it made me sick. Dara knew it. She extracted those compliments from me like teeth. (Brugman, 2002, p. 151)

This subjugation is a precursor to the ultimate decision in which Megan must choose between the satisfactory completion of her narrative journey or a curtailment of it by returning, via the quick, easy route, to her negative, upper-class position. She chooses oppressive power, humiliating Perdita and cementing her place within the group, her ascent complete. Megan's choice directly leads to

Perdita's suicide and only then does she learn her lesson about wielding unearned power without responsibility: 'I had sold my soul to the group and my reward was the understanding of the great charade that it was' (Brugman, 2002, p. 154). Thus, *Walking Naked* works as an extreme example of the perils that a swift ascent within the narrative can visit upon a character. Its message about unearned power, and particularly its utilisation, is clear: Australian young adult literature abhors privilege without labour.

The more common narrative depiction of a swift ascent is not the ascent itself, but the desire for it. This desire, even the pursuit of this desire, can be the focus of the growth and development of the protagonist. In A.J. Betts' *Wavelength* (2010), Oliver is a study of young adult fiction's rigidity regarding ascension and desire. Raised by his single mother, who supports her three children by making and selling muffins from the family home, Oliver's goal is a high enough Year Twelve score to gain entry into Applied Geology at university and, from there, a lucrative career in mining. In a non-young adult story, this would be a reasonable goal. In *Wavelength*, Oliver's career goal is framed as an ill-considered prospect, arrived at during the excitement of a Careers Expo where a mining company representative spruiks a vision of the contemporary Australian El Dorado:

'Mines are headhunting Geology students in their second year of uni.

They're starting on ninety grand a year. Think gold and iron ore. Think big. You'd be crazy not to.'

Ninety thousand dollars was more money than Oliver's mum would ever make in a year, and it wouldn't involve working his guts out at three am,

or trying to please fussy café owners. Being a geologist was a career, more substantial than a small business built out of baked goods. It could be his ticket out of here. (Betts, 2010, p. 17)

There is arguably nothing objectively negative about Oliver's desire to escape what is a fairly undesirable family circumstance for greener fields. But within an Australian young adult narrative, combining the desire for wealth and status with the lack of introspective personal journey, is anathema and is usually depicted in the negative. Oliver spends the novel attempting to justify his desire for a career in the mines in terms of anything other than monetary gain and failing dismally.

‘So,’ Jim tries to clarify, ‘you’ve got to study electricity so you can go and study rocks so you can work on a mine? Sounds like a funny way to go about things.’

Oliver sighs, disappointed he has to explain this. ‘It’s not just some shit-kicker job I’m after. It’s a career. It’s ...’ He falters for the right word. ‘It’s ...’ (Betts, 2010, p. 113)

Oliver is not an immature or foolish character for simply wanting money. His aspiration is represented unsympathetically because he does not adhere to the central premise of Australian young adult literature: that he must first undertake an internal journey, within the narrative, in which he conforms to the power structures set out within this chapter. In order to achieve this sympathetic representation and complete his narrative journey, he must do two things: admire the working class and realise the spiritual emptiness of the upper class. He

achieves this by changing from someone who is embarrassed by his muffin-baking mother and wants ‘more money than [he] had ever dreamed of’ (Betts, 2010, p. 17), into someone who appreciates his mother’s sacrifice and hard work and understands the familial love that fuels her actions (sacrifice, hard work and familial love are very often the core impetus for the actions of working-class characters). *Wavelength* is set in a retirement village among a range of characters who have settled for an honourable working-class existence: Oliver’s father is an ex-swim-coach-turned-senior-citizen-lifeguard and the similarly enigmatic Emma works the canteen. Both serve as cautionary examples which steer Oliver back towards the middle class, in particular the complex Emma, who fulfils the criteria set out in the previous section, **Poor = Good**. She is literally working class: ‘I make coffees and that’s all’ (Betts, 2010, p. 221), but she has descended to that position because of her unregulated aspiration. She has recently suffered a stress-related breakdown from the pressures of Year Twelve combined with high intensity sports training.

Oliver’s disavowal of his hectic, working-class family and his desire for a quick ascent marks him as unsympathetic, jealous and immature. However, the narrative does not resign him to the working class (still portrayed as ultimately unsuitable through the dissatisfaction of both Emma and his father). Instead, it provides him with the maturity to reconsider his focus upon the wealth and position afforded by his previously ill-considered mining career. His future is left open, but he does not remain in the working-class limbo of the retirement village. He returns home to sit his exams, whatever the outcome, and aspires to neither a reflective,

philosophical poverty with his father and Emma, nor an unfulfilling, lucrative life in the mines. The comfortable equilibrium of the middle class beckons.

### **Up slowly to the middle = the defining narrative message of Australian young adult literature**

It may appear that this thesis' attempt to define Australian young adult literature through the lens of social class has arrived at an impasse. Using class as a metaphor to position characters in terms of their power relations has provided a rough, three-tiered structure along which the inhabitants of contemporary narratives are arranged. Upper, lower and middle; strong, weak and exactly somewhere in between. Their representations across the range of texts reviewed conform to these basic principles: more powerful is evil, less powerful is unattractive and the middle ground is Goldilocks-approved – just right. The representation of movement between these positions is equally unequivocal: those who gather power, gather negativity, and those who shed power contribute to their own hardship. Since gaining or losing power is associated with detriment, how can any change occur in a literature defined by its positive representation? The answer to this is in the method of change, the third way: slowly.

The accumulation of individual power must occur within the narrative as the result of the experiences it presents. This is the way in which young adult characters 'earn' their power: through the events depicted or referred to within the story. This is a corollary of the finding that narratives negatively depict powerful characters who enter the story having already accumulated power.



When a protagonist successfully completes the young adult narrative journey, they will have accumulated power and could potentially occupy the same level as the powerful, negative characters discussed above. The thing separating the protagonist at the end of their journey from the already-powerful negative character is the fact that the protagonist's story is told within the novel.

Without a backstory for how they attained their power, many of the protagonists discussed in this thesis could enter a different story as a negative, oppressive entity and fulfil the narrative function of the upper class or powerful. For example, in *Wavelength* (Betts, 2010), Oliver could be imagined as the painful reminder of the success-at-all-costs lifestyle which Emma has been trying to escape. With no explanation for Oliver's obsession with high Year Twelve marks and a lucrative mining career, he embodies the reason for Emma's breakdown and becomes the negative, oppressive entity against which she must struggle in order to complete her own narrative journey.

Even if the events leading to the origin of a character's agential power do not occur within the timeline of the story, awareness of these origins will still lead to a positive depiction. As demonstrated above with the alternative imagining of *Wavelength*, the origin of power is more important than its actual expression. This is demonstrated by the way in which many young adult novels complete their narrative arc shortly after the realisation of this power. Examples abound: *Walking Naked* (Brugman, 2002), *90 packets of instant noodles* (Fitzpatrick, 2010) and *All I Ever Wanted* (Wakefield, 2011) all conclude with the protagonist acknowledging the development of their own inner strength. *Wavelength* (Betts,

2010) ends with Oliver travelling to sit his exams on his own terms; it is unnecessary for the story to continue any further. He has taken the first, important step towards growth and maturity and extra narrative would complicate the intrinsic, growth-positive message which guides young adult literature.

There are young adult novels which do not conclude with the implication that the protagonist's life will be somehow improved because of the events depicted in the story. However, these novels still promote the positivity of slow growth, because when a character does not end up mature or educated, they are invariably dissatisfied with the outcome. In *Checkers* (Marsden, 1996), the narrator remains static, having moved neither up nor down. Her time in hospital has taught her nothing new and brought her no extra responsibility or power, and, therefore, no hope for the future. Adrian Stirling's *The Comet Box* (Stirling, 2011) takes a different approach to the unsatisfactory outcome. The protagonist, Michael, gains maturity and experience from the events he observes and takes part in, fulfilling the young adult narrative arc. However, he learns that he has no control or personal agency which can affect the outcome of his life. He begins the novel in the lowest class on the power hierarchy: subjected to all, subjecting none. At the novel's conclusion, he remains 'lower class', still unable to overcome the more powerful entities that control his life. Oppressive power in *The Comet Box* is focused around forces which are as elemental as they are insurmountable and Michael remains subjected to all of them. The rising tide of empty suburbia, his father's infidelity, his disabled uncle, his runaway sister: all are examples of the burdens of maturity and responsibility. Michael gains wisdom with his experiences, but no wisdom which can lead to power. His impotence is deeply

unsatisfactory, exemplified by a discussion with his blind neighbour, Ruby (who doesn't even get his name right), ostensibly about her filthy house.

‘If I can't see it or do anything about it, why should I care?’

‘Because everything's wrong and there's no point pretending,’ I said. ‘I know what's really there. I know the truth about everyone now. They've been lying to me, Ruby, and they're lying to you as well.’

There was another long pause. ‘Does it really matter?’ said Ruby.

‘It has to matter,’ I said.

She attempted to look at me again. ‘You only need to know enough to get by, Andrew,’ she said. ‘The truth isn't everything.’ (Stirling, 2011, p. 223)

Michael's experiences across the arc of the novel bring him a step closer to understanding adulthood and maturity, but he does not accumulate any power with his wisdom. Like the narrator in *Checkers*, Michael cannot ‘achieve a truly happy ending’ (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 157) because, without power, he is not in a position to oppress others.

### **In summary**

Australian young adult novels promote the idea of achieving personal growth through experience. Every novel examined in this thesis contains this personal journey and follows a narrative arc that emphasises, either implicitly or explicitly, the primacy of growth and development. Successful narratives generally conclude once they have shown the importance of earning power through toil. This adheres

to the basic principle that earning one's power is positive because it teaches responsibility. Conversely, power bestowed without effort or toil is negative because it does not provide the knowledge to use that power responsibly. Failure to follow this principle does not mean that a story is a failure, but that it does not adhere to the narrative structure found in the majority of Australian young adult fiction.

Social class is both a useful lens through which to examine this journey and an effective metaphor with which to explain the flow of power. Australian social classes are stratified, but not rigid, and movement between classes is possible. This chapter has set out the principles that govern both how classes are depicted and what constitutes acceptable movement between them. These rules of depiction and movement are the same rules that govern the developmental journey in young adult literature. Stories in which characters do not grow and develop still emphasise the importance of the developmental journey by presenting negative outcomes for those characters.

## Chapter 5 – Writing *Photo Finish*: a narrative journey into the production of a young adult novel

*Photo Finish* was conceived as a young adult novel about a boy trying to grow up too quickly and a young woman trying to achieve material success without earning it. The novel was written in conjunction with research on young adult literature and its representations of class. The creative work and the exegesis formed a symbiotic relationship, each informing the development of the other.

The first four chapters of this exegesis have defined Australian young adult literature as stories that emphasise personal growth through experience and use social class to identify the developmental power hierarchies which form the basis for many of its narratives. This final chapter will specifically examine the creative work, *Photo Finish*, using the research and theoretical tools outlined by the exegesis. It will demonstrate how the three-tiered hierarchical power structure identified in Chapter 4 informed the production of the creative work and other Australian young adult novels.

### What's it all about?

*Photo Finish* is a novel about the desire for power. Every main character wants to elevate their position by attaining more power than they have or exercise at the beginning of the novel. Most characters accumulate this power as they follow their aspirations and work towards an individual goal, like passing school or entering a rewarding career. Jacinta, however, desires wealth and power in and of themselves. Her dreams of becoming a lawyer have nothing to do with any real

interest in studying or practising law. To Jacinta, lawyers simply represent the highest position achievable by a woman from her social class. This position is exemplified by the glamorous lawyer and ex-Paramount resident, Kate, around whom many of Jacinta's fantasies of success revolve. Jacinta's desire to escape her working-class existence overrides every other facet of her life. Desire for escape from 'positional suffering' (Bullen, 2006, p. 49) also drives Henry's narrative arc. Instead of class oppression, he experiences social oppression by being the youngest, weakest, least physically developed, least sexually experienced person among his peers; a situation often all too keenly understood by many young adult protagonists and readers.

The protagonists' desire for elevation is what makes *Photo Finish* a young adult novel. As set out in Chapter 4, in order to successfully complete their young adult journey, each must realise that any form of power must be attained slowly, through individual effort. Both Henry and Jacinta's narrative arcs lead them to this realisation. Henry understands the futility of attempting to behave like a full-grown adult and removes himself from Tranmere College's popular group to begin his own process of growing up slowly, beginning with the simple act of catching the bus. Jacinta discovers first-hand the cost of her unrestricted desire to live within the upper class, but is saved from complete destruction by the seed of her own humility. When she walks out of the café and towards the library to complete her assignment, she, like Henry, is beginning her period of slow, upward development, one step at a time. It is significant that for both characters, the primary act that defines the beginning of their development is one which underlines their independence. These two small acts exemplify the point made in

Chapter 4: that young adult literature does not need to depict the entire journey from dependent child to independent adult; it must simply portray a world in which this journey is a positive experience. The importance of slow, independent achievement is demonstrated through Jacinta's consideration of the journeys her family and friends take towards their goals, juxtaposed with her own.

Clara and Mattie would be on their way to class. Her mum would be on the morning round. Her dad would have already been on site for an hour. Even Jayden would be trudging off to school, his scruffy exercise book filled with whatever he had managed to stick in it over the weekend without Jacinta's help. Jacinta took another sip of her charity coffee. She didn't even have any contact hours on Monday. (p. 318-9)

Each character is walking the path of growth and development that both Jacinta and Henry attempt to short-cut.

### **How did class come into it?**

*Photo Finish* began life as a story about a precocious child, Henry, and his attempts to fit into Year Eleven after he was skipped ahead in order to better fulfil his intellectual potential. This narrative setting allowed the creative work to closely examine the young adult journey of growth and development. The research shows that Australian young adult fiction tends to be set around characters of a certain age (Wheatley, 1994; Bean and Moni, 2003; Owen, 2003; James, 2009; Arts SA, 2011), who experience a developmental stage which places

them closer to adulthood (Nimon and Foster, 1997; Jenkins, 1999; Aronson, 2001; Wilde, 2007; Nittes, 2012). School is a place of growth and development and provides a natural setting for stories of young people undergoing these life changes, concurrent with their academic and physical development. Most young adult novels cited in this thesis have some narrative link to school and, in many cases, the story arc follows the developmental arc of the student. The beginning or end of a story will often coincide with the beginning or end of a significant stage of school life; holidays, Year Twelve and exams are very common stages in this regard. Henry's precocity subverts that developmental process, thereby challenging these core elements. Placing Henry prematurely at the end of this common narrative arc (attainment of formal knowledge and mental prowess) exposed the elements necessary for the completion of his story. How was he to begin to 'sense the layers of human existence' and 'work out the ideals that will add depth to [his] character'? (Aronson, 1997, p. 1418) More importantly, how was he, at age thirteen, to believably walk among sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds who are already well past him in many of these developmental areas?

Enter Jacinta. She has what Henry wants: age and experience. She has, in many respects, reached the end of her developmental narrative arc. She has completed high school and is on her way to adulthood, having experienced many of the 'firsts' that Emily Jenkins states are 'critical when defining young adult literature' (1999). In order to place Jacinta successfully within a young adult narrative, she requires a place to go on her developmental journey. Jacinta naturally possesses the two developmental elements which Henry is missing (age and experience), but she is able to give these to Henry by proxy, by playing along with his



deception that he has an older girlfriend. The developmental area in which Henry exceeds Jacinta is social class. So, just as Henry is able to use Jacinta to take a short-cut on the narrative journey which would naturally imbue him with age and experience, Jacinta is able to use Henry to live out her similar desire to skip over her own developmental journey which would see her work towards an upper-class social position. By juxtaposing these two developmental journeys it became apparent that social class could be used as a metaphor for other developmental hierarchies in Australian young adult literature.

### **Where do they go wrong?**

Jacinta and Henry's desire for ascendancy is not unusual in young adult literature. Henry's yearning to fit in among the 'big kids' is just as natural as Jacinta's desire to leave her satellite suburb for something better. Each aspires to a future in which their ambitions are fulfilled. Henry will eventually grow up, attaining age and experience along the way, and Jacinta, guided by her ambition, will eventually leave her working-class circumstances. If left to their own devices, they would probably undergo the natural development process depicted in many young adult novels and discover that the upper strata is not the attractive proposition they had envisaged (in fact, this is what eventually occurs). However, their meeting short-circuits this process, suddenly placing each within that upper strata: Henry into the popular group and Jacinta into the leafiest of leafy eastern suburbs, Loxton Park, a place normally all but closed to working-class teenagers. (The name 'Loxton Park' juxtaposes the idea of an idyllic, public space, a park, with that of a locked town – 'Loxton' – only accessible by a fortunate few.) Henry and Jacinta

completely skip the process during which they should have learned about the negative connotations of the upper class.

For many characters in Australian young adult literature, aspiration towards or even membership of the upper strata is part of the impetus for growth and development. Unearned power or power received and used without responsibility is always represented as negative. The story arc for these characters is based upon the protagonist learning this truth about the upper strata. In *Photo Finish*, the protagonists only begin to realise this truth in the final pages. Other Australian young adult novels with similar themes depict the learning process as occurring across most of the story. For example, in *Walking Naked*, Perdita exposes Megan to the negative effects of the group's power from their first meeting (Brugman, 2002). In *Wavelength*, Oliver takes a little longer to realise what the negative effect of aspiration to power can be, but the conclusion sees him aiming his life in a different direction (Betts, 2010). Even if the protagonist does not learn this lesson, the reader will be left in no doubt as to the protagonist's failure to fulfill the young adult path of growth and development. In John Marsden's *Checkers*, as discussed in Chapter 4, the narrator's hopeless future is directly linked to her inability to escape the upper class (Marsden, 1996). *Photo Finish* examines the effects that remaining within the upper strata has on its protagonists. Conceivably, if everything had gone according to Jacinta and Henry's plans, they could have carried on for quite some time, each assisting the other to maintain their upper-strata position. Henry could have continued his group membership for the next two years until he completed Year Twelve and Jacinta could have continued visiting the Claphams' house and living out her fantasies of effortless wealth and

comfort. This would have produced an incomplete narrative because, as discussed in Chapter 4, any accumulation of power which elevates the protagonist above the middle class must be represented as the first stage of a two-stage story in which the protagonist subsequently understands the undesirability of the upper class.

In early drafts of *Photo Finish*, the second stage, during which this understanding occurs, was absent. This was consistently identified as the largest problem which prevented the story from being complete. While Jacinta's undoing in the last section was a consistent feature, the final, redemptive chapter was necessary in order to complete her narrative arc. Her story failed in early drafts because the Claphams' upper-strata existence is not depicted as negative. This is partly due to Henry's role as a protagonist; he cannot believably reconcile his own story of social development while also remaining completely satisfied with his upper-class circumstances. Jacinta's epiphany about the negativity of her aspirations needed clearer definition because she does not experience any of the downsides of the Claphams' upper-class existence. These negatives include: the familial detachment brought about by their long work hours and the large house which divides the family into separate living spaces; Henry's bedroom, Myra's outside table and Terry's study. This fragmentation of the family unit is frequently used in Australian young adult literature to represent the negativity of upper-class life. Jacinta's experience, however, remains that of an outsider and her only concern is how to insinuate herself further into the Claphams' materially comfortable lives.

Following the story's climax, where Jacinta sacrifices each of her deepest relationships, one after the other, in pursuit of her goal, she experiences an

internal realisation at what this path has cost her. For Jacinta, the upper class never appears to be a negative experience, because she never actually resides there. Instead, it is her pursuit of that location, her aspiration to reside there and therefore her *movement* towards the upper-class strata which has the most negative consequences for her. Aspiration to power is at the core of every negative event which befalls her. She loses her friendship with Clara because of her jealousy at Clara's increased abilities and her desire to maintain the higher (and therefore negative) position over Clara that she occupied throughout school (without effort – another indicator of negativity). Jacinta fails her brother, Jayden, placing not only monetary gain, but imagined social class position above his wellbeing. This anti-familial behaviour is the very antithesis of the positive aspects of working-class existence (Pope, 2001, p. 41). When Jacinta attempts to emulate the upper class by instructing *Backyard Bonanza* to drill a well in her own family's yard, she literally destroys her entire neighbourhood in an act of symbolic class betrayal. By enacting her delusions about the easy accessibility of the upper class, she exposes the fragility and precariousness of the working class.

### **How do they succeed?**

The final chapters which chart Jacinta's downfall do not result in revelation because none of the disasters which befall her are a direct result of any of the traditionally negative aspects of the upper class. It is only when Jacinta literally has nowhere else to go but the university (the seat of learning and knowledge), that she is finally able to reflect on the similarities between herself and each of the people whose lives she has affected negatively in some way. She sees that each of

them are taking slow, individual steps towards their goals and that each one of them, in their own way, will eventually achieve those goals through their own, individual effort. Her own attempt to reach her goal is shown to be fallacious and ill-fated and she has no option but to follow their lead. This is the first, crucial step towards maturity and responsibility that allows Jacinta to complete her young adult narrative arc.

Henry's narrative arc concludes in a similar way: with the realisation that his attempt to belong in the group and to force himself to become older can only have detrimental effects. Group membership is already a fraught activity, even for the rest of the group. According to Henry's chart, one's position within the group is based on a set of variable attributes, none of which rely on individual effort or responsibility; the primary emphasis of the young adult novel. The attributes are: attractiveness, wealth, sexual experience and connection with other group members. Attractiveness and wealth are prizes in the lucky-sperm lottery which the group members have used for entry. Sexual experience and connection are the trading pieces which group members use to gain and maintain their position within the group itself. The entire unit is a constantly churning power-struggle that denies the individual agency and familial support which are always positively depicted facets of the middle- and working-class existence.

Henry's ticket into the group is the magnitude of his supposed sexual experience. Group members believe that he has not simply had sex, but had sex with a university student, an adult. Much of the group's extra-curricular activities revolve around emulating the supposed benefits of adulthood: drinking alcohol,

going to nightclubs, driving cars and having sex, while the ultimate punishment is infantilisation, the nappy. These activities have a direct relationship to the membership attributes outlined above:

... an attractive person could be forgiven their low sexual experience, so long as they were wealthy and well-liked. Thus an *unattractive* person would have to be *very* wealthy *and* well-liked by everyone in order to maintain a similar position within the hierarchy. (p. 173-4)

When Henry symbolically crosses over into adulthood (perpetuating the lie about his relationship with Jacinta), he gains enough social power for the group to ignore his deficiencies in the other areas. As stated above, Henry could conceivably continue his deception, trading on the power that Jacinta's vicarious adulthood lends him. However, the group's position and design is not a passive structure, as described in the section **Rich = bad** in Chapter 4. They are not simply a negative example that Henry can choose to either emulate or disregard on his own path towards growth and development. The group's negativity stems from the fact that it is an active entity, dedicated to oppressing those beneath it in order to maintain its own elevated societal position within Tranmere College. In order for Henry to complete his young adult narrative journey, he must overcome and negate the group's power. He achieves this when he discovers the true locus of the group's negative power: Hunter and his Wall.

## Win the game, smash the system

Hunter plays both a passive and an active role in *Photo Finish*. In the passive sense, he serves as a negative example of the pursuit of power in which Henry is engaged. When Hunter confronts Henry in the library, Henry begins to sense what effect unearned group membership can have on a person: ‘The more Henry looked at the boy scowling across the table, the more he felt as though he were looking into a mirror of what might be’ (p. 203). Hunter has won none of the prizes in the lucky-sperm lottery that assures group entry. Even his wealth is in doubt because, while Tranmere College is an expensive school, Hunter is depicted with only the most meagre material possessions. He grabs other people’s lunches, monopolises their drinks and the ‘crumpled fifty-dollar note’ (p. 52) he loses to Peter has definitely not been slipped from a newly minted stack of other fifties. It never occurs to Henry that behind Hunter’s behaviour is a desire to disguise his relative poverty. Hunter’s name reflects the character’s aggressive nature and indicates the primary source of that aggression: survival. He clings to the group as though his existence depends upon it.

Hunter, like Henry, has discovered a way to circumvent the struggle necessary to maintain membership in Tranmere College’s upper strata: power. Where Henry’s power stems from his deception about his sexual prowess, Hunter’s stems from blackmail. He has capitalised on the group’s upper-class arrogance and irresponsibility by collecting and controlling every piece of digital evidence he can find, most of which would spell disaster for most group members, in particular its seemingly untouchable leader, Peter Anderson. Just as Henry

enables Jacinta's entry into the upper-class enclave of Loxton Park in exchange for her complicity in the lie about their relationship, so too does Peter allow Hunter's entry into a group to which he would normally never gain membership.

While Jacinta loses control of the events which result in her eventual expulsion from the upper class (or at least the opportunity to fantasise about it), Henry actively engineers his own exit by deciding to leave and utilising his newly accumulated power to do so. In her article 'A sporting chance: class in Markus Zusak's *The Messenger* and *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*', Elizabeth Bullen (2006) observes that characters may win a sporting competition and thus reach 'a truly happy ending [in which] a person who was oppressed achieves a position in which it's possible to oppress others' (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 157). There are no literal sporting competitions in *Photo Finish*, but, like Brugman's *Walking Naked*, the struggle for social position possesses all the same characteristics of a sport story outlined in the Nodelman and Reimer quote in Chapter 3. As well as the condition above, the two others outlined by Nodelman and Reimer stipulate that in order for someone to be victorious, someone else must also suffer defeat, and that the best victory is achieved through the application of individual power (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 157). Henry fulfils all of these criteria when he negates the oppressive threat of exposure and torment by Hunter, turning the tables and threatening both Hunter and Peter with the same exposure. By acting independently, Henry has secured victory by defeating Hunter and oppressing Peter.



Elizabeth Bullen goes further, suggesting that while narratives containing sporting games can allow characters to succeed and ‘overcome positional suffering within their own class location ... they encode a kind of passive acceptance of the existence of hardship and the “unfairness” of the class “game” ‘ (Bullen, 2006, p. 50). *Photo Finish* moves beyond this ‘passive acceptance’ and provides an active solution to the oppression of Tranmere College’s hierarchical social structure. The story adheres to the premise that social class structure in Australian young adult literature can be used as a metaphor for its other hierarchical power structures and inter-strata struggles. Sport represents one of these metaphorical possibilities; another is the stratified world of high school popularity. When Henry realises what his aspiration to the upper stratum has cost him (inadvertently filming his own mother in the shower, among other things), he decides to stop striving to join the group. But he cannot simply leave the popular group and pursue his own friendships because his reputation is on the line. If he fails to produce evidence of his relationship with Jacinta, he will be exposed to the entire school as the kid who fabricated an affair with his babysitter (the fact that she is his tutor is immaterial). As long as the hierarchical structure governing high school popularity remains in place at Tranmere College, Henry will be oppressed if he leaves the protective upper stratum of the group. To use Bullen’s sporting motif: he can stop playing the game, but he’ll still be on the field. Henry needs to dismantle the game itself by changing the rules and rearranging the balance of power. In Nadia Wheatley’s *The house that was Eureka* (1984), the balance of power and thus the entire social structure changes when the two houses come together, negating the structural landowner/renter divide. In *Photo Finish*, Hunter’s power over Peter and the group stems from his control over

embarrassing and compromising photos and videos. Hunter retains unquestioned group status because he has the power, not over where people are situated within the group – this is decided by the attributes listed on Henry’s chart – but over whether they remain in Tranmere at all:

[Henry] also understood why Hunter was so protective of it. Most of the things depicted in the videos were enough to earn expulsion or even arrest for most of the group.

*No wonder they tolerate him.* (p. 226)

In the game Hunter plays, he trades on this one facet to gain entry into the upper stratum. Like Jacinta and Henry, he does not ‘belong’ to this level, because removal of that one aspect would automatically expel him from the group. When Henry takes control of the videos, he changes the rules and the game by changing the focus of their coercive power. Instead of demanding group membership (and maintaining the hierarchical structure) as Hunter does, Henry demands freedom from the oppression of the group. In effect, he demands a dissolution of the very hierarchical structure that places the group at Tranmere College’s social apex.

‘I want out. I want to be left alone. I want everyone to be left alone. Have your parties or whatever, but if you bully me or anyone I make friends with, then I’m sending that video to the group. And maybe the police.’ (p. 314)

How does one extract oneself from a group responsible for oppression without becoming oppressed oneself? Or, to put it in an Australian young adult context: how does one finish one's narrative journey in the comfortable middle social stratum without fear of oppression? There are alternative solutions to this problem. For example, in *Walking Naked*, Megan simply finds a new group of friends, placing herself within the comfortable middle tier of the school's social hierarchy.

I sat with Angela and her friends at school. They weren't like the group, but there was a quiet, respectful kind of camaraderie that suited me.

I watched the group from the outside. Like everyone else in our year, I was aware of their dramas, romances and victories. Their actions were studied and discussed like the Royal Family's. For the first time I was glad that I was no longer on display. (Brugman, 2002, p. 171)

However, in this solution, the hierarchy itself remains in place, enacting oppression on those who continue within it. When Candice, the group leader, visits Megan after Megan's defection from the group, her only goal is to reinforce the group's position at the top of the school's hierarchy. Candice's idea of resolution is further adherence to the rules of the social game:

Candice stood there, rubbing the sole of her shoe across the doormat. 'I would never harass you, Megan,' she said, 'I don't know if this means anything to you, but there will always be a special place in my heart for

you. And if you do want to come back, there will always be a place for you in the group.’ (Brugman, 2002, p. 167)

The implicit message about Candice’s power is unmistakable: the group’s upper-class position will remain, as will its structural integrity. There is ‘a place’ for Megan in the group, but that place will undoubtedly be governed by the oppression which allows the group to exist.

Henry takes this solution a step further and effectively removes any oppressive power the group might have over any other social strata at Tranmere College. The group is still the wealthiest, most attractive and most desirable enclave, but Henry shifts the balance of power, preventing any abuse of their attractive position. The game changes from one dependent upon oppression to maintain a hierarchical social structure based on an imbalance of power, to one which depends on the responsible use of power for a harmonious, equal society.

### **Who did it right?**

*Photo Finish* is a novel about the desire for power. More specifically, it is a story about what happens when power is attained without responsibility. This exegesis has demonstrated that Australian young adult fiction depicts journeys which bestow both power and the responsibility not to abuse it. A narrative which ends with the fulfilment, or at least the acknowledgment, of both conditions can be said to be a young adult story. Jacinta and Henry both experience what happens when power is attained without a journey that concurrently bestows responsibility. The

lesson is learned and its importance acknowledged, but their journey does not occur within the novel; each character is merely depicted setting out on that journey in each of their final scenes. Young adult fiction does not require the completion of the journey into adulthood, just the realisation that it is possible.

The two characters who epitomise the journey towards both power and responsibility are Clara and Mattie. They function as a counterpoint to Jacinta and Henry's narrative pathways and their journeys are almost inverted. All four characters begin the narrative imbued with natural advantages; unearned power which could see any of them represented as occupants of the negative upper strata. The divergence of the two couples occurs before the events in the story take place. Jacinta and Henry spend the entire novel attempting to hold onto the higher social positions afforded by the coincidence of their natural advantages. Only at the story's conclusion do they begin to expend effort and take responsibility for their actions. In contrast, Clara and Mattie immediately begin taking responsibility for the higher social position afforded by their natural advantages. Both are on track to highly lucrative careers, but each must study and work extremely hard in order to maintain them and failure is a very real possibility. Jacinta and Henry, on the other hand, also enter higher social positions, but no work is involved in attaining them. Clara and Mattie earn their successes, Jacinta and Henry do not.

Both couples are also both in mutually dependent relationships. Jacinta and Henry's relationship is based upon mutual duplicity: Henry must continue telling his parents that Jacinta is helping him succeed at school, and Jacinta must

continue allowing Henry to portray her as a willing romantic partner. Clara and Mattie's dependency is more serious. Large sums of money are involved, both in the present in the form of student debt, and in the future in terms of potential earnings. The consequences of each relationship's failure are also unequal. For Jacinta, the threat of working with her dad on a building site picking up garbage for minimum wage is impetus enough, while for Henry, social isolation is the deterrent. The failure of Clara and Mattie's relationship will mean debilitating financial hardship and a stunting of their growth towards independence and adulthood.

By the time the story begins, Clara and Mattie have already begun their journeys towards power, responsibility and adulthood. They have fought their battles and made their decisions. Each is cut off from their parents and neither is willing to give up any of the power that this new responsibility bestows. This further emphasises the extent of their individual development. Jacinta and Henry carry none of these responsibilities. Both still live with their parents and neither imagines an existence where they would be entirely responsible for their own welfare. Jacinta goes so far as to fantasise that her parents are her dependent employees. Even her dreams of independence are simply an upper-class version of the parental relationship:

The city partners would approve her proposal, and she would come to reside at their high-end Loxton Park chambers. The matter of leasing versus what retainer she would negotiate for her services as in-house QC

might still be up for compromise, but again, she was willing to be flexible.

(p. 287)

Other contrasts between the two couples throw into further relief the paths that Jacinta and Henry have chosen. Clara and Mattie are in a committed, supportive romantic relationship, attracting the positive representation of the working-class family (Pope, 2001, p. 41). Jacinta and Henry are in a transactional, business relationship, aligning themselves with the negative representations with which young adult literature imbues corporate enterprise and capitalism in general (Parsons, 2006, p. 29). Clara and Mattie are from the same class background and are equals in all measures; whereas the interplay of Jacinta and Henry's unequal power relations provide the basis for the entire story. The key difference separating Clara and Mattie from Jacinta and Henry will be dealt with in the subsequent and final section of this chapter: work.

### **Arbeit macht bildungsroman**

Work. Struggle. Effort. Toil. These are all words which can be used to describe the 'matter' of Australian young adult literature. Between the beginning of a protagonist's story and their first, independent step towards adulthood, they will have performed the internal labour necessary to earn an understanding of power and responsibility.

Every character in *Photo Finish* engages in some type of labour, whether it is external labour, performed in order to maintain or transcend their social class

position, or individual, internal labour, performed to maintain or transcend their developmental position. Individual labour, the work on developing one's self, defines the Australian young adult narrative journey and it is the lack of this internal labour that separates Henry and Jacinta from the other characters in the story.

### **External labour: working in the field**

Nearly every adult in *Photo Finish* has a paying job. Jacinta, Clara, Mattie, Jacinta's parents, Henry's parents, Peter Anderson's parents, Craig the tutor, Kristen the Production Manager, Mr Dolan the careers counsellor/woodwork teacher and Kate the lawyer are all depicted either working or at least discussing their employment. Even the nameless minor characters, the sleazy taxi driver and the nightclub bouncer to name just two, are defined by their occupation. Clara's mother has neither a name nor is she defined by a specific profession, but she works two jobs. Just as school presents an ideal narrative framework for stories involving learning and development, *Photo Finish* needed to be set in an environment where work informs the structure of every character's life. This is because it depicts what occurs when the labour of that developmental journey is not performed. Labour is intrinsic to the narrative landscape of this young adult novel.

As a corollary, the adult characters in *Photo Finish* who do not have jobs suffer uniformly negative representations. The mothers of Peter Anderson's party guests, Pat and Raelene, are reduced to simplistic caricatures within the narrative.



Pat drinks a lot of wine ('two fish bowls') (p. 115) and drives home, while Raelene (p. 116) is the archetypical, silver-haired lady-who-lunches: suspicious and snobby.

The primary negative examples of unemployed adults are Mattie's parents, Windreed and Crystal Bell. In a narrative environment where paid employment forms the basis for the developed adult identity (even Jacinta's wildest fantasies essentially revolve around her having a job), Mattie's parents are a source of shame, embarrassment and even revulsion. Their lack of employment is directly linked to their lack of development and their naivety surrounding their son is depicted as borderline negligence. With each subsequent appearance in the story, they regress further and further into behaviour which is almost childlike in its irresponsibility. When they are first introduced, Clara says that they have simply travelled north for the summer, withdrawing their support during an important period of Mattie's life. This flippancy is compounded by their laughably thoughtless birthday gift: a box of stones, symbolic of the dead weight their relationship places upon him. While the stones are arguably ideologically positive (at least Mattie's birthday is celebrated), any pretence of parental responsibility is erased in their next appearance when Mattie's mother feeds him almost-rotten carrots from supermarket rubbish bins. Like the McDonald's disastrous home renovation, this is another instance where a working-class existence is depicted in close connection with society's detritus and reinforces the notion common across Australian young adult literature that while the working class may have its pride and familial bonds (Pope, 2001; Bullen, 2006), it is not a comfortable long-term proposition. In Windreed and Crystal Bell's final appearance, Mattie reveals the

true extent of their irresponsibility and how this directly links to their refusal to enter paid employment. They have not simply gone away for a holiday, but instead have absconded indefinitely from all familial responsibility to pursue not employment, but a childlike mockery of it. In the world of Australian young adult literature, work bestows the responsibility one achieves while growing up. Mattie's parents' choice of occupation almost guarantees an absence of responsibility.

‘As soon as they found out that I could get those loans and pay for Clara's uni, they were like “our son's a millionaire!” and they got in their stupid purple van and buggered off up the east coast.’

‘Clara said they were looking to stay up there and start their business.’

Mattie rolled his eyes and twirled a pen between his fingers. ‘Emergency chakras? Gimme a break.’ (p. 218)

Having never experienced work themselves, Mattie's parents clearly have no idea of the support networks required for someone to enter a world defined by labour. Their overall representation in the text is one of selfish irresponsibility and thoughtlessness. They are most certainly adults, but they possess none of the responsibility supplied by the young adult narrative journey. Without work, they cannot achieve the responsibility, let alone power, so central to the young adult narrative journey.

Social class and class movement provides a metaphor for the structure and movement between all power-based hierarchies in Australian young adult

literature. As discussed in Chapter 4, the influx or efflux of power governs the type of movement between hierarchical levels (up or down) and the way it is depicted (positive or negative). But power does not move from one place to another without some kind of impetus. This impetus is work. Just as characters can move up or down the social class hierarchy through work (eg. the lowest, Mattie's parents, do no work, while the highest, Henry and Peter's fathers, are all but consumed by labour), so too do young adult protagonists move through the structural hierarchy laid out in their narrative by performing internal labour.

### **Internal labour: it's what's inside that counts**

The paid work in *Photo Finish* provides a simple but effective metaphor for the internal work that the two protagonists must perform in order to complete their narrative journeys. Paid work is an activity in which effort and time is exchanged for money. Money can be exchanged for goods and services, which can then, in turn, increase or decrease one's social position (for example, an increase can come from food, shelter or education, while a decrease can come from drugs or gambling). Internal work operates in a similar fashion. It also requires effort and time, but the currency it bestows is power. As has been demonstrated, power and the way it is used can either increase or decrease one's position within a power-based hierarchy. This is the 'how' of the Australian young adult narrative journey and it helps to explain why Jacinta and Henry's internal development is stunted and delayed, despite their external circumstances reflecting an upward trajectory.

Mattie's parents are negatively represented because they perform no external labour in exchange for money, thus denying themselves upward social mobility and languishing at the absolute bottom of the social class hierarchy. Jacinta and Henry's internal labour reflects this situation. None of their internal labour contributes to the development of individual power and responsibility. As a result, their situation is as negative as the unemployed and labour-less because they focus instead upon maintaining a static, stagnant position.

In the world of Australian young adult literature, where individual growth and development are the teleological basis for all stories, the very idea of stagnancy is abhorrent. Even a static position, one in which no labour is performed, is equated with entropy and eventual decay. This is demonstrated with the undoing of both Jacinta and Henry's static positions within their chosen hierarchies. The individual must continue to labour towards their own growth and development and it is this labour which produces the young adult story. When a character travels on the narrative journey in which growth and development are the underlying themes and eventual outcomes, they perform internal labour on themselves. As they work, they gradually, across the arc of the narrative, attain an understanding of the responsibility of power. No matter how much power they eventually attain, if the work they have performed on their journey has taken them **Up Slowly** (as described in Chapter 4), they will have also gained the requisite responsibility that allows them to complete their young adult narrative with a positive representation.

Henry's internal work allows him to reach a point at which, despite the enormous, destructive power he holds over Peter, Hunter and the rest of group, he still retains a positive representation because he uses that power responsibly. He does not use it for individual advantage like Hunter, who uses to it maintain his static, non-developmental position within the group. Instead, Henry uses it to allow himself to simply continue his internal work of growth and development. He is not using it to make friends and build his social position through coercion and oppression, rather, he is using it to give himself the freedom to independently build and maintain his social position, free from both oppression and the need to oppress. His work finally leads him to the comfortable, natural, middle-class position held as the ultimate goal of Australian young adult literature.

## Conclusion

The issue of hope has never really left young adult literature. During the 1990s the genre was heavily criticised for being too tough and too bleak. Adults reading stories written for young people held up books like John Marsden's *Checkers* and Margaret Clark's *Care Factor Zero* as though they were mischievously misplaced road signs guiding the nation's children into on-coming traffic. How were young minds supposed to be hopeful themselves when their literature was so hopeless? So full of death, disease and foolish mistakes? This fussy protectionism missed the point entirely.

The first chapter of this exegesis describes the way that young adult literature is not, in fact, a map, much less an instruction book, for young people to follow. It is an art devoted to the exact period in every person's life in which they apprehend their own adult future for the first time. The experience of realising that one must grow up is (almost) universal. Every young adult story contains the moment when a young protagonist rises from the children's table, fixes their eyes up and away and declares: 'I am leaving'. Even when this moment does not occur, it is alluded to by the negatively represented fates of those who refuse that step. This exegesis makes the case that young adult literature is inherently hopeful, precisely because it shows a world in which growing up and changing from a child into an adult is a positive experience. This is even true for stories in which the journey towards adulthood and maturity is a negative one, because the reasons for that negativity are made apparent. The deep critical concern for young readers ignores the

possibility that they might finish Adrian Stirling's *The Comet Box* (2011) and conclude that Andrew's sad, lonely life is an unattractive proposition.

*Photo Finish* actively resists this 'I am leaving' moment until the final pages of each character's journey. Neither is depicted making the journey into adulthood, but once Henry steps onto that wobbly bus, he is right alongside Jacinta heading to the library to take responsibility for her life for the first time. Each character spends the story imagining that they don't have to grow and change and that adults are simply the sum of their attributes, rather than a product of their experiences. Young adult fiction depicts the almost universal experience of a child's realisation that their own continued existence implies a process of irrevocable change. The novel tells the story of how Henry and Jacinta each realise that they need to change in order to move forward with their lives, by showing precisely what happens when one attempts to move forward without change.

The idea that Australia's stories and ideals are forged in the bush is long past and no longer relevant to the current, largely urban experience of young adult protagonists (Heuschele, 2007, p. 351). However, Margaret Heuschele's division of 'urban' and 'rural' is not strictly accurate, because in many of the books she classes as 'urban', the setting is in fact 'suburban'. Beverly Pennell and Chris McAuliffe identify suburbia as the most suitable geographical setting for young adult literature's stories of change, growth and overlapping states of being (McAuliffe, 1994; Pennell, 1997) because suburbia also possesses these characteristics. Like young adulthood, suburbia is both its own place and

somewhere transcendent; it is an in-between space where children live, grow, change, and, ultimately, leave as they become adults and enter the world. In this way, suburbia plays the dual role of location and metaphor in Australian young adult literature.

*Photo Finish* uses the metaphorical potential of Australian suburbia to illustrate the state of each protagonist's life. Henry's life, like Loxton Park, is comfortable and cloistered, all but completely protected from outsiders like Jacinta. Minor incursions can happen, but money and power provide a strong fence and the means to control access, like the Clapham's actual fence in the story. Jacinta's life, on the other hand, like her home in Salisbury Hills, is built upon a foundation of greed. Dodgy developers, eager for the maximum return on a minimum outlay, have covered a garbage dump with dirt and allowed families to begin building their lives upon it. Jacinta, equally as eager for the maximum return on the least effort possible, begins building her own life, and her future, on a foundation of lies and self-deception.

The final aspect of Australian young adult literature that this thesis has examined is social class. As stated in the introduction to this exegesis, two characters may occupy the same geographical location, but be divided by class. This division can provide the impetus for the entire process of growth and development, and in many of the novels cited in this exegesis, it does. Characters recognise an imbalance of power and their story arises from a quest for equilibrium. This recognition, and its effects, are not restricted to social class alone. Hierarchies defined by relationships of unequal power form the basis of Australian young



adult literature. As characters interact with these inequalities, the literature represents each side of the struggle as essentially unattractive. This is done in quite specific ways: those with power over the viewpoint protagonist often lack the humanity to experience true satisfaction with their lives, and those over whom the protagonist has power are almost inversely presented as having nothing material to focus their humanity upon. The middle class then, is presented as the ideal destination for the journeys of growth and development told in Australian young adult literature. This middle stratum between the two others appears in story after story as the only proper destination. Young adults need both the lower strata's humanist understanding and the upper strata's aspiration to power in order to find their way forwards into a future with the possibility of equilibrium, and of hope.

Sam Franzway

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## Appendix 1

List of issues identified in Margaret Heuschele's 2007 study of Australian young adult literature from 1980 to 2000.

Aboriginal people	Family violence
Abortion	Friendship
Accidents	Gambling
Adolescents -puberty	Gangs
Aged and ageing	Guilt
Alcohol	Homelessness
Alienation	Homosexuality
Ambition	Individuality
Appearance	Love
Bullying	Mental health
Careers and work	Peer group pressure
Change - environmental	Philosophy
Cheating	Pregnancy
Child abuse	Racism
Conformity	Rape
Crime and criminals	Refugees
Cultural Diversity	Religion
Dating	Self-perception
Death	Sex
Death -family	Sex role
Disability -physical, mental	Smoking
Diseases	Social classes
Dissent -rebellion	Success
Divorce	Suicide
Drugs	Supernatural
Eating -disorders	Survival
Ethics	Unemployment
Failure	Violence
Family relations	War

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Sam Franzway – ID. 2005103 – Education, Humanities & Law  
[fran0194@flinders.edu.au](mailto:fran0194@flinders.edu.au) – 8201 5781

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Sam Franzway – ID. 2005103 – Education, Humanities & Law  
[fran0194@flinders.edu.au](mailto:fran0194@flinders.edu.au) – 8201 5781

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