

**First Impressions: Writing a contemporary Australian
adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.**

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Declaration	4
Acknowledgements	5
<i>First Impressions: the novel</i>	6
Exegesis: Writing a contemporary Australian adaptation of <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	255
Bibliography	301

The Abstract

First Impressions: Writing a contemporary Australian adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

This thesis consists of two components, the novel, which is 70% of the total and the exegesis, which is 30% of the thesis.

Together, the novel and the exegesis are an exploration of *Pride and Prejudice* from the point of view of a creative writer working to understand and adapt Austen's writing style. The focus on the concept of Emotional Intelligence is a deliberate strategy with two objectives, firstly to bring new insights into the reading and analyses of the novel and secondly to use this form of analysis to enhance the writing of a contemporary Australian adaptation. Thus this modern concept from the field of psychology is being used by a creative writer to explore Austen's unique character development and depiction in an original way. My original research question of "what insight and contribution can Emotional Intelligence make to our reading of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and to the writing of a contemporary novel" has informed the entirety of this thesis.

First Impressions shares the romance plot of *Pride and Prejudice* in that the central focus is for the protagonists to eventually unite, despite their preconceptions. However, although some of the characters are roughly based on those in Austen's novel, *First Impressions* diverges at many points due to the vast differences of modern social settings, group dynamics, education and employment. One major difference is the gender reversal of the major characters.

The exegesis outlines the importance of the source novel to my own creative processes. I reflect on the subtle balance between keeping resemblance to the original and a deliberate reshaping of characters and social situations. Although the exegesis is an integral part of the whole thesis, the starting point for the reader would ideally be the novel, *First Impressions*, as my aim is for my novel to stand alone but to have an additional resonance for those familiar with Austen's work.

Student Declaration

“I, Susan Holmes, declare that the PhD thesis entitled, “First Impressions: Writing a contemporary Australian adaptation of Pride and Prejudice is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work”.

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First Impressions: Novel

Chapter 1

Everyone knows that Australia is a society where people do not judge others by their appearance or income.

The Bentley family, all five of them, contemplated their new home; their ownership was new but the house itself was old and a little decrepit. Richard Bentley had inherited the house from his great aunt and he struggled with the door key which wouldn't seem to turn. His wife Carolyn took over and managed to unlock it but the door was jammed. The two eldest boys, Scott and Ryan, put their shoulders to the warped door and suddenly it burst open. Kit, the youngest of the three brothers, dreadlocks swinging, scooted between them and into the narrow hallway. He took a hard left into the front room.

'It's a bit whiffy in here.' The house had the stale, dusty smell of disuse. 'She didn't die here did she, Dad?'

'No, of course not.' At a raised eyebrow from his wife, he continued, 'I'm not sure, but I wouldn't think so, people don't do that anymore, do they?'

Deciding it was a rhetorical question, they all started moving around. The room was large, with a dining table at one end and a door opening into a kitchen beyond that.

'You can hardly move for all this stuff.' Kit was bumping into tiny tables, armchairs and a huge sideboard that almost filled the room. His mother, Carolyn Bentley, suggested that the way every surface was covered with objects and doilies made it seem claustrophobic. Richard Bentley, her husband, was offended.

'It's my inheritance. You never know, there might be some valuable pieces here; we could have a garage sale.' Richard grinned and rubbed his hands.

'In this street? Come on Dad. You think the neighbours here would want this stuff?' Ryan held aloft a vase full of plastic flowers.

Richard folded his arms. 'One man's trash is another man's treasure.'

Ryan nodded at Scott, his elder brother. Their father reverted to clichés and homilies whenever he was worried about something but wouldn't admit it.

'If you really believe that, then give it all to an op shop. Garage sales are about people trying to squirrel out a few bucks for things they never needed in the first place.'

Scott was calmly surveying the ceilings and light fittings. 'Bit of work to be done, but it'll come up alright with a coat of paint. Everything *is* a tad dusty.'

Kit followed his gaze. 'Yuck, cobwebs.' He opened a cupboard door and peered inside. 'Bet there's a few spiders and mice around.'

Carolyn Bentley, who had been picking up doilies by their edges, quickly placed her hands in her pockets and headed out the door, her mouth a thin, hard line.

Ryan went out to join his mother on the front veranda, snarling at Kit as he turned, 'Do you *ever* process a thought before you open your little trap?'

Kit spread his arms wide. 'Well, duh! Old house, empty for a while, what else can you expect?'

Richard and Scott merely shook their heads.

Ryan sat on the veranda next to his mother and put an arm around her. The small front garden was badly overgrown. Tufts of dried-looking grass and weeds were relieved only by a few straggly bushes that badly needed pruning. He looked at the other houses in Persimmon Crescent, Kew, most of which were modern, two-storeyed, with double garages and neat front yards. One had a BMW out front, another a Benz. There were two new gleaming townhouses across the road, one with a sold sticker on the front. He looked over at his father's ute and Scotty's old Holden. Ryan had a sinking feeling that his family were going to be seriously out of place in this neighbourhood. As if reading his thoughts, Carolyn patted his knee.

'Your Great-aunty Mary never quite fitted in to the area, but then she was a little eccentric.'

Ryan grinned. 'Yeah, and we're a regular Brady bunch.'

...

Earlier that day Stephanie Mathers had the sun roof open on her new car and was enjoying its smooth feel on the freeway. She was blissfully happy to be moving to Melbourne, where there would be much more of everything than in Canberra: more spunky guys, more designer labels, more exotic cocktails and hopefully way more adventures. She fluffed out her hair, grinned at her friend and then sighed at the positively mournful look on Laura's dial.

Laura Patchett had her seat pushed back to accommodate her long legs and she was feeling no bliss at all. Anxiety churned in her stomach at the thought of being trapped in a Melbourne suburban street, and especially at being deprived of the company of Wally, her horse, the one living thing that brought her comfort and love. Why on earth had she let her uncle talk her into this? They had all seemed to gang up on her: the damned psychiatrist and his talk of depression, her young cousin needing her and somehow Stephanie, her old friend, miraculously fitting in to the plan. A bit too neat for her liking.

...

Scott Bentley's Holden Commodore rattled along the Princes Highway, bound for Melbourne. This was it; they were moving in to Kew at last. Probate had taken a while but now his car was full of their belongings. The radio was blaring out blues music and the windows were wound down, both brothers preferring real air to air-conditioning. Suddenly Ryan snapped the radio off.

'Do you seriously want to live in crappy Kew?'

Ryan's thick, straight hair blew across his face as he stared at Scott. A good-looking young man, he had been blessed with naturally blonde hair, brown eyes and unblemished skin. He waited patiently for a reply. Scottie, his elder, quieter brother always chewed at his thoughts before giving them air space. The brothers were only twelve months apart and could have been twins, except that Scott's hair was dark and wavy.

'I'd like to stay in Geelong. It's home, but change can be a good thing. Anyway, you used to love that house when you were a kid.'

Scott glanced across to see Ryan's reaction. Though Ryan was younger Scott often felt like *he* was the younger brother. Ryan had such strong views on everything and Scott felt sure he was about to find out exactly what his brother's objections were.

Ryan stared straight ahead, frowning. 'I did a bit of research on Kew.'

Scott rolled his eyes. If he had a dollar for every time his brother *did a bit of research*, he would be rich. Whether it was a gallery, a school or an insect, Ryan always wanted to know more about it. He reached into the back seat and grabbed his laptop. He quickly opened up a file and scrolled down.

'It has some seriously weird historical anomalies. In Studley Park Road is a place called Raheen which was built, ah, around the 1870s for some rich brewery bloke, and around 1910, I think it became home to bloody old Archbishop Mannix, you know the one from the Frank Hardy book that was banned.'

'Is this from History 101?'

'Nah, Aussie Lit.'

'I'm yet to hear the weird bit.'

'Stay tuned. At approximately the same time they built the Kew Cottages, which back then was known as an Idiot Asylum for the, and I quote, 'care and training of feeble-minded children'.'

'Ouch!'

'It gets worse than words, bro. By all accounts it was a hell hole for the little buggers until it finally got shut down, but not until the nineteen eighties. I suspect there were a lot of people in there that someone wanted to get rid of. So, don't you think it's a little bit weird that in the same suburb you've got the biggest divide you could ever have? Seriously wealthy right next door to the most deprived?'

'Ancient history, Ryan. You're drawing a long bow if you think there's anything like that in Kew now.'

'Maybe, but history has a way of leaving its traces. The big thing, though, is I reckon we're all going to be the neighbours' worst nightmare. What I do remember as a kid

were the snooty glances they gave poor old Aunt Mary and I never saw *anyone* play kick-to-kick in Persimmon Crescent, Kew.'

...

The units in Persimmon Crescent were gleaming new. Laura angled herself out of Stephanie's low-slung sports car and hunted through pockets for the keys. The tree-lined little street was quiet and closed. Laura glanced around in dismay. The crescent was tiny; they would be in close contact with their neighbours and parking would be difficult. Was she stupid for buying a property she had only viewed over the internet? Uncle Hugh had organised it all and assured her it would be a good investment.

'Isn't this exciting?' Stephanie reached into the back for her capacious handbag. 'I've never lived anywhere so new and ritzy. I wonder if anyone is living in the one next door?'

The two units were detached, but identical. Built in mock Victorian style, they had double glass doors leading to a balcony on the second storey.

Stephanie bounced up the two front steps in her red stilettos.

'Shame there's no big, strong men to carry us across the threshold.'

'This is life, not a movie, Steph, and don't break your neck in those shoes.'

'OK, grumpy bum.'

Stephanie smiled to herself. Laura was jealous of those shoes. With size-eleven feet, Laura had little chance of getting anything so sexy. Not that she needed them; she was tall and didn't have people looking down at her.

At the top of the stairs was a huge empty room where light flooded in from the sparkling glass. The room was plenty big enough for both living and dining areas. A doorway to one side led into a galley kitchen.

Stephanie immediately raced over to the balcony doors, her heels clicking on the polished boards. She opened them and leaned across the balcony, twisting her head from right to left.

'Hey, this is great, Laura. Look! We've got a bird's-eye view of the whole of the street.'

'Including that monstrosity over there.' Laura pointed to a very old, oddly shaped bluestone and brick house with mullioned windows, turrets and gargoyles.

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Inside the monstrosity Richard Bentley was yelling at his fifteen-year-old.

‘For heaven’s sake, Kit, put that skateboard away and help me move some of this stuff.’

Kit, with ear pods in place, stuck his skateboard under one arm and went up to see which bedroom he could commandeer before his brothers arrived.

Richard sighed theatrically and attempted to put negative thoughts about the house aside as he decided which pieces of his Aunty Mary’s furniture they could discard. He had inherited the house and everything in it and she sure was a hoarder. He had already taken three trailer loads of junk to the tip, including old magazines and dress patterns by the hundred, all the plastic flowers and dusty doilies, and an assortment of broken crockery and ornaments.

The house was a lot bigger than their old one but the kitchen and bathroom were a nightmare. Maybe he and Scottie could tart them up. Ryan wouldn’t be any help; he was useless as tits on a bull when it came to anything practical. Must have taken after his mother, with his head stuck in a book or computer all the time.

Carolyn Bentley chewed on the end of a pen and contemplated a small room at the rear of the house. She called out to her husband.

‘Richard, come and move out these sewing machines. This will be my study. Bring some more of that surface spray.’ Carolyn checked out the room. It had plenty of light, unlike some of the other rooms and a view of the fernery, but most importantly a door that could be firmly locked.

...

As they drove over the Westgate Bridge, Ryan leaned into the rear seat and grabbed the street directory.

‘What are you doing? I know where I’m going.’

‘I’m checking out a few more things about our new neighbourhood.’

‘I seem to remember a serious lack of watering holes.’

‘Speaking of water, do you realise how far we’re going to be from the ocean? We’re never going to swim, let alone surf, anymore.’

‘There’s probably a swimming pool.’

‘Great! I love to swim in other people’s piss. And we probably won’t be able to go to training at Kardinia and we might not be able to go on match day.’

‘We’ll be able to go to the ’G and Docklands a lot easier though.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Bro, can’t you ever be a bit negative about anything?’

‘Not much point worrying about things you can’t change. It’s not going to be forever, you know.’

‘Exactly how long is forever? It could end tomorrow for me if there’s a bus with my name on it.’

‘Better have clean underwear on then.’

‘Idiot!’ Ryan grinned and went back to the street directory. ‘There’s a shitload of private schools around. Wasn’t High Street where all the shops were? Want to do some predictions?’

‘Mmm... Ladies’ boutiques and underwear shops.’

‘That’s lingerie to you, you philistine.’

‘Yeah, yeah and lots of handbag places. Yours?’

‘Over-priced coffee lounges and lots of dentists.’

‘Dentists?’

‘Yeah. You ever check out the teeth on those kids with the striped blazers? Enough metal to wire a third-world country.’

Chapter 2

In his rooms, Queen's Council Hugh Fitzgibbon took a call from the student welfare coordinator at Scotch College. His son, Patrick, was in trouble again. The SWC wouldn't be specific, as he wanted Mr Fitzgibbon to come to the school and meet with him and Patrick. That wasn't going to happen. Hugh tried his best courtroom interrogation tactics but when they clearly weren't working and he was getting red in the face he had a brainwave.

'My niece Laura, Patrick's cousin, will come and meet with you. She is an intelligent young woman who has been very kind to Patrick since his mother died. She has specifically come to Melbourne to be closer to him. She will know what to do and will talk some sense into the boy. I'll have her call you.'

Hugh Fitzgibbon QC, Fitz to his friends, 'the bull' to the administration staff, stared out the window at the courthouse. He wished life could be as simple as innocent or guilty; too many shades in the middle altogether. He was certain he wasn't abrogating responsibility; he just had much more important things to see to. Thank goodness he had managed to talk Laura into moving to Melbourne, although he doubted he could have done it without pressing her guilt button about Patrick, or without Stephanie's help. It had been over two years since his wife and Laura's parents had been killed in a light air crash. Anyway, being away from the isolated homestead should benefit Laura psychologically *and* solve his own problems.

...

Ryan had talked Scott into not doing the freeway to Kew as neither knew a great deal about Melbourne's inner suburbs. So, travelling more slowly now, they drove down Johnston Street through Fitzroy with its eclectic mix of old and new, trendy and derelict and trendy disguised as derelict. Then into Collingwood, heading toward Hoddle Street.

'Griff's Wine Pub.' Scott raised his eyebrows. What the hell is a wine pub?'

'The perfect mix of upper- and working-class cultures. Do you remember how Grandad used to call everything that wasn't beer, plonk?'

'Yeah. I never really understood what he meant. Did he mean wine?'

'Sort of. Plonk included wine, which was basically poncy. A wine pub is quite clever. It appeals to our nostalgic yearning for a real pub, as opposed to a hotel or bar but also appeals to our sense of ourselves as cosmopolitan, European even. It's like you're not selling out completely by going there, as it is a pub, after all.'

'Sounds like bullshit to me. You don't believe all that stuff, do you?'

'No, just giving you the angle, the tweak, the spin. All that rubbish that is supposed to appeal to Gen X and Gen Y. We are marketing categories with disposable incomes.'

Scott laughed out loud.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Neither of us has, at present, an income, brother, disposable or not.’

Both brothers were doing a bit of quiet reflection as the car took the bend up to Studley Park. Scott had left his job as a motor mechanic at a garage in Geelong. He could have commuted but somehow he had lost interest in sticking his head under car engines, plus he was heartily sick of the grease that would never completely wash off his hands. He wondered what his brother would think if he told him that he wanted to retrain to be a nurse.

Suddenly Ryan twisted in his seat and pointed out of the window. ‘That’s it, Raheen, the one I was talking about.’

Scott gave it a cursory glance. ‘Now you’ve jogged my memory. That place is now owned by the Pratts.’

‘Not the Carlton Football Club Pratts?’ Ryan looked horrified.

‘The very same.’ Scott grinned and prepared himself for a diatribe from his younger brother on the machinations of Carlton; as a lifelong Geelong supporter he had to hate them, but not quite as much as Hawthorn.

Ryan, however, kept it brief. ‘Too much grief in one hit. I’ve got a bad feeling about this move.’

‘You never know, you might meet the love of your life.’

‘Have you already forgotten what I told you before?’

‘What?’

‘They closed down the idiot asylum.’

Had Ryan been an actor he could have said he was resting, which of course meant no money, no job, no prospects. With an honours degree in history, politics and literature he was still, some years later, having some cognitive dissonance in coming up with any career that appealed.

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Laura’s mobile rang just as the removalist’s van was pulling into the street.

‘Damn! Hello, Uncle Hugh. Can you hold on a minute please? The removalists are here.’

As usual, her uncle ploughed on anyway. She gestured frantically to Stephanie. Holding her hand over the mouthpiece, she told her friend to give directions to the moving people.

‘Yes, OK, Uncle Hugh, I’ll do what I can. Hugh. Text me his number. Yes, yes, I know. Yes, I’ll tell him.’

The furniture was a curious mix of the antique and modern, the functional and aesthetically pleasing. The two young women were opposites in many ways but had been friends since primary school. Laura decided that Steph could decide what went where, she didn’t give a damn.

As the furniture van pulled out, Scott Bentley’s car rattled down Persimmon Grove. The exhaust pipe had broken on a speed hump and the clanging could be heard from the open window at the top of the townhouse.

‘Oh, no. Not the hoon factor, surely not in this street.’ Laura frowned.

The car stopped outside the monstrosity. Laura and Stephanie watched as Scott and Ryan emerged.

‘Wow, check out the bods on those two.’ Stephanie clapped a hand over her mouth. ‘If they’re hoons I may have to become a hoonette.’

Chapter 3

Carolyn Bentley decided to close the shop on smothering when her youngest son turned fifteen. That had been six months ago. An enlightened woman, she had set the house rules: equality for all. Her husband and sons would do their own laundry or work it out amongst themselves. The same with cooking and cleaning; it was their turn to take over. Carolyn enrolled in a PhD in American literature, ready to recreate herself. Living with four males had worn her down, like a dog-eared, yellow-paged novel. She wanted to escape from the noise most of all. Why did males have to make noise constantly? This house had given her the chance for a quiet room of her own. Oh, Virginia, you don't know the half of it! She ran a hand lovingly over her new laptop with its clean polished sheen. She had threatened death to anyone who dared touch it.

How she had changed from that woman who hungered for her baby sons, the feel of the tender little bodies, the smell of their necks. They had been interesting as toddlers and small children. She enjoyed watching and coaching their milestones. She had worked part-time doing the books and appointments for Richard's business but she had been just filling in time until she could return to herself. She had fallen in love with Richard, the handsome young electrician, when she was in her honours year at university. Their parents warned against such an obvious mismatch but she was besotted with the funny, loving young man and had quickly fallen pregnant. She supposed she still loved Richard but from a distance, almost another dimension. Luckily, the greatest attribute Richard had was his reliability. She felt no compunction in handing over management of the household to him, Scottie and Ryan. They could deal with Kit themselves, teach him to be an adult. Carolyn was interrupted from her reverie by the clanging of an exhaust pipe. Welcome to the Bentley boys, Persimmon Crescent. Your quiet street has a new persona.

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Laura was staring into her wardrobe and wondering if she needed a new persona. It hadn't taken her long to arrange packing, but then life on the farm for the last three years had only required jeans, tee shirts, windcheaters and strong boots. What on earth should she wear to Scotch College? She supposed, as a surrogate parent, she ought to wear a skirt or something but so few skirts had pockets. Being a handbag hater, Laura desperately needed pockets. Back before the plane crash, she had handbags full of the 'in case' items. Now she was a total minimalist.

She sighed and called out, 'Steph, I need you to come shopping with me'.

Stephanie raced in and stood, Monroe style, flanked by the door frame.

'I knew one day you would realise my true talent. Are we talking a whole new wardrobe? Max the plastic day?'

'No! A skirt, maybe a shirt. Not girly, but a bit more feminine than moleskins and blunnies.'

‘You do know you are going to have to alter your posture, your walk, to match the new you?’

Laura stood straight backed, hands in her pockets and thrust her chin out.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look at the way you walk, so heavily. It’s like a large animal.’

‘Well, Miss Department Extraordinaire, I am not going to walk around with a book on my head!’

‘I’m not saying that. I am merely suggesting that you occasionally take your hands out of your pockets and pretend you are walking on air instead of through a cow paddock.’

Chapter 4

As the diatribe concerning Patrick's misdeeds ended, Laura looked steadily at the Welfare Coordinator. He was a nice enough man, polite and well-groomed, but she doubted he had any sense of humour. Patrick sat opposite her, head down, shoulders slumped.

Laura glanced around her as the man checked out a report on his computer. Everything was state-of-the-art in his office and he had a splendid view of enormous well-kept grounds and a hockey oval. The grass looked manicured. Finally, he apologised and gave Laura his full attention.

'So, let's see if I've got this straight, Mr Hudson. Patrick has been sent back to school and suspended because of some prank he pulled at the school camp. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'You didn't mention, as I recollect, the nature of the, um... offence.'

'No. It's a little delicate. It would perhaps be best if Patrick were to tell you himself. Will you be taking Patrick home to his father now?'

'No, he will come and stay with me for a few days, as his father is in the middle of a big case. We will all discuss Patrick's behaviour and see if we can find some solutions.'

'Great, terrific. Please ring me at any time.' He handed her an embossed business card with all his and the school's details.

Laura couldn't help but think how relieved Grant Hudson looked as she and Patrick departed.

As soon as they drove off, leaving the imposing buildings behind, Patrick let out a big sigh and visibly relaxed.

'OK kiddo?'

'Yeah. Thanks heaps, Laura. Do I really have to have the big talk with Dad? He never listens.'

You poor little bugger, thought Laura. No, Mum and most of the adults don't want to know about you.

'Well, Paddo, you and I will have a talk first and see what we can sort out before your Dad arrives, OK? By the way, what did you do at the school camp that was so bad?'

Patrick blushed and mumbled.

'I don't want to tell you. It's a bit gross.'

Laura looked across at the fifteen-year-old and his obvious embarrassment. She thought he personified his age group perfectly. Overly large feet and hands, skinny body, bad posture and an awkwardness that no smart uniform could disguise.

...

The Bentley dinner table was set, in a fashion. A rug acted as tablecloth, with an odd assortment of condiments on top. Ryan pursed his lips as he surveyed the table.

‘Hey Kit, do you realise this is our best cutlery? What’s the special occasion?’

‘Huh?’ Kit looked up from the dresser drawer just as his father entered the room.

‘Why have you used the good cutlery, Kit?’

‘Jesus, it’s just knives and forks and stuff. What’s the big deal?’

‘Your mother won’t like it. That was her grandmother’s. It’s very old.’

Carolyn Bentley stuck her head around the glass door from the hallway.

‘What won’t I like? Oh, the cutlery, I couldn’t care less. I no longer see anything as ‘best’. Kit is right, it’s just knives and forks and...stuff. But please don’t blaspheme, Kit; that I don’t approve of. Richard, you need to get more surface spray, strong stuff, and go right around the house.’

Ryan frowned at his father. Richard Bentley looked perplexed.

‘What’s with Mum lately, Dad?’

‘Bugged if I know, son. Maybe she’s going through some sort of change.’

‘Dad, if you mean menopause, you’d better whisper it.’

Chapter 5

Laura was curled up on the couch, flipping through a newspaper while Stephanie sat at the dining room table, tapping away on her laptop. She had opened a spreadsheet and was estimating utility costs, food and rent into a monthly kitty for the household. Laura tried to appear interested as Stephanie called out figures. Patrick was in the lounge sprawled in front of the television, watching a DVD.

‘Patch, are you even listening?’

‘Yes, sorry, I’m a bit distracted.’

Stephanie jumped up from the table, sat beside Laura and put an arm around her friend’s shoulder.

‘Come on Patch, tell Aunty Steph what’s wrong. Are you missing the farm already? You’re not worried about Jim taking care of it, are you?’

‘No, he’s a good bloke, totally reliable and great with the animals.’

‘Ah, animals. Are you pining for that horse of yours?’

‘Yes, a little, but Wally will be OK. Jim will look after him.’

‘Weird name for a horse, you know.’

‘Yes, but he *is* a weird horse.’

Laura got up and started to pace the room.

‘No, it’s just that I miss...the space, being able to see for miles, see the horizon. I feel, well, hemmed in I guess.’

‘You could get a bike. Ride around Studley Park or somewhere.’

‘Yeah, right, along with a million other cyclists, not to mention walkers, people with prams and dorks on skateboards. Very peaceful.’

‘OK, OK, just a thought. Listen, what do you think about me doing some freelance bookkeeping from here?’

‘I thought you had transferred to another government department down here. Please tell me you didn’t quit your job to come here and live with me!’

At Laura’s suddenly raised voice, Patrick swung around to look. Stephanie gestured to him to keep quiet.

‘No. Settle down, old girl. I took a year’s leave without pay. I wanted to do something different anyway. I thought I might print up some flyers and we could do a local letterboxing, see if I can get any clients that way. And while we’re talking of work,

what are you going to do with yourself? I know you don't need the money but you are easily bored.'

'I thought I might do some volunteer work. Don't know what or where, though. Wouldn't mind working either, but honestly, what skills do I have?'

'What about approaching a TAFE? You know, one that teaches agriculture. Maybe you could do some sessional teaching.'

'Wouldn't I need a resume?'

'Yes, and I'm just the person you need. We can start right now.'

Laura gestured toward the lounge area.

'Let's leave it till tonight. There is someone I need to have a chat with.'

'Want me to leave?'

'No. It might be good to have another adult, who isn't family.' She called out, 'Patrick, can you turn that off please, we need to talk'.

...

Dinner was over and Richard, gesturing to his sons to stay put, waited until Carolyn left the room.

'OK boys, we need to talk finances.'

Richard was seriously concerned. They were living in a fairly posh neighbourhood but the house needed a lot of renovating, which cost big money. The only income they had at present was the rent from the house in Geelong and that wasn't a lot, as they were renting to friends who were in need. It would take him a while to build up his business in Melbourne; hell, he didn't even know who his competition was in the local area. There were lots of extensions and renovations going on and maybe he could get in on that. He would need to know the builders, though. He used to apply for tenders for bigger jobs but without a partner that was difficult, and who would write the bloody things now, given that Carolyn had opted out. He was wondering if this move had been wise.

'I'm nearly sixteen, Dad. I could leave school and get a job.' Kit looked hopeful for a few seconds.

'Who do you think would employ you?' Ryan stared him down.

Kit rallied.

'I could become Dad's apprentice!' He grinned hugely.

'No. Your mother would have a heart attack.'

‘Come on, Dad. She probably wouldn’t even notice.’

No-one seemed to have an answer for that. Kit tried hard to sell his idea. He reminded them all that he was useless at school and pressed the point that they wouldn’t have to pay school fees and uniforms and excursions and school camps. Finally, he ran out of breath.

His father looked dazed and worried, so Ryan took over.

‘Kit. Number one, you haven’t even started at your new school yet. You might like it. Number two, you have never, ever said you wanted to do a trade. Matter of fact, I don’t think you have ever told us what you really want to do. Well?’

Kit chewed on a fingernail.

‘I... er... haven’t really thought about it. I hoped maybe I could be a world-class skateboarder one day.’

Scott felt sorry for the poor kid.

‘Listen Kit, I used to dream of being an AFL footballer or tennis pro, or a world-famous surfer. But all those were just dreams. You need a heap of talent but more than that you need contacts and luck, and a plan B. Speaking of which, I had better come clean now. I am sick to death of being a motor mechanic, I want to become a nurse.’

‘What!’

‘Shit!’

‘Bloody hell, where did that come from, Scott? And why a nurse, of all things.’ Ryan thought he and Scott were close but this was a shock.

‘I started thinking about it that time I was in hospital getting my shoulder fixed’, Scott leaned forward, elbows on the table. ‘Those nurses really made a big difference to how I felt in there. The doctors couldn’t give a shit, but the nurses, they were great.’

Ryan butted in.

‘Talking of shit, how would you go with that and piss and vomit?’

‘Jeez, Ryan. Give me a break. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. I reckon I can do whatever it takes. Anyway, I’ve been to see people at Deakin University and they say I might get in. I need to do a year at TAFE first though.’

Richard opened his mouth but Scott put his hand up, palm first.

‘No, hang on, Dad. I’ve thought about the money aspect. I can fit in quite a bit of work around the TAFE course. I’m going to approach some garages for part-time

work. Otherwise I'll get a job in a bar somewhere. You know I've always worked. I'm not about to bludge on my family now.'

Ryan stared at Scott. This was the most outspoken he had ever known his brother to be. He felt deflated. At least Scott had a goal, a purpose. Ryan had no idea what he wanted to do. Throughout uni he had done bar work and then the school camps, but that was easy in Geelong where he had a network. Here in Melbourne he just didn't know where to start. Well, he would just have to get off his arse and try. He breathed out slowly.

'Well, good on you, mate. At least you know what you want to do. Maybe you can help me find something.'

...

Richard stepped back and admired his handiwork. The sign looked professional, he thought. Simple, yet classy.

RICHARD BENTLEY – ELECTRICIAN NO JOB TOO SMALL

Kit had wanted thunderbolts or lightning. Carolyn hadn't wanted any sign. Said she didn't want people knocking on the door, disturbing her. As if anything could disturb her once she was on that damned computer or had her nose stuck in a book. Richard reckoned World War III could start and she wouldn't notice. No, he had wanted the sign so he and his family could maybe get acquainted with some of their neighbours, get settled into the neighbourhood properly. Suddenly Richard Bentley missed his mates very badly. Even the old house seemed to look sad today.

The house was made of old weather-edged brick of an indeterminate age and had bluestone foundations. The entrance was at the side through a strangely small door, given the expanse of the house itself. Richard hadn't been around a hundred years ago so he couldn't know its humble origins. It started out as a single-storey dwelling, somewhat like a miner's cottage, except there were no miners in Kew. Aunt Mary, who was an umbrella maker by trade, moved into the house in 1942 with her new husband, Alec. She loved the house almost as much as her husband, which was just as well as it was all she had left at the end of World War II. In a sudden flush of wealth in the sixties, due to a lucky Tatts ticket (her one small flutter in an otherwise practical life), she built on two rooms at the top. When one of Mary's sisters also became a widow some years later and moved in, Mary added a couple of more rooms at the back. Built to her own design, the house had become all little passages and doors. Some would say they compartmentalised her life, she would say turning corners created anticipation. Richard was finding them a bloody nuisance, especially when it came to placing furniture.

He did, however, appreciate the pull-down staircase to the roof space where the accumulated detritus of three sons could be put out of sight. It also created an opportunity for him because Carolyn was too short to pull down the stairs without standing on a chair. All those left-over bits and pieces that she wanted thrown out could go up there without her even knowing. Why would you throw out perfectly good pieces of wood and old tool boxes just because you weren't using them at the

moment? Carolyn was a minimalist by nature and temperament. Richard was a maximalist. In Mary's house they could inhabit both worlds.

What the neighbours hated most about Mary's house was that it had always looked unfinished, as if the builders had taken leave-of-absence and forgotten to ever return.

Chapter 6

‘Tennis – a *Tennis* Club, Scott? You’ve got to be joking!’

Ryan was attempting to put his books in a bookcase in his room but kept getting distracted by the feel of them, particularly hardbacks with embossing on the spine. He was also attempting to cull. Did he really need three copies of *Dubliners*? Scott stood in the doorway, shirt hangers draped over one arm, a copy of the local paper in the other, opened at an advertisement for the Kew Tennis Club.

‘We need to meet some girls, Ryan, and I for one refuse to do that internet dating crap.’

‘It’s women, or young women, not girls. I think the word girl has been removed from the English language, for blokes of our age anyway. And why can’t we just go to a club or a bar? Are you trying to raise our social standing or something? Anyway, after Natalie, I don’t think I want anything to do with the opposite sex for a while.’

‘It’s been a *long* while.’

Shit, thought Ryan, he’s right. It’s nearly twelve months. Natalie had been a fellow student in Geelong. She was beautiful and smart, but very obsessive, compulsive and a neat freak who just couldn’t relax. They had great discussions and she was an excellent kisser but in the end he couldn’t stand being told endlessly that his hair was messy, he had a stain on his jeans, and he should clean his shoes. It felt almost as if she was mothering him. He sure as hell didn’t need two mothers, even if one had gone off to another planet. The break-up had been a bit rough at the time, but she had soon found someone else.

‘Well, think about it little bro. We might at least meet some local people and I need some exercise now the footy season is over. It would be better than pumping iron at some gym where all those roid idiots preen in front of the mirrors.’

...

‘Dinner time!’ Stephanie, armed with an egg slice, waved Laura and Patrick into the dining room. She had her new fifties-style frilly apron on. Laura almost expected her to start extolling the virtues of new electrical appliances. Laura stared at her plate.

‘Fish fingers! Can’t we do better than that?’

Stephanie counted on her fingers. ‘You have got your protein and your greens, that’s a balanced diet, and wait until you see what’s for dessert! It’s prepared from scratch by my own little hands. What’s the food like at school, Paddo?’

‘It’s OK, but it all kind of tastes the same.’

‘So, what did you do to get kicked off the camp? Did you hit someone?’

‘Steph!’ Laura looked aghast at Patrick. ‘You didn’t, did you?’

‘No, I’m not like that and besides most of them are bigger than me. I... um... I lit a fart.’

Laura nearly choked on her food and Stephanie tried to stifle a belly laugh.

‘Well,’ Laura placed her cutlery on her plate, ‘that was crass and extremely stupid’.

Stephanie spoke with a napkin covering her mouth.

‘How did you get caught? Did someone dob you in?’

‘No. I did it in front of a teacher, I mean, I knew he would be able to see me.’

‘What?’

‘Are you mad?’

‘Oh, I think I get it.’ Stephanie folded her napkin. ‘You wanted to be thrown out, suspended, didn’t you?’

‘I’d really like to be expelled.’ Patrick got up from the table and began to pace the room. ‘But I couldn’t think of anything bad enough. Although... ‘Inspiration lit up his young face, ‘maybe if I fail all my subjects...’

At the look on Laura’s face he held a hand up, palm outwards.

‘Well, not all of them, but a few. They wouldn’t want me back if they didn’t think I would do well in VCE.’

‘Your father would die of mortification. That’s a terrible thing to contemplate, let alone say.’ Laura banged on the table for emphasis.

‘OK, settle down everyone. Let’s discuss this rationally once we have finished dinner.’ Stephanie gathered up the plates and returned with three beautifully presented dishes of *crème brûlée*. Appreciative murmurs filled the room.

”

Ryan’s bedroom was at the front of the house on the ground floor, opposite the lounge room. He lay on his bed with the window open on the warm night air, the light turned off. As he gazed at the white townhouse across the road a woman appeared on the balcony, carrying two collapsible chairs. She was tall, very tall, and had dark hair pulled back into a pony tail. He couldn’t see her face but the careful way she held her body suggested a remoteness. Hell, if she owned that townhouse then she probably had cause to be aloof. A teenage boy followed her out and sat opposite her. The light from the room behind put them both in silhouette. The body language was interesting. She leant forward, hands on her knees, he leaned back, arms crossed. She did most of the talking. Suddenly she got up and put an arm around his shoulders. The boy seemed distressed. She took his face in both her hands and seemed so focussed, yet so

gentle, as if the boy were her entire world at that moment. She didn't look old enough to be his mother, perhaps an older sister? Ryan couldn't ever recall touching Kit like that. Maybe that was something only women could do, sad if it was.

He laid down and tried to sleep, but tossed and turned as thoughts of his future whirled through his brain. It was three years since he had finished his degree, and he had filled in the interim with a variety of odd jobs. Although it was an arts degree he knew teaching or the government bureaucracy was not for him... He would rather poke himself in the eye with a compass than teach groups of adolescents, all as silly and non-thinking as his brother Kit. He loved reading and learning but he also loved being outdoors, which didn't combine in any job he could think of. He knew what he didn't want to do but not what he did want to do. Bloody hell, his mind was a sea of red herrings.

...

Laura had had little sleep and was in a foul mood. She felt hemmed in and somewhat manipulated by her uncle. She needed to get out and about, now! She ran down the stairs and slammed the front door so hard it shook. Head down, eyes rapidly filling up, she ran out of the gate and straight into a young man. She staggered and he took hold of her arm to steady her. Without looking up she swung wildly with her free arm and connected strongly with his shoulder. He yelped.

'What the hell. Settle down, will you?'

'Don't tell me to settle down. Leave me be and take your dirty hands off me.'

Ryan inspected his hands and held them out, palms up.

'No. They are not dirty, at all.'

'I was speaking metaphorically. Leave me alone!'

With that Laura stalked off toward the top of the crescent without a backward glance.

Who the hell did she think *she* was, thought Ryan, gingerly rubbing his shoulder.

'Are you OK?'

A disembodied voice floated down to Ryan. Stephanie opened the doors wider and leaned over the balcony.

'What's with her? Does your friend have a supply of rude pills?'

'She's angry and upset at everyone and everything. Sorry you had to cop it. She's really not too bad, once you get to know her.'

'Think I'll take a pass on that. I'm Ryan. We've just moved in across the road.'

'Yeah? Us too. I'm Stephanie. Maybe we could do coffee some time.'

‘Maybe. Well, I’d better go. Nice to meet *you*, Stephanie.’

...

Richard decided to go for a walk and check out his new neighbourhood. He walked up High Street feeling relaxed but when he smiled at someone or said giddy they either looked away or appeared to be frightened. Richard looked down at himself. His fly was done up so that wasn’t it. He went into a few shops, tried to get a conversation going but was met with either disdain or polite indifference. How odd. Back in Belmont people were friendly, ready for a chat. The people, now that was strange... He noticed now that they were nearly all of a type, a white, very neat type. He had noticed one Asian-looking person but certainly none of the old Italian and Greek men and women who had populated his street, many in aprons, and not a black person in sight.

He walked beyond the shops and into some back streets. A mixture of housing styles, but lots of large old houses with high fences and locked gates stared back at him. Lawns were clipped and not an old ute in sight. What he liked most about Geelong was that even in the suburbs you were never far from either open country or the ocean. Suddenly he had a sense of being locked in, could picture the suburbs of Melbourne going on and on and him knowing so few people here. Oh well, maybe his sign would introduce him to people.

When Richard got back he checked the mailbox. Bloody hell, there was a letter from the local council. His sign was unauthorised; he would need to take it down and get a permit. The bastards!

Chapter 7

Kew Tennis Club was enjoyed by those who actually played the game, those who liked to be seen there and those who needed the status but were not accepted or didn't have the money to join at Kooyong. Stephanie practically dragged Laura into the club house. An impeccably groomed young man greeted them.

'Stephanie? Hi. I'm Rudi. We spoke on the phone.'

'Hi ya, Rudi. This is my friend, Laura.'

Rudi showed them around the club with its seven courts and large water tanks which had been installed when the drought had caused severe water restrictions. Stephanie was impressed. There was a well-kept garden area with a barbeque, a bar and a separate kitchen. The change rooms and toilets were clean and perfectly adequate.

Rudi explained membership, use of courts at weekends and during the week, as well as social events.

'We have pennant teams if you are interested', he added.

'I don't think we're...quite ready for that, thank you, Rudi. Can you tell us about individual and group lessons – a refresher so to speak?' Stephanie gave Laura a stern look.

Rudi outlined all the classes, for adults and children. Laura noticed that all the while he was fiddling with his hair and flicking off imaginary bits of dirt from his clothing. Anal, she thought, definitely anal. They walked away with forms and leaflets and plenty to consider. Laura poked Stephanie in the ribs as they got to the car.

'Not quite up to pennant? You have never, so far as I am aware, played tennis in your life!'

Stephanie grinned as she gunned the engine. 'How hard can it be? It's a bat and a ball, right?'

...

'Oh shit! Oh hell!' Richard hung up the phone and grabbed Ryan by the arm.

'Quick, son. Your Gran has had a fall. We gotta go!'

Richard's mother, Gwen, widowed for the last ten years, was a feisty old lady, friendly, and extremely independent. Richard couldn't imagine her falling and injuring herself so badly as to be in hospital. Ryan insisted on driving his father's van; he had never seen him so upset.

'This is it! The beginning of the end, the downward spiral, she'll go downhill from here.'

‘Dad, settle down! She might not be that bad.’

Richard jerked in his seat and kept adjusting his seat belt. ‘She’s getting on. Shouldn’t be living alone at her age. I should have known something like this would happen.’

‘Dad, anyone can take a fall. No point in getting your knickers in a knot until we know how she is. Who phoned you?’ Ryan decided to focus his father on the practicalities.

‘That neighbour. What’s her name?’

‘Allison?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘Is Allison looking after Harvey the wonder dog?’

‘I guess. I dunno. Oh hell. Can’t you go any faster?’

‘No! Breaking the speed limit won’t help Gran and won’t get us there any faster anyway.’ Ryan kept his voice measured and wished it was his mother beside him. At least he had one rational parent even if she was currently on leave. When they reached the front of St Vincent’s Hospital, Ryan told his father to go in while he found a park. He knew that in busy Victoria Parade it might take a while.

Ryan’s heart sank as he entered the emergency room and saw his grandmother on a trolley. She looked too small and fragile. She was obviously in pain but it hadn’t stopped her tongue.

‘Ryan, thank goodness. Will you please tell your father to stop fussing. I’m not dying, you know. People don’t die from broken hips these days. Fell over that bloody dog.’ She pointed a finger at Richard, who had his mouth open. ‘People trip over dogs all the time, Richard. It’s just that most of them don’t have bones as old as mine.’

‘Well, hello Gran, nice to see you.’ Ryan grinned as he kissed his grandmother, pleased that at least she hadn’t lost her spirit. ‘Have they given you any painkillers?’

‘Ah, my practical but kind grandson. What a relief!’

Ryan saw that his father was interrogating the triage nurse and anyone else he could find, so he garnered a chair and sat close to the trolley.

‘What rotten bad luck, Gran. How is Harvey?’

‘Bloody great big lab, he’s alright. I tell you what though, Ryan, he is getting fat and lazy. He needs walking.’ She stared at him, eyebrows raised and he took his cue.

‘You want me to look after him, Gran?’

‘Oh would you sweetheart? I don’t trust that Allison. She knows nothing about animals. Your father will kick up a stink though. Do you think it will be alright with Carolyn?’

Gwen had a complicated relationship with her daughter-in-law. She was grateful for her three grandsons but had never understood what the obviously intelligent girl had seen in her son, who she often thought quite dippy. Gwen was a great believer in sticking to your own class and hers was firmly of the old working variety.

‘Mum will be OK. She’s too absorbed in her studies to notice much else these days, Gran.’

‘That doesn’t sound good.’

‘No, honestly it’s fine. It’s high time we all pulled our weight anyway.’

What an amazing young man Ryan was, thought Gwen. He had somehow, genetically or otherwise, got a combination of common sense and empathy, a very rare combination in a male and in one so young.

Chapter 8

The Retreat Hotel in Brunswick was packed, both inside and out. Ryan and Scott edged their way through the myriad of rooms, looking for Gino. The pub had once been a hang-out for elderly Italian and Greek men playing cards but new owners had cleverly transformed it without spending much money. Quietly grunge it had become home to Gen Y and various bands. A huge beer garden carried the overflow and this was where they found Gino, who had snagged a table.

Gino had classic Italian looks. Hair so black it was almost blue and big brown eyes with eyelashes a model would die for. Ryan noticed that a number of young women were eyeing him off, but as usual Gino was completely oblivious. Friends since primary school, Ryan and Scott knew how shy he was.

Until secondary school Gino had been cursed with a stutter. Scott, a year ahead of Ryan and Gino, had defended the little boy from quite a few bullies. Ryan had noticed with wonder that Gino didn't seem to stutter at all when he spoke in Italian to his parents. The three boys had played kick-to-kick most lunchtimes right through primary school, with Gino's stutter becoming less obvious as the years passed and his kicking improved. They had also taken Gino to his first footy game at Kardinia Park and he soon became as big a fan as they were.

Scott placed three glasses of beer on the table.

'Isn't that your cousin behind the bar, Gino?'

'Yeah – Frankie. I'm living at his place while I do a course at TAFE. He's been trying to get me here for ages.'

That answered one question, thought Ryan. Bars were not normally Gino's scene. The boys soon settled into a solid chat about both families, work and, most importantly, who the Catters had picked up in the draft. At a lull in the conversation Gino fixed his eyes on a spot beyond Ryan's left shoulder and announced that he was getting engaged.

'You sly dog!' Ryan grinned. 'You've fallen in love and haven't told your mates. Who's the lucky woman?'

Gino's face had reddened. 'You remember Angie? You should, you used to go out with her.'

'Yeah. I remember Angie. But I didn't know you two were an item.'

'Oh, well, you know how it is. We kind of grew together.' Gino rubbed a finger around the rim of his glass.

Ryan exchanged puzzled looks with Scott, who decided the mood need lightening.

'Congratulations, Gino. That's terrific. I'm sure you will be very happy.'

Ryan wasn't so sanguine.

'Do you love her, Gino?'

'I like her very much, Ryan. She's a good person.'

'But Gino, engagement? Surely that's leading to a wedding and maybe even kids?'

'She'd make a great mother, in fact she's really keen to have kids.'

'But are you?'

'I wouldn't mind. Look Ryan, I just want a peaceful life. Mum is so happy you wouldn't believe.'

'It's not your job to make your Mum happy, Gino.'

'Well, no, but this will give her the daughter she's always wanted.'

'But, will it bring *you* happiness?'

Gino stared into space for several seconds, finally he nodded.

'Yes, I think it will.'

...

Ryan and Scott had moved on to the Brunswick Club for a game of pool. Luckily for them no-one occupied the pool table in the front bar. A few solemn drinkers nursed beers while watching the trots or dog racing on several screens mounted on the walls.

'You were a bit pushy with Gino, mate.'

Scott lined up the balls in the triangle and chalked up a cue.

'What? You think I should mind my own beeswax? He's a *very* good friend.'

'Yep, but it's his life.'

Ryan concentrated on making the break. With a twack the balls separated and a yellow one found a pocket.

'I think he's doing this for the wrong reasons.' Ryan's second shot didn't pot but snookered Scott.

Scott did a recce of the pool table. 'At least he's got reasons. How many blokes do we know who put someone up the duff, did the 'right' thing and regretted it ever after?'

Scott did a brilliant long shot, potted several balls and then the white on an in-off.

‘Two to you, bro.’

‘Sweet. I think Gino’s being manipulated and I’m not sure that he knows it.’

Scott leaned on his cue and thought about it.

‘Maybe he doesn’t see it that way. He seems happy enough and he might want security.’

‘Security is more about attachment than love, surely.’

‘A lot of people aren’t in love when they marry, Ryan. I hear some of those arranged marriages work really well and what is love anyway, do you know?’

‘Yeah, no. Oh God, I’m sounding like a football coach. I just feel...sad, I guess. He’s a great bloke who deserves to be happy.’

Scott carefully potted the black. ‘Maybe Angie has changed, maybe Gino can’t admit to being in love. I don’t remember you going out with her. Did it last long?’

‘No, couple of months max. I felt claustrophobic around her.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I felt like I was a thing, a possession to her. Kind of like something to be shown around. I dunno, a means to an end or something.’

‘So how did you break it off? I can imagine her being pretty upset.’

‘I told her a whopping great lie.’

‘What? What on earth did you tell her?’

‘I told her I couldn’t conceive children because I had an extraordinarily low sperm count. She kind of lost interest in me after that, except for a few pitying glances.’

‘Ah, now I get it. You think she’s just with Gino as a baby-making machine. I hope you’re wrong.’

‘Yeah, so do I.’

Chapter 9

Stephanie set off with her armload of leaflets on a particularly windy day. In her usual manner she was dressed to kill, complete with five-inch stilettos. She decided to drive to High Street where she would ask if shopkeepers and small businesses needed any bookkeeping and if they didn't would they put her leaflet in their window. After High Street she would drive home and walk around the neighbouring blocks to Persimmon Crescent, letter-boxing. She thought there should be some business drummed up that way and she was keen to make it work so she could at least pay her share of the bills and not feel like a freeloader. There was also that cute but pricey little black number in David Jones that she had her eye on.

She had had a reasonable reception and had just crossed at the lights to do the other side of the road when a kid on a skateboard knocked into her and leaflets flew in all directions. She let out a shriek and started running after them, staggering on her heels. Suddenly, from across the road, Ryan and an equally if not more delectable male were running with her, grabbing at paper. Ryan yelled out, 'You little shit, Kit,' to the departing skateboarder as he ran. The taller one with dark hair and the face of an angel approached her with a pile of leaflets he had saved.

'Here you are. Some are a bit crumpled but I think we got most of them.'

'Oh. Thank you so much, you're very kind.' And cute as, she thought.

Ryan came over with another bundle.

'It's the least we could do. The dork on the skateboard is our brother. We're meant to be delivering him to the dentist but I think he's legged it. Oh, sorry Stephanie, this is my brother, Scott. Scott, this is our new neighbour, Stephanie. Come on Scott, we'd better find him.'

As they walked quickly away, the dark one, Scott, glanced over his shoulder and smiled at her. Her insides fell to mush. Well, Laura might think they were bogans, but they had been extremely nice to her. Huh! She felt quite superior to her friend and she was determined to see more of Scott. By the time she had covered the High Street she decided to go home for lunch before tackling the letter-boxing.

...

It was late afternoon at the Bentley household. Ryan had only managed to get Kit into the dentist's chair by promising him a new Geelong scarf. Ryan had collected his Gran's dog, which was a Labrador crossed with something no one could figure out. It was huge and it was black but it was still young and so had boundless energy. The boys had sapped some of its energy by taking it for a run and some ball-throwing around the local park. Now they sat on the front veranda, having a quiet drink before it was time to decide who would cook the tea. At the sight of their father pulling into the driveway, Harvey barked excitedly and ran over to the van. Before Richard could pull the gate shut Harvey had bounded out and run straight across the road. Unfortunately, Stephanie chose just that moment to exit her own front door and the dog jumped up on her, knocking her to the ground.

Ryan pulled the dog away while Scott tried to get her to her feet. One of her heels broke as she tried to stand and so she fell again. Scott thought she looked a little pale so urged her to stay sitting for a while. He squatted down next to her.

‘Are you OK? Are you hurt? I’m so sorry. He’s only a puppy, doesn’t know his own strength.’

‘I...I think I’m OK.’

Laura opened the door and stepped outside to see what was going on. Her hair was in a towel and she had applied an avocado face-mask at Stephanie’s urging.

‘The Blair Witch no less.’ Ryan stared at her, then looked at the sky and added, ‘Or is it twilight already?’

Laura straightened her shoulders, scowled at him and pulled Stephanie to her feet.

‘Come inside, Steph, it’s obviously safer and far more salubrious than on *this* street.’

She pushed Stephanie inside and slammed the door.

‘Oh my,’ said Scott, ‘we’ve really made a good impression on the neighbours.’

‘Stuck-up bitch. Can’t take a joke. She wants to watch out she doesn’t swallow that plum whole.’

Chapter 10

The Kew Tennis Club was a bubble of activity. Roger Kemble, the president, was directing a bevy of volunteers from the membership, some more efficient than others. This was the most important day of the year for the club. The twilight round-robin had brought many new members in the past. He inspected the refrigerator. Good. Plenty of light beer, white wine and sandwiches. The sheets of lined paper for entries in singles, doubles and mixed events were taped to tables at the front of the room.

Alicia Coltrain had her laptop set up, complete with new software that would take the names and match them with opponents. Alicia had a good opinion of herself, reinforced by her make-up mirror at frequent intervals. Her new tennis outfit was modelled on one worn by Sharipova at the last Open. No-one quite knew how old Alicia was; she was adroit at avoiding the issue. With her recent divorce (good settlement, thank you) she was conscious of needing a new man; after all you couldn't attend the ballet and the opera on your own now, could you? Alicia had a fine brain; it was just hard edged. She glanced with disgust at Helen Davies, who was organising the food. Dumpy and bad hair, she thought. Helen's hair did look strange, like hat hair with gell. Helen was a very good tennis player though, and they all knew it. She had often lulled the opposition, particularly in pennant, into a false sense of security with her constant chatter, as if she was more interested in gossip than the game. The club found her most effective in mixed doubles where the men dismissed her on sight and the women rolled their eyes behind her back. First, the male would be surprised when she returned his big serve with alacrity, then the female would be wrong footed and a sharp backhand slice would hit the service line for a clean winner. Her own serve was a curious sight to behold. She wound up like a clock with a stuttering motion of the arms which belied the spin put on the ball.

Helen zoned in on Scott and Ryan as they hit the front door. Alicia was only half out of her chair when Helen was shaking their hands and welcoming them.

'Welcome to Kew Tennis Club, home to many talented and convivial people. Come, come and sign up. You can play singles, doubles, mixed or any combination you choose. Do you have a preference?'

'Doubles,' said Ryan.

'Mixed,' said Scott.

'Heh, heh, well then sign up for both. You both look strong enough to cope with more than one set.' Helen tried to look arch but her false teeth moved as she grinned.

'We'll...just have a little discussion outside before we do that.' Ryan was trying so hard for a straight face it hurt. He grabbed Scott by the arm.

The brothers sat on a bench seat next to the courts.

'Holy shit, Scott, what have you got us into? I'm going to crack up if I see that hair and teeth again. What's with the mixed? We'll probably be playing against scary spice in there!'

‘Look over there, at the car park. There’s a whole heap of people beginning to arrive, including some pretty good-looking females. What can possibly go wrong? It’s good exercise and we might just meet some interesting people, attractive or otherwise. Come on, it’ll be fun.’

Alicia printed out the draws randomly selected by the computer and based only on whether the players had described themselves as a beginner, fairly experienced or very experienced. Beginners were mixed with fairly experienced in the doubles and mixed doubles. Sometimes people claimed to be beginners merely so they could win, but then no system was perfect.

Stephanie was hugely excited, even though in tennis shoes she was five inches shorter than felt comfortable. Laura was resigned to a bit of exercise and pleasure at her friend having a fun day out.

Ryan had some trouble deciding what category in which to place himself. Scott had been the better player once, but neither had played much since high school. Finally they both decided on ‘fairly experienced’, as Ryan was fast on his feet and Scott had a big serve.

Laura had put herself down as a beginner purely to stay close to Steph. In the first ladies doubles Laura was paired with Alicia and Stephanie with Helen. As early as the coin toss it was obvious to Laura that Alicia and Helen were arch rivals and seemed as silly as one another. Helen won the toss and elected to serve and soon Laura realised that the woman could really play. Her service action looked weird but she mixed it up so much it was hard for her opponent to predict. Laura found herself enjoying the buzz of the game. Stephanie, the little sneak, had obviously had a few lessons, and apart from the occasional fresh air shot performed reasonably well. Laura thought, however, it was a little unfair of Helen to throw lobs at Steph as her reach was obviously her greatest weakness.

Laura had been taught by her father in the old style of serve and volley and it was effective, as it made her opponent try for big smashes or lobs. Helen and Alicia stuck to the back of the court and even threw in a few grunts and shrieks in the Russian style. Helen and Laura ended up winning the match in straight sets. Alicia couldn’t resist a snide reference to being paired with an absolute beginner, but luckily Stephanie didn’t pick up on it and Laura congratulated her on a couple of really good shots as they walked off the court.

Laura and Stephanie surveyed the list of names for their mixed doubles partners.

‘Yes! I’ve got the spunk, Scott Bentley from across the road. Ah! You’ve got Ryan Bentley.’

‘Not the one who called me a witch!’

‘He was only joking, Laura, and you did look funny.’

‘Yes, thanks to you and your erstwhile beauty products.’

...

Laura made sure she was the one to offer her hand when she walked out on the court.

‘Hello. I’m Laura.’

‘Ryan. Do you want to toss?’

‘I do. Listen, I’m sorry about the other week when I ran into you.’

‘OK and I’m sorry for calling you the Blair Witch.’

‘Apology accepted.’

Yeah, sure it is, thought Ryan. She’s not a witch, she’s an ice queen. Yeah, sure you’re sorry, thought Laura. She had never seen anyone look less like a tennis player in his baggy old shorts and unironed polo shirt, which was pilled as well.

Their opponents were Alicia and Tristan, a boy with manicured hair and a serious tan. Alicia sought to ingratiate herself with Ryan by complimenting him on his court coverage, even stopping to chat at the crossovers. Laura wondered what on earth she saw in him, although she did concede that he had awesome eyes and hair. Just as well for him, though, given his poor taste in clothing and lousy personality.

When Alicia squealed with delight at another save of Ryan’s, Laura could no longer contain herself.

‘Why don’t we all take a minute to stand and applaud?’

Alicia’s mouth tightened. ‘Don’t be so mean.’

‘Let’s just get on with the game.’ Tristan looked decidedly uncomfortable, fearing a cat fight on the court.

Laura was at the net with Ryan receiving from Tristan. Alicia caught the returning ball and drilled it straight at Laura. It hit her hard in the diaphragm. She dropped her racquet and clutched her stomach.

‘Oh, sorry.’ Alicia looked anything but sorry.

‘Are you OK, Laura?’ Ryan came running over. ‘Do you want to rest for a bit?’

‘No. I’m fine.’ Laura gritted her teeth and retrieved her racquet. She was very angry and it sharpened her determination. She now actively wanted to win this match. They played in silence for the remainder of the final set. Somehow she and Ryan coordinated well and won the match in a tie-break. They were intent on the game and unaware of that Stephanie and Scott were watching.

‘Don’t they make a great team?’ Steph stared in awe at the figures combining on the court. ‘Sorry I can’t play that well.’

‘Well, you are a beginner. Obviously Laura is not.’

‘No, I think she played at college.’

‘You didn’t go to school together then?’

‘We did in primary, but not secondary. My parents could never have afforded those fees.’

‘Is Laura’s family wealthy, then?’

Stephanie looked down. ‘Laura is seriously wealthy. Her family home is a mansion and it’s listed with the National Trust.’ She looked up at Scott. ‘But she is a great person, Scott. The best.’

‘Ryan thinks she’s up herself.’

‘I guess she can come across as aloof but she’s actually shy, and she’s had a very rough trot.’ Suddenly she grinned. ‘Laura thinks Ryan’s a bogan.’

Scott laughed. ‘Yeah, well the clothes would say that. My brother is a bit...old-fashioned I guess, in some ways a bit blokey, but he can run rings around most people.’

...

‘You’ve got to admit, it was a hoot.’

Scott was driving them home from the club.

‘It was OK. Think I’ll be sore tomorrow. Haven’t used those muscles in a while.’

Ryan gingerly rubbed his right shoulder.

‘So, how was your partner?’

‘She played pretty well. Good backhand.’

‘I *saw* how she played, Ryan. What was she like?’

‘She’s a strange one. So bloody serious. I’d like to see her laugh. She has this kind of ... air... about her, real don’t dare touch me vibes.’

‘Apparently she’s got a shitload of money.’

At a look from Ryan he added. ‘Steph told me.’

‘Ah! The light and airy Stephanie. It figures. The Ice Queen’s got that look.’

‘What look?’

‘The teeth, the hair, the walk. She would never slouch. Born privileged I guess, they carry it around like some sort of cloak.’

‘And you know this, how?’

‘Seen it all before. Remember school excursions where you ran into the kids from the richest private schools?’

Chapter 11

From the refrigerator Laura took olives, blue-vein cheese, prosciutto and sun-dried tomatoes. She looked in the cupboard. Damn, no dry biscuits. She called out.

‘Patrick! Can you go to the shops for me please?’

Patrick loped into the kitchen, maths book in hand.

‘I thought you wanted me to be doing homework when the old bloke arrives.’

‘Don’t call your father that. Do you call me the old bitch behind my back?’

Even though he denied it, Patrick had the good grace to blush. Laura wrote out a short shopping list.

‘Don’t rush back. Give me a little time with him first. Don’t get upset or angry with him. He responds best to reason. You know he wants what’s best for you, don’t you?’

‘Yeah, but he wants me to do things with my head, Laura, but my head’s rubbish. I want to do things with my hands. I want to mend things and make things, useful things. Why can’t he understand?’

‘First of all your head is not rubbish. Secondly, what you think you want now might change as you get older. Listen, I’m not that old that I can’t remember being fifteen. It’s not easy. Just remember where he’s coming from. He wants you to have a good life, make money, be somebody.’

‘Yeah, but not *my* kind of somebody. I don’t care about the law. From what I see it’s just a lot of people making money from looking and talking smart but not really doing. I want to do.’

‘Go *do* the shopping, Patrick.’

Patrick wandered down the street. His suspension time was nearly up. He had loved living with Laura and Steph. They were so... cool? Nah. Not Laura anyway. More like his Mum, reminding him to brush his teeth. His eyes began to feel all prickly. *Don’t go there, Patrick.* Laura treated him like a baby sometimes, but it was better than feeling like a number, just one of hundreds of other kids in the same uniform, trudging through every day because they had to. If only his dad would let him stay with Laura.

...

Richard stuck his head in the fridge and pulled out a ripe tomato and a block of cheese from Aldi, his favourite shop. He hauled out a box of Salada dry biscuits from the cupboard. He was grabbing a dinner plate when Ryan walked in.

‘Oh good, snack time.’

Richard made shooing gestures. 'No. Go away, Ryan, this is for me and Stephanie.'

'You and Stephanie? You mean the airhead from across the road. What's she coming here for?'

'Going to talk about doing my accounts for me. Maybe even help me write up a few tenders for Melbourne jobs. And don't call her names.'

'OK. Just make sure Scott's not around or she'll go all girly on you.'

'She sweet on him?' Richard's eyes lit up. 'Good.'

The doorknocker sounded. 'That'll be her now. Go and...do something.'

Ryan went to his room and Richard ushered Stephanie in very politely, offering her a drink.

'No, I'm good thanks. Let's get stuck into it.'

They read through an online tender together, stopping at crucial points.

'What the hell does that mean?' Richard pointed at the screen.

'Oh, that's just jargon. They all have it. I'll write you out a list of acronyms if you like. It's basically government-speak, I'll translate into plain English as we go.'

Richard liked her straightforward style. He thought they would make a good pair.

...

Laura hated lying to her uncle but she decided to try and avoid mention of the act for which his son had been suspended.

'Would you like a glass of wine, Uncle Hugh?'

Hugh walked over, inspected the bottle and frowned.

'I've got whisky if you prefer.' She held up a bottle of Dimple.

'Just a small one, thanks, driving and all that, you know.'

When they were settled in the living room, glasses in hand, Hugh asked where Patrick was.

'I've sent him up to the shops for a couple of things we need for dinner. He shouldn't be long.' Laura took a deep breath.

'I've been thinking, Uncle Hugh, Patrick seems very lonely and isolated at the moment. If he could stay here at weekends we could try to bring him out of himself

and teach him how to talk and act around adults. I know it just isn't working for him at school at the moment. I think he needs a buffer. What do you think?'

'I think you're sounding like his mother.' His tone was gruff. 'Sorry Laura, I don't think he realises quite how much I miss her too. I don't mean to be hard on him, I just want him to be successful. Surely letting him spend weekends here would be giving in to him. That boy needs discipline, not cosseting.'

'I think he needs a bit of both, and it won't be giving in as he wants to stay here full-time. A little compromise can't be bad.'

Hugh sipped his drink and considered. Actually, his doing a little conceding just might work in his favour. He knew Stephanie was already in his debt but decided to sound considerate.

'What about Stephanie, though? It could be an imposition on her as she is not related.'

'Oh, no. Stephanie won't mind. She's better than I am with kids his age. She knows all the latest stuff; you know, bands, designer labels, computer games. We really like having him here, Uncle Hugh. We have the room after all. Oh, yes, and Steph has even talked about joining him up at the tennis club.'

'Tennis club? Yes, that sounds good. You know, Laura, I think you could drop the uncle title for me now. You're an adult and sometimes you actually make me feel younger than you.'

Laura didn't know whether to feel complimented or insulted.

'What did he get suspended for, by the way?'

Just as Laura took a gulp of her wine to stall for time, her uncle's mobile rang. He excused himself and took the call. Laura furiously began to think of more acceptable reasons for being suspended, such as playing loud music after lights out.

After a brief conversation, Hugh snapped the phone shut and rose to his feet.

'Sorry, Laura, but I have to go. Something urgent has come up at chambers. Tell Patrick I'm sorry I missed him but I'll speak to him soon.'

After she closed the door behind him, Laura, smiling, raised her glass in a toast to herself and Patrick, and even her uncle, excuse me, *Hugh*, who wasn't so bad after all.

...

Kit dreaded his first day at Kew Secondary College. He thought longingly of his mates at Belmont and wondered what they were up to. Just his luck his parents had uprooted him in the middle of Year 10. It would be third term when he started and it was hard enough making new friends at the beginning of the year, let alone the middle. He conveniently forgot the numerous suspensions and that the principal had been threatening to expel him. He wouldn't admit it to anyone, but he was shitting bricks at the thought of all those kids who probably had money and would likely be smarter

than him. If only he was brainy like Ryan or good at sports like Scott. He sure did get the crappy genes.

Kit was royally pissed off with his family. Patrick was pissed off with his father. They had things in common. Trouble ran like a thin black line waiting for them to cross over and intersect. In the way of adolescent boys they both wanted to be somewhere else, someone else. Their worlds were mundane, boring and tiresome. Surely there were wicked thrills somewhere. They felt the pulse of heroes in their veins.

Chapter 12

Ryan was surprised, but flattered to get a call from Alicia from the tennis club. She must have found him attractive and he liked a woman not scared to make the first move. He was at a loose end, so meeting up for a drink with her was interesting. Alicia had drilled the Ice Queen, which wasn't exactly admirable, but hell, she was so annoying sometimes. Scott wasn't so sure it was a good idea.

'She's a bit old for you, isn't she, mate?'

'Don't be so ageist, Scott.'

'Smart-arse. This is your brother speaking so don't do all the 'ists' on me.'

'What do I have to lose? She's good-looking, tight body. Might be fun, or ...interesting. About time I saw a bit of action.'

'Well, as far as I could tell, she's incredibly vain and not that bright. But hey, what do I know. As you say, I only go for airheads.'

'Now, who's being a smart-arse!'

...

'Dad, I need an increase in my pocket money.'

'Yeah? Well, I need more money too, Kit. Join the club!'

'No, seriously, Dad. Only another ten dollars a week. It's not much.'

'What do you need it for?'

'My mobile, for texting mainly.'

'I don't understand why you kids have to stay in touch 24/7. People jabbering away on the tram, telling the world their business. It's crazy.'

'What's crazy?'

Carolyn selected an apple from the fruit bowl and started munching.

'Dad's doing a major rave about mobiles. All I want is ten bucks a week extra.'

Carolyn glanced at Richard, who merely shrugged.

'You'll have to do something to earn it, Kit.'

'Like what?'

'Something useful to the family. I'm thinking clothes washing, folding, ironing.'

‘Not ironing, that’s a girl’s job.’

Scott and Ryan returned from putting out the garbage.

‘What’s a girl’s job?’

‘Ironing.’ Kit was determined.

‘I do ironing.’ Scott’s look dared his response.

Ryan was amused. ‘I don’t.’

Carolyn’s mouth curved and she raised her eyebrows.

‘What?’ Ryan held his arms out.

‘No shit, Sherlock.’ Mother and son chorused.

Carolyn patted Ryan on the cheek and turned to leave the room.

‘Hang on, Mum. Turn up the radio, Scott. It’s lounge music. Come on Mum, let’s show this old house what good movers the Bentleys are.’

‘I really don’t have time, Ryan.’

‘Oh, come on, Mum. Five minutes. Please?’

With a rueful smile Carolyn succumbed and she and her son waltzed gracefully around the room. Hell, thought Scott, we haven’t done that in ages. It had started when he was an adolescent, was growing too quickly and had coordination problems. His mother had taught both of them ballroom dancing. Of course they resisted at first but as soon as he realised it was helping him, not only on the tennis court but even footy, he began to enjoy it. Ryan, who hadn’t really needed the exercise, was just a natural. Plus, for Ryan, anything that was different to what his peers were doing was a bonus.

...

Alicia knew she had taken a risk, albeit slight. She had accessed Ryan Bentley’s mobile number from the club’s database. She had grown tired of waiting around the club for him to show. Such a beautiful face, she wanted to stroke it. The bum didn’t look too bad either, even dressed in those terrible shorts. She could certainly help him with his dress sense. Alicia had a personal trainer and now it was showing. She felt trim and fantastic, rearing to go; feeling pretty damned seductive in fact. She’d had a leg and bikini wax and considered a Brazilian, but you couldn’t pick male tastes these days. Always better to tread carefully at first. Fresh sheets were on the bed. Sure, she was meeting him elsewhere but fully intended the night to end in her bed. She hoped

it would last longer than a one-night stand but that was OK too, because what she really wanted was a male with money.

Alicia didn't regret the fact that she hadn't bothered with any formal qualifications, all those useless bits of paper. The majority of her work had been in retail but she didn't want another stint selling furnishings or property. She could go back into property management, having schmoozed well over the years. But really, she would rather have someone else bring in the money. Still, while she looked further for that someone, Ryan Bentley could scratch an itch.

Chapter 13

Laura had to admit that, with tubs of bright marigolds around the pine table and benches, the tennis club was welcoming on an autumn evening. Roger, the president, was in earnest conversation but he stood up and greeted them warmly.

‘Hello there, Laura and Stephanie, isn’t it? Good to see you again. Let me know if you want the bar opened.’

‘Thanks, but we’re only here for a bit of practice.’ Stephanie looked at his male companion.

‘Oh, sorry girls, this is Eddie. He’s on the committee.’ Eddie stood up and shook hands with them.

‘We’re putting our heads together over a small problem we have with the council. We really need legal advice. I don’t suppose you have a lawyer in the family?’

‘I don’t, but Laura’s uncle is a lawyer.’ Laura kicked her in the ankle.

‘Ouch!’

‘Er, he’s not that kind of lawyer. He specialises in corporate law.’

‘I see, but hey, if he could recommend anyone we sure would appreciate it.’

‘I’ll ask him, but I can’t guarantee anything.’

‘That’s great. Thanks Laura.’

Laura’s grip on Stephanie’s elbow was tight.

‘Stop hurting me. What did you kick me for?’

‘There is no space in that brain of yours is there?’

‘What do you mean? What space?’

‘The space most people have between what they’re thinking and what comes out of their mouths. Uncle Hugh is a QC for heaven’s sake. Do you really think he’ll be interested in a dispute between a tennis club and the local council?’

‘Well, excuse me, Miss High and Mighty. Don’t all lawyers do that thing for nothing sometimes?’

‘You mean *pro bono*. That’s largely for charity.’

‘But isn’t the tennis club a non-profit thingy?’

‘Yes. OK, Steph. Tell you what, why don’t you ask him?’

‘Me! He scares the shit out of me.’

Stephanie stopped walking and slapped her forehead. ‘I’ve got it! We join up Patrick and then he’ll have a reason for helping.’

‘You’ve heard Patrick whinging about sport at school. He hates sport.’

‘Yeah, but that’s at school. This is different. I intend talking him into it.’

...

Ryan was reviewing his night out with Alicia. He didn’t quite know what to make of it. She had a fine line in repartee and a real belly laugh. He had started out thoroughly enjoying himself, which he hadn’t expected. She did hilarious impressions of various characters at the tennis club.

They had moved on from Fed Square to a piano bar she knew. It sure wasn’t what Ryan would have chosen but it was very relaxing and quiet enough to talk properly. Trouble was, they didn’t have much to discuss and seemed to inhabit very different families and lifestyles. Ryan was flattered by her attentions, though. It did feel a bit creepy when she started rubbing her foot up his leg. He remembered thinking at the time, what’s wrong with you, you idiot? This woman has the hots for you, just go for it. And so he did. The sex was hot but she did this yipping thing which was a bit disconcerting. He hadn’t stayed the night; something propelled him to leave. He felt a little empty spot in his core somewhere, as if he was missing something. As he wandered home he wondered who had been using whom and decided it just about cancelled out the equation.

Chapter 14

It was Gwen's seventy-fifth birthday. Richard had wanted to give her a surprise party but Ryan had told his Gran. He knew how much she hated surprises. Gwen looked around her. It was the first time she had been in her sister's house in twenty-odd years. Mary had been a weird old coot, always thought someone was trying to rip her off. Paranoid, she guessed they would call it these days. Her other sister, Iris, had lived there for a while and she was cut from the same cloth. Gwen, who was much younger than her sisters, reckoned there could be money hidden, squirreled away somewhere. She might suggest it to Ryan.

The front door opened and there was her baby, Richard's younger brother. He was unexpected, almost a 'change of life' baby as they called it in those days. Luckily, he had been as hearty as his older brother. Gwen sniffed. She wasn't sure about his current partner, the American woman, Elise. She seemed nice enough, but Gwen didn't want him living half way across the world from her. Still, if she gave him a child, a girl-child, that would be something.

Finally, all Gwen's cronies had departed and it was just the family left. Scottie had taken Gwen home and Ryan was enjoying a good chat with his Uncle David, albeit the uncle title was long gone, and Elise, who was vivacious and charmingly direct. This was only the second time Ryan had met her and he was pleased they intended to stay in Australia for six months so he could spend more time with them. David started to talk about a trip around Australia with Elise to show her some of the less touristy, but more interesting places.

'We're going up to Sydney of course. Elise needs to see the Harbour, Opera House and all that. As a matter of fact she's been doing a little research.'

'Oh hardly that, David. I just read an adolescent novel, Ryan, which got me really interested in the history of the Rocks area of Sydney.'

'That would have to be *Playing Beattie Bow*,' chimed in Carolyn, as she brought in a tea tray.

'Yes, have you read it?'

'Oh yes. Do you remember Ryan? I read it to you and Scott years ago when you were little tackers.'

'Yeah. Scott and I thought it icky at first because it was obviously a girl's book but I remember we really got into all the mystery and going back in time.'

'After that, though, we agreed that we might come back to Melbourne and then go to the Western District, Ryan. Show Elise some of real country Victoria. What do you think?'

'Sounds good, but I would take her up as far as Mount Gambier too and then down the Limestone Coast; there's some really isolated little places and all those shipwreck

areas on the way down to Warrnambool. It's generally a road less travelled, as the poets would say.'

'Hey, here's an idea. Why don't you and Scott come with us? It'd be fun.'

Ryan looked to Elise to see her reaction. She was grinning and nodding at him.

'I'd love to. Don't know about Scottie though, he has to start on the nursing training soon.'

'O.K. We'll ask him later. Let's get out the maps and make a plan.'

...

As soon as she hit the outskirts of Ballarat, a big grin took over Laura's face. Yes! She was out of the city and all she could see was the road ahead and gum trees at the sides. A few crops, cows and sheep and the occasional house. Laura glided through the small towns between Ballarat and Hamilton, all with tiny main streets, a footy ground and one local pub. Careful girl, she thought, slow down, police always lurk in hidden groves just before or after small towns. She could tell how small the town was going to be by the speed limit. If it didn't go below eighty kilometres it probably wouldn't have more than an old general store. There was a place she remembered beyond Hamilton on the way to Mount Gambier that had a name... Strath something... but all you could see were four roadside mailboxes. She wondered about that one. Maybe during the gold rush era it thrived and then just disappeared.

Laura decided to stop for a coffee at Linton. The sign on the right as she entered pointed to Snake Valley. One day, she promised herself, she would check it out. Suddenly she could smell cow manure. Oh, bliss! You could talk all you liked about the smell of freshly baked bread or coffee beans but give her a whiff of cow poo any day. A small petrol depot and general store promised real coffee on its sign but she wasn't convinced. She drove slowly down the main street, looking for a bakery, but before she knew it she was at the end and all she had seen was a post office and pub. She did a u-turn and passed a stunning stone house with a walled garden. Oh well, back to the roadstop café.

Coffee in hand, she sat at a bench seat and table out the front. The coffee was surprisingly good and the sound of magpies carolling in the morning air put her in a good place. Maybe if she could go home at least once a month she might last out the year in the city. Hugh and Steph had talked her into moving. She smiled as she remembered their separate terminologies. Steph, of course, referred to it as Laura 'getting a life', whereas her uncle talked about the social and cultural advantages of city living. Both, however, implied that she would become an isolate, an outcast if she stayed on the farm alone forever.

For a year after her parents' deaths she had craved aloneness and clung to the daily reminders of them about her, not in the house but in the land. Then she had the 'episode' and the shrink in the hospital agreed she needed a change. Her entire family now consisted of her uncle and her young cousin. Poor little Paddo, he took after his mother in so many ways. He had a gentle vulnerability that could never be at home in

a boarding school. Hugh's attempts to 'toughen him up' were misguided, and could well backfire. She wished she had him here now to appreciate the quiet and the slowing down it brought. She wanted him to occupy this good space with her.

Laura smiled to herself as she noticed the changes in the colour of the land around her. After a ten-year drought there had finally been rain, even plenty in some areas. Instead of the bare soil of a few months ago, the land was green, almost lush in places. She couldn't resist peering into each creek she passed. Some were still empty. She wondered if the dams on the property were rising. Up ahead she could see three horses in a paddock, their elegant necks bent to the ground. Her horse, her Wally, wasn't quite so elegant; in fact his large hoofs were a bit like a draft horse but he had personality in spades.

Gradually the Grampians came into focus. Today they were a translucent blue, almost shimmering. The little town of Dunkeld nestled at their giant's feet. Her father had said that each mountain had a special significance for people in the area. He had known so very much about the Western District; not only was he born there but his curiosity burned bright. God, how she missed his passion, the way when he laughed his whole body got involved. She needed to concentrate on the road.

She debated whether to drive through Hamilton or take the back roads. Hamilton was a boxy little town, as if someone had packaged it up and dropped it whole into the centre from the sky above. It needed a mall. She wondered if maybe she could live there instead of Melbourne one day; hell, maybe she could join the local council and advocate for a mall. Yeah, right, she was one hell of a public speaker.

Chapter 15

Scott finally plucked up the courage and asked Stephanie out to see a movie. She suggested a new action movie which wasn't quite his thing, but it seemed polite to go along and if he had told her about his preferences she would think he hadn't survived the ice age. He liked the action part but sometimes the special effects were over the top and just an excuse for a feeble plot. He loved the old James Bond movies and the spaghetti westerns of Clint Eastwood; at least in those the action was human.

They went in Stephanie's sports car. I'm a modern guy, he told himself. I don't need to be in charge. Still, he tightened his seat belt and hoped she wasn't a mad driver.

'Relax, Scotto, you're in good hands'

Stephanie laughed as she gunned the engine noisily, only to pull out at a steady pace.

'Must have cost a bit.' Scott patted the dashboard.

'Not for me, it didn't'

'What? You stole it?'

'Oh, please! I cut a deal with Laura's uncle. I agreed to quit my job in Canberra and come live with her if he paid half. I've *always* wanted a sports car. I suppose you think I'm a mercenary bitch and don't you dare tell Patch I quit my job, she thinks I took leave.'

'Does that make you her minder?'

'No. That makes me her *very* good friend.'

'Do I sense a current of ...shut the fuck up and mind your own business...in there?'

'You're pretty perceptive for an Aussie male.'

'Oh, I'm a snag alright.'

'Are you really a *sensitive* new age guy? It doesn't fit with the Y generation framework somehow.'

'Don't ever mention Y or any other generation name to Ryan. He says it's all argy-bargy bullshit and marketing ploys. But to answer your question, I guess I'm not exactly new age; don't want to blog or tweet. I would *love* an iPhone though, my old thing's a relic. I try for sensitive but I am a bloke, after all.'

'You and Ryan seem close, for brothers.'

'Yeah, probably because we're only a year apart, a bit like twins for Mum.'

'I imagine that would be hard for her, when you were little, I mean.'

‘I guess, but she always took us everywhere together.’

‘But didn’t you fight? Surely you must have fought with your brother.’

‘Oh yeah, punched the shit out of each other a few times. One time I gave Ryan a blood nose and Mum was furious. It was funny though, she wasn’t that upset about his nose, she was more worried that I’d hurt his feelings. We had the big conference thing that day, had to speak about why we were fighting and what was important, all that stuff. I think we did talk about things but mainly to shut Mum up. I don’t think we fought much after that, didn’t want the whole talking thing again.’

‘Sounds like your Mum should be a psychologist. She was using the talking cure.’

‘The what?’

‘The talking cure. That’s what psychology used to be called. I read it somewhere.’

‘OK. Didn’t know that. Anyway she must think we’re big and ugly enough to take care of ourselves now. Or maybe she just sees her job as done. These days she stays locked away in her study most of the time.’

Stephanie thought she detected a note of disappointment, but he was smiling so she let it go.

‘What’s she doing in her study?’

‘A PhD.’

‘Wow, she must be smart.’

‘She is, but it takes hard work she says, total involvement. She says it changes your way of thinking.’

Stephanie snorted.

‘I can’t think of anything worse. I couldn’t wait to get shot of school. It was so boring.’

‘Yeah. I was like that, but now I have to go back to school if I’m going to do nursing. I’m not sure I’m up to it. I’ll have to do maths which I was *not* good at.’

‘That was all I *was* good at. Maybe I can help.’

Scott thought that sounded great.

...

‘Hey you! You wanna game of kick to kick?’

Patrick looked up from dragging his feet and his school bag. Kit was slouched against his front fence and held the Sherrin above his head.

‘What, now?’

‘Yeah, why not? You scared of getting that nice uniform dirty?’

Little shithead, thought Patrick, but it sure would beat doing homework. He threw off his blazer, put it and his bag on Laura’s front step and crossed the road.

‘I’m Patrick.’

‘Yeah, I heard. I’m Kit.’

‘Yeah, I heard that too.’

‘Who do you barrack for? No, wait, let me guess.’ Kit eyed the blazer on the step. ‘Scotch College, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, it’s gotta be Hawthorn. As my Mum would say, it’s O-blig-at-ory.’

‘No, smart-arse, it isn’t and I don’t.’

‘Ooh, the college boy swears.’

‘Look, do you want to spend all day putting shit on me or play footy?’

‘Good point, Paddo. Let’s play.’

Kit had to admit the boy could kick, if only he would lighten up and take that scowl off his face. After about half an hour Patrick looked at his watch and said he had to go.

‘What? To be a good boy and do your homework?’

‘Don’t you ever lay off? Yeah, I’ve got to do homework but I’ve also got to peel the potatoes. Don’t YOU ever have to do stuff like that?’

‘Don’t get me started. Mum wants me to do ironing! Can you imagine that?’

‘That is way uncool. I don’t think Laura or Steph would trust me to do that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I burned a hole in my school shirt last time I ironed.’

‘I owe you big time, thanks.’ Kit held out his hand. Patrick took it and shook even though he didn’t understand what he was being thanked for.

Chapter 16

Jim Masters was out pretending to be mending fences when a whirl of red dust and the crunch of tyres on gravel announced Laura's arrival at the house. He thought about going over to meet her, but in the end did a huge wave that took in the horse behind him. She'd want to ride that horse before she spoke to him at any length.

Laura left the car door open and ran across the paddock. She flashed a grin at Jim and threw her arms around the horse's neck.

'Oh Wally, I've missed you so much. You've saddled him. Thanks Jim. I guess it's OK with you if I ride him for a bit?'

'Sure, take your time. I'll fix us a cuppa in a while.'

Jim had known approximately when she would arrive and he figured the best welcome he could possibly give would be a ride on Wally.

'Go easy on him, Laura,' Jim called out as she climbed into the saddle, 'he's not getting any younger.'

Laura frowned down at him as she patted the horse's head. 'He's alright, isn't he?'

At the note of alarm in her voice Jim sighed. 'Yeah, he's OK.'

Jim had known Laura since she was a little kid and he had come to work casually for her father. His greatest wish was that she would find someone to love. He never had, but as he was now an ugly old bugger that wasn't likely to happen. After her parents died so suddenly he had watched over her in his quiet way, scared like hell that she would go to pieces, which she did in a way. He reckoned Wally, the horse, was one of the reasons she hadn't completely lost it. Her sorrow was huge; it surrounded her like a glass lift he had once been in in Melbourne. He hadn't, like some of the concerned friends and neighbours, tried to break through it, he just watched carefully and waited, knowing time was the only thing to shrink the grief, if not heal it. Her friend Stephanie had come through, had been on the first plane down from Canberra as soon as she heard. He had to admit, even that old bastard uncle of hers had been a help in his own head-stuck-up-his-arse kind of way. He hoped their plan for Laura was working. It had been a rough twelve months, especially when Jim's dog had upped and died on him. In a way, that was good though. He and Laura had cried together. It was a relief to see her grieve.

...

While Laura was away Stephanie organised a tennis lesson with Rudi. She told herself she really did want to improve her tennis but she wouldn't mind another look at the coach. She wasn't sure that Scott was terribly interested in her. He was pleasant enough but he didn't seem to have a lot of get up and go.

The club was fairly empty on the week-day afternoon so they went straight on a court and did a thirty-minute session on her serve and some overheads. Rudi was teaching

her that, instead of attempting to jump to a height she was never going to reach, she could follow the trajectory of the ball and run back to get it. At first she tried to run backwards but soon realised that if she figured out the direction she could take her eye off the ball for a few seconds, at least long enough to get the base line.

After the session, Rudi suggested a coffee in the club rooms. Just as Rudi put the kettle on, in walked Alicia. She strode straight past Stephanie and stood next to Rudi.

‘We need to talk about the dinner dance, Rudi. We need to decide on caterers, music and a theme.’

‘Whoa. Hold up, Alicia. Stephanie and I were just about to have a coffee. Would you like one?’

Alicia waved her hand dismissively. ‘Oh, yes, alright, but we do need to talk.’

‘Well, maybe Stephanie has some ideas too.’ He raised his eyebrows in Stephanie’s direction.

‘Maybe,’ Alicia looked doubtful, ‘but with all due respect she has only just become a member and has no sense of the history of our club.’

In Stephanie’s mind, all due respect meant I hate you but I’m putting things politely to show myself at the best advantage. Be buggered if she would take it lying down though.

‘No, Alicia, but I do have a history of organising many functions in Canberra so I could have a few good ideas. However, I do need to leave now. I am helping one of my new clients, Richard Bentley, to write a tender.’

‘Bentley,’ mused Rudi, ‘now why does that name sound familiar?’

‘Is he any relation to Ryan Bentley?’ asked Alicia. ‘You know Rudi those two vey attractive young men who recently joined the club. Didn’t we pair you up with Scott in the round robin, Stephanie?’

‘Yes, you did and Scott and Ryan are his sons.’

‘Well, what do you know! I actually had a few drinks with Ryan the other night. It was a *vey* interesting night, a lot of fun.’

Stephanie considered the look on Alicia’s face to be positively lascivious and couldn’t wait to get the goss from Scott. Somehow she couldn’t see Ryan with Alicia. She would have liked to get Laura and Ryan together, but when she thought back to their previous encounters it did seem highly unlikely.

Chapter 17

Ryan borrowed Scott's car and went to pick up his Gran from the rehab centre. He had spoken to the social worker and everything was in place to get her all the help she needed – if she would accept it! He knew he would get grief over the handrails; one at the front door and two in the bathroom, let alone the shelf seat across the bath.

Gwen was sitting on a straight-backed chair, impatiently tapping her foot.

'Oh, thank goodness, Ryan love, get me out of here. I've never come across such bad food and fancy putting me in a swimming pool. Bloody frightening it was, they lowered me down in this brace thing. And then, would you believe, they left me in the wet bathers in my dressing gown. Bloody fools forgot about me. I ask you!'

Ryan looked at the walking frame beside her. Oh dear.

'Yes, and they needn't think I'm going to use this stupid contraption any longer than I have to. The physios say I'm doing particularly well, should be able to manage with a walking stick soon. Can we stop and get one on the way home?'

'Slow down, Gran. Let's just get you home and settled first.'

Ryan opened the car door. 'Is this Scott's car, you don't have one, do you?' Gwen frowned.

'Yes, Gran, it's Scott's, he loaned it to me. He would have come with me but he's got his first class at the TAFE today. Here, put your bum in first, Gran, then swing your legs around. That's it.'

Gwen craned her neck to see into the back seat.

'Where's my Harvey? Is he alright?'

'He's fine, Gran. We thought it best if he stayed with us for a little bit longer. I'm trying to train him to be less – exuberant. I'm working on a reward system plus I've taken him to a couple of dog training classes and I think he's improving. So far he's only knocked over one of our neighbours.'

'Training classes! And who is paying for those, might I ask?'

'It's alright, Gran. Dad put in some new power points for this guy who turned out to be a dog trainer so he worked out a barter-type deal. Pretty clever, I thought.'

'Hmm. He's a lovely dog, my Harvey; just doesn't know his own strength. Your father tried to talk me into getting a shihtzu, horrible yapping little things...'

'Yeah, well, he sure isn't little.' Ryan started laughing as he once again pictured Stephanie jammed against the fence thinking the dog might eat her.

'What are you laughing at?'

Ryan told his Gran about the incident and, after she made sure the girl was alright, she too saw the humour and had a good old laugh herself.

‘Just who is she, this Stephanie? What does she do? What is she like?’

‘Well, aren’t you nosy today?’

‘Don’t talk to your grandmother like that. I’m just curious about who my grandsons are mixing with. Come on, tell me all about your new neighbours.’

‘Well, there are two young women called Stephanie and Laura.’

‘I gather from your story that Stephanie is the attractive one.’

‘Oh, Laura’s far from unattractive. She’s just...hard work.’

‘What? Hard to get on with, you mean?’

‘Sort of. Look, I hardly know her but she seems so stiff and, well...formal, like she’s got this invisible wall around her.’

‘Sounds mysterious, in fact you sound a bit intrigued, Ryan.’

‘Me! No. Now, Gran, I need to tell you about some of your new house fittings.’

Gwen decided she wanted a look at this Laura. Ryan, if not an admirer, was certainly impressed by her and anyone who impressed Ryan deserved an inspection.

...

Stephanie and Scott caught up at the tennis club in the late afternoon. They helped themselves to, and paid for, drinks from the fridge and then sat in the sun outside.

‘Hey, I heard Ryan went out with Alicia.’

‘Yeah, he did.’

‘Well?’

‘Well, what?’

‘Did he have a good time? Does he like her? Come on, Scott, give me something to go on here.’

‘You’re trying to get gossip out of me.’

‘Of course. You’re his brother, and your father is my employer, so I’m kind of like part of the family. Almost.’

‘Look, he didn’t say much so I really don’t know. Sounded like he had fun, though.’

Stephanie let out an exclamation of disgust.

‘What?’

‘I can’t stand that woman, especially after she drilled Laura. I know Ryan thinks I’m an airhead but at least I’m not manipulative.’

‘What makes you think Alicia is manipulative?’

‘Come on, Scott. She thinks she’s God’s gift to men and tries to come on to all of them. She needs all men to find her attractive and that is seriously scary. I think she’d do anything to get what she wanted.’

‘Aren’t you being just a bit judgemental? We don’t know her very well and anyway, she’s never tried to come on to me.’

‘Oh, she’ll get to you, eventually. So far she’s been way too busy focussing on Ryan.’

Scott finished his drink and rose from his seat. ‘That sounds bitchy to me.’

‘Yeah, well maybe you don’t separate people from people enough. Some are intrinsically better than others.’

‘*Better?*’

‘Yeah, not everyone is a good guy.’

Stephanie put her hands over her face. She had just blown it big time. She had sounded like a bitch and a know-all. If he ever spoke to her again she would just learn to keep her mouth shut. Scott was so bloody nice, and cute, and funny. She really wanted him to like her.

...

Chapter 18

Laura and Jim sat in the kitchen and talked about the farm, the price of feed and how many new sheep and lambs had arrived. Jim had his computer open, showing Laura how he was trying to make good use of the new software programs Stephanie had downloaded. Laura was impressed.

‘It’s really not as hard as I thought it would be. I went to the TAFE in Hamilton for a week’s course and learnt how to use spreadsheets. Course I’m as slow as a wet week on the keyboard but as it’s mainly figures I put in I don’t have to be a whiz. It’s bloody amazing, Laura, what you can find out from the internet: new farming techniques, what new crops people are growing, the going rate for shearers or labourers, any amount of stuff you need.’

‘It all sounds great, but how are you doing, Jim? You must get lonely here all by yourself. This is such a big house. Are you still only using three rooms?’

‘Yeah, that’s enough for me. Phyllis still comes in to clean twice a week. She made noises about cooking for me but I like to do that myself. I’ve usually got at least one or two young locals helping out in the paddocks so I do OK. No need to worry about me, Laura. How are you doing down there in the big city?’

‘Apart from feeling like a fish out of water most of the time, it’s alright. Stephanie talked me into joining the tennis club.’

‘Yeah? Met any good people there?’

‘I got paired up in the mixed with an interesting but daggy guy who lives across the road from us. He insulted me...you know, looking back on it he was quite witty.’

‘Nice-looking?’

‘Mmm, but dresses atrociously. Good tennis player.’

‘Did you win?’

‘Yeah. I got a bit fired up when this bitch called Alicia deliberately drilled me. I got angry and... I was determined to beat them.’

Jim was surprised, but pleased. Laura hadn’t shown many emotions for a long time. He could tell she had surprised herself.

‘That’s my girl. How’s Steph going? Any new romances?’

‘As a matter of fact she went out the other night with the brother of my tennis partner. She’s also doing bookkeeping for their father.’

‘So, you’re getting to know the family.’

‘Well, Steph is. I’m not that interested. Their house is hideous.’

Jim thought the lady protested a little too much. The thing she needed back, he reckoned, was her sense of curiosity, especially about people around her. It had got up and taken a walk when her parents died. It was his job to care take until things didn't need taking care of any more. He hoped her new life and hopefully some new and good friends would ignite Laura, give her, well, a purpose.

...

Laura had stayed in one of the guest rooms at home, as she had done on the last few visits. She had fewer dreams there and it felt fine to get up in the morning, use the guest bathroom and get on her way. First though, she had to walk the length of the verandas, both upstairs and down. Jim probably thought it odd, this ritual she had adopted, but besides the great views, it somehow settled her, created a space between two places, maybe even two parts of her. She checked the balconies, the tiling, the eaves, making sure nothing was falling apart, but it was all in a reasonable condition. What would she do without Jim? There was no way she could look after this place like he did and she knew he didn't do it for money. She felt mean for not telling him about the letter from the National Trust. They wanted her to consider opening it to the public. Bloody hell, open it to the public, she couldn't even open it to herself. Not yet. Maybe one day.

...

Kit's first day at his new school wasn't nearly as horrible as he'd imagined. He quickly discovered he had an edge. Due to Geelong's success there were quite a few supporters in his year level. Ryan would reckon they had just jumped on the bandwagon, but it suited him just fine. Scottie had organised a friend to mail the *Geelong Advertiser* each week so he knew the inside information on the team. He had slurped up names, numbers and statistics from his brothers since he could talk, so he found he had a whole vault of information no-one else did. He didn't want to pump his own tyres but he was feeling a little bit like a hero. When he got home he decided to shock the lot of them and clean up his room.

...

'Look what I found in the back of my wardrobe.' Kit showed his father a framed portrait.

'Wow! It's Aunty Mary. She looks so different from how I knew her. She's really young here, she must be what, eighteen, nineteen?'

'She looks like one of those old movie stars, Dad.'

Richard took the frame and put it up on the mantelpiece.

'You know, Kit, I reckon if we clean it up and polish the frame, we could hang it here. I think I'd like to have Mary come to stay with us.'

'I found this too, Dad.' Kit showed his father a much-worn, brown leather notebook.

'Is it a diary?'

'No, doesn't seem like it. It doesn't have any dates or anything. It has lots of writing and some pretty cool drawings. I couldn't read the writing.'

Richard flipped through the book.

'Don't think I could either, son. It's so small and spidery. Maybe your Mum could decipher it.'

Chapter 19

‘Hey Patch, we’ve got an email from the tennis club. They’re having a dinner dance.’

Laura looked up from her book and raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, stop my beating heart!’

‘Come on, it should be fun. Live music, good food, cocktails and the price is very reasonable.’

‘I’d rather poke myself in the eye with a compass.’

‘Please. Pretty please. Just this once for me, your very best friend.’

‘Don’t do the guilt trip on me, Steph. Besides, what on earth would I wear?’

‘It’s high time we put you in a dress, and I saw just the one for you today.’

Laura groaned audibly. ‘Why don’t you just go with Scott?’

‘No. It’s not a couples thing. You book a table. Tell you what, why don’t we take Patrick?’

‘Patrick! At a dinner dance? He’s too young to drink and he would hate it anyway. He’s so shy.’

‘Well, it’s high time he learnt to socialise. It would give him something to talk about at school, might even raise his status.’

‘Hmm. There you have a point, but wouldn’t he stick out amongst all the adults?’

‘Not if I can get Scott to bring Kit.’

‘Who’s Kit?’

‘Their younger brother. I think he’s roughly Patrick’s age.’

‘You want me to put up with the whole Bentley menagerie? Not on your nelly. You organise a table if you want and you take Patrick, but count me out.’

Ever one for plotting and scheming, Stephanie decided to buy the dress for Laura. When she saw how good she looked she’d want to wear it out, wouldn’t she?

...

On a fine Saturday morning both Kit and Patrick, unbeknown to each other, were sent on errands to the supermarket and newsagent’s respectively. Fortuitously, or not, both decided on a pie for lunch and headed for the bakery. Kit, feeling generous, decided to

show Patrick his recent discovery – netball teams made up of girls their own age with fantastically long legs, practising and playing on some nearby courts.

‘Look at the legs on that one, Paddo. You like legs, or are you a bum or tits man?’

‘You’re gross!’

‘Oh come on, Paddo, you do look at girls, don’t you?’ Kit held out both hands in front of him. ‘Not that there’s anything wrong with you if you don’t.’

‘God, you’re a dipstick! Yes, I look at girls, don’t get much chance though, no girls at my school.’

‘Well, feast your eyes now, my man. I could introduce you to some of them, if you want.’

‘You really know them?’

Patrick was impressed. He wouldn’t be game to talk to girls he didn’t know. Of course Kit could be lying. Should he call him on it? No, the thought of talking to girls, especially these ones with their short skirts and long hair, terrified him. He would probably go bright red and make a dickhead of himself. He quickly decided he needed to take the groceries home, right now.

...

Gwen had been invited to Sunday lunch at the Bentley household. It was the only way Ryan could think of to reassure her that the dog was fine. He knew she needed the dog for company and hated to have to keep the dog away but he wanted to see her walking properly again first. She had acquired the coveted walking stick but seemed to use it more for pointing than walking. She was now pointing it at the photo portrait of Mary.

‘Where on earth did you get that from? I thought it had disappeared years ago.’

Richard paused in the act of turning the potatoes.

‘Kit found it behind a wardrobe.’ He slapped Kit’s hand away from the baking dish.

‘Yeah, Gran. Don’t you think she looks like one of those old movie stars?’

‘Not really. We all looked beautiful once upon a time. You know she had that done for when Alec came home from the war, but he never did. I thought maybe she had thrown it away.’

‘I found a book too, Gran. I’ll get it and show you.’

Gwen put her reading glasses on and peered at the writing, holding it up to the light and squinting.

‘Never could read her writing.’

‘What are the drawings of, Gran?’

‘Probably fabric designs or ideas for new umbrellas. She was very talented, your Great-aunt Mary, but she did obsess about those bloody umbrellas. I’d be out walking with her in the botanical gardens and all of a sudden she’d stop and stare at some tree or plant or bird. She’d walk around, looking from all angles and muttering to herself. We would go to the tea rooms and she’d pull out a notebook, actually one that looked a lot like the one you found, Kit, and start scribbling away. I used to get real cranky with her, couldn’t even have a decent conversation with her.’

Ryan brought Harvey in but had to stop the dog from immediately jumping onto his grandmother’s lap.

‘Harvey! Down boy. Come on.’

‘Oh, let him be, Ryan. He’s OK. Aren’t you, my beautiful boy?’

‘He’s got to learn to behave, Gran. You need to be with me on this one.’

‘Alright, alright, I’ll just give him a little hug and he can settle down.’

‘Good. What’s that book you’ve got there, Gran?’

Gwen handed it over.

‘It’s just your old aunty’s scribbles and drawings. None of us can read her writing, but it probably wouldn’t be worth reading anyway.’

‘Do you mind if I take it and have a read of it later?’

‘Oh, it’s not mine, Ryan. Your little brother found it with the photo. I guess they belong to your father as they came with the house.’

Ryan looked up at his father.

‘You’re welcome to it, Ryan. You’re the only one of us with the patience to try and read it. Dinner’s up. Can you go and get your mother. Please?’

‘Sure. Has she seen Mary’s book?’

‘Yeah. She was excited at first, thought it might be a diary, and so, you know, history stuff, but when she saw it was a notebook she lost interest. It’s all yours.’

Chapter 20

‘I joined the library today.’

The Bentley family murmured acknowledgement and continued eating.

‘And I got a job.’ Ryan continued eating too.

‘Where?’

‘How?’

Everyone now stared at Ryan, food forgotten except for Kit, who managed to snaffle a potato from his father’s plate.

‘So, nobody’s interested in the library, then?’

‘Actually, I am,’ Carolyn pointed her fork, ‘do they have...’

‘Mum!’

‘Carolyn, later please love. You’re not joking are you, son?’ Richard Bentley tried not to look too hopeful.

‘No, Dad, I’m not joking, but it was the library that led me to the job. In a people kind of way.’

Carolyn nodded her head sagely. ‘Librarians are good people, I’ve always found.’

Richard groaned but Scott interjected.

‘I will personally strangle you, Ryan, if I hear another word about the library. Tell us about the job.’

‘Alright. It’s with young people and it’s casual.’

‘How young?’

‘How casual?’

‘Mm, maybe fifteen to twenty-five and it’s in shifts of two to three hours, sometimes longer but not sure how many a week yet.’

‘But that means you’ll be two years younger than some of ‘em.’ Kit looked perplexed.

‘Doesn’t necessarily matter, Kit.’ Richard replied. ‘I’ve had guys older than me working under me at times. But who are these young people? Is it some sort of youth group?’

‘Not exactly, Dad. They’re ex-offenders.’

‘Gaolbirds? Phew! Didn’t they want experience for that?’

‘What did they *do*?’

‘What are you going to do *with* them?’

Ryan put up a hand as if to stop the traffic. ‘Hey, give me a break here, guys. I honestly don’t know that much more than you do yet. Basically, it’s a program run by a charity and they’re trying to get these guys settled back in the real world. I think they want me to do physical stuff, I mean that’s what I know, but I’ll find out more in a couple of days when I meet the staff and the group itself, well, the current one.’

Ryan wasn’t really sure he was up to this job; in fact he was as nervous as hell. How bad could they be, he asked himself and immediately pictured thick necks, piggy eyes and bad teeth. He remembered seeing a documentary called *The Big House* in school. It had been depressing and suggested a strong link between illiteracy and offending. He guessed book discussions would be out of the question.

...

On Ryan’s way to his new job in Brunswick he saw a sign on a local garage. He text messaged Scott. Scott had been looking at job websites for casual work. He definitely didn’t want to do telemarketing or any kind of selling. The big problem was that, even though he now hated it, working as a mechanic was worth far more money than anything else he could get. When the text message beeped through, he saw it as an omen and rang the number Ryan had sent.

...

When Rocco, owner of Sunfield Motors, introduced himself Scott thought he could well be Rocci, the Italian Stallion. Although the rest of him was stocky, he had hands the size of spades. He constantly jerked when he talked, making sweeping gestures of the old derelict workshop that Scott wasn’t sure would make it through the Health and Safety Regs.

‘Got a lot of good customers, got to keep them happy, you know?’ Rocco rubbed the side of his nose and Scott had no idea at all what he meant. ‘Most of the time I can cover things myself, but sometimes I need a hand.’

‘So you want a casual worker.’

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s it, casual. I pay you cash in hand. That’s good for you, yeah?’

Better for you, thought Scott. That way you don’t have to put me on your books. It was beginning to sound like the dodgy brothers, but what the heck, it could suit him. He was, however, going to make sure he didn’t get ripped off, and he was determined to check each and every piece of equipment before he used it. After some haggling they reached an hourly rate that was agreeable to both.

Chapter 21

Stephanie drove out to the airport to pick up her brother, Todd. She loved to watch the big silver birds take off and land, but actually being in one scared the crap out of her, not that she would admit it to anyone. Stephanie hadn't seen her elder brother for two years, and in his usual style he hadn't bothered to speak, merely texted her to pick him up. Should she be late? Deliberately? No, that wasn't her style. She hoped his recent success in New York hadn't made his head even bigger than it usually was, but she sure wouldn't bet on it.

She waited impatiently on the concourse in front of the huge metal doors that slid open and shut every few seconds, threatening to disgorge international arrivals. Those doors always made her feel like she was in the middle of a spy movie, and right on that thought, bingo, out stepped her brother looking like a James Bond understudy complete with umbrella and dark glasses. She had to admit though, that for a man only just above average height, he did walk tall. Stephanie thought she deserved a hug after two years sight unseen but all she got was the double cheek kiss. So European!

'So, what brings you to Melbourne, brother?'

'Maybe just to see you, sweet one.'

'Yeah, right.' She noticed he now had a mid-atlantic accent which she supposed was better than Yankee talk.

'Don't be mean, Steph, that is a part of it. I also need to see a man about a gallery.'

'An exhibition?'

'Maybe. We'll see.'

After stowing his luggage in the boot, Todd fastidiously wiped down the front passenger seat before getting in. Stephanie always had a hard time figuring out what made her brother tick. She had wondered if he was same-sex inclined but she found it difficult to picture him in a relationship of any kind. He was, like Laura, incredibly self-contained but with him it was purely voluntary. Even as a kid he had been remote, always doodling and drawing but showing little interest in much else. She seemed to remember that writing had been difficult for him and he had struggled to get enough marks to get into university and study fine arts. But, bless him, he had succeeded in the incredibly hard world of modern art. Todd had realised early on that the big bucks were in the corporate world and had turned his hand to large pieces which were suitable for large boardrooms. He did big and bold and he did it better than most.

Stephanie manoeuvred the car down the ramps and back on to the freeway.

'Are you staying in the city?'

'Uh, huh. The Victoria.'

'That old dump. Would have thought you could do better than that.'

‘I like it. It’s reliable and unpretentious.’

Stephanie decided there was really no reply to that.

‘Will you come and have dinner with us one night?’

‘Has your cooking improved?’ Todd raised an eyebrow at her.

‘Nup.’

‘Then how about I take you out to dinner. Tell Laura she’s welcome to come.’

....

Kit had a problem. He had to do work experience and everything on offer from the careers teacher was putrid. I mean, how gross could it get? A bank or the regional office of the Education Department. No way was he going to sit around on his arse taking orders from some pinhead or entering data into a computer all day. The teacher had said if he didn’t like what was offered he needed to find his own placement. Trouble was, so far he hadn’t had one single idea that appealed.

...

Patrick’s father showed him around chambers and introduced him to all the clerks, solicitors and barristers. Patrick wanted to shrink into the carpet. The tall glass bookcases and imposing desks made him feel like he was in some alternate universe. The office manager looked like his face would crumple if he smiled. He was supposed to do two whole weeks of work experience in this place. If only his Dad hadn’t insisted. He hated it. He thought he would suffocate if he had to stay here for one day, let alone ten! He felt bad though. His dad was just trying to be nice, to make him feel welcome. It would be extremely rude if he refused to do it. Maybe he could get seriously ill, develop something contagious so they wouldn’t want him around. He was busy thinking about how he could develop a rash, using sandpaper or something, while his father was explaining what he could and couldn’t have access to on the computers.

...

Ryan had managed to decipher some bits and pieces of Mary’s notebook.

I love the colours of dragon... and peacocks but management are so... They say black umbrellas are our... Bah! Black is safe, that is all. I want to make umbrellas that shout at you, or... you smile, or comfort you... you. One day people will use p... in Melbourne to guard against the harsh heat, hats are not nearly... enough. Maybe even men will stand... beneath them. Once, far away in China... were a status symbol. Now we are reduced to making them from... for stupid... people. The trade has gone to ...

...

Chapter 22

Laura lay on her bed, arms locked behind her head. She had the door closed, which she figured was a message. There was a soft knock on the door.

‘You asleep, Patch? Can I come in?’

‘No. Go away, Stephanie.’

Stephanie opened the door a fraction and poked her head in.

‘You only call me Stephanie when you’re in a snit. Are you OK?’

‘I said, go away. I want my own company.’

‘I’ve been shopping.’ The line was almost sung.

‘I don’t care, bugger off, Steph.’

‘Don’t be mean. I bought you a present.’

Laura looked at her watch. ‘Let’s see, no, it’s not my birthday. I don’t want a present. Leave me alone.’

‘You spend altogether too much time alone. It’s not healthy.’

Laura got off the bed and headed to the bathroom.

‘Where are you going?’

‘The shower, and don’t dare try to talk to me through the door.’

‘Well, I could get offended, but where’s the fun in that.’ Stephanie came back into the room and took a dress from white lacquered cardboard bag. She laid it out on the bed, tweaking at the folds to show it at best advantage. She’d tell Laura about Todd being in town when she was in a better mood.

...

Stephanie rang Scott to apologise for being such a bitch about Alycia.

‘I’m really sorry, Scott. It was none of my business.’ She crossed the fingers on her left hand. ‘I’m sure Alicia is an OK person, I just don’t know her very well. Am I forgiven?’

Scott laughed down the line.

‘You’re a big girl, Steph. You don’t need my forgiveness.’

Now what the hell was she supposed to make of that? She decided to keep going.

‘Hey, Scott, are you and Ryan going to the dinner dance at the club? I’m trying to talk Laura into it.’

‘We weren’t going to, but now I think we should. We both just got jobs. Don’t know that Ryan will be keen, though. He doesn’t like big social things’

‘Hey, congrats on the jobs. I’ll make sure they’ve got champers so we can toast you. You work on Ryan and I’ll work on Laura.’

...

Stephanie hefted her laptop on to the Bentley dining room table while Richard fumbled around for his reading glasses.

‘So, I’ve done the quote, Richard, I just need you to check that I haven’t left anything out. If you think it’s OK, the good thing will be we can use it as a template for future jobs.’

While Richard read from the screen, Stephanie prowled the dining room. She stopped in front of the portrait of Mary.

‘I don’t recall this being here last time. Is it new? Is it a photo or a portrait? Who is it? Oh, sorry, I’m doing it again. Laura says I’m always sticking my nose in.’

‘Rubbish. Curiosity is a good thing, I reckon. It’s my late Aunt Mary and it’s a photo but it’s been touched up with something like paint. They used to do that in those days. Kit found it behind a wardrobe. I guess I like it there ’cos it’s a bit of a tribute, her leaving me the house and all.’

‘It’s lovely. Talking of Kit, I was wondering if you could get him to go to the dinner dance at the tennis club. Laura’s young cousin, Patrick is staying with us and we thought it could be good for him. He’s rather shy, doesn’t mix easily. He’s about the same age as Kit.’

‘A dinner dance! I didn’t think they had those any more. I used to love to dance. Don’t get much of a chance these days.’

‘Why don’t you come too? What about your wife. Maybe your whole family could come.’

‘Mmm. Maybe. I’d hate to ruin it for Scott and Ryan though. We might cramp their style.’

‘No. It’s a big, fun thing. Lots of mixed tables. Why don’t you let me know and I could book a table big enough for all of us.’

Richard really liked the idea, but could he possibly talk Carolyn into it? And how on earth could he entice Kit to go? Bugger it! He’d give it his best shot anyway. Richard

made a pot of tea and carefully laid out Carolyn's favourite cup and saucer, a mug for himself and a plate of biscuits on a tray. He knocked on her study door before entering.

'I've made us a cuppa, love. Time you had a break.'

'Alright, just let me finish this sentence.'

Carolyn laughed as she turned away from the computer and saw the tray.

'A tea tray, complete with cloth. I didn't even realise we had one.'

'We didn't. I found this in a cupboard the other day. It had the cloth folded up with it. Look at it, Caro, Mary must have embroidered it herself.'

The cloth was white with a green border with flowers and a wheelbarrow embroidered at one end.

'Mmm, nice. Quite talented, your Aunt.'

'Yeah, she was. She taught me to dance, you know.'

'Yes, I remember; that was before we were married.'

'Speaking of dancing, apparently there's a dinner dance on at the local tennis club in the next few weeks.'

'How do you know? Oh, are Scottie and Ryan members there?'

'Yes, they are, but I heard about it from Stephanie.' At his wife's frown, Richard continued. 'You know, the girl from across the road who is helping me write some quotes.'

'The blonde one with the high heels?'

'That's her. Bright as a button, she is. Anyway, she was suggesting we all go, as a family.'

'No, Richard. I don't do entertainment at the moment.'

'You used to love to dance.'

'People change, Richard.'

'You've changed an awful lot, Caro. You hardly ever do anything with us anymore.'

'I *told* you that would happen.' Carolyn waved her hand at the desk and computer. 'This is *very* important to me, Richard. It won't last forever, but at the moment it is my life.'

‘Just this once?’

‘No, definitely not. Why don’t you and the boys go. Do a bit of male bonding. Take Kit too. Lord knows he could do with learning a few manners and social graces.’

‘OK, if you’re sure. I’ll run it by all of them.’

Richard wanted to ask about what would happen when she finished the PhD but he was afraid he might get an answer he didn’t want to hear.

Chapter 23

‘Damn! I’ve lost an earring. Maybe I left it at the Bentley’s.’

Laura emerged from the bathroom, her hair in a towel. She carried the dress Stephanie had bought for her.

‘Steph, it was a lovely gesture, but where on earth would I wear this?’

‘You could wear it tonight, if you wanted. I tried to tell you earlier but you were in such a foul mood. Todd is in town and he’s taking us to dinner. He should be here in about an hour. I thought we’d try that new Japanese restaurant at Federation Square.’

‘You haven’t seen him in ages; don’t you want to spend some time alone with him?’

‘Nuh. He’s my brother and I love him, I guess, but I sure as hell don’t understand him. It’s like he lives on another planet, so I’d be much happier if you came. He specifically asked me to invite you.’

‘OK, but did you buy the dress for tonight?’

‘Not specifically. I’d better get changed myself.’

Laura smelt a rat. The dress was absolutely gorgeous; she didn’t think she would waste it on a Japanese restaurant.

...

Ryan was filling the thermos while Scott cut the sandwiches. This was a well-oiled drill in the Bentley household whenever there was a footy match to go to. Unfortunately Kit was not fulfilling his role, which was merely to get himself ready.

‘I’m warning you, Kit. We’ll go without you if you’re not ready in five.’

Scott finished wrapping the sandwiches just as the phone rang.

‘Bentleys’

‘Is that you, Scott? This is Steph. Did I leave an earring over there earlier? It’s got a tiny ruby in it.’

Scott did a perusal of the dining room and spotted the earring on the floor.

‘Yep. It’s here. We’re about to set off for the footy, would you like me to drop it off? OK. Cool. See you soon.’

...

‘Wow! Looking good, Steph.’

Stephanie opened the door, wearing a black dress that showed off her slim legs to advantage. A mauve angora bolero matched her seriously high heels.

‘Thanks, Scott. My brother is in town. He’s taking Laura and me out to dinner. Come on in for a minute.’

Scott turned to Ryan. ‘Do we have time, bro?’

Ryan’s curiosity got the better of him. ‘Sure, a few minutes won’t hurt.’

Stephanie peered past them. ‘Where’s Kit? Isn’t he going with you?’

‘He couldn’t find his lucky underpants so we left him behind. He’ll catch up with us.’

‘I’ll leave the door open. I want a word with him.’

Scott shrugged as Ryan raised his eyebrows at him.

As they climbed the stairs, Scott nearly collided with Ryan, who had stopped to stare at a painting.

‘Is this an original? It’s a Lina Bryans. Must be worth a fortune.’

Laura appeared at the top of the stairs.

‘Of course it’s an original, I don’t do prints. I have no idea what it’s worth. It belonged to my mother.’

Laura had dressed in her best black trousers and a pink blouse. Suddenly, she wished she had worn the dress but then told herself not to be stupid. Despite the big hooped scarves and juvenile baseball caps they looked like they had a real purpose; they were pumped. She wanted to have that look and feel that way.

‘She’s worth knowing about, Lina Bryans. She was part of the Darebin School. Way ahead of her time.’

‘Never heard of her.’

‘Me neither.’

‘Ah, such ignorance. I bet you’ve all heard of the Heide group.’

‘Of course.’

‘Sunday Reed and all that. Sure.’

Suddenly Todd appeared, resplendent in black leather and shoes you could see your face in.

‘Do we have an art expert amongst us?’

‘No. I’m no expert.’

‘Let me guess. You just know what you like.’

‘No, mate, but I do know what I *don’t* like. Come on Scott, we’ll be late.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t introduce everyone.’ Steph thought she might stop it from becoming a pissing contest. ‘This is my *dear* brother, Todd. You’ll have to forgive his manners, Ryan, he’s an artist himself. Todd, these are our neighbours, Scott and Ryan. I’m doing some work for their father, a *very* nice man.’

Luckily Kit chose that moment to call out from below.

‘Wait up, Kit,’ Stephanie called out. ‘I want a word with you. I’ll just walk to the corner with you guys, if you don’t mind. Laura, can you get Todd a drink please, I’ll be back in a jiff.’

...

Stephanie grabbed Kit by the arm to slow down his headward rush to the train station.

‘Kit, I’ve talked Patrick into joining the tennis club. Why don’t you join too?’

‘Why would I want to do that?’

‘You’d meet all sorts of people. I hear you are having some trouble finding work experience.’

‘Yeah. So?’

‘It’s called networking, Kit. People do it to get jobs through contacts. It works.’

‘Sounds like arse sucking to me.’

‘Do you have to be so gross? Oh forget it. You probably couldn’t behave yourself for long enough to impress anyone.’ Stephanie dropped his arm, turned on her heel and began to walk briskly for home.

Kit turned, too, and moved close to say quietly, ‘Could so. Just haven’t got the money to join.’

Stephanie stood staring at him as he walked backwards, grinning at her.

‘Consider it done and dusted. Meet Patrick there next Thursday after school.’

Kit gave her the thumbs-up sign before hurrying to catch his longer-legged brothers.

...

Federation Square on a Friday night glistens with people and movement. Trams clang and disgorge an endless stream of humanity. Staff at the Transport Bar earn their money hard, trying to decipher shouted orders in a maelstrom of noise. Steps are taken outdoors to receive mobile calls. Couples meet up with couples for pre-dinner drinks. Young women vie for attention with figure-hugging dresses and dangerously high heels. Young men with manufactured messy hair and designer-distressed jeans stand beside men in suits looking suitably important.

Stephanie, Todd and Laura quickly abandoned the Transport Bar and elected instead for an outside table at the Riverbank Bar for pre-dinner drinks. After much-needed rain the banks of the river were green and lush. The water, however, was its usual muddy brown. The three sat quietly, nursing white wines and contemplating the water taxis heading upstream toward the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

‘I’ve never been to the MCG,’ Stephanie stated abruptly.

‘Yes you have.’ Todd responded.

‘Have not.’

‘Have so.’

‘When?’

‘When you were two. It’s one of my earliest memories. You cried because you dropped your ice-cream cone and then you fell down the concrete steps and screamed your head off.’

‘You’re making this up!’

‘No, you’re just too young to remember.’

‘Mmm. What’s your earliest memory, Laura?’

Laura thought about it.

‘Finding some newborn kittens in the stables. They were so tiny and their eyes were shut.’

‘Did you get to keep one?’

‘I don’t know, the memory is just a little snatch, but we only had working dogs, no cats, so I guess I didn’t get to keep one.’

Todd tapped his glass with a fingernail.

‘Your father probably drowned them.’

‘Todd! Don’t be so mean.’

'It's OK, Steph, knowing my Dad they probably all went to good homes. What's your earliest memory, Todd?'

'Pulling the wings off flies, maybe.'

'Todd!'

'He's just winding you up, aren't you Todd?'

Todd merely smiled enigmatically and changed the subject.

Laura couldn't decide if she liked Todd or not. He was a complex character, not at all like his sister who wore her heart on her sleeve.

Chapter 24

The Bentley brothers jostled their way through the crowd exiting Jolimont station for the MCG. The black-and-white stripes were worn proudly by a tall man with a large nose. Holding his hand, his partner wore the blue hoops and both were grinning. Two elderly women carried blankets and thermos flasks. Three young girls had scarves dangling over their bare midriffs. The excitement in the air was palpable. Both sides were sure they would win.

On the trek down to the gates the huge light-towers shone on business people in suits talking on mobiles, texting mates or glancing at watches as they hurried, each determined to be seated before the siren went. The brothers had their usual tickets in the Ponsford Stand but didn't bother finding the seats they were allocated on the third level. Instead they found a standing point behind the railings on the ground floor. Here they would have an uninterrupted view and the players wouldn't look like so many ants darting back and forth. They watched as the Northern Stand and the Members filled up by the minute.

'It's going to be huge. What do you reckon?' Scott pointed his football record at the crowd.

'Yeah. They're expecting 90,000.'

'Do you think we'll win?' Kit was very worried. He hadn't found his lucky underpants and was every bit as superstitious as any player who ran out on the ground.

'Dunno. It'll depend on the matchups I reckon. Here we go.'

The small screens above them started going through early and late withdrawals for both sides.

'God, I wish the J Pod was available. We need more big bodies out there. Do you think Hawkins is fit?'

'Nah, didn't look it last week, couldn't run properly. They talk about a hot spot. What the hell does that mean?'

'We can outrun them, though, can't we, Ryan?' Kit was anxious.

'Maybe. They're pretty fast too though, especially that Pendlebury. He's a worry. Hope they put someone fast on him.'

'They could put Mackie on him. He could talk him to death.'

They all stared as a line of Magpie supporters occupied the seats directly in front of where they were standing. This will be interesting, thought Scott. I hope Ryan doesn't get punched in the mouth. Usually Ryan's repartee was too esoteric for the opposition fans to pick up on but sometimes he carried it to dangerous levels.

The siren blared, the fans roared and the two ruckmen jumped to tap the ball out and start the game. Geelong was fast off the blocks in the first quarter and had a six-point lead at quarter time, but in the second quarter Collingwood took charge and kicked four unanswered goals. Geelong couldn't seem to get their running game going; handpasses were intersected and fumbles made. Something was wrong, thought Ryan, this wasn't the usual Catters style.

Jimmy Bartel got tackled and brought to the ground.

'Yer too bloody slow, Bartel, yer soft prick!'

The screamed comment came from a young man with a very large midriff.

'We can't all be slim, svelte athletes like you, mate.'

The man turned his head and glared at Ryan with his mouth open, a plastic mug of beer half way to his mouth. He wasn't quite sure if he had been insulted.

...

Kit was sure it was the lost underpants that had done it. Geelong had lost and to Collingwood of all teams. Sure, it was only one game but it was round 19 in a 22-round season and Collingwood was on top of the ladder. He knew he'd get shit from the Collingwood supporters in his year level and there were so bloody many of them. He liked to think of them as rabbits, multiplying all the time and not a brain among the lot. His brothers, as befitted their age, were far more philosophical, although equally disappointed.

'It'll be alright, Kit. A tiny glitch. We'll bounce back against the Bullys next week.' Ryan steered them down one end of the train, where fewer Magpie supporters were congregated. There were no seats to be had, but at least he thought these days they didn't have the long drive down the highway after a loss.

The lights were on as they passed Laura and Stephanie's place and some sort of classical music was playing.

'Hmm, Beethoven. A bit pedestrian for the imposing Laura.'

'You sure don't like her, do you?'

'To be honest, Scott, I don't know her but she gets my back up. She's bloody condescending.'

'You're the one who's being condescending, aren't you? The music sounds alright to me. You've got to admit Stephanie looked pretty stunning tonight.'

'Yeah,' Kit chimed in, 'and she's going to organise it so I don't have to pay to join the tennis club.'

'What?'

‘Why?’

‘I dunno. I guess she just likes me.’ Kit tried not to look smug.

Scott looked at Ryan and shrugged.

‘Stephanie’s OK. I’m not too sure about that brother of hers though. Although you were being a bit of a smart-arse, Ryan, going on about that painter none of us had heard of.’

Ryan was lost in thought for a few minutes. As Scott turned the key in the lock of their house, he finally responded.

‘My mouth gets ahead of my brain sometimes. I just get really mad that everyone raves about the European impressionists when we had some incredibly talented artists right here in Melbourne. I’d love to know how she got a painting like that. It’s awesome.’

‘Laura didn’t act like it was any big deal.’

‘That’s probably because it isn’t a big deal to her. That’s what makes it even sadder.’

Scott thought that sometimes he didn’t understand his brother at all. He was one weird dude, always thinking in some bigger way than the moment called for. Scott liked to keep things simple. He thought Stephanie did too.

...

Patrick kept looking at the sign on the Bentley’s house. Would Mr. Bentley take him on for work experience? Working for an electrician would be far more exciting, but even if he did agree, how on earth could he talk his Dad around? He just knew he would be useless in those offices. He was sure there were ghosts there. When you thought about it there had to have been a lot of murderers and dangerous people in and out of the building. After his third nightmare in a fortnight Patrick knew he had to do something, had to talk to someone. He could see Mr. Bentley unloading his van. He’d just go and have a chat about...whatever.

...

Laura didn’t know what to make of it. Todd had made a pass at her. After Stephanie had gone to bed the night before, they had sat up talking until Todd’s taxi arrived. He had told her he thought her quite beautiful and leaned forward and kissed her. She was so shocked she froze. The doorbell went, the taxi arrived and he left. What the hell! What had they been talking about? Beethoven, that’s right, and genius and nature versus nurture. She remembered hearing footsteps and voices, probably the Bentleys, just before he pounced. Well, to give him his due he didn’t exactly pounce, but she had felt ambushed. You don’t expect your best friend’s brother to come on to you out of the blue. Did it mean anything? Should she tell Steph? Oh bugger! For some reason

she couldn't get Ryan Bentley's face out of her brain. The way he had looked at the painting as she *never* had.

Todd had questioned her over dinner about the painting, where she'd got it and whether her mother had any other Australian artists. Laura felt excessively ignorant. She had always been too busy out in the paddocks or going to see stock with her father to take much notice of the things her mother valued. She vowed that next time she went home she would have a good look. But in the meantime should she do anything about Todd? She hoped he didn't think she was interested because she hadn't resisted. Should she ring him and tell him off? No, probably an overreaction, maybe he just had a rush of blood to the head. Awestruck by her beauty. Yeah, right, Laura. Fairy princess she was not.

...

Patrick stood awkwardly by the front gate.

'Excuse me! Mr. Bentley!'

'Oh, hello. What can I do for you?'

'We haven't met but I live across the road, well, at weekends, with Laura and Stephanie.'

'Oh, yes, I've heard about you, Patrick, isn't it?'

Richard leant across the fence and offered his hand. 'Call me Richard. Mr Bentley makes me feel ancient.'

'Er, OK. Um, I was just wondering if you like being an electrician.'

Richard scratched his head vigorously. 'It's OK. You meet new people all the time. Some jobs can be tricky though. Why are you asking? Do you want to be an electrician?'

'I...I'm not sure. My Dad wants me to be a lawyer.'

'Well, that's less tricky than a brain surgeon but a lot trickier than being a tradie. Most parents have big plans for their kids, I guess. Do you want to be a lawyer?'

'No. I know I don't want that. My Dad's a lawyer; actually he's a Queen's Counsel.'

Richard whistled. 'He must be really smart.' And bloody well off, he thought to himself. 'What does your Mum want for you?'

'She died a while ago.'

'Oh. Sorry, that must be tough.'

Shit, thought Richard, this was getting difficult. He needed to get out of here. ‘Well, Patrick, maybe you could talk to my son, Ryan, he’s pretty good at figuring things out. I’m only good at fixing things that don’t move.’

Richard packed up his things and started to move toward the house. The poor kid just continued to stand there, shuffling his feet.

‘See you later, Patrick.’

‘Yeah, thanks for talking to me.’

‘No worries.’

Chapter 25

Carolyn Bentley rubbed her eyes and slowly stretched her arms and flexed her fingers. She realised she had been working too long when the characters on the screen began to blur and blend. She stood up and took one step toward the door, then froze. Up high on the wall beside the door was a huge black hairy spider. She gingerly stepped ever so quietly through the door before running down the hall and through the front door.

Once outside she reached into her cardigan pocket and pulled out her mobile. It took several tries before her shaking fingers could access her phone book and call Richard. The phone rang and rang before finally going to voicemail. Next she tried Ryan and Scott but no-one was answering. She threw the mobile on the veranda in disgust. It broke into several pieces. She couldn't stop shivering and her throat felt constricted. She paced around the front yard, willing herself to calm down. It was irrational, dammit, but she could feel the hairy legs on her arms and running across her face.

Laura sat on her balcony writing out birthday cards for Jim and an old neighbour. What did you wish for someone who was turning eighty-nine? As she pondered, pen in hand, she glanced up and across and wondered what on earth the woman opposite was doing. Hell! That wouldn't do her mobile much good. Must have quite a temper. Oh no. Laura recognised that kind of pacing, arms protecting the chest. She would have to see if she could help.

'Um. Hello? Can I help you?'

Carolyn stopped pacing but stared blankly at Laura.

'I'm Laura. I live across the road. You seem...worried.'

Suddenly Carolyn burst into tears. Laura jumped the fence and then stood still, lest she alarmed the woman.

'Please, let me help you.'

Carolyn pointed at the house and stuttered out what sounded like spider.

'Is there a spider inside? Is that what's wrong?'

Carolyn nodded her head.

'OK. I don't like them much either. Do you have a vacuum cleaner?'

Carolyn nodded her head once again.

'OK. Here's what's going to happen. You show me, or tell me, where it is and which room the spider is in and I'll go and get him. Alright?'

Carolyn nodded again.

Speak up, you silly woman, thought Laura. I can't find it by my bloody self and I'm sure as hell not going to search through your creepy house.

Carolyn made a visible effort to speak but instead collapsed on the ground and started coughing.

'Well now. How about I go back to my place and get you some water and we try again?'

Carolyn nodded vigorously.

When Laura arrived back minutes later with a small bottle of water, Carolyn snatched it from her and downed half the contents in one go. She wiped her mouth with her cardigan sleeve and let out a huge breath.

'I'm sorry. This is so irrational. I know, up here,' she pointed at her forehead, 'that it's just a spider, but I can't seem to conquer it.'

'Really. It's OK.'

Finally Laura was directed to the hall cupboard and then the study where she sucked up the Huntsman spider. She wished she were brave enough to capture it by hand but this was the best she could do. She found the back door and left the vacuum cleaner in the yard. As she went back down the hall she could hear someone arriving home. She found Ryan in the front yard trying to put the mobile back together while rubbing his mother's back.

'Your vacuum cleaner is in the back yard.' She strode out of the gate without looking back.

Chapter 26

‘Shit! Looks like we’re the only skips here.’

‘Spot on, bro. What do I do with this?’

Scott carried the engagement present. Gino spotted them from across a table laden with food.

‘Hey guys, glad you could make it. Hey, Ange!’

His fiancée left a group of older women and came over.

‘Hello Scott, Ryan. How are you? Long time, no see.’

‘Yeah. Um, congratulations Angela.’

‘Thanks, Ryan.’

‘Looking good, Angela.’

‘Thanks Scott.’ Angela twirled to show off the soft folds in her blue silk dress.

‘Oh. No partners tonight? I’m sure we put that on the invitations.’

‘Didn’t want anyone to cramp our drinking style.’ Ryan grinned.

‘Don’t worry, Ange. He’s just stirring you up,’ Gino reassured a frowning Angela. ‘Anyway, on that note, what do you both want to drink? Scott you can put the present over there.’

Scott and Ryan, together then separately, moved through the crowd, being introduced to many of Angela’s friends and relatives and renewing old acquaintances from Gino’s family and friends. There were far more of the former than the latter, a fact which did not escape Ryan’s notice.

‘Who needs friends when you’ve got so many cousins,’ was Scott’s rejoinder.

‘It’s not the same thing. You can’t choose your relatives.’

‘Yeah, but it you can choose the ones you spend time with. What does it matter if they’re friends or relatives?’

‘Friends have a different role, is all I’m saying. They’re not scared to cut through the bullshit and tell you if you’re making a mistake.’

‘So, what, you’re going to tell him he’s making a mistake?’ Don’t rain on his parade, Ryan. You’re being too critical, too judgemental here. You don’t know anything about how he feels about Angela, now do you?’

‘I don’t want him reverting to that quiet, scared little kid we used to know. Look at them, Scott, she’s always got a hand on his arm directing him. I’ll bet it was her idea to have that stupid list of engagement presents and where to buy them from. Gino wouldn’t want to order people about like that. I reckon she’ll wear the pants in that relationship. I want him to be looking clearly at what he’s getting into.’

‘It’s none of your business, bro. Butt out. Gino’s old enough to make up his own mind about his future. You’re not responsible for anyone else’s happiness you know.’

‘I get it, Scott. Enough, already!’

...

Kit sauntered into the tennis club, well aware that he wasn’t dressed to play tennis. He couldn’t give a bugger about tennis, it was for old farts, but if he could get a decent work placement it would all be worth it. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to brown-nose too much. As he opened the door he noticed Patrick sitting with a guy who had the full tennis duds on, probably the coach. They were filling out forms. Kit ambled over.

‘Hey, Paddo. What’s happening?’

The man glanced at his sheet of paper.

‘You must be Kit Bentley, our other newcomer. We’ve been filling out Patrick’s membership form. I’ll get you to fill out one too. My name is Rudi, I’m the club pro.’

‘What’s a pro?’

‘It’s the name they give to a coach devoted to one club.’

‘Ah. Well...I’m just here to join up.’

‘Have you played the game before, Kit?’

‘Yeah, sure, heaps. Just give me the forms and I’ll fill them out.’

‘OK. I’ve got some re-stringing to do so I’ll leave you two to it. Put the forms over there when you’ve finished.’

‘You lied, didn’t you? I’ll bet you’ve never played before in your life.’ Patrick looked triumphant. Some people,’ he pointed straight at Kit, ‘are more important in their own minds than in others’.

‘What, you don’t ever drink your own bathwater, think you’re a legend in your own lunchbox?’

‘Narcissist!’

‘Wanker! Listen buddy, I’m joining ’cos Stephanie’s paying for it. I’m not interested in this tennis shit.’

‘So, why join then?’

‘I’m desperate to find somewhere to do work experience and Steph reckons I’ll find someone here to help if I go to that stupid dinner dance. I have to join before I can go to that. Understand?’

‘Yeah, I understand. ‘ Patrick continued to fill out the forms.

‘Gunna play tennis, are you, boyo?’

‘Not necessarily. I have to do work experience too.’

‘Well, no doubt you’ve got something lined up. Your Dad’s a lawyer isn’t he?’

‘That is the problem. He wants me to do it in his law firm.’

‘What’s wrong with that? I wouldn’t mind taking a look in some courtrooms. Pretty exciting if you get a murder or something.’

‘He does corporate law.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘He appears on behalf of huge corporations and believe me it’s not exciting. Not remotely. You’re probably going to think I’m a baby, but I’ve even been having nightmares about it. What I’d really like to do is a week or two with a tradesman, like your father.’

‘You! With my Dad. Getting your hands dirty?’

‘Yes, you tool. That’s what *I* want to do. What do *you* want?’

‘I dunno.’ Kit rubbed his forehead. ‘I can’t seem to come up with anything that appeals.’

‘Look. Why don’t we help each other? If you have a word to your father, I’ll try to find something that you might like. I’ll talk to Steph about who she’s already met at this place. Hey, maybe we won’t need to go to this stupid dinner dance after all.’

‘Actually, some of the netball girls might be going.’

‘Mmm. We won’t have to dance, will we?’

‘Nah. I’ll find a way of smuggling some grog out and we can have our own little party. Deal?’

‘Deal.’

Chapter 27

Laura was bored, extremely bored. There were only so many times you could do the gym, the coffee lounge, housework and reading. Daytime TV was a no-brainer and she refused to become a tennis-club retiree. So she trawled the online ads for jobs but she couldn't find anything in the city. Knowing how to groom a horse, throw fleece or fix broken fences combined with fluency in French and German didn't appear to cut it in Melbourne. She paced the lounge room and then in desperation called Jim's mobile. He had wanted her to move to Melbourne; maybe he could tell her what to do.

'Jim, hi, it's me.'

'Yeah, good. How's Wally?'

'Oh, that's sad, he was a good mate of yours. Thanks Jim, I'll look forward to getting it. No, no, it's all good, just wanted to touch base.' She hung up.

'You are so chicken shit, Laura Patchett!'

'I know that. What else is new?' Stephanie arrived home from the shops.

'Thanks a lot, Steph.'

'Stop feeling sorry for yourself and help me unpack this stuff. So, what's up? Who were you on the phone to?'

'I rang Jim. He wanted me to come to Melbourne. I wanted to piss and moan about being bored witless but a good mate of his had just died so I didn't.'

'Well, good. You showed consideration for his feelings. Why don't you get a job if you're bored?'

'That's just the point, my friend. There are no jobs, I repeat, no jobs in Melbourne that I could possibly go for. Believe me, I have looked and looked.'

'You worked in a pub once, didn't you? You could pull beers or go and get a barrista licence.'

'Steph, I do not want to work in a pub serving drunks or in a café serving rude people. That is stuff for when you are at uni, doing part-time work. I need something more useful.'

'All those things are useful, Patch. Someone has to do them. What about a government job?'

'I looked at a lot of those but they have all these selection criteria. You either need qualifications in something I don't have or experience which I don't have either. I'm feeling like a misfit here, Steph.'

'You've clearly got yourself in a tiz. What about a franchise?'

‘A franchise in what?’

‘Gardening? Lawn mowing? Or maybe you could re-train for something, like Scott’s doing.’

‘The famous Scott again!’

‘At least he’s doing something. What do you *want* to do, Laura?’

‘Go back to the property and work it.’

‘You know that’s not an option, right now. We’ve been through all this. Are you really unhappy?’

‘No, not really, just bored.’

‘Ring up your uncle. I’ve run out of suggestions.’

‘You know, that’s not such a bad idea. If he wants me in Melbourne, he can come up with something useful for me to do.’

Stephanie started to make a cake. She only made cakes when she had a problem and needed to think it through. There was something soothing about setting out the ingredients, weighing, mixing, pouring and baking and you got something good to eat at the end of it. She put on some music. Her friend was a real worry. If she went back to the family homestead she would fall very quickly. When Stephanie got confused, she did things, even if it was only cooking. Laura chased the problems around and around in her head which did her no good at all. Stephanie really didn’t think Uncle Hugh would be much help at all, but it least it would get Laura off her case for a while. She wanted to help her friend but had no idea where to start.

...

Against her better judgement Laura let Stephanie talk her into going to the Sydney Road street party. Stephanie had insisted they catch public transport but when they finally got off the tram Laura wanted to get right back on it. Sydney Road was a writhing mass of bodies, constantly moving as if on an invisible conveyer belt. Street vendors, information booths and food stalls jostled for position on either side of the wide road.

A cacophony of sound bled from wooden stands at the intersections where bands played, choirs sang and acoustic guitarists sang. Little pockets of street theatre and individual mime artists attracted circles of followers. Laura’s heart raced and her hands began to sweat. Stephanie took one look at her and dragged her across to a trestle table and bench seat vacated as the band ended its gig. The next thing Laura knew, a can of beer was thrust into her hand. She held it against her forehead and then took a large gulp. It tasted surprisingly good. A very cold drink, preferably alcoholic, was Laura’s valium and didn’t leave her feeling like shit later. Gradually Steph drew her attention to some of the people who wandered past. A man in a ballerina outfit on stilts waved at them and they watched as a young man wheeling a bike and carrying

one crutch talked extremely loudly to no-one in particular. Men pushed prams, others gave their toddlers a shoulder ride. Adolescents carried skateboards and young women wore big shoes and lots of jewellery. The air smelled of sausages and beer.

Laura counted her blessings, the chief one being a friend who understood your feelings without even asking. They continued to sit and observe. Arms held thick slices of watermelon like so many cheesy grins. A child squawked as her snow cone dropped to the ground.

When they finished their beers the friends moved slowly down the street, inspecting racks of new and second-hand clothing and pamphlets on how to save water. Laura was diverted by a stall where vinyl, CDs and old videos jostled for position with books in endless tatty cardboard boxes. Laura held up a picture book.

‘Hey Steph, remember this?’

‘*Princess Smarty Pants*. That was my all-time favourite.’

Laura couldn’t ever remember being into princesses or fairies, she had always gone for any stories about dogs or horses. Maybe that was why she was so non-girly. She was amazed by the diversity of clothing on the people she watched passing through the crowded street. How ever did they come up with such unusual combinations?

One young woman was completely clothed in nineteen forties-style, even to her hairdo. Another had white leggings with a tropical pattern, a short black frilly skirt and a black leather waistcoat. She noticed lots of asymmetrical hair cuts and acres of bare skin. What struck her most, though, were the delicate bodies of the girls. Most seemed to have impossibly narrow shoulders and waists. She looked at her hands with their short, blunt nails. She never grew or polished her fingernails. Laura thought of herself as the no-frills, perhaps even home-brand, product.

They wandered back to centre stage where the Sounds of Polynesia band in their multi-coloured Hawaiian shirts and crowns of flowers were drumming with their fingers, bare feet tapping in time. These gentle warriors brought their culture of the Cook Islands to downtown Brunswick. They listened for a while and Laura noticed that despite the masses of bodies, people moved in orderly lines. As the sun grew warmer, people sought shade and the tables in front of the stage were bare. Instead, chairs were lined sideways, people trying to avoid the hot sun.

As they moved back toward the tram, a harmonica player sat among the throng, two CDs resting against his case. A solo guitarist played similar blues to the harmonica player but with an amplifier for a bigger sound. The pubs and clubs they passed were having their busiest, most frenetic day of the year. Security guards checked IDs before allowing young people in to the blast of music in the beer garden and front bars. The detritus of food lay on plastic plates, an irritating bee or perhaps a European wasp weaving in and out of them. Laura felt overwhelmed by the heaving mass of humanity in one place at one time. It was as if she had emerged from a cave into a blinding light.

Chapter 28

‘Do you believe in ghosts?’

‘No.’

‘Do you believe in God?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Sometimes?’

‘Yeah, like when Geelong wins a grand final.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘So am I!’

Stephanie and Scott sat in the front window of the Mr Wilkinson bar in Lygon Street, Brunswick. Laura had been happy to get a taxi home so Stephanie had texted Scott and suggested a drink. She had had enough of the street party so had chosen a place within walking distance but well away from the noise and festivities. They sat on comfortable bench couches where, through the big front window, they could watch people escaping the party.

‘My clairvoyant says I’m going to do a lot of travelling.’

‘Your clairvoyant! Please, Stephanie, tell me you don’t believe in all that shit.’

‘Of course I don’t, well, not really. It’s just fun. I do, however, believe in ghosts. Laura has one at her place.’

‘At the townhouse?’

‘No, silly, at the family property.’

‘At the *property*. That sounds impressive. So have you seen it?’

‘Not exactly. That’s the thing with ghosts, you can never be sure. What about aliens? Do you believe in them?’

‘You’re an alien.’

‘Smart-arse.’

‘Does her house, no sorry, *property*, really have a ghost?’

‘Yep. It’s well known in the area.’

‘What, the ghost is well known?’

‘Stop being so sarcastic, Scott. It doesn’t suit you.’

Scott leaned across and kissed her cheek.

‘What was that for?’

‘It’s an ‘I’m sorry’ kiss.’

And that would be, thought Stephanie, as opposed to an ‘I want to jump your bones’ kind of kiss.

Scott went to the bar to get fresh drinks. Just as well he was working, eight bucks for a glass of wine. Ridiculous.

‘So what’s with all the ghost and God stuff, Steph?’

‘Sometimes I just wonder if life is... well, only what we can see, or if there’s... other stuff out there.’

‘Sounds like you’re bored with life as you currently know it.’

‘Maybe. I am missing my friends in Canberra.’

‘Why don’t you go visit them?’

‘Hmm. No. Not right now, Laura’s a bit fragile.’

Scott set down his glass and gave her a hug.

‘What was that for?’

‘It’s an ‘I like you, you’re good people’ kind of hug.’

Bloody hell, thought Stephanie, these Bentleys sure are weird. Cute, however.

...

‘Hey, Patch, look at this.’

Stephanie waved a pamphlet in front of Laura, who was cooking on the stove top.

‘It’s a guide to all these short courses in really cool stuff, like pottery, painting, jewellery making.’

‘I’m trying to make a risotto here, Steph, I don’t have time to look.’

‘You don’t need to. I’ll read them out. There’s even an art appreciation course, you could learn all about your mum’s paintings, but my personal favourite is the jewellery

making. Let's do it, Patch. It's for ten weeks and we get to work with metals and plastics and make earrings and bangles and all sorts of good stuff. Go on, Patch, say you'll do it with me. I can book us in online.'

'Sometimes, Steph, you are an annoying cartoon character, Tweety Bird comes to mind. Would you please give me a chance to think about it? We're out of parsley and parmesan cheese. If you go to the shop for me I promise to think about it. Hugh is coming for dinner and I want to get this risotto just right.'

'Consider me gone already. Just so long as you consider it.'

Stephanie took her purse and mobile and sailed down the stairs and out the door.

Laura considered while she stirred and stirred. Steph had mentioned art appreciation, Now that was something that interested her, if only to be on the same intellectual page as Ryan Bentley. She left the stove and sat down to study the details in the brochure. Five minutes later Patrick walked in.

'Something's burning, Laura.'

'Oh, shit, shit, shit!'

Laura tried to stir the rice but a sizeable proportion was glued to the bottom of the pan. She turned off the stove and threw the spoon into the sink.

...

'This risotto is not at all bad, Laura. Did you put caramelised onion in it?'

'Something like that. Hugh, do you have any contacts who could give me a job? I really need to do something – something useful.'

'We do have some data entry and some files to sort out in chambers, but I was saving that for Patrick to do on his work experience.'

'I'm happy for Laura to do it, Dad.'

'Don't you want to do your work experience with me, son? I thought you were looking forward to it.'

Patrick took a deep breath.

'Look, Dad, honest injun, I feel really claustrophobic in that place. It's so old and dark it gives me the willies. Sorry.'

'Well, I think that is a rather childish reaction but I'm certainly not going to force you. Do you have somewhere else to go?'

'I can help.' Stephanie started to gather the dinner plates. 'I've made quite a few contacts at the tennis club. I'm sure I can find him something.'

‘Alright. I didn’t realise you felt that way, Patrick. Though you know a lot of legal offices are very old. You’ll either have to get used to it or find yourself a new firm when you start practising law.’

A look from Laura told Patrick he should shut up while the going was good.

Chapter 29

In the Bentley household voices were raised.

‘Get out of the shower, Kit, you’ll use up all the hot water.’

Scott cornered his father in the hallway.

‘We need another bathroom, Dad. It’s ridiculous that five people have to share one bathroom.’

‘We had six people sharing one bathroom when I was your age.’

‘Yeah, but you probably didn’t tub that often. Times have changed. Don’t you have any mates that could help, preferably a plumber?’

‘Maybe. But where would we put a new bathroom?’

‘Just tack it on somewhere. It seems like that’s what Aunty Mary used to do.’

‘We’d need a building permit to do that. No, I don’t fancy having some suit from the council looking over this place. We’d probably have to knock a few rooms down. I’ll think of something. Which of these ties do you think I should wear, Scott?’

Richard held out two ties. One was red with black polka dots, the other green with yellow stripes. Scott grimaced.

‘Don’t you have anything a little more subdued?’

‘What? You think they’re a bit loud.’

‘As a circus!’

‘Huh, my sons are so conservative. I like a bit of colour, makes me feel more alive. Can’t wait to get dancing.’

Richard practically skipped down the corridor to his bedroom. Scott shook his head as Ryan came up and banged on the bathroom door.

‘What’s up? Get out of there now, Kit, or I’ll come in and haul you out.’

‘Dad’s talking about dancing. Please God, don’t let the band know how to play the chicken dance or Nutbush.’

‘He wouldn’t!’

‘He would.’

...

Laura tried on the dress Stephanie had bought her. It fitted well and the soft green folds were slimming. She was a bit worried about the neckline, though. It showed too much of her breasts and she didn't have any big jewellery. The only jewellery she ever wore was her locket but this dress made the fine silver chain look insignificant. She pulled off the dress and started to inspect her wardrobe.

'Aren't you going to wear it?' Stephanie stared at the dress on the bed. 'Don't you like it, Patch?' Stephanie's voice was unusually quiet.

'I love it, Steph. It's beautiful, but it's all wrong on me.'

'Show me.'

Laura put the dress back on.

'So, which bit exactly is all wrong?'

Laura pointed at her chest.

'There is nothing wrong with breasts, Laura. Oh, for heaven's sake!'

Laura stood with her arms wrapped around her. This was the way she would stay all night if she had to, Stephanie could tell from the stubborn look.

'Steph, I'd really rather not go. Can't you and Patrick go without me? It's not like I'm necessary. You'll probably talk to Scott all night and Patrick can mess about with the kid from across the road. I won't be missed.'

'Let's just see about that. Patrick!' Stephanie yelled. 'Come here a minute.'

'What?' Patrick had his best outfit on.

'Laura doesn't think she needs to go tonight.'

'If she doesn't go, I'm not going.'

'Paddo!'

'No, Laura, I mean it. I'll stay at home with you.'

'So, let me get this straight.' Stephanie pointed at Laura. 'You are being selfish and a touch narcissistic.'

'What?'

'Well obviously you think everyone is going to be looking at you. And as for you,' she pointed at Patrick, 'you are giving up the opportunity of finding a work placement that you just might enjoy just because you are a sook. In fact you are a good pair, you're both sooks. Come with me, Laura, I have a summer scarf that will cover your cleavage *and* look stunning.'

Chapter 30

The tennis clubrooms and surrounding cypress trees were covered in tiny lights. Sounds of laughter and music floated out in the balmy night air. Inside, groups of people milled around the bar or sat at tables nibbling on nuts and listening to the music. Alicia worked the room, moving from group to group, ensuring that everyone had a drink and was enjoying themselves. She had dressed in a long black frock with big slits at either side and very little fabric in the back. A five-piece band played soft, mellow music to set the tone for the evening. The lights were dimmed, the atmosphere expectant. Alicia personally greeted each new arrival with air kisses, a handshake or pats on the arm.

Stephanie swept into the room and clapped her hands with delight. She had personally overseen the decorations earlier that day and was pleased with the effect. White and yellow banksia rose branches surrounded windows while each table had a centrepiece of asparagus fern and jasmine flowers. A bandstand had been constructed and a section of the floor exposed for dancing. Stephanie dragged Laura and Patrick in behind her.

‘Doesn’t it look great? I did that.’

Laura’s eyes flickered nervously around. Patrick merely looked stunned at all the people and noise.

‘Yeah, great. Where do we sit?’

‘Come on, you two. We need to mingle. Come with me and I’ll introduce you to some really interesting people.’

‘I’ll join you later, Steph. I need to use the facilities.’

Stephanie grabbed Patrick by the arm and moved him toward a corner group.

Laura sat on the closed toilet lid and wondered how she could possibly get through an evening of small talk and pretending to be interested in people. She wanted to be a million miles away. She heard the outer door open and two women giggled their way in. As they started talking she thought she recognised one voice. Bloody hell, it was that woman who had drilled her at the tennis match.

‘What a great evening, Alicia. Did you organise it all yourself?’

‘Just about. I did have a little help from one of the new members, the little blonde air head, Stephanie, who I introduced you to. The twit is furiously trying to attract Scott Bentley, little does she realise he’s gay. Her friend, forget her name, is a real piece of work. Word has it she’s wealthy. She looks down her nose at everyone. You should hear what Ryan Bentley has to say about her.’

Well, go on, thought Laura. Tell me what he says about me.

‘They are both very good-looking but the father seems like a bit of a twit, and the youngest one looks like something the cat dragged in with those horrible dreadlocks.’

Footsteps receded and the door closed. Laure carefully left the stall and braced herself to head back in. Well her mum had been right, you never hear anything good about yourself when you eavesdrop. Was Scott gay? Surely Steph would have picked up on that. Her friend might give the appearance of being flighty but she was far from dumb, especially when it came to reading character.

A buffet of seafood and salads had been set up so Laura queued. As she took the tongs to serve herself some salad, the man next to her swung around and sauce flew from the bottle in his hand right down the front of her dress.

‘Oh, shit. Sorry love.’ Richard Bentley grabbed a fistful of paper serviettes and started to dab at her dress.

‘Stop it! You’ll make it worse, you fool.’

Laura marched back across the room to the toilets. Stephanie hurried after her, calling out over her shoulder.

‘Sorry, Richard. She didn’t really mean it.’

...

After everyone had finished, eating tables were cleared away to extend the dance floor and the band moved from mood music into a faster pace. At the end of the first bracket the lead singer announced that there would be a couple of competitions, with prizes.

Kit edged through the crowd, across the dance floor and to the table where Patrick sat with Laura. He leant down and whispered in Patrick’s ear.

‘Er, Laura. I need to go and help Kit with something.’

‘But, what...’ Patrick was out of his chair and out the door before she could respond. She didn’t like the look of the youngest, dreadlocked Bentley. She looked around for Stephanie, who was talking to Scott. She really needed to get out of the place.

As Laura rose from her chair Stephanie pushed her back down.

‘Oh no you don’t, you can’t leave yet.’

‘I wasn’t. I need to go and find Patrick.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he’s gone off with the youngest of that lot.’ Laura pointed to where Richard, Scott and Ryan were talking to Alicia and another woman. Laura grimaced as she looked at Ryan. What had he said about her? Probably something rude.

‘So?’

‘So, he’s bound to get in trouble. That boy has dreadlocks and he looks evil.’

‘Chill out, Laura. You’re so prejudiced by the way people look.’

‘With the Bentleys it’s not just the way they look, although that’s bad enough. Check out the father, you can hear his great belly laugh from over here. He’s probably drunk. And another thing, what do you really know about Scott?’

‘Know? Well, that he’s kind, considerate and very cute.’

‘Yeah, well cute may be the operative word. I overheard... ‘

‘Ssh.’ Stephanie put her hand over Laura’s as Richard, Scott and Ryan approached their table.

Richard straightened his tie and addressed them both.

‘Ladies. The dance competition is about to start.’ He rubbed the side of his nose. ‘And I have the inside word. It’s going to be ballroom dancing! I’m pretty sure there’ll be a waltz, maybe a fox trot. I love that stuff. Can either of you do ballroom?’

‘We both can.’ Stephanie grinned. ‘Laura is better than me, though.’

‘I couldn’t possibly remember any of that, Steph; it was years and years ago.’

‘Nah, just like riding a bike, eh boys? So, Steph, Scott has a sore heel so I wondered if you would do me the honour.’

Stephanie looked quizzically at Scott then turned back to Richard.

‘I’d love to, Richard.’

Scott bent down to Laura.

‘I’ve just had a bet with Ryan. He is adamant that you won’t agree to dance with him, but would you do it for me, please? He’s won so many of our bets lately that he’s becoming, er... ‘

‘Unbearable?’

‘Something like that.’

Ryan had been gazing around the room, apparently ignoring the conversation about himself. Laura stood up and locked eyes with him.

‘Can you dance?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘Very well.’

God, he was an arrogant shit but she didn’t want him to win any bet.

‘OK. You’re on, but if you step on my feet, even once, I’ll walk off the floor immediately.’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’ Ryan clicked his heels together, considered giving a Nazi salute but decided not. ‘So gracious of you.’ He held out his arm, elbow crooked.

The MC’s voice announced that the contest would be very traditional and that a judge would tap the male on the shoulder until one couple remained. After several loud interjections about discrimination, he declared that of course, couples could be same-sex.

...

Kit led Patrick around the back of the club and down a laneway. He yelled out over the top of a back gate and a young girl opened it.

‘Hey Sunny, this is Pat.’

Patrick’s eyes went saucer shaped. Sunny sure didn’t suit her name. She had long black hair, black shadowed eyes and the whitest skin he had ever seen. She took them into a tiny garden shed where another girl was nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. This one had bright pink hair and wore a nose ring.

‘Pat, this is Vanessa.’

Kit pulled a small flask of whisky from his pocket.

‘Have you girls got something to mix this with?’

Sunny went to a bar fridge and pulled out cola and a couple of bottles of something green and fizzy. Patrick was confused, were these two netball players?

...

Laura found that she liked the feel of Ryan’s hand in the small of her back. She had to admit he led well; she would never have picked him for being so light on his feet. As they glided across the floor her feet automatically remembered the long-ago instructions of her dancing teacher. She was sure he was holding her a little closer than necessary. He smelt faintly of lemon and something like rosemary. Thank goodness he didn’t want to talk; she could just lose herself in the moment of the music and movement. Stephanie and Richard waltzed past them. Good lord, Stephanie was flirting with him. Gradually the numbers of couples dwindled until there was only her

and Ryan, Stephanie and Richard and two other couples. She wondered why some of them had bothered, they could barely place one foot in front of another without jiggling. The music changed to a fox trot, uh-oh, that was far trickier than a waltz. Surprisingly Ryan seemed even more confident in the new steps. She wondered if he could tango as well. Stop it, Laura, you're being silly.

...

Patrick was not used to drinking spirits. He was used to a glass of wine with his meal but this stuff seemed to go straight to his head. Oh no, one of the girls was now rolling a spliff. How could he get out of that one?

...

Ryan looked at Laura's profile; she was only a few inches shorter than him. Maybe it was the lighting but her face seemed softer, more vulnerable. What a great body she had. Her scarf had shifted and he got a glance at a beautiful white curve. He could feel the softness of her thighs as their legs entwined. He sure would like to see her naked. Down boy, concentrate. He saw his Dad get tapped on the shoulder so he and Laura were the only two remaining. It had been good of Scott to claim a sore foot so his father had someone to dance with. Hang on a minute, exactly whose idea had the bet been? Somehow he thought he might have been manipulated, but what the hell, he was enjoying himself. The few times he got to do ballroom had been at weddings and the girls he partnered practically needed to stand on his feet to get the moves right. He and Laura fitted so perfectly he would like to do this again.

...

'I don't feel so good.' Patrick attempted to stand up but the ground in the tiny back yard seemed to shift beneath him. He staggered a few steps and then vomited.

'Shit! He's thrown up on Mum's hydrangea. Get him out of here.'

Sunny shot out of Kit's lap and flapped her hands about.

Bugger! Just when Kit thought he might be on to something bloody Paddo, the drip, was ruining it. If he did the right thing, though...

'Where's your hose. I'll clean up your Mum's plant. Sunny, take Pat to the bathroom.'

'No.' Patrick held his hands out, palms forward while his eyes darted furiously about. Shit, thought Kit, the weed has made him paranoid. I'd better get him out of here right now.

...

The winning couple received flowers and champagne. When Ryan escorted her back to her seat, Scott was with Stephanie and Richard so it seemed natural to take a seat beside her.

‘That was fun.’ Laura was the most animated Stephanie had seen her in ages. ‘Where did you learn to dance, Ryan?’

‘Mum taught us. She taught you too, didn’t she Dad?’

‘No, that was Aunt Mary, but your Mum sure made me look good. ‘She wanted to enter competitions but we stopped after a few. I was never good enough to make it past the first round.’

‘At least you tried. Where did you learn, Laura?’

‘School. It was either that or gymnastics, and I have never had the build for looking pretty twirling pieces of ribbon.’

Stephanie butted in. ‘Plus it was the only time you got together with boys.’

‘Don’t remind me. It was years nine and ten, and well, the boys for a start were usually shorter than me. I felt like a giraffe sometimes.’

Scott laughed. ‘If they were like me, they would then have a growth spurt and suddenly be all arms and legs flapping around the place.’

‘Can’t imagine you like that, Scott.’

‘Believe me, Steph, he was.’ Richard grinned at her. He bounced out of his chair as the music started up again. ‘Come on folks. If I hear right, that’s the chicken dance!’

Scott and Ryan groaned.

‘Looks like fun to me. Come on, Scott.’ Stephanie bolted toward the dance floor. Scott shrugged at his brother as he followed her.

‘Fancy a walk outside to get some fresh air? We could share our prize.’ Ryan held out the bottle of champagne.

Laura let out a huge sigh as she looked up at the night sky. It was a full moon and the stars outrivalled the fairy lights in the trees. Was it just the gentler light or was Ryan Bentley very handsome indeed. They sat quietly and drank a glass each. Suddenly from around the corner staggered Kit and Patrick.

Kit plonked Patrick down on the bench seat and looked warily at his brother.

‘Paddo’s not feeling too good. Must have been something he ate.’

Laura’s face hardened as she inspected Patrick. His eyes were bloodshot, his face deathly pale and he smelt ghastly.

‘What have you done to him?’ She rounded on Kit, hands on hips. ‘Have you drugged him?’

‘Hang on a minute, Laura. It could be self-inflicted.’ Ryan interjected.

‘Self-inflicted! I don’t think so. Someone, and we both know who, has been forcing him to drink and probably take drugs. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted your brother any where near him. He’s a little thug.’

‘Steady on with the accusations.’ Ryan was getting angry too. ‘You haven’t even heard Kit’s version of events. Or Patrick’s, for that matter.’

‘It’s all too obvious what’s happened. I’m taking him home this minute. Come on, Patrick.’ She gently pulled him upright.

‘Aren’t you even going to say goodbye to the others, not even Steph?’

‘I’ll text her. I couldn’t care less about anyone else.’

Chapter 31

Ryan was impressed by Gino's new car. They drove down the Great Ocean Road to Wye River to go fishing. Ryan loved the feel of being up high in a solid car as he gazed down the sheer cliffs to the ocean. It was such a clear day the sky and sea appeared seamless. The only clouds were like pale white brushstrokes.

'Awesome day, awesome car, Gino.'

'Yeah, and thanks. I like it a lot. Always wanted a four-wheel drive.'

'Must have cost a bit.'

'Dunno. It was an engagement present from the olds.'

'No shit? Are you planning on getting maybe a house for a wedding present?'

'Maybe.' Gino was terse.

'Sorry, mate. That was hugely out of order. I guess I'm jealous. Can't see anyone in my family buying me a car any day soon. Unless, of course, I could get myself a wealthy woman.'

'What about that chick across the road? She's wealthy, I heard and looks good.'

'Looks good, yeah, but I hate to think what's on the inside. Imagine the rudest, most disdainful person you've ever met and times that by three.'

'She can't be that bad. Didn't she help your Mum out? Scott mentioned something.'

'Yes, she did, but I don't think it was out of kindness. She was probably protecting the neighbourhood from looking crazy. Our house is seen as a blot on the landscape of Persimmon Crescent. As are we, I guess.'

'It is, well, a bit rundown.'

'A bit? Yeah, it's an eyesore, but that's no reason to judge the people who live in it under the same rationale.'

'Yes, but you have to *know* people to go on something other than the outside, don't you?'

'Spot on, Gino. I thought for a while at the dinner dance that we, well, clicked. I was really enjoying myself dancing with her. But then our Kit brought back her young cousin who was pissed as a newt and she blamed Kit, got in a huff and became her old disdainful self again. It's been one step forward, two steps back for the last few months. Think I'll give it up as a bad joke. She just doesn't *want* to know us, end of story.'

And I just summed *me* up nicely, thought Ryan. I don't really know your fiancée and here I am judging her motives furiously. It's confirmed, I'm a dickhead.

They set up the tent beside a river and sat on some rocks, their feet dangling in the water while they threw out their lines. They fished, mainly in that soothing silence you can achieve with people of like mind you have known for a very long time.

...

Stephanie awoke to sounds of banging and scraping from the unit next door. Wow! Someone was finally moving in. She quickly grabbed her robe and flew out to the balcony like an electric rabbit on a greyhound track. Sure enough, there was a removal van out front. A fridge, the size of a small country, was being manoeuvred by some seriously stressed-looking guys in shorts and work boots. Who could possibly need such a monster fridge? Maybe a family were moving in? She needed to shower and dress so she could do the neighbourly thing.

...

Abigail Witham was a charmer who worked hard at it. She had done some modelling and voice-overs but her passion was the theatre. She had heard there was a fine little theatre group in Hawthorn that she planned to inspect very soon. Moving in with Lance again was a bonus. Lance had always known he was gay, had suffered for it as a teenager but was, at age thirty, in charge of his life. He was a professional photographer and an excellent cook. The two combined to earn him a decent living. He photographed food for magazines and cookbooks and watched every television food show possible, even though some made him cringe. He particularly hated the shows where couples competed. There were always two especially bitchy women and the dialogue was contrived. He nearly threw up when they brought in children to MasterChef. Lance had met Abigail in an amateur theatre production where he played a very small part but mainly helped out backstage. He soon decided they were mostly pretentious twits, but Abigail had a zest for life and a fierce ambition which he admired without wanting to emulate.

...

Stephanie waited until the removal van had been gone a good hour and then rang the doorbell next door. Footsteps clattered down the stairs and the door opened with a rush.

'What?'

Stephanie took a step backwards. A guy in his bathrobe answered the door, a scowl on his dark complexion.

'Er, sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm from next door. Just wanted to introduce myself and...' Stephanie trailed off and started to back away.

'Oh, hell, sorry, please don't go. I didn't mean to be rude. I thought you'd be someone selling yet another utility company. They nearly drove us nuts in the last place. Come

in and meet Abby and I'll get dressed. Getting the fridge up the stairs and around the corner was a bitch. Sorry, I'm gabbling, aren't I? I do that when I get stressed.'

Lance held out his hand.

'Let's start again. I'm Lance Woodburn, pleased to meet you.'

Stephanie shook the proffered hand.

'Stephanie, Stephanie Mathers.'

'Come and meet Abigail.' He turned and led the way, giving Stephanie a view of very good muscled thighs.

Abigail greeted Stephanie like an old friend and insisted she have a coffee.

'Coffee?' Lance had finished dressing. 'Surely we have a bottle of bubbly to celebrate our new abode.' He strode across to the giant fridge and peered at the label on a bottle of champagne. 'Not bad – quaffable, anyway. Do you share with anyone, Stephanie? Would they like to join us?'

'Er, I share with Laura but she's not exactly sociable at the moment.'

'Sad, bad or a little mad?'

Stephanie blinked rapidly with her mouth open. Abigail came to her rescue.

'Don't tease people who are new friends, Lance, it confuses and embarrasses. Tell us about the neighbours, Stephanie. It's such a tiny street and we're awful gossips.'

Lance interrupted. 'Who lives in that amazing house across the street? It looks like it was designed by a mad scientist.'

Stephanie found herself feeling a little indignant on the Bentleys' behalf. Over several glasses of champagne she explained about the inheritance from their Aunt Mary.

'She must have been an interesting lady. She made umbrellas but she also did some designs of her own.'

'Cool!'

'Yeah. Ryan, he's the second eldest, showed me a notebook they found of hers. It has these intricate designs. Unfortunately the writing is practically indecipherable.'

'I'd really like to see that.' Lance sounded genuinely interested.

'Lance is a photographer,' said Abigail, 'so anything graphic grabs him.'

'Before you ask, Stephanie, no, I don't do weddings or christenings. I don't shoot people, only food.'

‘He shoots it and cooks it very well. Perhaps you and Laura could come to dinner. Let’s have a dinner party, Lance. Maybe we could invite the people across the road too.’

Whoa, slow down, thought Stephanie. These two travelled like she imagined the fast train from Melbourne to Sydney which each government promised but never delivered. She left soon afterwards with plenty to tell Laura, if she could possibly get her interested.

Chapter 32

Carolyn Bentley placed a computer print-out on the kitchen table at breakfast time.

‘We’ve had an email from your cousin.’

‘Not Caidyn?’

‘Yep.’

Ryan picked up the paper and read: *I’m going to be in Melbourne on business for a few days and was wondering if I could stay with you and catch up on old times.*

‘Translate please, Ryan.’

‘Let’s see, for ‘business’, read ‘running from the cops’; ‘for a few days’, read ‘at least a week’, maybe two; ‘old times’ probably means he’ll hit us for money.’

‘Oh, come on Ryan. That’s a bit harsh. His life hasn’t been that flash. I feel a bit sorry for him.’ Scott looked toward his mother for support, but she merely shrugged.

‘Well, I don’t.’ Ryan nodded. ‘Have you replied yet, Mum?’

Carolyn nodded. ‘Yes, I told him he could stay but he’d have to sleep on the sofa bed.’

At the look from Ryan she held out her hands. ‘I know. Caidyn is a complete fool, but with his parents giving him a name like that, what can you expect? We cannot deny family. As Scott said, his life has been a bit desolate and I’m not completely sure it’s his fault. However, I don’t want him staying on and on so you, Ryan, can devise a plan for getting rid of him, rapidly. Maybe you, Kit, could do the cooking; that should make him scarper in a hurry.’

Kit finished his toast, glared at his mother, and left for school. People were so unfair. He couldn’t help it if the spaghetti stuck together and he had only burnt the roast once. As he crossed the road, still feeling very miffed, Laura walked out of her unit. She was dressed in a black pant suit with a white tee-shirt and black high heels. He hurried past her and turned back to speak.

‘Cool duds, but if you’re working for CSI Miami, though, you’re going to need the shades.’ The glare she gave him made him feel so much better.

...

That little shit. Laura had surprisingly been enjoying herself at the dinner dance. She remembered the feel of Ryan’s arms around her but then remembered poor Patrick. Well, Ryan Bentley might well be a good dancer and attractive as all hell but the family as a whole were poisonous. She would steer well clear of all of them.

Laura took a tram into the city and out to Fitzroy. This was her first trip into the metropolis since her parents had gone. She resolutely concentrated on what was new

rather than memories of places visited. It didn't work so she put on her iPod with Beethoven blaring.

This was her first day of volunteering at a newly set-up soup kitchen, which actually provided a lunch meal of three courses. Laura felt her palms go sweaty as she approached the entrance. She had never met a homeless person and had no idea what to expect. A large cheerful-looking woman in an apron showed her around the kitchen but explained that today she would be serving tables. She put on a large black apron and was soon trying to balance more than two plates at a time. Cheryl, the woman in charge, had explained that most of them wanted a little chat as well as food; they were generally lonely people. Laura had hoped to work in the kitchen where she could avoid most people but Cheryl was adamant that that was where she was needed most.

Travelling home on the tram, Laura felt exhausted and confronted by the sheer numbers of homeless people, some so very young. She had avoided talking to the young ones, they were too curious about her. The older men were an odd mix of those to whom life had dealt bad hands, some who drink or drugs or both had ruined and some who liked life without enclosures. She could relate to those. A few had been so smelly she wanted to throw up and nearly all had very bad teeth.

...

The houses in Persimmon Grove were in total darkness as a fierce electrical storm ripped through the night. Ryan tried, unsuccessfully, to quieten Harvey the dog, who barked loudly at the booming thunder and streaks of lightening. Ryan was feeling sorry for himself as he was home alone with an upset stomach while the rest of the family were out eating pizza. He couldn't even read a book; it was too hard with just candle light. At a knock at the door he got off the couch, grabbed the candle and gingerly opened the door.

'Hi Ryan, would you have any spare candles? We just didn't think to get any.'
Stephanie jumped and Harvey yelped as a huge crack of thunder sounded.

'Shut up, Harvey. Come in Steph, I'll see what I can find.'

'Doesn't it make you jittery?'

'The storm doesn't but this bloody dog does. I can't get him to shut up.' Ryan started pulling open drawers and rummaging through.

'I'll bet Laura could. She's amazing with animals.'

'Pity she couldn't transfer it to humans.'

'You know, Ryan, I think she fancies you.'

'You're off your rocker!'

'No, seriously, she sneaks looks at you all the time. I've noticed.'

'Probably looks of disapproval, Steph.'

‘No. She looks, kind of... wistful.’

‘Yeah, right. Look, sorry, but I can’t seem to find any more. You can take this one if you like.’

‘No, that wouldn’t work; the dog might get more upset. Why don’t you bring the dog and the candle over to our place?’

‘Do you have anything for an upset stomach?’

‘Of course we do, you know, phases of the moon and all that.’

Ryan had absolutely no idea what she was on about but it sounded like a plan. Maybe the Ice Queen could settle the dog and some company would be good.

Just as they left Ryan’s front porch it started to pour with rain. In the short time it took them to cross the road they were both drenched and the candle had gone out. Laura appeared at the top of the stairs with a torch in hand.

‘I found my torch, Steph. Oh, Ryan. I’ll get a towel for the dog.’

‘Can you grab the Mylanta, too? Ryan’s not feeling too good. Do you want a heat bag to put on your stomach, too?’

‘I think we might have a problem heating it, Steph.’

‘Oh, yes. Bugger! We can’t even make coffee.’

Laura towelled the dog dry and put a blanket on the couch for him. She sat down just as a streak of lightning lit up the room. Harvey yelped and jumped onto her lap.

‘Harvey!’

‘It’s alright. Poor baby is frightened. Sorry, we’re all out of Mylanta but you can choose between two of my grandma’s old-fashioned remedies. They work just as well.’

Laura gently rubbed Harvey behind the ears. After a few moments he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

‘Yeah? What are they?’

‘Lemon juice and carb soda or brandy and port wine. Ah, no, forget the first option. We’ve only got lemon juice in the plastic bottle, I don’t think that would work so well. Steph, get Ryan a small measure of port and brandy, will you? I don’t want to disturb the dog.’

As Stephanie handed him the evil-looking concoction, Ryan whispered just loudly enough for Laura to hear.

‘I told you she doesn’t like humans. She wouldn’t poison me, would she?’

Laura gave him a very false smile. ‘No, I wouldn’t poison you, too messy but you’re right, I do prefer animals.’

‘Why?’

‘They accept you the way you are, and if you treat them well they are extremely loyal and they don’t fake anything and they don’t deliberately hurt you.’

‘Surely you could say the same for humans.’

‘No way! People always want to change other people and they fake stuff all the time. I know some people think I’m arrogant because sometimes I just don’t want to fake being nice, being kind, whatever.’

‘So, no little white lies for you, hey Laura?’

‘No.’

‘You do too, Laura Patchett! I’ve heard you telling Jim something was nice when you really thought it was awful. And I’m sure there are times when you don’t really like my new haircut or clothes.’

‘That’s different. You and Jim are people I love. You have to be kind to people you love. You’d never hurt *them*.’

‘So. Let’s see if I’ve got this. You only care what the people you love think of you, the rest of humanity doesn’t matter?’

‘Pretty much. You know, humans are the only species who kill for no reason. Animals kill to eat, to survive. There was another massacre in the States the other day. Six people gunned down by an idiot who had no reason.’

‘OK, so not everyone is a good person, but people like that are a very small minority, thank goodness. You can’t judge the whole of humanity by the odd ones out. They’re usually social misfits or have brains that are hardwired in a different way.’

‘Hey you two,’ Stephanie clapped her hands, ‘stop with this talk please? Laura, you don’t *really* hate everyone, you’re just going through a bad time. And you, Ryan, you don’t like *everyone*, do you?’

Ryan laughed out loud. ‘Me? No way. There are some people I wouldn’t piss on if they were on fire, to quote my Dad. My big brother, though, seems to like everyone; even makes excuses for people’s bad behaviour.’

‘Scott once told me when I was behaving badly.’

‘He told you?’

‘Not exactly, he just kind of made it clear that’s what he was thinking by his responses.’

‘Ah then, he was probably protecting someone else. He’s just too bloody nice for his own good. We’ve got this awful cousin called Caidyn staying with us at the moment and Scott actually believes he means well.’

Laura glanced up. ‘God, I hate that expression. I would hate it if someone used it about me.’

‘Why?’ Stephanie was confused.

‘Because it means you do really stupid things without thinking them through.’

‘Like what? I don’t understand what you mean.’

‘OK. Here’s an example. This is your grandmother’s dog isn’t it, Ryan?’

‘Sure is. He should be able to go home soon. Her hip has almost healed.’

‘Well, imagine if this dog died suddenly.’

‘Laura!’

‘No. Wait, Steph, It’s a hypothetical. So, say Harvey dies suddenly and the day after someone gives Ryan’s grandmother a new dog. They don’t ask her if she wants it, just give it. They don’t stop to think that this here dog was a unique being for its owner, that she loved it for itself, not just because it was any old dog. They don’t stop to think that she is grieving and needs to grieve. They just want to make it all better and some things you can’t make all better.’

‘That’s exactly the kind of thing cousin Caidyn would do. He’s got some street smarts but zero emotional intelligence. We’ve got more relatives than you could poke a stick at, but Caidyn is the worst. Trouble seems to follow him around like cows at milking time. Mind you, most of it is of his own making because... basically he’s as dumb as a bucket.’

‘No intelligence?’

‘He’s got street smarts. I think it’s more a lack of emotional intelligence. He’s like a two-year-old who reacts badly when he doesn’t get what he wants – now!’

‘Was he a school drop-out?’

‘A school drop-out? I doubt that he even dropped in.’

‘Maybe he has an undiagnosed disability.’

‘He has no ability, so I doubt he could have a disability.’

‘That’s a bit harsh!’

‘You haven’t had the pleasure yet.’

‘Pity we can’t choose our relatives like we can our friends, hey Ryan?’ Stephanie was sounding sleepy.

Would I be happy with Laura treating me like a friend? thought Ryan, as he watched her stroking the dog’s head. As she looked down at the dog her lashes cast a shadow on her pale skin. Friendship would be at least a start, more nights like tonight. Just as he realised he was feeling much better the lights suddenly came on and somehow spoilt the moment. He thanked them for the drink and helping with the dog and went home to think some more about this enigma of a woman.

Chapter 33

Caidyn wanted some wheels – badly. Scott had offered him his bike but Caidyn wasn't going to be a dork on a treadly and besides, helmets messed with your hair. Surely Scottie could get him a cheap car. He looked around the tiny street. There could be some serious money in this place. It would have to be cash though, or jewellery, maybe a fancy new iPhone. He'd check out some more streets in the neighbourhood, probably safer to be a bit further from his nest. He was royally pissed off at having to sleep in the dining room. He deserved a room of his own. His aunt's study would have been good. He remembered the scary look on her face when he suggested it. She sure had changed, maybe even gone a bit weird. No, he didn't want to cross her again. Uncle Richard hadn't changed though. He'd been interested in Caidyn's plans to set up his own gardening business, had even said he'd pay him to mow their lawn. Yeah, he'd do that any day now, once he got motivated. They'd used that word a lot at his school.

...

Laura awoke with the sun streaming through her window. She stretched and knew exactly what she needed. Exercise. Today. Her limbs and joints would atrophy if she didn't move them sometime soon. As she pulled on her robe and opened her bedroom door she could smell freshly ground coffee. Stephanie looked around from the fridge door.

'You want toast?'

'Yeah. Thanks.' Laura poured them both coffee. 'Fancy a hit of tennis today, Steph?'

'Sure.' Yes! thought Stephanie. She had, unbeknownst to her friend, been having some lessons and was keen to try out her new moves and hopefully impress.

Laura frowned as she bit into her toast. 'I'll ring and book us a court. I really don't want to socialise, Steph. I'll be on the court and out again. You hang around if you want.'

While Laura made the call Stephanie texted Scott – *tennis today?*

...

Richard announced at breakfast that they had to clean up the house; it was beginning to look like a pigsty. Scott looked up from his mobile and winked across at Ryan.

'It'll have to be a bit later, Dad. I've booked a court for Ryan and me to have a hit. It's such a beautiful morning. The lawn needs mowing. How about you do that, Kit?'

Kit merely grunted and continued to munch on his cornflakes.

...

When Scott and Ryan arrived they were told they would have to wait half an hour for a court. They wandered around and found Stephanie and Laura warming up. They found a seat not far away to watch. The game started. Stephanie served first and although her first serve was long her second one had enough spin to bounce up in front of a surprised Laura, who hit it into the net. Bloody hell, thought Laura, where did she pull that one from? Laura found she had to concentrate and she had to run a lot more because Steph was popping them all over the court. Oh well, she was getting that exercise she had wanted.

‘I’d say our Stephe has been having some lessons. Looking good isn’t she?’ Scott was pleased for her.

‘Yeah, and it looks like she didn’t tell her friend. Did you catch the look Laura gave her?’

‘Yeah, I’d love to know what she was thinking.’

‘No way, that’s a truly scary thought.’

Gradually, in typical Melbourne style, clouds gathered and the sky darkened. Their half-hour was up but immediately it started to rain.

‘Oh, no. There goes our game.’ Ryan sighed. ‘I guess we should go home and help Dad.’

‘Nah.’ Scott gazed up. It’s only a sun shower. I reckon it’ll blow over soon. Come on, let’s go and get a coffee in the rooms.’

Laura and Stephanie had only played a couple of games and were equally disappointed. They were hopeful of it stopping before long, though, and so made their way into the rooms too. Laura recoiled in the doorway and tugged at Stephanie’s arm.

‘It’s those damn Bentleys. Can’t we ever get away from them?’

‘Chill out, Laura. You’re just prejudiced because of their little brother. It’s not their fault he’s too out-there. Anyway, he’s a teenager, probably going through a phase. Please, for me, play nice in the sandpit?’

‘Hey, Steph.’ Scott called out across the room. ‘Looking good on the court. Been having lessons? Come and join us. Ryan’s making coffee. You both know Alycia, don’t you?’

Laura gave her most wintry smile as she acknowledged Alycia and took a seat. Alycia was regaling them all with the latest George Clooney movie she had been to see.

‘He is just the most perfect male.’

‘What makes him so perfect?’ Ryan began passing around mugs of coffee.

‘The face and the bod for a start. I know he’s getting on a bit now, but he’s still so handsome and dignified. And he seems like a really nice guy.’

‘Define nice please, Alycia.’ Ryan wouldn’t let go.

‘Um, well, kind, considerate, empathetic.’

‘OK. What do you think, Steph? Is that the total qualities of the perfect man?’

‘Oh no. He needs to be honest and sincere and generous and witty and charming.’

‘Anything to add, Laura?’

‘Intelligence, wisdom, no tunnel vision or fixations on things like sport, and he should always look in a full-length mirror before leaving his house.’

‘Oh, I forgot,’ said Alycia, ‘he also needs to be useful with his hands.’

‘Er, in what way, specifically?’

‘Oh pleeeze!’ Laura rolled her eyes.

‘Don’t be such a prude, Laura. That’s important too but I really meant to fix things, blocked sinks and stuff like that.’

‘I’ll bet George Clooney doesn’t fix blocked sinks, or Brad Pitt.’ Scott responded. ‘Sounds to me like you women are mixing up a whole heap of skills and talents. You want us to be super-heroes and we’re ordinary guys. Don’t we get a look in?’

‘Sure you do, Scott.’ Stephanie grinned at him. ‘Surely you guys have fantasies about perfect women too.’

‘I don’t.’ Ryan looked adamant. ‘Botox and Barbie dolls. Sure, I appreciate a great body and face, but I’d rather have someone I could talk to and laugh with than a handbag so other guys would think I’m a cool dude.’

Hmm, thought Laura, he has all the right words but does he mean them? He just could be worth getting to know a little better. Scott had been watching all the exchanges with interest. He couldn’t help noticing how much Laura’s eyes were drawn to Ryan. She was definitely interested in his brother.

‘Hey.’ Scott glanced out of the window. ‘It’s stopped raining and the sun is half out.’

...

They had resumed their game and played a few points when a shrill ring tone issued from Stephanie’s bag.

‘Leave it, Steph.’

‘Can’t. Might be Todd.’ Sure enough, it was her brother needing a lift home from a day procedure at the Royal Melbourne.

‘Sorry Patch, got to run.’ Stephanie grabbed her things and headed out to the car. Laura dejectedly gathered her own things.

‘Hey Laura,’ Scott called out, ‘want to play American doubles with us?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Come on. What do you have to lose?’

‘My self-respect!’

‘Scaredy cat!’ Ryan raised a questioning eyebrow.

Laura hesitated. She had so been enjoying the exercise and being out under the big blue sky.

‘Come on, Laura,’ Scott urged. I’m getting sick of my brother’s repartee. Come and liven up our lives.

Scott served first to Ryan, who hit it straight to the forehand corner. Scott lobbed it over the net to where Laura pounced, had time to wrong foot him and hit it across court for a clean winner. When Scott served next to Laura she thought he pulled it a bit but even so she only just managed to return it. Ryan stayed at the back of the court as they had agreed, but when the ball came flying back they both called out ‘mine!’ They almost collided but Ryan hit it, too hard, and it went straight out of court.

‘Sorry about that.’

‘Fine. Just don’t you steal all of my shots.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’

At the end of the game and as they changed places it was obvious that the brothers were mid-conversation.

‘He’s not that good a catch, Ryan.’

‘He’s pliable and his olds have money. Isn’t that enough?’

‘He’s not exactly ruggedly handsome though.’

‘Any woman would fall for those eyes, I reckon.’

‘Sorry Laura,’ said Scott, ‘my brother is concerned about a very good friend of ours.’

‘Do you go for the eyes, Laura?’ Ryan asked.

‘Amongst other things.’

‘Oh yeah, the full-length mirror thing.’

Laura served, catching Ryan off-guard. The serve wasn’t fast but it had a lot of top spin. Ryan hit it into the net.

Scott high-fived her. ‘Well done, Venus.’

At the next change, Ryan asked.

‘What are the other things?’

‘Huh?’

‘The other things that attract you to a bloke.’

‘I thought we already had this conversation.’

‘Humour me, I’m doing research.’

‘Non-intrusiveness.’

‘Ouch. How about honesty?’

‘Nah. Everyone cheats on their tax return.’

Scott intervened. ‘What about the physical things, you didn’t mention any of those.’

‘Well, there has to be some sort of attraction.’ She thought back to the time Todd hit on her after talking about himself all night. ‘I guess I have to find the person interesting. Sometimes it’s the personality that makes them interesting. You have to want to get to know them, what really makes them tick.’

‘Ah! I think she’s hit the nail on the head, Ryan. Gino is hardly a complex character. I love the guy but I can’t imagine him doing anything that would surprise me.’

Love the guy, thought Laura. She hadn’t known men to talk like that, but then again these two were unlike anyone she had ever met before. Maybe they were what people meant by metrosexual.

‘Hey guys. can we get on with the game? I’m starting to feel like I’m in the middle of a Jane Austen novel.’

Laura was feeling out of her depth. She really didn’t know what she thought about males any more but she did enjoy watching the smooth, lithe movements of Ryan Bentley and the way his blonde hair contrasted with the dark brown eyes. His half-smile did something weird to her stomach. She needed to concentrate on the game rather than the enigmatic guy.

Chapter 34

Patrick was hugely excited, felt like he could jump out of his skin. Steph had organised for him to do work experience with a mate of Mr Bentley's who was a builder called Eddy. In exchange for him promising, fingers crossed behind his back, to try harder at school, his Dad had hired him a hard hat and a pair of work boots. He was picked up by Eddy at 6 am in a ute, which was so cool.

...

Kit had finally found some work experience that sounded OK. Sunny's Dad owned a sporting goods outlet in Smith Street, Fitzroy, so he guessed he would be selling stuff, maybe even work a cash register. Given that the customers were mainly young people, Sunny's Dad had been cool with the dreadies. He had said to dress smartly though, so Kit had gone to Savers and got a pair of black trousers and a shirt and tie. He sure hoped they sold skateboards 'cos he could show some smarts on those.

...

Patrick was working initially with the bricklayer at a new housing estate out near Craigieburn. The big gloves he had to wear were awkward at first, but Eddy had given him a big lecture about Health and Safety Regulations. He told Eddy he had seen the TV advertisements so there was no way he wanted to touch a nail gun anyway. The site was alive with electricians, plumbers, plasterers and others Patrick couldn't identify as they all worked three houses at once. They all seemed pretty friendly and obviously knew one another as they joked and rubbished each other. At morning smoko, finding out he was on work experience, they all chatted about their own school experiences, some of which were hilarious but Patrick suspected might have been exaggerated. Rob, a plumber, asked him what his old man did for a crust and his big jaw dropped when Patrick told him. However when Patrick described how trapped he felt in the dark old law offices Rob nodded his head.

'Yeah, I get that, kid. Getting out and about in the open is a good bit about the job.'

'Any bad bits?' asked Patrick.

'Sure, kid. Every job has its downside, like working on a tin roof when it's boiling hot and removing some of the shit that blocks drains and toilets.'

'Given what your old man does, what school do you go to kid?' This was asked by a bricky's labourer, called Mick, who didn't look much older than Patrick.

Patrick briefly considered lying but knew he always got caught out.

'Scotch College.' He mumbled.

Mick put on a toffy voice. 'Oh, we are slumming it, working here, aren't we? What, did you want to see how the other half live?'

Eddy, just back from a meeting with the architect, butted in.

‘Patrick wanted to do this kind of work, and you know Mick, sometimes kids don’t get to choose where they go to school, do they Patrick?’

‘No. I sure wouldn’t choose to go there but my Dad went there and he insists.’

‘Couldn’t your Mum overrule him, mine usually does.’

‘My Mum’s dead.’

‘Oh, er, sorry.’

...

‘Bushy Newsome has a new foal he needs to sell. Would you like to see it?’

Jim sounded nonchalant but Laura knew him too well to be deceived. She had decided she needed a weekend at home, away from neighbours and tennis courts and people trying to pick her brain.

‘Wouldn’t hurt to have a look, I guess.’ I know what you’re up to, thought Laura, but it won’t work. No horse could possibly replace my Wally when he does go to God.

They drove out to Bushy’s place, a run-down, almost derelict shack which suited its owner. Bushy only cared about animals; the locals called him an animal tragic. He had horses, chickens, ducks, a few sheep, a cow and dogs. Jim reckoned the animals ate better and had cleaner living areas than Bushy did. With his dark mane of hair and long beard he looked like someone out of another era. His trousers were held up with a piece of rope and his work boots barely held together. Laura prayed he wouldn’t offer them a cup of tea.

The foal was a beautiful little chestnut and well proportioned. Jim ran his fingers over her legs and inspected her mouth.

‘Looks pretty sound. Was it an easy birth?’

‘Yeah, a dream one compared to the last one.’ He turned to Laura. ‘It was a bitch, a breach birth that got so risky on both of them I had to call the vet.’

‘Must have been expensive.’

‘Nah, I’ve done him a few favours. A spare hand on big jobs, that kind of thing, and I’ve passed on a few tips from my old dad.’

‘Bushy’s dad was a vet.’ Jim supplied.

‘Oh, didn’t know that. Did you ever consider becoming one too?’

‘Considered it, but just couldn’t put an animal down. A weakness I guess.’

‘No, not a weakness,’ Laura said firmly, ‘you have to know yourself and what you are capable of and not capable of, to get anywhere in life.’

At a nudge from Laura, Jim refused the offer of tea, saying they were running late on a few things. They loaded the foal into the back of the ute and secured her. They promised to let Bushy know within a few days whether or not they would take the foal, after seeing whether she and Wally bonded. Jim leaned out the window before driving off.

‘Have you named her yet, Bushy?’

‘Sort of, in my head really, I call her Fairy Bred. The mare was called Twinkle Toes.’

Laura kept peering through the back window to check on the foal.

‘How on earth does he make ends meet, Jim?’

‘He barter a lot and he has a lot of skills to draw on. He was a stonemason years ago so he has done lots of little jobs on your house. If things get really tough he’ll do a bit of fruit picking or shearing. He doesn’t need much to live on and the foals bring in a bit. He bloody hates to sell them, though. You couldn’t get a better one, Laura; the mother is from good stock and better looked after than you or I.’

‘I know, but it boils down to more work for you.’

‘Just as easy to feed and groom two horses as one. Anyway, let’s see if Wally is interested.’

Wally raised his head from grazing as the ute approached. Jim carefully unloaded the foal and took her through the gate, Laura following.

At first Wally was far more interested in his owner than the foal. Laura patted his head and gave him a piece of carrot and then both humans left the animals to themselves. As they watched from the rear of the house, the foal kept going over to Wally, who would back away or even take off at a trot. After a while the foal gave up and lay down in the field. Wally watched for a while and then went over, sniffed at her body and then prodded her with his nose until she stood up. They stood together, the foal touching Wally’s front leg and Wally gently nudging her every few seconds. Jim and Laura laughed at the performance.

‘You’re not seriously going to call her Fairy Bred, are you Laura?’

‘Don’t see why not. It’s still one of my favourite foods and she is a pretty little thing.’

Laura unpacked the food she had brought with her. It was high time she cooked a meal for Jim, one way of showing how much she appreciated him. Jim put on some classical music and they ate in silence. Laura felt at ease for the first time in weeks.

‘We need to talk.’ Jim turned off the music after they had finished eating and loaded up the dishwasher.

‘Sounds ominous.’

‘It’s serious, Laura. The house badly needs money spent on it, big money.’

‘We could use some of my investments.’

‘They haven’t recovered yet and besides, it would be throwing money away with no return.’

‘I’m not going to sell, Jim.’

Laura pushed out her chair and began pacing the kitchen, teacup in hand.

‘And I’m not suggesting that. I’ve been talking to some people at the National Trust.’

‘Is that why I got a letter from them? No! I don’t want strangers traipsing through the place, ogling all the stuff and probably stealing. There’s got to be other options. Have you spoken to Hugh? He’s got to be loaded, surely he could do something.’

‘He’s wealthy because he’s smart. He knows it would be throwing good money after bad. Look, if we leave it much longer it’s going to cost even more, or be impossible to fix. It needs new plumbing, re-wiring, plastering, painting, some new roof and replacement verandas. If we leave it, Laura, it *will* start to fall down. The Trust will give you a loan at *very* low interest rates if you agree to a few conditions.’

‘There’s one place that’s only open once a year. Can we do that?’

‘No. Those people don’t need the money, they don’t owe the Trust. We would need to open it once a month, minimum. They have very trustworthy volunteers who would make sure people behave themselves.’

‘So, was the colt a sweetener?’

‘No, the colt is for Wally, not you.’ Jim’s smile took some of the sting out of the words.

The old bugger still knows how to put me in my place, thought Laura, he always has. She dropped her shoulders as the masseuse had suggested and let some lightness wash through her. She pictured the house looking better than it had in her lifetime, all bright and sparkling. She had a thought that darkened the picture.

‘Is it a white elephant, Jim? Is it so big, it’s untenable as a place to actually live anymore?’

‘Hell, no. There are thousands of places like this in England and they manage. It’s just that it’s an oddity in this country. Look on the internet, Laura, do some research on those big houses in England. I think you’ll be surprised.’

Chapter 35

The woman two tables in front had a loud harsh voice full of opinions. She used the phrase ‘at the end of the day’ at least three times in two minutes. At first Ryan thought she was talking on a mobile and hadn’t realised a telecommunications tower was involved. But no, her quieter, more timid companion was being told precisely what she was doing wrong in her life. When the waitress delivered the full breakfast the loud one proclaimed, ‘This is why I do a workout’ and shrieked with laughter at her own wit. Ryan wanted to smack her. Perhaps he needed to do yoga.

Ryan had needed to get out of his workplace after a particularly bad teamwork session for staff. It was followed by a morning tea but he’d had a gut full of being nice to people and giving positive affirmations. So he strolled down Sydney Road to the Redbox café and sat outside to watch the world go on doing its business, even if it wasn’t told every five minutes how valuable its contribution was. He didn’t mind working with the offenders; most of them weren’t terribly dangerous, just products of their upbringing and lack of schooling. Sometimes their world innocence was kind of touching. He took them to the National Gallery one day, but they were more interested in what the café had to offer than the artwork.

She started up again just as his coffee arrived, ‘I can’t even relax in a relaxation class. Ha ha.’ She was now talking about being a stylist in a photo shoot. What the heck was a stylist? He didn’t think she meant a hairdresser. Something to do with movie making it sounded like. Suddenly the quiet one’s mobile rang and forced the loud one to shut up. Bloody hell, why did people have to talk so loudly about such crap. And what was it with the tats in Brunswick? Nearly everyone under thirty seemed to have a full sleeve or two. He even saw one guy with a huge butterfly covering his throat, wouldn’t that hurt like hell? He had been considering having a tattoo, as had Scott, but somehow all the stuff he was viewing was putting him off. Kind of like a club he didn’t want to be a member of. Maybe living in Kew was changing him. Actually, he knew exactly why he didn’t want huge coloured tats or body piercing. Laura would hate it to death and he would hate the look on her face. It didn’t seem to matter where he was or what he was doing, he kept picturing Laura with the pale serious face and the legs that went on forever.

...

Kit had cooked dinner. Glances were exchanged as each tested a mouthful. It was a shepherd’s pie.

‘Wow. Good stuff, Kit. Where did you get the recipe?’ Ryan was impressed.

‘Off the internet.’

‘Why do that? We’ve got lots of recipe books.’ Richard frowned.

‘Dad, you are so last century. Everybody does it this way now.’

‘Not everybody,’ Carolyn shook her head, ‘I like reading recipe books.’

‘Mum, you like reading everything.’ Ryan turned to his cousin. ‘Do you ever cook at home, Caidyn?’

‘Nuh. Now that Sharlene’s at home with the rug rat she does most of the cooking. Mum and Dad are both working.’

‘I didn’t know your sister had a baby. Is the, uh, father around?’

‘Shit, no, he pissed off as soon as he heard she was preggers.’

‘You must enjoy having a nephew. Have you changed his nappy yet?’

‘Don’t be gross! The smell is bad enough. I did help feed him once, heated up the bottle and all.’

Carolyn was curious for once.

‘Isn’t Sharlene breast feeding? It doesn’t work for everyone, I know.’

‘They told her at the health centre that she probably wouldn’t be able to eat spicy food, maybe not even onion, and that alcohol was out. She reckoned she was stressed enough with a tiny baby without worrying about what she ate and drank all the time so she got him on to the bottle real quick. He’s doing well, though, you know, looks real healthy and sleeps at night.’

‘I’m sure he’ll be fine.’ Carolyn was reassuring. ‘Have some salad.’

‘No thanks. I’m not really into vegetables.’

‘Just have the tomato then, it’s a fruit.’ Kit noticed his brothers looked impressed by this knowledge. Good.

‘Nah, not much into fruit either.’

‘How do you poo then?’

‘Kit!’

‘Just asking.’

Caidyn decided it was time to change the subject.

‘Scottie, can you see if you can get me some cheap wheels? You need a car for just about any job these days.’

‘Rocco has a few for sale, takes a commission from his regulars, of course. I could check them out, but you would need at least eight hundred for something remotely reliable.’

‘I should be able to manage that in about a week’s time.’
Kit’s ears pricked up at the sound of money, especially easy money.

‘Where you getting the dough, Caidyn?’

They all stopped eating to hear the answer.

‘Oh, here and there, doing a bit of this and that, you know.’ He finished his meal quickly and got up to leave. ‘Thanks for the tea, Kit. Got to go to see some people, who know some people, you know.’

As the door closed all the Bentleys looked at one another. Richard spoke first.

‘What does he mean by *you know*. What do we know?’

Carolyn and Ryan laughed together and Ryan replied.

‘Dad, you don’t *want* to know, believe me.’

Carolyn poked her fork at Kit. ‘We’ll never get rid of him if you continue creating excellent meals like this, Kit.’

‘It’s OK, Mum, I’ve got it figured out. We just eat vegetarian for a while.’

...

Laura was putting out the rubbish bins, wondering if they could have a compost bin somewhere, when a voice wafted down from the balcony next door.

‘Oh, is it rubbish bin night?’

No dammit, I’m wheeling them in and out to develop my calf muscles. Be polite, Laura.

‘Yes.’

‘What about the green bin?’

Laura didn’t look up as she replied.

‘Same night, collected later in the day.’

She bolted back inside.

Lance and Abby exchanged glances.

‘Well, I guess that’s Laura. We obviously met the friendly one earlier.’

Lance leaned back with his cocktail as Abby leaned forward.

‘She has a troubled aura.’

‘Not that aura shit again, my lovely. What colour was it?’

‘No need to scoff at things you don’t comprehend.’

‘I *do* comprehend, my friend. You want a mysterious aura and cultivate whenever you can. Oh, lookee over there.’

Lance pointed to where Scott Bentley was putting out their rubbish.

‘He’s cute!’

‘Careful, Lance. You don’t know his persuasion. And you know the old, old saying, don’t shit in your own backyard.’

‘I prefer, don’t buy your meat where you buy your potatoes.’

They collapsed in vodka-inspired giggles, causing Scott to glance up. Lance wriggled his fingers in a little wave.

‘Hi there.’

‘Giddyay.’ Scott turned away.

‘Ah Australian macho, love it. He has the body of an athlete.’

‘Huh! The steroids may have shrunk his balls.’

‘Bitch!’

‘Hey, Lance, isn’t this a bit like that old movie, you know, the Alfred Hitchcock one where he watches from the window.’

‘*Rear Window*. Wouldn’t that be fantastic, if we witnessed a murder right across the road.’

‘Yeah, you might fancy yourself as Jimmy Stewart but I’m no Grace Kelly. Can’t afford the clothes for a start.’

‘Hmm. You’ve got something there though. This is a tiny street and we have a bird’s eye view, could be interesting.’

‘A little too small for my liking. They can see us too, you know.’

‘Well then, let’s get to know them. I propose we do one of my fabulous dinners and invite them.’

‘I’ll never say no to your cooking but you can’t invite people you don’t know.’

‘Ye of closed mind. This is the post-modern era, Abs, anything goes.’

‘I’ll bet you twenty dollars that Laura refuses.’

‘You’re on.’ They shook hands. ‘I do so love a challenge.’

Lance was thinking. He had to pique their interest. Murder mysteries were so nineties but he needed something of that nature. He pondered issuing written invitations, gold-embossed and popped into their letterboxes. Bring along your favourite joke, old toy? Make it formal? No, that might scare off the boys across the road.

...

The very next day Stephanie gave him a solid gold excuse. She had bought a food processor and couldn’t follow the instructions. Lance didn’t blame her; they were probably translated from Chinese. He laid out the various pieces and started assembling them. Stephanie sat at the kitchen bench, chin in hand.

‘I’ve got a birthday coming up in two weeks.’

‘A big one?’

‘No, but I did want to go somewhere, do something. Trouble is, I’m a bit broke. Can you think of anything interesting I could do that wouldn’t break the bank? Maybe a picnic in the park?’

‘How many people?’

‘Six, perhaps eight.’

‘Then allow me, as my birthday present to you, my lovely neighbour, to cook a dinner for you and your guests.’

‘No! I couldn’t do that, you barely know me and you wouldn’t know the others at all.’

‘Yes, we are new chums but seriously, Steph, you would be doing me a favour. I adore cooking, especially for more than two people. Truly, it makes me happier than anything else I can think of. Well, almost anything. All you would have to do is invite them and find out if they have any foods they hate or are allergic to.’

Stephanie still looked doubtful but Abby walked in and pushed Lance’s case.

‘Please do say yes, Stephanie. It really does make him happy and I can assure you and your friends will love the food, plus we get to meet some new people.’

‘If you’re sure?’

Both nodded their heads vigorously.

‘OK. You’re on.’

Chapter 36

‘What do you want for your birthday, Steph?’

Laura was unpacking the dishwasher while Stephanie painted her toe nails on the kitchen floor.

‘I don’t know. Earrings?’

‘You’ve got a million pairs of earrings.’

‘I’ve told you a thousand times not to exaggerate!’

‘Seriously though, is there anything you need.’

‘Yeah, but you don’t have the equipment.’

‘You are grossing me out, Steph.’

‘I don’t need a thing, Patch, but what I would love is for you to come to a dinner party next door. Lance is cooking it especially for my birthday, he said, but I think he’s more interested in meeting the Bentleys than us. He’s rather... flamboyant. His flatmate, Abigail is more down-to-earth. A bit of a hippy though.’

‘Steph, please, you know how awkward I am with new people, I always say the wrong thing and people end up hating me. Plus, Ryan Bentley has already made fun of me and will probably do it again. I’m starting to get anxious at just the thought of it. Can’t you please go alone? I wouldn’t be missed.’

‘Stop right there.’ Stephanie pulled herself up from the floor and put her hands on her hips. ‘I’m sick to death of your negativity, Laura. You put the worst possible spin on everything. You haven’t even met these people and you’ve decided they won’t like you. There is absolutely no logic in that. You know what? You’re turning into an old grump. You don’t have to go, it’s not compulsory, although it is my birthday. But, you know what? You might just have a good time, you might even laugh a little, eat some good food. And you know what, if you find you aren’t enjoying yourself, why, you’re next door to where you live, two minutes from your own bed. You can’t ask for much more than that.’

There was total silence in the kitchen while Stephanie wondered if she had been too harsh on her friend and Laura wondered if she *was* totally negative about everything. She metaphorically squared her shoulders and decided to try harder to be nice to people.

‘I’m sorry, Steph. Of course I’ll go. Should I get a cake?’

‘That would be good. Please don’t mention the birthday bit to the Bentleys though. I don’t want them to think they have to buy a present. Oh, yes, Lance told me to ask everyone if there is anything they don’t eat and if they have any food allergies.’

‘You know me, Steph, tough as old boots, but I hate brussel sprouts and I am *never* going to eat snails.’

...

Kit’s first week at the shop wasn’t very exciting; all he seemed to do was shift boxes and stack shelves. What amazed him, though, was the money people spent on stuff. Two hundred dollars for a pair of runners, and they weren’t even top of the range. Most of it was on plastic of course. Dad would be horrified. He had told Kit more than once that the whole earth would implode one day because people spent what they didn’t have. The global economic crisis had made his Dad bang on even more than usual.

Kit had been impressed by the tests they did on people’s feet though. It looked really scientific to him but Ryan had taken the piss, reckoned it was all smoke and mirrors, whatever that meant. Still, people bought them, no matter how expensive, because of all the talk about how looking after your feet helped your whole body, so it didn’t go out of whack he supposed. Didn’t much matter to Kit what was on his feet while he skateboarded. He couldn’t think of any reason to go running unless someone, like a gang, was chasing you.

...

‘We’ve been invited to a dinner party across the road.’ Scott looked up from his laptop.

‘What, at Steph and Laura’s place?’

‘No, at Lance and Abigail’s.’

‘Never heard of them.’

‘They moved into that empty unit next door to Steph a couple of weeks ago.’

‘How come we’re invited, we don’t even know them.’

‘You know Steph, she’s gotten pally with them already, says they’re fun. It’s probably her idea. It’s next Friday night.’

‘No can do. I’m catching up with David and Elise to plan our little road trip. We’ll only have five days so we need to make decisions. Will Laura be there?’

‘Yep. I guess you’re glad you’ve got an excuse, eh?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

Bugger! He wished he could go but it was hard enough to catch his uncle and his partner at the best of times.

Chapter 37

Stephanie was incapable of keeping a secret so Scott knew it was her birthday. The trouble was he was flat broke. Scott leaned against Ryan's bedroom doorway, scratching his head. Ryan was propped up against the headboard, book in hand.

'Ryan, what can I give Steph that won't cost much?'

'Flowers.' Ryan didn't glance up from his reading.

'They're not cheap,' Scott was mentally picturing the fancy florists in the High Street, 'not for good ones anyway.'

'Not from a shop, Scott, from Gran's garden. She's sure to have something. We need to return Harvey anyway, so let's go.'

Ryan leapt up from the bed and into the hallway.

'Harvey! Here boy.'

The frantic scabble of paws on floorboards heralded Harvey's approach.

Harvey loved to ride in a car with his head clear of the window, his ears flopping in the breeze. Scott thumped the steering wheel.

'A crappy bunch of home-grown flowers isn't really going to cut it for a girlfriend.'

'She's a girlfriend now? Done the deed yet?'

'No, but I think it might be time.' Scott smiled.

'Go boy!' Ryan clapped his brother on the back.

'Yeah, right, she's going to be so thrilled by a bunch of flowers she's bound to rip my clothes off.'

'Never underestimate the power of flowers for a chick. However, you could give her a personal voucher.'

'Voucher? For what?'

Oh, to cook her favourite meal, do her ironing. No, wait, I've got it, a foot massage!'

'Yuk, no, I don't do feet, could do shoulders though.'

'That'll do it, and put *by candlelight* on it. Chicks love that kind of crap. And it could lead on, if you get my drift.'

'Loud and clear, great idea.'

Gwen was overjoyed to see her dog and her grandsons; she couldn't decide which of the three was the better looking. Harvey behaved himself, patiently let himself be patted and then flew out the back door to chase down a hidden bone.

'Don't you dare rip up my flowerbeds, you dunderhead.'

'Speaking of flowers, Gran, Scott needs a bunch of whatever you've got for his girlfriend's birthday.'

'Girlfriend? Is it the little blonde one?'

'Yeah, Gran, her name is Stephanie, she's the one Harvey knocked over. I guess you could say the dog brought us together.'

'Well, I'm glad he did something good. Now, as to flowers, I think we could do something pretty with my hydrangeas and some lavender. Grab those secateurs, Scott, and come with me. Ryan, you put the kettle on, love. There's some fruit cake in the tin and some biscuits in the cupboard.'

Gwen delighted in hearing all about her grandson's lives over a cup of tea. At the rate they were demolishing the slices she would have to have another baking day soon. She found some old ribbon in her sewing box and Scott had to admit they did look rather beautiful, with the white and deep blue hydrangeas and the purple lavender.

'Thanks, so much, Gran, you should have been a florist.'

'Any time. What about you Ryan, do you have a girlfriend?'

'No one special, but you know me, I have to beat them away with a stick.'

'Get on with you, you silly boy. It is nice though to have someone special to share your life with.'

'You're sounding wistful, Gran. Do you miss Grandad still?'

'Of course, but I'm one of the lucky ones. I've got my house and garden and my dog. And now my family is living in Melbourne I get to see you all a lot more. That sure is a bonus. And not all of my friends are dead yet, though these days everyone's afraid of losing their marbles. Huh, enough of that. Are you going out to celebrate Stephanie's birthday, Scott?'

'Actually we've been invited to a dinner party with the people who moved in next door to Steph and Laura. Should be fun. Apparently the guy is a good cook and he photographs food for a living. Steph says they're a bit wacky but interesting. The guy, I think his name is Lance, even asked everyone if they were allergic to anything or there was anything they didn't eat.'

'Very considerate. Of course, in my day we had never heard of food allergies, probably all the preservatives they put in things nowadays, plus a lot of parents don't

let their kids eat dirt. I hope that if you two have kids you won't wrap them in cotton wool. Do you two want children?'

'Maybe.'

'Someday.'

'Huh, men! It's alright for you to be so casual, you don't have to worry about a biological clock.'

'No, we don't, but hey, we don't even know yet if our sperm will sink or swim.'

...

'They're beautiful, thank you.'

Stephanie jumped up for a quick peck on the lips but Scott lifted her off her feet for a long, passionate kiss. Finally he put her down.

'Phew! Oh, the flowers. Come upstairs and I'll put them in water.'

Stephanie's heart raced as she climbed the stairs but Scott's sank as he saw the most exquisite flower arrangement on the dresser.

'I see you've got some flowers already.'

'Those, yeah, they're from Patch.'

'Must have set her back a bit, mine are going to look like the poor relation.'

'No, they're not, silly. Look at this.'

Stephanie was carefully arranging his Gran's flowers in a cut-glass, v-shaped vase.

'They're equally beautiful, just different. If you had two children and one was better looking you'd love the other one just as much, wouldn't you?'

'I guess so.'

'Bullshit, you know so. See, these look beautiful on the diningroom table. Laura has money to burn, Scott, and you don't. You know what, I'll bet these ones last longer. Who thought to put a little cut on the stems of the hydrangeas?'

'My Gran, they're from her garden.'

'Even better. This was really thoughtful of you.'

Ryan was right; they went all mushy over flowers.

'Oops, nearly forgot the other half of your present.' He handed her an envelope.

Stephanie read the voucher and grinned at him.

‘A massage. Wow! How soon do I get it?’

‘Later tonight, maybe.’ Scott was laconic. ‘Of course you’ll need to have some candles.’

Laura walked through the doorway towards the fridge.

‘What do you want candles for, Scott? Are we going to have a power failure?’

Stephanie was blushing and Scott trying not to laugh.

‘Anyway there’s plenty in the cupboard. I stocked up after that blackout we had from the storm. I know Lance said not to bring any booze but I think we should take a bottle anyway, seems impolite not to.’ She held out two bottles. ‘What do you think, bubbles or still white?’

‘Still white. Ryan’s bringing a bottle of champers.’

‘Right. Scott can you carry this please.’ She handed him a large white glossy cardboard box. He couldn’t resist opening it and peering in.

‘Now that’s what I call a serious cake. Is it chocolate?’

‘No, it’s tiramisu.’

‘Ryan’ll be happy, that’s his favourite.’

Laura smiled inwardly. How about that, she had chosen his favourite cake without even knowing she was doing it. Had to be some kind of karma.

‘What’s that you’re stuffing down your bra, Steph?’

‘Nothing. I thought you said Ryan couldn’t make it, Scott.’

Scott winked at Stephanie as they followed Laura down the stairs. ‘He managed to reconfigure his other plans.’

Chapter 38

‘We’ll be eating all the food with our fingers tonight, folks. Any objections?’ Lance ushered Laura, Stephanie and Scott through the front door. Ryan caught the door just before he closed it.

‘I refuse to eat mashed potato with my fingers.’

Laura couldn’t think of any sort of response, she needed to practise some repartee for socialising with these people.

‘That could have been fun. Maybe next time. Ryan, isn’t it?’

‘The one and only.’ Ryan held out his hand and grinned.

‘Have you had those teeth whitened?’

Abigail called down the stairs. ‘Lance!’ She wiggled one finger from side to side.

‘Alright, Mum. She thinks I’m too intrusive, but really I’m just curious.’ Lance was talking softly, as he and Ryan were the last two to enter the lounge. Ryan responded equally quietly.

‘Watch your step with the lovely Laura, she cuts like a knife.’

Stephanie gazed appreciatively around at the clear lines of the furniture and fabric.

‘Wow, you guys have settled in so quickly. It took Laura and me ages to sort out stuff and agree on where everything should go.’

‘It’s nearly all Lance’s furniture, Steph, so I left him to it. No arguments that way.’

‘Where’s your stuff, is it in storage?’

‘No, Abs doesn’t like to be tied down by material possessions.’

Abigail slapped his arm. ‘Not true, not entirely. That figurine is mine.’ She pointed to a small bronze sculpture of a dancer. Ryan moved over to examine it. It had immense grace considering its size.

‘It’s beautifully made. Was it a gift?’

‘No, I like to have few but meaningful possessions, things I adore.’

‘You should give our dad lessons, eh Scott?’

‘Yeah, the clutter king we call him. He thinks he might find a purpose for everything one day.’

‘Does he collect paper bags and elastic bands?’ Everyone laughed except Laura.

'I collect them. You should always have a paper bag handy in case someone hyperventilates and rubber bands have a huge range of uses.'

'Right. Everyone ready to eat? Abs, please show everyone to their places and make sure everyone has wine. I'll get the food. Tonight we are having small servings of food originating in various countries.'

He placed two platters on the table. One was of spring rolls, lettuce and Vietnamese mint, the other held lettuce cups with mince and slivers of carrot and cucumber. There were four sorts of sauces.

'Which sauces go with which?' Laura frowned.

'Try all of them and see what you think. I love experimentation, don't you?'

Laura hated experimenting with food. Her experiences in that area had burnt her mouth or made her want to gag. She looked helplessly at the tiny dishes. Ryan picked one up and handed it to her.

'I can recommend this one to go with either dish. I work with a Vietnamese woman who brings in lunch sometimes, it's always a treat. This smells wonderful, Lance.'

'Good. The smell of coriander is my favourite. Anyone else for favourite smells?'

'Hate to be trite but new-mown grass does it for me every time.'

'Ditto for the trite but freshly ground coffee for me.'

'Chanel No. 5, definitely.'

'Cow manure.' It was out of Laura's mouth before she could stop it. She put a hand to her mouth as if she could pull the words back out.

'You know,' Ryan smiled at her across the table, 'I don't think you're going to smell much of that in downtown Kew.'

Was he laughing at her, she wasn't sure. Her face felt hot, she hoped she wasn't blushing.

'So, you're a country girl, Laura.' Lance turned to Abigail. 'Is that a reasonable question, not too intrusive?'

Abigail laughed. 'I think I'll allow you that one. Did you grow up on a farm, Laura?'

It was Stephanie's turn to laugh. 'Calling Laura's place a farm is like calling the QE II a sailboat.'

Scott looked at Ryan and raised his eyebrows. I'd really like to hear more about this, thought Ryan, but Laura was pushing her seat back. She excused herself to find the

toilet. Scott whispered to Stephanie. 'Exactly how big is her place?' The others at the table were craning their necks to hear her reply.

'Huge. The house has over forty rooms, but I've said too much already. I've embarrassed her so can we please change the subject.'

Laura returned to the table just as the next dishes of samosas and pakoras were being served. The talk turned to the restaurants of Kew and Hawthorn. Even Laura found she could now contribute, as she had been with Hugh to several of the newer ones.

'The last course is...ice-cream.' Lance grinned evilly around.

'Come on, Lance, you've got to give us spoons for that.'

'No, I don't.' Two by two Lance brought out small cones of ice-cream and put dishes of hundreds and thousands and chocolate hail on the table. He shocked them all by plunging his ice-cream straight into the sprinkles.

'Go on, it's fun. Double dipping is allowed. Why should small children have all the fun? They all followed suit and a conversation started about favourite treats when they were small.

The birthday cake was brought out, candles lit and the birthday song sung with gusto. It was a beautiful night so they elected to sit out on the balcony with coffee and cake.

'It's a very unusual house you live in, guys. What's it like on the inside?'

Ryan smiled at her and she also found herself wondering if he had had his teeth whitened, they were beautiful and so straight.

'Much the same as the outside, lots of contradictions. Our great-aunt, Mary, was a little eccentric but interesting; like the house I suppose.'

'Tell them about the notebook, Ryan.'

'It's just a little thing. I'm having trouble deciphering the words, her handwriting is atrocious, but it's also full of amazing designs for umbrellas.' At the looks on their faces he laughed and added, 'She was an umbrella maker by trade.'

'Wow, how unusual.'

'Can't imagine how designs for umbrellas could be interesting.'

'Are they in colour?'

'Oh yeah, but they're so small she must have had the tiniest paintbrush. Some of them are more than umbrellas; they're for sun, not rain, if you know what I mean.'

'Parasols! How gorgeous. Can we see them, please?' Lance and Abigail were enthralled.

‘Sure, I’ll go get the book.’

While Ryan was gone, Scott and Stephanie were whispering, locked closely together. Laura felt the heaviness in her stomach that meant her period was coming and decided to go home. Saying that they had already seen the designs, and thanking Lance for the wonderful food, Stephanie and Scott left with Laura.

‘They are small. I wish we had a magnifying glass.’ Abigail turned the pages carefully, Lance leaning over her shoulder.

‘I can do better than that.’ Lance produced his digital camera, took a snap of one and loaded it into his computer. ‘Now, I’ll just enlarge it so we can get a better look.’

The brilliant colours of rainbow lorikeets filled the screen.

‘Fantastic!’

‘You know, Ryan. We could upload the whole lot. I reckon we could make an exhibition out of all this. What do you think?’

‘Mmm. The book is legally Dad’s, she left everything to him, so I’d have to ask him. I don’t think he’d object, but I’d better ask. I think it’s a great idea. Maybe she could get some posthumous fame for her ideas, or at least a bit of recognition.’

Chapter 39

Laura was having trouble sleeping. After the dinner Laura had had a revelation of sorts. She had been living and behaving as if she was still on the farm. With only Jim and Wally to talk to, she had lived quite happily with little interaction with her peers. In Kew, however, it was a constant bombardment. She was seriously out of her depth. If she was to survive and get any enjoyment and appreciation for city life she would have to reinvent herself. The abruptness, her clipped utterances, were born from a year-and-a-half of isolation. Her few friends from school had scattered far and wide and she had no replacements, especially with Steph having been in Canberra for so long. She finally gave up tossing and turning and decided to go make a cup of tea. She made her way into the corridor using only the pale glow from her bedside lamp. She gave a little yelp as she bumped into someone coming out of the toilet. It was Scott Bentley. She stood staring at his back as he made his way back to Stephanie's room after a whispered 'sorry'. Laura didn't quite know what to feel. Was that a tiny flash of jealousy? It wasn't that it was unexpected but it still felt surreal. She hoped it wouldn't change the house dynamic or her friendship if he became a frequent visitor, as he probably would. Well, that settled it; now that Stephie and Scott were really an item she needed to have some fun of her own. She wanted some happiness and maybe even a little love. She grinned to herself as she realised that Scott had looked as uncomfortable as she felt. Both their little worlds were changing.

...

Scott decided that nonchalance was his best bet. He sauntered into the kitchen where he could smell coffee brewing.

'Morning Dad, Ryan.'

'Where have you been son?' Richard buttered his toast.

'I'm guessing he's finally got his end in.' Ryan grinned wickedly.

'Oh! Who, where?'

'The lovely Stephanie, of course, Dad. Have you been asleep the last month or so?'

'Oh, right. She's a nice girl, I hope you used a condom.'

Scott didn't consider that deserved a response and merely stared into his coffee.

'Come on, bro. How was it? Did the earth move or was it awkward?'

'Somewhere in-between, good, relaxed, no dramas.'

'So, are you two an item now?'

'Yeah. I really *like* her, Ryan.'

‘You aren’t in love?’ Richard was disappointed. ‘I was head over heels the first time with your mother, very excited.’

‘Scott’s nothing like you, Dad, takes a lot to make him excited, doesn’t it, Scottie?’

‘I guess I’m not given to excesses of emotion, no. I like to feel I’m on level ground. What was weird though was bumping into Laura in the passageway in the middle of the night.’

‘Good Lord! Did she stare daggers?’

‘No.’ Scott frowned. ‘She looked more puzzled than anything. It was, well, awkward.’

Laura awoke groggily next morning. She could hear Steph clanking around upstairs, but with a head full of cotton wool didn’t feel up to conversation. A quick shower and a walk was what she needed. She wondered if Steph had that glow so often portrayed by romance writers. Laura had once, out of curiosity, read seven Mills and Boon romances in a day; a pity she could so seldom boast of such an achievement.

Stephanie reflected on the strangeness of the morning. When sex follows on from friendship at least you don’t have that awkward moment when you realise you have slept with someone you don’t really know. She thought about the sex. It hadn’t been wildly exciting, the mad ripping your clothes off kind, but it had been satisfying. Oh well, she supposed they would see how it went. She *liked* him a lot but wasn’t sure it felt like love which was probably a good thing, given how her past passionate encounters had ended. But hang on, she was still a bit young for comfortable sex, wasn’t she?

...

‘So, what do you think, Dad?’

‘I’m not so sure, Ryan, seems like a bit of a cheek, showing her private drawings in public.’

‘It *was* her livelihood.’

‘Yes, but the designs in her note book were never taken up by the company.’

‘All the more reason to show them. Give her some posthumous fame.’

‘Fame?’

‘I exaggerate a little, but we thought a small exhibition and a website show.’

‘What would all this cost?’

‘Very little. Lance can get us a gallery space through a friend for zilch and he is willing to put it on his own website.’

‘And what does he get out of it?’

‘Reflected glory? Vicarious pleasure? I don’t know, Dad, but he really admires her artwork and wants to put it out there.’

‘It might get stolen.’

‘I could ask him about copyright, but look, it’s your property, so it’s your call.’

‘Oh, no, I couldn’t decide something like that; she might haunt me from the grave. I tell you what, you ask your Gran, let Mary’s sister decide. I’ll go along with whatever she says.’

So, Ryan rang Gwen.

‘An exhibition! She would have loved that. She always was a bit of a show-off.’

‘Didn’t you two get on, Gran?’

‘Sure we did. Just a bit of sibling rivalry. I was jealous of her talent and she was jealous of my children. It evened out over time. But why are you asking me? Your father was her sole heir so surely it’s his decision.’

‘Gran, I love my father but he couldn’t make a decision if his life depended on it, you know that.’

Gwen sighed audibly down the line.

‘Well, I say go for it, and make sure I get an invitation.’

‘Great, and Gran, could you make some of those cheesy things for the opening? I’m trying to get food organised as cheaply as I can.’

‘Good idea, but you’ll surely need other food, and drinks.’

‘Yes, I know, I’m working on it. Bye for now, Gran.’

‘Goodbye sweetheart. Let me know the date.’

‘Will do.’

...

Stephanie had agreed to look after her friend Kayla’s shop in Canberra for two months. Kayla was going overseas and claimed there wasn’t anyone else she could trust to look after her one-person business. Stephanie was flattered and excited. She adored the tiny shop, which also did online orders. Now that she and Scott had a more intimate relationship she hoped he’d miss her like hell. Her big worry, though, was Laura. She texted Patrick and asked him to meet her for a coffee after school.

As he entered the coffee shop Patrick glanced up and down High Street. He hoped someone from school would see him. As usual, Steph looked gorgeous, all in red. He thought she'd done something different with her hair but thought better of mentioning it in case he was wrong. Girls were so tricky.

'Thanks for coming, Paddo. Order whatever you want. You're probably hungry after school, I know I always was.'

Patrick needed no encouragement, just a shame it wasn't Maccas. When the waitress sauntered over he ordered a milkshake and a piece of chocolate cake from the display case at the counter. Blinky's Café was a favourite of Stephanie's. She appreciated its pastel colours and the little booths that created a hint of intimacy. The leadlight of Blinky Bill above the door always made her smile, after she had googled it and discovered it was a quintessentially Australian children's picture-book character. She wondered if the Bentleys had been here. Somehow she thought that Ryan would appreciate a koala bear that glinted in the sunlight, and would probably know its history, unlike her dim self. As Patrick finished his cake she leaned toward him, arms resting on the table between them.

'Now, I don't know if you've heard Laura and me talking but I'm off to Canberra for a while.'

'Yeah, I did overhear something about that.'

'Well, here's the thing. I need you to look after Laura while I'm gone.'

'But she's a grown up! Do you want me to cook for her or take her places?'

'No. I want you to sharpen up your sensitivity.'

'Huh?' Patrick grimaced as if someone had hit him in the balls. Stephanie reached over and patted his hand.

'Don't look so horrified, all I'm asking is that you try to read how she's feeling and think about how you might try to make her feel better.'

'I really and honestly don't know what you mean, Steph. How could I possibly know what she's feeling, I'm not in her head.'

'OK. Let's break it down a bit. You can tell if she's really sad can't you?'

'Yeah, she goes all quiet and stares into space. That scares me, Steph. What could I do?'

'Just something simple to show you're there with her. Make her a cup of tea without asking, put some nice music on, maybe suggest a game of scrabble.'

'I guess I could do that, if I remember. What if I feel sad too?'

‘Just do the same stuff. She just needs to know she’s not alone. Now, the other thing. You know how sometimes she goes over-the-top cranky and irritable?’

‘Yeah. I hate that. I usually get the hell out of the way.’

‘When she’s like that, Paddo, she is being irrational, not thinking straight. So, I want you to try and use reason and logic, try pointing out that she’s being unreasonable. Only don’t put it in those words.’

‘Shit Steph, I don’t think I can do all that. You’re creeping me out with all this talk.’

‘Patrick, it will be OK. None of this might happen and I’ll be at the end of the phone 24/7. I’m just trying to look after my friend.’

‘Yeah, but she’s my *older* cousin. She’s supposed to look after me.’

‘Yes, and she has done exactly that. How about all the time you’ve spent with her and Jim? Do I need to remind you about the trouble you’ve had at school and how Laura has been there, helped you out, hell, even had you come to stay with us. Isn’t that enough helping?’

People’s heads were turning in their direction. Stephanie realised she had raised her voice. Hell, why were the young so self-absorbed, so bloody selfish. She shook her head to try and clear it and calm down.

‘Steph?’ Patrick was looking down at his empty plate and playing with his fork.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry. I think I see what you’re getting at. You’re asking me to kind of reverse things for a while. Is that it?’

‘Yes. Well done, Paddo, I knew there was a brain lurking in their somewhere. Maybe I’m making too big a deal of it but I just want you to try to be observant and act kindly. That’s it really.’

‘I promise I’ll *try* Steph, but could we be in touch each day.’

‘Sure.’

...

Stephanie knocked on the Bentley’s door that same evening. Richard beamed as he saw who it was.

‘Stephanie. Come on in. The job’s going well, even had to put on a couple of subbys. I see you’ve done the billing. Thanks for that. Do you think we should put in any more tenders? Oh, shit, sorry Steph, forgetting my manners. Cup of tea or a beer?’

He ushered her into the kitchen. Stephanie thought it could do with a refit, badly. The linoleum on the floor was cracked and there weren't many cupboards. An old dresser could be livened up with a coat of paint. She glanced at the bottom of the sink, no dishwasher; bloody hell they were roughing it.

'You know, a beer sounds great. No-one else at home?'

'No, it's nice and peaceful for a change. Scottie and Ryan have gone to see some band and even taken Kit with them and Caro's in her study as usual. Actually I was just thinking it's a bit *too* quiet. Not used to it, so very happy to see you. Cheers!'

They clicked stubbies.

'Richard, I'm glad the work is going so well because I have to go to Canberra for a couple of months. I'm looking after a shop for a friend, but don't worry about the accounts; I can do it all by email and phone.'

'Sure, no problemo. Is Laura going with you?'

'No, I tried to talk her into it but she wasn't having any of it; you see if she did come with me, Patrick would have to go somewhere and we're afraid his dad would make him board at the school again and he'd really hate that.'

'Yeah, I can understand that. Poor little tacker lost his mother he told me.'

'Yes, he did. The thing is, Richard, I'm worried about Laura, you see she lost both her parents in the same plane crash.'

'Holy shit, poor bugger, but she always looks so strong. I see her a lot, as I'm coming and going and she's always, like, head up, shoulders straight, as if she knows exactly what she's doing.'

'It's pretty much all an act, Richard. Inside she's doing it tough a lot of the time. Please don't ever say anything to her about this, she'd kill me, but I was wondering if you and the rest of your family could keep an eye out for her. It's only been just over eighteen months since the accident and she has these little lapses where she... kind of freaks out.'

'Sure, but how would we do that, exactly. I mean people don't knock at the door to borrow a cup of sugar these days.'

'Yeah, I thought about that. Do you think Kit could somehow spend a bit more time over there? Maybe they could do their homework together or something.'

'I dunno about that. Kit's not real flash with doing homework. Carolyn usually has to nudge or bully him into it.'

'Hmm. Oh, well, it was worth a try. Look, I'm probably worrying about nothing as usual.'

‘No. It’s good that she’s got someone to worry about her. I’ll have a word to Kit, see if we can come up with something between the two of us, even though we’re not the sharpest tools in the shed. Maybe Ryan could think of something.’

‘No! Absolutely not. Please don’t say anything, especially to Ryan.’

Richard was puzzled by her reaction. Didn’t she like Ryan?

‘Have you told Scott you’re going away? I’ll bet he’ll miss you.’

‘Yes, I’ve told him.’

She had told him and he said he hoped she enjoyed herself. Well, she hoped he didn’t enjoy himself. She hoped absence did make the heart grow fonder.

Chapter 40

Little Black Frock was in the lower half of a double-storey brick building opposite the Manuka shopping centre. Kayla had couriered the keys down, so Stephanie drove straight there. Pulling out the code for the security alarm that she had scribbled on an old tram ticket, she struggled with the heavy door and keys. Stephanie grinned in recognition at the Audrey Hepburn wallpaper and miniature chandeliers. Yes, still so classy. The shop sold exactly what the name said, black dresses and only black. Day dresses, cocktail and evening gowns and pinafores. The black was offset by scarves, shoes and bags in vibrant hues of purple, red and blue. Stephanie flicked through the racks; she felt honour bound to try them all on at some stage. She didn't turn over the closed sign and re-locked the door. Her first job was to see if there were any online orders waiting to be filled. She jumped as the land line rang loudly in the empty shop. It was a person from the warehouse telling her there was an order to be picked up; some new accessories from Japan had arrived. She spied a printout of instructions from Kayla. God, there was too much to take in, how the hell did her friend run this place single-handed? She might just need to get help, but who from? Her mobile beeped a text message through from Scott, asking if she had arrived safely. She thought about last night and Scott helping her to pack the car. He would have helped her even if they hadn't had sex, that's the kind of guy he was. She hoped he missed her like hell, and that he didn't crack on to anyone else while she was away.

...

Laura promised herself to be bright and cheerful while Steph was away. She wanted Patrick to have a pleasant home where he could forget all about school. She had a plan to reinvent herself and drew up a 'to do' list: Join the local library; start to jog; get a pushbike; try to see the beauty in all; cook all of Patrick's favourite foods (and mine!); be nice to people.

She had read somewhere that exercising, particularly cardio, spilled out some endorphins which made you feel happier. Of course it could be all bullshit but it was worth a try. She could walk up to the footy oval and jog around that. The bike would allow her the closest thing she could think of to riding a horse. She planned to go shopping for something beautiful and visit more art galleries. Maybe some plants for the balcony? Yes. She vowed to make some small talk; hell, she could practise that at the tennis club. More smiles, less frowns. If this worked, Stephanie would not recognise her. She rang Jim and asked him to send down a couple of her grandmother's cook books. A quick survey of the glossy magazines in the newsagent had confirmed her idea that they were full of ingredients she wouldn't know where to get. She planned to make roasts, casseroles, pies and filling desserts. Patrick needed fattening up and her shape didn't seem to change no matter what she ate. From the local paper Laura sussed out a hairdresser and beauty parlour.

...

Laura decided to get exercise and then do the beauty thing. Her long legs strode around the local footy ground. She planned to do about five circuits before leaving. She could see a couple of guys kicking a footy at the other end in front of the goal posts. A few people walked their dogs and an old man shuffled along on his walking

frame. She was about halfway around when a football flew in her direction. On impulse she leapt up and grabbed it, then kicked it back. Oh, no, surely that wasn't Scott and Ryan Bentley. Kicking a football didn't really fit her new persona. She grinned ruefully as she approached them.

'Hey, nice specce, Laura.' Scott hugged the ball to his chest.

'And a good kick, forty metres I reckon. Where did you learn to kick like that?'

'Taught myself in the back paddock.'

'Somebody must have shown you how.' Ryan clearly disbelieved her, which made her very cross.

'No, I watched very carefully and took a book from the library. Not everyone is an experiential learner, Ryan Bentley.'

Ryan nodded his head. 'OK, sorry, you're a good kick whichever way you learned.'

Laura felt like punching the air as she sauntered off. One over on Ryan Bentley was indeed a pleasure.

...

The hairdressers wasn't a huge success for a number of reasons. Having someone else wash her hair was relaxing but then when she was asked what she wanted done she had dithered.

'Um, just leave it long enough for me to put it in a pony tail.'

'Do you want it shaped?'

'I guess so. What do you think?'

'I think it would soften your features and give it more bounce.'

Laura bit her tongue and concentrated on the bounce aspect, although bouncing hair didn't seem very logical. She wanted to giggle, but suppressed that too and merely nodded.

'How about some colour? A few foils perhaps for highlights.' She was shown some colours and stabbed her finger at one.

She really tried with the small talk but didn't care that the hairdresser, call me Ange, had a daughter who was getting married. Ange rambled on about wedding dresses and receptions and guest lists until Laura wanted to scream. Finally, she was left in peace with a magazine while the foils took effect. Her hair was blown dry and Ange stood back to admire her handiwork.

'Lovely! You look like a different person.'

Laura thought she looked like nothing so much as a piebald pony but she muttered a thank you, paid an outrageous sum and quickly left.

The pedicure was much better. An young Asian woman gently bathed her feet, removed all the hard skin and massaged in lotion without saying a single word. Laura's feet felt wonderful, like she was walking on air – and she had chosen bright red nail varnish which made her feel very modern. The price was modest; she would definitely return.

...

Patrick's eyes goggled as she served up dinner.

'Awesome, totally awesome, Laura. I love roast pork and roast veggies.'

'Wait till you see dessert. So, you've finished your work experience. Did you enjoy it?'

'Most, nearly all of it was sweet. I was outside a lot of the time. I did cock up a few times but I learnt heaps and it was great to see things finished, one by one.'

They ate in companionable silence.

'Your hair looks different?'

'Different good, or different bad?'

'Er, good.'

'I think I look like a piebald pony.'

They both laughed out loud.

'But hey, I guess it's fashionable. And look at this.' Laura took her legs out from under the table and pointed at her red toes.

'Cool!'

'Yeah, it is, isn't it. It's the new glamorous me, Paddo.'

While Patrick put the plates and cutlery in the dishwasher and Laura took the pudding from the oven, Patrick wondered about his cousin and all this new glam stuff she was doing. Maybe she would finally get herself a boyfriend; she sure deserved one. The best thing was that she seemed so chirpy, so maybe he wouldn't have to do all that looking-after shit that Steph had gone on about.

Chapter 41

Scott had found a really cheap airfare to Canberra. He looked forward to surprising Stephie. He was to fly out at three in the afternoon and return at ten in the evening as he had to work the next day. It would be brief but exciting. He could picture the look of surprise on her face when he arrived at the shop unannounced. After that, he hadn't planned; she might be going out or something but at least they could have a drink and maybe a meal together. As he was about to board, an announcement came over the loud speaker: the plane would be delayed for approximately an hour. Bugger! Should he phone or text her? Nuh, it was only an hour's flight and the shop stayed open until five-thirty; he would make it. Scott was missing Steph more than he thought and he managed to daydream through the next hour with thoughts of the evening ahead.

Finally, at four o'clock he buckled his seatbelt and watched Melbourne fade away below. The plane hit some turbulence and he felt queasy by the time they landed. There was a queue for the taxis and then his taxi got caught between two trucks unloading just before Manuka. He paid the driver and ran the couple of blocks to the shop, his backpack bouncing. As he turned the corner there was Stephanie locking the front door of the shop. He started to call out but then a guy appeared and gave her a big hug. Scott hid in a shop doorway feeling extremely silly as they took off down the street arm in arm. Shit! What would he do now? He thought back to the emails and text messages: she had said she was having fun and catching up with old friends, she hadn't said how old or which gender. He had blithely assumed she was missing him as much as he was missing her. He slapped his forehead. So much for bloody spontaneity! There was a bar up ahead so he stopped for a beer and to think this through.

Scott nursed his drink morosely and looked around the little bar. It was obviously a place for the suits to meet after work and he felt out of place in his jeans and tee-shirt and backpack. He didn't know what to do, so he rang Ryan. He got his voicemail. He thought about ringing Laura and asking her if she knew if Steph had a new bloke but knowing how tight they were he doubted she would tell him. A group at the next table started laughing uproariously and he realised he was being a prat. He would just ring her and find out the worst. Her phone went to voicemail too. Had she seen his number and decided not to answer? He texted her anyway and then went walking, slowly.

...

Stephanie awoke the next morning with a mouth like chalk and a heavy head. She took a couple of aspirin and staggered downstairs to make coffee in the little kitchen before opening the shop. It had been a big night. She found the empty glasses on the bench. That's right, Rohan had brought her home and they'd had another drink! She found her handbag with her coat on a chair. Hell, she had forgotten to turn her mobile back on after the movie, not that she would have heard it in the club anyway. A missed message from Scott. Shit! He had been here. Oh well, she would ring him later and tell him she had been at the movies with a friend, he needn't know she had been out partying until all hours.

...

Ryan waited at Maccas until he got Scott's call. He drove through the airport, spotted his brother and pulled into the curb.

Scott threw his backpack onto the back seat and climbed in.

'Do you want to drive, bro?'

'No, I'm tired and I feel like shit. Think I'll give up on women and I bloody hate aeroplanes.'

'Whoa, relax, enjoy and ride and tell me all.'

The freeway was quiet, the coloured tail lights creating a smooth dance on the tarmac. Scott slipped further down in his seat, put his feet on the dashboard and replayed his disastrous time in Canberra.

'Just because she walked off arm-in-arm with some dude means zilch, Scotto, Steph's a touchy-feely kind of person.'

'Then why didn't she pick up her phone?'

'Flat batteries? She's a bit scatterbrained at times.'

'No, I've got a feeling. I think she's over me. Maybe she went up there to get away from me. Maybe I'm a dud root or totally boring or something.'

'Get off the cross, bro, someone else needs the wood! You're overreacting when you haven't even got all the facts. This isn't like you, are you seriously smitten or something?'

'Yeah, I guess I am.'

Chapter 42

Laura stared at the invitation and an idea began to form. She was invited, with a friend, to attend the opening of an art exhibition, a fundraiser for the soup kitchen, so it could be an exhibition of people's rejects but it did fit with one of her new objectives. Who the hell could she invite, though, with Steph away?

Laura waited until late afternoon and by dint of peering through Patrick's bedroom window was able to see him turn into the street. She grabbed her purse and a shopping basket, checked herself out in the mirror, and darted out of the front door.

As Ryan drew level with her Laura called out.

'Hi Ryan.'

'Oh, hello Laura.' Ryan didn't look particularly pleased to see her but she couldn't blame him, given the nature of her old self. She put on her best smile and crossed the street.

'Um, Ryan, have you got a minute?'

Ryan looked at her. She was actually smiling at him, wonder of wonders, but what the hell had she done to her beautiful hair? She touched it awkwardly as he looked.

'You've done something to your hair.'

'Yes, bloody awful isn't it?'

He couldn't help laughing and, surprisingly, she joined in. He didn't think he had ever heard her laugh before. It was a real belly laugh, not a giggle, and it was spontaneous.

'Still, I guess it will grow out. The thing is, Ryan, I just got an invitation in the mail. It's a fundraiser for the soup kitchen I've been working in.'

Laura, so dignified and arrogant, in a soup kitchen! He intended to hear more about that. He wasn't quite sure what response she wanted.

'Sounds, um, interesting.'

'Look I know it could be awful but it's for a good cause, and I...um...wondered if you might like to go.'

There. It was out and she had to hold tightly to her basket so he wouldn't see her hands were shaking.

'Are you asking me on a date, Laura?'

'Oh no! That is, I didn't... '

‘Pity. Yes, I’d like to go. I’m a sucker for openings, especially if they give you free grog and those little things on sticks. Do you think they’d have those?’

The bastard was playing with her, she was sure, but maybe that was just his way. He smiled, showing those gorgeous teeth and she was determined that this *was* going to happen.

‘I’m sure they will have wine, probably pretty ordinary though, and some sort of canapés.’

‘Good. It’s a deal then. Will Stephanie be able to go?’

‘No, she’s still stuck in Canberra and can’t leave the shop. Oh, do you think I should ask Scott?’ Hell, she really didn’t want this to be a threesome but didn’t want to be impolite.

‘No, it’s not his kind of thing. If Steph were here he’d drag himself along to be nice, so I guess it’s just us.’

‘Right. OK. Well, I’ll see you next Thursday then, about six-thirty?’

‘Sweet. I’ll bang on your door.’

Laura crossed back over the street and started toward home, but turned around as Ryan called out.

‘Decided not to go shopping then?’ His eyes indicated her basket.

‘Oh, yes, silly me, I almost forgot.’

Laura turned around and headed off with her head down, hoping like hell she wasn’t blushing. Nothing got past that guy, damn him. She had to bite her lip against making a smart retort. Bloody hell, it was hard to be nice.

...

Ryan accepted the beer Scott offered him as they both sat down to watch the news on television.

‘You’re not going to believe what happened to me today. The Ice Queen smiled at me, laughed with me, and then asked me out.’

‘Asked you out? As in a date? I don’t believe it, although remember, Steph did think she fancied you, said she was always sneaking looks at you. So, did you turn her down nicely?’

‘Oh no, I’m going, wouldn’t miss it for quids. I’d really like to find out what makes her tick. Of course she could be up to something, maybe she’ll try to make a fool of me. She asked if you would want to go, I hope you don’t, ’cos I told her it wasn’t your

kind of thing. Sorry bro, I didn't want a threesome but I hope she's not taking me to take the piss in some way.'

'I'm sure she wouldn't do that. Steph says she's a really kind person underneath all that nose-in-the-air kind of shit. Apparently her parents dying together has made her close up. Steph says she was an entirely different person before it happened; maybe she's trying to get back to that person.'

'Huh. You believe the best of everyone. Of yeah, and she's had some of those colour things put in her hair and it reminded me of that old cat we had.'

'Bartlett?'

'Yeah, remember Dad called him that 'cos he had a yellow stripe down his back and was always hungry.'

'Oh, you didn't?'

'No, I do have some common sense. I knew she wouldn't appreciate hearing that little story. Ah well, it'll be an interesting night.'

...

'Do I want to be your friend on Facebook?' Laura put her laptop on the couch and stood up. 'Hello! You live next door, you twit. If I *want* to talk to you I can go downstairs and knock on your door, or... ' She stepped out on to the balcony, 'I can just *yell* at you from here.'

'Laura!' Patrick grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back inside.

'Facebook is not really for talking, it's more so you can see what they're doing, you know, socially, and what they think about stuff.'

'What? You mean they talk *at* you!'

'Just don't respond, Laura, delete the email. Simple. You're being so old-fashioned, Facebook and Twitter are just new ways to communicate, and you don't need to get in a tizz about it.'

God, Steph had been right after all. Laura did need looking after at times. She sure was moody.

Twitter, what a word. Laura thought of the connotations: birds communicating at a base level, to mark territory or attract a mate. Funny, that.

Chapter 43

Laura wondered if she was brave enough to go to the tennis club by herself. She had noticed that it wasn't uncommon for people to wander in alone and see who was available for a game, but they were more often male and would settle for a beer or a game of pool if not paired up. God, the place was quiet without Steph around. Patrick was in his room, and looked like he was studying, even if his iPod was on. Her book lay discarded on the floor beside her cushion. She was revisiting Thomas Hardy but Tess and Angel Clare were driving her nuts. She put on her new, simple but elegant, tennis outfit, which had plenty of pockets, grabbed a racquet, her keys and purse. She looked at her cell phone on the charger. Probably nobody would ring but she could fiddle with it if she looked too lonely. She stuck her head around Patrick's door and yelled until he took one earplug out.

'I'm going to the club for a while. Will you be OK?'

The look he gave her reminded her so much of his father at his most disdainful that she merely shrugged and closed the door behind her.

...

Ryan was suspicious. He wanted to find out exactly what Caidyn was up to. He had cash and wasn't divulging the source. Ryan suggested that they go to a pub, have a few beers and a game of pool. Caidyn's face showed he was surprised and pleased.

'Is there a local?' he enquired as they set off up the road.

'Not exactly. There's one pub on the corner but other than that Kew has little wine bars that are expensive and don't open until later. We'll try the corner pub.'

The hotel was an unimpressive structure, box-like and stark with large advertisements on the roof. Ryan disliked it by sight but had never ventured inside. The interior was gloomy with old men alone and in pairs propping up bar stools. Most unfortunately though, the pool tables in the adjacent room were all in use and coins perched on the edges of the tables indicated that more people were lined up. Ryan wondered if IDs had been checked; some didn't look of legal age, especially the girlfriends, but what the heck, it was none of his business. He led Caidyn back to the main bar and they found a vacant tall table with two stools. He sat and waited for Caidyn to buy drinks so he could lead into the money issue, but Caidyn looked blankly at him, pulled out his mobile and started checking for messages. With an audible sigh Ryan tapped him on the shoulder and asked what kind of beer he wanted. Caidyn barely glanced up.

'VB, thanks mate.'

After two pots, both purchased by himself, Ryan realised Caidyn couldn't sit still long enough to chat. He kept jumping up to check out posters on the walls, the pub menu, the toilets, and the pool tables, to see if they were still occupied. Bloody ants in his pants, thought Ryan, this was obviously not going to work. Caidyn needed to have his hands and eyes in use to let down his guard, so Ryan suggested they move on to the tennis club where the pool tables were usually vacant.

‘A tennis club! That’d be a bit hoity toity, wouldn’t it?’

‘Nah, it’s cool. I’m a member, Scott and I both are.’

Caidyn’s eyes widened; he had never been a member of a club, unless you counted the footy club back home, but anyone could be a member there.

Caidyn was disappointed, the place wasn’t that flash. On the up side, though, there were some cute babes in their short skirts. Ryan knew Scott would probably be there, as Alicia wanted to see him about some possible modelling work. They had laughed and both shook their heads until she mentioned the money, which was not to be sneezed at. Sure enough, there was Scott in the corner with Alicia, their heads bent forward over some papers. Ryan guided Caidyn past them, telling him not to interrupt and led him over to the fridge. He grabbed two cans of beer and put money in the trust tin. Thank goodness it was locked, knowing his cousin. They moved toward the two small pool tables at the end of the room.

‘Next one’s on you, cuz.’

‘Sure, no worries Ryan.’

...

Scott was studying the drawings and photos of the new range of tennis gear Alicia’s friend were producing. Alicia was pushing the angle.

‘I think she’s on to something here, Scott. The idea is to get the kids used to buying Australian instead of all the overseas stuff.’

‘Will it be made here?’

‘Not exactly, but designed here, totally here.’

‘Why can’t it be made here?’

‘Too expensive, the range has to be affordable for the parents.’

‘If you’re appealing to kids then shouldn’t you have a kid as the model?’

Alicia leaned back in her chair. These Bentleys were a strange mob, thoughtful as well as good-looking, not a common combination in her experience.

‘Think about it Scott, kids don’t want to see some gawky adolescent who looks like them, no way. They want to see someone who looks like a hero they might become. Hell, if Tash had the money she’d probably be employing Nadal to model these. You’ve got nothing to lose, Scott, hell, it might start a whole new career for you.’

Scott thought about Rocco’s garage, and his father’s reaction and wasn’t so sure. This would be stepping outside his comfort zone but it could be money for jam. Put some

clothes on, get photographed and get paid good money, he would be a fool to look such a gift horse in the mouth. He could ask Lance if there was a downside.

...

As Laura approached the club house she could see at least three games in progress. She took a seat and watched some of the older members play. A game of doubles was in progress on court one. Grey and white hair abounded but they were surprisingly agile, even if most shots were lollipops. They laughed out loud at their own errors and cheered each other on. This game was about fun and friendship, not competition. Laura wondered if one day, if she got to be their age, she would be so uninhibited and carefree. But then what did she know, they might well have troublesome children or grandchildren, money worries, health problems, whatever. If they did, though, they certainly forgot about them on the court.

Caidyn had stepped outside for a ciggie. He sat on the same bench seat next to Laura and was covertly admiring her legs.

‘Silly old bastards, eh?’ He indicated the game she was watching with his beer can. ‘You’d think they’d know better than to make fools of themselves at their age.’

Laura glared at him, string-lipped, but Caidyn didn’t notice.

‘Doesn’t it make you sick to see all that saggy skin? I’m glad my Nan doesn’t get about in short skirts like that. Your legs now,’ he pointed once again this time with his cigarette, ‘they deserve to be shown off.’

Laura rose to her feet, fists clenched, not daring to open her mouth. She would not dignify his asinine remarks with a response. Even if she was trying to be a kinder person his type did not call for empathy or compassion. Idiot! She took a deep breath before walking through the door and looking around her. Ah, there was Ryan Bennet at the pool table. She ambled over.

‘Hello, Ryan. The tone of this place is definitely deteriorating. I just had to listen to a runty little twerp outside making some very crude remarks.’

‘Ah, would that be the runty little twerp you are referring to?’ Ryan indicated his head to where Caidyn was walking across the room. Caidyn was grinning, eyes firmly fixed on Laura’s boobs this time.

‘Laura, meet my cousin, Caidyn. Caidyn, this is Laura who lives across the road from us.’

‘Giddy Laura, or do your friends call you Loz?’

‘Never, ever.’ Laura glanced at her watch. ‘Goodness is that the time? I really must go. Goodbye.’

As Laura was walking toward the door she noticed Scott Bentley in what seemed a very earnest, perhaps even intimate, conversation with Alycia. So, this is what he did

while Steph was away. Now she regretted asking Ryan to go to the art show; she would have to find a way out of it. The Bentleys were scum.

Ryan soon found out what Caidyn had said and told him he had been offensive, but Caidyn merely shrugged it off. Her problem, was all he said. Ryan was furious but turned his anger to good use by wiping the table with his cousin. He then proceeded to get Caidyn very drunk. Caidyn was soon alluding to the richness of Kew and how people were stupid enough to leave windows open. He was boasting about the stuff he had managed to grab by the time Ryan propelled him out the door and helped him to stagger home.

...

The next morning Ryan shook Caidyn awake at an early hour, gave him a cup of coffee and toast and told him if he wasn't gone that day the police would be coming around to inspect his luggage. A bleary-eyed Caidyn gazed open-mouthed at him.

'Mate, you wouldn't dob in your own cousin, would you?'

'Yes, I would. We have to live here, Caidyn, so you know what you're doing? You're shitting on our doorstep, not very good from a relative is it? And you know what, you don't have all day to think about it. I'll give you one hour, so you'd better get moving before I phone Melbourne's finest.'

'OK, OK, don't get your knickers in a twist. I'll go, but at least let me say goodbye to my own aunt and uncle and thank *them* for *their* kindness.'

'I just changed my mind again.' Ryan hauled his cousin from the sofa bed and threw his clothes at him. 'I'm giving you ten minutes to get the hell out of here.'

Ryan leaned against the dining room table, tapping his foot and holding his wrist watch out in front of him. 'Time's ticking, better move.'

By the time the rest of the family entered the kitchen Caidyn was long gone, for good, Ryan hoped. They were all puzzled by the sudden departure but Ryan merely told them that Caidyn had had to leave in a hurry for family reasons. Scott raised his eyebrows but said nothing after a barely perceptible shake of the head from Ryan.

As Scott and Ryan were both heading off to work Scott decided he wanted some answers.

'What happened with Caidyn? He sure as hell wouldn't have left of his own accord.'

'He's lucky I didn't punch him.'

'Whoa, that's serious coming from you, little bro. What did he do?'

'He's been stealing from people in our neighbourhood, the little shit.'

'Yeah, well, we all could probably guess that one. There must be more. Give.'

‘He said some very offensive stuff to Laura. Just when I thought we were getting somewhere toward at least friendship and kaboom, he blows it in five minutes.’

‘She shouldn’t judge you by your relatives.’

‘I dunno. I probably would too, if I were her. Caidyn has absolutely no morals, no guilt and no empathy. He’s bloody ignorant and arrogant and that is a shit combination. I don’t know if I like *me* when I realise he’s related.’

‘Cheer up. You can probably use your famous charm when you go to that art show with her. You’ll have her eating out of your hand in no time.’

‘Yeah, right.’

...

Laura skyped Stephanie for a debrief as soon as she got home. She was told, in no uncertain terms, that she was overreacting. Didn’t she remember the night of the storm when Ryan had told them about his cousin? Don’t we all have family we would rather not have? No, well, Laura didn’t have much of that at all. Well, Steph did; sometimes her brother annoyed the hell out of her. They discussed the upcoming exhibition which Laura *would* go to with Ryan and give a full report to Steph the next day. Laura started to tell Steph about Scott with Alycia, but Steph said that was second-hand information and she would find out for herself what was going on.

Chapter 44

The exhibition was in what Ryan referred to as a basement. It appeared smaller than it really was, due to all-black walls and ceiling. The floor area, however, was spacious, with a raised platform looking for all the world like an empty stage waiting for an actor or two to materialise. Ryan snaffled a couple of flutes of champagne from a passing waiter and handed one to Laura. They both stared and sipped: Laura stared at the people, Ryan at an enormous abstract in oils.

‘You’d need a bloody big house to hang this one.’

‘Yes.’ Laura could actually see the painting in her home so her tone was hesitant. Ryan picked up on it.

‘Don’t tell me your place in the country is big enough to accommodate this.’

‘It could actually, but I think Jim would kill me if I took it home.’

‘Who is Jim?’ Ryan felt a sudden flutter in his stomach.

‘The estate, er, farm manager. Huh, the old boy tries to manage me more than the farm.’

Old boy, good, thought Ryan, as his stomach relaxed.

‘Check out the people here, Ryan, it’s not your usual arty scruffy types.’ Laura was glad she had dressed up and Ryan had certainly made an effort. She wondered where he had found what looked like an old dinner suit, the sort men used to wear cummerbunds with. His open-necked purple shirt hung loose over the trousers. Laura had noticed the glances coming his way from quite a few women. Pity about the sockless sandals but maybe that was fashionable.

‘I like this one.’ Ryan led her over to a much smaller painting. ‘It looks a bit like postcards or photos intersecting, scenes with sides and edges missing.’

Laura tilted her head to one side.

‘Reminds me of the cubists. Let’s see what it’s called.’ She opened the slender catalogue she had collected at the entrance.

‘Shaped by Art, Hmm.’

‘Holy shit!’ Ryan had just seen the asking price. ‘Were you planning on buying anything tonight?’

‘Only if I see something I really, really want. Haven’t so far.’

Ryan suddenly felt it, the gap between their worlds. She could probably buy the entire exhibition without hurting her bank balance. Hell, she probably didn’t know exactly how much she was worth. He, on the other hand, knew that he had precisely a hundred and seventy-five dollars in his account and not much in the way of prospects

any time soon. He supposed she had investments, maybe a share portfolio or two, probably a financial advisor.

‘Do you understand the All Ordinaries, Laura?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Never mind. Look, here comes food.’ Ryan munched on a risotto ball. ‘Good tucker, pity they make them so small.’

Laura stopped with one half-way to her mouth. ‘Goodness, it’s my Uncle Hugh.’

Goodness, had she really said that? A tall man in a designer suit and shoes was approaching. His dark hair looked as if the grey had been artfully placed in exactly the right combination. Ryan reckoned the suit would be worth a year of his current salary.

‘Laura, my lovely niece.’ Hugh kissed her on both cheeks, and then looked pointedly at Ryan.

‘Oh Hugh, this is Ryan Bentley, Ryan this is Hugh Carmichael, my uncle.’

The two men shook hands. In Ryan’s opinion the man’s handshake was much firmer than it needed to be. God, he hated men who turned a handshake into a pissing competition.

Laura was dreading the subtle interrogation she was sure would ensue, but before more than a few words could be exchanged, Todd, Stephanie’s brother, had flown toward them and entreated her uncle to come and meet one of the artists. He threw up his hands.

‘All in the name of charity, I suppose. I look forward to speaking to you two later.’

Laura was confused; she wondered what Hugh was doing there, and Todd. She couldn’t recall him and Todd ever being introduced. Ryan’s mobile sprang into life with an early Stones signature tune. He checked the number on the screen.

‘Sorry, it’s Mum. I’d better take it.’

While Ryan stepped outside to talk, Laura watched Todd and a companion with Hugh. Obsequious was the word that sprang to mind – the chatter too strained, the laughter forced, while her uncle merely looked amused. Suddenly, Ryan was back at her side.

‘I’m really sorry, Laura, there’s big trouble at home and I need to be there.’

‘Trouble? Is your mother ill? Is there anything I can do?’

‘No, no, it’s not mum, well, she’s having kittens; the police are there. Scott’s not home and Dad’s not much help. I really have to go.’ A quick peck on the cheek and he was gone.

Laura tried unsuccessfully to disappear shortly after Ryan did. Hugh grabbed her by the arm halfway to the exit.

‘Hey, leaving without deigning to talk to your old uncle? Not very polite, Laura.’

‘Ah, I thought you were deep in negotiations with Todd. Is he acting as an agent? Did you buy anything?’

‘Yes, to both questions. Todd is helping out his artist friends. A very nice young man, Laura, and single, I believe. I bought the very large abstract over there, thought it would brighten up chambers somewhat. What do you think?’

‘I just hope the other partners like it, and that it matches the carpet of course.’

‘Cheeky! Where has that rather dishevelled young man gone?’

‘He’s not dishevelled, he’s quite with it and he has a... family emergency to take care of.’

‘Even so, he shouldn’t have just left you here.’

‘It’s OK Hugh, we came in my car.’

‘It still shows a distinct lack of courtesy; however, if he’s not *your* young man then it doesn’t matter. How about you and I go and get a coffee, it’s getting crowded in here.’

Laura tried desperately to think of an excuse, she knew she would get a grilling about Ryan and there was no way she was mentioning the word police in front of Hugh. She could, though, grill him about how he knew Todd.

Chapter 45

Scott was feeling the complete idiot. Alycia and the photographer were directing him in posing for the camera, but every move he made was wooden and he knew it. He hadn't felt this awkward since he was an adolescent. Alycia had suggested she massage his shoulders to make him relax, but he didn't want to plug into his brain wiring the words 'Alycia' and 'massage' together. The photographer, whose name was Rob, seemed like a nice enough guy but was obviously getting fed up. Scott thought longingly of outside, away from the harsh lights.

'Couldn't you just photograph me on a court?'

'Sorry, mate, the light is not good enough today. Scott, why don't you sit there as if you've just had a tough match, racquet by your side. Right! Rob started clicking shots but stopped after only a couple.

'Scott, your face looks like your dog just died, lighten up a bit, eh?'

'Er, not that much, less teeth.'

They gave up on that pose and tried every other possible permutation, faux serving, receiving stance, knees bent in anticipation, an overhead smash, all of which embarrassed Scott and frustrated Rob even further.

'I know,' Alicia started to scabble through her bag. 'Let's have a little spliff – that should loosen you up, Scott.'

'No! I'm paranoid enough already.'

'A drink then. Any whisky around here, Rob?'

'No, Alicia.' Scott held up a hand. 'Look, this isn't working and we all know it. I'm obviously not cut out for this and these shorts are making my bum itch. Sorry, but you'd better find someone else.'

'What about Ryan?'

'God, no. Ryan despises advertising. Dad says he's almost a communist.'

As Scott changed out of the tennis gear and put his things together, Alicia apologised to Rob. She was reflecting that these Bentley boys just didn't fit any moulds she had ever known.

Ryan walked into a scene of bedlam in his own home. Richard and Kit were yelling at each other and Scott, who had just arrived before him, was yelling at his mother to get out of the bath and tell them what was going on.

'Stop! All of you. Kit, you put the kettle on, Scott, leave Mum alone and let's all sit down and discuss whatever is going on like normal human beings. Dad, what were the police doing here?'

Richard ran his fingers through hair that was already standing on end. ‘They had an anonymous telephone call telling them there were stolen goods here and drugs – and there was!’

‘Where?’

‘Here, the police were here.’

‘No, Dad, where exactly in this house were these items?’

‘There was a watch, an expensive one, too, under a cushion on the sofa bed, and there was some white powder in a little bag in Kit’s room, and Kit says it’s not his but I’m sure he’s lying.’

‘I am not lying! Where on earth would I get the money to buy cocaine?’

‘How do you know what it was, if you didn’t buy it?’

‘Oh please, Dad, white powder? It’s got to be cocaine, everyone knows that.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t, you’re too young to know such things. And anyway how could it have got there if you didn’t put it there? Your room is such a mess no-one else goes in there.’

‘Settle down, Dad. I think I know how it all got here.’

‘Caidyn?’ Scott raised an eyebrow at Ryan.

‘I’d bet on it.’

Richard frowned at both sons. ‘But, but if it was his stuff then who made the call to the police?’

‘He did. He’s getting back at us because I threw him out, the little shithead. Anyway, what did the cops say, are they coming back?’

‘Yeah, they wanted to talk to you two. I said I’d get you to ring and make some arrangement. What are we going to do though, what can we tell them? They might take Kit to court.’

‘Scott and I will think of something. Dad, go to bed, it’s late. You too, Kit.’

Ryan and Scott sat at the kitchen table drinking tea and planning a strategy. At least they managed a few laughs before bed as Scott gave a demonstration of his failure as a model and told of Alicia’s attempts to make him relax.

Ryan lay in bed, tossing and turning as he reviewed his evening with Laura. He had totally enjoyed her company and she had looked gorgeous. Her opinion of him, though, had probably by now descended to new depths. He had left her there on her own, which was rude and was sure to have been noticed by the uncle. It was a pity he

and Scottie had no money; their prospects with women sure would look up if they didn't live in this crazy household.

...

Stephanie's two months in Canberra were nearly up. She was proud of how well she had coped on her own and it had been excellent to catch up with old friends. She was, however, desperately missing Scott and Laura. Funny, she had been worried about Laura coping without her, but her friend seemed to be gathering strength. It had taken all her strength not to laugh when Laura told her about her new resolutions, but it had led to a real date with Ryan so it must be working. She thought those two were meant to be together, if only Laura could get to appreciate his particular brand of humour and not be so judgemental about his family. He, on the other hand needed to get to know the real Laura, beyond the proud, haughty exterior. She mentally rubbed her hands as she thought of ways of throwing them together.

...

Laura was having trouble concentrating. Her uncle was talking about some new mining shares she should look into, but her brain was back with Ryan on their way to the gallery. He had declared the night officially a date and held her hand on the walk from the car park. He had stopped under a street light and turned one of her hands over and inspected it. He had called them strong, capable hands and if he was ever injured or needy he would like those hands to be helping him. Had he told her they were beautiful she would have laughed in his face. As it was she didn't say a thing but felt strangely comforted, as if she had come home from a long journey.

'Laura, are you listening at all? You're in love, aren't you?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I was merely daydreaming.'

'Who is this Ryan you were with? How long have you known him?'

'He lives across the road, so I've known him as long as we've been in Kew – about eight months, I guess.'

'What does he do?'

'He goes to the football a lot.'

'Laura! Don't be facetious.'

'He works with ex-offenders.'

'A social worker? Surely not a soft-hearted tree hugger.'

'No, he's hardly that.'

'What about his family. What do his parents do?'

‘His father is an electrician and his mother...I think she’s studying.’

‘A weird combination. Doesn’t sound as if he’s much of a catch. You need to be careful, Laura.’

‘What? You think he’s after my money?’

‘It’s not beyond the realms of possibility, is it?’

Laura started laughing. Her uncle was hurt.

‘Sorry Hugh, I’m not laughing at you.’

Laura couldn’t possibly explain. After all, the snippets she knew about him didn’t add up to much. It was feelings rather than knowledge and even she wasn’t sure about the basis of those feelings – they were new and a little frightening. She changed the subject.

‘How did you find out about the exhibition, Hugh? I didn’t realise you knew Todd.’

‘Ah, Todd, yes, he’s the consummate networker. I received an invitation and a phone call from a colleague who had Todd design an excellent, really high-tech presentation for him. Apparently Todd organised this whole show. That’s probably why you got an invitation. I think he may be a little keen on you, Laura. Actually he asked me if I thought you would go out with him.’

‘How dare he!’

‘Oh don’t be so indignant, I would have done the same thing in his situation. You don’t find him attractive?’

‘Not in the least. I think he’s a slime ball.’

‘Such a horrid expression, Laura. I think you might be associating with people who are unsavoury.’

Laura stood up and took her car keys from her pocket.

‘Hugh, I am over twenty-one and I will *associate* with whomever I like. Goodnight.’

‘Laura, Laura! Come back. I didn’t mean...’

Laura strode out of the café without looking back. Damn the interfering fool. She thought she just might add some new ‘horrid expressions’ to her repertoire for when she saw him next. A little chat with Kit Bentley would do nicely.

Chapter 46

Laura was at her mailbox the next morning, nonchalantly flicking through the local paper and trying not to look across the road. She jumped, as Abigail suddenly was in her face.

‘Sorry Laura, didn’t mean to scare you. How are you? How’s Steph?’

‘I’m fine. Steph’s still in Canberra, not for much longer I hope.’

‘Come on up, Lance has the kettle on.’

Laura’s immediate reaction was to make an excuse as she usually did, but then she remembered her plans for the new her and followed Abigail up the stairs next door.

Lance gave her a quick hug and showed her their new espresso machine. A delicious aroma filled the kitchen; it was homemade biscuits, little Italian crescents which he sprinkled with icing sugar.

‘Guess what? We saw a police car outside the Bentleys last night. Do you know what that was about?’

‘No, it’s really none of my business, Lance.’

‘Of course it’s not, that’s the beauty of gossip; it doesn’t have to be anything to do with you. That’s what makes it intriguing and so much fun.’

‘Fun?’

‘Yes, inventing scenarios and of course, usually being way off the mark. I opt for the kid having done something stupid, shoplifting maybe. Abs?’

‘You’re a drama queen, Lance; it was probably something really mundane like an unpaid parking fine. I don’t think I’ve ever had the police come to my door.’

Suddenly Laura was lurched back into that dark time of police and journalists and rapid searches of the sky and land that resulted in nothing. She felt something on her arm and jumped.

‘What’s wrong, Laura, you literally looked like you saw a ghost.’

Laura heard a familiar car horn, leapt out of her chair, ran furiously down the stairs and flew into a huge hug with Stephanie.

‘Steady, Patch.’ Stephanie laughed out loud. ‘Careful, girl you’ll break my ribs. God, it’s good to be home.’

Lance and Abigail urged Steph to come up for coffee but she pleaded tiredness from the long road trip. Laura was very, very glad.

...

Kit set off for school in a snit. Life was so unfair. His family might laugh at Caidyn and call him dumb but to Kit he had got something right. He had got money for nothing and drugs! He wished he could have at least tried the cocaine; it was what all the movie and rock stars were in to. And Caidyn had paid Ryan back for tossing him out. How would his smart-arse brother get out of a little chat with the cops? Maybe, just maybe Caidyn was a bit like Robin Hood, stealing from the rich. He knew Kew people had shirt loads of money; you only had to see the houses and cars. You didn't need to look inside the houses to know there would be excellent sound systems and humongous TV screens. Surely they wouldn't miss a watch or two or some spare cash lying around. Maybe Caidyn was the smart one and his own family were the losers.

Kit heard running footsteps behind him. It was Patrick, racing for his tram to school. Kit grabbed him by the arm and swung him around.

'Where's the fire, man?'

'I'm late again and Laura wouldn't write me a note.'

'The bitch! Stuff all our relatives, I'm over them. Let's wag.'

'No, I'll only get in trouble, again.'

'Oh, stop being a wimp; worry about all that crap later. Let's have some fun.'

'Doing what'

'Hanging out in Brunswick Street.'

'Duh! We're in school uniforms, and even if yours won't be recognised, mine sure will be.'

'I have a plan. Follow me.'

Kit led them to a secluded spot in the park and there they waited until Kit knew his father and brothers would be gone. If they were very quiet getting in and out of the house his mother would never notice.

Patrick walked doubled over on the inside beside Kit, who kept a lookout in case Laura happened to glance out of the window. Patrick had never been inside the house Laura called 'the monstrosity' before, so he was equal parts curious and scared shitless they'd be caught. Kit left Patrick downstairs near the back door so he could escape if necessary, while he crept up the stairs to his room to get them some clothes. They changed in the laundry and Kit hid their school clothes in the clothes dryer. He knew they wouldn't be found, as no-one ever used the machine.

...

‘Gino’s wedding has been bumped forward.’ Scott pulled off his work boots and opened the fridge. ‘We got beer?’

‘Yeah, in the back. Dad got it cheap at Aldi.’

‘Geez, he loves that place. Probably tastes like cat’s piss.’ Scott flipped the cap off and took a swallow. ‘I take it back, not bad at all. You want one?’

‘I’ll get it. Did Gino call you?’

‘No, he dropped in at the garage.’

‘Something wrong with his car?’

‘Nope.’

‘She’s preggers, right?’

‘Yep.’

‘How was he?’

‘OK. Pretty chuffed that his sperm worked, I think. The wedding is next month.’

‘The full catastrophe still?’

‘Oh yeah, the Italian connections are in full swing, receptions booked due to Uncle Nino being on the committee of some club. He wants you to go with him on Saturday to see about hiring suits.’

‘Pretty strange he didn’t talk to me first – I am the best man.’

‘He loves you bro, but sometimes you scare him. He said he didn’t want you to do his head in with all your questions.’

‘He needn’t worry. I’ve decided that it’s his life, and if he’s getting married to please people other than himself, then fine. I think Gino needs someone to make decisions for him so he doesn’t have to rely on his own judgement. But I guarantee you, sex will stop pretty early on.’

‘Oh, come on, Ryan. What’s that prediction based on?’

‘I have watched, listened and learned. There are very few marriages that go the distance and it’s not surprising. I don’t think living in pairs is entirely natural.’

Scott shook his head and drank his beer. No wonder Gino was wary of Ryan. Sometimes he made a simple life too complex.

...

The boys high-fived each other. After some lightweight shoplifting, Cherry Ripes and a hair comb, Kit had talked an old codger into buying them some cans of beer. They had sat and watched Brunswick Street do its trade, spotted a few drug deals going down and then tram hopped their way through the city, stopping off to admire graffiti in the laneways and jeer at an occasional busker. While Patrick waited at the tennis club, Kit sneaked back into his house and collected their school clothes. Thus, they were to be seen strolling innocently home at the usual time.

Chapter 47

Stephanie and Scott were going for a coffee in the High Street. They walked side by side but there was a distance between them that hadn't been there before.

'I missed you, Scott.'

'Uh huh.'

'I'm sorry we didn't manage to connect, you should have told me you were flying up and I would have organised to be there.'

'Yep, in retrospect it's easy to see that. I thought I'd surprise you.'

'You would have done that.'

Scott felt edgy; he could still picture that guy with his arm around her.

'So where were you, you didn't say over the phone.'

'Didn't I? Oh, just out with an old friend, someone I used to work with.'

'Someone close?'

'Not particularly, just a friend.'

'Do all your male friends put their arms around you?' Scott wasn't looking at her.
'Sorry, forget I said that, it's really none of my business.'

'Wait a minute! How did you know all that?' Stephanie stopped walking and faced him. 'You were there, weren't you?' Stephanie stopped walking and turned to face him.

'Yeah, I arrived just as you were locking up the shop and leaving.'

'Then why didn't you call out?'

'You were hugging a bloke and then you walked off arm in arm. What would you have thought?'

'I would have marched right up and asked you what you were doing?'

'Would you?'

'Yes, I would, Scott. I like to know where I stand, even if it means making a dill of myself, which I have done on more than one occasion. Don't you trust me, Scott?'

'We haven't known each other all that long, Steph.'

‘No we haven’t but I trust you, or I did. I wouldn’t have slept with you otherwise. I have, and will continue to have, male friends and I hug everyone, you know that. I somehow don’t feel like coffee any more.’

Stephanie turned around and started walking back home. Scott stared after her in amazement. He guessed he’d have a coffee by himself. She was so tiny and yet such a strong woman. He was embarrassed by his infantile behaviour but still felt put out and wasn’t sure if he should apologise or not.

...

After much trial and error, Patrick had a reasonable facsimile of Laura’s signature, for the note to his home room teacher explaining his absence. He was feeling guilty, but as Kit had pointed out they weren’t doing anybody any harm. He thought Laura would understand – did understand to a degree – just how much he hated school. He hadn’t said anything about the bullying because there was a whole heap of macho bullshit that he didn’t think anyone understood, but he got the feeling that things would only get worse if he dobbed on anyone. The school had a no-bullying policy but the teachers couldn’t be everywhere all the time. Besides, some of it was so subtle it could never be proven and he’d only end up looking like some stupid nerd with no guts. He reckoned Laura would understand that kind of stuff but she wasn’t his mother and his all-powerful father was like a horse in blinkers.

...

‘Hey Gran, how are you?’ Ryan gave Gwen a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Harvey was so excited he ran around in circles on the kitchen floor, his toenails clicking on the linoleum. Ryan patted his head.

‘Hey boy, you look good. Ah, I’ve just had a great idea. Will you let Harvey come on a picnic with Laura and me?’

‘Don’t see why not, but first I’ve got a surprise for you. Come with me.’

Gwen took him by the arm and led him out through the kitchen, out the back door and around the side, into the garage. She carefully unlocked the side door and beckoned him in. In the garage was a EH Holden station wagon. It was immaculate. Gwen handed Ryan the keys and told him to look it over. Ryan was royally impressed. The interior of the car was as spotless and original as the exterior.

‘Well, what do you think? Pretty nice, isn’t it?’

‘It’s incredibly fantastic, Gran, but I didn’t know you had a driver’s licence – and is your hip well enough for you to drive?’

‘No, I’m not going to drive it. It’s for you. I know your birthday isn’t for a few weeks yet but I couldn’t wait for you to see it.’

‘For me? Oh, Gran, you can’t give me this, it must be worth a packet. Where on earth did you get it?’

‘You remember my old friend Beth? Well, it belonged to her husband Alec. He died two years ago and she finally decided it was criminal to have it just sitting there. None of her children wanted it; they all have those four-wheel drive things. I told her she should sell it but we both thought that sounded too hard. How would we know what its worth? Anyway, I told her I had a grandson who needed a car and so she wanted to give it to me. But I said, no that wouldn’t be fair, so I did my own research. I saw a car that looked much like this one in a car yard down the road and it was selling for a thousand dollars. In the end she accepted nine hundred dollars if I gave her something of mine she had always loved.’

‘What was that, Gran?’

‘That old sewing box that was my mother’s. It’s probably an antique by now so I figured she did alright. I did pay for the transfer of ownership to you so you can repay that. Beth had her son drive it around here and he was furious about our transaction, seemed to think it was worth a lot more, but bad luck to him, he shouldn’t have been so dismissive when it was offered to him. Open the doors, Ryan and take your grandmother for a drive.’

The engine turned over at the first try. It took a little while for Ryan to get the hang of the wheel-based gear shift but they finally drove smoothly down the driveway and out into the street. Ryan drove around the neighbourhood. Gwen had her window down and a big smile on her face. She waved regally at several of her neighbours out in their front yards or walking to the shops. Ryan decided he’d have to do this more often, his grandmother was really enjoying herself. When they got back to the house Ryan examined the tyres, which were good for a lot more ks and the registration, which didn’t run out for six months. He would need to save for that.

They sat down for a cup of tea and neither Ryan nor his Gran could take the grins off their faces. Apart from a coat of paint, Ryan didn’t think the kitchen had changed since his childhood. The fridge was huge and hummed loudly, the sink taps were old but gleaming and the lino on the floor was thin and cracked in places. The table he sat at was still the chrome legged one he had sat at with his coloured pencils and paper.

‘How can I ever repay you, Gran?’

‘You have done, many times already, especially by looking after my Harvey.’ The canine in question looked up at the mention of his name. Ryan swore dogs could smile. ‘Oh, and tell Scott and Kit that they’ll get either something of equivalent value or the money for their birthdays. Now, what’s this about a picnic and why did you want to take Harvey?’

‘I’m not sure if Laura really likes me but I know she loves your dog so I thought that could work.’

‘Have you been out with her before? Isn’t she the one across the road?’

‘Yes to both questions, but embarrassingly enough I had to leave her and go home early, due to a little family matter; no doubt Dad’s told you?’

‘About that stupid, stupid boy, yes he told me. I hope you apologised to this Laura.’

‘Yes, I did, and the picnic is a way of apologising as well. Thought I’d supply everything and make it really nice. I’ll just have to hope for good weather.’

‘You’re keen on her, aren’t you? What is it you like about her?’

‘She’s a bit of a mystery, haughty at times but very kind at others. She’s bluntly honest but easily embarrassed. I think she’s beautiful but she sure doesn’t. She seems sort of out of place in Kew. Apparently she is very rich, has a huge property somewhere in the Western District.’

‘Oh, then she’s from a different world.’

‘No, I do believe she’s an earthling, Gran.’

‘Nobody likes a smart-arse, Ryan; you know exactly what I mean. People are brought up differently, have different values and ideals when they come from the landed gentry.’

‘I’m not so sure hers are that different but it’s worth my time to find out. I wonder if she’ll like the car.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Not at all. Now, Gran, do you have a picnic basket and what exactly should I put in it?’

Chapter 48

Scott was attempting to build some bridges. Over the phone he pleaded a need to see the ocean. Stephanie had agreed to a walk along St Kilda beach, which he considered hopeful. Scott stooped down, grabbed a pebble and skimmed it across the water.

‘Looks like we’re going ahead with the exhibition of Mary’s drawings. Ryan’s getting people to supply food; any ideas?’

‘Laura can make gourmet sausage rolls.’

‘She can?’

‘Yeah. She used to help when they had the fly-ins.’

‘The what?’

‘Fly-ins. People who own small aircraft converged at the homestead for the weekend.’

‘To do what?’

‘Talk about planes, I guess.’

‘Homestead, planes, flying in? Just how rich is Laura, Steph?’

‘Not sure. She’d have to be worth a couple of mill at least, without the house. Both her parents came from old landed families.’

‘If they were so rich why didn’t they have more children?’

‘I don’t know, but they could have decided that one would take away enough of their time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When we were at primary school her grandparents lived with them and they, not her parents, were all she ever talked about. I think her parents were away a lot. Anyway, when primary school finished her parents and grandparents had a big falling out. I don’t know what over but the next thing, Laura is sent off to boarding school. She only came home in the big holidays. That’s when we got back together and it took me a couple of days, sometimes a week, to get a smile, let alone a laugh, out of her.’

‘Don’t you think her parents loved her enough?’

‘They did, very much, in their own way but when I saw them they were always more concerned about one another than her. I think they loved each other too much for anyone else to get a real look in.’

‘Sounds sad.’

‘It was, but hey, she’s a grown up now and they’re gone. I’ve probably said too much. Is this what they call pillow talk?’

Scott laughed. ‘Maybe if we were in bed, which would be good. But then I’m hardly a spy, Steph.’

‘Yeah, well, just so you keep it to yourself. Please don’t say anything to Ryan.’

‘Why not? He really cares for her.’

‘Maybe, but she sure as hell doesn’t want sympathy. He needs to care for who she is now.’

‘Yeah, but it does explain a lot.’

When they got back inside the car, Scott put his arm around her shoulders.

‘I’m sorry about my reaction in Canberra, Steph. I guess I was jealous.’

‘Nothing to be jealous of, Scott; my friend is gay.’ At the small smile on Scott’s face she pointed a finger at him. ‘But it doesn’t matter about his, or anyone else’s sexuality. People get hugs from me because I like them. And jealousy is a wasted emotion; I learnt that a long time ago. You should think about it.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

...

Ryan had called a family conference and had even managed to drag his mother away from her study.

‘The thing is,’ he stated earnestly ‘Scott reckons the car is worth way, way more than Gran thinks, right Scott?’

‘Yeah, I’ve checked it over and it’s absolutely sound mechanically and in mint condition. Beth’s husband must have loved that car and didn’t drive it much either.’

Richard scratched his chin. ‘But if your Gran is happy and Beth is happy then I don’t see a problem here.’

‘I think Ryan is talking about the moral issues here, Richard.’

‘Exactly, Mum. I feel like I’m dudding Gran and her friend. I have to tell them the real value. And, it means that Scott and Kit are missing out by not getting something of the same value as me.’

‘I’m not that bothered, Ryan,’ Scott interjected, ‘it’s just your good luck; things in life aren’t always equal.’

‘Luck! It’s bloody unfair, that’s what it is.’ Kit banged the table. ‘We should all be treated the same.’

‘Maybe your mother could adjust her will, Richard. I’m pretty sure she intends leaving everything to the boys.’

‘But Scott and I might have to wait years for that to happen.’

‘I sincerely hope you do! You’re only sixteen, Kit; you don’t need anything right now. I brought you all up to not compete with one another, you know that.’

‘You haven’t exactly done much bringing up, as you call it, lately Mum.’

‘Don’t go there, Kit.’ Ryan covered his mother’s hand with his, seeing the hurt expression on her face. ‘Mum deserves to have some life of her own. You know we all agreed to help make that happen.’

As his father and younger brother started talking at once, Scott held up a hand and spoke loudly over them. ‘Here’s what we do. First Ryan and I go to see Gran and lay it all out and see what she wants to do.’

‘I should be there too!’

‘OK, Kit, you too. Do you want to come, Dad?’

‘Nup, nothing to do with me.’

Chapter 49

‘Yum. Egg sandwiches on soft, crusty white bread, and is that real butter on them?’

‘Yeah. Old-fashioned, eh?’

‘Retro. If we can buy sixties lamps and shoes I don’t see why we can’t enjoy the food too. Anyway, I’m over sushi.’

It had been mutually agreed to eat their picnic in a small park and go to the beach later. Sand and food just didn’t mix. A pale sun warmed them as they sat on a blanket on the grass. Rain had been predicted but so far they had been lucky. Harvey sat happily at Laura’s feet, where he received regular treats from a little bag she had brought.

Ryan produced a thermos flask and poured drinks. They clicked glasses, Laura absently, as she shoed aside a fly.

‘No, no, Laura, you have to look at me when we toast, otherwise you know what happens don’t you?’

‘What?’

Ryan leaned in closer. ‘You never, ever, have sex again.’

Laura laughed.

‘I’m serious.’

‘You made that up.’

‘Don’t tell me you haven’t had that said to you before?’

‘Never ever. Cross my heart and hope to die.’

‘You’ve led a very sheltered life, Laura Patchett.’

‘Believe me, I know.’ At the wistful look on her face Ryan decided to change the subject.

‘So, are you missing country life, all that fresh air?’

‘Some, mainly my horses.’

‘I’ve heard about the famous Wally, didn’t realise you had any more.’

‘Only one, a recent acquisition. She’s a beautiful little foal. She’s good company for Wally.’

Ryan could very easily picture her beside the big old horse and the little one.

‘Name?’

‘Pardon me?’

‘The foal, what’s her name?’

‘Promise you won’t laugh. Her name is...um, Fairy Bred.’

Ryan spluttered behind his hand, but made a rapid recovery at the frown she gave him.

‘Well, that’s different.’

‘What? No caustic comment?’

Ryan stood up and took her hand and pulled her to her feet. Harvey ran excitedly around the two of them, until Laura put his lead on.

‘No, it’s too nice a day, and the company is too good, for any smart-arse comments from me.’ He gave her a quick peck on the lips before bending down to gather up their picnic things. Laura’s hand went automatically to her lips, she touched them gently.

Chapter 50

‘Did you get your fancy suit?’

‘Nup.’

Scott had booked a court. They were lucky to get one on a bright Saturday afternoon but the pennant teams all had away matches.

‘I am no longer the best man.’

‘What? Why?’

Ryan shrugged. ‘Family pressure brought to bear in the form of Angela’s brother. Apparently dear little Angie turned on the water works and Gino couldn’t say no because of her ‘condition’.’

‘That sucks, it’s so rude. Did you have a go at him? Aren’t you angry?’

‘I was more dumbstruck than angry at first, then I got angry, but then I thought about it and it’s not him I’m angry with so what would be the point? He’s not doing it to deliberately hurt me and I think he feels bad enough already. I did, however, refuse to be a groomsman instead and not entirely out of pique. I pointed out that he has plenty of groomsmen already and I’d like to be a normal guest; no pressure that way and I get to take someone rather than be stuck with one of Angela’s sisters all night.’

‘By someone I take it you mean the lovely Laura?’

‘Yeah, if she’ll go. Have you asked Steph?’

‘No, I’ve been slowly making my way back into her good books. You know, bro, I think you’re a little too forgiving, you must have been cut.’

Ryan had felt extremely hurt and betrayed, but Gino had been put between a rock and a hard place and their friendship was too important not to put up with a little hurdle or two.

‘Why don’t we ask the girls to come and play doubles?’

‘Good idea. I’ll phone Steph.’

The girls were having manicures and pedicures, so pulling on a pair of tennis shoes was not an option, but they did agree to meet up later at the club for a drink.

...

‘I think they planned that, manipulative buggers.’ Steph and Laura were both brushing their teeth in front of the bathroom mirror.

‘You mean asking both of us together?’

‘Yes, hard for one to say no.’

‘You didn’t seem too keen; I thought you really liked Ryan.’

‘Oh I do, it’s just that I hate weddings, especially the formal, sit-down things with all those stupid speeches. I get all twitchy.’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean, but a double date will be fun, and we will be with the two most handsome men in the room.’

‘So, you and Scott are OK again?’

‘Yep, he’s served his time in the dog house.’

‘Steph, that sounds like a married woman talking. Do you plan on trying to catch the wedding bouquet?’

‘I might. How about you?’

‘Never in a million years.’

...

The church was packed, so the foursome slipped in down the back. Laura was shocked to see that both Ryan and Scott bent down on one knee before entering the pew. They must be Catholics. Just as well her parents weren’t alive to see her go out with one of those. Laura had never been in a Catholic church before, so she stared around at the various statues with their stoic expressions and unseeing eyes. The leadlight windows were beautiful and cast angles of light and colour through the sun’s rays. There was something majestic about churches, with their high-vaulted ceilings and polished wood. Laura was struck by the solemnity of it all for something as light as a wedding – it would be better served for funerals. She gave a shudder and dismissed the thought to concentrate on the people. Gino was up the front, constantly twitching at his collar and pulling at his cuffs. The best man kept peeking looks down the aisle, looking anxious.

‘I think it’s just plain stupid for brides to be late.’ Laura whispered to Steph. A woman in front turned around and gave her a look.

‘It’s a tradition, Laura.’

‘Still doesn’t mean it makes any sense. It’s too hard on the groom. Poor boy looks like he wants to vomit.’

‘Ssh.’

Suddenly the organ started playing and all eyes turned to the back of the church.

‘It’s almost the full meringue.’

Stephanie tried not to giggle at the plethora of white lace, tulle and net that surrounded the bride. Two bridesmaids, resplendent in maroon silk, did battle with an incredibly long train. Behind them came flower girls and a page boy. They all did the stately march up the aisle, the veil modestly covering the bride's face. Laura glanced at the bride's father holding her arm. She felt an unexpected pang. He looked so proud of his daughter. She supposed her uncle could give her away if she ever got married but then decided that the term 'give away' was ridiculous.

'It's not going to be a nuptial mass is it, Ryan?' The thought horrified Scott.

'Nah, it's OK. It'll be a regular service.'

The ceremony went smoothly, although Angela's voice was a lot clearer than Gino's when they took their vows. The wait while they signed the register seemed interminable but finally husband and wife walked back down the aisle together. The congregation all stood and Ryan stepped out and hugged Gino when they passed. Scott shook Gino's hand and they both kissed the bride. Laura and Stephanie merely smiled their brightest.

At the reception they were handed drinks in the foyer and various relatives and friends of the groom greeted Ryan and Scott and asked after their family. Finally they were ushered into the diningroom and found their names on place cards.

'Oh, wow, they've got *bonbonniere*.'

'Steph, it *is* an Italian wedding.'

'I know, it's just that I've only ever seen these things in shops in Sydney Road – I've never actually been given one. Look Laura, it's a little glass basket with sugared almonds.'

'Tacky, but I like the notion of gifts for the guests, I *really* like that. I wonder if any other cultures do that. I wonder what the food will be.'

'Whatever it is, there'll be heaps of it, I guarantee.' Scott filled their glasses from bottles of white and red wine that were on their table and lifted his glass. 'Here's to us and a really good night out.' They all clinked glasses and Laura deliberately stared Ryan straight in the eye. He laughed. Stephanie knew the story about Ryan not being the best man and thought it sweet of Scott to make such a gesture.

Another two couples sat at their table, both of them lively and funny. Laura, still conscious that her social skills needed development, was happy to sit back with Ryan's arm around her, laughing at the jokes and eating the excellent food. When it came time for the speeches they all rolled their eyes but luckily everyone was fairly brief. The best man didn't seem to know a lot about Gino, other than that he was marrying his sister. At the end of his speech he had the good grace to ask if any of Gino's friends wanted to say anything. Scott nudged Ryan who shrugged but got to his feet, raised his glass and wished Gino and Angela a full and wonderful life together.

‘The bridal waltz. Did you know that some people have lessons for months so they can do that properly?’ Stephanie was intrigued.

‘Be good if they did the tango instead, I find the waltz a bit passé.’ Ryan waved his arm airily.

‘You twat. Come on Steph, we can all join in now.’

At the end of the evening they all stood in the traditional circle while the bride and groom said their farewells. Gino finally looked relaxed.

‘What do we say, Steph?’ Laura whispered. ‘We don’t even know them. This is *so* embarrassing.’

‘It’ll be alright, Patch, just shake their hands and say congratulations.’

Right at the end the bride prepared to throw her bouquet. Ryan nudged Laura.

‘Bet you you can’t do a specce and mark the bouquet.’

‘You’re on!’

Ryan and Scott looked on in amazement as the bouquet was thrown high in the air. Stephanie stuck out her hands but Laura took a flying leap over her and caught it. Ryan put two fingers in his mouth and made a piercing whistle and Scott called out, ‘Hands in the back.’ Ryan held one arm aloft in umpire mode and pointed a finger at Laura. ‘It belongs to Steph, hand it over Laura.’

Chapter 51

He hadn't seen it coming. It was their third 'official' date. They had been to see a movie and when they were walking home it bucketed down with rain. They both got drenched and raced, dripping, up the stairs in her place. She showered in her en-suite and showed him to the other shower, then lent him some old track-suit pants and a windcheater. No-one else was at home. They opened a bottle of red wine and turned on the heater. They flicked through Steph's DVD collection and agreed upon *Ghost* with Patrick Swayze. When the Righteous Brothers song came on Ryan pulled Laura up from the couch and then they were moving slowly, arms wrapped around one another and bodies close, so close he could smell the barest whiff of perfume and beneath it, lemon-scented soap. Her hair had the same lemony smell, clean and soft against his face. Their bodies fitted, hips against hips. Her head rested on his shoulder, her breath warm on his neck. One of her arms went around his neck and she started stroking his neck just where the hairline ended. He kissed her, tentatively, until he felt her respond, then both were furiously moving against each other, kissing lips, hair, chins, and necks. Suddenly she pulled away from him, only to grab both his hands in hers, look him straight in the eye and with a small smile, and gently raise her eyebrows. He gave a little nod and grinned.

Later, they both lay across the bed, legs intertwined.

'I didn't think it was meant to be that good, the first time with anyone.' Laura felt like she could levitate, her body felt so light.

'No, but of course, I'm not just anyone.' Ryan put the back of his hand to his forehead, in his best forties movie-star gesture.

'Oh, so humble too, Mr Super Stud.'

Ryan laughed so hard he nearly choked. Laura handed him a glass of water from the bedside table. 'What's so funny? Don't all you guys think of yourselves that way?'

Ryan checked her face and, yes, she was kidding.

'Are you hungry?'

'I'm a bloke, of course I'm hungry. Want me to fix us an omelette?'

'Can you fix the washing machine while you're at it?'

'Nup. Don't fix things, I'm not *that* blokey.'

They sat at the kitchen table, opposite one another, in silence, watching dusk close down another day.

'This feels good.'

'Totally.'

‘Would it make you vomit?’ Ryan stroked her cheek. ‘If I said it feels like this was meant to happen?’

Laura considered the question. ‘No, but I don’t believe in happily ever after, Ryan.’

‘Fair enough. How about a week then?’

‘A week?’

‘Yeah, see if this state can last a week without one of us giving the other the shits, like we usually do.’

‘A week it is.’

...

Laura couldn’t fall asleep, even after what was decidedly good sex. Ryan was rhythmically breathing the sleep of dreams next to her. She propped herself up on one elbow and stared at him. He was pretty special, she thought. He was kind, considerate, funny and he made a damn fine omelette. She should be feeling happy, but life wasn’t that simple, or was it?

...

In Victoria’s Western District, storms can be particularly fierce and sudden and with isolated properties the wind has little to impede its process of destruction. Jim had set out across the paddock to put the horses in the barn but his progress was slow as the wind nearly took his feet from under him. He watched as Wally ran over to where Fairy Bred was, beneath an old oak tree. He heard a loud crack and suddenly the tree had fallen directly on Wally, poleaxing him to the ground. As he fell, his momentum pushed Fairy Bred aside and she appeared unhurt. When Jim finally reached the old horse his breathing was laboured and he was in obvious pain. Jim frantically pulled out his mobile.

Jim shook the vet’s hand and waved him off the property. Shit! Wally was dead and all from a stupid old tree collapsing on him. Fairy Bred had been saved due to Wally taking the full brunt of the heavy old wood. How the hell was he going to tell Laura? He should have noticed that the tree was dying, it had cleaved straight down the middle, for Christ’s sake. What were the odds of Wally choosing that particular moment to go to the foal? But of course they had been largely inseparable since the foal came home. Still, he had often wondered if animals had a sixth sense and Wally had never been one to do the normal horse things. There were two things he didn’t want to think about – how would the foal survive without a companion, but more importantly, how would Laura survive without Wally.

...

Laura’s mobile woke her at 5 am. It was Jim. It was bad, very bad news. Her beautiful horse gone, just like that. She had to go home to farewell and bury him. Jim had

sounded too distraught to be there alone. She quietly gathered her things and blew an air kiss at the still-sleeping Ryan.

...

Ryan woke at seven o'clock to find the space beside him empty. There was no sign of Laura and her mobile and keys were gone. Maybe she'd gone out to buy him breakfast. He texted her: where r u?

...

Laura's phone beeped as she raced down the Western Highway, hoping to avoid any police cars as she was going twenty k's over the speed limit. She ignored the phone; pictures of Wally in pain pierced her brain. No, Jim wouldn't have let that happen. No-one, except maybe Jim, could possibly understand her connection to that horse. She *knew* he could read her moods, standing silently when she was sad, gently nudging her with his nose. His thick coat had absorbed many of her tears. When she had passed all her exams in Year 12 and her parents weren't there, Wally had seen her running joyfully up to the paddock and had given a little dance of his own before she jumped on and they sped off. She didn't think she could take another loss.

...

It wasn't fair, no matter what they said. Kit's anger burnt bright and deep. His Gran had said she didn't care what the car was worth and neither did her friend. He was going to get nine hundred bucks but it should have been more. Ryan had always been the favourite and he was sure his life had been an accident; they probably hadn't wanted him at all. He had a father and two brothers with cars and none of them could be bothered to give him driving lessons. Well, they had given him a couple but he didn't want to wait to be able to drive now. What they didn't know was that Caidyn had shown him how to hot wire an old car. He reckoned he might as well create his own driving lessons.

...

Stephanie emerged from her bedroom to find Ryan sitting at the kitchen table.

'Oh, Ryan, it's you.' She grinned at him. 'Been here long? Where's Laura?'

Ryan decided to ignore the first question, as her look said it was rhetorical. 'Don't know. Her keys and mobile are gone. I think I heard her mobile ringing in the early hours. You'd think she could have left a note, and I've tried texting and ringing her but got no reply.'

'She won't answer if she's driving, she's careful like that. Something must have happened. I'll ring Jim if we don't hear soon. Want some brekky?'

'No thanks, Steph. I've got to get to work soon. Can you let me know when you hear anything? Here's my mobile number.'

‘Will do. At least tell me if you two had a good night.’

‘An excellent night, Steph, awesome in fact.’

‘Yes!’ Stephanie punched the air as she heard the door close downstairs.

Chapter 52

‘It’s against the law, Laura.’

Wally was on the ground in front of them, his body covered with old blankets. Laura was crouched beside the horse slowly stroking his head. Jim had been attempting to get her inside for the last hour.

‘I don’t care, Jim, he’s not going to a knackery, I’m going to bury him here where he belongs. Over by the creek, I think, he liked that spot.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of a knackery, Laura. Vets nowadays cremate dogs and give you the ashes. I could ask her to do that for Wally.’

‘The vet’s a her?’

‘Yes, Dan retired. Her name’s Kate and she’s a good person. Look at the size of him, how could we dig a hole big enough?’

‘I mistrust ashes. There is no way of telling who they belong to. I’ve heard all sort of horrible stories.’

Jim gave in, took his mobile from his pocket and rang a number.

‘Brad, that you? Yeah. Listen mate I need a favour, can you bring your backhoe over here.’ Jim rolled his eyes at Laura. ‘Yes, Brad, cash. Yes, now. Thanks.’

Jim leant down and patted Wally’s head. ‘Farewell, old friend. Laura, come on it’s time to let go. Wally did not suffer, Kate said he died instantly. Fairy Bred needs feeding, she’s in the barn.’

‘You go feed her, and we need to change her name.’

‘Why?’

Laura’s eyes were vacant and she spoke slowly. ‘Because it’s too soft, too... ephemeral for a horse.’

...

Carolyn stood in the doorway tugging down on the sleeves of her sweatshirt.

‘Do we have any whisky?’

She started opening and closing cupboards while Scott flicked the remote through early evening news shows.

‘I didn’t think you liked spirits, Mum.’

‘I don’t.’

She flopped down on the couch beside him, placed her head in her hands and groaned.

‘It’s a mess, Scott. I feel like I’m walking through mud with this bloody thesis, it just doesn’t want to be written. I feel like... I’m trying to do a jigsaw but the edge bits are missing and I’ve lost the lid with the picture on it.’

‘Travelling blind then. Sounds painful.’

‘What sounds painful?’ Richard hauled in his work bag with assorted cables trailing across the floor. ‘You OK, love?’

‘Mum’s stuck, the thesis won’t move.’

‘Oh. Wish I could help, love.’

Richard bent down and kissed the top of his wife’s head. She smiled bleakly at him.

‘Pity all of us know bugger all about early American literature. What’s for tea?’

‘It’s non-pay week, Dad, so Ryan’s doing the ‘empty the fridge’ soup. Mum, it sounds like it’s a problem of structure, don’t you have a plan, some sort of, I dunno, a template maybe?’

‘ I thought I did, but it’s unravelling like wool from an old jumper.’

Ryan stuck his head through from the kitchen. ‘You are stressed, Mum, you’re mixing your metaphors wildly. Take Mum for a walk, Scott, while I get tea going.’

‘Good idea, put on a jacket, Mum; let’s go walking. It’ll clear your head.’

‘No, there’s no time. I’ve got a meeting with my supervisor tomorrow.’

Scott snapped off the television and hauled his mother to her feet.

‘Come on, old girl, fifteen minutes around the block can’t hurt.’

Oh, OK, I’ll get my runners, but less of the old girl, thank you.’

Mother and son set out at a brisk pace. Stephanie and Patrick were walking home, lugging bags from the local supermarket. The four intersected at the top of the street.

‘Steph, hi, hello Patrick. Mum, you know Stephanie. I don’t think you’ve met Patrick; he’s Laura’s cousin.’

Carolyn was very surprised when the boy shook her hand so politely.

‘Heard from Laura, Steph? Scott asked. ‘Ryan told me she’d gone AWOL.’

‘Yeah, finally tracked her down. She’s at home. There was an accident and her horse was killed.’

‘Oh no.’

‘How sad.’

‘Do you know when she’s coming back?’

‘No. She’s not exactly communicative at present. Has she been in touch with Ryan?’

‘Err, I think she may have sent a rather curt text message.’

Carolyn’s head was spinning. What was going on with Ryan, and what about Scott and this Stephanie? Were they seeing each other? She really seemed to have lost track of her children’s lives lately.

‘That girl is her own worst enemy sometimes. Oh well, we’d best get home and put dinner on. I’m going to teach Patrick to make *coq au vin*.’

‘Sounds difficult.’

‘No, it’s dead easy with this recipe I’ve got. Want a lesson too, Scott?’

‘Another time, thanks Steph. Mum needs a walk to give her a break from the thesis.’

‘Oh, right, how’s it going, Mrs Bentley?’

‘Carolyn, please, and it’s not going too well, it’s all over the shop.’

‘Sounds like you need a structure, a blueprint.’

‘Yes, well I thought I had one but it’s disappeared on me.’ Carolyn shook her head ruefully.

‘Look, I don’t know if this would help but I went to this leadership course in Canberra and they taught us how to do a Lotus Diagram. It’s a fantastic device for getting the big picture about a project, a job application, well anything really. Want me to give it a try?’

‘Mmm, thanks but I don’t know if that would work.’

‘Go on, Mum, isn’t anything worth a try?’

Carolyn sighed. ‘You’re right, of course Scott. Thanks Steph, after tea?’

‘Sounds good, bring whatever plans you’ve got. Scott, walk your mother over, OK?’

Scott bowed from the waist. ‘My pleasure, ladies.’

...

Scott pretended to read the paper but was watching Steph and his Mum, heads bent as Carolyn consulted her notes, or thought hard before responding, while Steph jotted down notes in little boxes. It looked convoluted to Scott but the women looked as if they knew what they were doing. Stephanie was a very good-hearted person; he also hadn't realised until recently what a tough little cookie she was, quite a package.

'Fantastic! That's much better. I think I've finally got something I can work with. Thank you so much, Stephanie.'

Carolyn clutched the diagram to her chest and prepared to leave.

'My pleasure, Carolyn, only hope it helps.'

'Oh it will, I'm sure. I want to get back to my study now and start putting it into practise.'

Scott rose from the armchair, but Carolyn gestured him to stay.

'Stay, Scott, if Stephanie wants you to. The night is as young as you two are.' Carolyn winked at Scott and departed.

Chapter 53

Lance and Ryan were having initial discussions about the exhibition.

‘We need to think about framing, Ryan.’

‘More money?’

‘Hmm, I can get us a job lot, but I reckon we could recoup plus a little by selling just a couple.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yeah, I’ve been checking out the interest and I’m thinking maybe an auction, that could be fun.’

‘Auction? Isn’t that usually for like, a charity?’

Abigail sauntered into the kitchen. ‘Put your clothes on Abs, we have a guest.’

Abigail gestured to her crop top and knickers. ‘Come on, Lance, you see more than this in a bikini. Don’t you Ryan?’

‘Er, I guess.’ Funny, thought Ryan, looking at her tight arse and firm breasts, doesn’t do a thing for me. Either I’ve started batting for the other side or I’m in love.

Lance clicked his fingers. ‘Well done, Abs, that’s it Ryan, we do it for charity. Did Mary have any particular causes she was interested in?’

‘Haven’t a clue, but Gran should know. I’ll find out. We’d need an auctioneer though, wouldn’t we?’

‘Got that covered. Guy I went to school with is an estate agent. We’ll need booze, of course.’

‘My friend Rachael works in a bar,’ Abigail walked back in, pulling loose trousers on, ‘and she says the wine from Aldis is just as good as the house wine they sell, and it’s like two to four dollars a bottle.’

‘Perfect! Glasses, I guess we’ll need to hire those.’

Ryan groaned. ‘More money, I might have to take out a loan at this rate.’

‘Hang on a minute. Why have all the glasses the same? My parents must have at least two dozen, what about yours Ryan, Abs?’

Ryan pursed his lips. ‘Ours are somewhat assorted.’

‘Ditto for mine, they have lots but they’re an eclectic mix from over the years.’

‘Even better, that will so go with the food theme. We’re moving away from the usual. Good! What’s our timeline?’

Ryan accessed his diary through his mobile. ‘I’ve got a road trip coming up with my uncle and aunt in two days but we’ll only be gone for five days or so, so how about two months from now, can we do that?’

...

The days seemed endless to Laura, she occupied a grey area and didn’t want to talk. She and Jim had had their own little ceremony over the grave, though neither could think of any appropriate prayers for a horse. They planted a native grass on the site, one with beautifully soft feathery fronds. Fairy Bred had been with them and Jim pondered on how quickly horses grew. She would never be a big horse like Wally but she had her own personality. If only Laura would get to know her, get close to her. But Jim understood. Don’t get too close if you don’t want to get hurt. He wanted Laura to go back to Kew but she wasn’t having any of it. The triviality of the city, the bright packaging, she had said, just made her forget sometimes what was really important. For days she walked and walked and sat by the creek talking to Wally.

...

Ryan couldn’t believe it, the text message read, *leave me alone*. Well, OK, fine then, I’ll bloody well leave you alone, completely. Surely she realised how good they were together, so why was she doing this? He went to a bar and got outrageously drunk, that sure as hell didn’t make him feel any better and he got told off for waking the family when he got home. Scott was worried about him; it wasn’t like Ryan to get so out of control. Thank goodness he was going away for a few days. Maybe it would be better if he forgot about Laura; she seemed to have so much baggage. Scott interrupted his thoughts.

‘Want a hair of the dog?’

‘No way, Jose. My head feels like shit. I very nearly pleaded sick and came home at lunchtime.’

Ryan stretched out on the couch and cradled a cushion.

‘I’m confused, bro. We had a great night, the sex was good; well, *I* thought it was. Hang on, maybe that’s it, I’m a dud root.’

Scott handed Ryan a glass of water and some painkillers.

‘I don’t think it’s that simple. From some things Steph has said I gather Laura has issues, no parenthesis.’

‘Like what? I know her horse died.’

‘More than that. You must have noticed how unpredictable she is, but do you understand *how* wealthy she is? She is truly one of the privileged, Ryan.’

‘Do you think she thinks she’s too good for me?’ His voice sounded more concerned than he intended.

‘I don’t know what anyone thinks, except me. It’s her behaviour and what it indicates. Remember her at the dinner party, she barely attempted to join in the conversation and then left as soon as she could.’

‘She could have been having a bad day.’ He was apologising for her. Why was that? Why couldn’t he just let it go?

‘No, there’s lots of other occasions when she’s been downright rude and she’s got bugger-all sense of humour. Hell, Ryan, she comes from the landed gentry.’ Scott ticked off points on his fingers: ‘A mansion, an exclusive school, no money worries at all. She lives in a different world from us.’

‘I guess you’re right but I thought she was changing, opening up more. We had a great picnic at the beach.’

‘Could be she was having a go at seeing how the other half live.’

‘Maybe. Her text was pretty rude. Guess I’ll just have to move on, eh?’

‘Might be wise.’

He didn’t want to hear his own thoughts but straight logic told Ryan that coming from vastly different worlds created strong barriers to a relationship. Perhaps she’d had enough of him and Kew and would choose to remain in the country. He couldn’t help his heart from keeping a little flicker of hope, though.

Chapter 54

David and Elise picked Ryan up bright and early, just as the sun was rising.

‘Hey Ryan, all ready?’

‘Sure am.’ Ryan slung a back pack and sleeping bag into the back of the four-wheel drive. ‘Can’t tell you how good it feels to be getting away.’

They drove down the Princes Highway, toward Geelong, Richard marvelling at the changes.

‘I thought we’d stay at Colac or Camperdown and show Elise a few smaller towns before we get to Warrnambool. Thought we’d wait until Warrnambool before we decide which way to go next. That sounds OK?’

‘Sure. Wouldn’t mind going up the Limestone Coast. I’ve never been there, have you?’

‘Once, but it was eons ago. Elise, the other name for that area is the shipwreck coast.’

‘Now that sounds interesting. Must be lots of big rocks.’

‘Yep, and winds like you wouldn’t believe. Anyway, there’s heaps to see at Warrnambool.’

‘I know, I googled it yesterday. There’s a lighthouse, an art gallery, a whale-watching platform and even a shipwreck sound and laser show!’

Ryan sighed to himself. Tourists crap. Be patient he told himself, just enjoy the ride.

‘I think the Warrnambool races are on while we are there.’

‘Oh, no. Look, if that’s the case let’s give it a miss – there’ll be people everywhere.’

‘Do you think we’d see whales at the whaling platform?’ Elise sounded wistful.

‘Tell you what, sweetheart, we’ll ask people before we get there if it’s the right season or not and take it from there. Sound OK?’

‘Anything is OK, David. This is an adventure for me; anything is new and exciting so I’ll leave the details to you two Aussies.’

What a great wife his uncle had found, thought Ryan. So calm and sensible. Quite unlike the cranky angel he had fallen in love with against his better judgement. He wondered what she was doing right at this very minute.

...

‘Hey, Steph. I’m just going over to Kit’s place; we’re going to do our homework together. OK?’

‘Sure kiddo, just don’t be longer than a couple of hours.’

...

‘I’ve finished the dishes, Dad. I’m just going over to do my homework with Patrick.’

‘Did you clean down the benches?’ Richard was laughing at *Two and a Half Men*.

‘Yep, *and* put out the garbage.’

‘That’s my boy, off you go. Don’t be late.’

It looked like his youngest son was going to turn out alright after all.

...

She had felt a connection to him, a meeting of souls, maybe. But no, she could never have the kind of relationship her parents had, they were two parts of a whole. She’d never seen that before, or since. Perhaps it only happened once in a billion times.

‘A penny for them, princess.’

‘Don’t know that they’re worth that much, Jim.’

‘Sad thoughts, then?’

‘Life is sad, don’t you think? Seems like there’s an earthquake or famine somewhere all the time. It’s like a great big entity has said, enough, you’re all fucked. Aren’t you glad you didn’t have children?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No. I had one chance and I blew it, one person I loved and I let her go because I didn’t have balls, excuse the expression, but that’s how it was. Her parents didn’t approve of me and so she married someone else and went halfway around the world to live.’

‘I’m sorry, Jim, I didn’t know.’

‘It’s OK, my life is fine, Laura, mainly because I don’t sit around thinking about things I can’t change.’

‘Touché.’

‘I wasn’t trying to be mean. I just don’t want you to blow any chance of happiness.’

‘You can’t guarantee it though, can you? I mean even if you think he or she is the one, you don’t know what’s coming.’

‘No, you don’t, but isn’t that just looking at one side of the coin? Your chances are just as good for happiness as tragedy.’

‘You reckon?’

‘I know you’ve had more than your share of the bleak side so I believe, really believe that statistically and morally there’s a whole heap of joy waiting for you, but you’ve got to grab it with both hands and don’t let go.’

‘I think it’s too late Jim, he probably won’t talk to me again after I texted him and told him to leave me alone.’

‘Do you want him to leave you alone?’

‘No. Yes. Look, for him it’s probably just a fling. He’s gorgeous-looking, smart and funny. His family is the down side though.’

‘What are they like?’

‘They’re a strange lot. His father seems loud and brash. His mother, well all I know about her is she’s terrified of spiders. His youngest brother is a rude little bogan and the cousin, well, let’s not go there.’

‘What about the one who goes out with Stephanie? He’s alright, isn’t he?’

‘Scott is hard to read. He and Ryan are kind of like twins, only about twelve months apart. He is polite, a little too polite, which I suspect means he doesn’t approve of me.’

‘Well? You don’t have to have an affair with his whole family, do you?’

‘They’re all really close, Jim. I just wouldn’t fit in.’

‘Sounds like an excuse to me. What are you scared of, Laura?’

‘I don’t know, Jim, they probably dislike me. He probably isn’t *that* interested. I don’t want a... fling.’

‘Maybe he doesn’t, either. For heaven’s sake, give it a go, girl. You know that old saying, if you always do what you’ve always done you’re always going to get what you’ve already got. Something like that.’

...

With not a whale in sight, they left Warrnambool and headed up the coast to Mount Gambier via Port McDonnell. They picnicked on the beach at the Port and Elise consulted her map.

‘See, David, there it is, Blackfellows Caves, I really want to see that place.’

They cruised through Mount. Gambier, planning to return later to check out the blue and green lakes. Having seen no signs, they stopped at a milk bar and got directions and a sense of how far the turn-off was from the edge of town.

At an intersection in a tiny place, signposted as Kongorong, the GPS gave up with a splutter and the map gave no clue as to which way to go. Ryan spotted an elderly lady in a beanie, walking her dog. He called out through the open window.

‘Excuse me, can you tell us which way it is to Blackfellows Caves?’

‘Eh?’

Ryan jumped out and went up close.

‘Blackfellows Caves. Can you tell us the way please?’

The woman pointed a gnarled finger. ‘There’s a sign right over there, you can look for yourself.’

‘Er, thanks, I think.’

The sign was only visible once you turned the corner past an old fire station. Ryan ran back to the car.

‘Weird place. Turn right up here Richard.’

The rest of the drive was along narrow winding roads with plantations of pine trees on both sides.

‘Is this the local industry, do you think?’ Elise was intrigued by the various stages of development of the trees.

‘Yeah, but there’s been some items in the paper lately about possible closures. I imagine it would be disastrous for Mount Gambier. Not many places can exist on tourism alone, especially this far from a major city.’

Suddenly they turned a corner and there was the sign, ‘Blackfellows Caves’.

‘I can’t believe it’s still called that,’ Richard laughed, ‘and in this time of political correctness no less.’

‘Mmm, alternatives, though – Indigenous Holes?’

‘Yuck.’ Elise turned around to look at Ryan.

‘Let me guess, you googled it?’

‘Of course, I’m very modern.’ David leaned over and kissed her on the head.

‘And very beautiful.’ Elise smiled.

‘Anyway, it said that Aborigines would spear cattle and sheep, get hunted by the white man, jump into the water and hide in the caves. Funny, it really didn’t say much at all.’

‘I think there would be a whole other story going on. It would be interesting to hear what the locals say. How about we stop over there on the cliff top, David?’

They crossed a wooden walkway with tendrils of seaweed clinging to the posts. The wind blew fiercely, turning the ocean shades of grey and green. They stumbled over pointed rocks with tufts of bracken. A lone seagull perched on a light post. A couple of cray boats were out but the cliff itself was deserted. They stood looking out, listening to the gentle slopping motion of the waves tumbling on to the pebbled shore.

They walked through the car park and across the cliffs where there was a semi-circle of rocks that jutted out. David thought maybe beneath it were the caves referred to. They all peered down but could see nothing.

‘Nothing much to see here.’ David started to move off.

‘Ssh, listen.’

The noise in the water of the caves was strange. First they heard only the plop, plop of the water hitting the rocks but then they heard other noises.

Elise whispered. ‘That sounds like footsteps.’ All three got down on their haunches to listen more carefully. They could hear what did sound like footsteps but also a sighing noise. Slowly they walked away, back to the car park.

‘There’s a sadness about that place, I think something bad happened there. Let’s get going.’

‘OK, sweetheart. Let’s go as far as Carpenter Rocks and then we’ll head back to the Mount.’

...

Laura was looking at her home through new lenses. Clipboard in hand, she was noting necessary immediate repairs, ongoing maintenance issues, furniture that was original and all the detritus that needed to go. Halfway through the project she felt a headache coming on.

...

‘Oo, ah, would ya look at those mountains, I swear they’re blue. I thought those were in New South Wales.’

‘They are, honey. I guess they got the name first.’

Ryan and David sat outdoors at a little café in Dunkeld while Elise attacked the information centre.

‘Should I order for Elise?’

‘No, she’ll be a while. I guarantee she will know all about the people who run that place by the time she gets back.’

‘You lucked in there, didn’t you? She’s an awesome person.’

‘I sure did. I feel kind of blessed.’

‘How did you meet?’

‘Sheer chance, Ryan. She was doing a promotion at a food expo I went to. The funny thing is, I only went in ’cos I needed a toilet. Do you remember that Godfather movie where Al Pacino and the young Italian girl look at each other and it’s instant love? Well, it was a bit like that, for me anyway. I did, however, have to pretend to be very interested in vegetarian cookbooks when really I couldn’t have given a rat’s.’

‘Did she twig?’

‘Oh yeah, but I didn’t find out until a long while later. She reads me like a newspaper. How’s your love life these days, Ryan?’

‘Nada. I thought there was something great happening but she gave me the bum’s rush.’

Elise sauntered back, leaflets and brochures in hand.

‘The loveliest couple run that place. They’re so interesting.’ Elise detailed the couple’s life to date, complete with names of children.

‘What did I tell you Ryan?’

‘Are you, to use the Aussie vernacular, taking the piss?’

‘Well done, Elise, you’re catching on fast, but no David was just saying you’re a people person.’

‘But isn’t everyone?’

‘No. I know someone who vastly prefers animals to people. Anyway, have you found any good things to see?’

Elise opened several maps and brochures and they decided to visit a famous wall and an old mine shaft.

‘Oh, and apparently there’s an old homestead which looks like being opened to the public soon. Sounds sumptuous, so I thought maybe we could take a peek from the outside. They’ve given me a rough idea of where it is.’

As they headed off, Ryan leaned back in his seat. It was a while since he’d felt this loose.

Chapter 55

‘This is it. Impressive, huh?’

‘It’s bloody huge.’

In front of them was an imposing two-storey bluestone mansion. A low fence of similar material separated the house from the dirt road and left a half an acre of low scrub and overgrown shrubs leading up to the front porch. The trio walked around the perimeter, inspecting the structure from all angles.

David pointed upwards to a second-floor balcony.

‘The grand old lady is showing signs of her age. Those pipes need replacing. How old is it, Elise?’

Elise consulted her notes. ‘Jess from the info centre thought it circa 1830. Apparently it’s only had three owners, but as she and Ted are new to the area they don’t know who the current owners are.’

As they turned a corner Ryan stopped abruptly, causing David to bump into him.

‘What’s up, Doc?’

Ryan stared in disbelief at a car parked in the back area. Surely it couldn’t be, but yes, it was the same registration number.

‘Oh no, I think I know who the current owner is. This is so embarrassing. We need to go.’

As if on cue Laura came out of a side door, clipboard in hand. She too stood stock still and stared in disbelief. She finally spluttered.

‘What... ‘

‘Sorry, Laura I ... ‘ Ryan trailed off.

‘Where are your manners, Ryan? Aren’t you going to introduce us?’

Ryan’s heart was thudding so hard he had trouble speaking.

‘Laura, this is David, my uncle and his wife, Elise. We’ve been on a little trip and Elise wanted to see this place. Believe me, I had no idea this was where you lived.’

‘Of course you didn’t, I never told you.’ Laura walked toward the three of them her hand outstretched. ‘Lovely to meet you, David, Elise.’ She smiled warmly at them. Ryan could only stare in wonder.

‘Would you like to come inside? I could make us some tea or coffee if you prefer, Elise.’

‘You look busy,’ Elise nodded at the clipboard, ‘are you sure we’re not interrupting?’

Laura laughed. ‘Oh no, I was just looking for an avoidance technique. This is perfect.’

Laura led them through a truly spacious hallway and front entrance, down a corridor and into the kitchen. She ushered them to chairs before opening the back door and calling out. ‘Come on in. Jim, we’ve got visitors.’

...

Jim found his gaze increasingly on the young man with the blonde hair and brown eyes who didn’t talk much but whose eyes followed Laura’s every move. The poor bugger, Ryan, that was it, was obviously smitten, but there was something else there in the tight line of his mouth, a little anger perhaps. Obviously Laura hadn’t met these particular relatives before; they seemed completely different to the ones she had described. The American wife was charming, regaling them with funny stories about language and culinary differences between both cultures.

Elise was making her own observations. Laura had introduced Jim as property manager and good family friend, and for the life of her she couldn’t see any of the arrogance that Scott had implied. Maybe she was out of her depth in a big city, having grown up with so much space and privacy. Elise thought the kitchen sure could do with a makeover. There were remnants of a bygone era in the huge old wood stove but largely it was drab seventies-style fittings and fixtures.

After tea, Laura showed them around, which surprised and delighted Jim. Ryan was obviously in awe of the library with its glassed-in book cases and ornate old volumes. The uncle and aunt exclaimed over the formal diningroom that was the best feature of the house, still retaining original furniture and display cases containing enormous silver platters and serving dishes.

Ryan was beginning to find it all smacked too much of privilege and couldn’t stop contrasting it with the servants’ quarters they had seen. Those rooms had been at the rear of the house, accessed through narrow corridors. The rooms were stark in their small nudity, having been cleared of all except some ancient cast-iron beds which looked very uncomfortable. He could imagine them, rising before daylight in the freezing cold to scurry downstairs and light the big stove and open fires before their employers deigned to get out of bed.

Ryan left the others in the dining room and wandered back to the spacious front entrance which promised so much. The staircase towered upwards, with gleaming mahogany banisters and steps wide enough for four people. He recalled glimpsing a painting just inside the front door and turned back for another look. He could hear Elise asking Laura what type of food they would have served and how many courses they would have eaten.

The portrait was of a young Laura, about sixteen he thought, with a horse that must have been Wally in his prime. The horse was big with a strangely shaped head. The artist had caught in the young girl that same sense of rebellion that exploded from Kit. He hadn’t noticed Jim approach until he heard his voice.

‘You wouldn’t have seen that hanging up there a week ago. I think it’s lovely but Laura hates it, says it makes Wally look ugly. Just between you and me he wasn’t exactly handsome. She also says it makes her look like a prat.’

‘It does capture that teenage angst, so how come it’s up there now?’

‘It’s by a famous artist, now deceased, so even more valuable. Someone from the National Trust is coming here next week, so I convinced her we had to have everything of worth on display. She’s spent the last week working really hard to get it all looking good.’

‘How long have you been here, Jim?’

‘Since Laura was knee-high to a grasshopper. I know she can be difficult...’

‘You can say that again!’

‘I call her my cranky angel.’

‘I get the cranky only too well, but angel?’

‘Have you seen her with animals?’

‘A dog, yeah.’

‘Well, there’s all that tenderness and care, you must have seen it?’

‘Yes, but it doesn’t seem to extend to human beings; well, certainly not this one.’

‘Give it time, lad, she’s worth the wait.’

...

They finally took their leave, with Laura inviting Richard and Elise to please call in if they were ever in the area again. Laura grabbed Ryan by the arm and stopped him as the three headed back to the car.

‘Ryan, I’m sorry I was rude. I don’t know that I can explain.’

‘You promised me a week but left the next day.’ Ryan shrugged. ‘We are who we are.’

...

Ryan thought his head might well implode from the masses of tumultuous thoughts chasing themselves around in his brain. He stared out of the car window but all he could see were images of that regal entrance juxtaposed with the servants’ quarters, all superimposed with the portrait of the girl and her horse. It didn’t fit with any part of his previous existence and he wasn’t sure if it could in the future, or even if he wanted it to.

Chapter 56

‘What? Hugh, slow down and tone down, you’re yelling.’ Laura held the mobile away from her ear, motioning for Jim to move the picture further to the right.

‘Alright. I’ll be there tomorrow. See you then.’

Laura slumped onto an old sofa they were considering repairing, and put her head in her hands. Jim sat down next to her, and then rubbed his leg.

‘This horsehair stuffing is coming through. I gather that was Hugh, I could hear him from right over there.’

‘Uh huh. Patrick has been skipping school *and* forging my signature.’

‘So Hugh is furious. Is he taking it out on you?’

‘Big time. I don’t know what to do, Jim, I’m not his mother, I can’t control him. Forging my signature no less.’

Laura peered through her fingers at Jim and they both burst out laughing. Finally Jim wiped his eyes and blew his nose.

‘Didn’t think he had it in him.’

‘Neither did I. God, I was just getting in to all this,’ she waved at the house, ‘and getting over Wally, and now I have to go back to bloody Kew, and have Hugh call me irresponsible and Ryan hating me.’

‘Ryan doesn’t hate you. He’s trying to, though. Don’t think it’s going to work. As for Hugh, don’t let him bully you like he does his son and just about everyone who lets him get away with it. Patrick is not your responsibility. Why don’t you get him to come up here for a while?’

Laura frowned and shook her head.

‘No, listen, think about it at least. It would give you a break, you could make time for Ryan and honestly, what sort of trouble could he get up to here?’

...

Laura was on the road early, Beethoven blaring from the CD player, window down, the breeze through her hair. If only life was one big road trip, no responsibilities, no-one judging you and finding you wanting. Still, it had been a good idea from Jim; she would throw it at Hugh and Patrick and see what fell to earth.

...

Ryan waved goodbye to Richard and Elise and walked into pandemonium. His father and Kit were yelling at each other and his mother had covered her ears with her hands.

Scott was nowhere to be seen. He walked across the kitchen, pulled the back door open and then slammed it as hard as he could. It made a very loud bang. Blessed silence as they all stared at him.

‘Dad, I’m sure there’s something you need to do in the shed.’ Ryan watched his mother silently nod at her husband. Kit glared at everyone. Richard departed, face red.

‘Now sit down, Kit and shut up please. Mum, what the hell is going on?’

Kit slumped into a chair, defiantly pulled out one opposite and put his feet up on it. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Ryan.

‘Kit has been wagging school and forging my signature and he won’t tell us where he has been going and what he’s been doing.’

Ryan deliberately lowered his voice so Kit had to strain to hear.

‘I think Scott and I have let you down, Kit.’

‘What?’

‘What are you talking about Ryan? This has nothing to do with you or Scott.’

‘I beg to differ. Mum, all kids wag, skip classes occasionally, Scott and I sure did. We just didn’t get caught.’

‘You did?’ Kit was bug-eyed. ‘So, that’s OK then.’ He started to get up.

‘No. Hang on a minute. You need to be strategic and never forge Mum’s signature.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because, then the school hassles her, Dad goes troppo and you end up like today.’

‘I didn’t think they would make such a big deal about it. School sucks.’ Kit once more folded his arms across his chest. Carolyn reached across the table and touched Ryan on the arm.

‘I thought you liked school. Scott too. Neither of you failed anything.’

‘We did like school but sometimes you get a crap teacher or you just get totally bored by the same old, same old, and you have to get out.’

‘Yeah.’ Kit shut up at the look he got from his mother and brother.

‘What I’m saying is it doesn’t have to be a big deal.’ He pointed at Kit. ‘It’s the fact that your grades are down and you’re doing the tough guy attitude. We need to change both of those.’

...

Laura arrived home to find Hugh pacing her lounge room in high dudgeon while Patrick stared out of the window.

‘Laura, there you are. I can’t seem to make my son see the seriousness of his behaviour. Please, back me up here.’

‘Just a minute, Hugh, at least let me put my things away. Patrick, go and put the kettle on, please.’

Laura walked into her bedroom, unloaded her back pack and sat on the bed for a minute, trying to figure out the best way of dealing with the situation. She squared her shoulders and walked back to the lounge, only to collide with a still-pacing Hugh.

‘For heaven’s sake, Hugh, sit down, take a load off.’

She walked into the kitchen and whispered to Patrick, ‘a little co-operation here, OK? We’re not the bad guys.’ Laura made a pot of tea and found some biscuits which she suspected were past their use-by date. She loaded a tray and put it on the coffee table.

‘Now, let’s talk this through like sensible human beings.’

‘Patrick is hardly being sensible, Laura, his whole future is at stake!’

‘A little exaggeration, I think, Hugh. Patrick, how many times have you skipped school?’

Patrick looked at the floor and pulled at his earlobe. ‘Um, two, maybe three times.’

‘Why?’ Hugh barked.

Patrick shrugged his shoulders.

‘That is not an answer. Where did you go and what did you do?’

‘Just hung.’

‘Hung where and with whom?’

‘Can’t say?’

‘Why can’t you say?’

Patrick shrugged once more.

‘Hugh, I think what Patrick is referring to is dobbing. You remember that concept, surely? Not dobbing on your friends?’

‘Piffle! I didn’t think he had any friends.’ He looked at Laura. ‘He doesn’t bring any home, does he?’

No, he doesn't, thought Laura. She began to get an idea which she didn't like at all, bloody hell, not Kit Bentley surely? She decided to change the subject.

'Hugh, the deed has been done, I really don't think there's much sense in rehashing everything, we need to move on.'

'The boy needs to be punished. It's obvious that his living here isn't working, so he needs to go back to being a boarder.'

'No! Dad, I'm sorry, I'm happy here. Can't you give me some other punishment?'

'I agree with Patrick, Hugh. He would probably just run away again and we'd be back to square one. How about we do away with some privileges for a while?'

Hugh looked suspicious. 'Such as?'

'Internet access, no iPod for two weeks. Oh, and no television either.'

Patrick groaned. 'I'll die of boredom.'

'I'm not sure that is enough. What punishment did you get from school, Patrick?'

'A week's yard duty and detentions.'

Laura began to gather up the tea things. 'I think Patrick is going to find life fairly unpleasant for a while, and I think that might give him pause for thought before he does anything like this again.'

To the relief of both Laura and Patrick, Hugh checked his watch and left with only a little more finger wagging in Patrick's direction.

Chapter 57

Lance slipped into the passenger side of Ryan's car.

'Dude, seriously cool car.' He patted the dashboard and ran a hand over the shiny seat.

'Yeah, great, isn't it? Can you direct? I don't have a GPS or a street directory.'

'Too easy, I've been there before.'

They eased their way through light Saturday afternoon traffic of the inner city. When they reached Collingwood and started traversing narrow one-way streets Ryan noticed the signs for well-known clothing brands. Interspersed with these small warehouses were renovated apartments. He thought how every different suburb had its own nature, its own structures and patterns. They found a parking spot outside a handsome old hotel, painted in the dark grey of modernism.

'That looks like a cosy place.' Ryan peered through the front windows.

'It's a place for gay women.'

'Really? What, all on their own?'

'Sort of. It equals out though, as there's a gay men's spot a couple of streets away.'

'Yeah? Geez, I feel like a country hick sometimes.'

'Chill, man. It's horses for courses. You'd have heard about it if you were gay. People gravitate to places that are comfortable, you know?'

'I guess. So, tell me about this gallery and the exhibition.'

'It's brand new; the owners are interested in innovative artworks and new artists. You'll see what I mean when we get there. Not to everyone's taste, mind. The way they set things up with multiple artists makes it affordable. I think they'd do us a pretty good deal, and that way we'd only have to cough up the money for part of the booze and food.'

They walked down a cobblestoned alley and Ryan could hear the hum of conversation and laughter from five hundred yards away. It was getting very cold at four o'clock on an autumn afternoon and Ryan was glad he had worn his footy scarf.

They edged their way through the buzzing throng of people. Lance made for the bar and drinks while Ryan checked out the place and the crowd. The gallery was well laid out with a large area in the middle for people to gather and chat. The walls were well lit and the artwork spaced out so each artist had a separate space. The people were a more eclectic mix than he had imagined, with not much black and not a beret in sight. Ryan was immediately drawn to a large work composed entirely of leaves, creating sinuous, winding shapes, beautifully rhythmic. Lance found him and handed him a red wine.

‘This is stunning. Any chance we could get this artist to be in our show?’ Lance peered down at the catalogue in his hand. ‘Don’t know her, but that won’t stop me trying. Let’s check out the rest.’

One multi-faceted piece had Ryan metaphorically scratching his head. There were six white box frames, each containing a book with the front cover removed and a small ‘cancelled’ stamp over the page. Beneath these were three rows of photos of people who could have been sleeping or dead.

‘What does this mean?’

‘Not sure.’ Lance consulted his catalogue once again. ‘Oh yeah, I never can quite figure out this guy’s work. What do you think he’s trying to say?’

Ryan peered closely at the work and then stood back. ‘I don’t think he’s trying to say anything, he might be asking some questions though.’

‘Like what?’

‘Hmm, is sleep the little death, maybe? It’s complex. Maybe it’s a paradox’

‘He’s really well known and has stuff in galleries all over the place. I used to think he was a wanker but then I met his wife. She is beautiful and intelligent and in my experience women with those attributes don’t marry wankers. Anyway, enough of him, come and have a look at this, will you?’

Lance led them across the room to where a painting of a container ship took up a small wall on its own.

‘That’s terrible. I’d be too ashamed to hang that on any wall, if I’d painted it.’

‘Ditto.’ They both laughed at the price in the catalogue. Ryan was shocked at all the prices in the catalogue, they were outrageous surely? He wondered who on earth had so much spare cash to spend, but then he remembered Laura’s uncle. Hell, Laura herself could probably buy out this little lot but he hoped she had better taste than that.

...

‘Is she rich, Ryan?’

‘Pretty much.’

Ryan was filling Gino in on his trip up country and Laura’s property. They sat on Ryan’s front veranda, enjoying the autumn colours in the street. Gino nodded at the townhouse across the road.

‘Does she own that too?’

‘Dunno, probably.’

‘How does that fit with your views on inherited wealth?’

‘Maybe I can get her to redistribute her wealth.’

‘To your family?’

‘I was joking, and she doesn’t like my family.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding! Your family is great.’

‘She doesn’t know them like you do, Gino, she sees only vague glimpses. Anyway, the point is moot, we’re over before we even began.’

Gino was surprised by Ryan’s disconsolate tone.

‘You care, don’t you?’

‘Yeah, I do, much to my own amazement.’

‘Well then, go get her.’

‘Nuh, she inhabits a different world, I like her a lot, Gino, but I don’t like her world of privilege and all that goes with it. Enough, of that, how was the honeymoon?’

‘God, that was six months ago. I had a good time but poor Angie had morning sickness but not just in the morning, all day, so the beach and the sun were pretty much wasted on her.’

‘Surely she’s better now?’

‘Yeah, she’s fine. We had the last scan last month and it finally looked like a baby to me. When she had the first couple I honestly didn’t think it looked like anything.’

‘I hope you didn’t voice that opinion to her.’

‘No, I’m not that stupid. Tell you what though, the first time I felt the baby move, wow, then it got real, you know?’

‘Yeah, I do. I remember before Kit was born, it was awesome feeling him move in the womb.’

‘Do you wish we could have babies?’

‘No way. Imagine having something growing inside you for nine months, having to do all the right things and still not knowing if it would come out OK. Then, there’s the birth and all that pain and shit. Nup, they can have it on their own.’

A flock of rainbow lorikeets flew into the box maple in the house next door, making a huge noise. The friends laughed at them.

‘Sounds like they’re having a stoush.’

‘Yeah, sounds like football hooligans.’

Gino leaned back in his seat and chewed on a finger’s edge.

‘Which brings us back to you and Laura. Sounds to me like two sides of the one coin. She doesn’t like your world and you don’t like hers, but surely it’s worth trying to salvage something. I dare you, Ryan, to have a go – no, like we used to say when we were kids, I double dare you.’

Gino finished his can of beer and grabbed his car keys.

‘And if you don’t, you are the biggest wimp of all time.’ Laughing, Gino turned back and made an ‘L’ for loser sign on his forehead.

...

It was almost a full-blown row and it was in the long-life milk aisle at the supermarket.

‘So, let’s get this straight. You think because my little brother has rat-arsed hair, rides a skateboard and goes to a government school that he must have corrupted your saintly little Patrick.’

It was duelling trolleys. People were starting to look at them. Ryan had raised his voice. Laura wished she hadn’t said anything. She carefully selected some soy milk and placed it gently in her trolley.

‘Not at all. It’s because he is a rude, crude person. It’s his attitude, not his appearance I am calling into question.’

‘Calling into question, is it?’ Ryan glanced at the soy milk and grabbed himself some full-cream variety. ‘You know, if you stuck your nose any higher in the air you’d get a nose bleed from the altitude.’

Ryan picked up his pace. She had looked mortified. Good. He threw in tea bags and instant coffee. As he rounded the corner of the aisle a woman in front of him stopped, suddenly causing him to almost run into her. Laura wasn’t so lucky, she was so angry she couldn’t stop in time (or that’s what she told herself) and her trolley went straight into Ryan’s back. He yelped in pain.

‘Oh my God. Are you OK? I’m so sorry, Ryan, I couldn’t stop fast enough.’

Ryan rubbed at his back with one hand. ‘I’ll live, but it is bloody sore.’

They stood awkwardly, looking at each other, then they both started to talk at once.

‘I didn’t mean...’

‘Didn’t you ever...’

‘Didn’t I ever what?’

‘Didn’t you ever wag school, Laura?’

‘No.’ Laura bit on her bottom lip. ‘I did try once, but there was nowhere to go.’ At Ryan’s raised eyebrows, she continued.

‘I was at school in Ballarat. You’ve been to my home, there is no way of getting there by public transport, so I moped around for a while and went back to school.’

Ryan could picture Laura in her school uniform looking lost and lonely, poor little bugger. Being rich just didn’t cut it sometimes.

‘Right. Can I buy you a drink after we finish here?’

‘Only if you let me buy; I injured you, after all.’

They agreed on a time and place and went their separate ways. Laura was confused, she had insulted his family, caused him injury and he asked her out for a drink.

Ryan finished shopping by brain remote.

...

They both made it just in time before the rain started coming down like stair rods. The place was called ‘Daffy as’, a new wine bar in Kew. The décor was minimalist, lots of black and white and brightly polished floorboards. Large windows led directly out to the street and Laura and Ryan perched on stools, looking out at the downpour. They found they had more in common than either had thought possible. Ryan felt positively lightheaded when she confessed to barracking for Geelong as a child. She said she lost enthusiasm for the game somewhere in her teens. He knew he could retrieve it for her. They both hated jazz, trad or otherwise, and loved blues music, she with a bit of country thrown in, but not country and western despite owning a horse. They laughed long and loud about *Rhinestone Cowboy* and then Ryan remembered seeing a notice at work about the Sydney Road Music Festival and a female blues singer they might both appreciate.

‘Would you go with me, if I can get tickets?’

‘Sure. Now, I’m going to ask you to go somewhere with me, but if you don’t want to that’s OK too. I wouldn’t go except I have to.’

‘Sounds intriguing. Why do you *have* to go?’

‘Family tradition. It’s Uncle Hugh’s birthday and we started going there when Mum was... here. It sounds stupid but I, well, I need to go, but I don’t want to be there with just Hugh. It’s the Lyceum Club. Mum took me there for my first grown-up birthday. It’s a bit run-down now but the food is always good.’

Ryan had absolutely no idea what sort of club she was talking about but it sounded like she needed support.

Laura knew she was prattling and she had been looking down, rather than at Ryan, as she talked. She looked up and he grinned at her.

‘A Bentley never, ever, knocks back good tucker. You’re on.’

Chapter 58

They turned down a lane and walked up granite steps to the foyer of the two-storey building which housed the Lyceum Club. Laura pressed a button and spoke into an intercom.

‘Patchett, party of three.’

A door opened soundlessly and Laura and Ryan walked up the carpeted stairs and into a lounge area. As Laura led him to a group of three armchairs, Ryan gazed around in wonder. He thought the place could do with a facelift as could many of its patrons. Mis-matched armchairs and sofas were placed strategically around coffee tables. He supposed it was for a homey effect, but it was hardly classy.

Ryan was conscious of being stared at and checked his impulse to inspect his shoes for dog shit. Nosy old buggers. He reckoned they were the only people under seventy in the place. They all looked well-heeled, though in the style of smart jackets and pearls, hair perfectly coiffed, even the blokes.

Laura almost whispered. ‘I know, it’s a bit daggy but the food is tasty and they have some really fine art work. I’ll show you later.’

A waitress came to take their drink orders just as Hugh walked in. He stopped and shook hands with several people before joining them. Laura kissed him on the cheek and handed him a small package.

‘Happy birthday, Hugh. Do you remember Ryan?’

‘Yes, of course. How are you?’ Hugh shook hands with Ryan, at the same time shoving the present into his pocket.

Birthdays in the Bentley family consisted of many hugs and immediate opening of presents, and exclaiming over the contents. Carolyn had taught her boys well. You could always find something good to say about a present even if you didn’t like it, and then you re-gifted it to someone who would like it.

Hugh started discussing Laura’s house and the work needing to be done before it was opened to the public. Ryan’s thoughts drifted off as he tuned out to talk of trusts and caveats. One entire wall of the room was windowed and he smiled as he thought of what his Gran’s reaction would be to the state of the curtains. They were too heavy and the hems were torn in places.

Over dinner, which was Ryan thought minimalist but delicious, Hugh asked Ryan where he saw himself in ten years’ time.

‘Ten years! No, I don’t plan that far ahead, a week is enough for me. What’s that old Jewish saying? Man plans, God laughs.’

‘Ah, but you’ve got to stay ahead of the game, get in early on opportunities.’

‘Sorry, I don’t get your drift.’

‘Your employment, investments, that kind of thing.’

Hugh ate with his elbows out which for some reason annoyed the hell out of Ryan.

‘No probs. See Hugh, my employment is a short-term contract and the only investments I have are my vinyl collection and footy cards.’

‘Football cards, surely they’re for children.’

Laura shook her head. ‘No, Hugh, if they’re the originals they’re worth quite a bit.’

‘I stand corrected.’

Ryan wondered what it would take to get the broom out of his arse. No wonder Laura got hoity toity at times. Hugh continued to try and elicit information about Ryan’s family history and political affiliations, but Ryan ducked and weaved like an adroit mid-fielder.

Apart from the food, what Ryan found endearing about the club’s diningroom was the way the tables were set up so they could have been one big family. Plus the wait staff of middle-aged women were polite and good humoured. Ryan accidentally knocked his knife to the floor. He retrieved it and started to re-use it which brought a horrified reaction from Hugh.

‘No, no, mustn’t do that. Waitress!’

‘I assumed the floor would be clean,’ Ryan remarked dryly.

‘It’s a lot cleaner than mine,’ the statuesque blonde woman said, ‘but here’s a fresh one. I know you wouldn’t want me to get into trouble.’

‘Thanks.’

‘My pleasure.’ She winked at him behind Hugh’s back.

After dinner they went back into the lounge area for coffee and port. Ryan declined the port and asked for a beer instead. Hugh raised his eyebrows and Laura grinned at Ryan, at his self-assurance which she was beginning to enjoy, especially when it annoyed her uncle.

Hugh was rattling on about how the male equivalent to the Lyceum, the Melbourne Club, was so much more dignified. He invited Ryan to be his guest some time. Ryan said sure, but thought that would happen on the day the league treated every other team the same as Collingwood, in other words, never.

Chapter 59

The venue was the Brunswick Green, a bar and garden that covered two shopfronts in Sydney Road. One shop front had the original blue tiling, leadwork edging and leadlight featuring a circled 'Brunswick Green' sign atop the window. The second shopfront was green and austere. The interior was an eclectic mix of multicoloured kitsch lamps, modern bar stools and assorted old bottles with waxed red stoppers. The 'L' shaped bar gleamed and photographs of patrons and performers jostled with posters to create a scenario that would keep a lone drinker occupied for hours.

The bar began to fill with dreadlocked, multicoloured and shaved people of both sexes sporting full-sleeve and leg tattoos and earrings which in times past would only be found in deepest Africa.

'Ryan,' Laura nudged him with an elbow in the ribs, 'that guy over there is wearing a skirt!'

'Yeah, I don't think I've ever felt so ordinary.'

Laura draped an arm around his shoulder.

'Ordinary works for me.'

'I can hear someone tuning up in the garden part; let's go out there.'

They sat at a bench seat, designer beers in hand. It was a bit chilly but there were gas veranda heaters on. Under the light of a giant candle on the table they studied the flyer for the night's entertainment. The first one was the woman who, as Lance had told Ryan, had a big gutsy voice and was funny. The second was a man who wore a cross around his neck and proclaimed to be inspired musically by Jesus.

'We don't need to stay for the God botherer.'

Laura grinned at him. 'Prejudice?'

'Big time.'

A blonde woman with sky blue eyes started strumming her guitar. When she started singing, all talking stopped. She had a rich, clear voice with a huge range and her whole body took a part. Dressed in jeans, boots and a simple fishnet top she looked nothing like most of her audience, but she had an immense presence and they all felt it. She finished the first song and the audience clapped and whistled their appreciation. Before her next song, she talked about growing up in the country and the friend the next song, *The deeds that you do*, was dedicated to. Laura hung on her every word and Ryan laughed at her jokes about herself and her guitar playing. As she started to play again, someone near Laura started talking; she shushed them loudly. The song began.

*Jack walks the greyhounds at eight every morning
And first thing in the afternoon, along the dirt road.*

*Jack feeds the chicken and fixes the wire
Them foxes are cunning they always find a hole.*

*The dams getting low there's no rain this side of summer
But Jack counts his blessings and Jack minds his manners
And Jack will learn your measure by the deeds that you do.*

Laura was transported out through the night sky, flying toward home, looking down at all the quiet fields and roads winding snake-like below her.

*He taught me to remember, you're lucky if you grow older
And the truthful and strong won't ever let you down
But here in the city, the talk is always easy
If the packaging shines, the customer will buy.*

*The dams getting low there's no rain this side of summer
But Jack counts his blessings and Jack minds his manners
And Jack will learn your measure by the deeds that you do.*

A gentle rain was falling on her flying figure now, filling all the little dams. Horses awoke from their standing sleep, sniffing the new air.

*Now I'm running through the paddock, my feet tough with summer
And we're chasing the crickets to where the sun goes down
And I can smell the horses and I can hear the voice
Of my friend as we walk home through a sleepin' town.*

*The dams getting low there's no rain this side of summer
But Jack counts his blessings and Jack minds his manners
And Jack will learn your measure by the deeds that you do.*

People were clapping, but to Ryan, Laura looked in a trance. He nudged her; she jerked to her feet and blew an ear-piercing whistle. Ryan looked at her. She had tears in her eyes. She sat down and hugged him hard. The woman sang some more of her own songs and a beautiful version of *Forever young*. Laura thought it was over all too soon. She urged Ryan to stay and listen to at least one song from the other performer. He went to the bar to get them another drink. Laura looked up at the night sky and felt a contentment that reached to her toes.

They listened to two more songs but the deity featured too heavily for both their tastes. As they headed out the door into Sydney Road, Ryan reached into his pocket, pulled out a CD and handed it to Laura. Laura read the label, *The framing of the shrew* by Jen Watkins and then noticed one prominent blue eye in the collage of the CD cover.

'How did you get this? Has it got that song on it?'

'They sold them at the bar and yes, that song is on it, I checked.'

Laura threw her arms around him and kissed him.

‘This is the best deed ever, thank you.’

As Laura slept beside him, Ryan reflected on their two recent dates, which had been as different as winter to summer. He thought he had coped well with the bloody Lyceum, even though discomfort had been his predominant emotion. Laura was certainly at home in places like that, but then she hadn’t been nearly as alive and excited as at the bar in Brunswick. He was just beginning to drift off when his mobile rang. He answered quickly, hoping not to disturb Laura.

‘Help, Ryan. We’re at your place. Angela’s in labour and I don’t think the ambulance will make it in time, apparently there’s a pile up on the freeway.’

‘What are you doing at our house, and I thought the baby wasn’t due for two weeks?’

‘Just get here Ryan, soon, please.’

Laura had woken up as the voice on the phone grew louder.

Ryan hung up; they both leapt out of bed, shoving on jeans and tee-shirts and ran across the road. Angela was on the bathroom floor, screaming, Gino looked like he was going to faint. Ryan’s father could be heard yelling into a phone, his mother shook her head and mouthed sorry. Laura washed her hands and then squatted down.

‘It’s nearly here. Angela, do what they taught you in pre-natal classes, OK? Stop screaming and push down. Gino, give her your hand to squeeze. Ryan, dampen a face washer and give it to Gino, then get out and give us some air in here. Gino, wipe her forehead.’

Richard stuck his head around the doorframe, goggle-eyed. Ryan pushed him back into the hallway.

‘I’m going to die!’

‘No, you’re not; you’re going to give birth.’ It felt, to Laura, like the longest moments of her life as she waited for the baby’s head to appear. Christ, the woman could yell, must be bloody painful with it all happening so fast. Finally she saw the head.

‘Atta girl, Angela. One more big push.’

Laura manoeuvred the head, the shoulders were stuck. Shit! She gently twisted the little body and suddenly out it popped on to her lap.

‘It’s a boy.’ She carefully wrapped him in a towel and put him on Angela’s stomach. Where was the bloody ambulance? She thought she could cope with the umbilical cord but wasn’t at all sure about the placenta, that could be tough to come out. Yes! She could hear a siren outside. Heavy footsteps entered the house and she moved out of the way to let the ambos take over.

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Laura and all the Bentleys collapsed on the couch and into armchairs. Richard had decided something much stronger than tea was required, so opened his birthday present of single malt whisky. Laura was thanked many times by all of them, especially Carolyn who felt badly about not helping out. She couldn't believe that after having three babies herself she had felt paralysed and completely useless. Laura explained that having seen and helped out with all manner of births in animals, her instincts had taken over. She confided that she had felt scared when the baby's shoulders got stuck, and that human placentas could be a lot trickier than those in animals – so she was as relieved as they were to see the ambos. Ryan's mobile rang half an hour later. It was Gino, to say that mother and son were both fine. They all raised their glasses and toasted the newest member of the human race.

The doorbell rang, startling all of them. Richard opened it to find two burly police officers behind a dishevelled-looking Kit. Laura squeezed Ryan's hand, excused herself and left.

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At least their stories tallied. They had hidden in the female toilets at the tennis club until the president locked up and left. They had raided the beer fridge, turned the radio up loud and had their own little party. In attempting to be rock stars they had ended up trashing the place. A neighbour had complained about the noise and the police had arrived just as they were attempting to break out through a smashed window.

Chapter 60

Ryan was entirely unsure of his welcome but decided to risk it anyway. Laura gave him a rueful grin and preceded him up the staircase.

‘We feel really bad, Laura. This whole business was probably Kit’s idea; he practically admitted it.’

Laura had dark circles around her eyes and she was cradling her coffee mug as if she needed the warmth.

‘No. Patrick doesn’t get off that easily. Sure, he is easily led, but there’s nothing wrong with his brain, although I sometimes wonder if it’s connected to his body. Tell me, is it a boy thing? Or is it their age?’

‘I’d go for both.’ Ryan put down his mug and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

‘Mum has this theory that boys aged between puberty and the early twenties should just go fishing.’

‘Is the fishing bit a metaphor?’

‘Yeah. Scott and I did it by playing sport, heaps of it. No wonder Mum doesn’t want to drive now, she must have spent hours taking us places and then waiting around for one or the other to finish. Right now, my parents are at their wits end; they can’t figure out what to do with Kit, and quite frankly neither can I. Have you told Patrick’s Dad?’

‘Yes and don’t even ask me how awful that was. I need a strategy as it really looks like this is going to court. Are you with me on this?’

‘Wouldn’t it be better if we separated them?’

Laura stared long and hard at her feet. She finally stood up and walked to the open window. All she could hear was the chirping of car locks, off, on, off, on. Technology didn’t change the human condition with all of its stupidity. She didn’t turn around when she spoke.

‘That would be easy if *we* weren’t together. Are you thinking that way?’

Ryan jumped up and swung her around to face him.

‘Not on your nellie.’

Laura laughed. ‘Why is it that you talk like someone twice your age, no, make that three times your age.’

‘‘Cos I’m the official keeper of the original Australian lexicon.’

‘Appointed by?’

‘My grandpa, before he died.’

‘Oh, OK it’s official then.’

‘What are we going to do about the bloody little idiots?’

Laura paced the room, arms folded, a grim look on her face. Ryan thought she was utterly beautiful, even with a stern demeanour.

‘I have a plan.’

‘Sounds ominous.’

‘Hugh actually wants it to go to court; he thinks it will teach them a lesson. He could have got them out of it with his contacts, you know.’

‘Yeah, but he could be right. I know my little brother is scared stiff, although he tries to act tough. Will they get off with a fine, do you think?’

‘Depends on the magistrate, but here’s where my plan comes in. As you know, my place badly needs a lot of work done on it, and I need to catalogue all the contents, which is going to be a huge job.’

‘Uh huh. But aren’t you changing the subject?’

Laura held out her hand, palm outwards.

‘Stay with me here, Ryan. One of the most common sentences is community service, so I was thinking, how about if I set up their community service? I mean, my place has been registered with the National Trust, so it kind of makes sense.’

‘Do you really think they would be useful? What about their schooling? How long would it be for? How long would you be gone for? I don’t know about this, it would mean you looking after them, that hardly seems fair.’

‘Steady on. It wouldn’t be just me; Jim would actually supervise them. There’s lots of unskilled stuff that needs doing: clearing out, cleaning, painting, mending things, plus pruning and planting. I could get them set up. I wouldn’t need to be there all the time. I think about three months would do. They could go up as soon as the school holidays start, which is pretty soon. If necessary they could bus into Hamilton and go to school there.’

‘Kit’s going to hate this idea.’

‘Really? How about if he gets to horse ride and learn to ride a motor bike while he’s there?’

Ryan grinned hugely. ‘You’re a genius, girl, you’re sending them fishing!’

They high-fived each other.

Chapter 61

The Bentleys got lucky with the weather gods; even Vincent would have appreciated the Melbourne night sky. A full, luminous moon lit up the city buildings that gave off enough of the day's heat to warm the air but not stifle.

Laura and Stephanie were working the bar; not difficult, as glasses of wine, stubbies of beer or cans of soft drink were the only beverages. Kit and Patrick thought they looked cool in their big black aprons while they waited for their trays to be filled with food. Kit's hand was slapped as he attempted to sneak a sample.

'Hey! I'm only checking it out to see if it's OK.'

Laura called across from the bar.

'It's alright, Kit, there's plenty for our own little party later.'

'Sweet.' Kit had practised holding a tray above his head like they did in the movies, but as the spaces got tighter he decided that elbows in was a better way of negotiating the crowd.

Scott and Gino were on the doors, with fake security tags around their necks, hoping like hell they didn't have to flex any muscles. Abigail was checking out her contribution. She had done a potted history of Mary's life and work in calligraphy on parchment, complete with a photograph of the artist looking demure in a black coat, court shoes and smart hat.

Three large umbrella designs took up one wall, with smaller cameos of other designs in a Southern Cross pattern on another wall. All the walls were pale cream in colour and the ones without artwork were covered in umbrellas.

David and Elise both gave Ryan a big hug. Elise stood back and looked at him.

'This is so exciting, Ryan. You're looking happy; is it just this, making you look like the cat who got the cream?' Elise patted his cheek. Ryan glanced over their heads to catch a quick glimpse of Laura pouring out a wine and smiling at someone. Elise followed his glance.

'Isn't that...?'

'Yes, it's Laura, she's, uh, helping out.'

'Uh huh, good of her.'

'Yeah, it is. She's good people.' Ryan grinned at Elise.

'In fact, Elise, she's bloody awesome.'

Elise smiled back at him. 'Good for you, Ryan Bentley.'

Richard strolled over nonchalantly, hands in his pockets. Ryan looked behind and to the side of his father.

‘Dad, where’s Gran?’

Richard frowned. ‘Er, was I meant to pick her up?’

‘Yes, don’t you remember, we agreed that you would do it.’

‘Right, well, I’ll just go and do that.’

Ryan turned to his uncle. ‘Is he getting dippier the older he gets?’

David laughed. ‘No, he’s always been like that, sometimes I feel like I’m the older brother. Speaking of which, where is Scottie?’

‘He’s at home, studying. He’s got exams tomorrow and if he passes, he’ll get into nursing. Oh, no!’ Ryan was looking at one of the entrances.

‘What?’

‘Laura’s uncle has just walked in. Excuse me, I’d better go and greet him.’

Ryan welcomed Hugh and asked if he wanted a drink. Hugh looked across at the bar.

‘Surely that’s not my niece serving behind a bar!’

‘Yep, sure is, she volunteered.’

‘Her father would turn in his grave. I’ll go and get my own drink and have a word to her. I can see you are busy, but you and I should have a talk some time soon.’ He turned his back on Ryan and strode off.

The crowd increased exponentially and Ryan wondered where on earth they were coming from. Lance admitted, in passing, that he had invited a few of his clients and that Abigail had put up a notice in the design section of a university she had enrolled in for next year. Lance introduced Ryan to numerous people and he fielded their questions about his late great-aunt.

Suddenly, there was the sound of glass smashing from the bar area. Ryan rapidly elbowed his way through the crowd, jumped the bar and found Laura on the floor, surrounded by broken stubbies. He crouched down and took her face in his hands.

‘Are you alright? Tell me you’re not hurt.’ He glanced at her hands. ‘You’re bleeding! Shit! Steph, get me a clean tea towel. Quickly. Can you get up? Laura, speak to me!’

Hugh had surged through the crowd and loomed over both of them. ‘What have you done to her?’ Ryan looked up at him.

‘Oh, I just pushed her over, and then smashed a few bottles for good luck.’

‘What?’ Hugh attempted to move Ryan away.

‘Take your hands off my grandson!’ Gwen had appeared, looking positively regal in a purple outfit, complete with a new hat purchased especially for the occasion. ‘Get out of the way, all of you, can’t you see the girl needs some fresh air.’ She took a clean handkerchief from her bag and gently dabbed at Laura’s hand. ‘Stop fussing, it’s only a surface cut, it’s always more the shock than anything.’ She put her arm around Laura and led her to a couple of chairs. ‘Get her a glass of water, Ryan.’

‘Feeling better, my dear?’

‘Yes, thank you so much. We haven’t been introduced. I’m Laura Patchett and I take it you are Ryan’s grandmother, Mrs Bentley?’

‘Gwen will do very nicely. Who was that obnoxious man standing over Ryan?’

‘That’s my uncle Hugh.’

‘Oh, I am sorry.’

‘It’s fine, really; he is rather obnoxious at times. He and Ryan haven’t exactly hit it off.’

‘How could anyone not like Ryan? I know I’m prejudiced and I know you shouldn’t favour any one grandchild over another, but he is so like my late husband I can’t help it. He’s a wise soul, Laura; you won’t meet many of those.’

‘Would your late husband be the one who made him the official custodian of Australian English?’

Gwen chuckled. ‘Yes, taught him everything he knew. Has Ryan subjected you to his array of rhyming slang yet?’

‘Not yet.’ Laura got to her feet. ‘It’s been lovely meeting you, Gwen, I hope we meet again. I’m fine now, so I’d better go and help Steph. I think Ryan is going to make a little speech soon, he might need you.’

Ryan announced that they would have an auction for the three large pieces, with the proceeds, after deducting costs, to go to his late great-aunt’s favourite charity. Gwen felt proud and quietly gave him the thumbs-up sign.

Lance’s friend, Ernesto, started the proceedings with a fine speil about the value of such pieces of originality within the burgeoning area of investment art. He was smooth and slick and his shoes shone. Ryan made gagging motions in Laura’s direction. She covered her mouth. When the bids started, Ryan moved over to stand beside her in front of the bar.

‘I just hope we make enough to cover all this.’

‘You will.’

‘You sound pretty sure.’

‘I am. Hugh just put his hand up.’ She grinned and Ryan could see the glint in her eye just before her own hand went up.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Making sure the man spends some of the money he gets from corporate crooks.’

The room had grown silent as Laura and Hugh battled it out, alone now, others having dropped out at the three thousand dollar mark. Laura was having a great time, especially when she noticed the frustration on Hugh’s face. He wasn’t used to being thwarted. She took him up to five thousand and then dropped out.

Ernesto clapped his hands together and pointed at Hugh.

‘Congratulations, sir, please leave your details with my friend here.’

As the second piece was being indicated by Ernesto, Laura whispered to Ryan, who shrugged and approached the auctioneer. The third piece was indicated instead and he started up with his spin. Hugh interrupted and offered to buy this one for the same price as the first, emphasising that there was obviously no-one else here with ample funds to contend. Laura and Ryan conferred with Lance and Ernesto and it was finally agreed that Hugh would pay an extra thousand dollars, provided the framed testimonial to the artist was thrown in.

Finally the gallery started to empty. Kit and Patrick were hoeing into whatever food was left and Laura allowed them one can of beer each.

‘What about our pay?’ Kit hazarded, chomping on a sausage roll.

On his way out the back with empty bottles, Ryan paused.

‘You two have a lot of *paying* to do, if Laura can keep you out of gaol.’

Deciding discretion was the better part of valour, both boys took their food and drink and sat down the back of the gallery.

Lance and Abigail had taken down the prints and were carefully packing them away.

‘A real success story, Ryan,’ Lance called out, ‘we sold everything.’

‘Who bought the last one?’

‘You didn’t tell him?’ Abigail called out to Laura.

‘Snitches! It was meant to be a secret.’

Ryan was irritated. He tapped Laura on the shoulder.

‘Why did you buy it? Did you want it? I would have given it to you.’

‘I know you would, and yes, I do want it. I know exactly where it’s going to go.’

Ryan arched an eyebrow. ‘It’s not about getting one up on your uncle is it?’

‘There is that too, of course.’ Laura grinned widely and continued emptying the fridge.

Chapter 62

Laura's property hadn't seen so much action in years. Once the National Trust had approved the renovations Laura, Jim and the boys had been busy preparing for the bigger repair issues by patching, scraping and painting in-between Patrick and Kit arguing over who got to do what. When it came to a full-on brawl in the dust outside, Jim decided enough was enough. He sat them down at the kitchen table.

'Right, you two – listen and listen good, 'cos I'm not going to say this twice. You're both big and ugly enough to sort out things without your fists. Laura got you out of trouble so she needs to be repaid.'

'We've done lots of stuff!' Kit was outraged.

'Yeah, we've worked really hard; well I have, anyway.'

Kit stood up, his fists balled at his sides. Jim pushed him back in the chair and glared at Patrick.

'Enough! Stop right there. You've both worked really hard and Laura knows that, but right now you're carrying on like a couple of galahs. So here's the deal, you either work out a system for who does what – I don't care if you take turns or flip a coin – OR I go and tell Laura that her plan isn't working and she puts you back with the magistrate. What's it to be?'

Despite much angry muttering the boys agreed to work it out for themselves.

'OK. Make yourselves a cup of morning tea and come and get me when you've got a plan.'

Jim found Laura at her laptop, trying to find out the best way to clean a very old tapestry.

'Any luck?'

'Yeah, a few ideas. Did you sort them out?'

'We'll see. Is Ryan coming up this weekend?'

'No, there's something wrong with his car.' Laura shook her head.

'What?'

'I can't believe how much I miss him. It worries me, Jim.'

'Well, given the number of calls, emails and texts I'd say he's feeling pretty much the same way. Why don't you go down for the weekend?'

'No, I've got people coming to quote on the roof and balconies. The National Trust gave very clear specifications.'

‘And what am I, chopped liver?’

‘Well, maybe I will. I’ll think about it.’

‘You do that.’

Jim grinned at her back before walking off, whistling. Before he could reach the kitchen Patrick and Kit approached him.

‘We figured out a system, Jim.’

‘What’s that then?’

‘Rock, paper, scissors.’

Jim looked from one to the other, rolled his eyes and shook his head.

‘It’s fair.’

‘Yeah, it’ll work.’

Jim shrugged. ‘OK, but if it stops working, see me before either of you explodes, alright?’

‘Yep, sure.’

‘Cool.’

...

Ryan gazed out the window of the train, feeling so low not even the spring growth on the trees outside could lighten his mood. Neither could the fact that Geelong was going to be in the finals again. He missed Laura like hell and his employers were letting him go. What a euphemism! Funding had run out, so he was to finish in two weeks’ time. He didn’t want to think about telling his small group of men; they had established an easy rapport over the last twelve months. Ryan had known it was only a short-term contract but they probably didn’t.

A guy about his age, in a suit, settled into the seat opposite, laptop/briefcase at his feet. Maybe he should get a job in the public service or the corporate world, get security and all that crap. Yeah, right, he could just see himself gelling his hair, growing designer stubble and working in some office kissing arse, climbing the ladder and kicking out at those behind him.

Ryan felt like he had lead in his shoes as he trudged home from the station. He walked in to find Scott trying to wrestle a bottle of champagne from his father’s hand.

‘Dad, give it to me. You know what happened last time you opened one.’

‘Oh, yeah, tricky little buggers, those corks. Your mother loved that vase.’

Ryan shrugged off his backpack. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Hey, bro. I got into nursing. Did well enough in the exams and got the offer today.’

Ryan hugged him and patted his back. ‘Well done. That’s really terrific, Scottie.’

Richard sighed loudly. ‘Yeah, except that it’s in Western Australia, the uni that he’s gotten into.’

‘Oh.’

Carolyn came in the back door, a wilted-looking pot plant in her hands. ‘It’s a good thing, Ryan. I don’t want my sons to be sorry losers, still at home with their parents when they’re in their thirties and forties.’

Carolyn had her back to them. As she talked, she turned on the tap and held the pot plant underneath. She didn’t see the look on Ryan’s face. The doorbell rang.

‘I’ll get that.’ Ryan decided his day was going downhill as fast as the big dipper. Stephanie skipped through the door, ran straight across to Scott and planted a big, smacking kiss on his mouth.

‘Just got your text. Congratulations, big boy. Bubbly? Yes, please.’

Richard suggested ordering in pizza for dinner but Ryan insisted on cooking. He had to keep himself busy and avoid talking about himself. No way was he going to rain on his brother’s parade.

Chapter 63

The bright fluorescent lighting of the supermarket hurt Ryan's eyes, so he kept his head down as he tossed potatoes, carrots and pumpkin in his basket. He looked at the green beans and decided to opt for frozen ones. It might be a celebration for Scott but Ryan sure didn't feel up to gourmet tonight. He'd get a frozen dessert to cheer things up a bit. As he reached into the freezer, arm outstretched to a chocolate Bavarian, a voice behind him said, 'Go for the pastry instead and I'll make us a pie with home-grown apples.'

Ryan swung around, almost taking the freezer door with him.

'What the...'

He rubbed his eyes, but it wasn't an apparition, it really was Laura. He grabbed her by the waist and swung her around in circles.

'Hey, you're making me dizzy.'

Ryan held her close and tight.

'Now you're squashing me. I guess you are pleased to see me, hey Ryan Bentley?'

'You have no idea, but what are you doing here. Is there trouble with the boys?'

Laura slipped her arm around his waist and leaned in.

'Stop fretting, everything is fine. I missed you and Jim gave me the weekend off.'

'Missed me, huh? How bad?'

Laura poked him in the ribs. 'Stop fishing for compliments. I guess you've grown on me. I called in at your house and they told me you would be here.'

...

Hugh Fitzpatrick was worried about his niece. He didn't think she was being rational. Like most women she was thinking with her heart and not her brain. He had been proud of his logic in marrying his late wife Katherine. Their marriage had been very pleasant. Her manners were good, her taste impeccable and she entertained well. He suddenly recalled a wistful look on her face before she caught him looking. Probably it had been due to her wish for another child which hadn't eventuated. Thank goodness it hadn't, one teenage son was quite enough to cope with. Hell, the whole thing was a mess. Patrick had been stupid, obviously easily led by that rat-tailed youngest Bentley and where was his son now? Up there with that...Kit, that was it. What a silly, fanciful name. Give a child an untenable name and that's how they end up. No surprise there. Still, he trusted that Jim chap to sort his son out. Jim might be just an employee, but he seemed solid. No, it was Laura he was worried about. He had a fair idea what she was up to, back in town again for no apparent reason. He'd be

damned if he'd let her throw herself away on that Ryan Bentley and his low-life family.

...

Laura and Ryan were cooking the celebratory dinner at Laura's place, so they could talk in private. After Ryan had stared at a carrot for about thirty seconds, Laura asked. 'Are you planning to sculpt that carrot?' No reply.

'Earth to Ryan!'

Ryan started and dropped the carrot.

'Sorry, I lost my job today, Laura.'

'Oh.'

'"Oh" – is that all you can say?'

Ryan washed the carrot roughly and then attacked it with gusto, his back to Laura. Peelings flew rapidly across the kitchen bench.

'I liked that job. It didn't pay much though, welfare jobs never do, so I've got about a hundred bucks in the bank and absolutely no idea what I'm going to bloody well do. I suppose you didn't approve of me working with ex-criminals, but I liked it.'

Laura threw an apple that hit Ryan firmly on the neck.

'Ouch. What are you doing?'

Laura pointed an apple peeler at him. 'I realise you are angry, but don't you take it out on me and don't *ever* put words in my mouth. OK? I thought it was great that you were doing something real, something useful.'

'Huh! I probably didn't make much difference. Should I do something fancy with these carrots?'

Laura moved over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind and rested her chin on his shoulder.

'If you made even one of them think differently about their life, that's enough. People forget about the little stuff, but it's important. Those forks in the road where you don't know which way to go, they are huge.' She slapped him on the behind.

'Stick some honey in the carrots, honey.'

Ryan found himself smiling involuntarily. Thank God he had found Laura. He might have lost his job but there was no way he was going to lose her.

...

Everyone agreed that the dinner was beautiful, but the mood was strangely subdued. Carolyn announced that she had been given a grant and would use it for a trip to America to do further research. Richard said he didn't know that he could spare the time and money to go but he was assured the trip didn't include him; he was to stay home and look after Kit. It felt to Ryan as if the whole family was fragmenting, people heading off in different directions, while he was rudderless. He was glad when dessert was over and he and Laura headed back to her place. As he held her close while she slept he knew this was where he belonged, whatever it took.

...

Sunday was bright and clear. Stephanie had them all organised to visit a few markets and then go to the museum to see the latest exhibition. She was teasing Scott about going west, where culture was thin on the ground, but he reminded her that Fremantle was supposed to be awesome as a result of money spent during the America's Cup years previously. He had some photos of the university he would be attending and they all admitted it looked magnificent, surrounded by beech trees with a fountain in the centre before the imposing-looking entrance. He was to live on site until he found someone to share with. As he and Stephie exchanged quips and laughter, Ryan thought they had more of a friendship than anything else. He finally told them about losing his job and they sympathised – contract jobs were here to stay for their generation. Scott pushed for Ryan to go with him to Perth straight away, saying he could always get bar work before anything else came along and they could find somewhere to live together. Laura surprised them all by interrupting. 'I need Ryan to help me, not to go half-way across the continent.' This created raised eyebrows in all but Ryan, who merely smiled quietly. Laura was to return home the next day, so she and Ryan sat up in bed watching an old movie and eating cheese and bread and drinking wine.

Chapter 64

Gwen was battling with the cryptic crossword when the doorbell chimed and Harvey went into his barking frenzy. If this was another of those energy supply people, Gwen intended chewing their ear off. There had been three at the door in the last four weeks and all wanting to see her power bill. Bloody cheek. None of their business and she had told them so. She had her best fierce expression in place as she opened the door.

‘Gran, you look like you’re going to kill someone. Have I come at a bad time?’

Gwen unlocked the security door and gave him a big hug.

‘It could never be a bad time to see you, sweetheart. Come on in. Harvey, leave Ryan alone! You look a little peaky, are you alright Ryan?’

‘I’ve had a bit of a shock, Gran. I need to tell someone and you’re the best listener I know.’

‘Sounds serious. Luckily I’ve made some chocolate muffins. I find chocolate very soothing. I’ll just pop polly on.’ Gwen turned and looked at her grandson. ‘Unless you need something stronger. I believe I have brandy somewhere.’

‘No, Gran, tea is just what I need.’

Ryan sat at the kitchen table. Harvey sprawled out at his feet, with one control paw on Ryan’s foot. He rubbed the dog’s head and Harvey thumped his tail. How many times had he sat at this table with its scrubbed pine top and mismatched wooden chairs, all with different coloured cushions. As his Gran reached for the old tea caddy, he realised that this was the only kitchen he knew where you got real tea leaves and not a tea bag. He had bought the hideous teapot cover for her years ago as a birthday present. He really should try and replace it, it looked like a bilious frog.

‘I hear Scottie is going to WA to do his nursing training, is that what’s bothering you? You two have always been so close; it will be hard on you.’ Gwen went to the kitchen dresser and pulled out her best matching cups, saucers and plates. Mugs were alright for coffee but for tea it had to be real china cups.

‘No, that’s alright. I was upset at first but I think it’s the right thing for Scott. It’s time he did something by himself, for himself.’

Gwen poured the tea carefully and put two muffins on his plate. ‘Is it the lovely Laura then? Have you had a barney?’

‘No, but it is to do with her, Gran. It’s ...embarrassing.’ Ryan fiddled with his teaspoon.

‘I’m old enough to have seen and heard most things, so for heaven’s sake, Ryan, spill the beans.’

Ryan straightened in his chair and crossed his arms.

‘Laura’s uncle invited me in for a drink when I took the prints to his house last night’

‘Sounds courteous.’

Ryan laughed bitterly. ‘Yeah, that’s what I thought, he’s being friendly, what’s the harm. He started out being the perfect host, even offered me a whisky, made sure to tell me it was a single malt.’

‘Pretentious twit!’

‘Of course he grilled me about my family and prospects but once he knew I was out of a job the conversation went downhill like a mack truck. I couldn’t believe it, Gran, I felt like I was in some weird reality show, I couldn’t believe what he was suggesting.’

‘Did he offer you a job?’

‘No. He offered me money, a lot of money, to split with Laura for good, once Kit’s time at her property is finished.’

‘Bloody hell! Sounds like something out of an old-fashioned novel.’

‘Yes, but there’s more. After I told him Laura was worth more to me than any money he could offer, he pointed out that we come from such different worlds that I could never make her happy in the end. She would tire of me, so it would really be for my own good if I thought with my head and not my heart and finished it before anyone got hurt.’

Gwen stood up and attacked a muffin so ferociously half it jumped off the plate and on to the floor. Harvey consumed it in one gulp. Gwen shook her head.

‘Quite the speechmaker. You know I dislike violence but that man needs a good slap. Who does he think he is? Lady Catherine de Bourgh?’

‘I was *so* angry I thought my head would burst, but I held it together and told him Laura could choose to end it any time she wanted but that I hoped she never would.’

‘Good for you! So you really are serious about her.’

‘Yeah, but the thing is, Gran, he’s her family and he obviously thinks I’m some kind of low-life who can be bought off, so what kind of future, for us, does that predict?’

‘Oh, Ryan, you know you can choose your friends but not your relations. It’s not Laura’s fault that she has a pig of an uncle. Are you going to tell her?’

‘I don’t know. What do you think?’

Gwen moved her hand from side to side. ‘I really don’t know. I think she needs to have some indication of his shenanigans. If he’s as devious as that, he might well try

some other way of putting you in her bad books. However, from what little I've seen of her, Laura is perfectly able to take care of herself, and her uncle.'

'Yeah, she is smart and sensible and bloody gorgeous.'

...

Due to its isolation, storms descended with little warning and unrelenting fury on Laura's homestead. Late afternoon, she called them all inside as thick black clouds hovered. She set the boys to hunting for candles with a reward for who found the most. Jim was fretting about the roof and arguing that he could get up there and secure a section that was flapping wildly. Laura seldom pulled rank but this time she was resolute; she would break the bloody ladder before she would let him go up there in this weather. Finally, with a shake of his head, Jim went out to make sure Fairy Bred was secure in the barn and had water and food. The few sheep and cattle could look after themselves, storms seldom upset them.

By five o'clock they had the lights on and Laura was considering an early dinner. Kit and Patrick had returned with an assortment of candles and were arguing over whether two half-candles counted as one or two. Luckily, she had found two chocolate-coated ice-creams in the freezer, so they were happy. She sent them down to the basement for wood for the old combustion stove; she didn't trust the electric stove to last through long enough to cook dinner. She could hear Patrick warning Kit to watch out for spiders that might land in his hair and spin a web. She smiled to herself as she realised her little cousin had become more resilient of late, lording his knowledge of country life over Kit, whose street smarts weren't much use in a rural setting. She wished Ryan was here to cook with her. She mentally slapped herself for the thought that she hoped he hadn't found a job yet.

'I just want you here, with me, babe.'

Jim walked into the kitchen, hauling off his raincoat. He raised his eyebrows.

'You talking to me?'

Laura's face turned crimson. 'Of course not!'

Jim glanced around the room and bent down to peer under the table, before holding out his hands and grinning.

'Must be that old ghost again.'

'What ghost?' Kit dropped some kindling in a box beside the stove. Patrick followed, carrying an armful of small logs.

'He's just joking.' Laura squashed newspaper and started to fill inside the fire door. The old stove would take a while to reach a good heat for cooking. Patrick leaned across her and put his ice-cream stick on the paper.

'I remember Dad once saying something about a ghost up here.'

‘Cool! Hope I get to see it.’ Kit was peering into cupboards, searching for possible pre-dinner snacks. Laura reached up behind him and handed down a box of savoury shapes. She honestly couldn’t believe how much the boys ate. Not much point in using the old, ‘you’ll spoil your dinner’ routine, they were always up for second servings. A loud clap of thunder nearly made them all jump.

‘Come on, Kit, let’s go upstairs and watch the lightning. It’s grouse from up there.’ Their boots thudded up the stairs, taking two at a time.

...

Ryan had trawled through all the job-search sites to no avail. All the jobs that sounded vaguely interesting had selection criteria he couldn’t fill in a month of Sundays. He rapidly realised that he was both over- and under-qualified. Go figure! His father had suggested he sign on for the dole until something turned up, but that made him think of Laura’s uncle Hugh and his stomach muscles clenched. Sheer frustration saw him head off for the local pool where he swam lap after lap until exhaustion sent him home.

...

Laura had just taken a casserole out of the wood stove and Jim was mashing potatoes when the electricity went out and the rain slammed into the roof and windows. Laura yelled loudly up the stairs, telling Patrick to take the torch beside her bed and head carefully down the stairs. A ribbon of lightning lit up the room as she placed candles around the kitchen. As they sat down to eat, Jim stood abruptly and opened the back door.

‘I thought so. Hear that banging noise, Laura? I think it’s Fairy Bred, the thunder must be making her skittish.’

Laura started up from her chair but Jim waved her back as he grabbed his raincoat from behind the door and checked for the torch in the pocket.

‘No point in both of us getting wet.’ He grabbed a couple of carrots and put them in his other pocket. ‘I’ll settle her down, won’t be long.’

The two boys were on their second helpings and asking about dessert when Laura realised Jim still hadn’t returned. The thunder and lightening had stopped and the rain turned into a continuous drizzle. Laura went to see what had happened to Jim, only to find him sitting on the concrete floor of the barn, his right boot removed to show a very swollen ankle.

‘Jim, what happened! Are you OK?’ She squatted down beside him, noticing his grimace and the size of his ankle.

‘Damned horse kicked me and I landed awkwardly. I think she’s somewhat embarrassed.’

Sure enough, Fairy Bred stood in a corner, head lowered.

‘I’m pretty sure that’s broken, Jim.’

‘Might be just a sprain.’

‘Dream on. You can’t put any weight on it, can you?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll get the boys and the ride-on mower and we’ll get you back to the house.’

Laura stepped outside the barn, and putting two fingers in her mouth let out a shrieking whistle. Two heads appeared at the kitchen window and she beckoned them over.

...

Ryan was flicking through the channels with the remote when his mobile rang. The screen said Laura. Yes! He hung up just as Scott walked through the door. Ryan was grinning.

‘Good news, bro?’

‘Yeah, Jim has busted his ankle.’

Scott widened his eyes and put his head on one side.

‘I’ll explain later. I gotta go pack a bag for tomorrow.’

Chapter 65

Jim, half-leg in plaster, glasses perched on his nose, was marking items off a list. He sighed as Laura handed him a mug of tea.

‘Worst possible time for this to happen. The next couple of weeks are crucial, Laura. There are people coming to quote on the roof and balconies, the painting, the French polishing, carpet cleaning, not to mention fencing and the front garden. They all need checking out, seeing how much help we can give and then co-ordinating. The Trust wants it all finished in three months, and I’m stuck in this thing for six weeks!’

‘Stop stressing and finish your tea, Jim. Ryan should be here about midday. It’s good timing in that he’s free right now.’

‘He doesn’t have a clue what he’s letting himself in for. Once he sees this list he might just head off back home again. Where are the boys?’

‘They’re scraping and bogging up in the old servant’s quarters. Not their favourite task but they’ve got some horrible music blasting out and enough snacks to keep them going.’

Laura raised her head and grinned as she heard the sound of tyres on gravel. She was out of the chair and through the door before Jim could open his mouth.

Ryan was hunched over the car, checking for any damage to the paintwork.

‘Hey you,’ Laura checked her watch. ‘Did you low fly here?’

‘Nah, left early. How’s Jim?’

‘Grumpy as a bear with a sore head.’

Ryan held out both his arms.

‘Do I get a proper welcome then, before I have to face him?’

Ryan studied the list Jim had provided and instantly thought of his uncle. Ryan knew his own strengths, he was happy to do the grunt work, but this was a big project with a timeline. It needed a set of skills and a big-picture view that he just didn’t possess.

‘Laura, do you have room for two more people to stay?’

‘Only if you sleep with me.’

‘Think I could manage that.’

Jim was looking from one to the other, not sure what was going on.

‘What two people?’

‘I’m thinking we need some expertise here. Do you remember my uncle David and his wife, Elise?’

‘Yes, I liked them.’

‘David’s an ex-plumber, who also does stints for large urban developments as a project manager. This could be right up his alley.’

Jim pointed a crutch at Ryan.

‘Yeah, but what does he charge?’

‘Jim,’ Laura stood with her hands on her hips, ‘I’m not exactly poor, you know.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘So, what is the point?’ Laura’s voice was raised.

Ryan put his hand on her shoulder. ‘It’s OK, Laura. I know what Jim means. How’s this for a plan? I see if David is available, he may not be, but if he is, I ask him merely to come and advise me as his beloved nephew.’

When neither raised any objections Ryan headed outside and up the hill to get a better signal for his cell phone.

Jim thought, just maybe, he would shortly become superfluous, so he emailed his friend, Pete, who had been urging him for years to pay a visit to his beach shack in Warrnambool. He could easily get a lift there from a mate. He deserved a vacation and he knew he wouldn’t be able to resist butting-in if he stayed.

...

Laura didn’t think she had ever met anyone so endearing as Elise. She was gentle, yet tough, and the boys soon found the steel beneath the sweet smile. She also knew her way around furnishings and the best ways to clean and refurbish them. After an enjoyable girls’ trip to Hamilton they made their way up to a second-storey room, colour charts in hand. A window was wide open and as they entered, Laura and Elise could hear Ryan and David’s voices drifting in from the balcony, where they were banging in loose nails. Laura went towards the window but Elise held her arm and whispered, ‘We just might hear what males *really* talk about to each other.’ Laura grinned and they both stood to one side of the window, out of sight from the balcony. The conversation, held intermittently between thuds was not what they expected.

‘So, who is this dude?’

‘Her uncle, Patrick’s father.’

‘Was he serious?’

‘As an earthquake.’

‘You’re telling me he seriously thought he could buy you off?’

‘Oh yeah, he had his cheque book at the ready.’

Laura stood stock still, mouth half open, her fists clenched. Elise hadn’t a clue what was going on but Laura looked like she needed comforting, so Elise lightly rubbed her back.

‘But why?’

‘Because he thinks I’m not good enough for her.’

‘Well, he obviously doesn’t know you.’

‘He knows I don’t have a job or any great prospects on the horizon. He probably thinks I’m after her money, so in that sense his offer had a certain logic. I don’t have much to offer anyone.’

‘Logic, my arse! You have plenty to offer, you’re young, healthy and good-hearted, which sounds like a lot more than he has. Anyway, possessions mean bugger all when you come down to it.’

‘Actually I do have something to give her. Gran gave it to me when I told her about this. I don’t know if she’ll take it though.’

‘Is it jewellery?’

‘Yeah, it is.’

‘She’ll take it, women love jewellery, maybe even more than flowers.’

The two women’s heads suddenly poked through the window.

‘Who died and made you the expert on women, David?’

‘Uh oh.’

‘Shit!’

Hammers dropped and nails pinged across the planks as both men scrambled to their feet.

‘How much did he offer you, Ryan?’

‘Thirty thousand.’

‘The lousy bastard! I’m worth more than that.’

‘That’s what I told him.’

‘I should really give him the shits and marry you.’ Laura started to stamp out of the room and down the stairs. She was furious and horribly confused. Ryan yelled after her.

‘Are you proposing to me, Laura?’

A half-snarl, half-scream was all that answered him.

‘Should I go after her?’

‘No, let her work off her anger. I’ll go and make coffee.’ Elise tapped David on the cheek. ‘You’ll keep.’

....

Laura knew she had to do something physical or she would explode. How dare he! Treating her like a thing. Her face went red with embarrassment at the thought of how Ryan must have felt. And to think she had made derogatory remarks about *his* family. She ran across to the barn, straddled the motor bike and sped off across the paddocks. She tried to clear her mind of everything except the wind and the trees, the rumble of the engine beneath her and the earth flying past. When she had had enough, she pulled in to the spot near the creek where Wally was buried. She sat on a rock and thought about the last twelve months – how much her life had changed, how much she wanted to stay with Ryan, wanted to grow old with him. But if she continued to pull scenes the way she did, he probably wouldn’t stick around. She recited, for Wally, all the things she loved about Ryan and said a prayer that he could find as many to say about her.

...

Later that night, over dinner, Laura apologised for her uncle’s behaviour and her own in responding to it.

‘Stop being so polite, damn it, Laura. You can’t choose your family.’

Laura laughed bitterly. Elise was confused.

‘What’s that funny laugh for?’

‘Oh, it’s just so ironic, Elise. I have so very little in the way of family and what I do have is odious.’

‘Hey, consider yourself lucky that you have so few to be embarrassed about. I have some this husband of mind is *never* going to meet.’

Elise soon had all three of them laughing hard as she described some of her relatives in America, especially the ones down south. David accused her of exaggerating their accents but she swore it was true and that *Deliverance* wasn’t just a movie. She described a memorable Christmas there as a child when she had been given a plastic rubber plant.

Ryan was brushing his teeth when Laura called out from the bedroom.

‘Why did you say I might not accept it?’

‘Huh? Accept what?’

‘The thing that your Gran gave you for *me*.’

Ryan reached inside the bedside cabinet and pulled out a very small box. He handed it over without a word. Laura stared at the box.

‘Oh, it’s a ring then?’

‘Yep, it’s actually an engagement ring but it doesn’t have to be. I mean you could wear it on your other hand, if you like it. You mightn’t even like it. It’s probably too old-fashioned. Er, I have to go to the toilet.’

Ryan sat on the closed toilet lid with his head in his hands. What was going on with him, he had been babbling like an idiot. He splashed some water on his face. When he returned to the bedroom Laura was holding up the ring and turning it over on her palm.

‘Aren’t you going to try it on?’

‘Look at the size of it, you dill. Did you really think it would fit on my sausage-like fingers?’

He went to take it from her but she pulled her hand away and slapped him with her other one.

‘I didn’t say I didn’t want it. It can be made to fit me. It’s beautiful, Ryan.’

She held it under the bedside lamp. It was a rounded pink gold with three tiny diamonds set between delicate frond-like shapes.

‘This feels weird.’

‘Weird good or weird bad?’

‘Just strange. We haven’t known each other all that long, Ryan.’

‘No, but we are good together aren’t we?’

‘We’re excellent together.’

‘Good, glad we sorted that one.’

Chapter 65

Ryan discovered that when Laura was tired and happy she went to sleep like an express train, often in mid-sentence. The last few weeks had been both exhilarating and exhausting. He remembered Elise and Laura's heads bent over material swatches and stained-glass patterns, Kit kicking the tyres of the ride-on mower, himself up a ladder. He would forever associate David with the four words, 'we can fix that'. All of them sitting exhausted at sunset on the back veranda. One particularly hilarious night Elise had prepared a barbecue solely with vegetable kebabs and marinated tofu. The looks of dismay on Patrick and Kit's faces as they searched for sausages were very funny. The chorus of cicadas had drowned out the human voices and everyone headed inside when the mosquito army landed.

In just over twelve months Ryan's life had taken a convoluted journey, from a suburban house in Geelong to a lopsided house and existence in Kew, to Laura's bloody great mansion in the middle of nowhere. The hard work was nearly all finished; David and Elise would be half-way around the world by now. Kit had returned to Kew and Ryan hoped he'd learned a bit more about life. Patrick was still with them, mainly because he had an anxiety attack when his school was mentioned. Ryan suspected he had been bullied for a long time. Laura was working on Hugh to get him shifted, but that was a work in progress involving all sorts of conditions and promises.

The National Trust was set to open up the house to the public. Laura had maintained a small number of rooms, sectioned off at the top of the house, that wouldn't be shown. They were to be there for Jim, for as long as he wanted, and for Laura, when and if she needed to stay. Although Ryan admired the place, especially after putting in so much work, he didn't really like staying there; felt like a fish out of water. They were moving back into Laura's unit in Kew for a while. Ryan was planning on doing a diploma of education. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to teach, but it seemed like a forward movement. Laura was to work, voluntarily at first, in an animal shelter. Jim was coming back to be caretaker and look after Fairy Bred.

Chapter 66

Over the following four seasons, Persimmon Crescent was witness to many arrivals and departures, the satellite dishes crackling with emails and text messages. Scott, having secured a university placement in Western Australia, was farewelled in both the monstrosity and the townhouse. In the former, sadness was mixed with optimism but in the latter, hilarity prevailed. Stephanie, Lance and Abigail had a communication breakdown, resulting in an avalanche of travel goods for Scott, which he didn't need anyway as he was driving across the Nullarbor. He left at four-thirty in the morning to avoid tearful farewells, only to find Stephanie in her dressing gown and slippers tapping at his car window as he was about to drive off.

'Steph, what are you doing? I'll bet you've never been up this early.'

'Have too,' she rubbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her gown, 'it's the best time to go fishing.'

'You go fishing?'

'Nah, course not, but I thought it sounded cool. Give us a last hug?'

They stood, locked in an embrace, in the middle of Persimmon Crescent just as the sky was lightening. Stephanie stood waving as he pulled away. In the rear-view mirror she looked like a small child. Scott felt excited about a new future but sad at leaving so many good friends behind.

Ryan and Laura were much changed when they shifted back to Persimmon Crescent a few months later. It took Stephanie a mere week to decide they were way too much in love for her to be around, and so she started arranging a return to Canberra and lining up a job in the public service. She felt she had achieved her goal of grounding Laura and so was perfectly entitled to keep the sports car. But to cover herself, she sneaked Hugh's private email address from Laura's computer. She chewed on a memory stick as she carefully worded it. One didn't say 'Hi' to someone like Hugh, but she didn't want to call him 'dear'.

Bfitzman@gmail.com

Hello Hugh,

As Laura is so content thought I would return to Canberra. Do you need any dollars for the car? Am a bit strapped at present as no job yet so will be in contact when in better position.

Kind Regards
Stephanie.

Hugh sniffed when he received it. Cunning little bugger. He decided against answering, he certainly didn't *need* any dollars and he had leased it anyway but he'd leave it hanging, keep her in the loop in case she was needed in future. Yes, bloody hell, Laura did seem content with that Bentley bogan. He guessed it could be worse

though, the boy was at least doing something toward a career, even if it was only in teaching.

Laura moved between city and country but the city was taking precedence as she began to feel very much a part of the mad but welcoming Bentley family. When she felt the need for open space she went back to Jim and Fairy Bred, but this happened less and less and Jim often phoned and texted. She was learning a massage technique for animals, mainly horses and dogs, which saw her become a regular visitor to Gwen and Harvey.

Gwen ended up solving the Patrick problem by having him as her boarder until he finished his secondary education. Patrick's grades improved exponentially under Gwen's supervision and excellent cooking. The bullying at school was stopped by a combination of his increasing self-confidence and lessons from Gwen in using the sharp side of your tongue. Patrick also gradually was given access to the shed, which put him in seventh heaven, stocked as it was with every tool imaginable.

Kit was at first delighted to be the only one left with the olds, but he soon experienced the downside, which was a lack of opportunities to slip under his parents' radar. He was resentful of Patrick until he learnt that his grandmother stood over him until he completed his homework each night at the kitchen table. Kit was a lot happier after he managed to make some money by delivering junk mail and local papers on his trusty skateboard. He did wish Ryan would pop the question, though, so he could be part of a much richer family.

After a major slump in business, Richard took up a job with a large construction company, where the regular company of other blokes soon compensated his feelings of failure. Carolyn continued with her studies but allowed herself to be distracted by Ryan and Laura on a regular basis. By spring, she could often be found on the balcony of the townhouse, wine glass in hand, discussing with Ryan whether he should go for a primary or secondary teaching job.

'You've done a placement in both secondary and primary now, Ryan, so what are your thoughts?'

'I really can't decide yet, Mum. There are so many Kits in secondary schools I think I'd go spare.'

'So, primary then?'

'Yeah, but what if I got the preps? They cry all the time. At first I thought they must be frightened of me, but other teachers told me that's just what they do.'

Laura had been sitting there quietly, a bemused smile on her face. Carolyn glanced her way.

'What do you think, Laura?'

‘I think he would be great at either.’ She kissed Ryan on the cheek. ‘Anyway, you have a while yet to decide, maybe you could try both as a CRT. I’ll go and get some biccies and cheese.’

Carolyn leaned forward and lowered her voice. ‘I wasn’t entirely comfortable with Laura at first, Ryan, but now I think she’s an absolute gem and you would be a fool to let her go.’

‘Believe me, Mum. That is not going to happen, not if I can help it.’

Toward the end of the year David and Elise returned to Australia to stay. David and Richard discussed how they could smarten up the house without spending a fortune and Elise renewed her friendship with Laura. They had stayed in touch by email, but wanting the latest goss and a bit of girl talk, she shooed Ryan across the road to help his father and uncle. As they sat at the kitchen bench drinking coffee, Elise brought Laura up to speed with her family’s distress at her intention of living half-way across the world from them. Elise laughed.

‘Families! You just can’t please them. Oh, hell, I’m sorry Laura. I keep forgetting...’

‘It’s fine, Elise, really. This may sound silly but I’m beginning to feel like I do have a family now, and not just Hugh and Patrick. Ryan’s family have been fantastic, especially Gwen, she is one amazing woman. Did you know she has Patrick boarding with her?’

‘Yes, I’d heard that. I think the jury is still out on whether she likes me though. She was obviously worried that her youngest son would stay in America to please me, but guess what, we’re here to stay!’

‘Fantastic! I know Ryan will be ecstatic, and it would be great for me now that Steph has gone. Even when you have a man you treasure, you need girlfriends too.’

‘Amen to that.’ They clicked coffee cups.

‘So, er, any marriage plans yet? Sorry, don’t answer, that was probably a rude question.’

Elise grinned.

‘I could very well ask you the same thing. You’re still wearing that ring, I see.’

‘Yes, I am, and that’s kind of enough commitment for me, at this stage, anyway. I’m not used to having so many people seem to, well, *like* me and I like them. When I think of how I used to act around them I feel ashamed. I keep thinking I’ll wake up one day and it will all be a dream, they will see through me and they will, just... disappear.’

‘That must be frightening.’

‘Yeah, but I know where it’s coming from, plus Ryan is so grounded. You know, Elise, I find myself smiling, laughing and just feeling so damned happy when I’m with him.’

‘You deserve to feel that way, girl. Everyone deserves some happiness; it’s cruel that some people don’t get much of it.’

...

Gino and Ryan were minding baby Zac, giving Angela a little respite. Ryan was amazed at Gino’s capability with such a tiny person. He bottle-fed him with expressed milk and then changed a nappy that made Ryan want to puke.

‘How do you do that, mate? You’ve taken to this baby business like a duck to water. How come?’

Gino looked thoughtful. ‘I don’t know that I could do it with anyone else’s child, but when it’s your own it’s totally different, totally awesome. I still can’t believe we produced this perfect little baby. People say that having babies is natural, but there are so many things that can go wrong. One of the women in our pre-natal classes had a stillborn.’

‘Shit!’

‘Yeah. So I feel very grateful. You want to have a hold of him?’ Gino held the baby out to Ryan.

Ryan held Zac in his arms and studied the baby’s toes. ‘How is Ange coping?’

‘Apart from being tired I think she’s alright. Our families are great, especially Angie’s sister and mother. They’re so loud and over the top but they make her laugh, which I think is important. How are the Bentley clan?’

‘All good. Scott is loving his uni course. Kit is getting a little more sensible, Dad likes his new job and Mum is kind of different lately, not so obsessive, she spends quite a bit of time with me and Laura. Hell, this never occurred to me before, that she might be lonely in an all-male household, and she’s never had many female friends.’

‘So Laura could be filling a ...gap?’

‘Laura fills in all the gaps, Gino. She is a completely different person to the one I thought she was. I was a judgemental prick.’

‘I seem to remember she didn’t think much of you, either.’

Ryan laughed. ‘We both acted on first impressions and didn’t give the other a chance. It could so easily not have been and I would have missed out on so much.’

...

Driving home from Gino's, Ryan thought back to his first encounters with Laura: the acrimonious times, the snipes at each other, how he thought she was defined by her wealth. Then there were the great getting-to-know-you moments, a gradual realisation that she was a unique individual with a great capacity for kindness. Ryan couldn't imagine life without Laura, even if it meant putting up with her uncle, who had a knack for arriving on the doorstep at inopportune times, usually involving sex, laughter, or both. Often Ryan would feel his temper rising at one of Hugh's quips about the teaching profession. He could mentally see his fist connecting with that arrogant jaw, but then Laura would gently squeeze his shoulder and the realisation would emerge that there was no such thing as perfection: life threw you things to catch, like his Laura, and things to endure, like Hugh.

Chapter 1: Making Connections

Several years ago I was tutoring students at Victoria University in a subject called “Romance & Realism”. One of the texts they were studying was Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and we were discussing the plot, structure and characterisation, in the original and screen versions. At the time I was also reading *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, by psychologist and science journalist, Daniel Goleman (1995). I was not reading Goleman’s text for any academic purposes but rather because the common use of the term “emotional intelligence” (EI) in popular culture had intrigued me. As I read Goleman I began to see immediate correlations between the emotional journeys of Austen’s pivotal characters and the emotionally intelligent behaviours Goleman was articulating. Goleman’s book, more anecdotal than evidence based, led me on to discussions and further reading and investigation about EI. I began to wonder if EI could help me understand the strength of *Pride and Prejudice*, especially its enduring popularity and critical acclaim and whether this understanding could lead to insights that I could utilise in my own creative writing.

My research question thus became: what insight can be gained and what contribution can be made by using the concept of EI to read and analyse Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and how might those insights contribute to the writing of a contemporary Australian adaptation?

Whilst one of my objectives was to posit the notion that the ideas and concepts of EI could contribute to the analyses and interpretations in literary criticism of *Pride and Prejudice*, as a creative writer my main interest was in the implementation of those ideas in the narrative and characterisation of my own novel. Thus I come to this thesis primarily as a creative writer rather than as a literary theorist seeking to break new ground in Austen criticism. I do, however, hope that my notion of using EI as a tool for analysis of literature, particularly in relation to characterisation, may strike a chord for others, including writers, literary theorists and literature teachers.

In this introduction I will give a necessarily brief, selective overview of some of the literary criticism on Austen. It is impossible in this exegesis to do justice to the plethora of the critical reviews of Austen or even those directly relating to *Pride and Prejudice*. The selection is determined by my overwhelming interest in what her narrative techniques, plot structure and intense character development can teach other writers in terms of crafting a novel. I hope to show, through this exegesis that many writers can learn from Austen.

One reason for this enormous extent of scholarly engagement with Austen’s novels through the years, from many and varied perspectives as new forms of analysis arise is summarised well by literary critics Lambdin & Lambdin (2000, p.53):

What is astonishing and gratifying about surveying the critical terrain of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is that it reveals the extent to which the novel resists any final assessment and opens itself anew to the varied methodologies and perspectives that inform the critical and theoretical literature from year to year.

This resisting of a final assessment I believe is one of the reasons for the wide differences of opinion on the novel since the time of its first publication. It seems that

the novel is read and re-read by females and males, by academics and those who read purely for pleasure. This is particularly remarkable given the novel's limited scope which has many times been noted, not least by Austen herself, as per her famous reference to "two inches of ivory" in the Austen-Leigh memoir.

The novel has been analysed and interpreted by the gamut of twentieth and twenty first century critics since Leavis, who in seeking to create a 'canon' of literature gives Austen her pre-eminence in *The Great Tradition*. The length and breadth of academic criticism, new-critical, Marxist, feminist, historicist and postmodernist, on Austen is as astounding as is the place her name occupies in all facets of contemporary creativity and general knowledge. As recently as August 2013 a huge controversy arose in Britain over the lobbying of a journalist and politician, for an image of Jane Austen instead of Charles Darwin to be placed on the ten pound note. (Rolphe, K. 2013)

Such is Austen's maintained readership two hundred years after the first publication that publishers HarperCollins are asking reputable authors to write contemporary re-workings of all Austen's novels. To date they have contracted Val McDermid for *Northanger Abbey*, Joanna Trollope for *Sense and Sensibility* and American novelist Curtis Sittenfeld to re-write *Pride and Prejudice*. (Campbell, L. 2012)

In terms of a somewhat prosaic Australian connection with Austen, in the last week of June, 2012, a gardening expert on ABC radio was mentioning how many new varieties of roses are named after famous people – his example was Jane Austen.

At times during this research the task of providing some new perspective on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has seemed overwhelming. This is a novel that was not only widely read and critiqued in Austen's own lifetime, has never been out of print and has been given contemporary relevance by a plethora of sequels, prequels and spinoffs in text and, particularly since the 1990s, also in film and television.

As early as 1821 Richard Whately would identify a quality that had previously eluded reviewers, who had given only tempered praise:

Jane Austen's devotion to the ordinary, recognisable, often chaotic doings of everyday life had shown, perhaps for the first time, how fiction could not only enthrall without seeking to astonish, but also enlighten without the need to preach. (Waldron 2005, p. 90)

Whately, by noting Austen's concern for the everyday, is here referring to Austen's participation in the emergence of the novel as marking a shift from the universal, in terms of the epic and the romance, to the particular, the quotidian events of everyday life. This concern is highlighted in the title of Paula Byrne's *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* (2013). Prior to the rise of the novel as a dominant genre, in the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries most literary texts had, via an heroic figure and deeds, sought to teach virtue. The shift was largely from a religious and philosophical traditionalism to a secular and realist form of writing. As Watt indicates:

This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. (Watt 1957, p.13)

Whately shows a very early recognition that the nineteenth century burgeoning of the novel as a dominant literary form was developing its own distinctive preoccupations. The twentieth century critic, Donovan (1999, p. 12) emphasises the ways in which the novel as genre broke with the past:

The novel arose in the modern period, a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and mediaeval heritage by its rejection – or at least its attempted rejection – of universals.

The shift from the heroic, universal and exalted to the particular and domestic heralded an increase in women writers being published. There was also an increased interest in the biography of the novelist and the possible connections between his or her life and writing. Thus critics began to look at not only the world of the writers but also their possible literary influences.

Todd (2006, p. 31) observes that “...in her defence of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* Austen praises only fiction that conveys ‘the most thorough knowledge of human nature.’ Richardson and Fielding, her male predecessors are seen by critics to have influenced at least several of her novels, “...both F.R. Leavis and Ian Watt saw Richardson and Fielding as parenting Austen, who combined their qualities of interiority and irony, realism and satire to form an author superior to both.” (Todd 2006, p. 20).

It is certainly known that she read a number of the novels of her contemporaries (there are eleven named in *Northanger Abbey*) but we have no idea whether she ever read Aristotle or Shakespeare. However, given that her father was a clergyman it seems logical that his library would have contained works by some of the Aristotelians, for example, Aquinas, Duns Scotus or William of Ockham, and that these would have been at her disposal.

We also know that Austen had access to the Knight collection when she visited her brother, Edward Knight in Kent. Dow and Halsey (2010, p. 14) tell us about this library: “There are texts (usually in the original Greek or Latin) by classical Greek and Roman writers and philosophers...including works by Plutarch, Plato, Homer, Sophocles, Epictetus, Euripides, Horace, Virgil, and Ovid.” Although we do not know specifically what her philosophical influences were, further analysis of all Austen’s novels could prove fertile in regard to the influences on her philosophy and its possible effect on her characterisation.

As Todd (2006, p. 20) points out, in relation to the novelist Richardson, “She could have noted not only the power of parody but also the combination of third-person narration with an intrusive opinionated narrator.” Some critics, notably Lara (2012, p. 3), believe she was influenced by Aristotle, either directly or indirectly.

She used Aristotle in a discourse that recaptured experiences of “perception”, “impressions”, “sensations”, “sensibility”, “judgement”, and “feelings” within a broader conception of “moral reasoning”.

The very words quoted here, especially “perception”, “judgement” and “feelings” tie in with some important aspects of EI. I explore this notion of Aristotle inspiring much of the extrapolation of EI in chapter two of this thesis.

We know that Austen was writing at a time when the novel was gaining popular acclaim (and a lot of disapproval from moral critics who saw it as offering idle amusement without moral purpose) due to the emergence of circulating libraries and inexpensive publications (Ivins, 2011. p. 51). She managed from the very beginning to capture a broad readership through the accessibility of her style and content. Most importantly though she managed to do this without any of the extremes of emotional outpouring of some of her contemporaries. She kept to her own well-observed and informed range of experience. While, as stated earlier, some of the earliest critics found this limiting, Todd (2006, p. 32) points out the significance and weight of Austen’s contribution to the development of the novel as the primary literary form:

The small but positive initial reception of Austen’s work as aesthetically and technically impressive – despite its often remarked ‘limitations’ – and different from that of other early women writers became one step in the critical uncoupling of the novel from the ‘feminine’ writing of her sisters: the gothic, sentimental, and didactic authors she enjoyed mocking. As a result, it helped the rise to critical pre-eminence of seemingly ungendered fiction in the nineteenth century.

The “seemingly ungendered” fiction Todd is referring to has different strands. While Austen did not rail against the realities of women of limited means she did represent those limitations as well as suggesting there could be improvement. Austen certainly dealt with gender and class issues in her time but in a measured and realistic tone. Todd (1993, p. 143) points to the differences between the style of Austen’s romantic plots in comparison to some of her female contemporaries when she says:

Because of her implacable opposition to sensibility Jane Austen, although using the traditional feminine romantic and sentimental plot, simply does not seize the possibilities for political or psychological expression, articulation of desire and protest that such plot had opened for women writers and readers.

Northrope Frye (1976, pp. 76-7) suggests that although Austen herself was conservative about gender issues, the romance format meant that certain transgressions could develop:

It is not that Jane Austen is a woman novelist expressing a woman’s resistance to social conditions governing the place of women in her time. She accepts those conditions, on the whole: it is the romantic convention she is using that expresses the resistance.

In my view it is not simply the romantic convention which expresses resistance, as if without any intention by Austen. Austen has created women characters with strong convictions, especially in *Pride and Prejudice* with her central character, Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth, whilst displaying some conventional female accomplishments uses irony to call into question the whole notion of how a female should behave. She also

resists other notions of respectability such as younger sisters being forced to remain hidden until the elder are married. I am referring here to her forthright answers to Lady Catherine's interrogation of her family at the visit to Rosings. She is also outspoken about realising, but also rueing the fact that females need a husband if they are to avoid penury in old age, as evidenced in her musings on the future of her friend Charlotte. The fine balance between realities for women, plus a search for a better alternative are personified in Elizabeth Bennet.

In terms of crafting her own style of writing the novel, it has been noted by critics that Austen was the first novelist to combine the modes of the epistolary novel, most commonly known through Samuel Richardson and the intervening narrator style of Henry Fielding:

Jane Austen...achieved, for the first time, a harmonious fusion of these two types of novel. In her works, the portrayal of the characters' inner consciousness and the author's critical observation of life merge seamlessly to produce a subtle interplay of empathy and distance, so that the complexities of human relationships are shown in both their psychological and their social aspects. (Bollman 2007, p. 20)

The complexity of human relationships is given full weight in Austen's small world. The Bennets' lack of communication, the puzzling of Elizabeth over her friend's acceptance of Mr. Collins are shown in all their disparities, as are Elizabeth's initial reactions to the insolence of Darcy as opposed to the seeming attentiveness of Wickham. This knowledge of the complexity of humanity and the sense of harmony and clear psychological insight without drama was what separated Austen most from her Romantic contemporaries. For her there would be no sense of great tragedy, nor any great heights or depths of emotional outpourings. As Austen herself said:

I could no more write a Romance than an Epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter... (Todd. 2006, p. 25)

Indeed it was this sense of the prosaic, the sense that presenting romance as something serious in life and the presenting of people with all their weaknesses and foibles without atmospheric, tragedy or melodrama which separated Austen from her contemporaries and predecessors:

They (Austen's novels) show us the ethics of everyday life and everyday interactions without heavy-handed ethical posturing or the kind of melodrama that virtually forces the reader to adopt a particular ethical stance. (Hogan 2011, p. 157)

Indeed Austen does appear to avoid taking ethical stances on larger issues in her society by restraining the narrative to the intricacies of the people of that class and time. It was indeed the so-called "limitations" noted by many early critics which drew me more closely to looking at Austen through the lens of EI. As Quindlen (2009, pp. 102-3) points out:

Critics have complained that her books are devoid of the politics of her era, the tumult of the French and American revolutions. Yet it is precisely because she chose to investigate and illuminate the enduring issues of social pressures and gender politics that *Pride and Prejudice* seems as vital today as ever, the most modern of nineteenth century novels.

Social pressures and gender politics continue to be the forces which both bind and divide society, and Austen presents this faithfully. Her politics are those of the personal rather than the public. She focuses carefully in order to give life and vivacity to her characters which were her major preoccupation; *Pride and Prejudice*, and, indeed all her other novels, are character rather than plot or theme-driven and it is the characters that stay with the reader long after the novel is finished.

It was this sense of modernity and Austen's intense characterisation that also lead me to undertake a contemporary Australian adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* as a part of my doctoral thesis. I was keen, in using the basic structure of *Pride and Prejudice* to discover what aspects of society and gender roles could be applicable in such a different setting. A more important element in my adaptation, however, was to use the concepts and ideas of EI to understand Austen's characterisation and to create characters that, like those in *Pride and Prejudice*, would have enduring appeal to readers. My novel *First Impressions* is written to stand alone but have an additional resonance and accessibility to readers familiar with *Pride and Prejudice*. Due to the popularity not only of Austen's novel itself but also of the many film and television adaptations I felt there was indeed a large intended audience for such a contemporary and Australian-centred novel.

It is Austen's command of character which impresses me most as a creative and academic writer. There are, of course, other great writers in terms of characterisation but few who have created such enduring, memorable characters in such a restricted setting. Priestley (2009, p. 99) speaks of the special significance of her small world by contrasting it with others.:

She is not great in the sense of being huge, expansive, overwhelming, as novelists like Tolstoy and Dickens and Balzac are. She created for her own use, as we have seen, a tiny world of her own, but no novelist before or since has succeeded better than she did in bringing close to perfection what she set out to do.

The perfection, for me, is in the psychological journeys of the main characters, plus the juxtapositioning of the minor characters which together create a total, contained world, where human strengths and frailties in all their variations are the focus. As the contemporary philosopher de Botton (2009, p. 142) says, "Our embarrassments, our sulks, our envy, our feelings of guilt, these phenomena are conveyed in Austen in a way that affords us bursts of almost magical self-recognition."

Such feelings and their expression are very much the focus of EI. According to EI proponents like Goleman we need to understand first our own feelings, and the behaviours or actions they lead to: this is the first precept. Perhaps of equal importance, however, given that we are social beings, is to understand the feelings of others, to develop empathy. To express our emotions in an intelligent and reasoned way and to understand emotion in others is the goal of EI training. Austen seems to

have understood this concept of emotional development of the individual more than most novelists of her time and perhaps even since.

Elizabeth and Darcy both undertake emotional journeys, which are much more clearly delineated than those of others in the novel. It is their development of what we can now call EI which allows Elizabeth and Darcy to finally connect with the other and reach a successful outcome. Their emotional development is complicated by issues of gender and class, but we are left in no doubt that their final joining is what drives the story and gives it its incredible energy. We are also in no doubt as to what Austen values for her most important creations. As Greene (2009, p. 216) points out, “She values honesty, decency, clear-sightedness, emotional responsiveness in whatever class they occur”. Austen presents only two classes in *Pride and Prejudice*, the middle class and the landed gentry, but with a range of stratification and small distinctions within both. Importantly, Austen presents members of both classes as lacking the ability to balance emotion and reason. Indeed both Lady Catherine and Mrs. Bennet are presented as very much as devoid of true understanding of the worth of individuals.

In much the same way as Austen restricted the world of her novels, I too, have chosen to stay within a limited spectrum, to have the characters located within a small geographical area, with few physical journeys but much larger psychological ones. I have limited locations and characters in order to focus on the behaviours and characteristics of emotional development. Although I have reversed the genders of the two main characters, for reasons I explore in chapter three, the two main characters in my novel are also from different backgrounds because I wanted to include as Austen does, some nuances of class in the story. In a contemporary novel I believed it was necessary to have class represented in a more overt way than in Austen’s work. I felt it necessary to have a key character with inherited wealth as there is, even in contemporary Australia, a sense of privilege inherent in a long tradition of ownership, private education and cultural capital which is lacking in the gaining of instant wealth.

In chapter two of this exegesis I have attempted to use the principles of EI to explore *Pride and Prejudice* and highlight the structure and literary devices used by Austen. Despite technology, and mass and instant communication, people remain complex individuals, trapped within emotions which confront, confuse and estrange us. The basic emotions have not changed, despite educational and social changes from Austen’s time to now. A sense of injustice still promotes feelings of anger and animosity especially when it is based on first impressions rather than on empathetic analysis.

I believe EI can be a valid and interesting contemporary framework to employ in analysing and interpreting literature whether current or from bygone eras, as well as a useful concept for creative writers and teachers of creative writing to explore in the development of characters and their interactions. Creating balances and imbalances in emotional intelligence can not only highlight the complexities of characters but also create resonance for the reader in terms of recognisable behaviours whether they be morally sound, aberrant, selfish or altruistic, to name but a few.

In chapter three I explore the notion of adaptation, the reasons why Austen is so much the focus of this and how and why I have chosen to write an Australian contemporary

version. Not only has Austen been adapted many times over but *Pride and Prejudice* in particular has often been reworked, evoked and used in popular culture. If we examine the gamut from the BBC's faithful screen adaptation (Wright 1995) to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen & Graham-Smith 2009) we see that Austen has created a novel that crosses the boundaries of all sorts of subcultures. Chapter three examines, in the contemporary Australian context, the important question of why this particular novel has resonated with such diverse readers and audiences for so long.

In terms of writing techniques, I have emulated Austen by paring down description to the basics and relying on the dialogue, behaviours and interaction of my characters to drive the narrative. There is a quality in the writing which film and television versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, while being hugely successful, can never replace or entirely replicate. Much of Austen's irony in *Pride and Prejudice* is achieved through free indirect discourse where the author provides a commentary which is in the tone of a character, rather than directly through their dialogue. As this is not possible in screen versions we do lose those elements of the novel which gives it its vivacity, mainly through the ironic narrative tone. Wiltshire (2011, pp. 173-74) sums up the differences between the media of film adaptation and literature:

Because cinema must do what Jane Austen never does, and fill the audience's mind with visual stimulation, with objects, backgrounds, facial expressions, gestural implications and with music, it is necessarily a quite different art from hers... Perhaps the very condition of the cinema disposes it to effects quite distinct from the bracing, contemporary, ironic, comic and intellectual writing that is the reason why we read Jane Austen.

These bracing and ironic qualities in Austen's writing that are referred to by Wiltshire have been interrogated and analysed across the centuries, but I would argue that they reach a new significance both in attempting a contemporary adaptation and in extrapolating her characterisation through an EI perspective.

Chapter 2: In a different light.

In this chapter I use emotional intelligence (EI) as a lens through which to view Austen's work. My aim is to provide particular insights into her writing, especially character development and portrayal, that can be of use to other writers as well as of interest to readers.

From the 1970s to the 1990s there were many and varied definitions of EI, and much debate about whether or not it is a skill that can be learnt. The editors (Forgas, Carrochi & Mayer 2001, p. 189) of *Emotional Intelligence in Everyday Life: A Scientific Enquiry*, have the following succinct clarification:

Perhaps the most well validated conception is from Salovey and Mayer (1990), who conceive of EI as “the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions.”

Some of the earliest philosophers, most notably Aristotle, focussed on the importance of emotions. For Aristotle emotions, the development of the psyche and rationality were important in producing “the good mean” or the optimum “state for man”. Emotion and empathy are, for these philosophers, essentially linked to ethics. Daniel Goleman and other proponents of EI have built their ideas on the work of these early philosophers. In *Emotional Intelligence : Why it can matter more than IQ*, the book which brought EI into popular usage, Goleman (1995, p. ix) quoted from Aristotle's, *The Nicomachean Ethics*:

Anyone can become angry- that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way- this is not easy.

However, despite these very earliest notions of managing emotion EI is a specifically modern term that emerged to describe the convergence of values placed upon the linked ability to reason and interpret ideas and information and the ability to understand how emotions can help us to communicate our ideas and information to others. In philosophy and psychology until the 1970s emotion and intelligence were treated separately. As Deborah Lupton (1998, pp. 2-3), professor of cultural studies, points out:

The emotions have been viewed as irrelevant or disruptive to the project of post-Enlightenment (modernist) academic scholarship, which has tended to privilege rational thought over “irrational” emotionality.

However, from the 1970s emotion and intelligence began to be linked, as Forgas, Ciarrochi & Mayer (2001, pp. 5-6) put it, “in the new field of “cognition and affect” (i.e. thought and emotion).

Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (2000, pp. 5-6) in *Emotional Intelligence Meets Traditional Standards for an Intelligence*, best sum up the emergence of a new way of thinking about the categorisation of people as not merely either rational or emotional but a combination which can be recognised in literature and life:

Emotional thinkers have been referred to over the centuries variously as “overly emotional,” romantics (or hopeless romantics), people who think with their hearts (instead of their heads), people swayed by emotions, or “biased” by emotions. Such labelling does accurately capture a kind of person who is overwrought with unthinking emotionality. What the existence of emotional intelligence tells us, however, is that there exists another type as well: the emotional, romantic, thinker-with-a-heart, who is engaged in sophisticated information processing, and who, in such a manner, contributes importantly to our lives and culture.

In relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, it seems viable that this statement could be referring directly to two key characters in the novel, Mrs Bennet and Elizabeth. Mrs Bennet operates with unthinking emotionality throughout the novel whereas Elizabeth increasingly learns to process information using both heart and head. Miller (2005, p. 257) sees Elizabeth’s perusal of the letter from Darcy, a turning point for her in awareness of the other as, “a ten-minute interval of cognitive and emotional processing...”. This blending of cognition and emotional reaction is exactly what psychologists have defined as EI.

Averill (2009, p. 228), a psychologist from the University of Massachusetts, points out:

From its introduction by Salovey and Mayer (1990), the concept of emotional intelligence became one of the most discussed topics in both the scientific and popular culture.

While Averill singles out the spheres of science and popular culture, EI was taken up also in the worlds of business and education, and incorporated into training resources in an attempt at creating harmony in workplaces and schools. An example of the latter is the Four Rooms of Change program, promoted by the development body Teacher Learning Network. In 2012 the program was trialled at McKillop Catholic College in Melbourne. (Ackerman 2012)

The reasoning behind such programs in schools and workplaces centres on people recognising and regulating their own emotions and acknowledging those of others in order to avoid conflict. This is of course pre-supposing that EI can be learnt, whatever type of personality is involved. There have been some strong criticisms of EI and its validity, and Oatley (2004, p. 224) points specifically to, “the workplace, educational and social institutions...rushing to teach EI before valid evidence for its effectiveness or the effectiveness of instructional programs has been demonstrated”. However, criticisms in this sphere aside, I believe that a focus on EI and its elements can provide new ways of reading and understanding fiction, through an appreciation of its role in the development of character.

As a creative writer, I have found that EI provides a way of thinking about and exploring characters and emotion that can develop a stronger understanding of the pivotal role of characterisation in literature. Also, as a teacher of literature I believe EI can be used to interrogate and understand more fully a variety of literature. It is my belief that the key characters from Austen resonate today because she expresses their emotions, combines these emotions with reason, and places this at the centre of her narrative. This sensibility can be interpreted, in modern terms as EI. The particular aspects of EI I intend to draw on are those which relate to judgement, emotional

understanding of self and others, regulation of impulses, adaptive coping and adaptive adjustment.

Of course, numerous books and journal articles have been written on moral reasoning and emotion in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*. Lara's (2012, p. 3) work is one indicative and perceptive example:

As I see it, the most striking feature of Austen's narratives is that she portrayed feelings as morally relevant, not as opposed to reason but complementary to it.

The use of the concept of EI can add to this scholarship by giving a current interpretation and frame of reference for Austen's success in combining reason, feelings and their ethical significance, for a modern readership.

This ethical significance and capability when applied to *Pride and Prejudice* illuminates the way Austen gives her characters moral dilemmas and shows how their ability (or lack of ability) to perceive and regulate emotion leads them to make moral judgements.

Elizabeth Bennet's first moral judgement involves the marriage proposal from Mr Collins and she very much uses her own standards and judgements to reject him. Indeed she attempts to convince him using rationality at first, but then is forced to become vehement when his own lack of EI prevents him believing that she could refuse him, given that he is offering her security. Mr. Collins sees no moral dilemma in proposing to someone he clearly does not love; he is merely in want of a wife. Austen (2008, p. 118) sums up both personalities beautifully when she says, "The idea of Mr Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed to stop him further, and he continued".

The emerging field of EI in psychology and philosophy is a contested one, and it is acknowledged as difficult to test and empirically evaluate, as has been shown by Oatley. I do not intend to enter into a debate or analysis of EI *per se* as the empirical validity of EI is not important here. Rather, I am interested in the way EI and the composite group of characteristics it identifies might be used to give me another way of reading Austen, and to gain insight into what makes her fiction so compelling and the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, so memorable and strong, and so appropriate for adaptation.

From pre-literate times people have used storytelling as a vehicle through which we can more fully reiterate morals and values. Despite enormous cultural differences certain emotions are recognisable and resonate across time and place. I believe that whether we read novels for erudition or enjoyment they offer patterns of life in accessible formats to more fully understand ourselves and others, what is valued and why. Josephine Donovan (1999, p. 5), in tracing women's history in writing novels, points to a blend perceptible in *Pride and Prejudice* when she says:

Because of this unique blend of realism and critical irony, the novel can foster ethical understanding of individual characters' plights and of the forces responsible better than perhaps any other medium.

Novels offer us various lives and behaviours; glimpses into worlds other than our own narrow spheres. They offer us the complete spectrum of behaviour and personality to extend our knowledge and understanding of the human condition. Hogan (2011, p. 3) points out the emotional energy we give to literature:

Indeed, literature is central to human life. Telling and hearing stories may take up as much of more of our emotional energy than our primary engagements in real life. Indeed, that centrality is part of what gives literature ecological validity in the study of emotion.

Certainly Hogan's description fits the way Austen's characters engage emotional energy as attested by the numerous adaptations and spin-offs in contemporary contexts from *Pride and Prejudice*. Two hundred years after it was written readers and viewers are still investing this emotional energy in the novel's differing formats.

In Austen's era travel was a very restricted pastime for most people and the novel therefore became a source of entering worlds other than their own. Additionally, people were becoming more literate and the emergence of lending libraries led to a far greater accessibility to novels. Austen, by her strong depiction of character, without attaching a sentimental morality, was able to give a clearer insight into intelligence and reason than most of her contemporaries. Todd (1993, p. 146) points to this difference when she says, "The expressiveness of the lady as potent victim, the staple of sentimental fiction, is likewise almost entirely absent from the mature novels."

Fiction allows access to a far greater range of people than we could ever hope to encounter in a lifetime. Of course they are not real people, they are fictional characters created by a writer, but nevertheless we do recognise elements of their thinking and behaviour that are familiar to us. Those characters that have survived the centuries have immediately recognisable archetypal qualities (I am not referring to archetypes here in the Jungian sense, but merely as models or prototypes) that we may admire or despise. Indeed, sometimes the simple naming of a character from fiction can create a mental image of personality more quickly than any description of behaviour of an individual could, e.g. Scrooge, Lady Macbeth or, indeed, Darcy.

While forms of storytelling such as tragedy explore strong emotions such as fear and anger which are also the most difficult to control and reason about, novels set in a small domestic world with a strong comic element, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, reinforce much of what we know to be life's less profound or traumatic but irresistible truths. For example, that sometimes life is not fair, that real barriers can prevent happiness but also that there is hope, that humans can overcome significant obstacles and succeed. In a sense Austen was able to show the macro through the micro, leading to an understanding of some universalities. This, as Dadlez (2008, p. 328), writes, gives access to:

... an understanding of broader human truths by recognizing ourselves and the people we know in the traits and foibles under review. That is, we and the people we know are made representative of humanity... This is partly the consequence of the kinds of experiences upon which Austen's comedy, as opposed to most tragedies, invites us to reflect.

When we are immersed in such a novel, and are relating to the characters, we feel joy when they triumph and sadness when they suffer a loss, we relate to their frustrations as obstacles impede their journeys. Dadlez has pointed to these elements of humanity and Donovan (1999, p. 8) makes a similar point, while further emphasising the moral dimension, when she says, “The imagination that is exercised in both writing and reading a novel is thus ‘a moral discipline’ that makes us aware of others’ situations, their suffering, and their coping”. Coping mechanisms, such as distinguishing the causes, features and consequences of strong emotions and a capacity to perceive in others, and recognising our own emotional signals through words, behaviour and body language are key components of developing EI. As readers too we are able to travel the gamut of emotions through our reading of other values and behaviours. Indeed, psychologist Elster refers to the importance of emotion in literature such as *Pride and Prejudice* retaining meaning across the centuries:

...in the domain of emotions, imaginative literature (e.g. drama, novels, short stories) offers a diverse set of paradigmatic examples of emotional life, its vicissitudes, and its potential solutions that also can be experienced and analysed. Experts include those who have written about emotions whose work has sufficient resonance with generations of people that it has become canonical and remains vivid and meaningful. (Oatley 2004, p. 217)

The longevity of *Pride and Prejudice*, is, I believe squarely founded on its emotional impact on the reader. The story seems at first a very deceptively simple tale of romance, a marriage plot with little description. The narrative is contained within an enclosed world and has little reference to anything outside that sphere. Critics, such as Garbitelli and Kries (2010, p. 26), have noted similarities between the writings of Aristotle and Austen in relation to the notions of friendship and use of a small world to depict larger truths:

Jane Austen’s novels share the Aristotelian focus on small social arrangements. If Aristotle prefers a small circle of friends living within a city of restricted size, Austen prefers a small circle of families living within a village of modest size; both however, emphasize situations in which a handful of people share together a life in which their happiness is intertwined.

Within this limited environment the novel’s primary achievement is the drawn out tension, whereby we wish the protagonists to eventually be united, no matter what obstacles are put in their paths. We want this because we watch them develop, as they realise and overcome their earlier deficiencies and misconceptions. The containment of setting, and for most modern readers a limited knowledge of Austen’s world, force us to focus on the characters. They take on individual identities for us as we recognise their personalities and idiosyncrasies, through their dialogue and behaviour, letters, and Austen’s use of free indirect discourse. Rather than a limitation, another of Austen’s strengths is the use of ellipses:

What is not commented upon, amplified or contextualised, is crucially important; interruptions, breaks and what is withheld from our understanding often contribute decisively to the novel’s intellectual and emotional excitement. (Wiltshire 2001, p. 107)

Examples of this are the chapters in *Pride and Prejudice* which deal with the marriage proposals by Mr. Collins and later Lydia's elopement. We are taken on a rapid physical journey with Mr. Collins from the Bennet to the Lucas households to witness behaviours glimpsed from windows but without the actual successful marriage proposal being depicted. Similarly, in the latter half of the novel the machinations undertaken to solve the Lydia problem are carried on off-stage from the novel, leaving the reader to garner the information at the same time as Elizabeth. Thus the reader sees the situation through her eyes and retains focus on her emotional development.

These literary methods result in a style which allows the reader an enormous play of imagination, for with so little description we can paint our own pictures of the characters. However, Austen also takes us beyond the dialogue and behaviour to witness the inner thoughts of the characters, through free indirect discourse where the thoughts of the characters are seamlessly interwoven with the narrative voice. This adds wit and satire as exemplified by the unthinking arrogance of Caroline Bingley, or the ridiculous fawning of Mr. Collins: "He begged pardon for having displeased her. In a softened tone she declared herself not at all offended; but he continued to apologise for about quarter of an hour." (Austen 2008, p. 73)

Letters are a particularly important literary device for Austen, they allow her to take the reader into the inner thoughts of the characters, to convey their feelings, in particular those of Darcy. Moreover the letters, particularly in relation to Elizabeth, are used by Austen as yet another way of developing characters' perceptions and empathy. Through Darcy's letter to Elizabeth we see, in EI terminology, his ability to delay gratification, tolerate frustration, and regulate impulses, as well as his developing emotional understanding of himself and the other.

Austen's selective use of the epistolary mode for certain exchanges has several obvious technical advantages. For plot purposes it allows for extended communication from a distance at critical periods, not only to establish who is where and why but to convey states of mind and plans which are essential to the forward movement of the novel. Examples are the snubbing of Jane in London by the Bingley sisters; Lydia absconding with Wickham and the subsequent searches. In a letter to Elizabeth Jane speaks of Carolyn's duplicity, "He knows of my being in town, I am certain from something she said herself, and yet it would seem by her manner of talking, as if she wanted to persuade herself that he is really partial to Miss Darcy." (Austen 2008, p, 168) As Tanner (1986, p. 120), British critic of the mid-twentieth century, points out motivations also are conveyed by this method:

So much of the main information in the novel is conveyed by letter – whether it be Mr Collins's vapid but acquisitive pomposity, or Miss Bingley's competitive coldness, or Mr. Gardiner's account of Darcy's role in securing the marriage of Lydia and Wickham...

Here, while Tanner conflates plot and emotional information, I suggest it is in this selective use of the conventional letter form to reveal nuanced emotion that Austen shows a major development from earlier epistolary novelists such as Richardson.

The use of letter writing to signal feeling, or emotion, can be seen as most effective in Darcy's letter to Elizabeth after the first marriage proposal. This letter functions as

a first person narrative in that it gives Elizabeth and the reader direct access and insight, for the first time, to Darcy's thinking and emotional state. Darcy is experiencing a transformation, and "by combining the dramatic and the epistolary modes, Jane Austen has deftly set before us a basic truth – that we are both performing selves and reflective selves". (Tanner 1986, p. 140).

A special aspect of EI is the need to reflect upon the feelings we are experiencing in order to reach full understanding of our emotions, a point that Tanner anticipates here. This is as true in our reading of literature as in our own personal lives; we reflect upon the emotions of characters and place them into context within the whole tale. Prior to Elizabeth's rejection of his first marriage proposal Darcy has been entirely in the performing mode, and this fits with notions of gender at that time. As a male, especially a wealthy one, Darcy is able to be proactive, to take action, to define himself. In EI terms, Darcy has become more emotionally aware and is able to adapt and adjust his behaviour to take into account the feelings of Elizabeth.

Darcy has been clinging to his world-view which, although rational is rigid. Until Elizabeth Bennet enters his life he is unchallenged on both intellectual and emotional terms. Darcy has been essentially surrounded by sycophants, who impressed by his wealth and standing, reinforce his sense of privilege as his due. We witness at the first ball that he has little in the way of social flexibility and is dismissive of social occasions, requiring a set of manners beyond those of his own narrow circle. His lack of respect for the social niceties is noticed by the people of the neighbourhood, as Mrs Lucas says, "he is such a disagreeable young man that it would be quite a misfortune to be liked by him" (Austen 2008, p. 20). Darcy is urbane and worldly but his limited and elitist circle prevents his understanding of others outside that domain. He needs an emotional and social education and Austen has a perception, akin to EI, in suggesting that sensitivity can be learned, rather than being an innate personality trait.

At a later dance Elizabeth points out to him the need for communication, no matter how trivial it seems to him. It is a good example of "the Austenian point that in social situations, people must have *something* to say, no matter how inane" (Miller 2005, p. 244). Elizabeth is referring to conversation as a way of people connecting and studying behaviour, or even just plain good manners. Darcy has seen no reason to be interested in anyone he considers below himself whereas Elizabeth thinks there is always something new to discover about people. She is already challenging his view of people and their motivations and in a sense educating him in emotional intelligence.

However, Austen makes it clear that her heroine also has a lot to learn, given as she is to judging people on first impressions, particularly on appearances and manners in the case of Wickham. She has been flattered by his attentions, particularly after overhearing Darcy's disparaging comments regarding herself. Elizabeth has relied on innuendo, community opinion and gossip, rather than on perceptive observation and reflection, to form her own opinion of the relative value of each man.

Similarly, Austen portrays how Elizabeth is forced to re-evaluate her initial reaction when Charlotte is to marry Mr. Collins, and to realise that she was in fact not seeing the union from Charlotte's perspective but entirely from her own. *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a demonstration of emotional intelligence and of the importance of knowing ourselves before we judge others. The importance of understanding our own

feelings and emotions and accompanying rationality is a key concept in EI for which a new set of terms is needed. Tanner (1986, p. 130) claims in reference to *Pride and Prejudice*,

There is in the book a whole vocabulary connected with the process of decisions, opinion, conviction, stressing or suggesting how various and unstable are people's ideas, judgements, accounts and versions of situations and people.

This instability of people's ideas makes for believable characters. People's preconceptions, biases and impulsivity create a shifting of beliefs depending on circumstances. Austen uses these facets of human nature to examine the motivations of the most and least interesting of her characters, her scrutiny is intense. We are shown, at the very beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, that the entire community has deemed Darcy to be proud and haughty, based on very little evidence and has thus dismissed him despite his wealth. Elizabeth forms her first opinion of Wickham based entirely on his own account of his past and the fact that he is genial, polite and attentive to her, all things that Darcy is not. All these initial first impressions are shown to be false.

Structurally, the emotional development of Elizabeth and Darcy is made possible by both the concentration on character and the beautifully captured contrasts of their potential with those of narrow-minded people across class and gender lines. Elizabeth Bennet is, as Tanner (1986, p. 143) argues, "an isolated figure trapped in a constricting web of a small number of simple people".

After the second letter from Darcy Elizabeth's subsequent questioning of her own behaviour and prejudices, her heightened emotional response and extreme self-reflection are the start of her new self-knowledge. As she re-reads and re-reads the letter she is able to see on what little evidence she had condemned Darcy and praised Wickham. Rather than seeking to rationalise or justify her own behaviour, emotionally unintelligent thinking, she is brought to a new self-awareness. It is not only Elizabeth's development that is satisfying for the reader but that we too are forced to change our view of Darcy as we come to see:

...that it is difficult to know any complex person, that knowledge of a man like Darcy is an interpretation and a construction, not a simple absolute. (Brower 1951, p. 67)

Austen shows us that Elizabeth is on a sharp learning curve and it unnerves her, she had thought herself to be a good judge of character, but now she is seeing the complexities she had hitherto never imagined. Austen (2008, p. 229) shows us her emotions as she reads Darcy's letter, "She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. – Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd".

Darcy is now challenging her view of himself, other people and their motivations. As Lerner (1976, p. 146) comments, she is reaching the point of "...reasoned virtues of self-command: *just* consideration of others, *knowledge* of her own heart."

Darcy has gained insight about how his earlier and ungainly marriage proposal would have affected Elizabeth on an emotional level. Although she is rationally aware that

much of what he said regarding her family is true it was the way in which he expressed himself which hurt her feelings and made her reject him. He had been haughty and full of self-pride, but has now realised that in order to gain her affection he must express himself with regard to the other, not just himself. This ability to reflect on his behaviour and to understand that he needs to regard the feelings of others as well as his own, is seen in the context of EI as being a key to emotional development. Darcy, in his first proposal, is using, as Louise Penny writes, the “near enemy” of compassion which is pity. Indeed Penny (2007, p. 237) writes of three instances of the near enemy, the other two being love and attachment, equanimity and indifference. I find these interesting notions in terms of how different emotions can be easily misinterpreted. Elizabeth, unlike Darcy is clear because of the shame Lydia is bringing on her family that it is pity for her circumstances which is being expressed. Elizabeth also knows her character is equal to his but it has taken her admonishment of his communication mode to shame him and make him re-think his prejudices. Importantly though Austen (2008, p. 237) shows us that it is Darcy who ultimately needed to re-think his own behaviour, “As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but was left to follow them in pride and conceit”.

The characters of the protagonists have been developed through dialogue, action and behaviour, as well as by contrast to those around them, but they are not fully brought to know themselves and thus the other, until the time of Darcy’s letter. By using the epistolary mode intermittently and combining it with the omniscient narrator and free indirect discourse Austen was able to produce a more complex development of the psychology of character in a way that prefigures some of the concepts of EI.

I am referring here to the development of character through the normal social interactions; the daily encounters which form the fabric of a life lived in a small town, where personality and character are shown through social interaction rather than extenuating circumstances. Dadlez (2008, p. 328) points out that Austen’s world:

dwells on the everyday, benign incongruities we confront, the kind we recognize. But this shows us that, in Austen the personal is never trivial, but a reflection, an instantiation, of human constants.

This essentially explains the virtually unique position of Austen as an early nineteenth century novelist who is still widely popular today. In real life there is, more of the everyday than the traumatic or tragic. Miscommunication and misunderstanding are more likely to be responsible for unhappiness and frustration while shared interests and amusements are more likely to lead to friendship and love. In shifting from notions of the universal to the specific Austen was incorporating a sense of realism with romance, from a gendered perspective. She was not the only novelist doing this but what she did from the outset was to capture a broad readership. This was due in part to her style and content, but more importantly through the representation of characters in a familiar social and economic setting. The depiction of character firmly grounded in the combination of reason, feeling and familiar ethical dilemmas highlighted when viewed through the lens of EI is what I believe lifts this novel set in a small domestic world beyond the ordinary for the reader, and across generations.

This gendered perspective of the conventional romance narrative is specified by Donovan (1999, p. 17) as:

A sense of irony toward patriarchal exchange systems, with their inherent commodification of women was one of the principal contributions women writers made to the rise of the novel.

Take, for example, the positions of two female characters who respond quite differently in terms of emotional/rational imperatives. Charlotte Lucas states quite categorically that she realises the lack of admirable qualities in Mr Collins but she marries him for strictly economic reasons, a form of economic exchange. Elizabeth, on the other hand, refuses to view her circumstances in purely economic terms even though she is roughly equal to Charlotte in age and social standing. The social arena of *Pride and Prejudice* is limited in terms of class. We see nothing of abject poverty, merely the extreme wealth of Darcy, the financial independence of Bingley and his sisters, the middle-classes as represented by the Bennets, Lucases, and the “in-trade” Gardiners.

However, given these limitations the sense of class divide is still very evident, especially when we encounter Pemberley and Rosings. Darcy’s aloofness and arrogance are highlighted by Austen in his encounters with Elizabeth, who, secure in her own sense of worth, challenges him from the outset.

Austen does maintain the status quo of the romance genre in *Pride and Prejudice* in that the marriage of Elizabeth to Darcy, unlikely in reality, could be seen as fantasy and the outcome for Charlotte the much more realistic one for a woman of that age and limited financial means. However the unlikely marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy could also be a validation that strong characters can create their own realities if they are clear sighted, virtuous, and emotionally intelligent. The focus, it seems to me, is essentially on characters and their journeys which, at times, bring class into the fore rather than developing the broader class issues which would be more visible in a novel of wider proportions.

It is interesting to note that the virtual absence of working and lower class characters has formed the basis of Jo Baker’s very recent novel *Longbourn* (2013) that reverses the focus. Perhaps our viewing of *Pride and Prejudice* from a contemporary focus gives rise to a wish to view the whole gamut of society of Austen’s time, rather than the one aspect she knew so well and chose to depict in isolation.

Pride and Prejudice has a wide array of characters who all serve a purpose, be it moral, comic, to drive the narrative cohesively or to provide structural sub-plots. Some characters, such as Mr. Bennet and Charlotte have some insight into their own personalities but are only partially drawn, as if they do not yet have sufficient self-knowledge to be emotionally intelligent. Of course it could be argued that they are no more than necessary plot devices, but I believe they signify elements of personality also, and differing levels of emotional intelligence or maturity.

Other characters, such as Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins, have not learnt to be empathetic nor do they have any understanding of themselves or others and so can appear to exist solely for plot purposes and as figures of contrast with the major

characters. Mr Collins does have a rather larger purpose which I shall discuss later. Researchers in EI have pointed out that, “The way we process emotions is highly context-dependent”. (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts 2009, p. 28) Austen has shown us that the aforementioned characters have their own hierarchical world where each is rigidly confined to their own barriers of pre-determined opinions and behaviours. In such a situation it could be said that neither has a context for any development of emotional intelligence nor the intention to seek it.

This notion of contrast is very deliberate on Austen’s part. In order to understand intelligence and virtue as positive human traits we need them to be highlighted through close proximity to the more negative aspects of humanity. As Smith (2000, p. 34) points out, Austen’s contrasts in behaviour and attitude leave us in no doubt as to who has more rationality and intelligence, “Between Mr. Bennet’s culpable indifference on the one hand, Mr. Collins’s and Lady Catherine’s ferocity on the other, stands Elizabeth’s tolerant distaste”.

Austen constantly weighs the characters in relation to each other and in terms of their balance of reason and emotion. As Wickham comes gradually to be seen as shallow and amoral by Elizabeth, and thus by the reader, so then the character of Darcy grows in moral strength through his actions and subsequent behaviour. The reader begins to perceive the Gardiners as wise because they provide the combination of rational advice and a nurturing, mentoring role toward Elizabeth, confirming that neither of her parents is able to do so, neither separately through the use of reason or emotion nor in an harmonious combination. Indeed Mr. Gardiner takes on a proactive role of father-figure in pursuing Lydia and Wickham and ultimately organising their uneasy social rehabilitation. The other role for the Gardiners is one of enhanced standing for Elizabeth in the eyes of Darcy.

The Gardiners balance out the negative aspect of Elizabeth’s family, displaying good common sense and innate good breeding in the face of Mr. Bennet’s lack of self-knowledge and Mrs Bennet’s single-minded vacuity. The Gardiners, as opposed to the Bennets display a balanced capacity for awareness and regulation of feelings; in our contemporary terms, they epitomise key qualities of EI and offer Elizabeth a model of self-realised adults in both emotional and social terms. In this way, the presence of the Gardiners makes the pairing of Elizabeth and Darcy more plausible.

Emotions are central to the experience of fiction, as, without some feeling for the characters, we cannot suspend our disbelief and enter into the world the characters inhabit. We need characters to show emotions that we recognise, if we choose to read fiction and want to be entertained by it. As readers of fiction we dismiss characters we don’t believe, alternatively characters we feel strongly about resonate long after the duration of the novel. However, creating emotional impact can be a complex route for the novelist. Too much, or misplaced emotion can result in annoying or abrasive creations or caricatures. The controlled and succinct depiction of emotion is a significant way in which Austen moved away from her predecessors and some contemporaries:

She represents emotion not by the hyperbole of Richardson and Burney but, in her style of restraint, by the odd staccato sentence or fragment of speech.
(Todd 2006, p. 32)

As mentioned previously Austen's style is also characterised by ellipses, extraneous details are omitted which avoid over-directing the reader and allow for our own interpretations of characters and their motivations. For example in the search for Lydia and Wickham by Mr Gardiner and Darcy the reader is never witness to the events but merely receives the news as the Bennet family does.

Another technically complex issue for a writer is the development of characters' psychological depth. It is necessary to create a balance between predictability, surprise and delight. Indeed there is a fine line between the creation of archetypes and stereotypes. This is especially a problem in the necessarily contained development of secondary, but pivotal, characters. For example, Lady Catherine is an archetype of the rich arrogant woman, but she is saved from stereotyping by her obvious micromanagement of her own affairs, and those of others. She has intelligence as well as disdain. Austen's art of characterisation is both subtle and complex and in itself shows emotional intelligence.

As Oatley (1992) has argued, emotions typically occur in situations that call for action but in which logical argument and imperial evidence are not persuasive, that is, precisely the kind of situation in which rhetoric (ie. The art of persuasion) has also traditionally found a place. (Averill 2009, p. 230)

One of the most interesting portrayals of class, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is where Lady Catherine's emotions concerning the possible marriage of her nephew to Elizabeth Bennet push her into action. She confronts Elizabeth with a pragmatic approach about the unsuitability of such a liaison in class contingencies. She uses every method of persuasion at her disposal. Lady Catherine hears a call to action, but lacks the emotional perception to adequately prepare herself for a confrontation with someone of equal intelligence but greater perception.

Elizabeth effectively counters all Lady Catherine's arguments showing that all her rhetoric is based on a false premise. Elizabeth is unequivocal in her belief that marriage, is a union of minds rather than fulfilment of societal expectations. By this stage Elizabeth is convinced of her own intrinsic worth and sufficient standing as a gentleman's daughter. Thus ultimately Lady Catherine is shown to be the one lacking reasoned intelligence.

It would be very easy to dismiss Mr. Collins as a comic stereotype who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. However, he has a pivotal role in that Austen uses him to make quite clear whom and what we, as the reader, should recognise as valuable. His total lack of emotional intelligence is made explicit by his reliance on books rather than interaction or understanding. It is impossible not to feel superior to a character with so little insight that he learns about women from conduct books alone. From the time of his marriage proposal to Elizabeth and subsequent immediate proposal to Charlotte we know him for the vacuous creature he is. It is his gratuitous and grandiose proclamations about his patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her condescension which make us dislike her even before we make her acquaintance. But the contrast is further reinforced when Elizabeth visits Rosings and is surrounded by the trappings of wealth but a paucity of social connection and true conversation, which Austen (2008, p. 188) points to conclusively, "Their table was superlatively stupid. Scarcely a syllable was uttered that did not relate to the game,

except when Mrs Jenkinson expressed her fears of Miss De Bourgh's being too hot or cold, or having too much or too little light".

In fiction a sense of place can be particularly important, for symbolic purposes as much as setting the scene. As previously mentioned, Austen is sparing in her use of description unlike more expansive writers such as Thomas Hardy and Charlotte Bronte who used the landscape and atmosphere as character in addition to setting.

Pemberley, in terms of its elegance and symmetry, is symbolic of Darcy's values, his honouring of hereditary commitments as endorsed by his housekeeper, and plays a vital role in Elizabeth's re-evaluation of his background and character. That Darcy chooses to place his own portrait in a less conspicuous location is indicative of a well-balanced ego, another component of emotional intelligence. The apparently minor detail takes on added significance because of Austen's usual reticence in description. Perhaps because of this absence of complex description and detail, critics in search of symbolism have made much of Austen's use of minor tropes such as dancing, letters, eyes, hands and dirty petticoats, all realistic elements of the period. For example Marguliet (2004, p. 105) in *Elizabeth's Petticoat*, argues that the petticoats represent repressed desire. However, we can also see them as contributing to the representation of different feelings in terms of the development, or otherwise, of emotional intelligence. Elizabeth is displaying a rational emotional decision in being more concerned about her sister's welfare than her own physical appearance in walking through the mud to Netherfield Park.

Austen offers an outstanding example of the ways in which an economical use of setting and brief, realistic selection of details can contribute to the emotional resonance of a novel. In writing a contemporary novel and developing characters who are emotionally and socially intelligent I have given much thought to what has and hasn't changed over time in relation to people's experiences as social and emotional beings. Today, as social beings, living in Australia, we obviously have a far greater range of possible experiences with people from different cultures and classes but there is still generally a great divide between the very wealthy and others. People tend to mix with like-minded people and have their zones of comfort and it can be emotionally confronting to move away from these, and when people do it often demonstrates strengths and weaknesses. One aspect that I don't believe has changed is the way we tend to form first impressions based on appearances and it can be difficult to realise that we have prejudices due to our own background and particular world view. The divisions in terms of class across society are still prevalent but perhaps only become visible and problematic when people are introduced to situations where the divisions are exposed due to a lack of previous experience of a social situation. When Elizabeth stays at the Bingley residence to look after Jane, her discomfort is obvious, she is forced into being pleasant to people she finds arrogant if not condescending and this is exacerbated when Mrs Bennet pays a visit and further embarrasses her.

Family, especially siblings and peers are central to *Pride and Prejudice*. Family gives us our initial sense of good and bad, virtue and decadence but later our peers and siblings speak to us in the language we understand and often challenge our sense of who we are and what we believe in. Elizabeth's family, specifically her mother, Lydia and Mary cause Darcy to develop a poor first impression of her and she is acutely

conscious of this, in the way that any emotionally intelligent person would be. Her immediate family also provides very poor material in the way of role models for marriage.

Marriage is used by Austen as a driving desire through the novel and it works to demonstrate the various levels of emotional development of the various characters. In his summary of EI, Mayer et al (2008, p. 102) write:

... individuals may be more or less “intelligent” with respect to three discrete, but interrelated, abilities: the ability to perceive and accurately recognise emotions, the ability to understand and reason about emotions, and the ability to effectively manage and regulate emotions. All three abilities would, on the face of it, appear to be important in the emotion-rich context of marriage.

Marriage, in all its permutations, very much controls the plot line of *Pride and Prejudice* as it does in Austen’s other novels. Though not married herself Austen was obviously surrounded by adequate models for her fiction. She shows us, through reference to Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet the central importance of marriage to women in her era. In unequivocal terms she indicates the very real plight of penury that could be the lot of an unmarried woman of a lower class, over a certain age. We are left in no doubt, either, as to the consequences for a family whose daughter is seen to be living with a man without the legality of marriage; not only the daughter in question but her sisters and the entire family would be social outcasts due to the morality of the time.

Austen provides us with the full gamut of good and poor marriages and I would argue that it is the emotional/rational dichotomy in these marriages which denotes their success or failure. Mr. Bennet is now largely operating on reason, having realised early on the folly of marrying the woman he did. Mrs Bennet, although being rational in seeing she does need to marry off her daughters, conducts herself in entirely emotion-based behaviours and speech and the two live very separate lives. Charlotte is willing to sacrifice emotional attachment for material security for herself and her family. For Mr. Collins marriage is a necessary part of his patronage by Lady Catherine.

The Gardiners, in contrast, are extremely caring and compassionate yet also provide logical advice and reasoned thought and action. The Gardiners are entirely necessary to the marriage plot as they provide the only model of domestic harmony, and a model there must be if the reader is to envisage a good outcome for Elizabeth and Jane Bennet. Marriage and burgeoning relationships are used by Austen to analyse the complexity of human emotions, and show that the balance of reason and emotion is what ultimately leads to successful outcomes for individuals.

In this “emotion-rich context of marriage” it would appear that little has changed, despite the many different types of marriage-like relationships we witness today. Battles waged in the family court are emotionally charged and it is generally individual’s inability to control their emotions which lead to the biggest disasters, yet despite all this people generally are desirous of a life-long partnership. The abundance of on-line dating services and the plethora of big and small screen depictions of romance in addition to print fiction would seem to give credence to this.

Although there are marriages aplenty in *Pride and Prejudice*, there is a conspicuous absence of weddings and wedding ceremonies. One inference from this could be that Austen was more concerned with the internal lives of her characters and thus cuts the wedding ceremony (which now often provides the visual climax in cinema and television versions) to explain their lives of harmony/disharmony after the marriage has taken place. It is also another example of the way Austen uses ellipsis to compact what she sees as insignificant to the real story, that is the interaction, beliefs and desires of her major characters. The only references in *Pride and Prejudice* to the details of wedding requirements, such as clothing and household supplies, are significantly in dialogue between Lydia and her mother. By juxtaposing this with the feelings of shame and embarrassment of Elizabeth and Jane, Austen leaves us in no doubt as to the trivial nature of such things in the wider context of marriage.

Austen used the romantic genre, which might be considered “stock” and subverted it through an emphasis on characterisation and the ironic narrative voice. She was doing something new using the existing tools available to her. She was paring down the minutiae of daily existence, stripping it back to essentials in order to focus carefully and intricately on her characters and their motivations, with a distinct lack of drama. Austen took the marriage plot, the love story with its economic imperatives and class and gender restrictions to a new level of interest for the contemporary reader and, in later years, the literary critic. If imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery then *Pride and Prejudice*, with its plethora of sequels, adaptations and appropriations is one of the most appealing novels of all time. The novel has stood out and endured and been reinvented for contemporary audiences I believe because of the strength of the characterisation which is further highlighted when read with an understanding of the concepts and ideas now referred to as EI.

In the following chapter I discuss my own adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* and show Austen’s literary devices, and how her use of emotion and reason have inspired and guided my aim to create enduring characters inside the framework of the love story within a contemporary Australian setting.

Chapter 3: Adding to the mix: writing *First Impressions*.

In this chapter I will be discussing the writing of my novel, *First Impressions*, which is a contemporary Australian adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. I will also make some general observations about the nature and extent of adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* to set a context for the writing of my novel. Although my novel is set in a different era and location it clearly fits with the way in which Sanders (2005, p. 26) describes the process, “An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original”. The relationship my novel has with *Pride and Prejudice* is one of a shared plot premise and narrative style. The method of character development also has some similarities. These have deliberately been my focus in creating a reworking of *Pride and Prejudice*. The narrative style is I believe the most difficult to emulate because Austen has such a strong, ironic tone which draws the reader in and directs his or her interpretation of characters and events.

Janet Todd (2005, p. 26), who has written extensively about Austen, here identifies exactly why Austen, far more than her contemporaries, is singled out for modern adaptations:

Eighteenth-century readers thought of Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa outside the novels and identified with them, but Austen is the first novelist whose central characters now live for *modern* readers as men and women with whom they can identify and about whom they might fantasise.

In addition to adaptations there have been various appropriations of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example Austen and Graham-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* which effectively translates Austen’s novel into a more modern and stylised genre, and Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* which weaves all the novels into a new context. Sanders (2005, p. 1) suggests this form of “...appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain.”

In the previous two chapters on *Pride and Prejudice* I outlined some of the reasons why critics believe Austen’s novel continues to have resonance for modern readers (for example, Quindlen, Hogan, Dadlez). In attempting to write a contemporary Australian adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* I was aware of the enormous range of sequels, prequels, spin-offs and film and television adaptations of the novel. However, while at times I questioned my desire to add to the already extensive list, I also felt compelled to do so by my appreciation for Austen’s skill and my desire, as a creative writer, to understand more fully her techniques and devices. As Deidre Lynch (2009, p. 162) points out about the critics of sequels to Austen:

Busy lamenting the sequel writers’ impudence and incompetence, their detractors have not got around to exploring why her works appear to have proven more hospitable to sequelisation than those of almost any other novelist.

In attempting to understand the reasons for this prevalence of adaptations I have analysed *Pride and Prejudice* through the contemporary lens of emotional intelligence (EI). Additionally, I aspired to create an Australian contemporary adaptation which would use the notion of EI to develop personalities of strength and resonance, like Austen’s characters, and to make a contribution to critical examinations of Austen’s

particular style of character development in a way which would benefit other creative writers.

I was aiming for what Julie Sanders (2005, p. 17), in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, has labelled “an intertextual awareness (which) deepens and enriches the range of possible responses”. I heralded this at the outset by having an opening statement which would, like Austen’s, provide a somewhat ironic premise for the novel, but in a contemporary Australian fashion: “Everyone knows that Australia is a society where people do not judge others by their looks or income level” (Holmes 2013, p. 1). Harman(2009, p. 3) refers to the importance of Austen’s opening when she says: “If *Pride and Prejudice* is the representative Austen title, its opening sentence is one of the most frequently abused quotes in the language, second only to ‘to be or not to be’”.

Any modern adaptation of Austen in a contemporary setting needs to resonate for readers in terms of the geography in which it is placed and the socio-economic aspects of the given society. I was endeavouring to capture the particular Australian context and vernacular in social settings in all their vicissitudes which would be familiar to an Australian audience.

Transplanting the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* to contemporary Australia has certain consequences. In paying respect to Austen the only two aspects that can and must remain are the inclusion of gender and class issues and the love story itself. However, the latter requires a different language of dialogue to work in the new setting and era; a less formal and more idiomatic dialogue. In transplanting the narrative I believed the most crucial aspect was to develop and maintain the essential nature of the protagonists. I believe I have somewhat captured the personas of the individuals, that is the reticence, aloofness and disdain of Darcy in Laura and the liveliness, curiosity and playfulness of Elizabeth in Ryan.

I gave the novel component of this thesis the title *First Impressions* for a number of reasons. Firstly, I wanted to establish a firm link with *Pride and Prejudice* for those familiar with the work of Jane Austen, as *First Impressions* was her original title for the novel. Second, I believe that Austen’s original title for the novel says a lot about the contemporary relevance and resonance of *Pride and Prejudice* and ties in with the original impetus for the subject matter of this exegesis, with its emphasis on EI. People who are emotionally intelligent learn not to be misguided by first impressions.

It wasn’t until I came to write a contemporary version of *Pride and Prejudice* that I realised the deceptive nature of Austen’s work. At first glance *Pride and Prejudice* appears to be a simple tale of romance, in a limited setting, with a cast of amusing characters. What is actually involved is a layering of techniques and literary devices which captivate the reader by the delineation of character, beyond the actual scope of the novel. The reading of *Pride and Prejudice* yet again, for the purpose of creating a viable adaptation, gave me many new insights into her construction of character, linking of characters, lively dialogue, the smooth transition of plot, but with constant changes of focus, and the tension created by the delays in the romantic conclusion.

As readers we get to know the characters through sharp and clear dialogue, and appropriate and believable behaviours and actions. We are directed to who is likeable, who is to be trusted and who is unreliable. We are directed by Austen, as McFarlane

(2010, p. 24) points out through “the ‘voice’ that attaches to no particular character but is part of narratorial tone...”. Austen makes Darcy enigmatic by his reticence in dialogue, although she gives us little hints as to his true nature; it is the gradual unravelling of his motivations which is compelling. Possibly the earliest instance of some sense of Darcy’s true worth is set up by Austen in the chapters where Elizabeth is at Netherfield Park due to Jane’s illness. The conversation between Caroline Bingley, Darcy and Elizabeth about the accomplishments a lady must have is enlightening in that Darcy, whilst expressing his own patrician views is quick to admonish Caroline for her suggestion that Elizabeth is undervaluing her own sex in order to recommend females to males. Caroline is forced to discontinue the subject when Darcy says, “there is meanness in *all* the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable.” (Austen 2008, p. 44) That he is referring to Caroline rather than Elizabeth is made clear to the reader by Austen’s following line, “Miss Bingley was not so entirely satisfied with this reply as to continue the subject.”

Such subtleties in Austen’s narration and the nature of the rich and complex layering of meaning throw up challenges to the filmic adaptations. These adaptations need other devices such as facial expressions, gestures and voice tones to ensure the audience is left in no doubt as to the true nature of the people being represented, who is emotionally intelligent and who is not and where our sympathies should lie. A modern viewer is adept at reading filmic devices, including angle shots and lighting; devices which can replace or replicate thoughts and emotions accessed directly in a novel but cannot entirely substitute for the nuances of a narrative voice.

McFarlane (2010, p. 27), in discussing contemporary adaptations, here points to a need for a modern resonance:

If Austen is still to be seriously relevant in 2010, the filmmaker will need to find not just a focus for his or her take on the novel, but a way into audience response to what has turned the filmmaker on.

Possibly the best example, in screen adaptations seeking to create this resonance is the “wet shirt” scene in the 1995 BBC version (Davies 1995). The male body in half dress is an image that most clearly portrays the sex appeal of Darcy, which is only hinted at in the novel, “...his friend Mr Darcy, soon drew the attention of the room by his tall person, handsome features...” (Austen 2008, p. 10) The modern viewer, with the implied audience being largely female, and with perhaps no knowledge of the novel requires something visually as well as intellectually stimulating. This said, the modern reader still finds Austen, in the original, entertaining because of the anti-sentimental nature of her romance stories and because her characters have strong personalities which resonate with the reader. Moreover, Austen develops and maintains a delayed, delicious physical, intellectual and emotional tension between Elizabeth and Darcy throughout the novel and which has been a common feature in popular romantic novels ever since. As adaptation theorists, Pucci and Thompson (2003, p. 6) point out, we need to combine the best features of literature and screen life to create a modern resonance:

...we underscore the importance of allowing the canon and its past to be complemented by and even in some sense to be supplanted by the tools and technologies of our contemporary culture and popular media.

Part of the process of undertaking the research for this thesis, especially the writing of the novel was to survey and analyse the various ways *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted and appropriated by others. The aim was to explore what has worked and why, and to ascertain the nature and significance of my contribution to the Austen oeuvre as well as more broadly to contemporary literature and the exploration of emotion. I have limited this survey to films and books and I will not focus on societies, clubs and blogs for contemporary fans of Austen as Claire Harman (2009) in *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* provides an excellent and thorough analysis of these.

Although there are many adaptations of other Austen novels, any web search of *Pride and Prejudice* and adaptations will give an indication of the enormity of the latter. According to Lynch (2009, p. 14), in talking of sequels, "Bibliographies compiled at the end of the 1990s...list over a hundred published books and stories that originate or appropriate *Pride and Prejudice*." Given that this does not include film and television adaptations, the actual list would be even more extensive with *Pride and Prejudice* being the most adapted of all Austen novels.

Interestingly, in terms of contemporary thinking about classical literature, the majority of the sequels and spin-offs began to appear after the 1995 BBC mini-series adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The enormous success of this adaptation brought the original novel to a broad contemporary audience, attracting new readers as well as reigniting the passion of earlier admirers. The 1995 production, although taking some licence such as the bedroom confidences of the sisters and the famous wet shirt scene, was mainly true to the original text and even managed to incorporate Austen's famous opening sentence in a contextual way. The heavily ironical sentence is given to Elizabeth, and because it is uttered in a scene with her mother and sisters it reinforces the role she is to play to offset the obsessive notions of Mrs Bennet about marrying off her daughters. I see this as one example of what Julie Sanders is referring to when she says of adaptation, "...the 'movement of proximation' brings it closer to the audience's frame of reference in temporal, geographic, or social terms." (Sanders. P. 21.) I believe Sanders is referring to a modern audience's need for more intimate settings, faster pacing and visual references to sexuality.

Joe Wright's 2005, film of *Pride and Prejudice* also enjoyed enormous popularity and captured a large theatre going audience across many counties. No screen adaptations are able though to capture Austen's famous ironic tone, as Brian McFarlane points out, "When I write of the impossibility of filming 'Jane Austen', I mean that there are crucial aspects of the totality that belong intransigently to *her* and the literary mode." (McFarlane p 24). McFarlane here is referring to Austen's particular use of voice, both as omniscient narrator and through free indirect discourse. For example, in the previously mentioned chapter at Netherfield Austen refers to Caroline Bingley as Darcy's 'faithful assistant' a phrase which succinctly outlines the former's motives. Austen effectively manipulates the tone by using the third person extra-diegetic narrator who weaves in and out of the novel, sometimes ironic and/or didactic but at other times merely commenting. McFarlane points out that this is impossible to translate onto the screen, without that trickiest of devices, the voice over, although some reworking of the voice as dialogue is possible, as Davies does with the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*.

For *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations in a text based form as opposed to screen based, Austen's exquisite dialogue and characterisation are necessary because the reader needs to be captured by the tone and voice to drive the plot as we are with the original text. Dadlez (2008, p. 324) points to the importance of literary techniques to guide and develop the complexities of the characters:

The question then becomes, what kind of difference *Austen's* use of form, as exhibited in plot construction, deployment of literary devices and ironic narrative voice, make to her portrayal of character and moral judgement?

I have found through writing an adaptation that the answer is; a huge difference. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is compact and controlled with no extraneous matter. For example, I wondered for a time whether Kitty was a necessary character. Given the era it was written in however Kitty is essential as a companion to Lydia. Today she would not be necessary, but in Austen's time Lydia could never have had access to the militia without a constant companion and Mary is obviously unsuitable for that role. Each of the characters is there not only for plot purposes but also for illumination of character, whether their own, or as a comparison point. Austen's deployment of literary devices, such as free indirect discourse, in accompaniment with the ironic narrative voice provides moral dilemmas for her principal characters and it is these problems which lead to their development of combining reason with emotion and thus becoming fully formed for the reader with a potential, enduring life beyond the novel. The abundance of sequels, referred to earlier, is an indicator of this endurance of characters for the reader.

Austen's style of writing is sparse and ironic, and Dadlez (2008, p. 327) points out: "Part of the effect of Austen's ironic distance is that it lets us step back. It provides a perspective that permits us to consider all the reasons for a given character's judgement." This perspective is indeed necessary as it allows us to see their interactions and the resulting miscommunication so prevalent when we allow our first impressions to inform and direct our judgement. Also this ironic perspective enables a sense of multiple potential developments as opposed to the kind of enclosing control sometimes given by a non-ironic omniscient narrator.

Austen's style is also characterised by witty dialogue and the ironical voice of the omniscient narrator, mainly through free indirect discourse; indeed the opening sentence tells us that this will be a romance, but one filled with wit, irony and surprises.

Free indirect speech is a technique on the cusp between speech and narratorial discourse; it is employed in passages usually without quotation marks which are not delivered as direct speech but which represent characters' expression by employing their vocabulary, phrases, sentence structure and idiomatic inflections.
(Todd 2006, p.30)

Austen captures beautifully the essence of cognitive processes and individual speech styles through the narrative tone when presenting the thoughts of individual characters. Mr. Collins is one such example: "Mr. Collins' triumph in consequence of this invitation was complete. The power of displaying the grandeur of his patroness to his

wondering visitors...” (Austen 2008, p. 157) The tone and vocabulary convey his pomposity perfectly.

Through the writing of my thesis novel, *First Impressions*, I have noted the challenges and difficulties associated with using this technique effectively. It is necessary to individualise the tone and voice in order to depict whose thoughts are being aired. The ironic tone can easily descend to sarcasm or condescension to the characters if wit is absent. The ability of a character to laugh at themselves, as well as the foibles of others, is a necessary component in any imitation of Austen’s style, in order to denote which characters are admirable and which are not. Austen shows characters stumbling with their awareness but they are never inconsistent. This is an important aspect of realist fiction writing as inconsistencies would lead the reader to doubt their authenticity. Austen’s characterisation, with its recognisable human qualities is seamless in its rendition and is consistent throughout the novel.

It is these easily recognisable facets of human behaviour, so clearly delineated by Austen, which I believe make her novels live on as entities in their own right as well as providing space for adaptation and appropriation in different periods and contexts.

McFarlane (2010, p. 24) is speaking of the possibility of Austen’s contemporary relevance when he says:

The modernness of what makes men and women attractive or not to each other, what constitutes friendship and what makes for decent behaviour (are) issues that exist independent of changing mores and which perhaps help to explain the popularity of the novels.

The “decent behaviour” McFarlane is referring to is the modern equivalent of moral behaviour and virtuous traits. In Austen’s time Christian and class-based values provided the accepted code of conduct whereas today we have a diversity of values, not necessarily attached to religion or class. However, there is still a sense of decent behaviour in terms of what is socially acceptable behaviour and it is a human constant to wish to be liked by others and thus to behave in socially appropriate ways. McFarlane here is referring to film adaptations but I believe the same is true for text based ones. The notions of attraction and friendship are indeed similar in a contemporary context; they are a perennial aspect of humanity, the need for validation of qualities we strive to portray. I believe he is also referring to the timelessness of human behaviours we witness in *Pride and Prejudice*. Prose (2007, p. 20) endorses this:

In her works, the portrayal of the characters’ inner consciousness and the author’s critical observation of life merge seamlessly to produce a subtle interplay of empathy and distance, so that the complexities of human relationships are shown in both their psychological and their social aspects.

This careful balance of empathy and distance means the reader is able to relate to the feelings of the character but can also interpret subtleties and nuances through the ironic overview and commentary. The characters thus become more complex and rounded. These complexities of single human beings, and those within relationships that Prose refers to are what capture the reader in any work of fiction. These complexities arise due to differing motivations, aspirations and expectations as well as

the ability to see the true nature of those outside our ingrained notions of what is right and true.

I have found it is interesting, but challenging, to interrogate Austen's style, not from a strictly scholarly perspective but from the viewpoint of a creative writer who has attempted to adapt *Pride and Prejudice*. I have attempted to re-create certain aspects of the style in order to achieve a similar tone, which includes both wit and irony. Prose (2007, p. 23) points to the specific nature of wit in relation to Elizabeth Bennet when she says: "In her, Austen created a new type of woman, the embodiment of 'wit', which at that time implied agility of mind, quick understanding and astute powers of reasoning".

In Ryan, my male equivalent to Elizabeth, I have endeavoured to embody these particular aspects of personality and emotional intelligence to create a memorable and likeable character. I have done this through both his dialogue and actions and I hope this will resonate with readers in the way that Elizabeth Bennet does. In my Elizabeth figure, Ryan, I have attempted to create a character who is similarly outspoken yet sensitive to the nuances of feelings of himself and others. However, he, like Elizabeth, succumbs to first impressions before he finds that these were based on his own prejudices and biases.

As previously stated there is a plethora of sequels to *Pride and Prejudice*. It would be impossible in an exegesis of this length to analyse all of these. Several interesting, but extremely different versions of these sequels are *Pemberley*, the sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* by Emma Tennant (1993) which traces the future of all the characters and *The Independence of Miss Mary Bennet* by Colleen McCullough (2009), which concentrates fully on one of the more minor characters. Emma Tennant's, as a sequel, does manage to capture much of Austen's tone but the continual references to a back-story, included for readers unfamiliar to *Pride and Prejudice* is annoying for those who know the novel. McCullough's novel is a clever and amusing take on Mary as an idealistic and unrealistic social reformer which fits with her character's zeal and complete lack of self-awareness in Austen's novel.

In an ironic way these sequels make sense given that Austen herself, in letters to her sister Cassandra, was given to inventing futures for her characters after the novel was completed (Laski 1969, p. 88). However, Lynch (2009, p. 165) also points to the result of overly dramatic and genre-crossing renditions, such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen & Grahame-Smith (2009), when she says, "The consequence is that these narratives often feel like throwbacks to the Gothic and sentimental novels that Austen loved to burlesque. They often feel, in their sensationalism, strangely pre-rather than post-Austenian". Indeed, they are a little similar to Austen's juvenilia where, as I have previously suggested, she seemed to write this out of her system.

Spin-offs, such as Fowler's (2006) *The Jane Austen Book Club* also made into a film (Swicord 2007) and Andrews (2008) *Lost in Austen* (tele-movie) rework Austen into varying modes, the former appealing to an older primarily female audience, and the latter to a much younger one prepared to suspend their disbelief in order to accommodate dramatic time shifts and reversals of plot. *The Jane Austen Book Club* is an interesting novel because it works as an entity in its own right but creates extra resonance to Austenites because each of the characters corresponds to a particular

Austen book or character, with a cast of extremely varied age groups. The film version is, however, far less earthy and more elegant than the book, perhaps to widen the age group appeal. *Into Austen* is cleverly scripted and captures well some of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* but spins off into somewhat absurd turnarounds in the final stages. They would only seem absurd, however, had you read the original, and wanted fidelity to the original text. I suspect that a very blatant post-modern approach worked for this adaptation, there is enough of the original to appeal to viewers familiar with *Pride and Prejudice* (and into anything Austen), enough of the chic-lit genre to appeal to young females and some complete twists of plot lines for those wanting something new and different.

Feilding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, first conceived as diary entries in a newspaper in 1995 that lead to the novel's publication in 1996 took the basic love story and transposed it to modern-day England. This novel departs in many ways from the original. That it is written in the form of a diary ensures that the focus is very much on Bridget and there is only one "voice" to produce. It also differs in terms of peers, rather than siblings being the influencing people in Bridget's dilemmas as a young woman coping with contemporary issues. Although set in modern England the tension in the original love plot is what drives the story and captivates readers and viewers. The film relies heavily on intertextuality and that Colin Firth, who played Darcy in the 1995 BBC series is the Darcy character in this story. Due to being set in modern times it is much more action-based and sensual than the original but it retains a very British aura through locations and dialogue.

My novel is similar to *Bridget Jones's Diary* in that it transposes the essential love plot to a contemporary setting. Mine differs, however, in both context and tone. I wanted, through *First Impressions*, to explore class and gender issues, particularly in relation to suburban Melbourne and regional Victoria, original home of the "squattocracy". I also wanted to inject some irreverent humour which seems to arise from an attitude of giving respect when it is earned rather than because of rank or position, a different form of humour to that in *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

I also decided on a number of changes in my adaptation, one of which was to reverse the gender roles thus making the wealthy person, the "Darcy" character, a woman, and the "Elizabeth" character a male. In this reversal I was acknowledging various changes in society between Austen's time and the present, and that generational and educational changes have occurred for both genders. Young women are more financially independent and have more life options than in Austen's time. I was also keen to explore how I might create emotionally intelligent young men and what devices I could use to achieve this. I found that the roles of mother and grandmother became hugely important in achieving this aim, reflecting a greater range of generations than perhaps were available in Austen's time.

I was also interested in exploring the way that class and gender continues to divide society and provide barriers to relationships. My aim was to develop characters that would have fairly small physical journeys but much large psychological ones, parallel to those in *Pride and Prejudice*.

One of the challenges for me as a writer was in entering the sensibility of the twenty-something male, to capture the nuances of both character and language. Although

much has changed in social constructions of gender and group dynamics since Austen's time, like Austen, I found I had limited access to conversations between young males without any females present. Conversations change as the dynamic does, depending on the mix of genders in a social setting. I found this required substantial research including observation of young men in my neighbourhood and, with an advantage not open to Austen, watching film and television depictions of young men of the type I was writing about. These were helpful in giving a sense of the so-called generation X and Y modes of behaviour and aspirations.

Another problem was how to bring a very wealthy young woman into contact with a young man from a totally different background in a realistic way. I found here that I was forced to remove Laura from her rural environment and move both Laura and Ryan, through various exigencies, into a very small street in the Melbourne suburb of Kew. I chose this particular setting as it is a suburb where there is a good mixture of old and new, the obviously wealthy and the less fortunate. I also placed them in a very small street to make frequent encounters possible. Although it is not now a social custom to introduce oneself to new neighbours the plethora of "village" type shopping strips in the inner suburban areas of Melbourne, with an abundance of coffee lounges and bars does make neighbourhood interaction possible. I also found, from direct experience, that the supermarket is a source of many chance encounters with people in one's neighbourhood, taking the place of the village draper's where the Bennet girls encounter Wickham and other men from the militia.

In a similar vein to Austen I have chosen to depict a limited world of contemporary characters, places and social classes. Although class issues have changed dramatically since Austen's time, social class still categorises the way in which Australian society is lived and ordered. Despite protestations of egalitarianism, Australia, like any other industrialised capitalist society, has a social order determined by levels of possession and power. These levels of power, which create observable social difference, possession and dispossession, are based primarily in socioeconomic factors and monitored regularly by magazines such as *The Business Review Weekly* and *The Bulletin*, which regularly inform us of the number and percentages of wealth which exist for an elite group in our society. Despite the common notional belief in Australia's lack of a class system, McGregor (1997, p. 268) states, "There is more income inequality in Australia than any other developed nation". Parentage, suburb of residence and place of schooling still figure largely in the future of many individuals.

Gender also continues to act as a barrier to acquired wealth. The paucity of women as chief executive officers of large organisations and the few women on boards of companies bears witness to this in contemporary Australia.

Very concerning is that almost two-thirds of ASX 500 companies have no female executives and only 12 have a female CEO and, if you look internationally, Australia has the lowest percentage of female executives compared to countries with similar government structures.
(Lannin 2013, p. 2)

Class in Australia, however, is a difficult to measure, multi-faceted and complex issue. My Master of Arts thesis (1998) concerned Australian women's working-class

writing and thus issues of gender and class have an ongoing preoccupation for me. That gender and class are key issues in *Pride and Prejudice* is evidenced by the opening sentence. I knew that although so much has changed from Austen's time in England to contemporary Australia, gender and class continue to be aspects of social and interior lives which resonate today. I needed to create circumstances which would bring together female and male characters from different social classes and create situations which would bring these differences to the fore.

I believe that in terms of class issues my novel is similar to *Pride and Prejudice* in that it is a mixture of romance and realism. It is unusual, although not impossible, for someone from an extremely wealthy background to come into contact with, let alone develop a relationship with someone far lower on the socio-economic scale. I would hope that the personal qualities I have created for my protagonists will take the reader on a journey that is believable even if outside the norm. I believe it is this connection to characters in *Pride and Prejudice* which makes it live on and so I have attempted to emulate this sense of two people destined for each other whatever obstacles are thrown in their path.

My chief concern in relation to *Pride and Prejudice* and my own adaptation is specifically the issue of people from different social backgrounds being placed in situations which are normally inaccessible and produce sensations of awkwardness and embarrassment. These feelings are not exclusively those of the person in the lower socio-economic category. Darcy is obviously repulsed by much of Elizabeth's family, and this is an obstacle which needs to be overcome in order for a satisfactory resolution for the reader. Family is the one facet of a class background which cannot be denied, as Todd (2006, p. 72) points out when she says:

When he leaves her after Lydia's disgrace, she assumes he has left because of this further example of her family's failings, where he has, in fact, understood that Elizabeth cannot be divorced from this family – and that, in human terms, what she offers is not much worse than what he brings, an almost disgraced sister and an impertinent aunt.

In my adaptation, Laura's privileged but also isolated background produces a lack of social and emotional skills that become obvious when she is anywhere near Ryan's family. She is also unable to divorce herself from her uncle who is disdainful, arrogant and completely dismissive of Ryan as a partner for his niece.

Austen uses the social context of balls and dances to bring males and females together in surroundings that promoted pleasure and, importantly, conversation. Given the contemporary nature of nightclubs and raves, with often extremely loud music, drugs and alcohol, I soon decided these were not an option for bringing my characters together. I therefore chose a tennis club as a connecting device as the game itself has appeal for people from a variety of social classes, and given this, also provides opportunities for the writer to reveal class distinctions. I also needed a non-threatening environment for a range of age groups which would secure opportunities for both intimate and wider social engagement. It would also provide a context for conflict, problems and issues to exemplify the social and emotional intelligence of a range of people. I also used a particular venue, the Lyceum Club, the female

equivalent of the exclusive Melbourne Club to provide an out-of-comfort zone for my male protagonist.

The exigencies of gender in Austen's time are brought into focus at the very beginning by the opening sentence and the problem of entailment, the legal entitlement of male inheritance. In constructing a family of five daughters Austen is showing us how important and entrenched was the nexus of gender, family and inheritance in her era. From this fact about the Bennet family's future we can grasp the nature of the marriage imperative, and how utterly dependent women were on fathers and husbands.

The issue of marriage is one that has changed dramatically since Austen was writing, although it still retains iconic significance with a huge money-making industry depending on the continuance of the wedding ceremony. In the early nineteenth century women of limited income had few options other than marriage as a means to improve their situation. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen points to this quite clearly in her depiction of the decision of Charlotte Lucas to marry Mr. Collins. Charlotte is fully aware that he has previously proposed to Elizabeth and been rejected but she also sees his proposal to her as the only way of avoiding penury and becoming a burden to her family as a spinster. Rajan (2005, p. 104) comments:

But from the very first her readers could not have failed to see that Austen's anti-romantic, pragmatic, frequently satirical representation of romantic love came from the recognition of the middle-class woman's lack of alternatives to marriage.

A good example of what Rajan is referring to here is the scene where Mr. Collins proposes first to Elizabeth, after finding that Jane is unavailable, and then to Charlotte, two proposals within three days. Chapters twenty to twenty-two of *Pride and Prejudice* are indeed about the absurdity of supposed romantic love, with Charlotte's thoughts summing up the realities of marriage for a good many of Austen's contemporaries:

Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (Austen 2008, p.138)

The ironic tone here is so similar to the opening sentence of the novel and captures the ambiguities for women who need something they might not want.

In writing an adaptation I wanted to explore issues other than economic imperatives that need to be considered in relation to marriage. Whilst it is no longer a financial necessity for most western women or men to marry there is still a strong familial and societal pressure to pair and reproduce. The current focus on same sex marriage also attests to a strong desire for the significance of a formal commitment. There is also the fact that most people crave intimacy in some form or another and modern adaptations are perhaps more realistic if this is the impetus for the romantic element, rather than thoughts of matrimony as a necessity at the outset. But clearly what is of most importance in gaining and maintaining a readership is a combination of both romance and realism. This is what Austen achieves, as Todd (2006, p. 26) points out:

The hybridity of romance and realism diminishes neither: accepting romantic closure the novels avoid intellectual closure, so allowing a reader to continue thinking.

This combination of romance and realism was one I wished to emulate, in the way that the contingencies and absurdities cause relationships to ebb and flow. I also wanted to avoid intellectual closure in order to leave the reader with something further to ponder, as we do with Austen's texts.

One of my earliest tasks in constructing the novel was to map the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and their relationships to one another, and to consider whether I needed equivalents in my novel. I did not find it necessary to replicate every character; indeed that would have been impossible in terms of occupations and lifestyles. What I was seeking to do was capture the essence, the particularities, the psychological equivalent. My main aim was to have the two central characters learning not to trust their own first impressions but ultimately gaining self-awareness leading to true awareness of the other, as when Elizabeth and Darcy undergo a journey of confronting their own biases. My Darcy figure, Laura, would need to learn to align her cognitive reasoning with her emotions which, like Darcy's are very much hidden due to her background, family and life experience. My Elizabeth figure, Ryan, would need to see beyond his preconceptions about people from wealthy backgrounds and learn to understand that fear of self-exposure can hide true empathy. All of these aspects of self-analysis are key components in the development of emotional intelligence.

As discussed in the previous chapter, in *Pride and Prejudice* letters form an important facet for communication of information that cannot be gleaned from dialogue. Crucial to the unravelling of the plot is a letter from Darcy to Elizabeth. These letters give the reader access to the character's thoughts and crucially in the case of Darcy show his emotional development. Film adaptations can either have the letters read out loud, if set in Austen's era, or have more open dialogue if contemporary versions. In a contemporary adaptation in the novel form I considered using modern forms of letter writing, such as email and texting, but concluded that they do not serve the same functions. Writing, particularly letter writing, is a process that requires reflection, deliberation and consideration, a slowing down of the thought processes. Unfortunately, perhaps, people seldom use such a method of constructing emails and text messages, certainly not for Facebook or Twitter. I did decide to use some texting and emailing, particularly in the ending of the novel as an authentic representation of the ages of my characters and as a summing-up device, which I shall return to later.

After trying a number of strategies, though, I decided to give the reader access to the male-to-male conversations. This allowed the two main male characters to discuss thoughts and ideas revealing some notion of their emotions during those conversations, but certainly not "deep and meaningful" discussions as this, I believe, would jar male readers. Other devices I used to reflect the development of emotional intelligence in characters other than letters were differing points of view, and the introduction of a grandmother who could draw out the intricacies of feelings about people in an unobtrusive way. I also gave some back story as to the nature of the relationship of the mother, Carolyn, with the siblings, Ryan and Scott, to point to their learned ability to empathise, this being instilled into their consciousness by their mother's insistence on the reasons for behaviours and her constantly reading to them

from an early age. Although both siblings have been taught about the importance of curbing emotions and impulsivity the innate intelligence of Ryan is contrasted somewhat with Scott, who like Bingley is more of a follower than a leader. Many admire Austen's skill in maintaining the drawn-out tension of the love interests in *Pride and Prejudice*. What makes the novel continue to work is our desire for the main characters to come together. While I wanted to emulate this tension of the romance in *Pride and Prejudice*, it must be done differently for a contemporary reader who certainly expects at least one sexual scene. I have certainly not attempted a raunchy update of the novel. I wanted intimacy rather than mere sex to drive the romantic elements of the novel as I believe intimacy to be the lasting emotion. There are many more choices available for individuals than were ever possible in Austen's time and this is reflected in my rendering of the counterparts to Jane and Bingley, Stephanie and Scott who have a sexual relationship but do not stay together.

Pride and Prejudice places significance on the role of siblings and friendships. In line with contemporary western families I decided that Ryan would have two siblings rather than four but that one of these siblings, Scott, would play the role of confidant, such as Jane does with Elizabeth Bennet. The other sibling, Kit, emotionally immature is an amalgam of the other Bennet sisters, having at times the flamboyance of Lydia plus the vacuity of Mary. There were friendships that I saw as having the most significance in *Pride and Prejudice*; one is that of Charlotte, in that she provides a surprise for Elizabeth who thought she knew her friend and what she valued. Elizabeth, at first, cannot believe that Charlotte would marry without love, but here she is placing her own value system on her friend. Elizabeth is in this sense the romantic and Charlotte the pragmatist, a model of those who marry because that is the only option they have available. Charlotte is indeed full of reason but is content to put her emotions in the background in order to have an acceptable outcome for herself and her family. Elizabeth is therefore forced to see that her own values are not universal and she needs to reconcile with Charlotte's reasoning if the friendship is to be retained and flourish.

In order to create something parallel to Charlotte's reasoning within the gender reversals of my novel, I created Gino, Ryan's friend who would marry Angela, not because he lacked other options but because of the immense load of familial pressure. The suggestion I am making here is not a marriage of necessity, because there *is* real affection involved but rather that people marry without truly exploring other possibilities because it is expected and accepted as a perennial way of life. The fear of aloneness/loneliness as well as existing as the "third wheel" in a society built around couples and families is something which I believe influences many people's choices in our contemporary world.

Another friendship of significance, in *Pride and Prejudice* is that of Bingley and Darcy and this I sought to recreate in Stephanie's friendship with Laura. Stephanie is the light to Laura's dark, offering a similar contrast to Bingley and Darcy, as demonstrated for example when Bingley entreats Darcy to dance and enjoy the ladies around him. Siblings and friends are more important than parental figures in *Pride and Prejudice* as the latter provide little in the way of role models for emotionally intelligent behaviours. I chose to give Laura a younger cousin rather than a brother as an equivalent to Darcy and Georgiana, partly to show her similar nurturing nature at odds with her initial social awkwardness but also to create a character, such as Patrick,

her cousin, caught in a privileged position in society which jars with his more down-to-earth aspirations.

My characters of David and Elise, Ryan's uncle and aunt, provide much the same purpose as the Gardiners do in *Pride and Prejudice*. They are a solid presence, and they travel with Ryan to Laura's property, in order to show that there are sensible, practical family members for Ryan, as opposed to his reclusive mother and emotional father. As well as providing role models as a happily married couple, they also show Laura that Ryan does have some family with intelligence, empathy and reason. As discussed in chapter two of this exegesis Austen created such a couple in the Gardiners to provide a counter-balance to the extravagant nature of other family members.

I also chose to reverse the personality types in parent figures. Mrs Bennet's annoying emotional outpouring is somewhat mirrored in Richard Bentley and he also has herd preoccupation with the future security for the offspring. Mr. Bennet's aloofness and disdain are reflected in Carolyn Bentley who retreats to her studies. She has temporarily abrogated moral responsibility but in a more female and contemporary way than Mr. Bennet. Carolyn has realised she needs some life of her own. In the way that Darcy has a very wealthy aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, who attempts to keep her nephew and Elizabeth Bennet apart, Laura has a wealthy Uncle Hugh, a Queens Counsel. Hugh's role is also to try and keep the protagonists apart but I thought it would be unrealistic for contemporary readers to imbue him with the same tyrannical demeanour as Lady Catherine. Lady Catherine is assisted in her tyranny by Mr. Collins, a character who would be difficult to emulate in modern terms. Hugh's purpose, rather, is to exacerbate the differences in social class and to make my protagonist even more determined to be contrary to his wishes as Lady Catherine did for Elizabeth.

In *Pride and Prejudice* there is a type of background chorus in the various characters who hold dinners and have all the gossip of the village and especially about the comings and goings of the militia. I decided to invent some neighbours for Laura and Stephanie who could provide this role in a modern context, creating a sense of social activity within a spatially-imposed community. Although physical movement is limited in distances there is non-the-less much social activity in *Pride and Prejudice* and I chose to mirror this in a modern context in order to keep the characters moving into different group dynamics creating alternate atmospheres and interactions. As with *Pride and Prejudice*, when people enter new social settings, for example, Elizabeth at Rosings, opinions and behaviours are brought into sharper focus by contrast with previously unencountered types of personalities. I took Ryan to the Lyceum Club precisely to enter a new and slightly puzzling world.

I found it necessary to introduce characters who would have no equivalent in *Pride and Prejudice*, such as Ryan's grandmother, Gwen. In attempting to round out the character of Ryan, and depict in him much of Elizabeth's good sense, he needed someone to provide wisdom and understanding, qualities not often provided by other young males. Austen chose not to go beyond two generations in *Pride and Prejudice* and I have wondered why that is so. There is some information about Darcy's father as this is necessary to the back story of Wickham. There is no mention of Darcy's mother, nor is there any mention of Bingley's parents. Austen's cast of characters

seems deliberately contained and this could be another interesting field of analysis. In Australia today grandparents can play a huge role in character and emotional development, having the closeness but the lack of responsibility which can allow them to see their grandchildren as separate beings from their parents. Interestingly, it is the Gardiners who take on this role for the Bennet sisters, particularly Jane and Elizabeth.

I wrestled long and hard with a believable equivalent to Lydia running off with Wickham and the shame that act brought to the family. I had noticed, in teaching *Pride and Prejudice*, that the enormity of such an event lacked resonance with students today and so decided upon something far less catastrophic, but shaming nonetheless, in terms of criminal activity, which could allow Laura, my Darcy figure, to actively provide a solution and ultimately save face for two families.

I travelled both physically and through the internet to some stately homesteads in the Western District of Victoria in order to have a sense of size and grandeur, historical significance and old family wealth and status. Another reason was to gain an understanding of the huge ongoing amounts of capital needed to maintain such properties.

I needed Laura to be, like Darcy, an enigma at the outset, due not only to her wealth but also to her reticence, so the reader could see why Ryan considered her a snob. Stephanie, her close friend, allows the reader to continue seeing a slightly softer, different version of Laura. Unlike Darcy there is no character reversal but rather a gradual build-up of the aspects of her past and family background which influence first impressions of her. I needed Laura to initially see Ryan as a lower-class figure, (“bogan” in the Australian vernacular or part of “the great unwashed”) with his family strengthening this impression until gradually, through social interaction she becomes aware of his moral convictions, his honesty and integrity. I also wanted Ryan to represent the irreverent nature of Australian culture, that iconic need to “take the piss”. I believe this stems from working-class culture and is an attempt to make people laugh at their own foibles. Laura, having had little previous access to such behaviour sees it as rudeness and reacts accordingly. As with Darcy, Laura has had little parental guidance, and due to her isolation, few social graces.

In keeping with contemporary society my characters needed to undertake many more and various activities than those of Austen’s time and for them to be far more open in terms of criticism and dialogue than the mores of Austen’s era allowed. In a contemporary context I believe a novel needs to provide the framework of jobs or schooling, family obligations and daily economic realities as well as a plot. Without this framework and its detailed expression I believe the novel would lack resonance for modern readers as these are the daily preoccupations of much of the population.

Of course, as suits the time, the language and the vocabulary of my novel is, less formal and more vernacular. I have attempted to give each character a distinct voice which suits his or her personality and style. I struggled with the issue of free indirect speech and sometimes was forced to abandon it for dialogue. If used effectively it can create that sense of distance mentioned previously but if it lacks clarity it can confuse the reader. I discovered that it takes a real depth of understanding of the nuances of

your characters to perfect this technique. My attempts to use this technique have increased my admiration for Austen's skill.

The last chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* is a type of epilogue given by the omniscient narrator, summarising Elizabeth and Darcy's life after marriage. In contemporary novels this is a seldom used-device, except perhaps in children's books, and I found my version sounded somewhat contrived, possibly because I could not match the ironic tone. In the end I settled for finishing with Ryan's thoughts.

My ultimate aim in undertaking a contemporary Australian version of *Pride and Prejudice* was to create a romantic yet realistic novel which would provide pleasurable echoes of Austen's style and characterisation located within a completely different time and context. It is ironic that, despite all the vast changes since Austen's era, including globalisation and technology dependence, personalities and characters, with all their insecurities and biases essentially remain the same.

Chapter 4 : Summing up.

In this doctoral exegesis I have outlined the processes I used to create *First Impressions*, a contemporary Australian version of *Pride and Prejudice* using the inspiration of Austen's style and characterisation and the basic tenets of emotional intelligence (EI).

In my introduction I have provided a selective overview of the theoretical criticism of Austen, concentrating on the critics who are interested in issues of empathy and in the techniques by which Austen created vivid, memorable characters. Of course this selection cannot encompass the plethora of books and journal articles studied in the development of this thesis. At times the sheer volume of Austen criticism seemed unending as each new wave and style of literary theory emerged. My selection focuses on what intrigued me as a creative writer: this ongoing fascination of Austen for critics, readers, writers and film-makers.

The more criticism I read the more I returned to the primary source, the novel, to revisit the sharp ironic tone and lively, witty dialogue in order to learn, as a writer, exactly how it is done. Each return to the complete small world of *Pride and Prejudice* led me, as a creative writer, to its characters in an attempt to discover how they continue to remain representative of humanity in all their kindness and blindness and a thousand other vagaries. Austen's characterisation lifts the narrative from straight romance into a compelling tale, in that we are intensely interested in the individual characters because of their diversity and not merely as part of some completion that straight romance entails.

The romance of Elizabeth and Darcy is, of course central; it owes its enduring interest and significance to the strength and veracity of the protagonists as credible central characters. A movement between reading analyses of Austen's style and the original, from the perspective of a writer, foregrounded for me the challenge of replicating the intricacies of such a contained domestic intimacy in the world of my own novel. The author's sense of containment in a character-driven plot has therefore been my major focus and the area of most value for me both as a writer and an academic. There are few extraneous details in *Pride and Prejudice*, all characters are there for a reason and the sparse description enhances the imaginative participation of the reader.

I developed the second chapter, which focuses on EI, not from a philosophical or psychological perspective but from the viewpoint of a creative writer extremely interested in how the concepts of EI could pertain to fiction in general and to character development in particular. I analysed how the particularly modern concept of EI could relate to characters within *Pride and Prejudice* and how I might utilise these concepts to develop my own contemporary characters and their motivations. I was attempting through using an emotional/rational balance, as promoted in EI, to ensure my characters would be established as well-rounded and three-dimensional as Austen's. I gave each of the minor characters a purpose, either in terms of contrast to the protagonists or to represent certain positive emotions such as emotional responsiveness, empathy, compassion and love, all valued and promoted aspects of EI. In addition for the minor characters I presented some archetypal negative characteristics of greed, jealousy and anger. One of the major tenets of developing EI is the ability to curb impulsivity. Goleman (1995, p. 34) characterises EI as including:

...abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration; to control impulse and delay gratification...

Austen, in her depiction of Lydia exemplifies that she will not achieve true happiness due to her inability to think before acting. Lydia acts entirely on impulse and personal gratification without any insight into how her actions impact on her family or the sense of shame they endure. Ironically, Lydia has imitated her father in choosing a partner for the wrong reasons. She is therefore the complete antithesis to Elizabeth who weighs carefully her choices, firstly in rejecting Darcy because he has insulted her family and herself and then in accepting him after gaining insight into his motivations in ultimately saving her family from disgrace. In Austen's reflections on the futures of her major characters, she emphasises the disparity between their lives based on the choices they have made, rationally or irrationally.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen provides the full gamut of human behaviour, placing a high value on the qualities now identified as EI. Some psychologists, Oatley (2004) for example, have referred to literature as able to teach us much about EI, but I have found few references that go beyond this general observation. I believe I have made a contribution to a more specific application of EI to fiction by interrogating and adapting the characterisation in one novel, *Pride and Prejudice* using my perceptions and practical experience as a writer of fiction. However, I believe there are infinite possibilities for using EI in both teaching about literature and writing and in developing depth in creative writing itself.

In my exploration of EI and its contemporary relevance to Austen I attempted to interrogate the reasons why Austen's characters are so memorable and analyse which aspects of their behaviour and dialogue establish their wholeness for a modern readership. I wanted to examine the rational/emotional equilibrium of the protagonists that made them interesting both to readers and other writers. I questioned why it is that as readers we need Elizabeth and Darcy to ultimately unite. I believe it is because they are created as opposites but complementary in terms of each having something needing to be learned from the other, each requiring a further degree of emotional or rational responsiveness to be a suitable match for the other: a type of behavioural fulcrum which makes the eventual joining an inevitability.

However, Austen's narrative gives equal space to the daily patterns of life, the interactions and socialisation which create a lively environment for the protagonists to inhabit and makes their circuitous paths between the minor characters as important as the straight forward, if impeded, romantic interest. Austen's characters, other than Elizabeth and Darcy, often serve as vehicles for developing a greater understanding of the potential of the protagonists. Darcy's housekeeper, for example indicates that he is a kind and generous landlord and Lady Catherine, in her confrontation with Elizabeth, shows us a sense of moral conviction in the latter which had been hinted at but now becomes obvious.

In the third chapter which discusses *Pride and Prejudice* and adaptation I focus on what I have attempted to do in creating a contemporary Australian version of the novel. I outline some of the major insights I have gained in my adaptation. I became immediately aware of the constraints imposed by transferring the setting to modern

Australia, a society that has developed in a very different manner to England and therefore has a different set of social and economic structures which over time has resulted in the construction of differently nuanced gendered identities. There is a lessening of traditional gender expectations, across the Western world in general, in terms of EI it is no longer so necessary for males to be excessively rational at the expense of emotion. I did, however, wish to indicate that attempting to be a sensitive contemporary male can carry its own problems. At times I regretted my decision to reverse the genders of the protagonists, as it became a challenge to maintain some of the plot constructions and atmosphere of *Pride and Prejudice* where the hero is a female. However, I came to enjoy the construction of Ryan as a character of complexity and as an emotionally intelligent, yet very grounded, young Australian male. I wanted him to have an overriding interest in people, as does Elizabeth Bennet, and to be open to his own biases and pre-judgements and I believe I succeeded in this regard.

Apart from gender issues, those of class and economics came into play when writing *First Impressions*. In my novel I developed a contained Australian setting where class can be a major point of confrontation and misunderstanding. I used *Pride and Prejudice* as a template for my novel, but with an overarching notion of using EI to develop characterisation which would lead to individuals of enough interest to drive the narrative without huge events or dramatic elements. I decided I needed to have an alternative opening sequence to *Pride and Prejudice* due to modern Australian demographics, where it is not often that people from extreme wealth come into contact with those much lower down the economic scale, and especially not through being neighbours. The Yarra River continues to be a social divide in terms of Melbourne's suburbs. I decided to move the Bentley family from their modest house in Geelong to an inherited one in Kew as the small street I created could also conceivably be a new home to Laura. It was important, though, that the new dwelling for the Bentleys was an old, ugly and eccentric residence to further contrast the family background and social status of the protagonists.

In the third chapter I discussed a very selective sample of adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, the constraints of a short exegesis preventing a more comprehensive treatment. However, I attempted to cover the major reasons for and importance of adaptations of Austen including my own. This significance is based on writers and filmmakers realising that Austen's fiction is about compact but complete structures peopled by enduring characters.

To summarise and conclude this exegesis, my field of scholarship has been to bring the contemporary relevance of EI to explore both a novel of enduring appeal to general readers and academics and to create my own Australian version of Austen's classic, *Pride and Prejudice*. What started out as a connection in my own mind between two seemingly divergent issues grew intriguing as I reflected on Austen's writing techniques and the varying opinions of critics on her style and influences. Her particular narrative style with its boundary-breaking, free indirect discourse took the novel form into another dimension by creating another "voice" to make sure the reader knows the true nature of characters by ironic references to their motivations. This leads to the reader having an insight into pomposities, rudeness and non-altruistic motives, especially in relation to Mr. Collins, Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine, who, if these insights into their characters came entirely from their own

utterances could lead to stereotypical characters. Austen's techniques are easier to discuss however, than they are to emulate. I believe my balance of creative writing and my critical reading in the light of EI has made a significant contribution to the field of literature and has thus fulfilled the requirements of a creative thesis.

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