

**Somewhere Between: The Shifting Trends in the Narrative Strategies and
Preoccupations of the Young Adult Realistic Fiction Genre in Australia**

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Erin Farrow
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Abstract.

'Young adult realistic fiction' is a classification used by contemporary publishers such as Random House, McGraw Hill Education and Scholastic, who define it as 'stories with characters, settings, and events that could plausibly happen in true life' (Scholastic 2014). From the first Australian young adult imprint in 1986 it has become possible to trace substantial shifts in the trends of genre. This thesis explores some of the ways that the narrative structures and preoccupations of contemporary Australian young adult realistic fiction novels have shifted, particularly in regards to the portrayal of the main protagonist's self-awareness, the complexity of the subject matter being discussed and the unresolved nature of the novels' endings. The significance of these shifting trends within the genre is explored by means of a creative component and an accompanying exegesis. Through my novel, *Somewhere between*, I aim to consider and build on the changing narrative structures and preoccupations of Australian novels of the young adult realistic fiction genre. The exegesis uses the examination of representative Australian YA novels published between 1986 and 2013 to demonstrate the shifting trends in these three main narrative structures and preoccupations. The gradual, steady, shift in the narrative structures and preoccupations of the genre away from stability and assurance gives evidence of shifting notions of childhood and adolescent subjectivity within contemporary Australian society.

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

"I, Erin Farrow, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Somewhere Between: The Shifting Trends in the Narrative Strategies and Preoccupations of the Young Adult Realistic Fiction Genre in Australia* 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".

Signature:

Date:

Dedication

To Mum, Dad, Brenton and Mark, because of you I have always known exactly where I belong.

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PROLOGUE

From my balcony on a muggy, February evening, I watch the sun set over the Shrine of Remembrance. From here, I look towards the CBD, not as far as the clocks of Flinders Street Station, the spire of Saint Paul's Cathedral or the misplaced architecture of Federation Square, but along St. Kilda Road, where I can see the hard, black lines of The Melburnian, the apartment complex that stands on the former site of Prince Henry's Hospital. Where she spent forty hours a week the years after she finished high school. Where she learnt about vital signs, blood pressure, medications and patient care. But also where she met my dad and where she found out she was pregnant with me.

If I look back towards South Melbourne, to Kings Way and the Arts Precinct, I can see the apartment building where the nurses used to live during their training. I can trace the path she would have taken from the front door to the entrance of Prince Henry's. The same streets and footpaths I take when I walk to the train, to work, to the supermarket or The Tan. When I stop at traffic lights, waiting for the okay from the little green man, I look across to the other side of the road, imagine her standing at the same intersection just twenty years before me.

In a few years' time, I'll have lived longer than her.

My room is full of all my belongings and memories. Books stacked on my shelves and overflowing onto the floor, my photo board covered in photos from home, of high school and the beach and Jem and me, the snow globe Grandma and Pa brought me the last time they visited from England. I try to imagine what her room at the nurses' residency would have looked like. Did it look like a typical girls' room? Like my room? I try to remember the stories I've been told about her, any piece of information that might help me form an image of her standing in her room. But all I know is trivial. Her date of birth, the name of the town she grew up in, where she studied and the date she and Dad got married. They're the details you might read in the obituary of a complete stranger. They're not the only details a girl should know about her mother. I want to know whether she had a sweet-tooth like me, I want to know what her favourite subjects were at school, who her friends were when she was young, what music she used to listen to, what books she read, what her laugh sounded like, but most of all how she felt about me.

We only had two days together, but still she is responsible for half of me and as I stand here, so close to where she spent her last years, I already feel like I know her better. And maybe I know myself a little better too.

CHAPTER ONE

This is the second time in a month that a piece of paper has had the power to change my life. The same tree that turns into a shopping list, scrap paper or a take away menu could also make the piece of paper that not only decides where I'll spend the next four years of my life, but also what I'll spend the majority of my days doing.

One month ago, on December 17th, a piece of paper gave me my ATAR score. It reduced thirteen years of schooling to a four-digit number, to two decimal points. Six end-of-year exams, weeks of studying, pages of cheat sheets with writing so small I needed a magnifying glass to read them, all came down to that number. A number that said whether I failed or not. A number that determined what I could do with my life.

High 90s and society expected certain things of you – how could you waste that ability, surely you would study medicine or become a lawyer? So what if you faint at the sight of blood? It doesn't matter if you're too afraid of public speaking to stand up in a courtroom.

That one piece of paper, that one number, carries the weight to determine the rest of your life. I'm meant to be able to stand up and say, 'This is me, this is who I'm going to be.' But I don't know the answers to those questions. I didn't know them before, I don't know them two months later.

I didn't tell Dad what that piece of paper said. I didn't tell Jem. I haven't told anyone from school. If I don't know me, how can they? It's hiding in my copy of *The Secret Garden* and each night when I pull its green cloth spine from the shelf and open it to my favourite illustration of the robin leading Mary into the garden, I wonder whether the letter's contents will give me answers this time. But instead I fold it up again and hide it, closing it against the indented illustration, marked from all the times I traced the robin's outline and the door to the garden so I could add colour to its leaves, so I could do my own part to bring it back to life.

I put the book back in the top drawer of my bedside table when I hear the kettle click off and walk back into the kitchen. I put the button down again, wanting the water to be hot so Dad and I can sit and read the newspaper together. The house seems too small to contain the thoughts in my head as I play out the possible scenarios.

The newspaper Dad has gone out to get, with its lists of thousands of students and their offers of University places, not only tells you what you'll spend the next three, four or five years doing, it tells you what you'll do for the next fifty. It has the power to determine what you'll do for eight hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year. People will ask you about it all your life. First they'll ask, what's your name? Then, what do you do? It becomes who you are.

The kettle clicks off again. Dad's already been gone for twenty minutes. The milk bar is only about a kilometre away. I've already got both the mugs on the bench, with the tea bags in them and grabbed the milk out of the fridge. I click the kettle on one more time, watching the little red ball on the side dance on top of the bubbles as it boils, the movement of the bubbles mimicking the current state of my stomach. I hear the latch of the gate and walk down the hallway to meet Dad. At the front door, he stops to hang Harry's lead and the keys on the hook, so I grab for the plastic bag. Harry gets caught up under our feet and Dad has to put his hand on the wall to steady himself.

'Lucy, will you just wait two more seconds?' he snaps.

'Two more seconds? I've already been waiting two months. Three if you count from exams. Hurry up!'

'I thought we were going to sit down and check it together over breakfast?'

'We were, but you took forever.'

'You could have at least made us a cup of tea.'

'Well if I did, yours would be cold by now.'

'Okay, fine. I'll make the tea, you find your name, but only your name. No checking the course without me.'

Dad hands me the paper and walks over to the bench, using the tips of his fingers to check the side of the kettle.

The paper opens easily to the centre and I'm able to remove the lift-out. Somewhere among these pages, in what seems like tiny eight-point font is my student number and a code, which corresponds to the University course I've been accepted into. My finger quickly scans over the list of numbers, across six pages until I have to slow down to find 3724521. And there it is. RMBN1024. A seemingly inconsequential eight-digit code that is going to decide my life.

'Quick Dad, I found it.'

'Okay, almost done,' he says, clinking the teaspoon on the side of the cup as he stirs in his sugar. I pull out the stool beside me when he starts to carry over the cups, moving the paper so there is room for him to put them down beside it.

And he's done it again. He's put milk in my tea. He drinks it white so he assumes I drink it white too. I'm partially to blame; I tend to always make the tea at home now, just to make sure I get it how I like it, so it doesn't really give him the chance to learn. I move my cup off to the side; I'll pour it down the sink later when he's gone.

'Okay, you ready Luce?'

'Ready? I've been waiting for you!'

'Okay.'

I flip to the back of the lift-out, where the course codes are listed alphabetically. I flick quickly until I see where the Rs start and again start scrolling through the codes with my

index finger. RMBE1072, RMBM1041, RMBM1042, RMBN1021, RMBN1023, RMBN1024.
There it is, RMBN1024 – Bachelor of Nursing RMIT Bundoora Campus.

‘Yes! It’s my first preference – Dad, I got my first preference!’ I yell, jumping off my stool.

‘Well done Luce, that’s great. What is it? Your hand was in the way, I couldn’t see it.’
Dad says, trying find the spot on the paper.

‘It’s a Bachelor of Nursing at RMIT’

‘RMIT?’ *Oh, shit.*

‘Yeah, RMIT Bundoora,’ I say, forgetting in my excitement that I hadn’t told Dad I’d changed my preferences.

‘Luce,’ he says, spinning on the stool to face me. ‘I thought your first preference was here? I thought you wanted to go to Deakin. We spoke about this.’

‘It was, Dad. I know we did,’ I say, looking down at the floor. ‘But after I got my ATAR we had three days where we could change our preferences and so I changed mine.’

‘Lucy, that’s something we should have spoken about.’

‘I know,’ I say sitting back down so we are sitting side by side. ‘But then my score was better than I thought it would be, which still wasn’t as high as the ATAR for the RMIT course, so I didn’t want to say anything because I really didn’t think it would matter. I really didn’t think I’d get in.’

‘That’s not the point, Lucy.’ Dad says, looking at the side of my face.

‘It’s a better course, Dad’, I say, staring down at my cup of tea. ‘They have good programs with some of the hospitals in Melbourne and there are a lot more specialty units that you can study. I emailed RMIT and got heaps more information on the course before I changed my preferences.’

‘I’m glad you looked into it Lucy, but again that’s not the point. You should have checked with me first.’

‘Checked with you first?’ I say, jumping off my stool again. ‘Dad, I’m not a little kid. This is about the rest of my life. It’s my decision. I want to go to Melbourne. It’s only three hours away. It’s not like I’m going off to uni in Sydney or leaving the country or anything.’

‘It’s not about the distance, Lucy,’ he says, turning to face me again. ‘What about the cost? Where are you going to live? How are you going to get around? You can’t get your licence until July. You don’t know anyone in Melbourne. You haven’t thought this through, yet you expect me to let you make the big decisions about your life?’

‘I have thought it through.’

‘Oh really?’ He says, standing to meet me. ‘Okay, so tell me. Where are you going to live? How much will it cost? Where are you going to get the money? Have you thought about all of that?’

‘Yes, I have. I’ve spoken to some people who have a spare room in Southbank,’ I say,

moving around to the other side of the kitchen bench. Rent is \$140 a week, plus bills and I could move in on the tenth of Feb, it's a Saturday. Orientation week starts on the twenty-seventh. So I'd have two weeks to unpack and get myself settled and maybe find a job. I've already emailed my resume to the Target in the city, Rosemary said they are always looking for staff and would happily transfer me there. I've got enough money in the bank to cover the first six months of rent, so I just have to get enough hours a week to cover food, bills and some spending money. I've even worked out how to get to uni from the apartment; I just have to catch a tram into the city and then I can either get a train and a bus to uni or swap trams at Bourke Street and get the tram all the way.'

'Wait hold on, who are these people in where, South Yarra?'

'No, Southbank, Dad.'

'Right Southbank, just as expensive. Who are they? Where did you find them? I'm not sure about you living with strangers.'

'They're not strangers, Dad, Jem knows them.'

'Great, Jem.'

'Dad! She's my friend. They're brother and sister. They're both uni students too, second and third year. They both work, Claire in retail and Sean at a restaurant in the city. You can meet them both if you want.'

'I don't know, Lucy. How well do you really know them?'

'I don't, but that's how it works, Dad. I...I've spoken to Claire on the phone a few times and we've all been messaging each other on Facebook.'

'Facebook? Did you really expect me to agree to this Lucy? To you living with people you don't even know?'

'It's how people find housemates, Dad. And I said Jem knows them. They're all friends.'

'How did she meet them? And when?'

'Daaaad!' I moan, 'why all the questions?'

'I'm not asking anything you shouldn't already have the answers to. You think you've planned everything, you think you've got all the answers, well, go on, tell me. What about the lease? I'll have to sign it. You can't, you're underage.'

I don't have all the answers, that's why I have to go to Melbourne. But I'm not going to tell him that.

Instead I sigh and say, 'Jem knows Claire and Sean because, Jack's mum, her foster dad's mother, lives next to door to them. So whenever Jem went to visit her she would see Claire and Sean too. Remember when Jem and I went to Melbourne last summer and stayed with her? I met Claire and Sean then too. And I'll take over the lease as soon as I turn 18.'

'Okay. Where did they grow up? What do their parents do?'

'Really, Dad? What does it matter?'

'It matters to me, Lucy. I want to know what kind of a family they come from.'

'Fine! They grew up in Melbourne. But I don't know what their parents do, it's not exactly something we talk about. Their dad might be an accountant or something.'

'Where in Melbourne?'

'In Hawthorn,' I say, shaking my head, 'you know where Jack's mum lives.'

'Lucy, I don't know, you really should have talked to me about this. Let me think about it. And that's exactly the reason why I didn't.'

CHAPTER TWO

Jem was so excited when I called her to tell her that Dad had finally come around to the idea of me living in Melbourne. She has to work today though so she can't help me move in, which is probably good, seeing her and Dad don't really like each other.

Dad was quieter than normal the whole drive down from Warrnambool and I think seeing Jem when we arrived would just have made things worse. So instead, Jem and I have decided to meet tomorrow. Jem says there are so many places she wants to take me so she's going to plan a full day of activities.

I'm exhausted after the move. Having a second storey apartment has not made things easy. I get the last box – heavy with books – out of the truck and do what is probably my fortieth trip up the stairs. Thankfully, Sean doesn't work until tonight, so he's been helping Dad and me with the heavy furniture like my bed and my desk and Claire has just come home from work with a few pizzas. We all sit down to eat and Sean offers Dad a beer. Dad mumbles a no. He eats a few pieces of pizza, still in the relative silence he has continued with all day and then, while the rest of us are still eating, says it's time for him to go.

I know he has a long drive back, but he could at least try to put some effort in with Sean and Claire. I'm so embarrassed. He stands, picks up his jacket and his keys and walks to the door, barely muttering a goodbye. I put my piece of pizza down and quickly glance, apologetically, at Sean and Claire. They both just shrug their shoulders. I follow Dad down the stairs and out to the truck, returning his silence. I vow not to speak to him until he speaks first. He opens the door to the truck, hoists himself up and sits down. He puts his hands on the steering wheel and stares straight ahead. Finally, he looks back at me and gets out of the truck again.

'Well, Lucy,' he says.

'Well, Dad,' I reply.

'I guess this is it.'

'Yep,' I reply again.

'So, call me when you know what's happening with your classes.'

'I will.'

He takes a step towards me and leans forward, puts one arm around me and lightly pats me on the back. I try to hug him back but there's too much space between us. He lets go, gives me a kiss on the forehead and whispers, 'Luce, be careful, please.'

'I will, Dad,' I whisper back as he climbs into the truck again, shuts the door and drives away.

When I get back upstairs, Sean and Claire have cleared the dining area and moved the pizza boxes to the coffee table. They both have a beer now and Claire picks up a third and holds it out to me.

'How did that go?' she asks sympathetically.

'I'm so sorry guys. I'm so embarrassed. I guess he's still trying to punish me or make me feel guilty. He could have at least been nice to you guys,' I say.

'He was fine, Lucy, I didn't think anything of it,' says Claire.

'Yeah he was okay, Luce,' says Sean.

'I think you're being a bit hard on him,' Claire adds.

'He doesn't seem as bad to you guys because he's not your dad.'

'I guess,' they both reply.

'It must be hard for him though,' says Claire.

'Oh no,' I reply. 'He does the trip to Melbourne and back about once a month for work. He's used to it by now.'

'No, I mean moving you here and going back to an empty house. Mum and Dad said it was so strange when I moved out and they had no kids left at home anymore. But at least they had each other. It's going to be harder for your dad, he'll be so lonely.'

I don't know how to respond; I haven't even thought about how my moving away will affect Dad. I've been too excited about living where my mum grew up, starting uni and being near Jem again. I know he will miss me, miss having the company in the house. But I'm sure there are things he's looking forward to, like not having to constantly pick up bobby pins and being able to have hot showers in the morning.

'Oh, he'll be fine,' I say. 'He'll probably actually enjoy the peace and quiet.'

'Yeah probably,' Claire says as she looks at Sean.

We finish the pizza and have a few more beers each, before Sean has to go to work. Claire helps me unpack some more of my stuff, showing me where I can put things in the bathroom and in the kitchen. I ask Claire if she wants to come with Jem and me on our Melbourne adventure, but she says that if Jem has planned it just for me she doesn't want to intrude.

I finish unpacking one of my suitcases and set all my books up on my bookshelf. I still have a few boxes of books left, but I'm exhausted. I make up my bed and climb in. It feels surreal lying in my own bed in a different room, surrounded by my things, but with everything in a slightly different place: my desk on the left of my bed instead of the right where it was at home, my bookshelf next to my bed like a second bedside table, instead of under the window. I probably should feel homesick. I probably should feel that rising fear in my throat. I'm away from home. Away from everything that's familiar. Away from Dad. Away from all the

things I use to define myself. I probably should feel that, away from everything, I'm different. That a part of me is missing. That I'm a little bit less than me. But I don't. There's something else growing within me. An excitement. The thought that here, in Melbourne, I might finally find out who my mum was. That I might find out what sort of a person she was. I might find out how I'm like her. I might find out who I am and who I want to be.

CHAPTER THREE

I wake on Saturday morning with the same excitement from last night. Jem has our whole day planned. She's calling it 'Jem and Lucy take Melbourne'. I offered to help her plan it, but she refused. She wants it to be a surprise. As I get ready, I think of all the places she might take me. I've been to Melbourne quite a few times growing up, maybe twice each year. I came up with Dad sometimes when he had a meeting on a Friday and we'd stay the whole weekend. We'd go off to the footy or to the aquarium or to the top of the Eureka Sky Deck. And we had a school camp in grade six, where we spent a week in Melbourne going to Parliament House and Scienceworks, as well as the Zoo and Melbourne Museum. But that's Melbourne as a tourist. I want to know Melbourne as a local. I want to know it like I've lived here my whole life. I want to know where the good cafés are, where the best bookstores are and where to go to see good live music.

I put on my jeans and a t-shirt, lace up my Cons and grab my bag on the way out. Ready to 'take Melbourne'. We've planned to meet under the clocks of Flinders Street Station at 10:00am. Jem said I couldn't get lost. Claire told me to take the first right, then to turn left at St Kilda Road and to just walk straight. I couldn't miss it.

I almost bounce to Flinders Street, looking at everything differently as I walk. This is where I live now. Within walking distance to the Arts Centre and the CBD. Basically across the road from the Botanical Gardens and the Shrine of Remembrance. Within one hundred metres of a tram stop. All of this is just around the corner from my house. I'll get to see all of this every day from now on.

As I get closer to the station's steps, I start looking for Jem. I can't see her, but it's only 9:50am. I get my phone out of my bag and start to text her, just to let her know I'm already there, when I feel two hands on my shoulders.

'Luce! You walked straight past me!' Standing in front of me is not the same Jem I saw less than eight weeks ago. I knew she'd added to the three tattoos she had on her left forearm, but I hadn't realised the result was a half-sleeve. Her dark brown hair is now almost black and shaved on one side. And she isn't wearing her usual jeans and t-shirt. Instead she's wearing a sleeveless denim vest over a white singlet and black shorts over tights. She looks great, just not at all like the Jem I saw on Boxing Day.

I say hi and return her hug. She's already telling me about all the things she has planned for the day. 'It's my favourite place in Melbourne. I go there once a week at least. Some guys at a party told me about it. You'll love it. I just can't believe you're finally here. I thought your dad would never let you come,' she says. She barely stops for breath, so I just nod in reply.

She links her arm through mine and starts dragging me across Flinders Street. We stop to grab a coffee on Flinders Lane. Jem knows my order, asking for an extra strong black tea. Then she orders herself a soy latte.

'Soy?' I ask.

'Yeah, the guys at the café got me onto it. Did you know that the protein in soy milk helps you burn fat quicker?'

'I had no idea,' I say.

'It took a bit of getting used to though. It tasted like shit at first.'

I don't reply; I'm still trying to process the fact that Jem has changed her coffee order. She's been drinking lattes ever since she started working at the café back home when we were fifteen. She's a coffee snob. She used to tell customers back home how a latte was the best way to have your coffee when you took into consideration the flavour and the effect of the caffeine.

'And I'm vegetarian now. Have you seen those documentaries about livestock transport? It's horrible how they cram in the animals. I'm actually seriously considering going vegan. Nearly everyone at work is. We really take this planet for granted.'

'Vegan! Jem! What about cheese? You live for cheese!'

'Oh no! God, I'd still eat cheese. I'd have to. There's no way I could give up cheese. Have you tasted that faux cheese stuff? Yuk! I just wouldn't tell anyone I was still eating it. And I'm not going to stop wearing leather either. Plus, I still eat kebabs on the way home when I've been out.'

'Oh, um, okay.' I say. How could Jem be a vegetarian? Her foster dad was a stock agent. They basically had whole cows and sheep cut up in their freezer. Actually I'm surprised she didn't think to do this earlier just to annoy him. It obviously isn't just her dress sense that has changed since she's moved to Melbourne.

Once our drinks have been made, we start walking up Flinders Lane towards Spring Street. I know the basic grid of the city: Flinders Street at the bottom, La Trobe Street at the top, each crossed by Spring Street, with Parliament House at one end, and Southern Cross Station on Swanston Street down the other. I know the outer square; it's the streets in-between that I get stuck on. Which ones go parallel to Flinders Street and which run parallel to Spring Street? Then there's the order. Does Queen come before Elizabeth or after? And what about Collins and Bourke?

When I was little and Dad took me into the city, he would try and get me to memorise the grid. He would make up a rhyme for me to learn. By the end of the weekend I'd know it by heart. Two days later I'd have forgotten. The next time we'd be in Melbourne I'd have to start all over again.

Just before we get to the next T-intersection, Jem grabs my shoulders, turns me so I have my back to her and puts her hands over my eyes.

'Jem, what the hell?' I ask.

'Relax, Luce. I'll move my hands in a second. You're going to love this place. I couldn't believe I'd never heard of it. It's amazing. So, are you ready?'

'Yeah I'm ready,' I say.

'I don't think you are. You need to prepare yourself. You need to be ready to take it all in. I know I'm not talking it up too much, I'm pretty sure that's impossible. Now are you ready?'

'Jem, I'm ready,' I say, taking a deep breath. I have no idea what she's about to show me. Back home, Jem's favourite place has always been the beach. Not the main beach; she doesn't like tourists and likes being interrupted by locals even less. No, her favourite beach is Logan's Beach, an out-of-town beach used mostly for whale watching and surfing. When we were still at school, Jem would head down the steep stairs to the beach, away from the tourists using the viewing platform. It wasn't unusual for people on the platform to see a few of the more experienced surfers dotting the waves and Jem, the lone figure sitting by herself against the towering sand dunes. She'd hide away there and draw, the strokes of her pencil helping to ease her frustration with her foster parents or the limitations of a small town she so badly wanted to escape. So, when she moves her hands and I open my eyes, I'm surprised to see we are standing in a small space that's already filling with tourists and their cameras. I expected Jem's favourite place in Melbourne, her new place of solitude, to be quieter. More out of the way. I can imagine her hidden away in an overgrown corner of one of the gardens that are scattered around Melbourne. Maybe Carlton Gardens or Fitzroy Gardens. Not here.

Once I start to look around properly though, I can see why Jem likes it. It's breathtaking. Every inch of the laneway is covered in graffiti. From the lowest brick to the highest. Even the rubbish skip. A mix of vibrant colours and different works overlapping one another to find space.

'This is Hosier Lane,' explains Jem. 'What do you think?'

'It's amazing. The graffiti is beautiful,' I say. Beautiful isn't a word I ever thought I'd use to describe graffiti. Back home, the only graffiti I'd ever really seen involved vandalism, people tagging trains and local landmarks. This is completely different.

'It's not graffiti, it's street art,' Jem corrects me. 'It's done by artists, not taggers. They plan and develop their pieces for months before they come here and create them. It's like a living gallery exhibit. Each time I come here there's something new. Something has been added; something has changed.'

It's great to listen to Jem talk so passionately about something. She usually only gets this vocal about something that she's complaining about, like her foster parents.

'You really love it here, don't you?' I ask.

'Yeah, I do. I try and find a spot to sit down, it's usually next to the bin so people don't annoy me, and I draw.'

'Have you done anything here?' I ask her, looking around.

'God no!' She says. 'I couldn't. I'm not an artist. Not like them. I'm just some little kid drawing in a scrap book compared to them.'

'I think you're an artist, Jem. Your stuff is great. Have you done any street art since you've been here?'

'No, you know me, Luce, I only draw for me. I don't show my work to anyone. You're the only one who's ever really seen it.'

'Yeah I know. But it's such a shame. It's all so good, you're so good, Jem.' And it is a shame. I've always tried to get her to show more people her work, to show anyone besides me. She wouldn't even do art at school because she didn't want to have to show the art teacher her work.

Jem's always drawn, even before I met her. Ever since she could. But when she moved from foster home to foster home when she was little, before she got to Barb and Jack's, her drawings always got lost. So she started hiding them, keeping them safe. Every day at school, her backpack would be full of drawings. She always had them with her.

'It's amazing here Jem,' I say, grateful that she's brought me.

'Have a look around,' she says, grabbing her phone out of her bag and focussing the camera on a painting of a tree.

She walks the laneway and I stay a few steps behind her, following her movements, conscious of being out of place. I know very little about art, even less about street art, and so instead I watch Jem. She stops every few metres to take more photos, changing the angle of her phone and occasionally stepping closer to the walls.

'Look at this one,' she says, pointing to an image of a small boy playing with what looks like a bomb. 'The artist has layered it, using stencils, to make it look like it stands out off the wall. Can you see it? He looks like he's emerging from the wall.'

I'm more disturbed by the image of a little boy playing with a bomb.

'And this one. How the artist has used wheat paste to glue the vintage tram to the wall so that they could paint the passengers on to it.'

She lingers the longest on a large painting of what initially seems like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. But when I look closer, it turns out to be a mix of a few different creatures. One quarter is a cocoon, and another a beautifully patterned butterfly starting to unfurl its wing. But the other half is more unusual. In the lower right hand corner there's a

spider's leg emerging from the cocoon, gangly and covered in fine brown hair. And in the upper connecting corner the head of a bee emerges, with tiny depictions of the laneway reflected back in its many eyes.

'This one is my favourite piece,' Jem says. 'I never actually saw the artist working on it, but I did see it at different stages. It's amazing. Its detail. Its creativity.'

Jem's right. The image is incredible. How could someone even come up with that? It's surreal. And flawless. But I don't get it. It seems like a mess to me. A jumble of images cut and pasted together. An animal that doesn't know what it is or what it wants to be. A butterfly with intricate patterns on its wings, I get. Or the grace and menace of a spider. I don't really know what to do, so I get my own phone out and start taking pictures of it, too.

Once we've finished taking photos, Jem grabs me by the hand again and leads me out of the laneway.

'Are you ready?' she asks.

'Ready for what?' I question.

'Ready for our next stop?'

'Yeah of course! Where is it?'

'You'll see; we'll be there soon.'

Jem and I walk back to Elizabeth Street and jump on the number 19 tram, heading out of the city. I still don't know where we're going, but I try to take in the street names we pass and the different tram routes. I look at all the people we pass, the cafes and the shops. This is my home now and I want it to be familiar. With each new spot that gets my attention, with each new place I make a mental note to visit, I can't help but wonder if it was there when my mum was young. If it's a café she might have gone to, or a tram route she used. How much has changed since she was here? How much has stayed the same?

'Have you worked out where we're going yet?' asks Jem.

'No, I have no idea. Is this the way to your place?' I ask.

'This is kind of the direction to my house, but we aren't going there today. You can come and check it out next week.'

'Oh, this is the Queen Vic Market!' I say, excited. 'Yay! I've always wanted to come here. This is great. Claire says she comes here every few weeks to do a big fruit and veg shop. She said there are some great food stalls. She told me I had to try the donuts.'

'Whoa, calm down. We aren't here for the market. You can come back and do your groceries with Claire. This is our stop though,' she says as she presses the button for the next stop.

We get off the tram right in the front of the original entrance to the market. The footpath is crowded with people carrying bags of shopping or wheeling carts full of fresh produce. A

worker goes past dragging a trolley stacked high with boxes of avocados. The smells of ground coffee, deep fryers and the fish vendors mix together to confuse my nose. I can't believe we are this close but Jem has no interest in going in.

'Well, why are we here then?' I ask.

'I want you to meet Zeb.'

'Zeb?' I say, not sure whether I want to know who he is, let alone meet him. I assumed she was still hanging out with Dan, but I hadn't asked because I really hoped she wasn't. And with Jem's taste in guys, I couldn't be sure that Zeb would be any better.

'Yeah, Zeb. He's my tattoo guy.'

'You have a tattoo guy?' I ask.

'Yeah, he's working on the design for the top half of my sleeve. He messaged me yesterday to say it was nearly done and that I should come check it out.'

'Okay,' I say, 'I thought today was Jem and Lucyday?'

'It is! This is just a quick detour. Plus, you said you wanted to know where I hang out in Melbourne. I'm here all the time and I'll be here even more once Zeb starts on the rest of the tatt,' she says as she turns to walk away from the market entrance.

Once we're in the tattoo parlour, she introduces me to Zeb, then they both quickly forget about me as they sit down behind the computer at the back of the shop to look at the design for Jem's arm. I wander around the waiting area at the front of the shop, not having been invited to go behind the beaded curtain where Jem and Zeb are. The walls are covered in framed A3 posters showing rows and rows of possible tattoo designs that customers can choose from. There are birds and butterflies, lizards and skulls, Chinese symbols, star signs and flowers. They just seem like the obvious things you would choose if you were getting a tattoo just to be cool. Not because they had any significance.

I didn't think Jem really liked tattoos that much. I didn't think she put that much thought into them. She always said her tattoos were just another way for her to make her foster parents mad. She got her first tattoo when she was sixteen, a diamond on the inside of her forearm. A gem stone.

She's always hated her full name, Jemima. Always preferring to be called Jem. It's as if, instead of officially changing her name to Jem, having the tattoo on a visible part of her body, permanently, will make it stick.

Jem once told me how she got home one night and asked her foster Mum if she could get her belly button pierced, but she'd said no. Her foster Mum, Barb, is a nurse, and she'd said that she'd seen too many young girls come into hospital with blood poisoning and really bad infections from dodgy piercings that they hadn't looked after properly. Jem told me how,

jokingly, Barb said she'd prefer Jem get a tattoo than a belly button piercing and so a week later Jem did.

I'm still sitting on the bench in the front window of the tattoo studio, after nearly forty minutes, when Zeb stops working on the tattoo design and Jem stops giggling and touching him on the shoulders. Looking over at the market I can't help thinking that if I'd left five, ten or fifteen minutes ago I could have had a look around, gotten one of those donuts or some fresh berries and been back without them even noticing. Or that Jem could have just let me wander around the market while she came in here; it isn't like she wants my opinion on the tattoo anyway.

I turn away from the market when I hear the clatter of the beaded curtain. Jem hugs Zeb, tells him to call her when the design is done and we finally leave.

'Are you ready for our next stop?' she says again, like we are off to the next exciting place.

'Sure,' I say, 'but you have to tell me what it is this time.' I don't think I can fake interest anymore.

'Next is lunch,' she says, and I start to relax again. 'We're going to Little Tea House.'

'Is that the really cute tearoom that serves all those delicious cakes? The one that's a hundred years old or something? Dad's Office Manager, Anne, told me about it. That it's been open nearly as long as Melbourne's been a city.' I go on, excited that Jem has picked somewhere I've always wanted to go.

'No, it isn't that. That's the tearoom in the Block Arcade. Is it the Hopetoun Tearoom? I don't know. Anyway, I've never been there. I've only walked past it when I've cut through the arcade.'

'Oh,' I say, annoyed that I've let myself get carried away again.

'No, Little Tea House is a restaurant in Chinatown. It's great, you'll love it.'

Once we've been seated at our table and the waiter brings us our menus Jem says, 'Let me order, I've been here so many times I've pretty much eaten everything on the menu, so I know what's good.'

'Great, I've never had dumplings so I wouldn't know what to order anyway,' I say.

I still look over the menu and it all looks great, there are dumplings with pork and Chinese mushroom, pan fried lamb dumplings and ginger chicken wings. But when the waiter arrives Jem orders vegetarian dumplings, salt and pepper tofu and steamed greens. I guess she was serious about being vegetarian now.

When our first round of dumplings is brought out Jem asks, 'Would you mind if I add another stop?' I struggle not to roll my eyes. 'You'll like this one, I promise,' she says, picking up on my lack of enthusiasm.

'Yeah that's fine,' I say, watching the people at the table beside us eating their sticky honey pork ribs.

'Look, I'm sorry I dragged you to see Zeb, I know it wasn't exactly what you had in mind. I thought you would like it though. But the rest of the day is about you, okay?'

Our next stop, only a couple of blocks from Chinatown, is the State Library of Victoria. It's amazing; amazing that among the trams, cars and bikes sharing the roads and the people spread four wide across the footpaths, the library, with its green lawns and quiet interior, could provide an escape. Not just from the day, but from the city itself.

'I know how much you love books,' Jem says as we walk up the front steps into the foyer. 'How many do you have in your bag right now?'

'Very funny! Only one,' I say. But I don't tell her I had two packed but took one out just before I left home because my bag was a bit heavy.

'I know your uni is kind of far away, so I thought you could come here when you need somewhere quiet to study,' she says as we walk inside. It's nice that even though Jem's not studying, she still considered that I'd need somewhere close to home to get work done. Even if she didn't think of what I might have liked to eat at lunch.

'So I did a bit of research,' Jem says. 'I thought I'd give you a bit of a guided tour.'

It's great. Jem's put so much effort into it, knowing how much I'll love the library. She knows when the library first opened and that the marble of the steps to Queen's Hall came from Italy. She takes me on a tour of the artwork in the Keith Murdoch Gallery and the Cowen Gallery, into the Redmond Barry Reading Room and finally into the La Trobe Reading Room, to look at the dome. It's stunning. It's symmetry. It's timeless elegance. The way the light shines through and plays around the room. It's the type of beauty I can appreciate, unlike the street art in Hosier Lane.

Looking around at the photos on the walls, that show the library in past decades, I can't help but wonder if maybe my mum had been here too, once. That she too had stood under this dome. Maybe as a primary or secondary school student on an excursion, on an outing with her parents, or later when she was living with Aunt Maude. Had she, too, been in awe of its beauty and found peace in its quiet, compared to the city? I knew it was impossible for me to feel her around me, but I was filled with the thought of getting to know who she was.

'I know you could stay here for the rest of the afternoon, Luce, but I'll end up asleep in a chair. We've got two more stops and then we can just find a bar and hang out.'

The next stop is Docklands. We catch the City Circle tram and get off near Etihad Stadium. As we walk down to the water's edge at Central Pier and around Victoria Harbour, Jem says, 'When I need a break or some inspiration, I have Hosier Lane. I thought this could be your Hosier Lane.' She knows how often I went to Granny's Grave, a section of beach in Warrnambool, and how much I love being near the ocean.

'Technically your closest body of water is the Yarra, but it doesn't count. Its water is so gross. And obviously you can't really swim here; your closest swimming beach is Port Melbourne. But it's better than nothing. So if you need a fix of home, and seeing me isn't enough,' she says, nudging me, 'you can come here.' Jem knows being near the water helps me clear my head, so she's picked this stop because she thinks it will make me feel less homesick. And it's nice of Jem to think of it. I'm so grateful to her for thinking of how I'll settle in and I know she thinks she's done such a good job planning today – she thinks it's been our first great adventure together in Melbourne. And I know she's tried really hard so I can't tell her that I'm actually not homesick at all. That instead, I'm so excited about being in Melbourne and by all its opportunities that I'm sure I'll never need to come here again. That I'm so excited because I feel like I'm closer than I've ever been to my mum and to finding out who she was.

'So the next stop is the last one,' Jem says, bringing me out of my daydream. 'It's the one I'm adding to make up for being such a shitty friend.' We catch the tram back towards the city and when we get off at the corner of La Trobe and Elizabeth Streets and start heading away from the city grid, I realise where Jem's taking me.

'Jem,' I say, turning to look at her.

'You're surprised? Really? How could I not bring you back? You spent the whole time we were here this morning looking out the window like a sad puppy.'

'Thankyou,' I say, leaning in to her.

We only get about an hour to wander around the market stalls before the vendors start to pack up. There's time to get a few donuts each though and they are just as good as Claire said. Then, as the market closes for the night, and with full stomachs and tired legs, we catch a tram to a bar off Little Collins Street. On the tram, I start telling Jem about my first night in the apartment with Claire and Sean.

'Sean was the best. Even though he had to go to work last night, he still spent nearly the whole day carrying all my heavy stuff up the stairs,' I explain. 'And I forgot how easy Claire is to talk to. No wonder you spent all your time up here with them instead of Jack's mum,' I say.

'Yeah, well, it was better than hanging out with an eighty-four-year-old all weekend,' Jem says. 'I still can't believe you moved in with them though. When I suggested it, I didn't

actually think it would happen. Mostly because I didn't think your dad would let you,' she explains.

'Oh Dad wasn't too hard to convince. Especially once I told him who Claire and Sean were and that I did actually know them. Plus, I think he liked them too when he met them yesterday. I know he would've thought Sean was a hard worker and he liked how responsible Claire is, bringing home dinner for us,' I say.

'Yeah, responsible Claire,' Jem says. 'She'll be heaps of fun to live with.' Which seems strange, because I can't quite tell if she means it or not, but I wonder whether she just feels a bit left out that I'm moving in with her friends, when she had to find her place on Gumtree because Sean and Claire didn't have a spare room then.

When I get back to Southbank later that night, Claire and Sean are both out. I make the most of them not being at home and unpack my things for the kitchen and the bathroom. Then, in my room, I finish hanging my clothes. As I rearrange things in my wardrobe I think back on the day with Jem. The first half of it was not what I'd expected. We seemed awkward together. Out of sync. I hadn't even thought about what it would be like seeing her after eight weeks apart. I assumed it would just be like it always was. It's never been a problem before, but we've only really ever gone two weeks or so without seeing each other.

When I walked straight past her, when I felt so out of place at Hosier Lane, when I felt so left out at the tattoo studio, and when I only got to eat vegetarian food at lunch, I was worried that Jem had found a life here without me. Then, in the afternoon, the ease we've always had returned. As if the eight weeks hadn't happened. As if I'd seen Jem yesterday and the day before and the day before that. At the bar, I was able to talk to her about Dad and how he'd been yesterday during the move. I told her how excited I was to finally be where my mum grew up and the idea that I might be able to find out more about her. She told me about quitting her job at the pub and the fight she'd had with Dan on Friday night. She said she was done with him. Again. But for good this time. She told me about the café, the one on Brunswick Street that she was working at. The second one since she'd moved to Melbourne in November. She told me she was happy to have me in Melbourne and again I felt the rising excitement of possibility building inside me.

CHAPTER FOUR

The first day of uni is nothing like the first day of school. I loved my first day of school. I couldn't wait to go. I didn't cry when my dad dropped me off. The size of the school didn't bother me, neither did the older kids. I had my new school dress, my new backpack and my new purple lunch box. My shoes were shiny and I'd gotten Dad to put a ribbon in my hair. I was used to being away from Dad. I was used to being with other kids. I was in day-care by the time I was eighteen months old and started kindergarten at three. I was so ready for school that I started when I was four years old, a year younger than nearly all the other kids in my class.

I barely know anyone at uni. I met a few other nursing students at orientation, but I don't know if any of them will be in my classes. I've had the same friends since primary school and I even already knew Claire and Sean before I moved in with them. I don't really know my way around campus and I have no idea how hard the classes are going to be.

I've checked the public transport app on my phone five times. Three times last night and twice this morning. I'm on the 8:50am 86 tram so I can get to Bundoora by 9:48am, even though my first class isn't until 11:00am. I want to make sure I have enough time to find the classroom and find the bookshop so I can buy my textbooks before class.

The campus is huge; I can't imagine ever being able to find my way around without having to check the map. I get a coffee on the way to class, hoping it will settle my nerves.

When I get into the classroom, it isn't as bad as I had thought. There are only about sixteen people in the class, a lot less than in the mock lecture held during o-week. The tutor explains that we will do a quick introductory exercise, and then she'll take us through the unit guide for the class and show us the referencing system we'll have to use in all of our assignments. It doesn't seem too bad. I'll get through it okay, or the first week of classes at least.

Our tutor introduces herself. She's petite, with short brown hair and a warm smile that must instantly put her patients at ease. Sally has been a nurse for over thirty years. She did her training at St. Vincent's Hospital in the city, before nurses went to university to get their degrees, just like my mum. She has worked mostly in surgical wards, but has done some theatre nursing and worked in a GP clinic while her children were young. She also helped develop the Bachelor of Nursing Degree at RMIT.

Then it's time for us to introduce ourselves to the rest of the class. We have to tell everyone our names, an interesting fact about ourselves and the reason why we want to be nurses. I panic straightaway, heat rising in my chest. I hate public speaking. It's even worse when I have to speak about myself. I guess it's because back home I've never really had to.

People already knew who I was; I didn't really have to introduce myself. I'm also not particularly interesting. The only good thing is that I don't have to go first.

The desks in the class are set up in a u shape, all curved around to face the whiteboard and projector at the front of the room. My seat is about three-quarters of the way around the semi circle, so there are at least ten people to go before me. A mature-aged student is the first to go. Her name is Susan, she's decided to become a nurse after working as an orderly at a hospital for the last ten years and she is an identical twin. Next is Josh, he's straight out of Year 12 too and eventually wants to be a midwife. He has a pet tarantula named Steve. Other students have their turn, working their way around the classroom, getting closer to me. I don't speak several languages. I don't have any unusual hobbies, I'm not a sky-diving instructor, I don't have my own cupcake business and I don't make sculptures out of animal bones. I didn't grow up in a foreign country and I don't have an irrational phobia of cotton wool.

And the reason I want to be a nurse? Can I tell them I don't really know?

I've been trying so hard to come up with responses to the questions that I've missed the two students before me. I hope I won't need to know their answers later or get paired with one of them because now I don't know their names. But now it's my turn and I'm blank.

I introduce myself and say 'And for something interesting about myself, well... I...' and I pause, my mind scrambling to come up with something. I'm running out of time. Already it feels like an eternity since I last spoke. 'Um... I... I have dual citizenship here and in the UK and I want to be a nurse... I decided to be a nurse because... because my mum was a nurse.' Everyone's very quiet. Have they all noticed that I had said 'was', that my mum 'was' a nurse? They all know. They know she's dead and now they'll feel sorry for me. I keep my head down, looking at the blank pages of my exercise book. Great, now I'm going to be that girl again, the same girl I was back home. The girl with the dead mum.

Sally thanks me and asks the student next to me to introduce herself. My heartbeat slows, as the rest of the class move their attention to the remaining few students.

Once everyone in the class has introduced themselves, Sally takes us through the unit guide. The class is 'Foundations for Nursing Practice'. Sally says it will introduce us to the theory and practical skills of basic nursing practice, but some of the concepts she's describing don't sound basic. I didn't realise we'd have to learn the legal side of nursing so quickly, or the ethics surrounding patient care. The assessments seem straightforward enough and at least we don't get most of our mark from an exam. Not like in the Biomedical and Physical Sciences 1 subject where 60% of our mark comes from an exam on the human anatomy.

That's all anyone had been talking about during o-week, the cadaver lab, where we learn about the body using real dissected human body parts. That wasn't something I'd really thought about when I applied for nursing. I was thinking more about the aftermath, working in an actual hospital, treating patients who were alive.

At the end of the class I'm one of the last to leave the room, because I'm studying the map. I'm trying to find the café where Claire said to meet her in between our classes when Sally starts talking to me.

'How are you finding your first day so far, Lucy?' she asks.

'Oh, you know, it's a bit overwhelming, but I'm sure I'll get the hang of it,' I say, forcing a smile.

'Don't worry, everyone feels the same this early on. Are you from Melbourne?'

'Um, no I'm not. I guess that doesn't help much either, it means nothing is familiar really.'

'It won't take you long to get the hang of it all. Where are you from?'

'I've just moved here from Warrnambool. It's two hours the other side of Geelong.' I explain.

'Warrnambool, well you have come a bit of a way then, haven't you. I know where it is, my son plays basketball so we go there once a year for the basketball tournament.'

'Oh, okay. Not many people know where it is,' I say, not really knowing what else I'm meant to say to her. It's a different relationship, the student-tutor one, from the relationships I've had in the past with school teachers.

'Well I better get off to my next class. Enjoy your first week, Lucy. If you have any issues send me an email, I'm more than willing to help if I can.'

'Thanks,' I say, thinking she probably doesn't mean with directions to the café.

Claire beats me to the café, but it didn't help that I walked past the entrance to the library three times before I found the right way there.

'How's your morning been?' she asks me. 'You must have left early. My lecture only started an hour after your class but I didn't even hear you leave.'

'I didn't sleep very well. I was a bit nervous about today. So I just thought I'd get up and get out here, instead of pacing at home.'

'Oh Luce! You should have told me; I would have come out early with you. So how was your first class?'

'Yeah, it was good. Our tutor's really nice. That helped. We didn't cover much though,' I say.

'You never do in week one. I'm third year and we still did nothing today. Except get given about twelve chapters to read by next week,' she says, pointing to the pile of books on the chair next to her.

'I thought the three books I had to buy today was bad,' I say.

'When you find the content interesting it's not so bad,' she says. 'It will be better when you get to choose your electives.'

'Yeah I guess,' I say. But I haven't even thought about specialisations. More than three quarters of the students in the class this morning said they wanted to specialise in something: midwifery, critical care, cardiac rehab, perioperative, orthopaedic trauma. I couldn't even answer why I wanted to be a nurse. I hadn't even thought about what kind of nurse I wanted to be. Some of the specialisations I hadn't even heard of. I wonder what my mum did.

CHAPTER FIVE

One night at home, Claire and I are sitting on the couch reading when she asks me about my mum. Sean's gone to work for the night and we're both too tired to do anything. We have cereal for dinner because we're both too exhausted to even cook a stir-fry and too poor after buying textbooks to order takeaway. Then we settle into the couch to read.

Claire's borrowed my copy of *The Secret Garden*. She saw it sitting on my bedside table when I moved in and asked me about it. I couldn't believe she didn't really know anything about it, so I've lent it to her to read.

While she's reading it, she stops and asks me, 'Luce, can I ask you about your mum?' I guess she's just read about Colin and is thinking about how the two cousins have both lost their mothers.

'Yeah sure,' I say, sitting up, 'but I don't know if I'll be able to tell you much'.

'What was it like growing up without her?'

'I don't really know how to answer that. It's all I've known. I don't have your perspective to compare it to. But I know it's a big part of who I am, the fact that she wasn't around.'

'When did you know?'

'Know?' I say.

'Yeah, when were you aware that your mum wasn't around?' she asks. People often say that, 'wasn't around' or 'gone', I think they're worried about what I'll do if they say dead.

'I can't remember when, exactly. It's not like I can trace it back to a month or a day. Dad was always upfront with me about it,' I say, then pause. 'Well at least he was at the start, when I was really little. He told me she'd died. But I was too young to really understand then. But as I got older I became more aware.'

'How?' Claire asks. 'Sorry, if you don't mind me asking?'

'No, it's fine,' I say, putting down my book. 'I don't mind talking about it. Um, how did I know? Well when I was really little, as a toddler, I didn't know any different. Dad was always there to cook my dinner and bathe me and do my hair. I wasn't old enough to work out that the other kids had a mum and a dad at home, whereas I only had Dad.'

'So when did you know?'

'I guess by the time I reached primary school I started to become more aware. On play dates and sleepovers I started to notice that my friends had two people to play with them and two people to tuck them in at night. After school I started to notice that my dad was the only *dad* there waiting to pick up their child, that at assemblies I only had one person waving back at me from the crowd and only one person cheering me on at School Sports Day. And my friends started to notice, I guess it was more unusual for them. They would ask me, "How come your mum doesn't get you after school?" or, "Why doesn't your mum help out in the

canteen?" or, "Who packs your lunch if you don't have a mum?" At the start, I thought I knew the answer, it was always Dad. Dad picked me up from school, Dad packed my lunch – I didn't think too much about it. Dad did those things because he was there. Who else would do them? Then they started asking, "But Lucy, where is your mum?" and I didn't really know the answer to that.'

'So did you ask your dad?' Claire asks, leaning forward.

'Yeah, I did eventually. Actually it was because of Jem that I asked. We were in Prep, I can still remember it now, when all the kids were asking me about my mum, she just went up to them and said, "Not everyone has a mum, I don't have a mum either." Just like that. Then that night I went home and asked my dad, "Where's my mum?" And he just said, "Lucy, she's dead".'

'Oh wow. That must have been so hard for him.'

'Yeah, I guess it was. I still remember it, what he said. I'm sure he'd been waiting for that question for a long time. He just said, "Dead means she isn't here with us anymore," choosing his words carefully. Then I asked where she was and he said, "She's in Heaven".'

'Is your dad religious? Or was your mum?'

'No, Dad's not,' I say, because I know the answer. 'I don't think Mum was,' I continue, because I have no idea. I don't know what my mum's childhood was like, with my grandparents. I know Mum and Dad got married by a celebrant; that it wasn't in a church. Claire's still looking at me, waiting, ready to hear more. So I say, 'I think he just said it because he realised it was a nice idea, particularly for a six-year-old.' Mostly because it sounds good.

'Yeah that's nice I guess. Better than having to explain coffins and things,' Claire says. 'Your poor dad. I can't even imagine.'

'It got worse.' I say.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, then I remember asking him, "Is she coming back?"'

'Oh no. You poor thing. You were so little. What did he say?'

'He just said, "No Lucy, she's not. She can't." And that was it; I didn't ask him any more questions that day. I'm not sure why. I've had a thousand questions to ask since then. And if I'd been older I probably would have asked them.'

'It's nice that you and Jem had each other.'

'Yeah it took us a while to talk about it, even though we were inseparable ever since that day she stood up for me. But it was nice knowing we were there for each other when we did have questions, or when there was a dance on at school and all the Mum's offered to volunteer, that we had each other.'

'Did you talk about it much?' she asks, then says, 'I'm sorry, tell me to shut up if I'm prying.'

'No, it's fine. I do feel like I'm getting a free psych appointment though. I keep expecting you to say, "Tell me about your childhood,"' I say, laughing. 'I guess I should take advantage of it while it's free, soon you'll be qualified and start charging me a fortune.'

'Haha. Funny,' she says. 'I'll never charge you, I'll just ring you for free medical advice all the time.'

'It's a deal,' I say. 'I actually don't mind talking about it though. I prefer it to knowing people are thinking about it or pitying me but won't say anything. But with Jem and me, we went through phases; something would set it off, a birthday, Christmas or a fight with Dad or Jem's foster parents. But our situations are different. I know my mum would have done anything to be here; Jem's parents abandoned her. When we were really little she would talk about how one day they would come and rescue her, how they would save her from her foster parents. But then as we got older and they kept missing birthdays and Christmases and Barb, Jem's foster Mum, made comments about them being addicts, she just gave up.'

'Do you know much about Jem's parents?'

'No, not really. Only what I overheard from Barb when we were little. They were really young when they had her and couldn't look after her. I once heard Barb talking about them, she said they were both drug addicts, spending their money on their next hit, too high to get up to take Jem screaming from her cot,' I say, clenching my jaw.

'Lucy I can't imagine how it must have been for you both growing up.'

'It was worse for Jem. I was okay. Mostly I had a good childhood. I might have liked to have known more, but at least I was safe, loved. Some children aren't. It was just different I guess, and as I got older I started to wonder how else it could have been.'

CHAPTER SIX

It's already week six of Semester One. We're half way through and I just keep thinking about how much I have to get done before exams. At the start of class, Sally tells us we will get our assignments back at the end. She doesn't like handing them out at the beginning of class because then students don't pay attention to anything.

And I'm still not paying attention, because now instead of stressing about exams, I'm thinking about how I went in the assignment and I'm thinking the worst. And listening to Sally talk about OH&S for nurses and patients in a clinical setting isn't exactly helping me keep my mind off things.

It's the first assignment I've had to hand in for uni. And even though it was only an 800-word essay on the role of a nurse in a patient care setting, using reference to the legislation that registered nurses are bound to, it felt like I spent more time researching and writing it than I did studying for my three hour VCE English exam.

English was always my best subject at school; I don't think I ever got a mark lower than an A. The teachers knew my work; towards the end they probably didn't even really read it, they just knew what to expect so gave me the same mark each time. I could write an essay analysing a text without even really thinking about it. But this was for university. I didn't know what the standard was. So I went to the library and borrowed six books on nursing standards and legislation. I read eight journal articles. I planned the essay down to what each paragraph would argue. And I proofread it four times before I handed it in. Claire tried to help, but she was studying Psychology, so besides being able to tell me that it was well written, that the referencing was right and that there were no spelling mistakes, she couldn't help me with the content. I had to trust I knew the answers.

I spend most of the class staring at the pile of assignments Sally has put on the desk, so I don't notice when she stops talking and finishes writing on the board. I only realise that the two hours is nearly up when she picks up the stack of assignments and starts handing them out. She walks around the U shape that the desks are arranged in, putting students' assignments face down in front of them.

I'm glad she does it like this, if I don't get a good mark the last thing I want is for whoever is sitting next to me to see. Mine is nearly at the bottom of the pile and when she puts it down in front of me she smiles. Is it a good smile, as if I've done well? Or an encouraging smile, like nice try? She does it too quickly for me to tell.

I lift the assignment from the desk and pull it straight towards my chest without looking at the front. I sit with it like that for a while, deciding whether I want to look or not. A few others from the class have got theirs and just walked straight out without looking at their mark. Others have checked and are now flicking through the pages looking for more

feedback. I'm still holding my assignment to my chest with one hand and rubbing between my eyes with the other. Sally starts to make her way back around the U shape to see if anyone has any questions. That's when I look at my assignment. If I went badly I don't want her to ask me any questions, so I finally look at it, hoping she won't stop and talk to me if it looks like I'm reading.

18/20. That's 90%. A HD. Wow! I check it again, just in case. Still the same! I try not to smile too much, but it's hard. I can feel my lips tightening, wanting to curve up at the ends. I don't want to seem too happy about it. Everyone else probably just thinks, 'Who cares, it's an assignment and it's only worth 20% of our mark.' But I care. I did it.

I start looking through the comments that Sally has left in my work. 'Excellent Lucy, you have a strong grasp of the concept.' 'Good reference.' 'Your work shows you have carefully considered the legislation.' 'Well done!' I'm still going through the feedback when Sally interrupts me. The classroom is empty; everyone else has taken their assignments and left. Sally is starting to pack up.

'You did very well, Lucy.'

'Oh, thank you,' I say, a bit embarrassed.

'I've read hundreds of variations of this same assignment, everyone basically writes the same thing because there really is only one answer. But yours was a pleasure to read.'

'Thank you,' I say again, not knowing what else to say.

'You were the one who said your mum's a nurse, in the first class, aren't you? That should come in handy. Did you get her help with this?'

'Oh um, yeah, that was me. She was a nurse. But no, I didn't get her help with it,' I stammer back, not knowing how much to say.

'Where did she nurse? Is that back in Warrnambool too? That's where you're from aren't you?' she asks, and I'm thankful she has focussed on that, not why I didn't get my mum to help with the assignment.

'Yes I'm from Warrnambool, but my mum wasn't a nurse there. She nursed at Prince Henry's Hospital, in the city.'

'Oh, really? I have a few good friends who did their training there. Did she train there too?' she asks.

'Yes, she did.'

'You'll have to ask her about it. How different it was to learning in a university setting. I often wish there was more in-hospital training still. I just feel like students learn so much more that way and they build better relationships among themselves. You bond a lot more over actual nursing work, rather than in classrooms. Some of my friends still have great contacts from their training days at Prince Henry's. Maybe it's because the hospital closed

down too. But they have all these reunions and Facebook groups where they stay in touch. You probably know all about that, though.'

'Yeah,' I say because it's easier to just be polite.

'Well I better get to my next class, but well done again, Lucy. See you next week.'

'Yep, see you then,' I say, thinking over what she said.

I go straight to the library, find a quiet spot in one of the study rooms and log into Facebook. Prince Henry's Facebook groups. I had never thought to check. The hospital closed so long ago, a long time before Facebook. And I always forget that adults have Facebook, that parents do. Dad doesn't, but the mums of some of my friends from school have it. Barb, Jem's foster Mum, has it, but Jem refuses to accept her friend request. Maybe my mum would have had it too. And I would have accepted her friend request. If we'd still moved to Warrnambool, it would've been an easy way for her to stay in contact with her friends in Melbourne.

I start typing Prince Henry's in the search bar. There's Prince Henry of Wales. I didn't know Prince Harry's real name was Henry. Prince Henry of Battenberg and Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester. There's a Prince Henry Hospital in Sydney, one in Mascot, NSW and a Prince Henry Hospital Chapel in Little Bay. But there are also heaps of pages and groups from Prince Henry's Hospital in Melbourne. There are ones for twenty-five, thirty and forty-year reunions, each one depending on what year you graduated from your training. There are also different ones for the nurse's accommodation. But it looks like there is one main group. A group with 873 members. I click on it. In the 'About' section it says it's a public group. It says that it's for anyone who worked, trained or was cared for at Prince Henry's Hospital, South Melbourne. The purpose of this page is to establish contact between those who were involved with the hospital in any way and to share information about one of Melbourne's great old hospitals.

I can't believe what I've found. I go straight to the photos. I click through each one, stopping to check every face, looking for my mum. She's not there, but I can't help but wonder if any of those faces, any of those people, knew her. Or was she the one taking the photo? Or was she just to the left, or the right, outside of the frame, but in the same room, on the same ward, at the same party?

I look through all the members of the group, reading their names, looking at their profile pictures. I'm not sure why. I know I won't know any of them. I know she won't be there. But still I look. I look at all 873 of them. One of them must have known her.

I click on the 'join group' button. And there it is. The comment box. My entrance into this world. My chance to find her, to know her. My hand hovers over the keyboard. I run my fingers over each of the keys. Touching each one, but not enough to actually type anything.

What do I say? How much do I say? I don't want people's pity. I don't want comments from people saying how sorry they are for me. I want to find someone that knew her. I want someone to tell me about her.

I spend the next half an hour writing sentences and then deleting them. Reordering my words. Adding more information. Removing it. Trying to make myself sound smarter. Making it personal. Making it impersonal. Until finally I write:

Hi Everyone, my name is Lucy Wallace. My mum, Beth Wallace (she was Beth Ffelan before she got married) was a nurse at Prince Henry's. She did her training there and then worked there for a couple of years. I'm just posting this to see if anyone in the group knew her. If you did, I'd love to talk to you about her. Can you please contact me? Thanks.

And then I press 'post comment'.

I sit in the library for another half an hour, clicking on the refresh button to reload the page, checking for comments or even a like. But there is nothing. I hit refresh so many times that I drain my laptop's battery. I pack up and go home, carrying my flat laptop and an aching need for a reply.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I get home from uni, Sean is home, lying on the couch, the coffee table scattered with empty Subway bags and bottles of water.

'You're home early,' Sean says as he looks up from playing FIFA. 'I thought you were studying in the library all day.'

'I was, but my computer went flat.'

'Watching porn again were you?' he asks, raising his eyebrows.

'Yep, you got me. That's exactly it,' I say, rolling my eyes and getting my laptop out of my bag to charge.

'Hey, Luce, what's up with you? No comeback? No dig? You never let me win that easily.'

'Move,' I say, pushing Sean's feet off the couch so I can sit down.

'Shit, you're in a good mood today. Want me to make it worse by beating you at FIFA?' He hands me the second controller.

'Sure,' I say. 'I can't do anything until my computer's charged any way.'

'Luce, I just scored my third goal because you left your goalie standing in the midfield, nowhere near the goals. I know I beat you every time, but you're usually more competition than this. You're playing like Claire.'

'Sorry, I'm not really paying attention,' I say, staring at my phone, checking Facebook.

'I can tell. Why do you keep checking your phone? Is it a guy?' He says, nudging me with his knee. 'Tell him you can't talk now because you're playing FIFA, that'll get him.'

'Ha. No, it's not a boy.' I say, rolling my eyes at him. 'I'm just waiting for a reply on Facebook, or a message back from Jem. I don't know if she's at work or not.'

'Well, it's Jem, so she's probably not at work. 'Cos if she was she'd definitely be on her phone.'

'Yeah I guess, but I've messaged her and called her a few times. She'd usually have replied by now.' I say, staring at the TV.

'Who knows where she is,' he shrugs. 'She probably went out last night and is still sleeping it off.'

What are you checking on Facebook anyway?'

'Um, well, I think I might have found a way to find someone who knew my mum.' I mumble, not really sure how to explain it.

'Oh shit! Really? That's massive. On Facebook?' he asks.

'Yeah. I just posted a message to this group; it's full of nurses who used to work at the same hospital as her. I asked if anyone knew her. I've checked for a reply a thousand times though and there's nothing,' I say, refreshing my news feed again.

'When did you post it?'

'About two hours a...wait, no, no. Shit!' I say, swiping my phone, trying the on button, shaking it in my hand.

'Hey, relax,' Sean says grabbing my phone out of my hand before I throw it across the room. 'No wonder it's flat. It's only been two hours. And it's the middle of the day, so they're probably all at work, that's why no one's answered. I don't think it's been long enough for you to panic yet.'

'I know,' I say, sighing. 'It's just, it's been so long. I've waited so long. I don't want to have to wait any longer.'

'Plug your phone in. Let's go and get some food.'

'Food?' I say, 'I don't think I could eat.'

'Well you might not be able to, but I'm starving. And if I'm going to have to help you keep your shit together while you deal with this, then I need some food. Let's go. If someone replies it will still be there when we getback.'

Sean and I walk to the South Melbourne Market so he can get some food. Once we cross Kings Way and continue walking away from, things get quieter, calmer. I know we are walking towards the ocean, and even though I can't see it, I can sense it. The air gets clearer and I find myself involuntarily taking deeper breaths. We pass about six takeaway shops on the way there, but Sean's desperate for South Melbourne Dim Sims so we walk over a kilometre to get there.

'Do you know they sell these on Swanston Street?' I say. 'Near the Flinders Street intersection. It's closer to home.'

'Yeah, I know where it is. But they're not the same. They don't taste the same as when they're from the market.'

I don't argue with him, instead I just fall in step beside him. I'm still thinking about the message; who could reply, what they might say, what they might be able to tell me.

'Did you know that an elephant's gestation period is twenty-four months?' Sean asks.

'What? No!'

'Or that the plastic part at the end of a shoelace is called an aglet?'

'No.'

'What about that it's illegal to carry an ice-cream in your back pocket in Kentucky.'

'What? Why is that a law?'

Sean spends the entire fifteen-minute walk there rambling. Rattling off random facts and talking for too long about how grapes explode when you put them in the microwave. He talks about everything but what we are both thinking about. Thankfully, on the way back his mouth is too full of dim sims to talk.

When we get back to our apartment Jem is sitting, drawing in the gutter out the front, waiting for me.

'You two look like you've been having a nice time,' Jem says, looking Sean and me up and down.

'Jem, what are you doing here?' I ask.

'Well, when I had four missed calls from you and a couple of text messages telling me to ring you, I did. And then I did again, but your phone kept going straight to voicemail, stupid me thought there might have been something wrong,' she says, now looking from me to Sean and back again.

'Oh shit, sorry, my phone went flat. We decided to go get some food while we waited for it to charge.'

'Right, you went to get food.'

'Did you know that in 1616 in America it was illegal for farmers not to grow marijuana?' Sean says as he walks past Jem to open the front door.

'Thanks, Sean,' I say.

'Anytime, Luce,' he says, giving me a wink.

'What was that about?' Jem asks, watching Sean go up the stairs to our apartment.

'Nah, nothing. He's just full of random facts today,' I say, smiling. 'Can I just run upstairs quickly and grab my phone? Then do you wanna grab a coffee?' I ask, pointing to the general store across the street.

'Yeah, whatever.'

We order inside at the counter and sit at the metal table outside on the footpath, waiting for our drinks to come out.

'So what was with all the phone calls and the text messages?'

'Um, well,' I say, refreshing Facebook on my phone again. There was still nothing there when I checked my phone upstairs and there's still nothing there now. 'I think I might have found a way to find out about my mum. To find someone who might have known her.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well my tutor at uni told me about a Facebook group connected to the hospital where my mum used to work. So I went on and left a message, asking if there was anyone in the group that knew her and if they did to contact me.'

'Your tutor knows about your mum?'

'No, not really. She just mentioned something. But that's not the point,' I say, shaking my head. 'What if someone writes back who knew her?'

'Yeah, I guess that would be cool. You could talk to them. Ask them some of the questions you have.'

'Cool? It would be amazing!'

'Yeah you're right, of course it would be. I'm sorry, I just thought something must have been wrong when I checked my phone and saw all those missed calls. Sorry. I guess I was just expecting something else.'

'Yeah I was at the library when I rang you. I wasn't sure what to write. Then I was panicking, waiting for a reply. I just wanted to tell you.'

'Okay. I was at Hosier Lane, drawing. I had my headphones in so I didn't hear your calls. Then I was so close I thought I'd just come over and check.'

'Well, thanks for coming. I should have told you more in a message. Sorry for worrying you.'

Our coffees come out and we stay in the sun, talking. Jem tells me about what she was drawing, about her weekend and how the sleeve design is coming along with Zeb. I don't say much more about the post or the Facebook group, or what it could mean. Jem still seems worried; I didn't think about her seeing all those missed calls, so I let her talk about what she's been up to and instead try to distract myself, thinking about why someone would even want to put an ice-cream in their back pocket.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'm glad I'm working on the floor in women's wear today. I'm too tired to do anything else. Too tired to be on layby, too tired to be on a register, especially now that they've changed the acceptable margin of error on the end-of-day till counts from \$5, over and under, down to \$2. I think my last two tills were \$3.50 over. If I was short changing people before, imagine what I will be like today. Though who even cares if I'm over? Doesn't that mean I'm making them more money anyway?

Instead I get to spend all day picking clothes up off the floor, putting them on hangers, sorting racks in size order and letting people into the change rooms. I'm working like a robot, repeating the same movements and asking, 'Would you like to try that on?' and 'How did you go?' over and over again.

It was after 1:00am last night when I finally stopped checking Facebook. I kept falling asleep with my computer on my lap. Once I only woke up just in time to grab it before it slid off the bed onto the floor. That's when I worked out that anyone who might actually write back to me would already be asleep so I might as well go to sleep too. I was so tired this morning getting ready for work that I put the teaspoon in the bin and the empty yoghurt container in the sink.

We aren't allowed to have our phones on us at work, but this morning when I got to work, I hid mine in the drawer under the counter in the change rooms, so I could sneak back in and check it any time I got a chance.

In my morning tea break, I sit in the staff tearoom and see if anyone has written back to my post. They haven't. So then I check to see whether there has been any activity at all on the page since yesterday. I check it again on my lunch break but there's still nothing there.

It's been nearly twenty-four hours since I found the group and finally worked my way up to posting the message. I got so excited yesterday, it seemed like such an obvious way to find someone and I'd missed it. People use Facebook so much that it seemed certain to work. I check Facebook five or six times a day. First thing in the morning when I wake up, when I'm eating breakfast, anytime I'm on public transport, whenever I'm in an awkward situation, or when I'm waiting in line somewhere. I check it for people's birthdays and to see what my friends back home are doing. I check it even more when I'm meant to be doing uni work and it's usually the last thing I look at before I go to sleep. Even if other people don't check it as much as me, surely they look at it at least once a day?

But now I'm starting to think I won't get a response at all. Maybe no one will remember her. And I think that's the main reason I want so badly to find someone who knew her, because yes, she was my mum, but I also hate the thought of her being forgotten.

I spend the rest of my shift thinking about what happens to people when they die. Not their bodies or their souls. Not about Heaven or an afterlife. But what happens to the memories of them. To their impact on the world. To how long they are remembered.

My mum is remembered by me, by Dad and maybe, hopefully, by people she worked with, or trained with. She's remembered by my grandparents in England and my Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Emma, and by all of my dad's family, but my mum had no family of her own to remember her, to keep her memory alive.

I keep thinking about how some people are remembered by the whole world, and for centuries, like Shakespeare or Jane Austen. Or how some families talk about dead relatives for generations. But then I think about people who die and don't have anyone to remember them. To continue their story. I want to be able to continue my mum's story. I want to tell my kids about her, and their kids one day.

I'm glad Claire and Sean aren't home yet when I get there. I know they will both ask about the post. So, I go straight into my room and shut the door behind me.

I open the top drawer of my bedside table and take out the photo of my mum and me. I sit it beside me on the bed and pick my computer up off the floor. I just want to put my headphones in, turn on a movie and go to sleep so the day can be over.

But then, I open my computer and it goes straight to my Facebook page. And there, in the right hand corner, is the familiar red dot of a notification. *Jodie Hoy replied to your comment.* I click on it straight away and there it is. The answer.

Lucy, what a surprise it was to see your message this afternoon. I knew your mum, I even knew you once. Your mum and I trained and worked together. She was a good friend of mine. If you would like to contact me send me a private message and we can talk. I'd love to meet you. I hope you're well and I look forward to hearing from you.

And suddenly, in that one message, the suspense and the anxiety of the last day and a half just drop away. The time spent checking my phone and my computer. The energy spent daydreaming about the best possible outcome and then the worst. The worry that it could be another dead end. In that one, short message, it's all gone. She knew her. And now maybe I will too.

CHAPTER NINE

I'm ironing. I hate ironing. Dad never made things at home easy for me; I was always expected to do my fair share around the house. It was my job to unload the dishwasher, to put the bins out every Wednesday night, to keep my room clean, make my bed every morning and walk Harry every day after school. But I never had to iron.

Ironing was Dad's job. Every Sunday, he would spend a couple of hours standing at the ironing board, ironing his work shirts and my school uniform while he watched sport.

So when Claire and Sean get home the night before I've organised to meet Jodie, they walk in to find me fighting the ironing board and getting tangled in the iron's cord.

'When you're done with that, Luce, I've got a few things you can do for me,' Sean says.

Claire hits him on the arm and tells him off for making dadjokes.

'How are you feeling about it, Luce? Are you nervous?' Claire asks.

'Well, I've ironed three tops and a skirt, because I've changed my mind about what to wear six times.'

'Ha, okay. So what have you decided on?'

'I still don't know,' I say, leaning over to rest my head on the ironing board.

'Luce, just wear whatever, she won't care what you wear,' Sean calls out from the kitchen.

'She might not care, Sean, but Lucy does.' And Claire is right, I do care. First impressions and all. 'What are you thinking?' Claire asks.

'First I thought I'd wear my interview clothes. Black pants and a shirt. But then, that just seemed too formal. So I thought I'd just wear jeans and a t-shirt, but I don't want her to think I haven't put in any effort. That's when I got out the skirt, but I don't really wear skirts, so why would I now? I still want to be me.'

I want Jodie to think I look like my mum. I wish I knew what she looked like when she was seventeen. Then I could do my hair like hers and dress like her. But what if I don't look like her? People back home always say I look like Dad; that I take after him. They've never seen my mum though. If I take after Dad, can I take after my mum, too?

'Wow, Luce, you are over-thinking this. Just pick whatever you are most comfortable in. I've only really ever seen you wear jeans, so wear them. But if you want to look like you put in some more effort, wear a nice top and do your hair. I can't believe I'm saying this, but Sean is right.'

'Hah!' Sean scoffs from the kitchen.

'Do you know what you're going to ask her?'

'I've got a list of a thousand questions going around in my head. I don't think I'll run out of questions. I just don't know what to ask first.'

'You'll work it out tomorrow. Wait and see what she's like. You might not even have to ask her many questions; she might just know what to say.'

'I hope so, because I'm worried I might get there and just shut down. That I might finally have gotten this chance only to stuff it up.'

'Oh, Luce,' Claire says as she comes around the other side of the ironing board to put her arm around me. 'You'll be fine. Just be you. And be honest. The rest will work out. Do you want me to come with you? I can swap my shift at work.'

'No, that's okay. Thank you though. I'm meeting her at Jem's work. So I'll have Jem there.' It had always been me and Jem. Together, getting through. And it would be her with me now.

CHAPTER TEN

The next day I hide in the kitchen with Jem. She's prepping food for the lunch rush. Washing lettuce mix for the salads. Chopping vegetables to be roasted. Threading lamb onto skewers and filling dipping containers with sauce. It's only 9:30am. I'm not meant to meet Jodie until 10:00am, but Jem and I are already looking through the small window out into the café each time the front door opens.

A woman walks in the door at 9:35am. She's wearing a full-length camel trench coat and high-heeled boots over her jeans.

'Do you think that's her?' Jem asks.

'I don't think so; she doesn't look like a nurse,' I say, as we watch her pull a laptop out of what looks like a very expensive handbag. She settles into some work, typing away. I'm relieved that she's not Jodie.

The next woman who comes in is a fair bit older. She could be in her sixties. She's got short grey hair, is wearing a cardigan with a brooch on the left hand side and has to get her glasses out to read the menu.

'Maybe that's her,' Jem says. 'How old is she?'

'I don't know. I didn't ask. I just assumed she would be my mum's age. I mean that they would have been the same age when they were nursing,' I say, correcting myself.

'She might have gone back to uni when she was a bit older,' Jem says. But then the woman's husband comes in to the café after tying their dog up outside.

I grab a stool and sit with my back facing the window out into the café. I can't watch anymore. I grab a handful of serviettes and start folding them for Jem. There's a full breakfast on the bench in front of me, with poached eggs, bacon, hash browns, spinach and beans. Jem always gives me all the extras because she knows I won't buy avocados or haloumi at the supermarket because they're too expensive. But I can't touch it today. Jem will pack it up for me so I can take it home for lunch.

I'm still folding serviettes when Jem pokes me in the arm.

'Luce, Luce,' she says, trying to get me out of my daydream. 'I think that's her. It has to be her.' I stand up quickly, almost knocking the stool over underneath me.

'Which one?' I ask, scanning the tables.

'The one in the nurse's uniform,' Jem says.

'Oh. Makes sense. Where is she?' I ask again, eyes searching desperately.

'She's right there, at the counter. Calm down, Luce. You're so on edge.'

'I'm trying,' I say, not realising I'm bouncing up and down on the balls of my feet. 'I just... I'm nervous. What if she doesn't know anything? Or what if she does, but doesn't like me?'

'Lucy!' Jem says, grabbing me on the arms to stop me moving. 'If she doesn't know anything, you're not any worse off. You just keep looking. And who cares if she doesn't like you. You just want to ask her some questions, not get her to adopt you.'

'I guess,' I say, taking a deep breath; holding it. I watch her at the counter. She asks Ben for something and then walks towards a small table with two chairs in the back of the café. She's about my height, with shoulder length blonde hair and a really friendly smile. I didn't really know what to expect; I think subconsciously I had wanted her to look like my mum: dark curly hair, brown eyes, olive skin. But it doesn't matter what she looks like, it's what she can tell me.

'Okay,' I say. 'I guess I better go out there.'

'Go,' Jem says, glancing up quickly from the coriander she's chopping. 'You'll be fine.'

I walk out the back door into the alleyway next to the café, where the suppliers deliver all the food. I didn't want to go into the café straight from the kitchen, I didn't want Jodie to see me and think that I'd been spying on her. Or hiding. Even though I was.

I feel lightheaded. Nauseous. I squat down, lean against the wall of the café, wrap my arms around my legs and bury my head between my knees.

After a moment, I pull myself together. I stand and walk around to the front door of the café. I take a deep breath. This is it.

'Hi, you must be Lucy.'

'Yes, hi Jodie.'

'It's so lovely to meet you, in person.'

'You too. How are you?'

'I'm okay. At least I will be in about five minutes once I've had a coffee. I'm coming off two weeks of night shift.'

'You must be tired.'

'You'd think I'd be used to it after more than twenty years of shift work, but it still gets me. Nothing a little caffeine can't fix. Sorry, I nearly ordered you a coffee too, but I wasn't sure what to get. People can be very particular about their coffee.'

'That's okay, I actually don't drink coffee, I'll just order a tea when Ben comes back.'

'Your smile, your eyes. Now the coffee.'

'Sorry...I?'

'No, that's okay. It's just... I know I'm sleep deprived, but, watching you come in the door, it was like I was twenty years old again. You're just, so much, so... you're her.'

'Really?' I ask.

'Oh, Lucy, yes! I mean, you're not identical, I can see a lot of your father in you too. But I think I could have picked you out in the street.'

'Really?' I repeat, my whole face responding. We are interrupted as Ben puts Jodie's coffee down on the table.

'Would you like a drink, Lucy?' he asks.

'Yes, please.'

'Black tea, with an extra scoop of leaves?' Ben asks.

'Yes thanks,' I reply before he walks back towards the kitchen. 'Sorry about that, you said people are fussy about their coffee, I'm the same with my tea.'

'Sure, I understand. And you like your tea black and strong?' she says, shaking her head.

'Yes?' I reply, uncertainly.

'The same as your mother. She used to use two tea bags at once at Prince Henry's. She said the tea bags the hospital bought were so cheap that one couldn't get it strong enough for her.'

'We drink our tea the same,' I say. More to myself than to Jodie. As if saying it out loud will make it sink in.

'Has no one told you these things?'

'No, I... I know the big things. That she grew up in Melbourne, in Cheltenham. That she was an only child. That her parents died in a car crash when she was fourteen and so she went to live with her aunt, her mum's older sister. That she met my dad when she was eighteen. That she was a nurse. But I don't know any of the little things. The things that made her, her.'

'Okay, what about pictures?'

'I have a few, only one of us together; from the day I was born. I have one of her and Dad on their wedding day and I have one of her in her uniform standing outside of the hospital,' I say, as Ben brings my tea to the table.

'Does David talk to you about her?'

'No. I guess it's too hard for him. I don't know. I used to ask questions. But he got quite good at ignoring them, or changing the subject or whatever. So then I just started to try and find out things by myself.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry sweetie. It must have been really hard for you. But your dad, he was devastated when Beth died. We all were. But he was heartbroken.' She stops and puts her hand around her coffee mug, as if trying to draw out its warmth.

Nearly a minute has passed and she is still quiet, staring into her coffee. I start to wonder if I should say something, or ask her if she's okay. Then I realise she's re-living it.

That moment she found out. Those days following. And I suddenly realise it's different for her. Yes, I lost my mum and it's something I'll live with, or without, every day, for the rest of my life. But it's also all I've known. A huge part of my life is missing, but it's not a part I ever had, really. I was a baby when she died. It's not like I had to get used to her being gone, she just was. It wasn't like that for Jodie. She had a friend one day and then, with no real warning, she was gone. She's had to get used to that. She's had to move on. And now, seeing me, she's living that shock and that grief again.

Eventually Jodie looks up and gives me a half-smile.

'I think about Beth all the time, Lucy. I'll drive along St. Kilda Road or past *The Spaghetti Tree* on Bourke Street where we always used to go for dinner, or I'll have a patient that brings back a memory of my early days as a nurse. But they're mostly good thoughts. It's been awhile since I've thought about what happened. I had to stop myself from thinking about it. I had to stop myself from going over the unfairness of it all. From trying to find some way to reconcile it all, because I knew I couldn't. It was sudden and horrible and utterly unfair. But focussing on that wasn't helping anyone and I had to tell myself that that's not what your mum would have wanted. So I went back to work and I worked for both of us. I did what she could no longer do. And now you're here. And again, because I know it's what she would want, I'm going to answer any questions you might have. And I'm going to tell you all the things about her that I can still remember. How does that sound?'

Her pain is so real, and I can see that this is hard for her, but I can also see that there's something else there that's pushing her forward. Her friendship with my mum maybe? I'm not sure. But whatever it is I'm grateful for it and grateful to have found her.

'I don't think you could possibly know how good that sounds to me. Thank you.'

Ben comes back with two blueberry muffins. My favourite. 'From the kitchen,' he says. Jodie smiles and thanks him. I look over just in time to see Jem give me a wink before she disappears into the kitchen, back to work. We order another drink each and he takes our cups away.

'Okay, so, where do you want to start? You probably have a list of questions stored in your head. What's first?'

I let out a long sigh; finally relaxing, relieved that this isn't a waste of time like every other time I thought I was getting somewhere when it came to my mum.

'All my life I've thought about how it would go if I actually got to sit down with someone who knew her and now that it's happening I don't know where to start.'

'How about I start from the start? From when I first met your mum?'

'That's perfect.'

I spend the rest of the day in a daze. A foggy, surreal, excited daze. My cheeks tight from smiling, but my forehead tight from thinking.

I miss my tram stop on the way home from the café. Then I nearly microwave the leftovers in the foil container Jem packed them into for me. And I only write seventeen words for an assignment while sitting at my computer for over an hour.

I keep trying to add each new story and trait into the file of my mum that I've built in my head. Trying to fill the gaps in the timeline and think of what I can ask Jodie the next time we meet. She invited me over for dinner one night next week and said she'd get together some things to show me.

I keep coming back to the fact that not only had my mum worked just a block away from where I live, but that she also lived there too, for three years.

Jodie told me how the nurses studying at Prince Henry's lived in Nursing Accommodation just behind the hospital. On Wells Street. Less than two hundred metres from my apartment on the corner of Wells Street and Miles Street. A block from my bedroom.

Jodie also told me about the first day they met. That she and my mum had both had to go down to Human Resources to get their ID cards fixed. Jodie's said she was a registered nurse, instead of a nursing student and they had spelt my mum's name wrong on hers.

Jodie said as she walked into the office she overheard my mum saying, 'It's my name, why would I have spelt it wrong?'

'Oh we just thought you might have gotten distracted while filling out the form and made a mistake,' the receptionist had replied.

To which my mum had said, 'I've been writing that word for as long as I've been able to hold a pen.'

Finally, the receptionist had apologised and said, 'We're sorry Nurse Ffelan, we will issue you a new ID straight away.'

From that point on, Jodie said, she had called my mum Nurse 'Double F' Ffelan and they did almost everything together. They studied together, cooked their meals together, they spent their days off together and even lived together when another nurse, Jodie's roommate, dropped out of the program. They moved my mum into the room before anyone could say no.

By the time Jodie and I left the café, Jem had already finished her shift. I tried to call her straight away but she didn't answer her phone. I couldn't wait to tell her all about Jodie and all about my mum. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have found Jodie. I hadn't just found someone who knew my mum; I had found one of her closest friends. I thought I'd leave

knowing that she was a good nurse and maybe one or two stories about her. But this...
Jodie. She might be able to answer all the questions I've ever wanted to ask.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'How come you're so nervous?' Sean asks. 'You've already met her. You know she's not a serial killer.'

'Very funny,' I say, checking my bag for the third time to make sure I have everything.

'But Lucy, seriously, calm down. You've been so excited all week. Why're you so jumpy now?'

'I don't know. I know it's silly. It's just, for so long I didn't think this would ever happen. Now it is happening and I just...I just want her to like me.'

'Luce, it'll be fine. She'll think you're great, just like Claire and I do, even if we did hate you at first,' he says, nudging me on his way to the kitchen.

'Gee thanks,' I say, rolling my eyes at him.

'Want a beer?' he asks. 'You know, some Dutch courage?'

'No thanks,' I say. 'My stomach's already digesting itself. I think I'll just go now.'

'What time's dinner?' he asks.

'Oh, not until 6:30pm, but I'll just go to Hawthorn early and look around Glenferrie Road for a while to fill in the time.'

I get off at Glenferrie Station and take the underpass to Glenferrie Road. The smell of the competing cafes and restaurants intermingle, producing a curious combination that's oily, yet sweet. I love that in Melbourne, at any time of the day or night, I can get anything from frozen yoghurt, to sushi, to pizza or Gurkhas. And often all on the one street. The sidewalks are filling with high school students dressed head to toe in their private school logos. Even though I'm probably the same age as, or even younger than, some of them, our differences seem obvious. They seem to ooze a sophistication which comes from having grown up in Melbourne, a sophistication I wonder whether I might have also had if my Mum was still alive. I stop at Readings Bookstore. I've been there before with Jem and Claire and know that I will be able to find something there to distract me until I have to walk to Jodie's.

Among the shelves, as I scan the titles and read some blurbs, each story makes me think of my mum. There are stories about hereditary illness, where children have to care for their dying father while they decide whether or not they want to know their own fate, about women struggling with families and careers, about a young woman falling in love with an Irish backpacker and about a young girl orphaned as a teenager. Each one makes me think of another question I need to ask Jodie, about another thing I want to know about my mum. Like, what her early childhood was like? Did both my grandparents work or was my grandma home with my mum? Did they try and have other children or were they happy with my mum? Did my mum like being an only child? What did my mum think of Grandma and Pa

when she first met them? Did my mum ever think she and Dad would like in England? Now that I had someone to ask, the questions kept coming.

In the end I buy *The Secret Garden* colouring book, hoping that colouring in the garden will soothe me like it did when I was little.

I get to Jodie's house fifteen minutes early. There's a car in the driveway, so I guess she's home. When we had coffee, she'd told me she would be home any time after 5:30pm, once she'd picked her two sons up from basketball.

Their house is on a beautiful street in Hawthorn, where the trees on either side of the road stretch to meet each other overhead. Their house is an old brick terrace house, with a wooden veranda and a path lined with roses out the front.

I ring the doorbell and stand back on the veranda. I hate waiting for people to answer the front door. Do you stand looking at the door, or is that nosey? Do you turn and look out over the street? But then you have your back to them when they answer the door.

'Lucy,' Jodie almost sings when she opens the door and gives me a hug. I go rigid at first, startled by how welcoming she is, but the hug is so nice I quickly feel silly for being so worried about coming.

'Come in, Lucy,' she says. 'We just got home. The boys are just having showers; I'll introduce them to you when they're done. Now do you want a cup of tea?' she asks, as if it's my tenth visit.

'Yes please,' I say.

Jodie's house, like the front yard, is spotless. It's decorated so nicely, with everything in just the right place. The flowers in the entrance arranged in the vase like they came straight from the florist. The coasters and place mats set out neatly on the dining room table. The books in the bookshelf arranged in size order. I shouldn't be surprised; the house is just like Jodie. Her hair parted carefully, just off centre. Her shirt tucked neatly into her jeans, her belt shiny. But even though everything's so perfect, it's effortless, natural. There's nothing forced or pretentious about Jodie or her house.

When we sit down at the kitchen table with our cups of tea, Jodie starts talking about how my mum and dad and she and her husband, Bruce, used to spend most of their weekends together. How they would go to the footy, or to St Kilda beach, or just play cards against each other at home. It's so strange to hear about the life they all had before me.

'Did David ever meet anyone else?' Jodie asks me.

'No, not really. He dated a few times when I was younger. Nothing serious though. He never introduced me to anyone at least. The babysitter would start looking after me on Saturday nights a bit more often for a few months, but it wouldn't last long. Eventually she'd stop coming and it would be Dad and me at home together watching movies again on

Saturday night. Then a year or so would go by and it would start again. I used to hope that he'd marry Anne, his Office Manager, but then I realised she was already married. What about my mum and dad?' I ask, 'How did they meet?'

'David didn't even tell you *that* story?'

'No, he just said it was at a party.'

'It was at a party. Oh, Lucy this is a great story. One of the best. Do you believe in love at first sight?'

'Um, I don't really know. It's not like I've had much experience with it,' I say, thinking of the few boys I've kissed back home, but never went out with because it was a bit hard, with Dad. 'It seems like something that only happens in fairy tales or bad romantic comedies,' I continue.

'No experience! But sweetie, you're the result of love at first sight. Well, at least for David. Beth took a bit of convincing.'

'My dad?' I scoff.

'Yes, your dad. By the end of that party your dad knew he wanted to marry your mum.'

She quickly senses that I'm still completely unsold on the thought of my dad being even the tiniest bit romantic.

'Beth and I went to a party at Sue's, another nursing friend of ours. Her older brother was throwing the party because his cricket team had just won the grand final. Beth and I didn't really know anyone at the party, except for Sue, so we got a drink from the bar and stood watching a group of guys playing pool. We were keeping mostly to ourselves, just happy to be spending some time away from the hospital and the nursing accommodation. Sue had introduced us to a few different people, some friends of hers from high school and her cousins. Then another guy from the cricket team came over and asked us for a kiss on the cheek. He said he was going around the party to get a congratulatory kiss from every girl that was there. It was your dad.'

'My dad?' I scoff again.

'Yes, your dad.'

'What happened?' I ask, needing more proof.

'I gave him a kiss on the cheek; I didn't see any harm in it. I thought he had guts and I also thought it would be the quickest way to get rid of him. There were a lot of other girls at the party.'

'And my mum?'

'To your father's complete shock, she said no.'

'Ha, really? Why?'

'I don't know. I don't know if she even knew. But Beth never did anything just because everyone else did or because people thought she should. She got that from your grandfather, she used to say. From her father. She said he always told her that happiness

only comes from being true to yourself. He told her growing up that if she kept changing herself to please other people she would never find her own happiness. So instead she should focus on being herself and then happiness would come.'

'So then what happened?' I say, leaning towards Jodie, totally hooked. 'What did Dad say when she turned him down?'

'He tried to use his charm and impress her with his sporting prowess. Telling us how he caught the last ball of the game. He asked her one more time and when she said no he moved on. Or so we thought. We had a bit of a giggle about his plan but then forgot all about him. Until the next Friday when he turned up at the hospital at the end of our shift.'

'He came to the hospital? Why?'

'Beth had intrigued him; more than that, she'd gotten in his head. It turned out she was the only girl at the party who had said no to him. There had to have been at least thirty girls at that party and she was the only one who said no.'

'Huh, good on her.' I'm impressed, my mum sounded strong and confident. Qualities I hope have a biological component. But I'm also shocked. My dad asking for kisses from thirty girls and getting them – well mostly. I would say 'Go Dad!' but it's still too surreal to believe.

'What happened when he turned up at the hospital?'

'At first Beth didn't really know who he was. She hadn't thought about him again since the party. Then when David explained who he was, she was just confused. She didn't know why he was there or how he knew where to find her.'

'How did he find her?' I ask.

'He had gone back to Sue's house the day after the party to ask her brother who your mum was. But he didn't know, so he asked Sue. From his description, Sue worked out it was Beth and then David pestered her so much about being introduced to your mum again that Sue finally just told him when her shift ended that Friday afternoon. Sue and I both thought it was so romantic. That David was so taken with the one girl at the party who'd turned him down. And that he couldn't stop thinking about her.'

I realise I'm slowly shaking my head from side to side. I knew my mum and dad had met at a party, but I guess I'd just assumed it was a typical meeting. Introduced by mutual friends, talk, find out you have things in common and then organise to go out on a date. I had no idea it was such a unique story. Or that my dad was such a romantic back then.

'What did my mum think?'

'She wasn't as impressed as we were. But obviously he wore her down eventually. The thing with Beth was that she wasn't like the other girls that gave David a kiss that night. She wasn't like me. She was who she was. She was unusually self-assured for someone still so young. She was composed, like she always knew things were going to be okay. And because of that people were drawn to her. I was drawn to her. I'm sure it's why your dad

was drawn to her. But what made her one of a kind was that I don't think she even realised how she was, or how she affected people.'

Their story started like a modern fairy tale. Prince Charming and Cinderella met fleetingly at a ball, then Prince Charming went to great lengths to find his true love. My mum and dad met fleetingly at a party, then Dad hounded his friends until he tracked my mum down. I piece together the stories Jodie tells me, with the snippets I've learnt from Dad, and a sense of who my mum was starts to emerge. Of a woman who was strong, despite losing her parents at a young age. Of a woman who had integrity and was willing to give others a chance. Of a friend who was loyal. And I hope that one day someone will describe me just like that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I spend the mid-year break working, hanging out with Jem at the café and taking advantage of the free food, spending time with Claire and Sean, and in Hawthorn spending more time with Jodie.

I work nearly every second day, so that I can afford to pay rent during second semester and try to save money so that I won't have to do as many shifts once uni starts back. When I'm with Jem, we go to bars where her friends work so we can get free drinks, or she makes me sit with her while she gets the rest of her tattoo done. Claire and Sean take me on a few day trips, trying to show me more of Melbourne. We go to the NGV and Abbotsford Convent, we freeze walking along the esplanade at St. Kilda and we walk the 1000 steps in the Dandenongs.

But my favourite way to spend the break is at Jodie's. I go out to her house in Hawthorn a couple of times a week during the four-week break. Sometimes we go out for lunch. Sometimes I look after the boys for her while she and Bruce are at work, in exchange for a free meal and some leftovers, and then we talk when she gets home. The boys are as welcoming as their Mum. They both have Bruce's floppy brown curls and dark brown eyes, but they have their mum's temperament. They never seem to question my presence in the house or begrudge the time I spend with Jodie. Other times we just sit at their kitchen bench or at the dining room table and talk.

She tells me about what she knows of my mum's childhood – that it was quite normal. That my grandpa was a sign writer and my grandma was a hairdresser before she had my mum, but that she kept cutting people's hair from home after my mum was born. That they used to go camping in Bairnsdale every summer over Christmas. That they had a pet Labrador named Banjo.

It's during one of these visits to Jodie's that I get the courage to ask the one question that's been following me ever since I was old enough to understand that my mum had died.

Jodie was telling me about the day that my mum told her she was pregnant. 'Your mum and dad had only just found out themselves. Beth was only about five weeks along. Even back then people used to wait until they were at least twelve weeks along before they told people, once they'd gotten through the first trimester. But Beth was so excited. She made David drive her to my house straight after they had been to the doctor's to get the results of the blood test. I'd just finished a two-week roster of night duty, it was a psych rotation and all I wanted to do when I got home was close the curtains and sleep for a week. I didn't even have enough energy to shower first. So when I got home and found Beth and David sitting in their car out the front of my house, I was so confused. Obviously I thought the worst. We didn't have mobile phones then, so I thought they'd come around, met me at home after work, to tell me something terrible. Straight away I thought of Bruce. He

was working on the redevelopment of a shopping centre at the time and I was having visions of him falling off scaffolding or getting electrocuted. That was until I saw Beth's face. Oh Lucy, your mum, she was beaming. The only time I'd seen her that happy was when she was walking down the aisle towards your dad on their wedding day.' I picture my mum's smile in the photo I have from the day I was born and how it was me who'd made her so happy.

'I knew straight away,' Jodie continues. 'She didn't have to say anything. Neither did I. We just hugged. And cried.' Jodie stops as she wipes a tear from her eye. I think about my mum and dad in the car, driving to Jodie's that day. Knowing it wasn't just going to be the two of them anymore. I wonder what they thought, or hoped, I'd be like.

'Poor David,' Jodie says. 'He didn't know what to do. He was just as excited, but with Beth and me hugging and then breaking apart to look at each other and then hugging again and all the tears and the laughing, he was a bit overwhelmed. We were all just so happy, but for Beth, it was more than that. As soon as I met her, one of the first things I knew about her was how much she wanted a family. And whether it was being an only child, or her parents dying, I don't know. But for so long she'd wanted to be a mum. She'd wanted her own family. And finally, with you on the way, she had it.'

I don't know how to respond. I can't think of any words to tell her how I feel, but I can feel myself sitting up straighter and my chin lifting higher. It's an amazing feeling to know just how much my mum loved me from the start. How much she wanted me. How happy she was.

But it also makes it even sadder. That she missed out on it all. That she never really got the family she always wanted. And then, that's when I finally ask what I've wanted to ask Dad nearly my whole life.

'So how did she die?' I ask, my shoulders dropping and my eyes on the table drawing my chin back down.

'Oh Luce, it breaks my heart too,' Jodie says, her hand reaching out to hold mine. 'It was postpartum haemorrhaging from uterine atony. It was an accident. The doctors had done everything they were meant to, given her oxytocin to prevent the bleeding, but they just didn't know that Beth's uterus wasn't contracting until it was too...' Jodie stopped explaining when she saw my face.

'I don't... what does all that mean?' I ask, not looking up from the table.

'Sorry, Luce. Postpartum haemorrhage is excessive bleeding that occurs after childbirth. Bleeding after childbirth is really common, understandably, but your mum just had a lot more bleeding than normal. She lost too much blood.' Jodie stops when she sees me wince. 'Sorry, is this too much for you, Luce?'

'No it's okay, I want to know,' I say, moving my hands from the table. And I do, but it's hard. 'Why? Why was there more bleeding than normal?' I ask, tearing at the tag of the

teabag in my cup.

'There are a few reasons it can happen, if there is trauma during the birthing process or if the entire placenta isn't delivered after childbirth. But with your mum, it was because her uterus couldn't contract so it couldn't stop the bleeding.' It's almost unbearable. The thought of all that happening, because of me, even though I know how much she wanted to be a mum.

'Would she have been in pain?' I ask.

'Oh no Luce, she wasn't,' Jodie says, reaching over to rub my arm. 'She was on pain meds after the birth, so they would have helped. But she was just so happy. Oh when I saw her holding you for the first time, it was only a couple of hours after you were born, she was beautiful. She just looked so complete.'

'Could they have stopped it?'

'I've asked myself that hundreds of times, Lucy. Particularly when it happened. I wanted answers. I wanted to be able to blame someone. But there was no one, because it was just... it was unfortunate,' she says, sighing. 'It's rare, but it does happen. And by the time they realised why Beth's heart and breath rate were so high it was too late. They got her into surgery but she had lost too much blood. They did everything they could.'

And then, without looking up, I ask the question that's been making me sick most of my life, 'So, it wasn't me? I didn't... it isn't my fault she died?'

'Oh, Lucy,' Jodie says, grabbing my hands again. 'No. No sweetie it wasn't your fault. It just happened. It was nobody's fault. Beth, better than anyone, knew that there are risks with any pregnancy but that never would have stopped her. She wanted you so badly. You were everything to her.'

And then I sigh too. Not just because I realise I've been wondering whether Jodie might have blamed me. But also because I've been holding my breath a bit, blaming myself, for my whole life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

One night during the uni break Jem and I are at her unit, eating Indian takeaway and watching reruns of *Friends* on the TV in their lounge room.

We've pushed the kitchen table to the side, along with its mismatched chairs, and dismantled their coffee table that's made of milk crates Jem stole from the café, so that we can set up the fold-out couch – my bed for the night.

Jem's North Fitzroy unit, is one of six old, dark brown brick units off Miller Street that she shares with Shelly, Trav and Mel. Trav and Mel have the biggest room at the front of the house, Shelly has the next room and Jem's is the last one down the hallway and the smallest. It barely fits her double bed and the old metal filing cabinet she uses to store her clothes in. But Jem feels comfortable there. She says it's the first home where she's felt settled.

Jem tells me about Zeb and how they went out for a few drinks together the other night. She seems to really like him and I'm just happy she hasn't said anything about Dan.

I start to tell her about Jodie, about all the things that I've learnt about my mum in the last few weeks. I'm just starting to tell her about how my mum and dad met – I can't wait to tell her how romantic my dad was, because I know she won't believe it either – but I only get part way into the story when she stops me.

'So what are we going to do for your birthday?' she asks, propping her pillow up against the wood paneled wall behind us.

'I don't know Jem. I haven't really thought about it, it's not for another month.'

'But, Luce, you only get one chance at it. It's not like you can go back and change it if you don't like it the first time!'

'I know, Jem. I just don't want to make a big deal about it,' I say, looking down at the exposed fibres where the olive green carpet has worn where it meets the mustard coloured kitchen lino.

'You don't want to make a big deal about it? But it's probably the most important thing that has happened in your life so far. You have to do something. Do I really have to tell you that you only turn eighteen once?'

'Ha, no Jem, you don't. Even though you just did! But trust me, I know. I just don't really know what to do. Or if I really even want to do anything at all. Plus, even though I've worked nearly every second day during the holidays, I've still got no money. I'm going home to see Dad a couple of weekends after so we'll go out for dinner then.'

'You can't just go out for dinner with your dad!' Jem says as she sits upright. 'Plus that's a few weeks after your actual birthday. Let's do something up here on your birthday. It's a Friday night. We can go into the

city, go out. It'll be your birthday so you won't have to pay for a single drink. And you won't have to use my old ID! You can use your own!

'Oh, I'm having dinner at Jodie's the night of my birthday, Jem. She offered to make me a roast and a birthday cake.'

'So that's what you're going to do the night you turn eighteen? You're going to eat your veggies with people who aren't even your family?'

'Jem! When Jodie offered, I didn't have anything else planned yet.'

'Well you do now. You're coming out with me. You're going to do something fun!'

'I can't just cancel on Jodie now,' I say, sitting up to meet her gaze.

'Yes you can. Just make up some excuse. Tell her you have an assignment due. Or just call her on your birthday and tell her you're sick or something.'

'Jem! I'm not doing that!'

'Why? You hardly even know her. And it won't even be that much of a lie. You'll be sick, but just not on your birthday, the morning after instead,' she says, nudging me on the elbow.

I just shake my head. 'Well, what time will we go out? It wouldn't be until late would it?'

'Nah, not until like 10:00 or 11:00pm. Why? What are you thinking?'

'I'm meant to be at Jodie's for dinner at 6:30pm. So I can have dinner with her, Bruce and the boys and then come to yours after. I'd probably be able to get here by 9:30pm. How's that sound?'

'Yeah! Good thinking. Get the boring part over with early and then your real birthday celebrations can get started. Everyone can come here before for a few drinks and then when you get here we can all go into the city.'

'Okay, sounds good. But who's everyone? I was thinking just you, me, Claire and Sean if he isn't working. I don't really want it to be a big thing. Let's just keep it low key, okay?'

'Yeah, okay. Just leave it up to me Luce. I know exactly what you want. I'll plan the whole thing. You just work on getting that dinner over with quickly.'

An eighteenth birthday, I realise, is meant to be a big deal. It's a milestone, I guess. You're meant to be excited that you're finally legally an adult. Even if you've probably felt like one for a while and it's just other adults catching up. There's getting your driver's licence, so that you can finally go wherever you want, whenever you want, without having to ask for someone's help. Or so that you can escape, usually from your parents.

There's being able to vote, as if one day you're too young to have a say in your future but the next day you're not.

There's the big party, celebrating that you're finally, legally able to drink. Where usually, your parents get up and say a big speech, where they say how they can't believe you're eighteen already, that they still remember when you were a baby and you fit in their arms.

How they embarrass you by telling stories about the first time you kissed a boy or about the imaginary friend you had growing up. But it's also where they stand in front of all your friends and family and say how proud they are of you and how much they love you.

And that's what I couldn't tell Jem. That that's the reason I'm not looking forward to my birthday. It's the reason why, ever since I've been old enough to realise that someone was missing, I haven't really looked forward to any of the things other kids do. Not Christmases. Not Easter. Not school holidays. And not birthdays. Certainly not this one. How could I look forward to a day where I'd be constantly aware that my mum wasn't here with me? Where everyone else that knew she wasn't here would pity me and where those who didn't know would be really happy for me and wonder why I wasn't as happy as them? How could I look forward to a day where I'd know, that if things had turned out differently, my mum would have been right there with me, telling me what a beautiful woman I had become and that she was lucky to have a daughter like me?

But there was a small part of me that was looking forward to having dinner at Jodie's and not just because it would probably mean I'd get to learn more about my mum, but also because when I had dinner with her family I liked to think that's what it might have been like if things hadn't happened the way they did. That we might have had a family like that. With two parents and a couple of kids. That I might have had a brother or a sister. Or both. That we'd have eaten dinner together. That we'd have shared stories about our days. That we'd have made fun of each other, but also encouraged and supported each other. A family who would have had special dinners to celebrate things like an eighteenth birthday.

So I'd go to Jodie's for dinner and I'd get my fix of family life and then I'd go to Jem's and she, Claire, Sean and I would go out. There wouldn't be too much of a fuss and I'd manage to get through the day okay.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The week leading up to my birthday went quickly, so I didn't have much time to dwell on the reality of the situation. I had two assignments due and despite Jem's idea that I use them as an excuse to get out of dinner at Jodie's, I really didn't want to have to write the assignments over the weekend.

Dad rang me in the morning on his way to work. At 7:00am. It wouldn't have occurred to him that I might have wanted to have a sleep in on my birthday. The call was quick; he wished me a happy birthday and said he was looking forward to seeing me in a few weekends. That was it. Like any other birthday. Like me turning eighteen wasn't a big deal to him. It was hard to know if he would've been any different had I been in Warrnambool with him to celebrate it. But I doubt it.

Claire and Sean made a bit of a fuss over me in the morning. They bought me a bunch of flowers and a copy of *1001 Books you Must Read Before you Die*. And Claire made us all pancakes; she even brought mine out with a number eighteen candle sitting on top of the stack. We'd only been living together for four or five months and already they knew me so well. Books and sweet food, it didn't get much better than that.

And of course I'd heard from Jem. She sent me a message early in the morning with a picture of her kitchen bench covered in bottles of alcohol. Vodka and tequila. Pimm's and Bacardi. Midori and gin. Besides the letters HB, which stood for Happy Birthday, the only other thing the message said was 'punch or shots?'

Jem and I had pretty different ideas when it came to alcohol. I've never really been that interested in it. It didn't help that I didn't like the taste, or that I'd never exactly had a way to get alcohol. It wasn't like I was going to ask my dad, was I? Not like Jem. She always seemed to have someone, somewhere, who was willing to buy her alcohol for a party, or just a Saturday night at home. I'd still had my share of drunken nights and horrible hangovers though. The worst was from when Jem turned eighteen the year before.

She'd begged and begged her foster parents for a party. And those two weeks they took to think about it, were the only two weeks I'd ever seen Jem that well behaved. Not skipping any school, doing all her homework. She kept her room clean, walked the dog every night and even made dinner twice. But they still said no. They said they weren't comfortable having a party where so many underage kids would be drinking without their parents knowing. Jem was furious. She thought they had used her, taken advantage of how much she wanted a party to get her to help around the house. And she wanted payback.

So she got one of the boys who'd been in the year above us at school to buy her a few bottles of vodka, then she told everyone to meet her at the Warrnambool Botanical Gardens for her birthday party. Word spread around the Year 10, 11 and 12s at our school pretty quickly. Then it spread to the other high schools in Warrnambool. By Saturday night, most kids in Warrnambool aged sixteen and up knew about the plan to meet in the gardens, with their own drinks, for a big party.

Jem had organised for some guys she knew in a band to play and she'd mixed the vodka with orange juice and put it into drink bottles for us to share. I told Dad that I was staying at Jem's. I had an 11:00pm curfew and I really didn't want to have to leave the party early.

When we got to the gardens at 9:00pm there were already about fifty people there. By 10:00pm that amount had doubled and on Monday the local paper reported that there were over three hundred youths drinking illegally on City Council property.

Things got out of hand early. The gardens are opposite the school and as soon as it got dark, people went over and started messing around. They bent the rings on the basketball courts, put the outdoor chairs on the roof and even set fire to a small section of the two-meter high hedge fence that surrounded part of the school. That's when the police got called. But I had no idea.

Everyone else heard the sirens when the police cars got to the highway, which was only about three blocks away. They started to panic. Everyone was scrambling to get out, hoping they wouldn't be the ones caught by the cops. I only noticed the chaos when someone stood on me where I was passed out in the trees against the back fence. It turned out Jem had put extra vodka in one of the drink bottles, making it triple strength for her, but then mixed them up. I couldn't tell because to me all alcohol tastes disgusting. It doesn't matter what it is or how strong, it's all gross. So after I'd started to slur my words and lose my balance, Jem decided the safest place to hide me was behind a big tree close to the fence at the back entrance of the gardens, which happened to be right where everyone decided to climb the fence to get away from the cops.

Jem hadn't heard the sirens either, but for a very different reason. Jem and the guy she knew from the band had broken their way into the rotunda and were having some fun of their own. They only found out about the police being on their way when the rest of the band came looking for their friend because he had the keys to the van and they needed to get their gear out of the gardens.

While they were lugging their amps and guitars back to the van, Jem came looking for me in her hiding spot. I was still there, covered in leaves and dirty footprints, but I knew to wait because Jem would come back for me. She might get me incredibly drunk, but she would never leave me behind. Never. She got me out of the gardens by walking me around

the perimeter, staying hidden in-between the fence and the trees that lined it. The police were too busy with the kids passed out in the gardens and those vandalising the school. We jumped in the van with the band, Jem in the front seat, me lying flat on my back between a drum kit and the drummer.

We'd made it out of the gardens, but getting back into Jem's place was hard. If I hadn't been so drunk I'd have just gone home. It was only just after 11:00pm, I would only have just missed curfew. Dad wasn't that strict, five or ten minutes wouldn't matter, but the drinking would. I also didn't realise just how good Jem was at sneaking out and sneaking back in again.

Jem's room was the furthest away from her foster parents, which helped. But her room was next to her sister Melissa, who was eight, and across the hall from her brother Joseph, who was eleven. Luckily they had all worked out an agreement. Melissa and Jacob had both learnt that it was better for them to get what they could out of Jem, instead of ratting her out. Mostly Melissa just wanted to use Jem's makeup, which she didn't have much of anyway and Joseph got in enough trouble at school that he and Jem had made a deal where Jem would sign their foster Mum's signature on the letters the school sent home and Joseph wouldn't do on her. They kept each other's secrets.

Jem got me inside first, pushing me head first through her window, which thankfully had her bed pushed up underneath it. And then she had climbed in herself behind me. And we had done it, barely making a noise. That is until I threw up all over myself and all over Jem's doona cover and sheets. Jem's foster Mum, Barb, woke up when she heard the washing machine start up and saw the light on in the laundry.

'What are you doing in here, Jemima?'

'Nothing. It's fine. Just go back to bed.'

'Jemima, why are you putting on a load of washing when it's nearly one in the morning?'

'Don't call me that, you know I hate it and you're using it because you assume I've done something wrong.'

'Why else would you be doing washing at this hour?'

'I was sick, if you must know. I vomited all over myself and the doona and the sheets. So I'm cleaning it up. I'd have thought you'd be happy about that, mostly because it was probably your shitty cooking that did it to me.'

'Jemima, your language.'

'I tell you I've been sick, in the middle of the night, and that's what you say? You tell me off for saying shitty?'

'It smells like alcohol.'

'It does not. You just want it to so you can tell me off.'

'Where's Lucy? Is she okay, is she feeling sick too?'

'You would show more concern about her, wouldn't you? She's fine, she slept through the whole thing. She's too polite to get sick off your food.'

And so it seemed we had gotten away with it. Jem put my clothes and the bedding in the wash and came back to bed.

In the morning I woke up feeling like my mouth was full of cotton wool and that my head had been repeatedly hit with a sledge hammer. It was 10:00am and Jem was already up, sitting at her desk, drawing.

'Ooh, Lucy! How are you feeling?' I just stared straight back at her. My body was struggling to be alive; it would have to work its way up to talking.

'Things got a bit out of hand last night, didn't they? I would apologise about the drinks thing, but I think things are even now that you spewed all over my bed.' I rolled my eyes and buried my head back in the pillow, which I realised didn't have a case.

'Well, you need to suck it up, because we have to get out there,' she said, leaning her head toward the door. 'I'm pretty sure we got away with it – even with Barb busting me in the laundry washing your spewy clothes at 1:00am. But if we stay in here too long it will look like we had a big night – we were here the whole time though, weren't we?' I just nodded back, feeling my brain thump back and forth in my skull as I did.

'Yeah, that's it. You stay quiet, let me do all the talking.' I was grateful for that, because I still didn't feel like I could talk; listening was taking enough effort. Plus, if we got caught out, Jem was practiced enough to try and talk her way out of it. I, however, would cave and confess everything at the first sight of a disappointed look.

'Okay, so, we'll quickly have breakfast with them and then get out of here. But we can't be too quick. It can't seem shady like we're rushing to get away. But don't linger because we don't want to give them enough time to ask a question that could catch us out. You got it?' Again I just nodded, because it was easier, not because I'd gotten it. I had no idea what we were meant to be doing. How did Jem do this nearly every weekend? The preparation. The cover up. It was exhausting and I wasn't convinced it was worth it. Particularly not with the hangover I had. We went into the kitchen and Jem's foster parents, Barb and Jack, were sitting at the table with cups of coffee and the papers spread out.

'Good morning, you two,' Barb said, sounding a lot more cheerful than she usually did when speaking to Jem. Jack stayed unusually quiet. Normally he took delight in stirring Jem up about whatever he could, which he got away with, because when things turned serious he was usually her only ally.

'Did you girls have a good night?' Barb asked, with a coy grin on her face. I took Jem's advice and stayed silent. This one was up to her.

'It was fine. We just hung out down the street after school. Got a pizza for dinner and went to the movies. We were home by 11:30pm. You were already in bed, so I didn't want to wake you to tell you we were home. We just had something to eat and went to bed.'

'Right, what movie did you see?'

'Um, it was a scary one. *Night of the Walking Dead*, you wouldn't like it. Too scary for you.'

'Oh I don't know, maybe I just need to see more scary movies. What did you think, Lucy?' Barb asked me, but Jem jumped in before I had to answer.

'Lucy is nearly as bad as you. She basically jumped into my lap in the cinema. I think she's still too traumatised to talk about it, aren't you Luce,' she said turning to me, as she opened her eyes wide and gave me the slightest nod. I was confused, did that mean I was meant to reply? I thought she told me to stay quiet.

'See, I told you, she's too spooked to talk about it,' Jem said. I thought it was a good save; I was impressed. I was starting to believe the cover and I *knew* it wasn't true.

'Right, it sounds scary. So what was it about? Where was it set?' Barb asked. Any other time it would've been nice that she was so interested, but did she have to show her first sign of interest in Jem's social life then?

Jem always gave Barb such a hard time and was always so tough on her, but at least she didn't pity me like some of the other mums. She never tried to mother me and didn't get that sad look on her face every time she saw me. I actually liked how disinterested she was. It meant I knew she wasn't treating me any differently to the rest of Jem's friends just because she knew about my mum.

'Obviously it's about zombies. What else do you think the walking dead are? And it's set at night. Get it? *Night of the Walking Dead*?' Jem said sarcastically.

'Okay, so is it set in the future or is it one of those end of the world type movies?'

'God! I guess it's the end of the world. It's set in New York. Why don't you just go and see it yourself?'

'Maybe I will. I just thought it was set in a garden, that's all. Like the public gardens of a small town.'

'No,' Jem said, 'I told you. It's set in New York,' she added, not realising Barb's change in attitude until she had completely fallen for her line of questioning.

'See, I think Teresa from the bakery told me about that movie and she said that it was about a group of underage kids drinking in the Botanical Gardens.' Barb said as she slid a plate of muffins and croissants across the table towards us. Jem and I both looked down at the plate of food, the muffins wrapped in the branded Northpoint Bakery baking paper. Still looking down at the table, I stepped backwards slightly. I had no idea what to do. If Jem

didn't want me to say a word when she thought we'd gotten away with it, then she definitely wouldn't have wanted me to speak then.

'We...' Jem started before Jack cut her off, speaking for the first time.

'Don't, Jem. Don't even try to talk yourself out of this one. You won't. And you wanted us to trust you enough to have a party here. You want us to start treating you like an adult, then you go and act like this?'

'Jack, I...' This time Jem stopped herself. She suddenly looked worse than I did. She tried again, 'I'm...' but this time it was Barb who interrupted her.

'Don't you dare try and suck up to Jack after this one. This is it Jem. We're not stupid, we know that party was all you,' she said, slamming her hand on the table. 'We know you organised it. I think maybe you should be treated like an adult. How about the police treat you like an adult? I should call them and tell them it was you. 'Cos it will be different this time. It won't be like the shoplifting or the vandalism. This will go on your record and stay there. And how's this for wanting to be treated like an adult – now that you're eighteen we don't *have* to have you here anymore. No one does. If we kicked you out we wouldn't be dumping you on some other poor family, you'd be on your own.'

'Barb!' Jack interrupted, 'Jem, she doesn't...'

'No Jack, don't take her side now. She needs to hear this. We don't have to feed her, or clothe her or house her anymore. Our duty is done. We've had twelve years of this and I've had about enough. She's got three months left of school. If she's going to keep going, if the school doesn't kick her out over this, she can stay until then. But after that, she's gone. And Lucy?' Barb continued, and I was nearly sick. I thought they'd all forgotten I was there. I had been doing everything I could to try and will myself out of that room – praying that I could make myself invisible or that a sink hole would open up underneath me and swallow me up. But, not only had Barb known I was still in the room, she'd turned her anger on me.

'I think I'm actually more disappointed in you. You're better than this. You can do better than Jem. It baffles me that you stay friends with her, that you let her bring you down with her. That you go to parties with her and that you look after her when she gets so drunk that she vomits all over herself. I should tell your father, but I won't. And it's not because I feel sorry for you, or because I don't think you should be punished, because I think you will punish yourself enough. I'm not telling your dad because I don't think I can handle his disapproval of me and my parenting skills. And because I'm doing that for you, I want you to do something for me. I want you to think about why you spend time with Jem. I mean really think about it. And ask yourself whether it is really in your best interest, because I think you'll find that it's not.' And then she'd left the kitchen.

I looked over at Jem, but she wouldn't look back at me. I looked at Jack, but he was looking at Jem. I'm sure he'd been thinking the same thing I was, that he'd never seen Jem look so still.

'Jem,' he said softly, 'she doesn't mean it. You know she doesn't really mean it. She's just angry now and disappointed. Give it some time, she'll calm down. She'll change her mind, but you need to just stop. Okay? Stop pushing. Stop playing up. Just stop and give her some space and things will be okay.' Jem still hadn't looked up. I couldn't tell if she was upset or angry. Her face was vacant. She hadn't moved. When I looked at Jem I was no longer sure if it was the hangover that was making me feel sick, or if it was what Barb had said. I could feel the tightness in my chest and my stomach wringing. And I wasn't Jem. I hadn't just basically been told I was on my own.

'Lucy, I think you better go home now. How about you pack your stuff up and I'll drop you home?' I waited a few seconds to see if Jem was going to come with me, but she still didn't move. Jack gave me a small nod, as if to say, go, it's okay. So I went back to Jem's room and packed my bag. My clothes were still in the laundry somewhere, but I just left them. When I got back into the kitchen, Jem was gone. Jack was back at the kitchen table reading the sports section of the paper.

'Ready?' he asked, as he picked up my bag and walked toward the back door.

We both stayed silent in the car for most of the drive. It wasn't until we were nearly at my house that Jack said, 'She took the dog for a walk. I guess she just needed to be on her own. Clear her head, you know? Give her a few days and she'll be back to normal. Barb will be too. It's just because they are both so similar. They're the same really. Both hard. Both stubborn. Both so independent. If only they could both see it. If they could just talk to each other, Jem would see that Barb went through a lot of the same things as a kid. That she was shifted from one home to the next. Why do you think she never wanted kids of her own? Why she insisted on us getting in to foster care instead? It's the only reason she hasn't kicked Jem out already. She can't bring herself to do it after so many families did it to her. No one really cared about her. And that's what Jem thinks too. That no one cares about her. But we do. I do and Barb does too, she just never really learnt how to show it because no one showed her.'

He finished talking as he pulled into our driveway. I thanked him for the lift and got out of the car. I didn't know what else to say. I didn't know that there was anything I could say. At least nothing that would have made the situation any better. I was furious at Barb, I couldn't believe she would speak to Jem like that. I knew they fought, I'd seen them before, but it was never anything like that. Barb would be angry because another teacher had rung the house or because Jem had taken money from her wallet. She'd yell and then punish Jem. She had never been like this before, so finished, so done. And now Jack was trying to

get me to feel sorry for her. Yeah right, poor Barb. But it's no excuse, doesn't it just mean she should know better? She's the adult. Plus, Jack talking about Jem like that made me feel uncomfortable, like I was betraying her by listening.

I spent the rest of the weekend at home trying to avoid Dad in case he said anything, but he never did. I messaged Jem and tried to call her a few times, but she didn't reply. At school on Monday, I sat with her at recess but she didn't say anything. I didn't know if things with Barb had gotten better or worse over the weekend. She didn't ask about Dad, if he had said anything or asked me any questions. She only talked about the party if someone else brought it up first and didn't bring my clothes back. Jem wasn't herself for the rest of the school year. She spent more and more time at the beach drawing. She never missed curfew again, but for those last three months she would get home every night with a minute to spare and go straight to her room. She took every shift she could get at the café, after school, weekends, even during the lead up to exams. I had to keep going in to get tea so that I could see her. Then the day after our graduation, she told me she was moving to Melbourne the next week.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Once my classes finish on my birthday I catch the train out to Jodie's. When she opens the front door, I'm speechless. There's bunting strung across the entryway, reading 'Happy 18th Birthday Lucy'. The dining room table is set, as if for a dinner party, with a beautiful bunch of white peonies in the middle, folded napkins at each setting and candles peppered around. There are even clusters of balloons in each corner. No one has ever put this much effort into my birthday before, or for anything really. Dad has been recycling the same pink and white-striped candles and red party hats for my birthday since I was about eleven. Jodie can tell I'm overwhelmed, so instead of waiting for me to actually respond she just puts her arms around me and whispers into my ear, 'Happy birthday, Lucy'. It's what I haven't realised I've been waiting for all day.

She takes me into the kitchen, where she has a platter of cheese and dips laid out beside two champagne glasses.

'Bruce and the boys won't be back from basketball for about another hour. So, I thought we would have our own little girls-only celebration before they get back,' she says, taking a bottle of expensive-looking champagne out of the fridge. 'I can share a glass of this with you now without feeling like David would tell me off. This is what Beth and I used to drink on special occasions. While she was pregnant, she often said how on the night she stopped breast feeding we would have a glass together.' Jodie stops talking as she pops the cork, fills both our glasses and hands one to me. She raises her glass towards mine and says, 'Happy eighteenth birthday, Lucy. You are a beautiful, intelligent, strong young woman and you should be proud of yourself, just like your mum would be,' and she clinks my glass. I watch her take a sip and close her eyes to swallow, savouring not just the taste but also the memories it brings. I take a small sip and while it's easier to swallow than any alcohol I've had before, I know a liking for champagne is one trait I don't share with my mum.

'I have something I want to give you,' Jodie says once she's come back to the present. 'I've been putting it together ever since we first met in that cafe.'

'You didn't have to get me anything. This is more than enough,' I say, glancing over towards the dining room.

'Well, it's not really a birthday present as such, it's just a few things I thought you might like and today seemed like the perfect day to pass them on to you.' She goes and retrieves a black box from the hall table and sits it down in front of me. It's a bit larger than a shoebox and is tied with a black satin bow.

'There are a few mementos in here, from Beth, that I've kept over the years and I think that, really, they should belong to you now. They're photos from Prince Henry's and your mum and dad's wedding. There are a few letters and postcards that she sent me at different

times and some other things, like the Black Forest Cake recipe I told you about. I actually made it for dessert tonight. It won't be as good as Beth used to make it, but I tried. Who knows, maybe you'll make it even better than her one day.' I stroke the bow, considering what lies inside.

'Don't open it now though,' she says, placing her hand over mine. 'Take it home with you and open it when you're ready go through it all. Savour it. Take your time. Make the recipes and ask me any questions you might have. Hopefully it will help you fill in some of those gaps,' she says, sliding the box closer to me across the bench.

'Jodie, I can't take all of these They're yours. I can't keep them,' I say, still stroking the ribbon, knowing how much I want to get lost amongst what's inside the box, but also knowing how much it must all mean to Jodie.

'Yes, you can,' she says, 'I've kept copies of what I need, but I wasn't even sure why I had held on to some of it. Every time I moved I would go through it thinking I should throw it out, but I could never bring myself to do it. So it's moved with me from house to house. But then when I met you, I came straight home and got what I had out of storage in the study. I want you to have it all. And Beth would have wanted that, too.'

'Thank you Jodie, it's the perfect birthday present,' I say. And it is. All I want to do is go home, hide in my room and open it. There, sitting right in front of me, is a box that could hold all the answers. It's like every wish I've ever made blowing out my birthday candles on this day for nearly eighteen years has come true.

Jodie leans across the bench and places her hand on top of mine, breaking me out of my daydream. 'I hope you like roast lamb and veggies. It's the boys' favourite and a bit of a birthday tradition around here. Roast lamb and all the trimmings. Baked potatoes, honeyed carrots, cauliflower in white sauce, tomato and onion pie and homemade mint sauce.'

'That sounds perfect,' I say. It was nice to be taking part in a family tradition, even if it wasn't my own.

When Bruce and the boys get home from basketball, we all sit down around the dining room table in front of the feast that Jodie has prepared, and pass the food around the table as we fill our plates. In between mouthfuls, I laugh as I listen to stories of how the boys celebrated their birthdays over the years. Of when Bruce pushed Liam's face into his cake when he was about to blow out the candles at his fifth birthday party. How Jake's been terrified of pelicans ever since his third birthday when a pelican at the Adelaide Zoo took a piece of fish straight out of his hand. Or when they all went to Port Macquarie for Bruce's fortieth birthday and they accidentally went to a nudist beach. They talk over each other in a frenzy, correcting one another when they mix up the finer details, prompting the next story with a 'don't forget about' or a 'remember when' and bursting out with laughter before they have even gotten to

the end of the story. Dad always did his best at birthdays and they were always fun, but once my friends went home it was just the two of us. So this is nice, I get so caught up in the excitement of their stories and the way they interact with each other that I start to feel like I'm a part of it, only occasionally remembering that the reason I'm there, at their dining room table, is because I don't really have a family of my own.

Once we've finished dinner and the table has been cleared, Jodie dims the lights and brings out the cake topped with eighteen candles. They all sing Happy Birthday and the boys try to sneak a few sips of champagne while Jodie is serving. The cake is delicious, I can't see how my mum could have made it any better, but I do like to imagine her in the kitchen separating the eggs for the sponge, whipping the cream for the centre and decorating the top with chocolate covered cherries. Did she sneak a few extra tastes of the mixture? Was she impatient, checking the oven before it was ready? It's also nice to think that even if things had turned out differently, the way they should have, that I'd probably still have been eating this cake on my eighteenth birthday.

At 9:00pm Jodie offers to drive me to Jem's, she says it's late and it's dark, but I'd prefer to catch the train. To just sit with the box, like it's an extension of my mum. Just her and me together on the train, on my birthday. I cradle the box on my lap while Jodie drives me to the station. On the train, I don't open it, even though I'm dying to. I can't though, because I know as soon as I do I won't be able to draw myself away from what's inside and Jem won't be happy if I miss the stop.

I can't wait to tell her about it, she'll be so excited for me, excited that I'll finally get to know what my mum was like. Besides, I want Jem to be there with me tomorrow when I do open it.

During dinner, Jem sent me six text messages, checking to see if dinner was finished or whether I had left yet. Once I get on the train I write back to tell her I'm on my way, but I don't hear back from her. Maybe she's given up on me. Maybe she, Sean and Claire are having too much fun at my birthday drinks without me. I get off the train at Flinders Street station and walk to Bourke Street to catch the tram. Each time I'm in the city I still can't believe this is where I live, that this is all here, within walking distance. I'm really looking forward to the four of us coming back in to have a few drinks tonight.

When I get off the tram at the Nicholson/Miller Street stop, it's quarter to ten. Groups of people are standing on corners, inching closer towards oncoming traffic, trying to get taxis to stop and pick them up. A few teenagers are drinking in the park on the corner; two of them are kissing behind the swing set. The music of a few parties flows out from the balconies of the multi-level apartment blocks facing the street. I walk down Miller Street, away from the

traffic, towards Merri Creek and Jem's. Usually things get quieter the closer I get to the creek.

Jem and I like going for a walk on the path that bends with the water, or sit there, me studying, Jem drawing, because down there you can almost forget you're in Melbourne. In a quiet spot, away from the rumble of tyres on the road, the ding of trams and the wailing of sirens, we could relax, listening to the flow of the water and birds hopping in the crunch of dead, discarded leaves.

But this time the sounds of the city are being drowned out, not by distance, but by the heavy thud of bass, the indistinct shouting of a party anthem and voices raised to be heard above it all. I think someone in one of the units next to Jem's must be having a party, and I'm certain of this when I get to the driveway that connects all the units and there's an empty slab box with the words 'Party Inside' written on it with texta.

The music is so loud I think it must be coming from the front unit that faces out on to the street, but as I walk past the mailboxes at the entrance, towards Jem's unit, it just keeps getting louder and louder.

As I walk down the driveway towards Jem's and the other units at the back, I can see people standing in the driveway and sitting on the grass near Jem's. It must be one of her neighbours having the party. I only know John that lives next door, but he's a retired school teacher, who seems unlikely to be having a party with this kind of music on a Friday night. But Jem must have some younger neighbours I haven't met yet. Then I spot Sean standing on the grass with a beer in his hand. They must have decided to gate crash the other party. Then I realise that all the people are coming and going from Jem's. That all the lights are on in her unit and that her speakers are sitting on the window ledge of her lounge room, facing out into the driveway, playing the thumping music I've been hearing for blocks.

'What's going on?' I ask Sean as I get to him in the crowd.

'Oh, hey Luce! You're here. Claire said you weren't here yet.'

'Yeah I'm here. But what's going on?' I ask. 'Who are all these people?'

'I don't know, I just got here. I guess they're all Jem's friends, I don't know any of them.'

'Then why are they here?' I ask.

'They're here for the party, I would have thought,' he says sarcastically. 'But it's your party, so does that mean they're here for you?' he continues, giving me a nudge on the shoulder. He turns back to the people he was talking to before I interrupted. I decide to try and find Jem instead; she can explain what's happening. I turn down the path towards the front door and find Claire standing in the doorway yelling at a guy who has a bottle of tomato sauce in his hands. She's trying to take it off him using one hand because she's holding a garden gnome in the other.

It's such a funny sight. There's Claire, standing on the front step and she's still two foot shorter than the guy with the sauce. She's wearing a high waisted skirt, her leather jacket and ballet flats, trying to fight off a giant. She's starting to wave her finger at him; it's the same way I've seen her tell off Sean when he tries to sneak his dirty clothes into her washing basket. Right now, it's easy to tell that she's a few years older than me. When she's like this she feels like my older sister; other times it's like she's eighteen too and we've been friends all our lives.

'Just give it to me,' she yells at him. 'Stop being such a dickhead!' He's clearly not expecting Claire to get so mad, because it startles him, giving Claire just enough time to grab the bottle out of his hand and give him a shove out the door. He nearly knocks me over, which is when Claire notices that I've been standing there watching her fight with him.

'Lucy, thank god you're here!' She sighs and hugs me. I smell tomato sauce and pull away from her looking at the bottle and then trying to look at the back of my jacket where she hugged me.

'Oh, it's okay, it's closed,' she says.

'But I can smell sauce,' I say, confused. Claire doesn't say anything, just points to the security door. Jem's rusty security door is now covered in tomato sauce, like someone has been shot while standing in front of it.

'What hap—'

'Don't ask,' Claire says, cutting me off as she throws her hands up in the air, still holding the tomato sauce bottle in one hand and a gnome dressed in overalls and a flannelette shirt from one of the neighbour's gardens in the other. I point to the gnome.

'Oh, this,' she says, rolling her eyes. 'Some idiot thought it would be fun to start kicking them over. I jumped in and saved this one after they had kicked it over, just before they could jump on it to smash its head.'

'What is happening here?' I ask.

'I don't know; things just got out of control, so quickly.'

'Do you know any of these people? Sean said they're all Jem's friends.'

'Sean? Is Sean here?'

'Yeah, I just passed him on the way in.'

'I've been waiting for him to get here so he can help me. They've been lighting Sambuca on fire on the kitchen bench – it's leaving black stains all over the bench tops. Stay here, I'm going to go find him. Don't let anyone else in the house.' Before I get a chance to ask her about Jem, she's gone. It's the first time I've been able to take the whole mess in. There must be forty or fifty people here. There are only about fifteen left in the house, all crammed into Jem's tiny kitchen. The rest, who Claire must have already kicked out, are on

the grass outside, sitting on the mismatched chairs from the kitchen table and scattering empty beer bottles everywhere. Claire comes back with Sean.

'You should have called me earlier, Claire. You can't handle all of these drunks on your own.'

'I called you when they got here,' she says, 'but they basically all turned up together, two big groups, about five minutes apart and only because they couldn't all fit on the same tram.'

'What do you mean handling them all on your own?' I ask. 'Where's Jem?'

'Yeah right, Jem.' Claire scoffs. 'She's in her room with Dan.'

'Dan?' I ask. 'I didn't think they were together anymore.'

'They're not, but when she rings him every other weekend to score, he sometimes ends up staying the night. Sorry, I didn't say anything to you because I thought you knew.'

'So are these Dan's friends then?' I ask.

'No, they're Jem's. Or some of them are and then they brought along their own friends. Jem told all the guys at the café just to bring whoever they wanted. So they closed the café, had a few drinks in Fitzroy first and then all came out together.' As Claire says this, two guys on the grass start wrestling each other and as they tip backwards on the kitchen chairs, one of the legs snaps off in the grass.

'Screw this,' I say, 'I'm getting her. She invited them, she can get rid of them.' And I walk straight through the house, past the lit-up shot glasses in the kitchen, past Trav and Mel's room where there are two people having sex on their bed and past Shelly's room which is hazy from all the bong smoke, all the way down the hall to Jem's room. 'Jem,' I shout, banging on the door with my open hand. She doesn't answer. 'I'm coming in,' I shout in warning after thumping the door a few more times. I barge in and there's Dan, sitting at Jem's desk playing Grand Theft Auto on her computer. Jem's lying on her bed.

'Fuck Luce, you scared the shit outta me,' Dan says, taking off his headphones.

'Jem,' I yell again, ignoring him.

'Oh, you might have to shake her a little Luce, she's out of it,' he says, laughing and putting his headphones back on.

'Jem,' I yell again, shaking her by the shoulders. She's passed out, lying on her back, palms facing up. It takes a few times, but eventually she starts to stir. Groggily she opens her eyes, focuses them on me and smiles.

'Oh Lucy,' she says, lifting her arms up to hug me. 'I love you, Lucy. I hope you like your party.'

'Party? This isn't a party. It's a mess. You need to get up and deal with what's going on out there,' I say, but before I've finished, Jem is unconscious again. I turn around and Claire is waiting at the door.

'What do we do?' she asks.

'We should just go home,' I say. 'I told her I didn't want a party and look how that turned out.'

'Lucy, we can't just go home. They'll trash the place.'

'I know. I said that's what we *should* do. But we can't leave Jem,' I say, thinking back to Jem's eighteenth. 'Let's get everyone out of here.'

'I've been trying for the past hour! But now you and Sean are here it should be easier. I'll get Sean started on everyone outside. Do you need to do anything here?' she asks. I turn back to Jem, she hasn't moved at all and Dan's back lost in the game.

'Hey Luce, you should order us a pizza, Jem's gonna be hungry when she comes outta this,' he yells over his headphones. I slam the door shut behind me. Claire and Sean are outside trying to get people to leave – Claire's giving them their drinks back from out of the fridge and Sean's outside pulling the rest of the kitchen chairs out from underneath them. I'm starting to get pissed off, so I happily take it out on the people in the kitchen, trying to get rid of them. I go into the bathroom and fill the glass Jem uses to keep her toothbrush in with water, then I go back into the kitchen and pour the contents onto the burning spill of Sambuca that is spread along the bench, dropping the plastic glass into the sink when it's empty.

'Oi!' one of them yells.

'What did you do that for?' says another. Someone else just calls me a bitch. I don't wait around to answer them, instead I walk into the lounge room and unplug the stereo, taking the two speakers off the windowsill and shutting the windows. Now the people outside are yelling at me.

'Turn it back on.'

'Fucking party pooper.'

'Who invited her?' No, I think, who the fuck invited you?

For the next hour, Claire, Sean and I fight to get everyone to leave. And I'm furious. While I'm distracted the music gets turned back on, twice. Someone comes with another bottle of vodka and the neighbours also get tomato sauce sprayed all over their front doors. We're lucky it's only about 11:30pm by the time we get everyone out; otherwise I'm sure they would be out here complaining about the noise. We hose down the doors so they can't complain about that tomorrow.

We spend another half hour cleaning up. The driveway and the garden beds are covered in empty bottles, most of Jem's furniture has been moved outside and then there's the kitchen bench. Claire gets garbage bags, Sean starts moving the furniture back inside and I get the Spray 'n' Wipe and a roll of paper towel. The whole time, Dan stays in Jem's room on the computer and Jem's still passed out.

When we're done Sean calls a taxi.

'You're coming home, aren't you Luce?' Claire asks from the door, her bag over her shoulder. I want go home. I'm furious with Jem. She didn't listen to me at all. This is exactly what I didn't want. And it's like she didn't care at all. But I have to do the right thing.

'I can't, I have to stay with Jem. Make sure she's okay.'

'Do you?' Claire asks.

'I should be here when she wakes up, so I can tell her what happened.'

'Lucy, I think she'll know what happened. She might not know the details, but it'll be pretty familiar.' I don't know what to say. I still feel like I have to stay with Jem. Sean comes back to the unit from taking the last load of rubbish to the bin.

'Alright, let's go. The taxi should be out the front by now,' he says.

'Lucy thinks she should stay,' Claire tells him.

'Why?' he asks, turning away from Claire to look at me.

'Just to make sure Jem's okay,' I say.

'Why wouldn't she be?'

'Well, she's taken something and she's passed out.'

'And,' he says, 'so what's new? She does it every other weekend without you being there to look after her. It's no different now. Leave her with Dan.'

'Sean!' Claire hisses under her breath, giving Sean a look from under her brow.

'Come on Luce, come home. You can come back first thing in the morning. I'll drive you.' Claire says, and this time I listen, because she's right. They both are. And I don't want to spend the night here with Dan, so I agree to go home. I'm about to shut Jem's door behind me on my way out when I remember the box Jodie gave me. I go back to get it out of the laundry cupboard where I hid it earlier. I can't believe Jem made me forget about it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the morning, I wake up mad. Mad at myself. Mad that I wasn't angrier last night. Mad for kicking everyone out. Mad for cleaning up. Mad at Jem. Furious at Jem. Why couldn't she have just done what I asked? Why did I think she would listen to me? Because she's my friend? Because it was my birthday? Why did I let her talk me into leaving Jodie's? Where I was having fun. Where I was actually enjoying my birthday. Why didn't I just do what I wanted to do? She'd managed to ruin the rest of my night, while taking no part in it. It went from being one of the best birthdays of my life, with Jodie giving me the second best gift I could ever have asked for, to... I felt like I was Mary Lennox and I had just been given the key to *The Secret Garden*. To me fighting with drunks and cleaning up their mess, while my best friend, who'd thrown me a party I didn't want in the first place, was passed out.

I wish I'd just gone home. That I'd left it all for her to clean up. Because what's making me really angry is that Jem will probably wake up this morning with no memory of what happened. She won't know what Sean, Claire and I did for her and she certainly won't know that she ruined my birthday. She'll get away with it because I won't say anything and that makes me the angriest of all.

Claire knocks on my door and slowly opens it. She knows I'm awake because everyone in our apartment complex would be able to hear me taking my anger out on my furniture as I clean my room, slamming drawers, dropping books on my desk and throwing shoes into the back of the wardrobe.

'Everything okay in here?' she asks, popping her head around the doorframe, shielding herself in case I decide to throw something at her.

'Fine, just cleaning up,' I say, as I start chucking dirty clothes into the corner.

'How are you this morning?' she asks.

'Pissed,' I say.

'Thank God,' she sighs.

'What?' I ask, confused.

'Well, you were so calm last night, about everything, that Sean and I were starting to think you were a saint. That you were just too nice. That or a psychopath,' she laughs. 'Either way, we were starting to think that we had made a terrible decision letting you move in.'

'Ha, no. Nothing like that. Perspective I guess. It all got to me the more I thought about it this morning.'

'So you are normal, just like the rest of us. We were starting to wonder.'

'Of course I am. But you've seen me get mad before – with my dad.'

'You were hardly mad then. Plus, there wasn't really anything to be mad about.'

'I probably did overreact about Dad,' I admit, 'but I guess it means I'm just like everyone else. Getting frustrated at your own family for no reason.'

'Well you have every reason to be angry about last night,' she says.

'Yeah, but the more I think about it, I'm not that surprised. It's just Jem being Jem really.'

'There you go again being too nice. That's not an excuse. Sometimes I'm not sure she deserves a friend like you.'

'How can you say that, Claire? She's your friend too,' I say.

'She is,' she says, dropping her head, 'but we aren't as close as the two of you are. We never have been. And we've never spent as much time together as you two have. I learnt early on that it was best not to,' she says.

'I know that she can be unreliable and that she's a bit selfish, but she's my best friend. And mostly she's a great one. She's usually there for me and she understands me. She's just been through a lot.' I say, thinking back to that morning after Jem's birthday.

'But you've been through a lot too Lucy, and you're still always there for her, even when you shouldn't be, like last night. And it's not like she has a good reason not to be there for you,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'Well last night, it was your birthday and she couldn't even wait until you got there before she went and got high.'

'She... she doesn't usually do that stuff when I'm around,' I say.

'And that makes it okay? What? Because she didn't do it around you, because she did it before you got there?'

'Well, no. That's not... I mean, I've been thinking about what Sean said. She knows how I feel about drugs so her and I... we don't usually talk about it. It's not like it's that big an issue.'

'You really don't know, do you, Lucy?'

'Know what?' I ask.

'How bad it is.'

'No, it's not that bad. Jem said, she said she only takes stuff at festivals and at some gigs. Only a couple of times a year.'

'Oh, Luce, it's more than a few times a year. Since she moved to Melbourne, it's more like a few times a week.'

'Well, maybe, but she says it's only if she's with other people who are doing it. She doesn't buy anything herself.'

'Maybe. But then she chooses who she hangs out with because of it.'

'No. No I don't think so,' I say.

'Why do you think she's still spending so much time with Dan? It's not because he treats her so well,' she scoffs.

'But she said she's not with Dan anymore. At the tattoo place she was all over Zeb. She said she likes him now.'

'So why was Dan there last night?' she asks.

'I don't know, why were the rest of them there? It seems like she invited anyone she could.'

'Yeah maybe. But from the sounds of it Zeb doesn't seem like he'd be much better for her either.'

'Oh, I don't know. I've only met him a couple of times, but he seemed nice. They looked like they have fun together.'

'They didn't look like they were good for each other at the Forum the other night.'

'What do you mean? When was this?'

'I don't know, a couple of weeks ago. You were out at Jodie's. We were all at a gig, but Jem and Zeb spent most of the night in the back fighting.'

'About what?'

'Well Jem wouldn't tell me, but Sean said she was holding some pills for Zeb in her bag, that he was meant to be selling to people and when he went to get them back off her there were a few missing. Zeb was pissed. Jem said that's how many he'd given her to start with. I don't know, but anyway Jem wrote herself off after that so who knows?'

'But, it just doesn't sound like Jem.'

'Maybe not to you, but how many times have you been out with Jem since you moved up here?'

'I haven't really. We've only just had drinks at bars together, or that time the four of us went out on Chapel Street.'

'Yeah, well maybe that's why it doesn't sound like her. You said yourself she wouldn't do it around you, that she knows you don't like it.' I don't know what to think. She picks one of my textbooks up off the desk.

'Look, Lucy, don't get me wrong, I love Jem. She's my friend too. But I just want you to know what's going on. You're too nice and I think you're too good to her. So just be careful, will you?'

I don't know what to say, it's like Jem has this whole other life outside of our friendship. Is she really hiding that much from me?

Claire puts the book back on my desk. She knows she's right, that I really have no idea about Jem.

She's about to leave my room when she notices the box sitting on my desk next to the pile of books.

'Hey, what's with the box, Lucy? I saw you with it last night, but didn't get a chance to ask.'

'It's a present from Jodie. She put together a few things that she kept about my mum from over the years.'

'Lucy! Wow!' she says, her eyes opening wide. 'That's fantastic. What a perfect present. So what's inside?'

'Oh... I haven't opened it yet.'

'What! Why not?'

'Well... Jodie told me not to. She said to take it home and open it when I had the time to go through it all properly. But then last night happened and this morning, I was too mad. I didn't want to open it like that.'

'That makes sense. But it must be hard for you, that's basically all you've ever wanted right there tied up with a pretty bow.' I sigh, because she's right.

Last night on the train all I could think about was opening it and what would be inside. But each time I thought about it, Jem was there with me. It was always her and me, in my room, sitting on the floor, the box's content spread out around us.

'Are you going to open it today?' Claire asks.

'I'm not sure, I want to make sure I'm ready.'

'Ready? It sounds like you've been ready to open it your whole life.'

'Yeah, you're probably right. I guess I just thought there would be someone there with me when I finally got to learn about my mum.'

'Of course, your dad,' she says. But no, I hadn't thought about Dad at all. This had nothing to do with him. If he had just told me about my mum from the start I wouldn't need a box to get to know her.

'No,' I tell her, 'not my dad.'

'Jem,' she says, slowly, realising why I haven't opened it yet. 'Does she know you have it?' she asks.

'No. It's not like I got the chance to tell her about it last night. I didn't really think it was worth mentioning while she was coming in and out of consciousness.'

'So call her now. Surely she'd be here straight away to open it with you if she knew. She wouldn't want you to have to wait any longer to open it because of her.'

'You're right,' I say, and I tell Claire that I'll ring Jem and tell her straight after I've had a shower.

But I don't. All weekend I keep coming back to the box. When I go to get some books off my desk. When I'm feeling sorry for myself and decide to bake something bad for me. When

Sean and Claire both go out Saturday night and I stay home, alone. With nearly everything I do I feel the box pulling me back into my room. Drawing me to my desk.

I wanted to wait for Jem; I wanted her to be there with me when I opened it. I'm still too mad at her to tell her about it. Maybe Claire's right, maybe I've gone too easy on her in the past.

So by Sunday night I've given up on her. Given up on her calling. Given up on her apologising. Why should I wait for her? She ruined my birthday and she hasn't even rung me to see how I am. If Jem can apologise to me first, for basically ruining my birthday, then maybe I'll tell her about it.

Once Sean and Claire go to bed on Sunday night, I get the box off my desk and take it into the lounge room. I sit cross-legged on the floor and place the box in front of me. I think I'm ready to find out what's inside, but I can't seem to bring myself to even undo the bow. There's still something stopping me. For now, I take the box back to my room and slide it under my bed, out of sight.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next day, when I leave home to go to work, the apartment is already empty. Claire has left for uni and Sean must have gone for a ride because his bike isn't hanging from its usual spot by the front door.

Outside the breeze is still cool, but I can feel the heat of the sun on my back as I walk into the CBD. Spring is slowly edging out winter and already the streets and footpaths seem busier. The cafes along the Yarra at Southbank are starting to fill up and the buskers in Federation Square are starting to draw large crowds again, as people make the most of the sunny days knowing that, being Melbourne, they aren't guaranteed to last long.

I only have a few hours left of my shift when Jem comes in to see me in the afternoon.

'Hey you,' she says, trying to come behind the counter and hang out with me in layby like we used to do back home.

'Hey,' I say back, as I move to block the entrance.

Jem notices and says, 'Oh, I thought we could hang out. I had the urge to play with some bubble wrap.'

'Sorry Jem, you can't. Not here. This store's not quite like the Warrnambool one. We get more customers in than mums with their kids in their pyjamas and teenagers stealing lip gloss.'

'Oh, you're no fun. No one will know.'

'I can't. I'm in charge of layby and I have heaps I have to get done.'

'Fine,' she says, rolling her eyes at me. 'What time do you finish?'

'4:30pm,' I say.

'Okay, let's get a coffee when you're done. I'll meet you at Degraives,' she says, leaving without even giving me the chance to say yes or no.

From work on Bourke Street, I turn onto Swanston Street, cross into Flinders Lane and zig-zag through pedestrians down to the entrance of Degraives Street, dodging the tourists who have stopped to take photos of Melbourne's narrow icon. As I get closer to Degraives, the smell of coffee takes over all my senses. I stop hearing the cars tooting at the pedestrians who cross Flinders Lane without checking for traffic. I don't hear the man on the corner spruiking the latest edition of the *Big Issue*. For a moment I even stop feeling the ache in my legs from my eight hour shift.

I spot Jem at a table outside on the street. She hasn't spotted me yet because she's got her head down, drawing, her hand moving back and forth shading a large area. When I get closer to the table I can see the image in her sketchbook; it's different to the others I'm used to her drawing. Her pages are usually full of commanding female characters, drawn with strong, hard lines, their legs braced wide for the fight. But this girl is fragile,

elfin, her hair and flowing dress drawn with delicate, gentle pencil strokes. She lies on her back in a field of grass, each blade delicate and inviting. Jem must feel me looking over her shoulder because she stands to give me a kiss like nothing's happened.

'Hey Luce, how was the rest of your shift?'

'Same as always, really. I can't believe how busy it is here for a Monday afternoon.'

'Tell me about it, I had to stalk a couple for their table. Hanging around like a creep while I waited for them to finish eating and pay the bill.'

'You're such a weirdo,' I reply, forcing a smile.

'I'm so hungry. I saw the waiter bring out the smashed avocado on toast before, it looked so good! You better pick something quick, I'm ready to order.'

'Oh, okay, sure. So how was the rest of your weekend?'

'It was okay. I don't remember much of it. I went to a party on Saturday night. I think I got home and pretty much passed out. I woke up with a half-eaten piece of Vegemite on toast lying next to me.'

'Oh Jem,' I say, shaking my head, 'who was there?'

'No one you really know. Joe who used to work at the café and a few of his friends who I met the other weekend when I went to that gig.'

'Okay. Where was it?'

'In Northcote somewhere, some little street off High Street. I don't really remember. So did you like my little surprise party? I got you, didn't I?'

'Yep, you got me alright,' I say.

'I went to work this morning to check the roster and the guys were telling me that it was awesome, well, until Claire got there and started kicking everyone out. What's with her anyway? She used to be fun.'

'It was pretty messy Jem.'

'Yeah I know! The guys said it was pretty crazy. You're welcome, by the way. I bet it was better than the dinner you went to first.'

'The dinner was actually really good,' I say. I want to tell her it was the best part of my birthday, but it isn't worth it. So instead I say, 'Jodie made a lot of fuss.'

'What did she do? Get party hats and make you play pass the parcel?'

'Jem! It was really nice. She cooked a beautiful meal and we had champagne and she made me a birthday cake.' A cake my mum used to make, I want to say. 'I actually had fun. They're like family.'

'Well, it's not my idea of fun. And you already have a family.'

I'm surprised by how rude she's being. How dismissive.

'I know I have a family. But I like spending time with Jodie.'

'Well not that you've even asked me, but I think you're spending a lot of time with Jodie.'

She almost spits her name out when she says it and I realise there's anger behind her words.

'What do you mean – "not that I've asked you?" Am I meant to ask for your permission?'
'No, not my permission, but if it was me I'd have at least asked what you thought.'

I instantly feel awful. She's my best friend and I haven't once asked her advice or her opinion about it all. It hasn't even occurred to me that I should. I thought she understood that I need to find out about my mum. I thought she understood how important it is to me.

'Jem, I'm sorry I haven't talked to you about it much. I guess I've gotten carried away with it all. It's been so surreal. I think, maybe, I never actually thought it would ever happen. That I'd never really get to find out who my mum was or if I'm like her at all. Maybe next time I see Jodie you could come with me?' I ask, trying to make things better.

'I don't think so,' she says without a thought.

'Jem, it would mean a lot to me,' I say, trying again.

'No it wouldn't', she says dismissively, 'you don't care if I'm there, you've got your new mum now.'

I don't know how to reply. I stammer for a second but nothing resembling a word actually comes out. My pulse is pounding in my neck, my chest is tight and my hands are gripping the chair. My head is racing with thoughts and responses and I don't know where to start.

'My new mum?' I spit back at her. 'How could you even say that to me Jem?'

'What? Well it's true, isn't it? It's like you've found your replacement mummy and now you don't need any of the rest of us,' she says as she dumps her coffee cup back on its saucer, the mug clattering back and forth from the force. My head clears as anger takes over.

'You don't know what you're talking about Jem.' I throw my teaspoon back down on the table.

'No, I probably don't, but whose fault is that? You do realise you didn't deny it though?'

'I don't have to deny it, it's ridiculous.' I push my chair back from the table, trying to distance myself from her. 'And maybe I would have talked to you about it more if you'd actually seemed like you cared.'

'It's a bit hard to ask you about it when every time you talk about it you go into some weird kind of trance,' she says, rolling her head around. 'Like you're off in some fairy-tale land where you get dressed by cutesy woodland creatures and you talk to the furniture,' she mocks.

'I didn't... I was...' my anger has subsided and now I'm just hurt. How can she be teasing me about this? How can she be so dismissive? So insensitive? I thought she understood. 'Meeting Jodie has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me,' I say, looking down into my cup of tea. 'Finally getting to find out about my mum, to get to

know who she was. It's...' The words block my throat. I realise I haven't told anyone how much it's meant to me. How happy it's made me. How grateful I am. How much fuller it's

made me feel. And now I'm about to tell Jem after everything she's just said. I hesitate, I don't know if I want to tell her. Not if she is going to dismiss it too. Not if she's going to spit something back at me afterwards. But she's my best friend and I want to be able to share it with her. I want her to be a part of it.

'Jem, this year, all I've learnt, it's been everything. Everything I've wanted my whole life. Everything I've wished for. Everything. And I'd like you to be a part of it.'

'I don't get it,' she sighs.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'I don't understand why it matters so much. I don't get it.'

I draw further back from the table, further away from her. 'How can you not understand? You know how important finding out about my mum has always been to me. Don't you?'

'I know you've always wanted to know more about her. I know that. But I don't get it. Why does it matter so much?'

It's Jem, how can she not understand?

'Are you really... do you really not understand?' Suddenly I'm glad that I haven't told her about the box. 'But I thought you... I thought you of all people would understand. Not just because you're my friend, but because you don't really know your parents either.'

'That's why I don't get it.'

'What do you mean?' I ask, even more confused.

'It's because I don't really know my parents that I don't get it. You're right, I don't really know them. But I don't want to. I don't need to. I don't get why you care so much. I don't get why it matters how much you know about her or not.'

'You don't know why I care? Or why it matters?' I repeat, shocked.

'No. I don't.'

'I care because she was my mum. It matters because she was my mum. She's part of me. A huge part. I'm here today because of her. She made me. She carried me. She gave birth to me. I am who I am because of her.'

'But are you?' Jem asks.

'What? I don't understand what you mean.'

'I mean, are you who you are today because of her? Am I who I am today because of my parents? They didn't raise us. They didn't teach us anything. We didn't learn by watching them. We are who we are because of us. We did this ourselves. She just gave birth to you.'

'Just gave birth to me?' I shake my head.

'Yeah. She hasn't been here for your life, so how much of an impact has she really had on you? Is she really that important?'

'It's not like she had a choice Jem. She died. It's not like she chose not to be there. Not like your parents.' The words come out of my mouth faster than my brain can process them.

She just glares at me. It's a look I've never seen before and I know I've gone too far.

'Oh Jem, I'm so sorry. I didn't, I just...'

'No, don't apologise. You meant it and you know what, sure, you're right. My parents had a choice. Drugs or me. They chose drugs. And it's because of that, that I don't care about them. That they don't matter to me. That they don't get to have any control over me. Because they gave up that right. That's why I don't go looking for them or even think about them.'

'But don't you wonder, Jem? Don't you wonder how you're like them? If you look like them? If you take after them in any way?'

'Well I wouldn't have to do much wondering, would I Luce? Hey? Like what? Oh, your mum used to party pretty hard too, she had a real taste for it. Like mother like daughter.'

'Jem, that's not what I meant. I'm sure they both had good qualities, too. What about your drawing? What if one of them was an artist? That would be cool.'

'No, I don't think so Luce. I think the less I'm like them the better.'

'I think they'd be proud of you,' I say.

'Who knows, maybe. But it's not like I'd really have to do much for that to be the case. What? Just don't turn into a total fuck up? Or don't have my baby taken off me?' She says it sarcastically but I know it hurts her.

'I'm sorry, Jem.'

'Oh, forget about it. You're just being honest and you're right. It's different for you and me. We're different.'

'I'm sorry for that too, but that's not why I apologised. I'm sorry that you didn't get the parents you deserved. It's not fair.'

'Well, it is what it is.'

'Yeah, I guess. And we're not that different, you and me.'

'Yes we are.'

'I don't think we are. It's why we're friends. Because we're alike, because we're similar.'

'But are we?' Jem asks.

'What? Are we alike? Of course we are,' I say, because it's a given. 'We grew up together, we went to the same school, we worked together. I've known you as long as I can remember.'

'That stuff doesn't make us similar. Those things are about location and proximity. Convenience. We were together a lot so we became friends. It made sense. But I've been wondering, if we met now would we be friends? Do we really have that much in common?'

'Jem?' I say searchingly, trying to see if she really means what she's saying.

'Don't take it the wrong way Luce, I love you. But I just don't think we are alike anymore.'

'Why? What's changed?' I ask, wanting her to explain.

'A lot has changed. You've changed,' she says.

'Me?' I say in disbelief, 'I haven't changed. I'm the same as I've always been.'

'No, no Luce you're not. Can you really not see that?'

'Well, how have I changed then?' I ask.

'I don't know. I can't explain it. It's all this stuff with your mum and Jodie. You're different because of it. You know more. You're different. You've changed. And I don't think you need me anymore.'

'Jem, of course I need you!'

'Luce,' she says, hanging onto the sound of my name for a few seconds, 'I don't think you do.'

I play my conversation with Jem over and over in my head the whole walk home. She said so many things I hadn't expected, or hadn't considered. How could she not understand? How could she not get how much it means to me to know who my mum was? It's what our whole friendship has been based on. That we knew each other. That we understood what it's like to be missing something and to want to find it. We used to talk about her parents and my mum and wonder what they were like. How our lives would have been different if they were there. I thought it helped her get through living with Barb and Jack. I thought she'd be thinking about it, even more now, since her fight with Barb. I really thought she understood. That she felt the same. That it was something we shared. Or was she just jealous? That I was getting answers? That I was happy and she wasn't? I'd be happy for her if it was the other way around. I'd be there with her for every moment. Because I'd understand.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At home I can't relax, I keep pacing in my bedroom, from one side of the room to the other, out on to the balcony and back inside again. Jem's voice is playing over and over in my head; I can't get her words to settle in my mind.

I tried to call Jodie on my walk home so I could talk it out with her, but she didn't answer her phone. She's probably at work. So I try Claire when I hear her get home.

'Claire. Are you in there?' I ask, gently tapping on Claire's bedroom door.

'Yeah sure Luce, come in. I'm just studying.'

'Thanks,' I say, pushing the door open. Claire's sitting cross-legged on her bed, textbooks, notepads and highlighters spread out around her.

'You look like you've had a shit day. Bad day at work?' she asks.

'No, work was fine. Bad afternoon. I met Jem after work.'

'I didn't know you had plans to see her.'

'I didn't,' I say. 'She just came in to work like nothing had happened.'

'Oh, did you talk to her about the party?'

'No, we skipped over that. It wasn't worth it. Her idea of a good party is the cops coming to break it up. She was never going to see it how I see it.'

'I still think you should have said something. At least just about her not really being there for your birthday.'

'Well it turned into a whole other thing.'

'What do you mean, thing?' Claire asks. I don't know how to describe it, really. I don't know if I should call it a fight or an argument.

'I don't really know. She said so many things I didn't expect, or hadn't thought about, and that I'm not sure I understand.'

'Like what? What did you talk about?'

'Well it started with Jodie. I know I've been spending a lot of time with her lately, but I thought Jem understood. I thought she knew how much it means to me to find out about my mum, or at least knew how long I've been looking and how hard it's been constantly getting nowhere. I thought she'd be happy for me.'

'Isn't she happy for you?'

'Well no, it didn't seem like it today. I don't know, maybe I should have included her more. I tried not to talk about it too much. I didn't want to rub it in. You know, with her family and everything. But she had a go at me for not asking her whether I should have contacted Jodie or not.'

'What? Like you needed her permission? It's your life Lucy.'

'I know. And I don't think she meant it like that. Oh, I don't know. But it made me feel like a terrible friend, as if she thinks that I've left her out of it on purpose.'

'It doesn't seem like she is being a very good friend either. And she hasn't been for a while now. She should be supporting you. Not making you feel guilty,' Claire says.

'Guilty. Yeah, well she definitely made me feel guilty. Saying I had a new mum. Like mine is replaceable.'

'Did she really say that?'

'Yep. And I thought she, of all people, would know that wasn't true. She was moved between five different foster homes before she ended up with Barb and Jack at the start of primary school. And I can't remember the amount of times I heard her yell 'you're not my mum', when she was having a fight with Barb.'

'I don't really know what to say. I would feel comfortable giving you advice about most things, but I don't really know what to say about Jodie and finding out about your mum. Have you told your dad about Jodie yet?' she asks.

'No, not yet. I know he'll get mad, he'll want to talk to her and I don't want her to stop telling me things because she feels like she has to run it all past him first,' I say.

'Oh Luce, I don't think he would do that. I'd think he would be happy for you. He would be happy that you have extra support in your life. It's just that we, Sean and I, had such a, I guess normal, home life growing up. I don't really know what to say to help you.'

'I know and it's okay, Claire. No one's ever really known what to say to me. That's why I really like having Jodie to talk to. She was there, she knows more than me, so she can help me with it. She's been easier to talk to than Dad and she's really honest with me. She's looking out for me. I know she's mostly doing that for my mum, but she's also helping me with Dad. She tells me when I'm being too hard on him. When I haven't been fair. But mostly, it's just nice to have someone older to talk to. Someone I can call, any time, for advice, for help or just because I've had a bad day. Dad and I have never really been able to do that, not like I can with Jodie. He's never been much of a talker, so I found it easier just to figure things out without him.'

'You are too hard on your dad, Luce. I *can* tell you that much.' Claire says.

'Yeah, well Jodie's helping with that too. We spoke on the phone last night, Dad and I, for over fifteen minutes. That's a long time for us. It was mostly about uni and Harry, but he's getting better at it. We both are.'

'That's great Lucy. I know you really want to know about your mum, but don't forget you've got your dad right there too.'

'Yeah. I know. I'm trying. It's just that Dad's, well I don't know how to describe him, he's not like other dads. He's not like your dad. Your dad's outgoing, he could talk to anyone. Like you and Sean. My dad can only talk to anyone if it's about engineering,' I try to explain.

'Your dad might be a bit quieter Lucy, but he loves you. And from what you've told me it sounds like he's always tried really hard. It can't have been easy for him either.'

'Yeah, I guess,' I say, starting to realise why Jem makes all those snide comments about Claire and her psychology degree. But I know Jem only does it because Claire's right. And she's probably right now too. 'Sorry Claire, you're studying,' I say, looking at the text books covering the bed, 'you don't want to hear this.'

'No, it's fine Luce. Here,' she says, packing some of her books away. 'Have a seat. Is that something you and Jem talk about together, both of your families? Is that why she was mad today? Does she think you're talking to Jodie about all of that now instead of her?'

'I've spoken to her a lot about my mum. And I still had been talking to her about it, but probably about Jodie a bit too. I don't know, Jem and I are different when it comes to our families. Jem says she's never wondered about her parents like I have about my mum. Well, that's what she always said when we've spoken about it, that she doesn't think about them, that she doesn't wonder where they are, but I guess I always thought she was just saying that. How could she not? Isn't that kind of an innate thing, wanting to know where you come from?'

'I don't know Luce, I'm sorry. I've never really had to wonder, but yeah I would have thought so. I'd want to know. If I didn't know, I mean. My family are a big part of who I am.'

'That's what I think. So I guess I always thought Jem did wonder. Now I don't know.'

'I've never really been able to get Jem to talk about it,' Claire says. 'I've tried to ask a few times, but she always changed the subject pretty quickly. Not like you, you're always happy to talk about it. You're much more open about it.'

'She talked about it a bit with me, a lot when we were younger. Then she stopped. But I always just thought she did that because she didn't want to admit how much she wanted to know about them, because it would mean admitting she was abandoned by them. Or that she pretended not to think about them to try and punish them for not being there. So when she said, today, that she didn't get why me finding out about my mum mattered so much, I didn't understand. I was sure that she'd always kept wondering about her parents too. That deep down she still wanted answers. That she wondered how she was like them. Like me with my mum. Whether she looked like them. Whether she spoke like them. What made her like them? But maybe she had been telling the truth all along. That she didn't care.'

'But your situations are pretty different, aren't they Luce? Your mum died, Jem's parents... well, they left her. Can you imagine that? Being abandoned by the two people who are meant to love you unconditionally. I can't imagine. It would be horrible. No one should have to go through that.' I looked down at my hands in my lap. I had considered that, as I so sensitively mentioned today. I didn't want to tell Claire I'd been such a bitch. That I'd

said that to Jem. Claire was disappointed in Jem and the things she said to me, but I was just as bad.

'I said something to Jem too, today, that I shouldn't have. About her parents.'

'What?' Claire asks.

'I said something about her parents having a choice to be with her or not. And basically that they chose not to be.' I say, still looking down at my hands.

'Oh Lucy, you didn't?'

'I know. It was mean. I shouldn't have said it. I didn't mean to, it just came out. But they're not excuses. I apologised straight away, but it was too late. I knew it hurt her. I should have realised earlier that it was different for her. Like you said, our situations are different. My mum died. She didn't get a choice to be here or not. But Jem's parents, to some extent, had a choice. They could have gotten clean. They could have changed. For her. They could have fought to get her back, or at least contacted her in some way in the last sixteen years. They could have visited her, they could have called, they could have sent her a birthday card. I should have considered it from her side more. If that's what had happened to me, would I still be so eager to know my mum?'

'It is very different. And it probably also wasn't a choice for Jem's parents either Lucy. It might not have been that easy for them to choose Jem over drugs. It might not have been that easy for them to get clean. Just like it might not be that easy for Jem to stop what she is doing. I've been there and it wasn't easy.'

'You?' I ask, confused.

'Yes Luce, me. My first two years at uni. Living on res. It sounds clichéd, but trying to fit in. Trying to stay on top of uni, to keep working, and then go out four or five nights a week. I was always at gigs and parties and festivals. And if everyone else around you is taking drugs, it doesn't seem as bad. Plus, you start distancing yourself from anyone who doesn't do it as soon as they show any signs of disapproving. In the end, Mum and Dad took me out of res and moved me back home. I had a semester off uni and a lot of weekends at home while they both watched my every move.'

'Claire, I had no idea.'

'I'm not surprised. Sean won't talk about it. He hated what it did to our family and just prefers to forget it even happened. I'm a bit surprised Jem didn't tell you though. That's when she and I first started to become close. When she was coming down on weekends, to stay with Jack's mum, so that Barb and Jack could have a break, we'd go out together. After a while Jem stopped staying with Jack's mum and would just come to res and stay with me instead. But basically once Mum and Dad moved me out, Jem stopped contacting me. I guess we didn't have that much in common anymore with me stuck at home every Friday and Saturday night.'

'Claire, I'm sorry, I didn't know.'

'Hey, don't be sorry. I'm glad you didn't know. It was stupid. My biggest regret so far. And the fewer people that know about it the better. I only told you because I thought it might help you understand things from Jem's side a bit more. Not how she's acting, but about her Mum and Dad.'

'Jem says they don't matter, her parents, my mum, because none of them raised us, but I disagree. She dismisses her connection to her parents because she doesn't want to admit that she may already be like them. But I want to be like my mum. I want her to be a part of me. I need her to be. She didn't just give birth to me. She is part of me. So it does matter.'

'Of course she should matter to you, Luce. She was your mum and from what you told me, she loved you.'

I'm quiet for a moment and Claire starts to spread her books out again to study. But then I ask, 'Claire, why do you think people become friends?'

'Sorry?' she says.

'Why do you think people become friends?'

'I guess it's because they have things in common. Something they can do together, or talk about. Sometimes they have mutual friends to begin with. They like spending time together,' she answers, but looks at me with her head slightly tilted.

'And what happens if those things change? If they don't have things in common anymore or don't really spend any time together?'

'Well, I guess they stop being friends, or as good friends. They might only see each other a few times a year. Friends change, Lucy. Sometimes because you change, sometimes because they change. But you always get new ones, sometimes better ones. Is this because of your fight with Jem?'

'Yeah, just something Jem said today.'

'It just sounds like you both said some things today that you need to talk about. Give it a few days, wait until you've both calmed down. It might take a while and things might be different, but you've been friends for so long, you'll be able to work it out.'

'Thanks Claire. I'm sure you're right,' I say. But I'm not sure at all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Our afternoon classes at uni get cancelled – the lecturer is off sick, so I catch the tram home. While the tram winds its way along High Street Northcote, then Smith Street and finally onto Bourke Street in the city, I think about uni.

We're nearly half way through the semester. I'm enrolled in the second unit of Biomed, as well as Lifespan Development and I have my first lot of placement at the end of the semester. Everyone else at uni is so excited about placement, even though they all know that the majority of them will be in geriatric wards bathing incontinent patients. It doesn't matter to them. They're still excited.

'I got the Royal Melbourne,' says Steve. 'I can't believe it, I thought it would be such a long shot.'

'I'm going back to Geelong for mine,' says Josh. 'I can't wait to be back staying at Mum and Dad's, having someone cook for me instead of living off pizza. Are you going home too Lucy?' he asks me.

'No, I'm hoping to get somewhere in Melbourne,' I reply. 'I'm not as into the idea of living at home again.'

'Oh, haven't you heard yet?' Steve asks.

'Nah, I'm still waiting,' I say. 'I don't really mind though, I'm sure it will be great wherever I go,' I add, trying to sound excited. But I'm not. I'm not excited, I'm not nervous, I'm not anything.

'I thought you'd know by now. They're leaving it a bit late, aren't they?' he asks.

'I'm sure they'll tell me soon,' I say, realising that I am something, that I'm indifferent. But I don't know why. The lectures are interesting, I understand the content – but that's not surprising, I've always been pretty book smart. If I read something enough times it usually sticks. That's how I got through VCE Biology and Psychology. I could regurgitate the definitions I needed for the exams. The tutorials are pretty simple, we just talk about what was said in the lectures, but in more depth. They're pretty easy to follow. If you have a basic knowledge of the human body, then the rest is common sense. It's only first year. I get the work done because I don't really have to try. If it was harder, I'm not sure how I'd go. I don't know if I'd have the motivation or the desire to work harder.

I get off the tram at the intersection of Swanston and Bourke Streets and start the walk home. When I cross the road at Flinders Street and walk along St Kilda Road, I pass Hamer Hall and the NGV. This is always my favourite part of the walk home. I love watching the musicians walking with their instruments and seeing dancers coming and going from their rehearsals. I'd love to know what they're working on, what they've been creating. I make up scenarios in my head. I'll see a cellist carrying their case and imagine that they've been

working on the music for a contemporary ballet. Or I'll see a painting being delivered to the NGV and imagine the artist in their studio starting with a blank canvas. I've always been curious about how people can make something – a piece of music, a play, choreograph a dance or paint a whole exhibition – from nothing. How rewarding creating something unique, something totally your own, must be. And it makes me realise that's something I'll never get to experience as a nurse.

When I get home I put my bag in my wardrobe, hiding it away. I sit down on the couch to watch some TV, hoping it will help me pass the time, at least until Claire or Sean gets home and I can talk them into doing something with me, maybe go see a movie. I flick through the channels. Talk show. Infomercial. Cooking show. Eighties sitcom. More infomercials. Another talk show and finally Croatian news. Not much to choose from. I settle on the talk show. The panellists are speculating about whether a Hollywood actress is pregnant or not. Their in-depth reportage is based solely on close ups of her stomach at various awards ceremonies. Next they move on to discussing the fashion highs and lows of the past week. I turn the TV off. I'm too restless to put myself through any of that. I grab my phone and open Facebook. It's been over a week since Jem and I had our fight and we still haven't spoken. I've checked her Facebook page most days and it looks like she's been doing fine without me. She's still checking in at bars and she's uploaded plenty of photos of her out with different people. I wonder if she's checked my page at all? Probably not. Claire's asked me most days if we've spoken yet and each time I think about lying, but I know she'd never believe me. I want to ask her if she's spoken to Jem but I'm not game to ask. I don't want to put her in the middle, but I also don't want to know what Jem's said about me if they have spoken. Claire's seen me looking at her Facebook page and she's tried to tell me that people often portray a different image of themselves publicly than what they're really feeling. But I still can't help but feel that every photo Jem uploads, every comment she writes and every like is somehow trying to hurt me.

I go into my bedroom and pick up my copy of *The Secret Garden*. It was actually my mum's copy. When I was about eight, I found it in the bookcase in Dad's office. It was on the bottom shelf, lying on its side, stacked in between a bunch of Dad's engineering books. I took it without him knowing. I only knew it had belonged to my mum because it has her name, Beth Ffelan, handwritten on the title page. I'd always wondered if she'd written it herself, or if her mother had. My grandmother. But I never asked Dad. I didn't want him to take it off me. That first night, after I'd found it, I hid under my doona and read until I fell asleep. I did the same thing every night after until I had finished it. It took me quite a while; I was only eight. I've read it every year since. Each time I read it I wondered what my mum liked about it the most. Was it the second chances that everyone got? Was it reading about how, as the garden came back to life, so did the children? I open to where my bookmark sits in the fourth chapter, but find myself rereading the same paragraph. Over and over.

I ring Jodie, knowing she has the next few days off before she starts another block of night duty.

'Hi sweetie,' she answers.

'Hey Jodie,' I reply, my voice missing its usual energy.

'I didn't expect to hear from you today, Lucy. Not until lunch on Sunday. Is everything okay?'

'I'm just having one of those days I guess,' I reply, not really knowing what's wrong myself.

'Are you still thinking about last Monday? Is it about Jem?' she asks.

'No, it's... well maybe that's part of it, but there's... it's just... I don't know really. I'm just feeling a bit lost I guess. It's silly.'

'Hey, that's not silly at all. It happens to everyone at some stage. Where are you? Are you still at uni?'

'No, we finished early today. I'm at home.'

'Have you spoken to David? You're going home next weekend aren't you? Could you go home for a few days now?' she asks.

'No, Dad's working all weekend. He's got meetings with clients who are down from Melbourne. It's why I couldn't see him for my birthday earlier, unless I skipped uni and he wouldn't let me do that,' I say.

'Okay, well you stay there. I'm coming to get you.'

'No, Jodie, I'm sure you have other things to do.'

'Don't argue with me. I'm getting the keys now. We'll get the boys from school and then you and I can have a chat. Pack a bag, you can stay tonight.'

'Thank you,' I say, knowing I should put up more of a fight to be polite, that I should say, 'Oh no, I don't want to put you out,' or, 'it's too far', but I really don't want to. I need this.

I quickly have a shower and throw a change of clothes into my overnight bag. I'm about to go and wait outside the front of the apartment for Jodie when I see *The Secret Garden* still sitting on my bed. I put it in my bag in case I can't sleep tonight. Maybe it will help.

Once we're back at Jodie's, she feeds the boys before they go and start on their homework. Then it's just the two of us in the kitchen and she puts the kettle on. I sit on a stool on the other side of the kitchen bench, while Jodie busies herself emptying the boy's lunch boxes and loading the dishwasher. It feels strange watching Jodie and the boys go about their routine. Even though they do it on a daily basis, without any thought, it's such an intimate process. They're so relaxed and comfortable around each other, so able to be themselves.

There's no hesitation, no consideration of how the others in the room might judge their actions. They're a family. At times I feel like an intruder, invading their family time. But the fact that they don't seem to change their actions in any way when I'm around makes me feel like I'm a part of their family. And I love my dad, but I've always longed to be part of a family where the house's always full with talk and laughter, where you have to fight for your time in the bathroom and race the others to the car to get the front seat.

Once the kettle's boiled and the cups of tea are made – mine very strong of course – Jodie moves a stool to the other side of the kitchen bench so she is sitting opposite me.

'Okay, where do you want to start?' Jodie asks.

'I don't know, I don't know what's wrong or if there even is anything wrong, which makes it kind of hard to know where to start,' I say, but at least feel better for having done so.

'Well it's lucky you brought your overnight bag. We might be at this for a while,' Jodie says, smiling. 'How has your week been?' she asks, seemingly just to make conversation. But I've seen her do this before, with her sons. She'll carefully ask them enough of the right questions until, without even realising it, they start talking to her about whatever it is that's bothering them. And she's good at it.

'I haven't really done much since I spoke to you on Monday. Just work and uni,' I reply.

'Have you spoken to Jem since Monday?' Jodie asks.

'Yeah, I spoke to her last night. I'm going over there on Sunday night.' I'd written Jem a message, asking how she was and how her week had been. At the end of the message I'd asked if we could see each other soon to talk. She didn't ask how I was, or how uni was going, she just told me to come around on Sunday.

'That's good. So everything is okay between the two of you?'

'Yeah, she didn't say anything about Monday, but then neither did I. She just asked if I wanted to go around there on Sunday.'

'That's good. You're talking to each other at least. How's work been?'

'Work's fine. I don't love it, but it helps me pay the rent and I have fun when I'm there,' I say.

'And uni?' Jodie asks.

'It's fine too, I guess.'

'Did you get your assignment back?'

'Yeah I got it yesterday.'

'And... how did you go?'

'I got a credit, but only just,' I explain.

'You're disappointed?' she asks.

'A bit. I've never gotten a mark lower than a B+, a credit's like a C.'

'Did you do the work?'

'You sound like my dad. Yes, I did the work. More work than I'd usually do. I thought I'd done a pretty good job.'

'What did your tutor say?' she asks.

'I didn't talk to her after class. I just wanted to get out of there. But in her comments she said I had the definitions and the theories right, but that I didn't adapt them to the scenarios. Whatever that means. She said I needed to learn to 'depart' from the textbooks,' I say, emphasising the word depart.

'Okay, well that's good feedback. It's a bit hard for you to consider actual scenarios with patients when you haven't done any placement yet. Once you get inside a hospital it will get much easier,' Jodie says, trying to be reassuring.

'Yeah, I guess,' I reply, unconvinced.

'You have placement in a few weeks don't you? Do you know where it is?' she asks.

'No, not yet.'

'Where did you put down again? You put the Austin didn't you? You won't be on my ward, but we might have a similar roster, I could give you lifts there,' she said.

'Oh, um, I haven't done my preferences yet,' I say.

'Lucy! Weren't you meant to have them in weeks ago?'

'We were meant to have them in by week three. It's week five. I just can't decide. I don't know where I want to go. I don't really know if I even want to do placement.'

'What do you mean you don't know if you want to do it? You have to do it don't you?' she asks.

'I have to do it to pass the unit.' I say. Then there's a pause. She's got me. But I'm still not sure. If I say it out loud, I'll have to do something about it. I'll have to change. I'll be worse off than I am now.

'Jodie, when did you know you wanted to be a nurse?' I ask, trying to dodge her questioning.

'I don't know. Things were different back then. When I finished school we didn't have the choices you do now. We didn't have as many options, for girls especially. It was basically be a nurse, a school teacher or go to secretarial school. We didn't have the career options you do now.'

I didn't realise this; I had assumed Jodie had always wanted to be a nurse. That she'd always known that's who she was going to be.

'Did you want to be a nurse?' I ask.

'I wanted to be a nurse more than I wanted to be a school teacher or work in an office. Don't get me wrong, I really enjoy what I do, I wouldn't have done it this long if I didn't. But if I'd had more choices, more options back then, I honestly don't know if I would have become a nurse.'

'What do you think you would have been?'

'I used to think I would have enjoyed being a vet. Maybe working with big animals, like at a zoo or even on a farm. I volunteered at a vet clinic when I was still in high school and I loved it. Actually, Beth and I used to talk about this during our training. After a really long, hard day, when we had difficult patients, we would talk about what else we'd like to be doing. Dream about how different our lives could have been.'

'Really! What did my mum want to be?' I ask, having never considered that my mum might have wanted to be anything other than a nurse either.

'Beth used to dream of ways she could bake for a living.'

'Bake?' I ask.

'Yes. She used to talk about opening her own cake shop or a café. Where she would make all the sweets.'

'Wow!' I say, 'I had no idea.' The thought of her being anything but a nurse was strange. I thought it was such a big part of who she was. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe, instead, I had made it so. It was one of the few things that I knew about her. So I focussed on it. 'What else did she bake, besides the black forest sponge?' I ask.

'Oh Lucy, she could make any cake you could think of. In her spare time, in the nurses' accommodation, she would bake pavlovas and cheesecakes. She would make pies and biscuits. I used to love coming home after a shift knowing Beth hadn't been at work. I'd be able to smell her cooking half way down the street. I was her official taste tester. I put on seven kilos in our first year and it was all Beth's fault,' she says. 'And my lack of will power,' she adds, smiling.

'I didn't know she was such a good cook.'

'Lucy, she would have spoilt you with her cooking growing up. She was so good at it. Ask your dad. If he wasn't smitten enough after the party, he certainly was when she made him a New York baked cheesecake for his birthday.'

'New York baked cheesecake,' I repeat, my sweet tooth tingling.

'It was another one of her specialties. She used to serve it with a beautiful raspberry coulis. Oh, my mouth is watering just remembering it, how sweet the cheesecake was, but how the tartness of the raspberry perfectly complemented it.' She was staring off into the back of the room, but then she shook her head, 'Sorry. So, since you asked me, when did you decide you wanted to be a nurse?'

'I don't know really. Dad said ever since I was a little kid I used to talk about being a nurse. He said I would use all the toilet paper as bandages on my teddy bears.'

'And what makes you want to be a nurse now?' she asks. But that's the question I can't answer.

'I don't know anymore,' I tell her.

'Lucy, do you want to be a nurse?'

'I'm not sure,' I say.

'That's okay, Lucy. It's a big decision. Why did you apply to do nursing?'

'Well, I don't really know anymore. Partly, I think, because of all the stories Dad used to tell about how I'd play nurse when I was little. And partly I think because of my mum. I thought that becoming a nurse would make me more like her.'

'And what do you think about those things now?'

'Now?' I wonder out loud. 'Now I think I'm doing it for them. For Dad and for my mum. Not for me.'

'And what about you, Lucy?' she asks. 'What do you want to do?'

'I don't know. Not nursing, I don't think. But I don't want to let anyone down.'

'Who would you be letting down?'

'Dad, and my mum I guess. And what about all the people who know I'm doing nursing. All the people back home. And what will I do instead?' I blurt out, before resting my head in my hands.

'Oh, sweetie,' Jodie says, walking around the bench to sit beside me and put her arm over my shoulder. 'Firstly, don't worry about what other people think. They don't matter. All that matters is that you're happy. As for what you do next, whether you stick with nursing, or change courses, or stop uni for a while, that doesn't matter either. Not right now. You'll work it out eventually. Your dad, me, even your mum if she were here, we just want what's going to make you happy. And if nursing doesn't make you happy, that's okay.'

'That's easy for you to say. You don't know my dad. He's not like how you remember him. Not anymore.'

'Luce, you're too hard on him. Have you actually spoken to him about all of this?'

'Yeah right! After him not wanting me to come to Melbourne. I'm not ringing him just for him to tell me "I told you so".'

'Luce, you need to give him more credit. He would understand.'

'No he wouldn't, he'd just think I'd given up. That I'd quit. And he'd be right.'

'Lucy, promise me that before you do anything you'll talk to your dad. This is a big decision. He would want to help you with it,' she says, her tone changing.

'Help me with it? Decide for me you mean? And why are you on his side now?' I ask.

'There are no sides, Lucy. We all just want you to be happy. But he's your dad and you're all he's got. So promise me.'

'Fine, I promise.' And I don't want to lie to Jodie, but I don't want to talk to Dad about this either. I already know how the conversation will go. He won't tell me what to do, but he'll make sure I know how disappointed he is in me, trying to get me to feel guilty so I'll just stay

at uni. I don't see the point in studying nursing if I don't want to be a nurse. But I know Dad won't be happy unless I have a plan. Which I don't.

After dinner, we all sit down to play a game of cards. The boys have just learnt how to play Euchre and they want to see if they can beat their mum and dad. I join Jodie and we play the same hand. At least we're meant to, but I'm too distracted. Before the boys get to eleven points I excuse myself and go to bed, knowing Jodie will be fine to finish the game without me.

Jodie has set up a blow up mattress for me on the floor in their study. I get *The Secret Garden* out of my bag, leave the desk lamp on and lie down on the bed.

Bruce is a builder and uses the office sometimes to do quotes and to pay his workers. It's different to Dad's office at home though. The bookshelves are mostly full of the boys' old picture books and family photos hang on the wall and stand on the windowsill. Family photos from Luna Park and the carousel at Melbourne Zoo. There's a picture of Jodie and Bruce on their wedding day and a picture of the boys playing in the sandpit in the backyard. There are even a few old yellowing drawings on the back of the door that the boys must have drawn when they were little. The family is everywhere you look.

In Dad's office, everything is about engineering. The only pictures on the wall are the plans of the subdivisions Dad's worked on. And the only thing in the bookshelves, besides construction books, is a model of a bridge made out of ice-cream sticks that Dad made while he was at uni. He has one photo of me on his desk. A wallet-sized school photo from when I started prep. And Jodie thinks I'm too hard on him.

I know he loves me, but he isn't the same David that she knew. He hasn't been in a long time. I know she's right, however; I should talk to him about uni or whatever I'm going to do. He was so mad when I didn't talk to him about changing my preferences. And, for some reason, it seemed to mean a lot to Jodie. She was so insistent and she had that same expression on her face as when I met her for the first time. At the café when she went quiet. When I could tell that she was reliving my mum's death. Maybe that's why she was so insistent on me talking to Dad, because she knows my mum would want me to. No, but there was so much sadness in her eyes. What did she say? 'You're all he's got'.

And then I realise. And it feels like a truck has driven straight through me. Like my feet are still planted on the road, but that my stomach and my chest have been carried away with the force. How can it have taken me this long to understand? I worked it out the first time I met Jodie. How could I have spent eighteen years with Dad and never understood? I realised at the café that it wasn't just me who had lost someone the day my mum died. That Jodie had lost her friend. But Dad? He lost his wife. He lost the love of his life. And not just that, he lost the life they'd planned together. He lost all those moments they thought they

would get. Birthdays, Christmases, anniversaries. Taking me home from the hospital together. Watching me grow up. Having more kids. My siblings. I didn't... I've never thought about it from his perspective. It was always about me. What I'd lost. What I'd missed out on. How it had made my life different. My mum. But she wasn't just my mum. Yes, she was Jodie's friend, but she was his wife. His friend. His other half. Jodie's right. I *have* been hard on him. I've been selfish and naïve. I've never considered him. I didn't consider him when I changed preferences. I didn't consider him when I moved to Melbourne. And I've never considered how it would have been for him to lose her.

I check the time on my phone. Suddenly I have an overwhelming need to hear my dad's voice. But it's 11:30pm. It's too late to call him now. I'll call him tomorrow. I don't know what I'll say, except for that I'll say sorry. How do you apologise for eighteen years of selfishness? How do you make up for being selfish all of your life? I don't know, but I have to start trying. And just like that, not wanting to be a nurse anymore doesn't seem like such a big thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dad is waiting for me on the platform when I get off the train at Warrnambool Station. When I woke up at Jodie's I decided calling him wasn't enough, I needed to see him. So I went home first thing in the morning, packed my bag and got the lunchtime train to Warrnambool.

He reaches to grab my bag from me, but I put it down instead and hug him. I can't remember the last time we hugged. Not properly. Not just an arm hung around a shoulder or a light hand on the back. He is stiff at first, arms by his side, startled. But then he puts his arms around me and I feel him relax. And so, do I. For the first time, in a long time, I feel like I'm where I'm meant to be.

We still only have a typical, mundane conversation in the car on the drive home. I ask about his work, he asks me about uni. He tells me how much rain Warrnambool has had and asks about the weather in Melbourne, like the three-hour distance could mean the difference between sunshine and snow. We both know we have more to say to each other. I can feel it lingering in the air between us. Unsaid. And maybe it's because we are in the car, sitting side by side, that neither of us says what we really need to say.

When we get home, Dad puts the kettle on while I put my things in my room. It's strange being in here. Most of my things are missing, yet it still feels like home. I take the box out of my suitcase, its corners blunt and the ribbon flattened. I hide it under my bed. I'm still not ready to open it, but I wasn't able to leave it behind.

Dad's sitting in the kitchen waiting for me, mugs on the table. His tea white, mine black. Turns out it took me moving to Melbourne for him to learn how I have it. Before I'd left, this would have been something I'd have made a point of, sarcastically. But now, I know Claire and Jodie are right, I've been too hard on him. I've spent my life punishing him for being the parent who was here; I've judged him against an ideal that is probably impossible for anyone to live up to. And I want to tell him that I'm sorry. I want him to know that I've finally realised it wasn't just me who lost Mum, that I know he lost someone too. But where would I possibly start?

'Happy Birthday, Luce,' he says, and raises his mug towards me before taking a sip. I'd forgotten I still hadn't seen him since my birthday, but so much has happened since then. He reaches across to the seat of one of the empty kitchen chairs and pulls a present out from under the table. 'I was going to send it up to you, but then I decided not to. I wanted to be there when you opened it,' he says, handing it to me across the table.

I hadn't even thought about what Dad would get me for my eighteenth. Last year at school, when everyone else in our year level was turning eighteen, it was almost like it became a competition between who could out-do each other with their birthday gifts. Brand

new cars, expensive watches, return tickets to London. That was about the only thing that made me glad I wasn't turning eighteen in Year 12, because I knew I could never compete with everyone else. Dad was never going to buy me a car and there was no way he was going to get me something as sentimental as a watch or a pearl necklace that I'd have forever, as a reminder of when I became an adult. No, my present would be the same as always. Something Anne picked up, wrapped and gave to Dad to give to me, along with the cake she'd made.

Growing up, I always hated that he didn't get my present himself. But now I realise it would've always been hard for him, because my birthday was the anniversary of Mum's death. It always would've been a reminder that he was doing it all on his own. A reminder that almost another year had passed since he'd lost his wife. Another year that he'd been without her.

But this present isn't wrapped with Anne's usual care. One end is square, taped down at the corners; the other is pointed, taped down at its triangular tip. There's far too much sticky tape and no card. For once I think Dad has actually wrapped it himself, meaning he must have bought it himself too. There's no scenario I can think of in which Anne would have bought the present, but not wrapped it. I'm touched that Dad has tried to do it himself this year.

'Thanks Dad,' I say, lifting the tape from the corner. The gift is hard, rectangular, weighty. I'm expecting a book, though which book Dad would buy me, I'm not sure. So once I've torn off the paper and I start to pull whatever it is out of its box, I'm surprised to see the stand of a photo frame. I pull it out upside down, expecting it to be empty. I guess a photo frame is a pretty standard gift for a teenage girl. Safe, but impersonal. You might buy it for the daughter of a family friend, not your own daughter. I work on my face, telling myself in my head, 'look grateful', 'at least he tried', 'smile'.

'Oh Dad, a photo frame. Thanks.' I say, my voice high pitched, overcompensating. But as I turn it in my hand, I notice that the silver frame contains an image I've seen nearly every day since I was eight, when I found it in the top drawer of Dad's office desk. It's Mum with me on the day I was born. Instead of looking at the camera, Mum is looking at me. Leaning in, either to give me a kiss or after having already done so. She smiles wide, with her eyes as much as her mouth. It's the single, most important moment of my life. But one I don't remember. I've looked at that photo, a torn, crumpled, yellowing copy, thousands of times and willed myself to remember that one moment. To remember how I felt in her arms, the feel of her lips against my skin, her smell or the sound of her voice. But I was too young. And here it is, that moment captured and framed, presented for display, instead of secret glances by my bedside lamp.

'Oh Dad,' I say again, this time my voice is soft, catching. Grateful. 'It's perfect. It's... she's beautiful.'

'You look just like her, Luce. I see her in you every day.'

I let out a single sob, a single breath carrying with it years of questioning, years of resentment, years of grief. I reach across the table and put my hand on Dad's. He has tears in his eyes, but he too looks like he's let out a deep breath, one he's been holding for eighteen years.

'Dad,' I say, leaning forward to put my other hand on top of his. I've never seen him look like this. So vulnerable. So human. Even with the faults I projected on to him, he always still seemed infallible to me, like he could do no wrong. But now, now he can't look me in the eye. Instead he looks into his tea, his shoulders hunched, his hands limp. 'I want to move back home.'

'What?' he says, lifting his head quickly.

'I've learnt a lot Dad, recently, about myself, about other things. I feel like I'm starting to learn who I am. And now I know that I'm not a nurse,' I try to explain.

'Well of course you're not a nurse, you're only in your second semester.'

'No, I mean, it's not what I want to do with my life. Be a nurse. I'm not... it's not me.'

'Lucy, have you really thought about this? You've barely started, how do you know you don't want to do it?'

'I've been thinking about this for weeks, Dad. I don't even know why I decided to do nursing in the first place. And I'm not really enjoying my classes, it's not what I see myself doing every day for the rest of my life.'

'You're not really meant to enjoy your classes,' he says.

'They can be hard, but I should still want to go. I should still find the content interesting,' I reply.

'Well you can't give up because it's too hard.'

'It's not too hard, my marks have been okay. And I'm not giving up! That's not what this is. It's me realising I want to do something else with my life.'

'Lucy, I think you should stick with it a bit longer. Wait until the end of the year. If you still feel the same way, we can talk about it then.'

'Dad, I'm not really asking you. I've decided. I'm not going back next year and I'd like to move home. Work here while I work out what I want to do.'

'It's not that simple Lucy. I want you to do something with your life, not just come back, live here with me and work. You can do more than that.'

'It wouldn't be forever. Just while I work out what I want to do.'

'And when do you think you're going to know that? All you talked about last year was being a nurse, what if the next thing you choose turns out not to be right either?'

'God, I don't know. I thought I was being responsible. I thought moving back would be the right thing. I can work, save some money and figure out what I want to do.'

'Well I think you would have to pay rent if you're not studying. If you lived here and you were studying, it would be fine. But I don't want you getting used to getting things easy in life.'

Easy? He thinks I've had an easy life? I can't believe I let Jodie convince me that he was different. That I'd been too hard on him, that I'd misjudged him. Maybe I had when it came to Mum, but he still doesn't understand me or respect me.

'I'm not an idiot!' I shout. 'I can make my own decisions without ruining my life. I don't need you to make them for me.'

'Lucy, that's not what I'm trying to do. I just want you to think about this more. Maybe you could transfer to Deakin here. Keep going with your course, but from home.'

'Why? I'm not going to like it any more from here. I like Melbourne. I would stay there, but I just thought it would be a waste of money to stay there while I worked out what I want to do.'

'Well what are you going to do here, then? I'm not going to have you lying on the couch reading books all day. You would have to work.'

'Dad! You're not listening to me. I said I'd work. That I'd save money. I'll go back to Target, I'll get a second job at a café. I might even do a short course at TAFE.'

'What short course?'

'I don't know Dad,' I say, frustrated. 'That's why I want to come back, so I can work that out.'

'Well I still think you need to think about it more. Talk to your teachers at uni. Look into short courses. Maybe you could do a short course in Melbourne while you think about it.'

'Dad! I don't need to think about it anymore. I'm not going back to uni. I'm done. You can't force me. I'm sorry I thought you might actually want me to come home. I was obviously wrong. I'll just stay in Melbourne with Claire and Sean!' I scream, getting up from the table, the chair scraping on the floor with the force.

'Lucy, sit back down.'

'No. You're not listening to me, so why should I,' I say, as I grab Harry's lead and slam the front door behind me.

I walk Harry down to the beach, hoping to clear my head. It's a walk I've done hundreds of times, but by the time I get there I'm exhausted. My legs are shaky; my heart is pounding in my chest and through to my fingertips. I'm furious at myself for thinking Dad had changed. Normally when I'm having trouble with Dad, I ring Jem. I think it's part of the reason why she's just as hard on him as I am, even worse. I tell her everything he does to annoy me, but

while I usually get over it, because he's my dad and I have to, Jem doesn't. She remembers every single argument I've told her about, every fault. But this time I can't call her. We've barely spoken since our fight.

I could call Claire, but I haven't said anything to her and Sean about maybe dropping out of uni. I don't want to worry them about having to find a new housemate until I know for sure whether I'm moving out or not. I call Jodie instead; she's basically the only person I have left to call.

'Oh Lucy, give him a chance. He'll come around. He's obviously just worried about you and wants to make sure you're making the right decision,' she says once I've filled her in on how it's gone so far.

'I tried to explain. He just doesn't get it and he doesn't want to listen so that he actually could. He just wants to keep treating me like a little kid.'

'Well, you're his daughter, to some extent you will always be a child to him.'

'Great, so I'm going to get this my whole life! Maybe it's better if I just stay in Melbourne.'

'Lucy, give him another chance.'

'Another chance? I'm getting sick of giving people second and third and fourth chances. It only ever seems to make it worse for me.'

'Your dad's not Jem, Luce.'

'No, he might be worse. He's family.'

'Luce, go home and talk to your dad again.'

'Why are you always on his side? You were on his side last time, too. I thought you were fine with me not going back to uni.'

'I'm not on his side. There aren't any sides, Lucy. But it doesn't matter whether I'm fine with the decision, it's a decision that you have to make yourself, but you need to talk it over with your dad first.'

'I thought you were my friend.'

'Lucy, honey, don't get me wrong. I like that we're spending time together and I like that I've been able to help you get to know your mum. But this is really between you and your dad.'

'Oh, um, okay. If it's too much for you, if I'm too much for you, just forget it. I just thought you wanted to help me. Don't worry about it.'

'Luce, that's not what I meant. I want to keep spending time with you. I just meant, when it comes to these big decisions, I don't get a say. What I think doesn't really matter.'

'Fine. It's fine. Just forget it. Go back to your family. I'll work it out myself.' And I hang up. Harry has gone to sleep on my feet, but I pull him up to nuzzle in his neck.

'It's just you and me buddy. You and me.'

Harry and I stay on the beach until it's dark, then we walk into town to get a pizza. When we're in there, I keep my head down. I don't want to run in to anyone I know. I don't think I can deal with talking to anyone else. I don't want anyone to know I might be moving back. That I've failed.

Harry and I find a quiet seat, a couple of blocks closer to home, to sit and eat. At first I feed Harry pieces of ham and the burnt bits of crust, but then after I've picked at most of the pizza without really eating any, I give Harry the whole box.

When we get home, it's after 11:00pm. Lucky I don't have curfew anymore. I drop Harry off in the backyard and go through the back door. Dad has fallen asleep in his chair in the lounge room, the TV still going. I sneak past him and go to bed.

In the morning when I wake up, I hear voices coming from the kitchen. I've slept in, it's 10:00am, but I was hoping Dad would already have been at work before I got up. I know I can't keep avoiding him, but I also know that the next time we talk we'll get the same result. I wonder if Mum was stubborn too, because otherwise it's one thing I definitely got from Dad.

I lie in bed for a couple of minutes, trying to decide whether I should get up or not. If I stay here and read my book for another half an hour, maybe they'll be gone.

I wonder who it is though. Who would be here on a Friday morning? If Dad has decided to take the day off, which I really hope not, maybe it's Anne. She's the only person I can think of. It wouldn't be a client; Dad never has clients at home. Not when his office is so close and he can just meet them there. But if it's Anne, I'd like to see her, so I decide to get up.

Right before I go into the kitchen, I take a deep breath. I don't like being fake, but Anne's just so sweet; I don't want her to know Dad and I are fighting. Dad wouldn't have told her. I step into the kitchen, already smiling, ready to say hello and give Anne a hug. But I stop. It's not Anne. It's Jodie. Jodie is sitting at the kitchen table with my dad. Their cups are empty, the kettle is boiling again and there's only one biscuit left on the plate in front of them.

'What. I don't... why?' I stammer.

'Lucy let us explain,' Dad says, turning to see me standing in the doorway.

'Us?' I ask, looking back and forward between them.

'Yes', Dad answers. 'Jodie called me straight after you first met.'

'What?' I ask, no longer confused, just angry.

'I was confused at first,' Dad continues. 'I hadn't spoken to Jodie in nearly eighteen years, not since we've moved here. And of course I had no idea you'd contacted her, that you were thinking about contacting her or that you even knew how.'

I was still looking between them both. Jodie was there. They'd been talking this whole time. I let him keep talking.

'Jodie explained that you'd contacted her. That you'd met. She suspected I didn't know; so she wanted to make sure I was okay with it. She wanted to make sure she was doing the right thing.'

The right thing, I thought. The right thing by who?

'And I hadn't realised you wanted to know about your mum so much. You hadn't asked me any questions.'

'That's because you wouldn't answer them.' 'What? No, I...'

'Don't lie. You don't talk about her. You don't tell me anything. So I contacted Jodie and the two of you have been going behind my back the whole time.'

'No, Lucy, that's not what we were doing,' Jodie says. 'Really? It's not?'

'Your dad was once a good... is... a good friend of mine. I didn't know what he'd told you already and I didn't want to overstep or cause any problems between the two of you. So I wanted to make sure it was okay with him before I saw you again.'

I ignore her and turn to Dad, 'You've never been able to just let me make my own decisions. To trust me to do anything myself. I've always had to do what you thought was best or if I made a mistake, hear about how you would have done it differently. Now I find out that you were pulling the strings on the one thing that I thought was mine.'

'Lucy, that's not fair,' Jodie says.

'Again, you're taking his side. I've wondered why you always defend him, now I know. You've been in this together all along. I bet you've been having great fun talking about me and keeping secrets from me.'

'Lucy that's not what happened,' Jodie says. 'I never told David anything that you told me.'

'Yeah right. Do you really expect me to believe that?'

'You can believe me or not, but it's the truth.'

'She's telling the truth, Lucy. All Jodie told me were the questions you were asking about Beth.' It's so strange to hear him say her name. It floors me.

'And after a while, even though he was hurt by it,' Jodie says as she glances over at Dad, 'David realised that, if you didn't feel like you could talk to him about Beth, it was good that you felt like you had someone you *could* talk to.'

'And I was glad it could be Jodie,' Dad says, giving Jodie the slightest nod.

'Sorry to interrupt this little moment you're having. But Dad, how could you be hurt? It's not like you gave me a choice.'

'But Lucy, I honestly didn't know you felt that way. I thought it must have all been too hard for you, that's why you didn't ask any questions.'

'Hard for me? Before I met Jodie I hated that you never spoke about Mum. That you barely mentioned her. I thought you just didn't care. But Jodie helped me realise I had only been seeing it from my perspective. I never thought about how hard it must have been for you to talk about her. How much you must have missed her. Still miss her.'

'Oh Luce, it's never been about how hard it was for me. It's always been about you. I wanted to protect you.'

'But I don't need you to protect me,' I say.

'I'll always want to protect you; I'm your dad. So when you were really young and you asked questions all the time, I always had to be careful what I told you. I'd answer them, as best as I could, but you were still so young. I didn't want to overwhelm you or scare you. I had to remind myself that you were only five and that it might be too hard or too complicated for you to know why she wasn't here and why she couldn't ever be here.'

'But then you just stopped really answering them,' I said quietly, my eyes on the floor.

'I didn't mean to, but I had to remind myself that whatever I told you, you'd probably share with your friends at school. So I had to be careful; I wasn't sure I wanted everyone to know all the details. And then one day you just stopped asking. You stopped coming to me with questions. You stopped trying to work her into conversations. And if I had known you would stop, I'd never have held back. Especially if I had known it would make you think I didn't want to talk about her.'

'Of course I wanted to talk about her. She's my mum,' I say.

'I just thought it must've been too hard for you,' he says. 'I always assumed that you'd eventually start asking questions again, so I waited. But I didn't want to push you. But then you never did and I think by then, so much time had passed, it became too hard to start the conversation again. So I never did. I took the easy option and I shouldn't have. And I'm sorry. I should never have done that. I should have found a way to speak about her every day, not just for you, but for your mum too. I failed you both.'

'Oh Dad. I'm...' But I don't know what to say. I can't stay angry at them both. The old me would have. But looking at Dad's face and Jodie, whose helped us to talk more in the last two days than we have in the last five years, I say, 'Dad, it's my fault too. I was too mad at you and too selfish to see that Mum dying could affect anyone more than me. She was my mum. I lost my mum,' I look Dad right in the eyes as I say, 'I couldn't see that she was your wife.' I turn to Jodie, 'Or your friend.'

'Lucy, you were a kid. Now you're a teenage girl. I don't have a lot of experience with teenage girls, but it would seem to me that being self-involved was almost a requirement.'

'It's not an excuse though,' I say, 'I know that now.'

Dad, Jodie and I spend the rest of the afternoon talking. It turns out Dad rang Jodie the day before, right after I had. That's what made her decide to drive down, after hearing how upset we both were. It was nice to see that Dad and Jodie were friends again. I start to see glimpses of what my dad was like back then. And I get to hear a lot more about Mum.

'What did you think of your birthday present from Jodie?' Dad asks.

'Oh, I haven't opened it,' I say, turning away from Jodie.

'Why not?' Dad asks.

'I just... it never felt right to.'

'Go get it now,' he says. I glance at Jodie again.

'Is it here?' she asks. I nod. 'Then what are you waiting for?'

And so, instead of Jem and me sitting on the floor of my bedroom in Southbank, I open the box sitting on the floor of the house I grew up in, with my dad and my mum's best friend.

There are photos from Mum and Dad's wedding, but not the formal ones I've seen before. These ones are from Jodie's camera. Close-ups of Mum getting her hair done. Mum in the wedding car. Mum and Dad on the dance floor. One of Mum and Dad with Jodie and Bruce.

There are postcards Mum sent Jodie from Mum and Dad's honeymoon in Fiji and from when they spent Christmas in London with my grandparents.

One of my favourite things is a letter Mum sent to Jodie during that trip, just before Christmas.

Hi Jodie,

Merry Christmas all the way from Bath, England. I never thought I'd be having Christmas in England, but it sounds much more festive than it actually is.

I always wanted to have a white Christmas, after growing up watching the original Miracle on 34th Street, and It's a Wonderful Life, I thought a real Christmas had to have snow. That a real Christmas had an open fire, knitted Christmas jumpers, mulled wine and a snowman in the yard. I thought that's what we'd have this year, but now that we're here all I want is the usual Australian Christmas.

I want the sun, I want to have bare arms and legs. I want fresh cherries, not tinned ones. I want seafood, delicious fresh seafood. Listen to me! I sound so ungrateful. I'm in England! It's beautiful. And David's parents are so lovely. They've made me feel very at home and insist on treating me like one of the family – they even got a stocking for me to hang on the mantle. But it's just so cold! It's too cold. It's too cold to go and see the 12ft Christmas tree in the town centre, or to go listen to the carollers at Royal Victoria Park. And

it turns out that I don't even like mulled wine. The nutmeg and the cinnamon flavours are great; it's the little pieces of bread they put in that I don't like.

But David has been excellent, on the one nice day we've had so far – and by nice I mean it was 4°C instead of -1°C and you could see to the end of the street instead of just the end of the driveway. We covered nearly every inch of our exposed skin, we had gloves, scarves, beanies and earmuffs, even gumboots, and David took me on his own walking tour of Bath. It was part retrospective of places from his childhood – his primary school and high school, the local newsagency where he had his first job and the oval where he played soccer every weekend.

But the other part was all about Jane Austen. Did you know she holidayed in Bath with her family nearly every summer? More sensible in her timing than us. She wrote while she was here, so Bath features in some of her novels. David took me on the walk that Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth take in Persuasion. And he showed me the house the Austen family lived in while they were here.

So, while we're stuck inside where it's warm, we've drunk enough tea and eaten so many biscuits and scones with jam and cream that you may not recognise me when I get back. But on the upside I have a few new recipes to try out when I get home, David's mum's trifle is the best!

But besides how beautiful Bath is, and how nice it is to see where David comes from, the best part of the trip has been the feeling that I'm part of a family again. Ever since Mum and Dad died, Christmas has just been me and Aunt Maude, or whichever friend took pity on us and invited us to their house. Last year, when you and I had to work all day, that's one of the best Christmases I've had since before I was twelve. Because it was full of people. Even though they wanted to be anywhere else than at Prince Henry's. But here, there's David and me, his mum and dad, his brother and his wife with their little baby Alexander, David's uncle Joe and his grandma Mary, who is 89! There are four generations. Whether we're all sitting around the dining room table having dinner or in the lounge room looking at the Christmas tree, it's lovely. And because David's mum and dad have lived in Bath for nearly 30 years, ever since David was born, there are always people visiting, stopping by to drop off presents and to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. I've met a few of David's friends, his godparents and even one of his old teachers.

I can't believe he would ever have wanted to leave this familiarity, the sense of community he had here, to move to Australia. But he said growing up it wasn't as idyllic as it seems to me now. He says as a teenager he hated that everyone knew him, that they knew his parents, that he was always Jimmy's little brother. That by the time he turned 18 he couldn't wait to move to London, thinking that he could move there and get lost in the big city. That people wouldn't hear his surname and assume they knew him. People would have

to get to know him and make up their opinions about him based on his work, his personality, and his skills. It would be up to him alone to succeed. Then after a few years even London seemed too small. He kept seeing people from Bath – at the pub, at the supermarket, one of his old classmates even lived in the same block of units as he did. He had to get further away, and how much further away from England can you get than Australia? I know I should be happy that he felt the need to get so far away, otherwise we wouldn't have met, but why so far away from his family? From the community he grew up in? The familiarity? I'd have given anything to have had that growing up. To have been lucky enough to feel like I belonged somewhere. It's hard for me to imagine that I would ever have wanted to be so far away from my family, my home. I know that when David and I have children that's what I want for them. I want them to grow up with lots of people around them. In a community they feel a part of. Where they feel safe. I want them to know their neighbours, to ride their bikes to school, to have the same friends all their lives. I want them to have the childhood I didn't have.

Sorry Jodie, I got a bit side-tracked. I better go now; David's mum has just made fruit mince pies. I hope you're enjoying your time off. Lie in the sun and read a book for me. I'll see you as soon as I get back. Merry Christmas and lots of love. Bethxx

I give the letter to Dad to read. I can tell by his face that it's the first time he's read it.

'It's like having her here,' he says as he hands it to Jodie. She only glances at it, it's obvious she's read it enough to know exactly what Dad meant.

'I tried to contact you David, after it all happened. After the funeral. To give you copies of all of this,' she says glancing at the box. 'Is this why you moved to Warrnambool?' she asks Dad. And I'm glad she does, because it's something I've always wondered about.

'I saw a job advertised for an engineer at the local council, so I applied,' he replies, with the same answer he'd given me when I was little.

'It just seemed so far away. Forgive me, but it was like you were running away.' I couldn't believe she had said it. I looked at Dad straightaway.

'It's okay Jodie, you're right. I was running away. I did run away. Not that I'd have admitted it at the time. My parents wanted me to move back to England. They came over for the funeral, they stayed for a month or so, the whole time expecting that Lucy and I'd move back to Bath and live with them. And we did go back for a few months,' he says.

'I know,' Jodie says. 'I went by the house one day and it was just empty, with the sale sign out the front.'

'It's what my mum and dad wanted,' he continues. 'And I knew how Beth felt, everything she wrote in that letter. She wanted to raise Lucy in a small town. To have the same upbringing I had. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave Beth. She was here in Australia. Our life

had been here and our future would have been too. And just because she wasn't there to help me, didn't mean I couldn't give Lucy that for her. I had to do what she wanted. But my parents kept saying that I couldn't be a single father in Melbourne. That we didn't have the support, that things were too busy and too expensive. And they were right. It would never have worked. So I applied for the job here, in Warrnambool.'

I was fascinated. It was like they'd both forgotten I was in the room. But I wasn't going to remind them in case they stopped talking. I was learning more about my life, my dad and what happened after Mum died in that one conversation than I had in eighteen years.

'I was in Melbourne. I would've helped.'

'I know Jodie. I know you would have. But you couldn't have been there all the time. You had your own life. You had Bruce and you had work. I was trying to put Lucy first and that's why I thought Warrnambool was best.'

'But you had friends there. And family.'

'Yes, we had friends in Melbourne, but none of them had babies. And by the time Lucy was born, my brother and sister-in-law had moved back to England and Beth's Aunt Maude's dementia was so bad we'd had to move her into a nursing home. We didn't have any family left in Melbourne. We didn't have any family left in Australia. It was just us.'

'But you just disappeared.'

'I know, now I know I was running away. I thought I'd keep in touch. That I'd keep my friends in Melbourne. But no one knew about our story down here; it was easier. And the easier it got down here, the harder it was to go back to Melbourne. I just... I couldn't stay in Melbourne. It was too hard. For me, everything there was about her. I met Beth three months after I moved to Melbourne, so nearly all of my memories of Melbourne had her in them.'

I feel so much for Dad then. My heart breaks for him, hearing about all the tough decisions he had to make and how hard it was for him after Mum died. But at the same time I'm grateful for everything that he's done for me, all the sacrifices he made. Leaving his friends, staying in Australia, moving to Warrnambool.

'Do you ever regret moving to Warrnambool, Dad?' I ask him.

'I can't complain,' he says.

'Dad, that's not an answer.'

'I'm sorry. For so long that's been my standard line. My cover. Early on, I realised it was easier to just say that instead of telling people the truth. It still is. But things could've been worse. I could've lost you both. We could've been back in Bath living with my parents. I could have never met Beth. So really, I can't complain. But I don't have to use that cover with either of you, do I?' He looks at Jodie and me. We both shake our heads.

'So tell us,' Jodie prompts.

'Tell you what?'

'The truth. How has it really been for you?' Dad looks at me first, for a long time, before he answers her.

'It's been hard. You would know. Luce, I think you were the only thing that got me through. If it wasn't for you I don't think I'd have even gotten out of bed, or gone back to work. And being a single father with a newborn baby in a small town raised a lot of questions. I was different. When people found out what had happened, they pitied us. It was like the funeral all over again. Those looks. Those 'how will they cope?', 'that poor baby', 'that poor man' comments. Then, about the time you reached high school, I found that everyone here had really accepted us as their own. You, in particular, Luce,' he says turning to me. 'People would learn our orders at restaurants and stop to offer you lifts home from school if you were walking and it started to rain. It was just what Beth wanted.'

'That's great David, it seems like you've really made a home here.'

'We made a home here,' he says winking at me.

And for the first time, really, I cried. I cried because Mum was dead. I cried for the years that Dad and I had lost. I cried that I had my dad back. I cried that I had Jodie in my life. And for a while Dad and Jodie cried with me.

We keep talking over dinner, with Dad and Jodie telling me stories about Mum, and then it was time for Jodie to drive back to Melbourne.

'Thank you,' I say, when Jodie and I get to her car.

'Lucy, you don't have to thank me,' she says.

'No I do. I really do. I was horrible to you yesterday. You've helped me so much and I was awful to you. And then you still came down to help us. So thank you.'

'No I mean it; you don't have to thank me. I should be apologising to you.'

'Apologising?'

'Yes. About your dad and me. I had to call him, after we first met. I started thinking about how I'd feel if it was one of the boys seeking out a relative stranger. I didn't want to upset your dad, or cause any problems between the two of you.'

'Any more problems you mean,' I say, smiling.

'No Lucy, I mean it. Neither of us liked going behind your back. But your dad was a good friend of mine and I needed to make sure that he was okay with it. So I Googled him and found his company website and his mobile number. And then we didn't tell you because we didn't want to risk you getting upset and not feeling like you could talk to *either* of us.'

'I like that the two of you are friends again.'

'I like that we're friends again, too. But I like that you and your dad are talking again more.' She leans in to give me a kiss on the cheek and tells me to come over for dinner

when I get back to Melbourne. I stand in the driveway waving goodbye until her car turns onto the highway.

Dad and I watch a movie in the lounge room that night. We sit on the same couch, my head resting on his chest, his arm around me.

It's how we used to sit together when I was little. Usually Dad would be watching sport, cricket or football, and I'd interrupt over and over again wanting to know everything that was going on.

'Who's that, Dad?'

'What's batting?'

'Why do they throw it like that?'

'What's a goal?'

'Which team is that?'

'Who's winning?'

Dad was always very patient with me, answering my questions. But I never really cared that much about what was happening, I just wanted to be with Dad. I loved falling asleep like that, in the nook of his arm, and him having to carry me down to bed. It was the safest place in the world and right then it still felt the same.

Once the movie is over, we say goodnight to each other and go to bed. But too much has happened in the day for me to sleep. Everything I've learnt – about Mum, about Dad, about myself – keeps going around in my head. The box is on the floor beside the bed. An actual, physical tie to Mum. To her words, her smile, things that she touched. I pick up her copy of *The Secret Garden*, hoping its familiar words will help me clear my head. I'm up to the chapter where Mary follows the noises at Mistlethwaite Manor to find Colin, the cousin she didn't know she had. He's so willing to believe that he's dying; it becomes a part of him. It's how he defines himself, until Mary comes along and changes his perspective. It makes me wonder if I'm the same, if I've let the fact that Mum died when I was a baby define me? Yes, it's a part of who I am, but is it everything I am?

'Luce, are you still awake?' Dad asks, knocking lightly on my door.

'Yeah Dad, just reading.'

'You couldn't sleep either?'

'No, too much going on up here,' I say, pointing to my head.

'Me too,' he says. He grabs the book out of my hand. 'I can't believe you're reading this again. How many times is it now?'

'What? I didn't know you even knew I had it.'

'I lost count of the amount of times I came in to check on you just before I went to bed and found you lying in here after falling asleep reading this. I'd take it out of your hand, hide it back under your pillow, turn your bedside lamp off and tuck you in. What is it about this book? I think your mum read it just as many times as you.'

'Really?' I ask.

'Yep. At the start I just thought it was because it reminded her of her mum and dad. But when I asked her she said that was only part of it; she liked that the characters all got a second start at life. She thought that was what she'd gotten with me and then with you. She read it to you twice while she was pregnant. I'd fall asleep next to her, listening to her read it out loud to you. That's how much she liked it.'

'Wow,' I say, taking the book back out of his hand and holding it against my chest.

'So Luce, about uni,' he says.

'No Dad, I don't want to talk about it now. I don't want us to fight again, not after today.'

'We won't Luce, I promise. I had a little talk to Jodie about it last night and she helped me to see it from your side. I'm sorry, I didn't really let you explain properly.'

'I did spring it on you.'

'You did. But if I had shown more interest, instead of just asking how your grades were, then maybe I wouldn't have been so blindsided.'

'I guess.'

'Anyway, I think we can come to a compromise.'

'A compromise? Really?' I ask.

'Yes. How many weeks are there left of semester?'

'Seven weeks then exams.'

'Okay, and you have placement during those?'

'Yes.'

'Well how about you at least finish off the semester and then over the break you can move back, stay here, work over the summer and then if you really don't want to go back you don't have to.'

'But Dad, I already know I don't want to go back.'

'That's what you think now, but what if, in a couple of years' time, you decide you want to go back to it, not necessarily to do nursing, maybe something else. I think it's worth finishing this semester off just in case.'

'I hadn't thought about that. I guess these units might be able to count as credits towards another course if I decide to do one.'

'That's what I thought. And it will still give you three or four months to think about what you want to do before uni starts again next year. You could do a short course here over the summer if it helps.'

'And you're happy to have me here?'

'Luce,' he says putting his hand on my shoulder, 'of course I am. I'll love having you back. It's been so quiet here without you.'

'But you said I'd have to pay rent if I wasn't studying.'

'I know what I said, but I was only trying to deter you from dropping out. You can always stay here. It's your home. I'd be happy if you stayed here until you were forty.'

'You never said you were struggling here.'

'I know I didn't. I couldn't. It would just have made you feel guilty for leaving.'

'We'll see how you feel at the end of the summer, you might be ready for me to go again,' I say, smiling.

'I doubt it, Luce.'

'Okay,' I say, 'I'll stay in Melbourne until the semester is over. It's only seven more weeks.'

'Good. Now I've got something else I want to give to you. I've been holding on to it for a long time. I always thought I'd wait and give it to you on the day you told me I was going to be a grandpa. But after today, I think now is the right time.'

'What? A grandpa? What is it Dad?'

'It's a letter your mum wrote, to you, a few weeks before you were due.'

'It is?'

'Yes. And I hope you know it already, but if not, it should help you see how much she loved you.'

Dear Baby,

My baby. Oh how I love being able to say that. I've always known that I wanted a family. That I wanted you. You're not even here yet, but already I feel so full, I feel whole.

*I haven't really had a family of my own for a while. It was just Aunt Maude and me for a long time, until I met your dad and was welcomed into his family. Even though I miss my own mum and dad, I try not to spend my time wallowing that they're gone or getting disappointed that they can't be here to meet you and to love you, too. Instead, each time I feel you kick or flip inside me, I imagine the new family we are all a part of. I imagine you, and your father, and me. I imagine birthdays and Christmases, first steps and the first day of school. I imagine looking into your eyes and holding your hand, lying with you, skin against skin, for the first time. I also imagine the little things, the everyday moments, you saying my name in a crowd, us in the kitchen together, you sitting on your dad's shoulders and me reading *The Secret Garden* to you.*

And your dad, I think he's even more excited than I am. I keep catching him, just sitting in your nursery staring out the window, smiling. You're the luckiest baby in the world to have him as a dad. He has so much love to give. Part of what I love about him, about being married to him, is that I know I can get through anything because he'll always be there, no matter what. And he'll be there for you, too. He'll always protect you. He'll support you and listen to you. He'll teach you to be kind and thoughtful. He'll always love you. We'll always love you.

In a few weeks we'll both get to meet you properly. We'll get to hold you. To feel you. To name you. We'll get to take you home from the hospital and start our new life together. The three of us. As a family.

I can't wait to meet you.

Love, your mum.

When I'm trying to fall asleep I think about everything that I've learnt today, about why Dad moved us to Warrnambool, about everything that's in the box. And I think about Jem, about how she said I was different. I wonder whether she's right. Have I changed since the start of the year? When I applied to study nursing, when I moved to Melbourne, I did it all so I could be like my mum. I didn't just want to find out who she was; I wanted to be like her. I thought that was the only way I'd feel close to her. But now, after meeting Jodie, after learning about my mum, after starting my nursing degree, after talking to Dad, I've learnt that I don't have to try so hard. I've learnt that I don't have to be the same as my mum to feel close to her. I already am like her and that makes my connection to her feel even stronger. And I know that that's what she would have wanted. I don't think she would have wanted me to live in Melbourne just because she did. Or that she would have wanted me to be a nurse just because she was. I think she would want me to do what makes me happy. She would want me to find out what makes me who I am. But I don't know what that is yet. I don't know when I'll know, but at least I'm looking out for it now. At least I'm getting closer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I've been staring at the ceiling for nearly twenty minutes, massaging my neck and shoulders. I'm meant to be typing up my first journal entry for placement. It's part of one of my assessments, but knowing I probably won't ever go back to nursing again is making it hard to get motivated. I haven't admitted this very often, but Dad is right about at least finishing the semester. And I've been thinking about staying at uni afterwards, maybe transferring to Deakin in Warrnambool, maybe studying arts.

When Claire and Sean both get home I tell them that I'm moving home at the end of the year. Claire asks me what I'm going to do.

'Are you going to transfer and do nursing in Warrnambool?' she asks.

'No, I don't want to be a nurse. Not now anyway,' I say.

'So what are you going to do?' Sean asks.

'I don't know really. I've been thinking about how different my life would have been, how different I could have been, if Dad and I had moved back to England after Mum died.'

'Well, you wouldn't have met us,' Sean says, giving me a little smile.

'I know,' I say. 'Trying to find out about Mum has made me think about people and who they are. About how they define themselves. How they learn. How they grow. How growing up somewhere different would have influenced who I became,' I try to explain.

'So is that what you want to do now?' Claire asks.

'Maybe,' I say. 'I don't know if it's something I want to do, as a career, but I'd like to learn about it.'

'Sounds interesting,' Sean says.

'Yeah and there's history and literature. And there's teaching or media studies. I'll work it out,' I tell them.

The intercom for the front door to the apartment complex buzzes from the kitchen. It's Jem, so I get up to let her in. I open the front door so she can just come in when she gets up the stairs and go back to save my work. I hear Jem before she even gets to the first floor landing. She's stumbling up the stairs and crashing into the walls, carrying her backpack and lugging two beanbags behind her.

'Jeez Luce, do you have to live up so many floors? I'm stuffed.' She flings one of the beanbags into our lounge room, hitting the coffee table and sending Claire's candle and coasters onto the floor. She dumps the other one right in the walkway to the kitchen and the bathroom.

'What are you carrying those around for?' I ask, as I reset the coffee table, straightening the magazines that sit on the shelf underneath.

Jem rolls her eyes at me and says, 'Well, Mel and Trav had a huge fight over the weekend, throwing shit and telling each other that they'd both cheated. So they broke up. Mel got her brother to come around on Sunday while Trav was at work and move her stuff out, and it turns out all the lounge room furniture was hers. So now we have nothing to sit on. The first night we had to dismantle the coffee table and sit on the milk crates. And they hurt, even with a cushion. But now we have these. I found them on the footpath just around the corner from work, so I grabbed them on the way here. People were giving me weird looks on the tram.'

'Ew. How do you know where they've been?'

'I don't. And I don't care. I can't exactly afford a new couch. My daddy doesn't pay for things like yours,' she says. I'm about to defend myself, to tell her that she's wrong, that my dad hasn't given me any money since I moved here. That I actually work and save. But I decide it's not worth it. 'Plus I never knew where Mel's couch came from,' she continues, not even realising that what she said got to me. 'Trav once spilt a whole bowl of tomato soup on it and couldn't get the stain out so he decided to just flip the cushion, but there was an even bigger stain on the other side.' I shudder a little, thinking about the times I slept on that couch.

'How are you going to get them home?' I ask.

'Same way I got them here. Or I'll flirt with Sean until he offers to drive me home. Is he here tonight?'

'Nah, he's working,' I say, thinking it's lucky for Sean. 'Maybe just leave them in the corner and we'll go do a few laps of the Tan. Claire showed me a good Japanese place near Domain Junction that I thought we could grab some takeaway from on the way home.'

'Yeah sure, whatever,' Jem says.

We walk around the Army Barracks and cross St. Kilda Road to get to the Tan, Jem talking about her weekend the whole way. Even though I often walk the Tan alone, or sometimes with Claire, I feel a sense of community among the other Melbournians who stop here to exercise on their way to or from work. I imagine we all share an appreciation of the natural buffer it offers in the heart of the city. Jem and I walk along Lithgow Avenue, past the Sidney Myer Music Bowl and Batman Avenue, and get to the Alexander Street hill and Jem is still talking. She tells me how she ended up at a party with Dan on Saturday night, after she got sick of listening to Mel and Trav screaming at each other. About how the party got really awkward when Zeb turned up, because Zeb and Dan hate each other.

'So I just grabbed a bottle of vodka from the drinks table, skulled half of it and avoided them both for the rest of the night. I was pretty hungover on Sunday so I didn't really mind that you didn't come round,' she says.

Jem knew I'd cancelled because I was back home for the weekend, even though I wasn't planning on going back for another few weeks, but we were over half way through our walk and she still hadn't asked me how my weekend was or why I'd decided to go home early. I let her go on about Dan and Zeb until we're at the Japanese place and waiting for our order. And then, because I know she isn't going to ask me herself, I say, 'My weekend was good. It was good to get back home.' She pulls a face, raising her eyebrows and screwing up her nose.

'I wouldn't call a weekend back in Warrnambool good. But mostly because I'd have to see Barb. What was so good about it?' she asks.

'It was good to just relax. I took Harry to the beach a couple of times.' I wasn't sure if I was going to tell her about talking to Dad, about Jodie being there, about what was in the box or about the deal Dad and I had made. I'd spent most of the walk trying to psych myself up to tell her.

'You should just move Harry up here and then you'd never have to go back.'

'Well, no, because... actually... I'm moving back at the end of the year.'

'Ha! Funny Luce. Like you'd move back.'

'I'm not joking, Jem. That's why I went back over the weekend, to talk to Dad about it.'

'Great, so it's your dad making you move back,' Jem says, raising her hands. 'He didn't want you to come here in the first place. Why do you even listen to him? He's so boring. Of course he wants you to go back, he wants you to have a boring life like him.'

'He's not making me. And even if he was, you can't talk about him like that. I had a good talk to Jodie on Thursday night and she made me realise I'd moved here and started nursing for the wrong reasons.'

'Jodie,' Jem spits out, throwing her hands up again. 'I should have known as soon as you said it wasn't your dad.'

'Jem!' I look around to see if anyone in the restaurant has heard her. 'It was neither of them. It was me. I decided. I want to move back. I wanted to move back now but Dad actually convinced me to finish off the year.'

'Can you hear what you're saying?' Jem snaps at me, getting even louder. 'He convinced you. She made you realise. Do you do anything for yourself? Fuck Lucy, it's your life.'

'That's not fair, Jem,' I say back, getting louder myself. 'I went to Jodie. I told Dad I was finishing uni. I'm deciding what to do with my life. That's more than you can say.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It's supposed to mean, I'm at least trying to find out what I want to do. I tried uni. I took a chance. It might not have worked out, but at least I did something. What are you doing?'

'I'm having fun. I'm being nineteen.'

'What? So getting fired from three jobs in the last six months and getting high every

weekend is fun?’

‘Yeah, if you’re not an uptight prude.’

‘So I’m an uptight prude, am I? What? Is it because I want a career? Or because I don’t take drugs?’

‘No you’re an uptight prude because you think you’re better than me.’

‘I don’t think I’m better than you.’

‘Yes, you do. You look down on me and you don’t even know it. Which actually makes me smarter than you. How do you like that?’

‘No you’re not smarter, because you’re wrong.’

‘I’m not wrong. I’ve seen you give me the look.’

‘What look?’

‘The pity look. When people look at me and realise their lives could be worse.’

‘Ever thought you just think that’s what people think of you because that’s how you feel about yourself?’

‘No, you do give it to me. So does Claire. God, when I suggested you move in with her, I didn’t think you’d turn in to her. Boring and judgemental.’

‘Is that what you really think of me?’ I ask, standing up. Neither of us realise that two of the waiters are starting to point at us because they’ve noticed the people inside are watching us instead of eating their food. Jem stands up so that we are at eye level again.

‘Maybe it is,’ she says, as she steps in closer to me. So close that I can feel her breath on my cheek.

‘And what do people think of you?’ I ask.

‘I don’t give a shit. That’s where we’re different.’

‘Well maybe you should.’

‘You know what Lucy, maybe the quicker you go back to Warrnambool the better,’ Jem says as she walks out, knocking my shoulder and our food that the waiter is carrying at the same time.

‘Jem!’ I shout after her, but she’s already storming off down the street. I go to follow her, but the waiter stops me.

‘Miss, your food. You must pay.’

So I walk home by myself. Walking as quickly as my anger will let me. I’ve probably set a new record getting home. I can’t understand Jem. I can’t work out what’s gotten in to her. It can’t all be about Jodie still, or all about me moving home. I know I sprung it on her, I know I shouldn’t have told her like that. But she just keeps lashing out at me. Nothing I do is right; nothing I do is good enough. Nothing makes her happy.

After replaying our fight over and over in my head for the next twenty-four hours and not coming up with any answers, I almost decide not to tell Jodie about it when I get to her

house for dinner that night. I'm embarrassed to tell her that we've had another fight. She

must think it's all Jem and I do. But we never used to. And as angry as she's been making me and as confused as I am, she's still my best friend and I can't forget everything she's done for me. How she always stood up for me and how she helped make me feel normal, like less of an outsider because I was different to everyone else.

'When I got home the beanbags were still there and I had \$30 of Japanese takeaway that I could barely afford,' I finish telling Jodie.

'Have you heard from her since?' Jodie asks.

'No. I messaged her to see if she still wanted the beanbags. Claire and Sean are sick of them taking up room at home. But she didn't text back. Sean said to just throw them out, but I couldn't do it. So instead, this morning I got him to drive me around there to drop them off.

Trav was home and I asked him to get Jem to give me a call, but either he didn't pass it on or she just ignored it. She has to know I've been there though once she sees the beanbags.'

'She's probably just disappointed that you're moving back. I remember you telling me how excited she was when you decided to come to Melbourne for uni.'

'No it's more than that. It wasn't just disappointment. It was stronger than that. She was mean. She wanted to hurt me.'

'Do you think it's because you didn't go to her first?'

'I don't know, maybe. But why would I go to her first? She doesn't care, she didn't even ask me why I went home last weekend; I just had to tell her.'

'Is there something going on in her life that you might not know about? She didn't know you were thinking about leaving uni, so maybe she's preoccupied with something. Have you thought to ask?'

'I'm really not sure,' I say, everything Sean and Claire have told me about Jem running through my head.

'Okay. Well, what are you going to do next? Try and contact her again?'

'I don't know what else I can do. We're meant to hang out this Sunday, so maybe I'll just go around then and hope she's there. Hope she's gotten over it.'

When I get home that night I make Claire and myself a cup of tea and when I go to get the milk out of the fridge for Claire, I see the sushi on the top shelf. I know it will be no good anymore, so I throw it out. Doing so makes me sad, so I make a promise to myself that when I see Jem on Sunday I'll talk to her, properly. I'll stay calm and we'll work it all out. We have to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I knock on the front door for the third time, banging harder than would usually be polite. She's probably got her music on too loud or is in the shower. I'm about to ring her mobile phone again when her neighbour John, a retired school teacher whose hobby it is to spy on the people who live in the other units, opens his front door and steps outside. John the gatekeeper, always watchful of the car spaces and the custom of using the communal bins, has seen me enough times to know I'm no threat to the compound.

'Hi Lucy. She should be in there; I saw her come through about twenty minutes ago. Maybe you could call her; I don't think the banging about is getting you anywhere.'

'Oh thanks John, I'll just give her another call,' I say. But I don't. Instead, after he's gone inside and I've seen him peek out through the curtains, I grab the spare key from inside the old gumboot that sits at the front door and let myself in.

'You better be doing something important, Jem. I knocked a hundred times and called you a couple of times, too.'

Once I stop talking, I realise how quiet the unit is. There isn't any music playing, she hasn't left the TV on, and the shower isn't running.

'Hey Jem, where are you?'

No answer.

Standing just inside the front door, I can see that she isn't in the lounge room or the kitchen. I check her bedroom; her phone, wallet and keys are on the filing cabinet. I walk further down the hallway, noticing through the bathroom door that the door to the toilet is also open. She must be in the backyard; I often find her there drawing. She's always done her best thinking with a pencil in her hand, solutions coming to her as the smudge on the inside of her palm grows.

'Couldn't you hear me knocking from out there, Jem? You're lucky nosy John told me you were here. I nearly gave up and went home,' I shout as I walk the rest of the way down the hallway. I get to the end of the hall but the back door is shut. I know straight away she isn't out there; she never shuts the door to the house if she's sitting outside, but I check anyway just in case. All that's in the backyard, among the knee high grass and an old gym set of Trav's, is her bike, an empty washing basket and a load of washing hanging from the crooked clothesline, already dry. It's odd that she isn't here, especially if John thinks she is, but I guess she can't be far away. I go back into the house to see if she's in Shelly's or Trav's room. She's not. Then I check the kitchen again to see if she's left me a note, but there's nothing on the kitchen bench or on the milk crate coffee table. Maybe she's gone out to the bins or walked to the 7-Eleven down the street?

I find the cleanest spot on the couch and turn on the TV; an afternoon cooking show fills the screen. A chef explains how you can trick your fussy kids by hiding veggies in Bolognese sauce. I turn the TV off. I check the water inside the kettle to see if it's clean because once I found a dead fly floating in it. I turn it on so it will be boiled for when Jem gets back. To fill in time, I decide I'll help her out by bringing in the load of washing from the backyard. I keep the back door open so I'll hear her if she comes in. There isn't a full load on the clothesline, just a few towels and a fitted sheet. I walk back inside just as the kettle clicks off. The bathroom is a tight space; as soon as I get past the door I have to take a step to the right so that I can close it and make room to get to the washing machine. With the basket resting on my hip I push the door and freeze. Then my legs collapse underneath me and I start gasping for air.

At first my brain can't register what I'm seeing. The bath full of bloody water and Jem's hair, floating across her face, catching on her neck and mouth as if it were strangling her. From my knees, I lunge toward her, plunging my arms into the water, trying to haul her limp body out of the bath. Her head is still above water, the level too shallow for full submergence. I struggle to get a hold of her. Her arms are slick, covered in a slimy film. Kneeling beside the bath, I don't have the strength to lift her body over the edge; instead, the water draws her back in. I hesitate, only slightly, before stepping into the bath, knowing it's the only way I can get the leverage to pull her out. The water is lukewarm, but it's the consistency that startles me as it ebbs to make way for my feet, then flows back to surround my calves, moulding around them like quicksand. I bend over and loop my arms through Jem's, clutching my own shoulders to connect the link, to make my grip stronger. I tug her close to the bath's edge, inching my feet along with me. There is a metallic tang in the air. I can taste it, like I've been sucking on a coin. I straighten back up to a standing position, pulling Jem up with me, her lower back starting to surface from the water, her head lolling forward, chin to chest, devoid of all muscle control. I lift my left leg out, over the bath, heaving Jem along with me. I slip on the water that splashes over the side of the bath. I can't steady myself under her weight and I collapse again on the bathroom floor. I land awkwardly, my right foot still caught up on the edge of the bath, Jem lying face up across my lap. My chest is heaving under the pressure, but she is finally out. I grab the towels that are strewn across the bathroom floor, the washing basket abandoned beside them. I use the first towel to tie her wrists together, the freshly oozing blood a deep scarlet in comparison to the diluted paleness of the bath water. I use the remaining towels to cover Jem's wet body and the goose bumps starting to spread across her arms and her translucent skin.

I know I have to call for help, but the thought of leaving her lying in her blood-stained white singlet and underwear on the cold bathroom tiles is unbearable. I wriggle out from under her

and as I stand up I brush her hair off her face. I don't know if she can hear me but I whisper, 'I'll be right back Jem, hold on, please, for me.' I run into the lounge room where I left my bag and fumble around inside for my mobile phone. I'm dialling 000. When it starts to ring my breath catches and I realise I've been screaming, but I don't know for how long. The call connects and the operator asks, 'Emergency – police, fire or ambulance?'

'Ambulance,' I hear a click as I'm connected to the ambulance call centre.

'What is the exact address of the emergency?'

'219 Miller Street, North Fitzroy. Unit 9. Unit 9/219 Miller Street.'

'What is the phone number you are calling from?'

'It's mine, my mobile.'

'Tell me exactly what happened.'

But I can't, I don't know. The other questions were easy, routine. They didn't require me saying that my best friend had... had tried to...

'Ma'am, what's your name?' Another easy question.

'Lucy.'

'Okay Lucy, I need you to tell me what has happened.'

'Jem... Jem, my friend, she... she...' but I can't; I don't know how to say it.

'Lucy it's okay, I can help. I just need to know what has happened.'

'She, she tried to kill herself.'

'Okay Lucy, thanks. Someone is on their way there now. You're doing great. I just need to ask you a few more questions. How did your friend hurt herself?'

'The bath. I found her in the bath. There's blood, in the bath. She... her arms.'

'Okay Lucy, not long now. Is she awake?'

'No, I... no.'

'Do you know if she is breathing Lucy?'

I'm standing back in the doorway of the bathroom. Jem is there, on the ground, her legs caught up awkwardly underneath her, her arms wrapped together by her side, her upper body covered in a towel.

'Lucy, is she breathing? Can you check?'

I crouch down next to her; I've learnt enough at uni to know that the cuts will stop me from getting a proper read of her pulse at her wrist, so I have to check on her neck. It's the first time since I found her that I've looked at her face properly. I feel for a pulse but I don't know, is it hers or is it mine thumping through my body down to my fingers?

'I don't know, I can't feel, it's... I don't know.'

'Lucy can you tell me if she's letting out any air from her nose or mouth?' I hold my hand over her face, it's shaking. But all I can feel is how cold she is.

'No... I can't. Is that...What should I...?'

'It's okay Lucy, you've done well, they're almost there.'

I lift Jem's shoulders up and pull her into my lap again. The weight of her a comfort. Proof that she's still here. I look down at her. At her eyes. They're open, but they're vacant. She stares through me as if there's someone there. I turn around, following her gaze and there's John, standing by the doorframe, his feet still on the carpet in the hallway, not willing to cross the threshold.

'Oh Lucy. I heard screaming. Is she... is she...?' But he can't ask the question any more than I can answer it. Noise from the front door saves us both, interrupting the possibility, or the impossibility.

'I'll...' John tries, as he walks into the hallway, towards the door.

'They're here, Jem,' I whisper in her ear, 'it's going to be okay, you're going to be okay.' I reach for her hand; it's cold and tacky, the blood starting to clot.

John returns, followed by two paramedics. John stays in the hallway again, the paramedics rush past him, their sense of urgency bringing me back to the horror.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The paramedics move with an intensity that my shock hasn't allowed me. They're seemingly unaffected by the situation, as if they haven't registered Jem's sodden body lying awkwardly on the bathroom tiles, her hair beginning to clump together in crusty dreadlocks or John crouching in the hallway, still unable to enter the bathroom or complete a full sentence. I see my best friend slipping away from me; they see a problem they can fix.

They work with care, their movements precise as they announce each of their actions and prompt each other's tasks. They start working on Jem as soon as they arrive. They straighten her body.

'Airways clear, no breath, but I've got a threadypulse.'

'I need an O2 bag and we can start compressions.'

'You work the bag, I'll pump.'

'Two breaths, thirty compressions.'

The lead paramedic places a mouth piece over Jem's bluing lips and squeezes the inflated bag connected to it, leaving the mask in place while the second paramedic begins compressions on Jem's chest.

His hands dip lower than it seems possible, deeper than it seems Jem's chest can withhold. The flex in her ribcage as he presses his weight down onto her chest, causing her body to almost bounce as it springs up from the tiles due to the force. When he stops the compressions, the unnatural stillness of Jem's body, as it resettles, startles me. Watching her body respond to the CPR has made me forget how lifeless she's become.

The lead paramedic squeezes the bag twice more before the second round of compressions begins.

Then she asks me, 'Your name's Lucy, isn't it?'

I'm surprised that she even notices me nod in response.

'Lucy, my name is Lindsey, I need you to tell me what happened to your friend.'

'I came to see Jem. I couldn't find her. I yelled out. I looked in the house. Outside. I looked outside. Then I found her. In here. I found her in here.'

'Okay, so you found her in the bathroom Lucy. Was she in the bath? Did you get her out of the bath?'

'Yes, I... I couldn't, I tried.'

'Lucy, was Jem under water? Was her face underwater?'

'No, she was... floating. I... I could see her face.'

'Lungs should be clear, no water on board', she says to the other paramedic before she pumps the bag again.

'You did a good job stopping the bleeding, Lucy,' she says, as she removes the towels from Jem's wrists gently. They have started to stick to Jem's skin. My body lurches as I see the jagged horizontal line, gaping, just before Lindsey covers it again with a bandage.

'We've got rhythm; let's get her on the stretcher and to St V's. Tell them we're on the way.'

'Go,' John says and nods after the stretcher. 'I'll—' he looks back into the bathroom, 'I'll cl... take care of things here,' he says.

I follow behind the paramedics, down the driveway toward the ambulance. My feet move involuntarily, keeping me close to Jem.

The legs of the stretcher clatter as they collapse to go in the back of the ambulance. It's noisy and rough.

A crowd has gathered on the opposite side of the street. People stare at Jem, they whisper behind hands and nod in my direction. I know they're wondering. Making assumptions. But they don't know, they won't know. They couldn't even imagine.

Lindsey climbs in after Jem, while the other paramedic helps me step up before going around to the driver's side.

'Mike, I'm putting in a drip. A litre of saline.'

'Sure, ETA ten,' he replies.

'Lucy, do you know if Jem is allergic to anything? Any medications?' Lindsey asks, reaching into a container on a low shelf running the length of the ambulance, pulling out a bag with clear fluid inside.

'No I don't... think so. I don't know.'

'That's okay. What about medication, do you know if she takes any medication for anything?' She takes a needle out of its wrapping.

'No, nothing. She doesn't take any... she's not on any medication.'

'Could she have taken something else, Lucy?' Lindsey asks, picking up on my uncertainty.

'I don't know. Maybe. She does, sometimes. I don't... I don't know what though.'

Lindsey pauses, briefly, so briefly that it's almost unnoticeable.

'Lucy did you notice anything in the bathroom, or anywhere else in the house? Pills? Or a needle? Or any... powder?'

'No I didn't, I wasn't looking...'

Lindsey pulls the blanket down, exposing Jem's arms. She looks on the inside of her arms, turning them over in her hands.

'There's no obvious scarring from IV drug use. I'm inserting the cannula in the cubital fossa, the dressings are blocking the cephalic veins.'

I cringe as Lindsey pushes the needle into the inside of Jem's arm and have to look away when I see the blood come to the surface. Lindsey removes the needle and connects the tube of the drip.

When we get to St Vincent's, Mike gets out and opens the doors for us. He helps Lindsey get the stretcher out and they wheel Jem into emergency. We're met by hospital staff and again I'm surprised by how detached they are. How they can assess the situation in a minute and act straight away, without getting caught up by the weight of it all. Of a nineteen-year-old girl, lying still, wounded, damaged. And by her own hand.

'Nineteen-year-old female, attempted suicide, lacerations to both wrists. Unresponsive on arrival, thready pulse, not breathing. Began CPR, de-fib pads attached, saline infusion commenced.'

And with that Jem's gone.

'Lucy, you'll have to stay here. This is Holly, she's a nurse, she's going to take you to the family waiting room.'

'Lucy, why don't you come this way?' Holly asks. Her hand hovers near my back without touching me, as if to guide me.

I follow her down the hallway, in the opposite direction to where they took Jem. Wherever they took her. I keep looking back over my shoulder. I feel like I'm getting further and further away from her. That with each step I take, with each new person I speak to, she's slipping away. I should have stayed with her. She needs to know that I'm there. I should have been there. I should have known.

'Lucy this is a private waiting area. You can stay here, no one will disturb you. One of the doctors should be back soon to talk to you, to give you an update. There are some scrubs on the chair there, and a bathroom in the corner. You can get changed out of those wet clothes and clean up. If you need anything, just come to the nurse's station and ask for me,' Holly says, speaking in a low, even tone like she's approaching an injured wild animal, trying not to spook it. 'I'll come back and get some details from you once you're cleaned up,' Holly says as she leaves the waiting area.

My hands are steadier than before, but they still won't move properly for me. It's like that delayed reaction you get when you're really cold, between your brain and your extremities. I'm telling my hands to unzip my jumper and they know how, but they just can't seem to perform the movements. My hands hover at my chest, in front of the zip, unable to grasp it. Stuck. I look at myself in the mirror, noticing for the first time the dried blood on my forehead and in my hair. I stare at myself and take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. Telling myself that I *can* do this.

I try the zip again and this time I'm able to move it down. I shift, almost involuntarily, slightly turning each shoulder so that I can take my arms out of the sleeves. Once my t-shirt is off I put it with my jumper into the bag Holly gave me and pull on the cold, green starched top, strong with the smell of washing powder.

Once it's on, I manage to kick off my water-logged shoes and work the button on my jeans, before pulling on the pants and struggling with their drawstring waist. I fumble with the tie, trying to keep the pants around my waist but they fall straight back down to my hips. The hems bunch on the floor, inches too long, making me look like I'm playing dress-up. Playing at being an adult in the real world.

In the waiting room there's a coffee table stacked with magazines and a TV hanging from the wall. But this is the emergency department; anyone in here would be waiting because someone they know, someone they love, is hurt. Or dying. How could they be in here reading or watching TV? Entertaining themselves while someone they love is being cut open, or cut apart, or stitched, or pronounced dead.

One of the walls is lined with pamphlets about disability services, organ donation and grief counselling, telling those in the room that their wait isn't likely to end well.

I don't know how long I've been at the hospital, but eventually a doctor comes into the waiting room with Holly and a middle-aged woman wearing a navy blue skirt and a shirt covered with the St Vincent's logo.

'Lucy, I'm Dr. Samuels, you can call me Alex. You've met Holly and this is Louise, she's from Counselling and Support Services. I just want to tell you how your friend is and then Louise can help you. Now, Jem has lost a lot of blood, so we have had to put her in an induced coma. This is just a precaution to keep her rested so that her body can have a chance to repair itself. We don't know how long she might have been without oxygen, so we'll have to wait for her to wake up before we know the extent of her injuries. We're giving her more blood and another doctor is working to stitch up the wounds on her wrists. And again, once she's awake we'll be able to ascertain if there's been any nerve damage to her wrists. Do you have any questions?'

'When can I see her?'

'It won't be for a few hours yet Lucy, I'm sorry. And she may not be awake until tomorrow evening or the next day. And even then I can't guarantee that she'll be responsive. She's going to have a long recovery and that's the best case scenario. She's very lucky to be alive. She has you to thank for that. But as soon as she's settled, Holly will come and get you and you can at least sit with her.'

'Okay,' I say, because it's all that I can manage.

Responsive. Lucky to be alive. His words keep going around in my head. I thought that once Lindsey and Mike got her breathing again everything would be okay. I didn't realise, I didn't know, that the damage could be lasting. I want to ask if he thinks she might have brain damage, but I can't bring myself to.

'I'll leave you with Louise now, but I'll be back again later when I have more news.'

'Okay,' I say again, watching Dr. Samuels and Holly leave the room. Louise puts her hand on my shoulder and leads me towards the couch.

'Let's have a seat Lucy, and we can have a chat. You just sit down here beside me,' she says, prompting my actions, trying to guide me with her voice. 'I'm here to help you through this. To support you and make sure that you're okay. Holly has already called Jem's foster parents. They're on their way. Now did you understand what Dr. Samuels said?'

'That Jem might not, that she might not be... Jem.'

'There is a possibility, depending on how long Jem wasn't breathing, how long she was deprived of oxygen, that it may have had an effect on her brain. That it could result in impaired brain functioning. But it is still very early and too soon to tell. That's why she's been put in an induced coma, so that her body and her brain have the best chance to heal themselves.'

'Is she in pain?'

'No, she won't be aware of anything that's happening at the moment, which means she won't feel any pain.'

I feel awful because there's a part of me that's disappointed in this. That she isn't feeling anything even though she knew I would be. That she knew I'd find her, that she knew what she was putting me through, that she wanted me to find her dead.

'I don't understand... she didn't say anything... I didn't know.' Or I don't think I did. I was searching my memory for signs, for hints.

'Lucy, Jem is unwell. It can be very hard to see the signs of depression or suicide. Particularly when someone wants to hide them from you. It's very unlikely that you could have prevented this.' We had been fighting more and maybe we were drifting apart, but was that enough to make someone want to kill themselves? Or was that not what this was? Was this for attention? Did she not want me to go? Did she think this would make me stay? Could she not have just spoken to me?

'I yelled at her the last time we saw each other. We had a big fight.'

'This is not your fault, Lucy. You need to remember that Jem is sick. She's no more responsible for what is happening to her than someone with a chronic illness and neither are you,' Louise says, trying to reassure me.

'I know. I just don't understand, that's all.'

'It's hard,' Louise says, 'sometimes with mental illness, loved ones never get all the answers they need. That's why I'm here, to help you work through it. Now is there anyone you would like to call?'

The detachment that the paramedics and the hospital staff must feel starts to wash over me. I'm worried about Jem, about how badly she has hurt herself, about the damage she may have caused. I'm anxious for her to wake up, to know how she is. I feel sorry for her. I pity her. I understand that I may have played a part in this, but I don't blame myself. It's not my fault. If she is okay, if she can recover, she has to heal herself. I can't be the one to fix her; I'm not her solution.

'Yes, I'd like to call someone please,' I reply, realising for the first time that I left my phone and bag at Jem's.

'Okay, would you like to call them or would you like me to?' Louise asks.

'No, I can do it,' I say.

'Of course,' Louise says, as she hands me a mobile phone from her pocket. 'Would you like me to leave you to make it on your own?'

'No that's fine, it won't take long.' I take the phone from her hand and dial the number. It rings a few times before I hear the familiar voice on the other end. 'I need you. Can you please come to Melbourne, Dad?'

EPILOGUE

My feet sink an inch into the sand; each footstep clearly marking my path along the curve of the beach. I can see my destination in the distance. The point where the sand ends, replaced by kelp-covered rocks, too slippery to cross. The salt in the air clings to my skin, damp from the walk, while the smell of the sea fills my lungs as I inhale deeply, craving oxygen. I walk to the rhythm of the waves crashing, receding back out towards the horizon and returning to crash on the shore again.

In this isolated, untouched area, I feel secure in the fact that I know every inch of what lies around me. To the left, beyond the dunes is the town. To the right, an endless expanse of ocean. I've already passed the main part of the beach, the surf life-saving club and the Flume. It's not like Melbourne; there aren't any new cafes or bars opening, or an array of hidden laneways to explore. Things here don't change much, but it's familiar. I know here. But more important than that, I know who I am here.

Ahead of me is Granny's Grave. I climb the steep limestone steps onto the dunes, towards the solitary grave of the female settler whose name isn't even correct on her headstone.

The first thing I do each time I arrive is take off my shoes and socks. With the sand under my feet I feel more connected to her. Then I place the single flower I've carried with me in my hair on the upper curve of the headstone. I sit down, cross-legged, within arm's reach of the bluestone marker.

Although the headstone reads Mrs. James Raddleston, her name is Agnes Ruttleton. She arrived in Warrnambool, with her husband James, in the late 1840s, but no one knows from where. Most think they were probably convicts from Van Diemen's Land. But it doesn't matter to me. What matters is that no one knows when or where she was born, or when she came to Australia, or why.

Until I moved to Melbourne, before I met Jodie, before I started really talking to my dad, I thought of Mum like Granny, unknown and forgotten. Lost to time.

The dunes rustle in the wind and occasionally a bird will appear, jolting me out of my thoughts, but otherwise there is silence. I've always come here to think and to talk to her. Sometimes out loud, sometimes in my head. Sometimes I simply sit, waiting for answers. Sometimes I sit here for hours, but I never feel alone. I talk to them both. To Granny and to Mum. I hated that I couldn't visit Mum's grave. That she was alone. That she was so far away from me. So instead I visited Granny's. It was some consolation that I was able to make sure she wasn't on her own.

Sitting here I'd tell Mum about my day. I'd tell her the mundane things I would have told her in the car on the way home from school if she'd been there to pick me up. I'd ask her

questions, the questions I wanted to ask Dad but didn't have the courage to ask, about what she was like and what she thought of me, and then make up the answers myself.

And I'd ask Granny what it was like living in Warrnambool all those years ago and how it felt to be so far away from home. Because even though Warrnambool was where I'd lived basically all of my life, I still felt lost. And I used to think, that maybe for me, my mum was home. That until I knew her I'd never truly feel settled. Never find where I belong.

But now I know that's not true. After moving to Melbourne, after meeting Jodie, after getting to know my dad again and finally feeling like I know who Mum was. After Jem. Who's somewhere between. Between anger and acceptance. Between forgetting and forgiving. Between who she is and who she wants to be. And that's okay. I know it's okay because it's a place I used to be, with her. Between my past and my present. Between my mum and my dad. Between what should have been and what was.

But I've realised I have to choose. I have to choose a place. A place for me. A place for the future. And it doesn't have to be a physical place; it just has to be home. My home. Which isn't a building on a street somewhere with a letterbox out the front. It's in me. I am my own home. I carry my place. And as long as I know who I am, I'll be home. I'll belong.

And who am I? I may not know what I want to do or where I want to be. I may not have my whole future mapped out. But I know who I am. I'm Lucy Wallace. I'm eighteen years old. I live in Warrnambool, Victoria. And I like living here. I like that I know my neighbours and that I have the same friends from primary school. But I also liked living in Melbourne. I liked the possibilities it offered and I liked making new friends like Claire and Sean. I like what I learnt about myself there. And I know I want to keep learning about myself. I know who I am will change. That will keep changing. But one thing won't change, that I'm the daughter of David and Beth Wallace.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since literature began to be written with a child or young adult (YA) reader in mind, the possible impact of certain texts on the moral, social and psychological development of their readers has been widely acknowledged (Hunt 2006, Lilliss 2010, Miller 2014). This possible impact of YA literature has led to fearful responses and attempts to censor novels. This was again made evident in 2015, when Ted Dawe's novel *Into the River* (2012) was banned in New Zealand due to its depiction of racism, bullying and drug use, as well as its use of profanities. Christian lobby group, Family First, filed an appeal to have the book reviewed and a restriction order placed on its publication (Office of Film and Literature 2015), as is discussed in Chapter Two.

Recent media attention directed at YA realistic fiction, such as the censorship of Ted Dawe's novel *Into the River* (2012) and the 2014 Great YA Debate, as discussed in both Chapter Two and Chapter Three, demonstrates that the genre is a topical subject matter. This is also demonstrated by the fact that YA literature is one of the fastest growing genres in publishing, both in sales and readership. At the annual Nielsen's Children's Book Summit in 2016, it was revealed that while the overall book market had increased by 33% since 2004, the children's book market had grown 52% in the same period (Jarrad 2016). While according to YA theorist Danielle Binks (2013), in 2013 children's and YA books made up 46.4% of all book sales in Australia. Despite the increased readership of literature written for a YA readership, the censorship of Ted Dawe's novel, and the debate about who should read literature written for young adults, went largely overlooked in Australian academic writing. This omission demonstrates the need for further research in the discipline. This is just one of the ways where my thesis has made a contribution to the already existing discourse on the YA realistic fiction genre.

This creative thesis is comprised of a novel for young adults, *Somewhere between*, and an exegesis, *Somewhere Between: The Shifting Trends in the Narrative Strategies and Preoccupations of the Young Adult Realistic Fiction Genre in Australia*. The novel component is 70% of the total word count of the thesis and the exegesis 30%.

In the novel, I aim to explore and build on the changing narrative structures and preoccupations of Australian novels from the YA realistic fiction genre that I have identified, particularly in regards to the portrayal of the main protagonist's self-awareness, the complexity of the subject matter being discussed and the unresolved nature of the novels' endings. This is important in order to highlight the current trends of the genre and to demonstrate how the genre has developed in an Australian context.

Somewhere between, is a YA realistic fiction novel about 17-year-old protagonist, Lucy.

The novel, through first person narration, depicts Lucy's attempts to establish her own identity through the act of finding out information about her deceased mother. The novel focusses on Lucy's development from being both naïve and self-involved, to the point where she is becoming increasingly aware of her own subjectivity through her experience of getting to know who her mother was, repairing her strained relationship with her father and the decline of her relationship with her best friend Jem. The novel concludes where not all of the challenges Lucy faces throughout the novel are resolved, but where Lucy has reached a turning point in acknowledging her own subjectivity.

In the exegesis I argue that the narrative structures and preoccupations of Australian YA realistic fiction novels, published between 1986 and 2013, have shifted, particularly in regards to the portrayal of the main protagonist's self-awareness, the complexity of the subject matter being discussed, and the unresolved nature of the novels' endings. I argue that these shifting trends have led to the publication of YA realistic fiction novels which are more complex, ultimately acknowledging the increasing capabilities of their YA readers.

The exegesis also considers how the genre of YA realistic fiction has changed, both historically and socially, as well as the sociohistorical and/or literary changes this has reflected and/or influenced. It considers the extent to which such a shift has resulted in the destabilisation of the lives of the adolescent protagonists and the increasingly absent points of reassurance in the genre.

Literature Review

This creative doctoral thesis (novel and exegesis) focuses on the genre of contemporary YA realistic fiction, a term which is widely used among publishers and academics. It is categorised as 'a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey towards identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its "Grownup" peers' (Stephens 2007, p. 40- 41). The term is also used by bookseller Amazon (2014), and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) (2016) a division of the American Library Association.

The dominant features of YA realistic fiction include: its propensity to employ a first person, adolescent narrator; and to include subject matter which focuses on social issues that affect adolescents, such as the character's first sexual experience, their first encounter with death or their attempt to define boundaries between themselves and their parents/guardians. It is these conventions that differentiate it from other YA literature genres, such as the YA fantasy genre, known through contemporary novels such as *Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone* (Rowling 1997) and *The hunger games* (Collins 2008). However, the most marked difference of the YA realistic fiction genre is that it is consistently

set in locations familiar to their readers, such as the protagonist's home and/or school, is written using a direct, conversational tone of voice and has, since the 1950s, shifted away from the coming-of-age story to contain themes related to social acceptance and self-awareness (Koss & Teale 2009). This exegesis argues that these texts no longer subscribe to an Enlightenment notion of individual progress and maturation; instead they acknowledge that the constructing/attainment of individual identity is much more fragmented and uncertain than this, resulting in the genre shifting away from rite of passage, linear storylines toward a more complex postmodern notion of shifting subjectivity and liminality, which sees an individual's sense of self as continuously shifting instead of rigidly defined.

Although the term is used widely by publishers and academics, there is no widespread consensus on how to define the genre. In addition to this, Mary Owen (2003) explains that the genre has been referred to in a number of negative ways, such as: 'adult lite'; not a real book; a genre not in its own right; a step up to adult books; novels for slow readers; books just about sex and drugs, dysfunctional families and dropping out; and, a 'sub-literature' not worthy of discussion' (p. 11), as is discussed further in Chapter Three. While I recognise that there is no complete consensus on the genre's definition, I will use the publishing industry's term 'young adult realistic fiction' throughout this exegesis.

Above I use the definition presented by Professor John Stephens (2007), as it includes a reference to the type of protagonist, narrative voice, the themes discussed and highlights the genre's literary value, however it does so by creating opposition between adolescent and adult concerns. In order for the genre to be seen in its own literary right, I argue that the genre needs its own definition, one that does not pit it against adulthood or fiction written for adults. In consideration of the shifting trends in the narrative structures and preoccupations of the genre over the past 30 years, as I have argued throughout this exegesis, I believe that the genre needs to be redefined. Here I offer my own definition: young adult realistic fiction portrays an adolescent protagonist's search for self-awareness through the depiction of relatable events that could conceivably occur, typically told by a first person narrator to a readership of any age.

This literature review identifies and explores the key terms of 'adolescence', 'young adult literature', 'realism', 'the implied reader', 'subjectivity' and 'genre'. This section of the literature review defines and clarifies each of the terms listed above in order to contextualise them for use throughout the rest of the exegesis.

Before a discussion can begin about the history and purpose of YA literature, the specific readership of the genre needs to be examined. The term 'young adult' is used for literature and film media, however it also equates to some extent with the sociological and psychological category of 'adolescence'. An in-depth discussion of the stages and characteristics of the

period of adolescence is beyond the scope of this thesis, which is a creative literary thesis not a sociological or psychological thesis. However further discussion of adolescence can be found in chapter three. Adolescence is usually defined as the period of physiological and emotional growth that occurs between the stages of childhood and adulthood (Dolgin 2010, American Psychological Association 2002, Baxter 2009, Berk 2007). This developmental stage begins at approximately age 12, when the individual starts to mature towards puberty, yet the conclusion of adolescence is less clearly defined (Dolgin 2010). Although experts have not been able to reach a general consensus on the final age of adolescence, they have however come to an agreement that it is both a measurable and yet imprecise transition which occurs differently for each individual (Dolgin 2010, Zarrett & Eccles 2006, Glover 1999). The indeterminacy of the stage has implications for the writing and reception of YA literature.

Research into the stages of adolescence began with American psychologists early in the 20th century. This period coincides directly with the establishment of a stand-alone genre of literature, in the United States of America, separate from children's literature, for individuals whom we now call 'young adults'. This can be seen particularly through the introduction of the juvenile novel, which was established in order to distinguish between tales written for younger children and those written for individuals situated in-between childhood and adulthood. Examples of juvenile novels included titles such as *The mystery of the clock* (Keane 1930) from the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories and *The tower treasure* (Dixon 1927) from The Hardy Boys Mystery Stories (Nilsen & Donelson 2001). It is widely acknowledged that the identification of this new developmental life stage can be directly linked to the establishment of texts specifically targeted to young adults (Wadham & Ostenson 2013, Cart 2010, Pattee 2004). At the same time as social researchers such as Inhelder and Piaget (1958) began to study adolescents and define their maturation, authors, librarians and publishers began to create, classify and market narrative texts that portrayed this experience. In the United States of America these texts came to be classified under the genre of YA literature, when the American Library Association (ALA) formally established the Young Adult Services Division (YASD) (now known as the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)) in 1957 and coined the term young adult (YALSA 2016). The term YA literature is now simply described as 'anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 and 18 choose to read' (Nilsen & Donelson 2001, p. 6). It is further categorised as generally having an adolescent protagonist who tells the story from the first person perspective, of being a moderate length and describing the transition into the adult world (VanderStaay 1992). While there are terms which can be used to refer to those individuals who are neither children nor adults, such as adolescent, teenager, young adult and juvenile, for the purpose of this exegesis the readers of YA fiction will be referred to as either adolescents or young adults. Furthermore, as has already been established, although there is no widely agreed upon age range for this period of development, this exegesis defines the age

range of the YA readership as from 12 to 22 years of age. The age of 22 has been decided on as I argue that with the increasing complexity of the YA realistic fiction genre its readership is extending beyond the age of 18, into the realm of adulthood. YA fiction emerged from the larger category of English language children's literature. It is useful to consider how perceptions of the purpose of children's literature have shifted over time, as this illuminates the fact that there is often an overt ideology behind children's texts, and therefore YA novels.

Before the 19th century, published stories for children were predominantly based on religious tales (Grenby 2014, Gopalakrishnan 2010, Nilsen & Donelson 2001). They tended to be moralistic narratives which threatened their characters' indiscretions, and consequently their readers', with the wrath of God or moral retribution. In *Secret gardens: the golden age of children's literature*, Humphrey Carpenter (1985) explains that books such as *A token for children* (1804) by James Janeway and Caleb Bingham forewarned that 'idle and thoughtless children would die an unpleasant death and suffer everlasting torment in hell' (p. 2).

From the mid 19th century, Romantic notions regarding the innocence of childhood, as opposed to original sin, were influencing the development of children's literature. Carpenter (1985) explains that, by the early 20th century, novels like *Five children and It* (Nesbit 1902), *A little princess* (Hodgson Burnett 1905) and *Peter Pan* (Barrie 1911), celebrated childhood and emphasised enjoyment and entertainment for the child reader.

The influence of Romanticism can also be seen in the development of the *bildungsroman*. The genre is characterised by its portrayal of a youthful protagonist's maturation into adulthood; literary historian Karl Morgenstern coined the term in the 19th century to refer to narratives such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship* (1796) (Twark 2007). Although not specifically targeted to children, some of the first novels that may have appealed to the age group now called 'young adults' were *bildungsroman*. These novels, also known as coming-of-age or rite-of-passage novels, explore the physical, intellectual and emotional maturation that occurs during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Such *bildungsroman* as *Great expectations* (Dickens 1861), *Jane Eyre* (Bronte 1847) and *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884) examine the development of the central character through life 'on his[her] way to maturity and harmony' (Tennyson 1968, p. 136). These novels often differ from our contemporary YA realistic fiction novels because of their ostensibly happy endings. While tragedy is very much a part of the *bildungsroman*, particularly through the death of a parent or friend, these events often lead to the character's maturation. According to psychologist Caroline Giordano (2008), 'The moral development of the protagonist actually happens at the expense of other characters being killed off' (p. 26). However, in regards to contemporary YA realistic fiction novels,

these tragic events are more likely to befall the protagonists themselves, sometimes

preventing their maturation entirely, examples of this are Luke in *Night Train* (Clarke 1998) and Celia in *Cry Blue Murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the United States of America was emerging as the new leader in the publishing of children's literature in terms of its quantity of publications (Gopalakrishnan 2010, Nilsen & Donelson 2001, Egoff 1981). At the same time that the notion of adolescence was gaining widespread recognition in a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, literature and sociology, the United States of America became the forerunner in the production of novels for adolescents (Baxter 2009). During this time, ideologies about youth were shifting, the distinction between childhood and adulthood had begun to blur. The psychologist Hall (1904), was central in characterising the transition through adolescence as being a period of 'storm and stress' (p. 534), consisting of instability and fluctuations, and this had become a widely accepted definition by the middle of the 20th century. As explained earlier, it was in this context that the classification of the junior/juvenile genre was first used by American librarians in 1957, who were among the first to acknowledge that if adolescence was a stage distinct from childhood, the literature read by adolescents should also be distinct (Page 2005).

In the late 1950s, fiction of the *bildungsroman* genre embraced what Canadian theorist Sheila Egoff labelled an innovative new form of 'realism', or a new honest representation of the era (Egoff 1981). This prompted Egoff to conceive an entirely new term for a new genre of fiction for adolescents — the 'problem novel.' The problem novel, as an innovative derivative of the *bildungsroman*, originated in order to exhibit the fatalism and resignation of the era's young people who, according to Egoff, were beginning to see their lives as consisting of one problem after another, as they struggled for independence from childhood and integration into an adult world (Egoff 1981).

Problem novels became popular for the forthright manner in which they tackled issues that had previously been deemed taboo – topics hitherto considered too depraved, complex and nihilistic to be discussed within literature for young adults (Nilsen & Donelson 2001).

They discussed sex, drugs, death and abuse in a forthright manner. Many theorists recognise J. D. Salinger's *The catcher in the rye* (1951) as being the original YA novel (Owen 2003, Nilsen & Donelson 2001, Nikolajeva 1995). Although the novel was not originally intended for a YA audience, according to children's literature theorist Professor Maria Nikolajeva (1995), the publication of Salinger's novel was a crucial moment in the history of both children's and YA literature. It portrays cynical protagonist Holden Caulfield, as he admonishes the 'phoniness' of the adult world. The novel was one of the first to use a first person young adult narration which openly critiqued the adult world. Other principal titles of this genre include William Golding's *Lord of the flies* (1954), Sylvia Plath's *The bell jar* (1963) and S. E. Hinton's *The outsiders* (1967).

Many YA literature experts (Sturm & Michel 2009, Salvner 2007, Thacker 2007, FitzGerald 2004) have expanded upon Egoff's theories of the problem novel. After the initial surge of problem novel publications in the middle of the 20th century, titles of the genre began to be criticised for being single-minded in their focus on 'the problem', which ultimately became the sole purpose of the novels (Cart 2010). In a direct attempt to distance themselves from the negative connotations that were building in relation to problem novels, newly published titles began to be classified as YA realistic fiction, as described above. YA realistic fiction novels could be seen to strive for a more comprehensive focus, in terms of their characters, settings, and themes, as well as plots.

As the focus of this thesis is on Australian YA realistic fiction from 1986 to 2013, it is essential to consider the specific Australian history and development of the genre. Children's books were almost exclusively imported into Australia from Britain up until the 1940s when World War II made this difficult (Page 2005). It was during this shortage in book importation that the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) was established, along with the Australian Publishers Association, indicating the transition into the phase Prentice and Bennett (1992) have termed 'Australcentric', when books began to be published in

Australia, written by Australian authors, specifically for Australian children about Australian topics. Prentice and Bennett define a final stage, the Universal phase, in which we now find ourselves. This stage is categorised as a move towards global publishing strategies. This is the stage when YA literature, including YA realistic fiction novels, was established as a stand-alone genre in Australia. This can be seen through the foundation of specific YA literature imprints, such as the YA Fiction imprint of University of Queensland Press which was established in 1986, and the introduction of the Older Reader category in the CBCA Book of the Year Awards in 1987 (Page 2005).

The shifting trends in the narrative strategies and preoccupations of the genre of YA literature have not gone unnoticed by the wider public. Due to the age of the target readership, novels published within the genre have been widely monitored by academics, educators and parents. Since the 1950s, and with the emergence of problem novels, requests to have books removed from school libraries and school curriculums increased in Australia, resulting in the censorship of YA literature. In *Censorship, children and school libraries in Australia: issues for concern*, Dillon and Williams (1994) assert that challenges (the act of attempting to have a book censored) are common in Australian School Libraries. In an earlier work, Dillon and Williams (1993) discuss the ways in which 'protectionists' and those supporting minors' free expression can view YA literature as a 'potent tool of social engineering, mysteriously but inexorably moulding young minds and leading problematically to certain behavioural outcomes' (p. 59). This sentiment is what fuels the debate between would-be censors and anti-censorship individuals. Protectionists see young readers as the 'embodiment of a precious innocence

which must be protected' (Dillon & Williams 1993, p59), while those in favour of the free expression of minors view the protectionist argument as repressing and patronising. In order to study YA literature, ideologies that may affect our interpretation and expectations of that literature must also be considered. Therefore, this exegesis examines sociological theories of childhood that relate to these ideas surrounding protectionism, as these views are what perpetuate the debate surrounding the value and content of YA realistic fiction.

There are four concepts from literary theory that are particularly relevant to the discussion of YA realistic fiction: 'realism', 'the implied reader', 'subjectivity' and 'genre'. As these will be referred to extensively throughout this exegesis, a description of each term is given below.

While the term 'realistic fiction' is highly contested, because it forms the basis of the genre being discussed, it is essential to refer to it throughout the exegesis. Here the term is contextualised and its meaning in relation to the fiction discussed within this exegesis is defined.

Professor Pam Morris (2005) suggests that, the issues involved in using the term 'realism', or any version of the word, stem from both the difficulty that comes when trying to define it without any ambiguity and its usage in both everyday and critical literary discourses. When a created work such as a novel is described as being 'realistic' it is being compared to an externally verifiable 'real'. However the term 'realism' 'almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it' (Morris 2005, p. 2). Inherent differences of individual perceptions and values relating to what is 'real' thus confuse the definition of 'realism' and 'realistic'. According to Morris (2005), critical responses to

'realism', from members of the Frankfurt School including Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), consisted largely of the dismissal of Enlightenment views related to rational knowledge and human advancement. 'Realist novels are accused of colluding with functional reason to produce philistine readerly narratives... (which) give comfort to the reader's moral and cultural expectations of what life should be like rather than challenging the existing conceptual and socio-political status quo' (Morris 2005, p. 37). 'Readerly narratives,' in Morris's criticism, refer to Roland Barthes' (1975) description of readerly texts as ones that contain predetermined, fixed meanings and essentially render the reader passive. It is the argument of this thesis that instead of producing 'readerly narratives', current YA realistic fiction novels in Australia depict complex, multi-layered characters, complicated and intricate themes and unresolved endings that require active consideration from the reader. The concept of Barthes' (1975) 'readerly narratives' will be discussed again in Chapter Three.

Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), in *Narrative as virtual reality: immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media*, defines a realistic text as one 'that depicts situations that

could be actualised in the real world' (p. 157). Ryan (2001) explains that from the writer's

point of view, writing a realist text means making sure that the plot of the story does not disobey physical or logical rules. The reader must be able to believe in the plausibility of the story; they should not be required to accept overly improbable or coincidental storylines.

Kathryn James (2009), in *Death, gender and sexuality in contemporary adolescent literature*, builds on Ryan's definition by discussing the aim of the realist novel as being 'to create an authentic or faithful reproduction of "reality", to represent "life" in such a way that it is consistent with the/an external reality and human experience *outside* the text' (p. 74). It is this aspect of 'realism' that I have tried to achieve within my own work of YA realistic fiction, particularly in the familiarity of the setting, by utilising the specificity of the Australian landscape within my work, where I make reference to identifiable Melbourne landmarks such as Flinders Street Station and Hosier Lane.

Therefore, despite the contestation surrounding the term, throughout this exegesis I continue to use the term realistic fiction, without engaging with the problematic nature of the term's claims to the truth, but instead in reference to the stylistic elements of YA realistic fiction, namely: the genre being set in identifiable locations such as schools and family homes, portraying relatable experiences such as peer pressure, finishing high school and the process of gaining and asserting independence from parents and guardians.

While the definition of both the YA realistic fiction genre and the concept of adolescence have been discussed, it is important to consider these in relation to how they are used to target the readers of the genre. YA literature, like children's literature, has the distinction of being the only form of literature that is consistently written for a readership both separate and distinct from the individuals who produce it. Thein and Sulzer (2015) explain that 'because YAL is written for adolescents by adults, it always represents, first and foremost, what adults think adolescents want, need, and care about, and who adults think adolescents are' (p. 47).

Perry Nodelman (1988) defines the implied reader as 'a figure implied by the text who possesses the expertise it assumes' (p. 6). Thein and Sulzer (2015) further explain that 'the implied reader is a textually constructed reader who observes, appreciates, understands, and is completed by the interaction between the narrator and narratee' (p. 48). The implied reader of YA literature then is not the actual reader, not the individual who physically reads the book, but the reader the author has in mind, either consciously or subconsciously, while creating the text.

This exegesis will consider how the idea of both the child and the young adult as the implied reader impacts on the content of children's and YA literature and its narrative strategies.

As mentioned above, one of the major changes that occur during the developmental stage of adolescence is emotional growth. Literature is just one example of a medium that can contribute to an adolescent's growing sense of identity where an individual progresses mentally

and emotionally from childhood to adulthood, developing a revised sense of self.

Mary Arian Broughton (2002) suggests, the 'construction of self begins at birth and continues throughout life ... as they grow and develop and when they move from one experience to another' (p. 2).

This concept, of a shifting sense of self, is known as subjectivity, where 'the self is constituted through discourse and practice and is continually constructed and reconstructed' (Arian Broughton 2002, p. 3). According to Weedon (1987), poststructuralists define subjectivity as 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (p. 33). Held (2007) argues that subjectivity and the idea of identity and the self, have been at the centre of Western thought since Descartes, while modern concepts of subjectivity originated with Kant and Rousseau.

The first chapter of this exegesis analyses how the awareness of the protagonists in the YA novels being discussed has shifted towards a more (post)modern notion of subjectivity. This notion of subjectivity recognises that an individual's sense of self is not fixed but is instead constantly being negotiated in relation to their experiences. I argue that the adolescent protagonists in more recently published YA realistic fiction novels are portrayed as moving away from a linear progression and instead towards a shifting notion of subjectivity, which acknowledges the indeterminacy of life.

The methodology and conceptual framework of this exegesis utilises the multi-disciplinary approach of genre theory, as a form of literary criticism, to research the shifting trends of the YA realistic fiction genre.

A genre is defined as a specific category or type of literary work, which is recognisable through its employment of common conventions (Baldick 2008). Genre exists in literary theory as a classification system, in order to link, for research, contextualisation and criticism purposes, literary works that have shared narrative structures and preoccupations (Bawarshi 2000). Genre theorists argue that genres are not fixed (Cohen 1986). Cohen (1986) suggests that 'generic transformation reveals the social changes in audiences and the interpenetration of popular and polite literature' (p. 216), where polite literature refers to literary works considered to be high culture or intellectual. In the context of this exegesis Cohen's (1986) claim can be seen through the hybridity of YA fiction as it aligns with both popular fiction and literary fiction. Genre theorists, therefore, claim that changes in genre can reveal sociological shifts and their effects on literature. Theorists Bawarshi (2000) and

Fishelov (1993) explore the relationship between genre theory and sociology, based on the connection between author, reader and text and the negotiation between the three entities. This is discussed further in Chapter One. The sociological elements of genre theory also bring into question 'how and why texts as cultural artefacts are produced; how they in turn reflect and help enact social actions; and how, finally, they can serve as sites for cultural critique and

change' (Bawarshi 2000, p. 335). By examining the shifting trends of the YA realistic fiction genre, this exegesis is able to explore some of the sociological changes that have influenced the genre.

Genre theory, as a critical methodology, examines the part that genre plays in the formation not just of texts, but also of their perspectives, including the characteristics of their authors and of those whom they represent (Bawarshi 2000). The research questions explored in this exegesis directly relate to concepts of genre, specifically the genre of YA realistic fiction and its origin, history, narrative elements and sociological impacts. This exegesis, as portrayed above, presents a discussion of the Australian YA realistic fiction genre from 1986-2013, while taking into account my own creative component, *Somewhere between*, through a discussion of how the narrative structures and preoccupations of the genre have shifted.

In outlining the history of genre theory, Cohen (1986) states that critics of the method argue that categorising texts into specific classes cannot help to interpret an individual text, and that they do not find that 'classifications serve evaluative purposes' (p. 207). In this sense, genre theory has been criticised for allegedly pigeon-holing texts and linking texts with little or no commonalities. However, since the late 1980s, genre theory, as a form of literary criticism, has undergone a reconceptualisation. Instead of focusing on the categorisation of texts, contemporary theorists (Devitt 2000, Fishelov 1993, Cohen 1986) have illustrated the evaluative capabilities of genre theory. While this exegesis does not extensively utilise genre theory as a form of literary criticism, it does consider a number of its main theories, particularly the acknowledgement that genres are not fixed and that tracking changes in a genre can reveal both literary and sociological trends.

Through an analysis of YA realistic fiction, published in Australia between 1986 and 2013, this exegesis argues that the genre has changed historically, socially, culturally and in relation to the specific literary conventions that link the novels of the genre. The 27-year time frame being studied, which, for the purpose of this study, I have defined as the period from the first YA literature imprint in Australia to the present, is divided into three separate time frames for the purposes of textual analysis. These time frames were chosen, simply by splitting the larger time period into three smaller sections, in order to make the analysis more manageable. The first period encompasses 1986-1994, the second from 1995-2004 and the final from 2005-2013. A cluster of novels which were published within each of these periods has been chosen for analysis. Using these novels as samples of the genre, I research the literary changes of the selection and, stemming from those, the sociohistorical changes that are reflected and/or influenced throughout the time frame. It is important to note that these time frames are guides to show the trends being discussed within this exegesis. They do not serve as exact divisions between types of novels published. For example, the novels published close to the years which

define the divisions often demonstrate the trends relating to both time frames.

The following section lists and describes the novels that have been selected for analysis throughout the exegesis and establishes how, through researching Australian YA realistic fiction novels from the time frame being discussed, the research contributed to the development of my novel, *Somewhere between*.

In order to establish an initial list of Australian titles for each time frame, from which a short list of suitable novels could be chosen, I consulted the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) (2014). The CBCA (2014) is a 'not for profit, volunteer run, organisation which aims to engage the community with literature for young Australians'. Each year the CBCA presents awards to texts of literary merit for their excellent contribution to the field of children's literature in Australia (CBCA 2014). The CBCA partners with Australian authors, illustrators, publishers, booksellers and other organisations in the children's book industry and has the distinction of being the longest running book awards in Australia after having marked its 70th anniversary in 2015 (CBCA 2014). CBCA judges must meet a number of eligibility criteria, including having recognised standing and qualifications in the field of children's literature and a wide and recent knowledge of children's literature particularly within Australia (CBCA 2014). The aim of the CBCA is to be the premier voice on Australian children's literature (CBCA 2014). Each of the above mentioned distinctions make the CBCA the most appropriate source from which to establish a shortlist of novels for exploration throughout this exegesis. Other alternatives for the selection of the novels for consideration included choosing the novels based on their ratings on reader judged websites such as Goodreads or from the collection available at the Victoria University Library. These alternatives however, did not offer a selection of texts which had already been vetted by industry professionals across a wide ranging time period suitable for the timeframe outlined within the exegesis.

The first Australian Book of the Year Awards were held in 1946, with just one category, however the awards have since grown to include five award categories (CBCA 2014). The category of Children's Book of the Year Older Readers has been awarded since 1987. The award is for 'outstanding books of fiction, drama or poetry which require of the reader a degree of maturity to appreciate the topics, themes and scope of emotional involvement' (CBCA 2014). These books are generally considered to be appropriate, based on their style and content, for secondary school aged readers (CBCA 2014). My initial choice of YA novels for consideration was established by assembling a list of the CBCA award winners, highly commended and commended novels from 1986-2013.

The shortlist of novels (Appendix A) was selected after reading these YA novels, from many different genres. Texts that were CBCA award winners or commended texts suggest a potentially wide readership and an acknowledgement of literary merit by industry experts.

Specific elements of these novels are explored throughout the exegesis including their use of the genre's canonical elements in relation to the three main topics of the research question; the self-awareness of characters, the major themes discussed and the resolutions of the novels. I briefly explain the reasons I explore these particular novels below, however the detailed reasons are discussed further within the exegesis.

The three novels from the period of 1986-1994 selected for discussion are: *Blue days* (1986), by Donna Sharp, *So much to tell you* (1987), by John Marsden and *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992), by Melina Marchetta. The novels from this period are written in first person perspective and offer their readers the hopeful endings that were synonymous with YA literature from this period. These novels helped to inform the development of the narrative voice of Lucy, the protagonist in *Somewhere between*, to guide the writing of the novel away from a rigid focus on the issues faced by the characters and towards a more postmodern notion of subjectivity, which sees an individual's sense of self as continuously shifting, instead of rigidly defined.

The analyses of the novels from this period are important to the thesis as a whole, as they show the limited, singular perspectives of the protagonists, the increasing range of issues discussed within the plot – which begin with the death of a parent and then escalate to family violence and suicide – and the tendency to offer readers a neatly resolved ending. Other novels from this period that are discussed briefly in order to further contextualise the period include *Speaking to Miranda* (1990) by Caroline MacDonald, *Came back to show you I could fly* (1991) by Robin Klein and *Letters from the inside* (1991) by John Marsden.

The analysis of the second time frame, from 1995 to 2004, includes consideration of the novels *Dear Miffy* (1997), by John Marsden, *Night train* (1998), by Judith Clarke and *Killing Aurora* (1999), by Helen Barnes. There is a noticeable shift in the narration of the novels from this period, to include narration other than first person and an attempt to depart from an authoritative adult point of view towards a more adolescent viewpoint, as well as a preoccupation with darker themes. These novels helped to contextualise the adolescent voice within YA novels, enabling me to write a credible first person narrative, which departed from the authorial adult point of view which was often present in earlier novels, and influenced the writing of the ending of the novel to exclude any contrived or coincidental material that could be hard for the readers to accept.

The examination of the novels selected from this time frame revealed an increase in the emphasis placed on the themes being discussed, when compared to novels published previously. The novels from period two discuss these themes, in a more direct manner, with forthrightness and the use of profanities. Their endings are less likely to be resolved, and when they are resolved the characters' recovery is often portrayed as being casual and quick,

resulting in the significance of the challenges they face within the novel being trivialised.

Other novels from this time frame which are briefly discussed include *Peeling the onion* (1997) by Wendy Orr, *Chain of hearts* (1999) by Maureen McCarthy and *The song of an innocent bystander* (2002) by Ian Bone. The novels chosen for discussion in the final time frame, from 2005-2013 are *On the Jellicoe Road* (2006), by Melina Marchetta, *Stolen* (2009), by Lucy Christopher and *Cry blue murder* (2013), by Kim Kane and Marion Roberts. The examination of the novels from this current period shows a significant shift in the narrative structures and preoccupations of the YA realistic fiction novels published in Australia.

Each of the novels presents a complex main character who is multi-layered; they struggle with the outside world and with their own sense of self. Their growing sense of themselves is fragmented, showing that the construction of identity is variable. An analysis of the novels from this time frame, as discussed in the next chapter of this exegesis, demonstrates that the representation of the subjectivity of the protagonists has shifted since 1986, towards a more fluid concept of identity. These novels also discuss complex themes and topics. Unlike the didactic novels published before them, these novels acknowledge the complexity of YA readers. The themes discussed within these novels cannot be easily concluded, often resulting in the destabilisation of the lives of their adolescent protagonists and increasingly absent points of reassurance being offered. This exegesis demonstrates that it is the complexity of the themes that these novels discuss which results in them having a prevalence of unresolved endings, where the characters' lives cannot be neatly settled by the final chapter.

Other novels from this time frame that are briefly discussed include *No worries* (2005) by Bill Condon, *Rose by any other name* (2006) by Maureen McCarthy and *Friday Brown* (2012) by Vikki Wakefield.

This exegesis argues that a study of the Australian YA realistic fiction genre, from 1986 to 2013, reveals a gradual, but steady, shift in the narrative structures and preoccupations of the genre. These shifting trends parallel the shifting notions of adolescence, within Australian society during this period, and show a change in the stability and assurance of the protagonists within the endings of contemporary Australian YA realistic fiction.

The next section of this exegesis, Chapter One, explores how the self-awareness and subjectivity of the protagonists in Australian YA realistic fiction novels have shifted since 1986. The chapter begins with an overview of how protagonists are typically presented within the genre. It explores the shifting trends in the characterisation of the protagonists within the genre by analysing the main characters from a selection of the novels discussed above. The chapter also contextualises *Somewhere between* by discussing how Lucy, the protagonist, illustrates these changes.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SHIFTING SELF-AWARENESS OF CHARACTERS

She would want me to find out what makes me who I am. But I don't know what that is yet. I don't know when I'll know, but at least I'm looking out for it now. At least I'm getting closer. Somewhere between (Farrow 2017, p. 113)

Throughout my analysis of the Australian YA realistic fiction novels mentioned within the literature review, I identified an increase in the number of novels being published which portray characters who demonstrate a greater understanding of their own subjectivity and increased levels of self-awareness. The result of this shifting subjectivity is the depiction of YA protagonists who are aware that they have not reached a final, fixed stage of development. Accordingly, many YA protagonists in contemporary novels of the genre are depicted in a liminal space at the conclusion of the novels. In this liminal space the characters are not portrayed as having fully transitioned into adulthood as were characters of earlier novels of the genre, instead it is suggested that their development will continue throughout their lives.

This is explored through the discussion of the shifting concept of adolescence, the shifting concept of the implied reader, the notion of subjectivity, the use of first person narration and finally an analysis of the shifting self-awareness demonstrated by the characters in the novels being considered.

The concept of a distinct adolescent self is a comparatively new development in the broader field of childhood research, and was first discussed by American psychologists in the early 1900s (Dolgin 2010). In the later part of the 20th century psychologists suggested that while childhood, and therefore adolescence, has distinct biological indicators, it is a social artefact (Erikson 1968).

According to theorist Neil Postman (1982), until the start of the 17th century, the words used to refer to young males represented men aged between 30 and 50 years of age, and there was no word in the French, German or English languages that signified a young male between the ages of seven and 16. Since there were no strong, culturally recognised distinctions of different stages of childhood and adulthood there could be no awareness of self as child or adolescent. This has implications for the development of a literature specifically written for this age group.

Postman (1982) makes a direct link between the contemporaneous inventions of childhood and printing. He argues that Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press with moveable type created a new model of adulthood which excluded children: 'As children were expelled from the adult world it became necessary to find another world for them to

inhabit ... that other world came to be known as childhood' (Postman 1982, p. 20). The distinction between adults and children became more clearly defined by the ability to read, as adults increasingly gained access to information that children were excluded from. The notion of children as 'other' to adults, which remains consistent within current western society, evolved. From the invention of the printing press onwards, adulthood had to be attained, 'The young would have to become adults' (Postman 1982, p. 36). It is this idea, an adolescent's transition into adulthood, which has become one of the central topics of YA realistic fiction, along with the protagonist's awareness of this process and how it affects them.

Janice Alberghene (1985), in *Childhood's end?*, questions whether children's literature helped to create the notion of childhood in society, or whether it was the development of childhood that brought about the introduction of literature for children. Richardson (1998) asserts that children's literature positions itself as 'a productive and not simply reflective relation to the constructed aspects of childhood' (p. 36). A more detailed discussion of the relationship between the notion of childhood and children's literature is beyond the scope of this thesis, yet it is the assertion of this thesis that whatever the relationship, it is evident that the development of children's literature and the construction of childhood as a concept are reciprocal. They serve to nourish and advance each other, similar to the interactive process of writing both the creative and exegetical components of this thesis.

Once it was accepted that childhood was a stage of development distinct from adulthood, literature for the child began to be created (see p. 134 above) heavily influenced by the romantic construction of the child. This romantic construction was characterised by a focus on childhood innocence and purity and the Rousseauian idea that children needed to be protected from the adult world (Rousseau 1762). This can be seen in a number of 19th century novels, including Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), and *Oliver Twist* (1837) by Charles Dickens.

Modern writers, according to Richardson (1998), break with this emphasis from the Romantic period and no longer 'limit themselves to the purely imaginative and securely innocent matter ... they acknowledge the cognitive needs of child readers, their more than understandable desire for discursive maps and conceptual grids as they work through the arduous and lengthy process of piecing out the densely coded world of adult discourse' (p. 36). This assertion directly acknowledges the shifting trends in the narrative strategies and preoccupations of children's and YA literature throughout history, which has seen the central topics of YA literature become less didactic, plots that are not always linear and narrative styles that focus on representing an adolescent experience rather than relying on an authorial adult voice.

Richardson's argument is informed by contemporary ideas of the implied reader and, by

extension, that reader's self-awareness. Children's literature, and with it YA literature, has the distinction of being the only form of literature written for a readership both separate and distinct from the majority of individuals who produce it. Reader response theory, as a critical methodology, directly considers the implied reader and the role it plays in the analysis of texts. Thein and Sulzer (2015) explain the three subjects of reader response theory: the narrator, the narratee and the implied reader. The narrator is defined as the voice of the story. In many YA novels it is the adolescent protagonist who tells the story. However, there are some YA novels which employ a third person narrator, such as *Night train* (Clarke 1998) and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999). Thein and Sulzer categorise the narratee as

the often invisible character in a text to whom the narrator talks, writes, or references. The narratee may be clearly marked in a text, —for instance, she might be a friend to whom a narrator writes letters in an epistolary novel (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 48).

The narratee of a text, however, is not always explicitly indicated. Instead the narratee can be discerned by considering the types of knowledge, values, socialisation and vocabulary that are necessary in order to understand the narrator (Thein and Sulzer 2015). For example, in J. D. Salinger's *The catcher in the rye* (1994) it may be deduced that the narratee is a psychiatrist that Holden Caulfield is telling his story to, although this is never explicitly revealed in the novel (Nikolajeva 1995).

Finally, the implied reader, as mentioned above, is a 'textually constructed reader who observes, appreciates, understands, and is completed by the interaction between the narrator and narratee' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 48). Using this critical methodology throughout this exegesis leads to a consideration of the perceived recipient of a genre or particular novel. Considering the implied reader of a genre, and particularly how that implied reader may change over time, can give an insight into the shifting trends of the genre.

Using these definitions in relation to John Marsden's novel, *Dear Miffy* (1997), we can identify Tony as the narrator, who is telling his story to Miffy, the narratee, through a series of letters. The implied reader of the novel, based on the analysis of components such as the characterisation, cultural references and language, is an Australian adolescent. This can be deduced from the use of Australian slang, such as 'bloody', 'bloke', and 'g'day', and Australian cultural references, such as the Rock Eisteddfod and netball.

Reader response theory also considers the real reader of a text – that is the human being who reads the book. The real reader may or may not 'share much in common with the implied reader' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 49). It is the role of the real reader, when engaging with a text, to decide the 'extent to which he [sic] is willing to affiliate with a textually constructed implied reader' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 49). It is important to mention here, that I am not the

implied reader of any of the novels being discussed within this exegesis and therefore my interpretation of the novels is not necessarily what the author expects from their implied reader.

This exegesis argues that by examining trends in a genre it is possible to see how sociological shifts have influenced a body of literature. Children's literature theorist, Maurice Saxby (1995), in his study *Changing perspectives: the implied reader in Australian Children's Literature, 1841-1994*, further contends:

Children's books with the autonomous, fluent reader in mind, reflect not only shifting social values but changing expectations of the reader in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, the form of the discourse, and the narrative pattern as these arise out of the stance and expectations of the author (p. 26).

I argue that, in contemporary YA realistic fiction novels, this 'autonomous, fluent implied reader' that Saxby (1995) references, is being more consciously considered. Consequently, novels of the genre are being published which portray increasingly complex narrative structures and depict YA characters with broader vocabularies and a greater sense of self-awareness.

Saxby (1995) contends that it is possible to track patterns in the changing perceptions of the child as the implied reader within Australian children's literature by considering its history from three distinct time frames: 1841-1891, 1891-1941 and 1941-1991. This is a finding that supports the central argument of this chapter, which contends that the awareness and subjectivity of the characters in YA realistic fiction novels published in Australia over the past three decades have shifted to reflect how society's perceptions of adolescents has also shifted during this time.

Saxby suggests that at the beginning of the 20th century there was a new kind of implied reader within children's literature. No longer was the implied reader an exclusively upper class child being prepared through moral instruction for a life of distinction. Instead the implied reader of Australian children's literature in the 20th Century was 'homely and middle-class' (Saxby 1995, p. 31), just like the characters in the novels. Instead of teaching propriety, these new texts were about 'humour, romance, and pathos, and the language is easily processed yet always remains conveniently "correct" in its structure' (Saxby 1995, p. 31). The implied reader was simultaneously being given more freedom and recognition; freedom through the ability to idly read a book for enjoyment instead of education, and the recognition that they were readers who could 'empathise with mischievous rebels, but who are never offensive or delinquent' (Saxby 1995, p. 31). These readers were able to demonstrate their increasing levels of self-awareness and subjectivity by choosing which books they wanted to read, what 'morals' they

decided to take away from them and how they would use that knowledge, ultimately developing their own subjectivity.

While Saxby's survey of the implied reader in Australian children's literature remains the most comprehensive to date, other researchers have also considered how the idea of the implied child reader has shifted in recent times. In 'Maintaining distinctions: realism, voice and subject position in Australian young adult fiction', John Stephens (1999) explores how the preponderance of first person narration since the 1950s has impacted on the implied reader. Stephens (1999) suggests that the change in narrative style indicates that the 'sociocultural or moral perspectives are no longer enunciated by an identifiable narrative voice, but such perspectives are embodied by the text's events and existents (that is, characters and settings) and by strategies for aligning character subject positions and reading subject positions' (p. 189). Therefore, while Saxby (1995) claims that changes in the implied reader gives actual YA readers agency, Stephens (1999) claims that using a YA focaliser may result in an implied reader occupying a position of knowledge or authority.

Saxby (1995) states that it was not until after WWII that Australians began to acknowledge seriously the art of children's literature. One result of this is the introduction of the Australian Children's Book of the Year Award, which was first awarded in 1946, in order to recognise the best works of children's literature published in Australia each year.

According to Saxby, it was also in this time frame, in the late 1950s, that social realism came to dominate children's literature in Australia, led by authors such as Nan Chauncy and continued by authors such as Colin Thiele, Eleanor Spence, Ruth Park, Nadia Wheatley and John Marsden (Saxby 1995). The popular social realism format was modified again in the late 1980s and early 1990s to develop into the problem novel, stories that included a 'social problem; a single parent; an alienated child; or an agonizing search for identity, acceptance, and reassurance' (Saxby 1995, p. 34). This is where the concept of self-awareness began to develop in Australian YA literature: as characters in the novels began to be depicted dealing with these social problems their consciousness of how these issues affected their own identities also began to be considered.

Saxby (1995) alludes to the growing sophistication of children's literature in Australia, with its developments of new formulas, of novels with intricate subject matter, multiple perspectives and a range of structures, where the implied reader 'can attach meaning to symbol(s) and deconstruct multiple texts to make intellectual, emotional, and social connections between the present and the past' (p. 34). Saxby (1995) considers the changing idea of the implied reader within children's literature in Australia over a 150-year period, ultimately concluding that 'the development of the reader and the literature go hand in hand' (p. 36). Saxby indicates, that the development of new forms of implied reader, particularly with the rise of the 'problem' novel, are closely connected to the increasing emphasis on the adolescent's identity and transitioning

from child to adult. An adolescent's search for identity, for the answer to the question Who am I?, is a large aspect of the process of transitioning into adulthood. It is this development of 'self' that is at the centre of many YA novels.

According to literary critic Donald Hall (2004), in the New Critical Idiom series, 'Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control' (pp. 3-4). It is this idea that is central to the characterisation and personal development of Lucy the narrator/protagonist within my novel, *Somewhere between*. The title of the novel directly references this process, and the liminal nature of adolescence, by alluding to the fact that Lucy finds herself between two worlds, between childhood and adulthood, between the country and the city, between being like her mother and being herself. In the beginning of the novel Lucy's principal way of defining herself is based on the limited knowledge she has of her deceased mother. She believes that once she finds out more about her mother's identity she will be able to establish her own sense of self, 'I already feel like I know her better. And maybe I know myself a little better too' (p. 1). It is this belief that leads Lucy to studying nursing and to moving to Melbourne. However, once Lucy meets Jodie, her mother's best friend from her nursing training, and starts to learn more about her mother, and in turn about herself, she starts to consider the ideas that are fundamental to subjectivity – those relating to how identity itself is formulated, what it is that influences one's identity formation and the theory that identity is not a static phenomenon. I argue that it is this trend, towards acknowledging that identity formation is an ongoing process, which helps to separate *Somewhere between*, together with those Australian YA realistic fiction novels that have been published in the last 10 years, from earlier works of the genre.

Subjectivity is important to literary studies, as it facilitates the consideration of identity and self which is central to many novels. Social and cultural historian Joe Moran (2002) suggests this is because literature asks what he considers to be the 'big questions', including those addressing 'the nature of reality, language, power, gender, sexuality, the body, and the self' (p. 83). These are questions which young adult novels have been addressing since they first began to be written. My novel, *Somewhere between*, focusses on this idea of self, as Lucy attempts to re-establish her sense of self through her role as daughter, friend, roommate and student.

Shelia Egoff (1981) asserts that in problem novels, an early form of YA realistic fiction, the narrative is typically presented in the first person, more specifically by a first person adolescent narrator. Of the nine novels, which are critiqued throughout this exegesis, seven of them are written in the first person, with the two exceptions being *Night train* (Clarke 1998) and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999).

First person narration is employed extensively in YA realistic fiction as it is often argued that it makes the protagonist more accessible to the reader (Thein & Sulzer 2015, Cox Gurdon 2013, Sturm & Michel 2009). Sturm and Michel (2009) claim that 'each time the character speaks, the reader reads "I" and treats the experience as if it were his or her own' (p. 43), as the use of first person pronouns allows the reader to clearly associate with the protagonist. Sturm and Michel (2009) argue that first person narration allows the reader to completely immerse themselves in the story of the novel, so that they are experiencing the same problems and emotions as the protagonist.

Thein & Sulzer (2015) assert, 'writers use this device to create a feeling of urgency, to show solidarity with the reader, and to make the reader feel as if he or she is occupying the persona of the narrator' (p. 40). There are instances, however, when first person narration does not effectively engage the reader. For example, first person narration is only effective, if the adolescent narrator has a credible YA voice. Early works of the genre, such as *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and *Came back to show you I could fly* (Klein 1991), are overshadowed by an authorial adult voice. In *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), after a fight with her mother, 16-year-old protagonist Marie says 'I am a sentient semi-mature person who is perfectly capable of being reasoned with in normal vocal tones and pitch' (p. 15). Marie's tone, after the fight with her mother, is too measured and calm, it shows no emotion or frustration and does not use the vocabulary of an adolescent girl. At times, first person narration can also alienate the reader, particularly if the narration results in too many gaps being presented within the novel. An example is Tony's limited self-awareness in *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), which results in the reader being presented with a limited understanding of the events, such as when Tony casually discusses sexual assault, 'Then we pulled a train on Sharon one night when we were off our faces'. The reader is only presented with Tony's flippant view of the event, not the alternative view of the criminality of the act or its impact on Sharon, the victim. As a result, the reader may mistrust the narrator and their narration. However, there are examples where an author can leave gaps in a first person narrative without limiting the reader's knowledge or understanding of the text, if executed successfully. For example, in *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), Marchetta successfully fills the gaps which exist in Taylor's narration, such as the fact that she does not know that Hannah is her aunt, through the information given to the reader in the sections of Hannah's manuscript which are interspersed with Taylor's narration throughout the novel. Taking this into consideration, the use of first person narration in *Somewhere between* focusses on presenting a credible YA voice, using YA vocabulary and tone, in order to align the reader with Lucy's thought processing, so that they could directly experience Lucy's responses and emotions.

Now that I have indicated the changing concept of adolescence, the idea of the implied reader,

the notion of subjectivity and the use of first person narration in YA literature, I will analyse the novels listed in the literature review while directly considering these notions.

Throughout my analysis, I identified trends in the subjectivity and self-awareness of the novels' characters across the time frame being considered. Due to the limited scope of this exegesis, each chapter, while considering all of the novels mentioned within the literature review, only focuses in detail on one novel from each of the three periods. This chapter focuses on the subjectivity of the main characters from the novels *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) and *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), while referring to the remaining novels in order to support and enhance the argument of the chapter.

When considering Marie, the protagonist from *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), it is evident that her self-awareness is limited. In the beginning of the novel Marie is focussed on a single problem she is faced with and cannot see her own identity beyond this issue. This is also evident in *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987), through Marina's characterisation, and while Josie, in *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), initially focuses on a number of problems her subjectivity shifts more than that of Marie and Marina. By the end of the novel it is evident that Josie has matured and is portrayed as considering other characters' feelings and motives. *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987) are consistent with the texts Shelia Egoff (1981) labelled 'problem novels'. Egoff (1981) described problem novels as being 'very strongly subject-oriented with the interest primarily residing in the topic rather than the telling' (p. 196). Yet despite the focus on the subject matter, after minimal character development or growth, by the conclusion of the novels each of the characters is shown as transitioning through to adulthood by finding their sense of self. Marie, in *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), is focussed on the death of her father. In *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987), Marina's subjectivity is limited due to the fact that she has developed selective muteness following the traumatic incident of her father accidentally throwing acid in her face when he was aiming for her mother. Josie, in *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), while being the most self-aware of the protagonists from this period, still sees her sense of identity as fixed at the conclusion of the novel, even though she is only 17 years old. At the conclusion of the novel, while reflecting on her year, Josie says, 'I'll know who I am until the day I die. I'll believe in my world' (Marchetta 1992, p. 249).

The death of Marie's father, in *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), is so central to the novel, and to Marie's identity, that it is one of the first things the character speaks of on the first page of the novel, 'It may seem like a strange place to start this story but it all began when my father died' (p. 1), and it is the central plot point, from which other events are described as occurring either before or after his death, 'It was before Dad died' (p. 40). Marie fights with her mother about her father's death and her actions surrounding it, 'My mother just didn't understand me and she was so spaced out by my father's dying that she couldn't think straight in any case' (Sharp

1986, p. 3). Her insular awareness prevents her from seeing the situation from anyone else's perspective, 'Everywhere I looked all I could find was more hypocrisy, more stupidity, more pointlessness, more pretence' (Sharp 1986, p. 18). Like Lucy in the beginning of *Somewhere between*, Marie is unable to see how her father's death has affected anyone else besides her, not even her mother. Where Lucy's sense of awareness shifts, enabling her to see that her father also lost his wife when her mother died, Marie's selfishness stops her from seeing that she and her mother are grieving together, she asks, 'What do you do when the only person in the world who thinks you're beautiful inside ups and dies on you?' (Sharp 1986, p. 23). The adolescent protagonists of YA realistic fiction novels from this period are consistent with the period's broadly held view of adolescents as irrational, unpredictable and self-involved, as theorised by psychologists from Hall (1904) to Erikson (1968). As sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) suggests, both Hall (1904) and later Erikson (1968), in their widely studied seminal works, emphasised 'the volatility and treachery that adolescents brought to the family and wider world' (p. 10).

Therefore, instead of Marie gaining a sense of awareness of herself and her situation, her knowledge remains limited, instead she chooses to believe that it is everyone else who does not understand, deciding that 'what you do is you find that there's nobody left to believe in you anymore and you begin to fall apart at the seams' (Sharp 1986, p. 23).

The protagonists from the novels published between 1995 and 2004 are more aware of their circumstances. They face a greater number of challenges, with the characters dealing with neglect, abandonment, mental health issues and the typical pressures of adolescence such as finishing high school and deciding on their future after graduation, all often simultaneously. Luke, in *Night train* (Clarke 1998), acknowledges the pressures, 'They always said this: the HSC was the big chance, the only chance, and if you messed it up you could ruin your whole life' (p. 66). Although the characters are more cognisant of their own situations, their empathy remains limited. Where the characters are able to consider the feelings of those around them it is usually limited to another adolescent character, to a peer, someone who is similar to themselves. For example, in *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), Tony is able to consider how Miffy is affected by her father's abuse of a young girl, 'I don't know what it would do to you, having a pervert for a father' (p. 49), while Web, in *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), is the only other girl at St Dymphna's Non-Denominational Ladies' College who is aware that Aurora has an eating disorder. Instead of validating her weight loss as enviable, Web confronts Aurora and her attitude towards herself:

'I hate this uniform. It makes me look so fat.' Web sighs with disappointment.

‘That’s what all the dumb chicks say. ‘Oh, I’m fat. Oh, I’m ugly.’
And you’re not. I’ll only say it the once. You’re not ugly.’ (Barnes
1999, p. 74).

Despite the fact that Web is not named in the title of the novel, she could be described as the novel’s secondary protagonist, as her complexity and impact on the reader is significant. Although she is given less space in the novel, it can be argued that her characterisation is more developed than that of Aurora’s. The reader is more aware of her motivations, her longing to find a friend, but not at the expense of losing her identity, her need for her father’s attention which manifests in her behavioural issues at school and her inability to accept her mother’s abandonment. However, in similar ways to the other protagonists in the novels from this period, her development at the conclusion of the novel is not elaborated on, although she has finally found a friend in Aurora, she once again becomes the catalyst to demonstrate Aurora’s suggested recovery.

Another identifiable difference in the subjectivity of the characters in the novels published during this period is their view that their identity at the end of the novel is fixed. Several of these characters consider the selves they are becoming as they transition into adulthood as their final selves, ‘Scars and stretchmarks fade over time, and Aurora will finish her growing up and become an ordinary young woman. For the rest of her life she will moan about her weight, and use words like *sin* and *wicked* to talk about chocolate cake, and feel the need to apologise for her thighs’ (Barnes 1999, p. 224). The characters are not aware that their sense of self will shift continually throughout their lives. Aurora is not aware that she still has the time and ability to find body-confidence and self-acceptance throughout her life.

From the beginning of *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) it is clear to the reader that Tony has very little hope, ‘Sometimes I think I’ve changed and I’m better; sometimes I think I’m worse’ (p. 13). During the novel, what little hope Tony may have had in the beginning disappears completely, ‘I was wrong what I said before, about how great it is writing these letters. How it makes me feel better. It doesn’t make me feel better. It makes me feel like all I want to do is die. And I can’t even do that’ (Marsden 1997, pp. 34-35), until finally at the end of the novel Tony has no hope at all, ‘Is there something wrong when your main ambition in life is to be dead? I don’t think the people here would think that was a very good ambition. Every day when I wake up I don’t want to get out of bed because I know it’s going to take so much effort to stop from killing myself’ (Marsden 1997, p. 99). In the final pages of the novel the reader learns that Tony has already tried to kill himself, by jumping in front of a train. Tony writes, ‘That’s why I just lost my fucking legs, all the way up to my dick, just about, plus fucked up my spine. And that’s why I’m in this fucking wheelchair’ (Marsden 1997, p. 111). Then in the final letter of the novel, when Tony learns that the staff at the facility have been reading his letters

to Miffy all along, his anger and aggression returns, 'Dear fucking bastards who've been reading these letters. I know you've been reading them now... Well, fuck you all. That's the last time I write anything. Just so you bastards can read it' (Marsden 1997, p. 112). In this last letter it becomes clear to the reader that Tony's self-worth, that his sense of self, is minimal. His identity at the end of the novel is the same as it was in the beginning, and he is not aware that he has the ability to change it. Tony's lack of self-awareness and empathy are problematic, particularly as they are characterised through the use of first person narration. The discussion of rape and preying on girls who are inebriated, as presented through Tony's first person narration, is problematic as it does not allow for alternative viewpoints to be portrayed, leading to these topics being discussed casually and without opposition.

When considering the limited awareness and subjectivity of the characters from these novels it is important to consider the factors that may contribute to such a portrayal. One of the contributing factors to the characters' narrow understandings of their own subjectivity could be the mode of narration. Meghan Cox Gurdon (2013) claims, 'The trouble is that the first person present tense also erects a kind of verbal prison, ... This narrative style reinforces the blinkers teenagers often seem to be wearing, rather than drawing them out and into the open.' (p. 40). However, as *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) and *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) are both written from the first person perspective and both portray characters who display knowledge of their own subjectivity, it would be a generalisation to claim that a lack of subjectivity can be attributed solely to the narrative style. The age of the narrators themselves could contribute to the lack of awareness portrayed within a novel. Patty Campbell (2010) proposes, 'A YA novel is told from within the confines of a lack of maturity that is inherent in being a teenager, particularised to a character' (p. 75). This suggests that it is the traits considered typical of adolescence (Hall's (1904) 'storm and stress'), which are contributing to the protagonist's self-interest and lack of awareness. These perceptions about adolescents extend to the literature written for them, as John Stephens (2007) claims, 'The majority of the academic, serious side of society, still seems to cast negative light on young adult literature' (p. 35). I argue however that this view of adolescents is a construct, where these traits are often enforced and reinforced by the adult gatekeepers of YA literature. Thein and Sulzer (2015) suggest, 'YA literature is written for adolescents by adults, it always represents, first and foremost, what adults think adolescents want, need and care about, and who adults think adolescents are' (p. 47). From my analysis of the YA protagonists in novels published in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s it is clear that adults viewed adolescents as being self-involved, with little capacity to consider society beyond their own lives. This is further supported by the work of Thein and Sulzer (2015) who contend:

It is not surprising, then, that YA literature sometimes supports

dominant ideologies and discourses about adolescents found within society at large...[which] conceptualise adolescence as a universal, developmental phase marked by raging hormones, rebellion, impulsive and myopic behaviour, mimicry of peers and prototypical identity crises. (p. 47)

Many of these novels portray their YA protagonists with characteristics consistent with those expressed by Thein and Sulzer (2015), which serve to both trivialise and stereotype the adolescent experience. The shifting subjectivity of protagonists in contemporary YA realistic fiction novels, as argued throughout this chapter, is supported by recent psychological research which has begun to contest Hall's (1904) theory of adolescent 'storm and stress' (Arnett 1999). In an article for *American Psychologist*, psychologists Tom Hollenstein and Jessica Lougheed (2013) dispute the theory that 'storm and stress' is likely in all adolescents, instead arguing that the notion of adolescent 'storm and stress' is an inefficient framework for understanding adolescent development. Hollenstein and Lougheed (2013) instead propose a more comprehensive methodology which considers biological, behavioural, environmental and emotional factors, as well as the individual nature of adolescent development and duration.

Finally, the self-awareness of the characters in the novels published from 2005 onwards is much more evident. Not only are these protagonists more conscious of their own lives and their own identities, they are also mindful of the lives of those around them. In *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), when she realises she has been abducted, Gemma thinks of her parents and how they are coping, 'All I could think about was my parents at the airport. What had they thought when I hadn't turned up for that flight?' (p. 68). Whereas in *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), it is Celia and Alice's shared concern for missing girl Hallie that launches their email correspondence and subsequent friendship, 'I just feel so dreadful for Hallie and her family. At least we're *doing* something by helping them out with the hope-boats' (p. 8). In 'More than "a time of storm and stress": the complex depiction of adolescent identity in contemporary young adult novels', Janet Alsup (2014) examines how the concept of adolescence has changed, as has its depiction in YA fiction. Alsup (2014) suggests that the postmodern concept of adolescence acknowledges that while adolescent identity is biologically determined, it is also a complex interplay between acquiring knowledge, experiences, associations and opportunities. Unlike many earlier works of YA realistic fiction, the contemporary novels discussed above, acknowledge and portray the intricate, diverse and individualised development of adolescence.

Another major shift that is recognisable within these characters, when comparing them

to characters from earlier works of YA realistic fiction, is their acknowledgement that their identities are not fixed. Many of these characters openly acknowledge that their identities at the conclusion of the novels may change. The characters from these novels, with the exception of Celia in *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) whose fate remains unknown, exist in a liminal space. They do not consider themselves children, nor have they reached a final, complete stage of development. They are aware that they will have many versions of 'self' throughout their lives, therefore it is natural that at the conclusion of the novel they do not know exactly who they are or what they are going to be. In *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), while Taylor is looking after her dying mother, she is taking in all her mother's stories because she may not be able to process them now, they will be important later when the time comes for her to reflect on her past and her identity. Taylor says, 'and life goes on, which seems kind of strange and cruel when you're watching someone die. But there's a joy and an abundance of everything, like information and laughter and summer weather and so many stories' (Marchetta 2006, p. 286).

Throughout *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), Gemma is constantly reflecting both on her own subjectivity and the identity of Ty, her kidnapper. The narrative is driven by the conflict between Gemma's physical attraction to Ty and her revulsion at his actions, the abduction. This narrative structure is consistent with the standard trope of adult romance novels, further demonstrating the increasing complexity of the YA realistic fiction genre as it adopts subject matter typically consistent with novels written for adult readers. On waking up in Australia after the abduction Gemma says, 'I didn't want the person standing there, beside the bed, to be the same face I'd found so attractive at the airport. But you were there alright; the blue eyes, blondish hair and tiny scar. Only you didn't look beautiful this time. Just evil.' (Christopher 2009, pp. 14-15). In a similar fashion to *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) is also centred on the efforts of the protagonist, Taylor, to actively develop her own sense of self. Taylor uses her relationship with her guardian Hannah, the stories of her parents, her role as head of Lachlan House and leader of the boarders to construct, and reconstruct, her identity. Taylor builds her own sense of self while observing her relationships and the relationships of others, 'These people have history and I crave history. I crave someone knowing me so well that they can tell what I'm thinking' (Marchetta 2006, p. 173). Comparably, in *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), Celia is developing her own identity and constantly reassessing her sense of self, while girls, similar in age to her, are abducted from suburbs in her area. Celia's uncertainty about herself, who she is and the events happening around her are evident in the poems she shares with Alice, 'I remember missing Jaime as she'd always been there / One incident so many versions / And the truth lies in none / but in all' (Kane & Roberts 2013, p. 112).

It is clear in *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) that Gemma is constantly reassessing her sense

of self. It is evident, from her internal thought processing that, like Lucy in *Somewhere between*, she is vacillating between a number of different, yet conflicting, positions: whether she sees herself as a victim or a survivor, whether she thinks she will be able to escape or will remain as Ty's hostage, and trying to reconcile the feelings she has towards Ty. The sympathy she feels for him, although he is her kidnapper, may be consistent with Stockholm Syndrome, defined as 'the bonding and role reversal that often occurs in the context of captor-hostage entrapment' (Hooper et al. 2013, p. 99). In alternating thoughts, the reader is shown the liminal space Gemma occupies, as Gemma demonstrates her strength as a survivor, but is also portrayed as a victim. On the same page Gemma says, 'One thing I was certain of, you wouldn't do anything to me without a fight' (Christopher 2009, p. 45), while later on the same page she says, 'I was scared, some days I was stupid with terror' (Christopher 2009, p. 45). These fluctuating ideas can also be seen in Gemma's thoughts about escaping. In close proximity within the novel Gemma can speak of her need to escape, yet also connection with Ty, in an attempt to explain why she might want to stay:

So I followed you. I don't know why really. I could say it was because I had nothing else to do except stare at four walls, or that I wanted to try escaping again, but I think there was more to it than that. When I was trapped in the house, it felt like I'd already died. At least when I was with you, it felt like my life mattered somehow ... no, that's not really it, it felt like my life was being noticed (Christopher 2009, p. 98).

From Gemma and Ty's very first encounter, through the kidnapping, the time she is held hostage and in the lead up to the court case, Gemma's feelings towards Ty fluctuate between hatred, fear, intrigue, sympathy, understanding, lust and possibly even love. In the beginning of the novel, Gemma is coming to terms with having been abducted and getting to know Ty, yet she can't help but be curious about him, 'I'd never imagined that you'd have a story too. Until that moment, you were just the kidnapper. You didn't have reasons for anything. You were stupid and evil and mentally ill. When you started talking, you started changing' (Christopher 2009, p. 88). As Gemma spends more time with Ty, her curiosity subsides. Once Ty has rescued her several times, such as during her first escape attempt when she gets lost in the desert and at the end of the novel when Ty takes Gemma to the hospital after she is bitten by a venomous snake, her feelings for him start to become increasingly confounded, 'I pulled your face towards me. My head left the pillow, a little, to get to you. Your skin was centimetres from mine. Your mouth so close. My lips found your cheek' (Christopher 2009, p. 272). By the end of the novel Gemma is so confused by her

feelings that she portrays one set to her parents and the police and reserves one for Ty, in her thoughts:

I hated you for everything; for making me feel so helpless everywhere I went, for making me lose control...I hated you for turning my life upside down and then smashing it into shards...But I hated you for something else too. Right then, and at every moment since you'd left me, all I could think about was you...I wanted your arms around me, your face close to mine...And I knew I couldn't – shouldn't – have it. That's what I hated most. The uncertainty of you. You'd kidnapped me, put my life in danger...but I loved you too. Or I thought I did. None of it made sense (Christopher 2009, p. 291).

In the final pages of the novel Gemma is awaiting the court case, she knows she must tell the truth and subsequently Ty will go to jail, yet she also hopes that she can secure him a second chance. The final page portrays Gemma still uncertain about her feelings; she is still coming to terms with the events of the kidnapping and her feelings for Ty, however she knows she has to move on. She writes, 'A part of me doesn't want to stop writing to you, but I need to. For both of us' (Christopher 2009, p. 301). The storyline of the novel brings into YA realistic fiction the standard trope of adult romance novels, a trope that is far removed from the plots evident in early works of young adult literature, such as *The mystery of the clock* (Keane 1930), a Nancy Drew mystery. This ending is also consistent with the trend towards unresolved endings with increasingly absent points of reassurance, which is seen in recently published YA realistic fiction novels and is discussed further in Chapter Three of this exegesis.

My analysis of the novels discussed above directly influenced the writing of my own novel, particularly when it came to the characterisation of Lucy, the protagonist. I aimed to examine and extend from the portrayal of protagonists within the YA realistic fiction novels being considered within this exegesis, in order to develop a main character who is relatable, yet complex; whose characterisation and voice is consistently adolescent. It was my aim for Lucy to be curious and selfish at times, yet also becoming increasingly more independent, and importantly becoming aware of her own subjectivity.

Unlike Marie in *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and Marion in *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987), it was my intention to portray Lucy as being aware of the lives and emotions of those around her, at least to some extent. In the early chapters Lucy is sympathetic to her friend

Jem and her family situation, along with Jodie and the fact that her best friend, Lucy's mother, died, 'Her pain is so real, and I can see that this is hard for her' (p. 42). Lucy's flaw, at this stage of the novel, is that her adolescent selfishness is preventing her from understanding that her father also suffered when her mother died, 'I used to ask questions. But he got quite good at ignoring them, or changing the subject or whatever. So then I just started to try and find out things by myself' (p. 41). This reveals Lucy's limited awareness in the beginning of the novel, showing that her adolescent self-interest prevents her from understanding that her father also suffered when her mother died.

The motive for Lucy's move to Melbourne is to find out information about her mother. It is her belief that the development of her own identity is intrinsically linked to her becoming aware of her mother's personality, 'Mostly I had a good childhood. I might have liked to have known more, but at least I was safe, loved. Some children aren't. It was just different I guess, and as I got older I started to wonder how else it could have been.' (p. 26). It is the fact that Lucy knows little about her mother that has caused strain in her relationship with her father; Lucy blames her father for not telling her about her mother. In the prologue Lucy says, 'Her date of birth, the name of the town she grew up in, where she studied and the date she and Dad got married. They're the details you might read in the obituary of a complete stranger. They're not the only details a girl should know about her mother' (p. 1). Lucy's own self-centredness manifests as a projection of selfishness on to her father. Instead of being able to see that it might be grief that prevents her father from speaking about her mother, Lucy sees his silence as a deliberate method to keep information about her mother from her, 'I try to remember the stories I've been told about her, any piece of information that might help me form an image of her standing in her room. But all I know is trivial' (p. 1).

As Lucy starts to learn more about her mother; about her childhood, how much she enjoyed cooking, how she met Lucy's father and how she felt when she found out she was pregnant, the reader sees Lucy's subjectivity and self-awareness beginning to shift. No longer does Lucy believe that she must be a nurse or live in Melbourne to be like her mother. In a conversation with Jodie, Lucy discusses why she applied to study nursing:

'Well, I don't really know anymore. Partly, I think, because of all the stories Dad used to tell about how I'd play nurse when I was little. And partly I think because of my mum. I thought that becoming a nurse would make me more like her.'

'And what do you think about those things now?'

'Now?' I wonder out loud. 'Now I think I'm doing it for them. For Dad and for my mum. Not for me' (p. 94).

As Lucy's sense of awareness starts to shift, she also realises that she is not the only one affected by her mother's death. She is not the only one who lost someone. She realises that her father also lost his wife:

And then I realise. And it feels like a truck has driven straight through me. Like my feet are still planted on the road, but that my stomach and my chest have been carried away with the force. How can it have taken me this long to understand? I worked it out the first time I met Jodie. How could I have spent eighteen years with Dad and never understood? I realised at the café that it wasn't just me who had lost someone the day my mum died. That Jodie had lost her friend. But Dad? He lost his wife (p. 95).

This is also the point in the novel where Lucy stops referring to her mother as 'my mum', as if she is the only one who has a claim to her and is then consequently the only one who was affected by her death. From this point on in the novel Lucy just refers to her as 'Mum'.

Lucy's realisation, that she does not have to model herself on her mother to understand her or to know herself, and in repairing her relationship with her father, Lucy grasps the basic notions of subjectivity:

And who am I? I may not know what I want to do or where I want to be. I may not have my whole future mapped out. But I know who I am. I'm Lucy Wallace. I'm eighteen years old. I live in Warrnambool, Victoria. And I like living here. I like that I know my neighbours and that I have the same friends from primary school. But I also liked living in Melbourne. I liked the possibilities it offered and I liked making new friends like Claire and Sean. I like what I learnt about myself there. And I know I want to keep learning about myself (p. 130).

As Lisette Dillon (2011) states, 'Typically the process of discerning what is "me" and "not me" is vital in differentiating self from others' (pp. 224-225), this is evident in Gemma's characterisation in *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) and is precisely what Lucy does throughout *Somewhere between*.

In the epilogue it is clear to the reader that Lucy has a better idea of who she is, when compared to the beginning of the novel, but she is also aware that this is something that will change throughout her life. She is acknowledging, as Dillon (2011) suggests, that self is

'Thought of more as a project than a search, reflective of a constructionist approach towards understanding self and identity' (p. 215). Lucy remains in a liminal space, she is aware that as her interests and circumstances change, she too will change. This realisation however, does not worry her because she knows she has the support of her father and Jodie.

Fiona Hartley-Kroeger (2011), when writing about subjectivity in YA novels, suggests that there are two central components of a character's subjectivity in a text, the first is 'being subject to, or capable of being acted on or influenced by forces other than oneself, such as situations, environment, and other characters' (p. 277). This is limited in the novels from the first two periods being analysed. Particularly when considering Marie in *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and Tony in *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), whose egocentricity prevents them from being influenced by any external elements. In comparison, Gemma, Taylor and Celia, the protagonists in the novels published since 2005, are much more aware and in tune with the events that are happening around them. The second element that Hartley-Kroeger (2011) mentions is 'having agency, or being capable of conscious and deliberate thought and action' (p. 277). This is another trait that distinguishes the characters from the novels published most recently from those published between 1986 and 2004; they are able to consider their own sense of self and acknowledge that it is fluid. This is made clear, in *Somewhere between*, as Lucy reconsiders her own identity, 'It makes me wonder if I'm the same, if I've let the fact that Mum died when I was a baby define me? Yes, it's a part of who I am, but is it everything I am?' (p. 110). It is Lucy's ability to examine and evaluate her own sense of self that separates her from the characters in the earlier novels.

From my analysis above, it is clear that a shift has occurred in the self-awareness and subjectivity of characters in YA realistic fiction novels published in Australia between 1986 and 2013. Where characters from earlier works, those published between 1986 and 2004, portray limited knowledge of not just their own identities but of the events around them.

These novels perpetuate previously held views of adolescents as self-absorbed, immature and incapable of making their own decisions. Thein and Sulzer (2015) argue that it is these prevailing discourses on adolescents that 'limit and constrain the ability of adults and young people to see adolescents as complete, complex people with a range of interests, needs, desires, experiences, and ways of participating in school and life' (p. 47). Novels published more recently depict characters that are distinctly more aware of their own selves, as well as the fact that these selves are not fixed entities, that they are liminal and evolving continuously. Lisette Dillon (2011) suggests these characters are portrayed as 'agents of their own self-awareness' (p. 217), making them more rounded and complex characters than many of those who preceded them.

The next chapter of this exegesis explores how the main themes and topics of the novels being analysed have changed since 1986. It focuses on how the shifting trends in themes have made the novels more complex, how they have changed along with societies' perceptions of adolescents and how these changes have influenced my own creative work.

CHAPTER TWO: THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF THEMES

At first my brain can't register what I'm seeing. The bath full of bloody water and Jem's hair, floating across her face, catching on her neck and mouth as if it were strangling her. Somewhere between (Farrow 2017, p 120)

It is widely acknowledged that YA realistic fiction novels have shifted their focus to consider a broader range of themes and plot points (Seymour & Beckton 2015, Cart 2010, Nodelman 2008, Habegger 2004, Nilsen & Donelson 2001). This chapter extends this notion, through an examination of how the YA realistic fiction novels discussed within this chapter demonstrate the contention that novels of the genre display increasingly complex themes. Throughout my evaluation of the Australian YA realistic fiction novels explored within the literature review, I identified a shift in the themes of the novels being considered. This research has validated the overarching contention of this thesis: that the narrative structures and preoccupations of the novels from within the genre have changed significantly throughout this time.

The focus of this chapter is on the reasons for such a shift because, as Denise Beckton (2015) notes, there is limited commentary 'related to the driving forces behind these changes' (p. 2). This is contextualised within a discussion of the history of YA realistic fiction, the debate about the appropriateness of certain topics in YA literature which manifests in the censorship of the genre and the changing concepts of adolescence, all in relation to the examination of the selected novels.

The subject matter of literature written for children and young adults has been debated persistently since its foundation as a literary category. In terms of YA literature, the rise of the problem novel arguably brought about the impassioned debate that surrounds the appropriateness of the subject matter in novels written for adolescent implied readers. The problem novel built on the *bildungsroman* genre, by portraying the coming of age story that had become synonymous with literature written for young adults while adding an overarching element of cynicism and despondency. Lisa Habegger (2004) describes the earlier 'squeaky-clean' novels of the 1950s as dealing mostly with a narrow range of adolescent emotions, ideals and experiences, such as peer-pressure, first-love, finishing high-school and first time employment. These early *bildungsromans* mostly offered little challenge. The change in subject matter brought about by the introduction of problem novels saw a shift towards overly sensational themes. The focus became the issues that the character faced instead of the evolution of the characters themselves, as discussed in Chapter One. This is an issue that significantly influenced the writing of my own novel, which I discuss later in this

chapter. By the 1980s, as Sheldrick Ross (1985) explains, the YA coming of age story had become a dangerous journey from innocence to knowledge. By this stage the novels were being described by publishers and theorists as discussing adult subjects and themes (Apseloff 1987), a description which clearly demonstrates that the subject matter being discussed prior to this time was not considered adult, and was therefore disparaged as immature.

This brief history demonstrates how the themes discussed within YA literature have shifted, particularly in response to the content of problem novels. This chapter discusses, in detail, how this shift can be seen in Australian YA realistic fiction novels published since 1986. When considering the novels published between 1986 and 1994, the focus of the linear storylines is usually limited to the events of the novel. In *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), the novel's focus is on the death of Marie's father and how she subsequently copes in the aftermath. In *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987) the main focus is Marina's selective muteness which develops after her father throws acid at her mother, but hits Marina instead. In *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992) the main focus is Josie's attempt to establish her own identity through reconciling the displacement she feels between her Australian and Italian heritage and meeting her father for the first time.

The concentrated focus on the issues of the novel, where the protagonist is preoccupied solely on themselves and all their problems, is one of the major limitations of the novels from this time frame. Michael Cart (2010), renowned YA literature theorist, discussing the problem novel, explains that the increase in popularity of the problem novel and its freedom to discuss difficult subject matter 'caused some writers to forget the totality of the realistic novel's mission: it must portray not only real-life circumstances – problems if you will – but also the real people living in real settings' (p. 32). This can be seen in the early chapters of *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), as Josie begins to discuss her concerns: it gets on her 'nerves' that she has to go to her Nonna's every afternoon after school because, 'Firstly, the best looking guys in the world take the bus to Glebe while the worst take the bus to where my grandmother lives. Secondly, if I go straight home in the afternoon I can play music full volume whereas if I go to Nonna's the only music she has is *Mario Lanza's Greatest Hits*' (p. 6). Seemingly, the purpose of the first chapter is for the reader to become aware of all of Josie's concerns. Josie complains about not being able to go out on social outings and that she is stuck at a school dominated by rich people. She explains that she does not feel as if she belongs to either the Australian or Italian communities, tells the reader that she thinks her mother has cancer and mentions her self-image issues. Michael Cart (2010) suggests that this trend towards a concentration on introspective concern with

difficulties detracts from the narrative and structural aspects of the fiction: 'The subject matter too often became the tail that wagged the dog of the novel' (p. 64).

The issues and problems that the protagonists of these novels experience are those typically faced by most young adults, such as finishing high school, fighting with parents, finding a boyfriend/girlfriend and pressure from peers. They are not the increasingly complex problems that the protagonists of more recent novels face. In *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), Josie talks about the pressure of finishing high school: 'For the last five years we have been geared for this year. The year of HSC (the Higher School Certificate), where one's whole future can skyrocket or go through the toilet' (p. 5). She also discusses her relationship with her mother, 'My mother and I have a pretty good relationship, if a bit erratic. One minute we love each other to bits and spend hours in deep and meaningful conversation and next minute we'll be screeching at each other about the most ridiculous thing' (Marchetta 1992, p. 5). Although Josie's problems are ones that many adolescents would face, and they represent the adult assumption of the adolescent tendency to catastrophise seemingly small things, Josie further proves Cart's (2010) theory about the singular focus on subject matter, by continuing to focus on the number of problems she has, when she says: 'Personally I feel that the HSC is the least of my problems. Believe me, I could write a book about problems' (Marchetta 1992, p. 179). Although the novel attempts to portray the cultural diversity of Australian society and alternatives to the nuclear family, Josie's characterisation is still limited in comparison to more recently published YA realistic fiction novels.

There is a clear change in the way that more recently published YA realistic fiction novels use their characters to portray and explore the subject matter of the texts. In novels from the earlier periods, difficult subject matter or traumatic events are more likely to happen to secondary characters, those around the protagonist, not the protagonists themselves. In *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), it is John Barton who commits suicide and Josie finds out about it after the fact. It is Josie's mother who finds out that her father, Josie's grandfather, is not actually her biological father. Interestingly, in the instances where the traumatic event does happen to, or involves, the protagonist, it happens outside the novel. Usually the protagonist has already experienced the event prior to the book beginning, so that the reader learns of the event in the past tense, therefore removing some of the traumatic impact. While taking the dramatic impact out of the narrative may have been employed in an attempt to shift the focus on to the character, it can actually be seen to limit the characterisation, as the readers are not privy to how the characters react to the traumatic event. In *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), Marie's father has already died before the book begins and the reader is never explicitly told how, while in *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987) Marina's father has already thrown acid in his daughter's face. This narrative strategy is also

evident in many YA realistic fiction novels published between 1995 and 2004. The novels discussed within this exegesis, including *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), *Night train* (Clarke 1998) and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), portray the protagonists experiencing challenging and traumatic events. Tony stabs a man at the market and jumps in front of a train, Luke suffers from anxiety and engages in risky behaviour that leads to him being killed by a train and Aurora suffers from an eating disorder. Each of the novels, however, does still employ a strategy that may reduce the traumatic impact on the reader. Neither *Night train* (Clarke 1998) nor *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999) is told in the first person, they instead employ a third person narrator. Furthermore, *Night train* (Clarke 1998) reduces the impact of Luke's death by revealing it to the readers in the beginning of the novel, then uses flashback for the exposition leading to his death. Similarly, the impacts of Tony's suicide attempt and his act of assault, in *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), are lessened by the way they are narrated after the fact, in letter form, not as they occur. Other novels from this period, such as Wendy Orr's *Peeling the onion* (1997), Maureen McCarthy's *Chain of hearts* (1999) and Ian Bone's *Song of an innocent bystander* (2002), all portray the aftermath of a traumatic event, such as a life changing car accident, death of a friend and hostage situation, instead of depicting the events as they happen. In contrast, in *Somewhere between*, Lucy is present during part of Jem's suicide attempt. While she is not there when Jem harms herself, she is there to see the horror of the event, the blood and her friend lying lifelessly in the bath tub. As a result the reader empathises with Lucy, as she attempts to save her friend. They are not told about the attempt later in the novel when the intensity of the trauma is reduced.

This shift is consistent with contemporary novels, where the protagonists are usually central to any trauma that occurs within the novel. The readers, therefore, are directly confronted by the events and emotions. In *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), Taylor is abandoned for the second time, this time by her guardian Hannah, with no warning and no way to contact her. She finds out that her father is dead, her mother is dying and she is present as her boarding house burns down. Gemma, in *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), and Celia in *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), are both the victims of an abduction. Gemma is abducted in the beginning of the novel and the reader vicariously experiences the trauma with her, while in *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) Celia is abducted in the final chapter resulting in the reader experiencing the shock of the kidnapping and not knowing if she is safe at the conclusion of the novel. In my own novel, while Lucy is already aware that her mother is dead she learns of the details of her death as the narrative unfolds, along with the reader. Lucy is also present during her best friend's suicide attempting. She is the first person to find Jem and is responsible for trying to save her. The experiences of the characters in these more recent novels, demonstrate how the complexity of the way the themes are portrayed within YA realistic fiction novels has shifted over recent years. This

shift in the portrayal of the genre's subject matter has also contributed to the increased complexity of the narrative techniques used within the genre, such as the implementation of non-linear storylines and the use of multiple narrators.

The novels written between 1995 and 2004 differ from those written more recently in terms of their subject matter, particularly when considering their portrayal of the central themes. The novels written during this period tend to rely on shock and coincidence, which results in sensationalised subject matter. Instead of focussing on the complexity of the issues and carefully considering their consequences and impact, they rely on the sensation and the controversy that inevitably follows novels with such content. While it may have been necessary, for social and cultural reasons, for early YA writers to use sensationalism as a tool in an attempt to change adult attitudes towards adolescent problems and adolescents themselves, this exegesis argues that the sensationalism present in these texts minimises the textual impact of the novels as works of art. A text becomes sensationalised because of the way the topics discussed within them are framed, for example instead of focussing on the complexity of the issues and carefully considering their consequences and impact, they rely on the sensation and the controversy that inevitably follows novels with such content. It is possible for a writer to successfully write about taboo topics, by placing more emphasis on character and plot development, as well as consistent exposition, over shock value. The argument of this thesis is that the texts from this time period were written about in such a way as to make them less successful, due to their sensationalism. In 1999, John Stephens claimed that the feature which clearly differentiates books for 'older children' from books for adults is a difference in degrees of explicitness, with the children's book presenting a view of the world that is more sharply polarised between positive and negative representation. Although Stephens (1999) directly references *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) in his article, I would argue that the positive representations in Marsden's novel are lacking, that instead of presenting the two views of the world, as suggested by Stephens (1999), the novel relies on the sensationalism of its negative subject matter. Shivaun Plozza (2015) maintains that realistic fiction in YA literature is effective when the subject matter it explores is 'dealt with in a sensitive and thoughtful manner, not for shock value and not without a thorough understanding of the issues at hand' (p. 8). This is where the novels in this time period falter. At times the shock value of the events portrayed in the novels seems to be at the expense of careful narrative construction.

Killing Aurora (Barnes 1999) illustrates some of the points that Plozza (2015) considers, specifically when considering the minute detail which is given in regards to, not just Aurora's rapidly declining weight, but the symptoms she develops as a result of her eating disorder, including halitosis, the fine hair growth that covers her body and her obsession with food

which manifests in her collaging her bedroom walls with photos of food cut from magazines. The novel's emphasis on Aurora's mental and physical decline far outweighs the details given about her recovery, which arguably deserves more attention, resulting in poor character development and an incomplete narrative arc, which is discussed further in Chapter Three of this exegesis. The novel portrays the details of the specific ways in which she loses weight:

'I, uh, did without lunch. I don't like the sort of food you're supposed to have for lunch. I have an apple and a litre of water instead.' She lectures to awestruck ears. 'It really fills you up. You don't feel hungry at all.' Aurora is too shy to tell them that the best thing about dieting the Aurora way is that your periods stop, completely, as if they had never been. No more mess. No more fuss. (Barnes 1999, p. 86)

It is the sensationalism of these novels, as seen in the quote above, which often contribute to their being targeted by censors. The language used, particularly 'No more mess. No more fuss' (p. 86), could be considered to be condoning Aurora's behaviour. It could be considered to invite an acceptance of her behaviour, which through the language used is portrayed as having positive ramifications. This tendency towards sensation caused *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) to be a regular target of censors. In one review, the novel was criticised for its use of profanities, tallying the total times the word 'fuck' was used within the novel to 78 and the word 'cunt' 14 times (Tucker 1998, p. 109). Similarly, in a review in *The Australian Magazine*, entitled 'Life sucks, Timmy', Kate Legge (1997), journalist at *The Australian*, argues that 'the novels of some of Australia's top writers of young people's fiction have never been bleaker or more explicit' (p. 10). Both *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999) and *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) discuss important issues that are relevant to the lives of their YA readers, such as eating disorders, neglect and abandonment, consent and rape culture, family violence and mental health issues. However, the way in which they are discussed risks trivialising their importance or moreover risks not exploring the issues beyond a cursory reference. For example, in *Night train* (Clarke 1998) Luke's anxiety is dismissed by most of the adult characters in the novel, with the exception of Mrs. Brennan Luke's English teacher. Instead he is considered to have behavioural problems and to be lazy. His anxiety issues are not acknowledged, and therefore are not addressed, by any of the other adult characters prior to his death. Plozza (2015) suggests of the novels, 'this does not mean that they must be morally absolute, but it does mean that they should be thought provoking and non-sensationalist' (p. 8). The overall impact of the novels risks being lost due to their

sensationalism. Instead I believe that more emphasis on plot development and consistent exposition over shock value, such as ensuring the portrayal of a character's recovery matches the exposition of their struggles, would improve the overall impact of these novels.

Another narrative preoccupation of these novels that tends to sensationalise, and therefore detract from, their overall impact, is their inclusion of an overabundance of 'taboo' subjects in a single novel. When authors started to include subjects in their novels that had previously been deemed to be outside the scope of the YA age range, YA readers responded to the fact that these novels didn't retreat from difficult content and to the forthright way these topics were being discussed (Cart 2010). However, I question whether the authors of the later novels were over influenced by this reader response to focus too much on including taboo subjects, that weren't well considered or consistent with the storyline. Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1985) discusses this emphasis on subject matter, where 'the topics – all adult-oriented – sound like chapter titles from a textbook on social pathology: divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion, and death' (p. 175), where the topics in a single novel can include death, substance use, divorce, depression and sex. In *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999) the content includes a discussion of eating disorders, self-harm, arson, abandonment and sex. In *Dear Miffy* (1997), Marsden discusses unsafe sex, rape, drug use, molestation, suicide, murder and assault.

In my own writing, I tried to avoid including features that might result in a reader or reviewer judging *Somewhere between* to be sensationalised, such as including too many taboo subjects or taking a superficial approach which lacked a deeper understanding of the subject matter. After reading novels such as *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999) and *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), I became aware of the features of a YA realistic fiction novel which might result in a text being viewed as sensational and if included could therefore minimise its intended impact. Consequently, I made adjustments to the original plan of my novel to remove any storylines and subject matter that could have this effect. In my candidature report, the synopsis of my novel included a narrative arc in which Jem, Lucy's best friend, contracted HIV through drug use. This could have subsequently impacted on Lucy's health at the conclusion of the novel, when Lucy tries to save her after her suicide attempt. On reviewing my main purpose for the novel, which is to show the personal development of Lucy and her shifting sense of self-awareness subsequent to her realisation that she does not need to be exactly like her mother to feel connected to her, I was able to see that the HIV storyline would not enhance the strength of the novel, but would instead detract from it. I made a deliberate decision, as a writer, despite the work that had gone in to the planning and drafting of the specific storyline, to remove it as I judged that it would ultimately strengthen the overall impact of *Somewhere between*.

In discussing recent YA fiction, Koss & Teal (2009) suggest that while 'YA novels still do focus on social issues, there has been a shifting trend from the big event or coming of age stories to a more general focus on teens struggling to find themselves and dealing with typical teenage life' (p. 567). These shifts in content, implied reader and narrative structure, away from those of the problem novel, can be found in the novels written between 2005 and 2013. This is supported by Tilghman (2011) who claims that, 'While the newest generation of YA fiction often takes on heavy, realistic subjects, there is still a marked departure from the "problem novel" that focussed on truthfully portraying issues, like death or drug addiction, often at the expense of craft in the 1970s, 1980s and even 1990s' (p. 5). Both Koss & Teal (2009) and Tilghman (2011) support the claim of this thesis that a shift is evident in the narrative structures and preoccupations of the YA realistic fiction genre, particularly in relation to the depiction of its complex subject matter.

While the subject matter of *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) and *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) may not represent 'typical' teenage life, they do offer their implied readers more complete and complex storylines. As mentioned in Chapter One, throughout *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) Gemma is constantly being tested after her abduction, not just by her own internal thought processes, but by her surroundings and societal pressures, directly resulting in the reader reconsidering their own assumptions about right and wrong and whom we develop relationships with. When reading *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), the reader is forced to consider their own feelings about the kidnappings of the secondary characters in the novel, but even more is challenged to pick up on the very subtle nuances which allude to the fact that 'Alice', a middle-aged man preying on young girls through the internet, is in fact the murderer and kidnapper, before this is revealed in the final pages of the novel. *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), which I focus on in this chapter, is arguably a more complex work by Melina Marchetta in comparison to *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992) her earlier work previously considered in this chapter. By looking at the two novels, the shift in how the themes are presented in each is evident, particularly when considering the narrative structures that they employ. Other novels from this period, including Maureen McCarthy's *Rose by any other name* (2006) and Vikki Wakefield's *Friday Brown* (2012), discuss subject matter similar to those synonymous with problem novels, including homelessness, abuse, criminal acts and the seduction of a YA protagonist by her friend's middle-aged father, however in contrast instead of these novels focussing on these issues as plot points their storylines are driven by the character development of the protagonists.

On the Jellicoe Road (Marchetta 2006), in terms of both its subject matter and its execution, is handled with considerable depth and maturity, acknowledging the complexity of its implied reader and their ability to consume it. Plozza (2015), writing for the special YA

issue of the Australasian creative writing refereed journal TEXT, praised *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) for being structurally complex and acknowledging the capability and maturity of its readers. In the novel, Marchetta interlaces two narratives, one set in the present and one set almost two decades previous. Although initially juxtaposed, the narrative arcs eventually meet in a notably affecting and well-considered climax. The novel challenges its reader, not just because of its content, but also through its narrative structure. The reader must work hard to analyse and then connect the two narrative arcs in order to comprehend the fact that the characters in Hannah's manuscript are in fact people in Taylor's life. This is a revelation for Taylor, as well as the reader, as it allows her to reconstruct her past. Through interpreting Hannah's manuscript Taylor finds out who her father is and that he actually died before she was born; she realises that the reason her mother left her with Hannah, and why she feels such a strong connection to her, is because Hannah is actually her aunt; she is able to work out that the memory she has of being on her father's shoulders is actually her being carried by the Brigadier; and why the Hermit whispered 'forgive me' in her ear right before he killed himself, as he seeks forgiveness for killing Taylor's father.

Koss & Teale (2009) explain the shifting complexity, as demonstrated in *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006):

These novels require readers to follow several different strands, perhaps out of linear order, presented through different voices or narrators and sometimes with conflicting information and unreliable narrators. Readers must sort through, analyse and organise what they read to put together a coherent whole (p. 570).

These narrative devices are the complex elements that were often missing from earlier works of YA realistic fiction and which are now utilised within contemporary novels of the genre.

While the narrative structure of my novel does not present as many challenges to the reader as Marchetta's *On the Jellicoe Road* (2006), I believe it does still demonstrate the increasing complexity of the YA realistic fiction genre. In the beginning of *Somewhere Between*, Lucy is an unreliable narrator, of the kind Koss & Teale (2009) identify as a recent introduction to contemporary YA fiction, because her credibility is compromised once the reader identifies that she is unable to consider anyone else's perspective. Her limited awareness at the beginning of the novel, as mentioned in Chapter One, prevents her from understanding how her father has been affected by her mother's death. She can't see how his pain and grief

may have made it hard for him to speak of his wife or the sacrifices he has made for Lucy. Even when both Claire and Jodie try to tell Lucy that she is being hard on her father, she questions them. When Lucy finally confides in Jodie that she is thinking about leaving University, Jodie asks whether she has spoken to her father about it. She says:

‘Luce, you’re too hard on him. Have you actually spoken to him about all of this?’

‘Yeah right! After him not wanting me to come to Melbourne. I’m not ringing him just for him to tell me “I told you so”’. (p. 94)

Initially Lucy can’t see past her own limited perspective. The reader can also see how unreliable Lucy is as a narrator since she hasn’t considered that her mother could have wanted to be anything but a nurse and since she does not see any of the signs that allude to Jem’s mental health issues, such as the change in her drawings:

When I get closer to the table I can see the image in her sketchbook; it’s different to the others I’m used to her drawing. Her pages are usually full of commanding female characters, drawn with strong, hard lines, their legs braced wide for the fight. But this girl is fragile, elfin, her hair and flowing dress drawn with delicate, gentle pencil strokes. (p. 77)

Because the novel is written in the first person, it is up to the reader to analyse Lucy’s narration and decipher the clues that have been imbedded in the novel to show that her point of view is limited and variable. An example is the subtle interaction that occurs between Claire and Sean when Lucy suggests that her father will actually enjoy the fact that she has moved away, “Oh, he’ll be fine,” I say. “He’ll probably actually enjoy the peace and quiet.” “Yeah probably,” Claire says as she looks at Sean.’ (p. 8).

I tried to develop my novel in consideration of the complex subject matter mentioned within this chapter. The story centres around Lucy’s focus on the death of her mother, who died during childbirth. Although Lucy’s mother died before the beginning of the novel, as in the novels discussed earlier in the chapter, details of her death are discussed in detail with Lucy finding out about them for the first time along with the reader. An example of this is when Jodie explains to Lucy that her mother died from postpartum haemorrhaging from uterine atony and Lucy asks questions both for herself and for the reader.

In addition, the novel explores drug and alcohol use, neglect, abandonment and suicide. The depiction of suicide within the novel is quite detailed, in a way that differs from earlier examples of the genre. Paula S. Berger wrote, in 1986, in *The High School Journal*, that

'until quite recently suicide was regarded as a taboo subject' (p. 15). From that point forward, suicide began to be explored in YA literature more frequently. As discussed earlier in the chapter, when suicide first began to feature in YA literature, such as in *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), while the event had a substantial impact on the protagonist, it usually involved a secondary character. In *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), when suicide involved the protagonist it was usually mentioned only after the reader had been assured of the protagonist's survival. However, in *Somewhere between*, while it is Jem, not Lucy, who attempts suicide, Lucy plays a major part in the event. It is Lucy who finds Jem floating in her bathtub after having cut her wrists:

I hesitate, only slightly, before stepping into the bath, knowing it's the only way I can get the leverage to pull her out. The water is lukewarm, but it's the consistency that startles me as it ebbs to make way for my feet, then flows back to surround my calves, moulding around them like quicksand. (p. 120)

And because it is made clear that Lucy and Jem have organised to 'hang out' that day at Jem's house, it is left open that Jem may have intended for Lucy to find her after the attempt. Writing in support of discussing 'dark themes' in YA literature, scholar Diana Hodge (2014) explains that 'Young people are experiencing traumatic events in real life; reading a work of fiction that may help them cope is tame in comparison. Young people do get bullied, they do die of terminal illnesses, they do commit suicide, and they do get addicted to drugs'. Therefore, while suicide is a confronting subject to read about, it is undeniably a part of many adolescents' lives and should be discussed within the literature written for them in an effort to offer knowledge of mental health issues.

Much of the debate surrounding this subject matter relates to its appropriateness within YA realistic fiction novels which are written for readers who are not considered fully mature or self-governing. As YA author and theorist Vanessa Harbour (2012) argues, the pairing of children's literature with controversial subject matter such as sex and drugs is seen as a paradox. Some critics contend that these topics should not be discussed in literature written for children in order to protect child readers, but where there are others, including writers such as Harbour, who maintain that fiction is actually a suitable medium to explore such issues. Such debate stems from discussions about the function of the genre and a consideration of what these novels are expected to do in terms of their YA readers. Plozza suggests that this function is often suggested as being a need to assist with a young person's socialisation (2015). Therefore, before a discussion of the appropriateness of the themes discussed within this chapter can be considered, it is important to first examine the

function of YA realistic fiction. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the central themes of YA literature is argued to centre on finding the answer to the question 'who am I?' Patty Campbell (2004) asserts that regardless of what events occur in a novel, finding an answer to that question is what the book is really about. This is supported by Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1985), who states that 'the basic pattern, as has often been observed, is the rite of passage from childhood to maturity. At the heart of the genre is the change of status that comes with the initiation into new knowledge' (p. 177). For Harbour (2012), the reading of fiction, for readers of any age, is about engagement. Harbour describes the 'real purpose of young adult fiction: to be a site of mutual exploration for the writer and the reader' (Harbour 2012). Commentary on the function of YA literature is often polarised. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the reader should be protected from potentially harmful subject matter, and at the other are those who see the benefits of equipping YA readers with a breadth of knowledge on which they can draw when necessary.

This debate, and the emotion it generates, is not a new one, as has been well-established by children's literature theorists such as Peter Hunt (2006) and Alyson Miller (2014). Hunt surveys the debate's history, 'from criticism of folk and fairy-tales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to debates about the dumbing down effects of the teletubbies in the 1990s' (2006, p. 257). Similarly, Miller (2004) describes children's literature as 'a site of considerable angst' since the 18th Century (p. 120).

Some of those who argue for the censorship of YA realistic fiction, on the grounds that the shift in the subject matter being discussed is too mature or nihilistic for YA readers, believe that 'the problem with the darker offerings in Young Adult literature is that they lack this transforming and uplifting quality. They take difficult subjects and wallow in them in a gluttonous way: they show an orgiastic lack of restraint that is the mark of bad taste' (Cox Gurdon 2013, p. 42). I acknowledge that some of these novels do lack an uplifting quality, but argue, in Chapter Three, that they remain important regardless. I argue throughout this chapter, that these critics, for example Graham (2014), Cox Gurdon (2013), Tucker (1998), Jameyson (1997) and Legge (1997), choose to focus on isolated elements of the novels, rather than considering the novels as a whole. In contrast to these critics, Plozza argues that, 'With our heads out of the sand, most of us can recognise that life is full of light and shade – we can see that there are negative aspects of life that our children, as much as we would wish to protect and shelter them, need to learn about' (2015, p. 6). The emotive language used by Plozza (2015) and Cox Gurdon (2013) highlights how impassioned the debate surrounding the appropriateness of YA literature has become, as well as reinforcing the polarised views that exist within it. Plozza's (2015) position, which is shared by a number of YA fiction advocates such as Harbour (2012), Cart (2010), Koss & Teale (2009), Phillion (2009) and Nodelman (2008) gives more credit to the intelligence, ability and resilience of its

implied reader, an argument I fully agree with.

Those who are in favour of the censorship of YA realistic fiction also often critique the genre for being nihilistic, hopeless, shocking and violent (Plozza 2015). It is their belief that content of this nature should be reserved for adult readers, and that the putative innocence of YA readers should be protected by limiting the depth and range of the subject matter offered in YA novels. Alyson Miller (2014) suggests, 'The sensitivity attached to conceptualisations of the child figure has meant that representations aimed at children tend to be carefully monitored and are capable of attracting considerable scrutiny from institutions such as the school and church' (p. 121). Usually the aim of those who wish to censor a text is to act as moral guardian to young readers, irrespective of whether they know the reader or not. Writing for *USA Today*, Meghan Cox Gurdon (2013), berates contemporary YA fiction for being 'increasingly lurid, grotesque, profane, sexual and ugly' (p. 40). In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Cox Gurdon (2011) makes several unsupported claims, suggesting that the texts about self-harm could incite imitation from its readers. Similarly, Legge accuses YA literature as being out of control, suggesting that 'too many of today's writers for children finish where there's no bloody hope' (1997, p. 10). John Marsden's *Dear Miffy* (1997) is one of the novels that Kate Legge focuses on in her article, in which she condemns this shift in subject matter for destroying the genre of YA realism. While I have critiqued *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) for its tendency to sensationalise and discuss complex subject matter in a trivial way, the text is not representative of the entire genre. Cox Gurdon (2011) and Legge's (1997) critiques of YA realistic fiction are subdued in comparison to the attack from independent researcher Richard Eckersley (1994). In 'Failing a generation: youth and the crisis in Western culture', he argues:

In any other culture, at any other time, children this age would be told stories that would help them to construct a world view, a cultural context, to define who they are and what they believe – a context that would give them a positive, confident, optimistic outlook on life, or at least the fortitude to endure what life held in store for them. (Eckersley 1994, p. 35)

It is his belief that the current texts being published for YA readers do not include such stories and as a result 'we are witnessing the cultural abuse of an entire generation of young Australians' (Eckersley 1994, p. 35).

While these arguments may seem exaggerated, censorship is a very real threat to YA literature. In 2015, in New Zealand, Ted Dawe's novel *Into the River* was banned after Family First, a Christian lobby group, filed an appeal to have the book reviewed and a

restriction order placed on its publication (Film and Literature Board of Review 2015). The appeal found that it was 'in the public interest' to place an interim restriction order on the book and bookshops were warned that they would face fines of up to \$3,000 for an individual or \$10,000 for a business if they supplied the book to anyone. The book was banned due to its discussion of racism, bullying, drug use, and sexuality, as well as for its use of profanities. However, prior to the ban, the book won the 2013 New Zealand Post Children's Book Award for both the Best Young Adult Fiction Book and the Margaret Mahy Book of the Year. Fortunately the ban was lifted in October 2015.

It is interesting that critics, such as those mentioned above, argue for the content of YA realistic fiction to be limited, when their own reflections of the novels are themselves limited. They often do not take into consideration the novel as a whole, such as their character development, their complex narrative structures or the fact that they offer social and cultural commentary. Or they do consider the novel as a whole but they do not like the particular cultural message that it portrays, and instead often resort to attempt to stifle an individual's freedom of speech. Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1985) asserts that these arguments for censorship are open to dispute on two counts, 'First, it fails to recognise that texts have their meanings in relation to other texts as well as in relation to the outside world. And, second, it implies a theory of reading that does not take in to account the reader – in this case the YA reader' (p. 176), who Sheldrick Ross argues, completes the work through their act of reading. Nothing is written in isolation of other works within its genre. *Somewhere between* is an example of this, it is a part of a continuation of work that already exists, it does not exist on its own. It takes into account the shifting trends discussed throughout this exegesis. As I argue later, this ultimately alludes to the fact that these censors (Graham 2014, Cox Gurdon 2013, Tucker 1998, Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997) cannot acknowledge the complexity of YA implied readers. The complaints that censors make against YA realistic fiction single out the very features that attract YA readers.

However, just as there exists a number of theorists and articles condemning and seeking bans on YA realistic fiction novels, there is also an abundance of researchers, authors and educators who write in support of the genre. Fortunately, as Plozza (2015) explains, 'The genre has been defended for its ability to challenge and empower growing minds, to break down taboos and provide a platform for teens to traverse isolating and overwhelming issues' (p. 2). In terms of the debate surrounding the censorship of YA realistic fiction, this thesis argues that the virtues of the genre, such as those listed above, far outweigh any distorted arguments not supported by evidence and that the genre plays a valuable role in the lives of YA readers.

Along with the censorship of texts, another result of the shifting complexity of the subject

matter in YA realistic fiction novels in Australia is the introduction of the New Adult genre, brought about as a result of both the changing perception of young adults in society and the rise in the adult readership of YA fiction. According to Beckton (2015), 'The porosity of content and flexibility in relation to age-defined readership between categories is similarly evident in the emergence of the New Adult literature category' (p. 6). The New Adult genre, as originally coined by S. Jae-Jones, is defined as 'cutting edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA and can appeal to an adult audience' (Jones 2015). Jones (2015) specifies that the protagonist should be aged 18 or over, but that there is a preference for characters aged in their 20s. Although extensively discussing the New Adult genre is beyond the scope of this exegesis, it is important to briefly consider it in order to identify how YA realistic fiction is itself a relatively new genre, which is now being subdivided and rebranded in various ways by the publishing industry as its content and the perception of adolescence and their reading habits shift. Apart from the suggested age range of both the implied reader and protagonists of the New Adult genre, the narrative structures and preoccupations of the genre are very similar to those of YA realistic fiction. Both genres portray subject matter related to the breakdown of relationships, mental health issues, career decisions, finding independence from family, experiencing love or participating in sexual activity for the first time, and death. Central to the New Adult genre and to YA realistic fiction, as has already been established throughout this exegesis, is the protagonist's search for their own sense of self. When discussing the similarities between the two genres, Denise Beckton (2015) explains that 'while it is true that most young adults are not traditionally represented at college or in full-time employment in Young Adult fiction, these novels often include the same plotlines involving serious relationships and experiences away from home' (p. 7). Although the age of the New Adult characters may mean that they are at different life stages than their YA counterparts, their experiences often remain notably similar.

Another result of the shifting subject matter of YA realistic fiction novels is the changing demographic of the genre's readers. Bowker Market Research (2012) revealed, in *Young adult books attract growing numbers of adult fans*, that 55 per cent of YA fiction purchasers who bought the books to read themselves were over 18 years of age. Although this is not conclusive evidence that adults are opting to read YA novels over general release adult texts, as Beckton (2015) suggests, 'The results do indicate that adults are attracted to the themes, genres and content' (p. 6) now associated with the YA fiction category. I argue that this suggests that YA realistic fiction novels now portray content and themes consistent with adult fiction.

While I have discussed the impact that the shifting subject matter of YA realistic fiction has

had on the genre, I will now consider the possible reasons for the change. As I discussed in Chapter One, it is clear that the subjectivity and self-awareness of the protagonists and the implied reader of the genre have shifted since 1986. However, when you consider the prevalence of criticism surrounding the appropriateness of the genre's content for its implied reader, it is evident, as Plozza (2015) suggests, that there 'is the assumption that the YA reader is passive, impressionable, reckless and incapable of sensible self-reflection. The concern, therefore, is not just about the inclusion of certain topics but the way in which they are presented and to whom they are directed' (p. 3). Much of this concern then is a direct result of the way society perceives young adults. The period of adolescence is still considered to be 'other', a transitional phase, not yet within the adult domain. However, as Jenny Pausacker (1998) states, 'The marginalisation of young adult fiction reflects nothing more or less than the lack of value given to young adults by society as a whole' (p. 114). Therefore, it could be argued that, the increased complexity of the subject matter within YA realistic fiction and the shifting representations of YA protagonists in the genre, as discussed in Chapter One, is evidence that society's perception of adolescents is in fact also shifting. Arguably this suggests that society is indeed beginning to view present-day adolescents as being increasingly complex.

In 'Growing Older – Young Adult Fiction Coming of Age', YA author and theorist Anthony Eaton (2010) argues that the disposition of adolescent literature and its protagonists are indeed shifting by suggesting that:

Increasingly the institutions which influence young adult writing in Australia seem to be recognising as valid 'young adult fiction novels' which, just a decade or two ago, would have been considered adult: protagonists above school age, emancipated from the family unit, dealing with concerns and contexts more traditionally associated with the adult world (p. 53).

These protagonists include Lucy, from my own novel, who has finished school, has moved out of her family home and has to deal with the attempted suicide of her friend. Eaton's argument can also be considered in relation to Taylor Markham from *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), who while still at school lives in boarding houses and has to contend with being abandoned by her mother and her guardian, finding out that her father died before she was born and then nursing her mother while she dies. Celia, in *Cryblue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), is concerned about the abductions of girls who are similar in age to her and from neighbouring suburbs. Similarly, Gemma, in *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), is herself the victim of abduction and struggles with the feelings of empathy and affection she

has towards her abductor. Each of these protagonists is forced to deal with concerns and experiences that were once considered to be associated with the adult realm, a signifier that publishers are more willing to publish increasingly complex narratives, and that writers are wanting to write them.

Another possible reason for the shifting complexity of the subject matter in YA realistic fiction, along with society's changing perceptions of young adults, is the influence of technology on the lives of adolescents. Mary Owens (2003) suggests, 'Societal changes, technological advances and mass media have, in many ways, pushed young people to an early maturity' (p. 2). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore, in detail, the sociological impact of mass and social media on the adolescent experience, it is necessary to at least discuss its impact on the novels being explored within this thesis. Technological advances such as the Internet and smart phones, along with social media sites Facebook and Twitter, have had substantial impacts on the lives of adolescents by exposing them to more content. Inevitably, these advances have begun to be portrayed in YA literature. *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) is the most pertinent example of how social media advances have influenced the content of YA literature. In the novel, Celia and Alice meet through Facebook, their correspondence is entirely online – through email and social media, those in the community organise vigils for the missing girls through social media and the abductor canvases his victims and learns their movements through studying their Facebook activity. In *Somewhere between*, if it weren't for social media Lucy would not meet Jodie and subsequently would not be able to learn about her mother and ultimately herself. YA novels depict the social and cultural changes that their adolescent readers are experiencing, which ensures that they remain relevant.

Advances in mass media, specifically the free access to information that now exists within Western society through television, newspapers and online news sources, have resulted in adolescents being privy to increased amounts of and a diverse range of information. Considering these advances in technology, it is even more important for YA novels to discuss topics such as war, terrorism, crimes against children and adolescents, health epidemics and crimes close to their homes so that their readers can gain an understand of events that have, or could conceivably happen, around them. Just as Taylor Markham tries to prevent Jessa McKenzie and the other young boarders at the Jellicoe School from hearing about the serial killer on the news, the girls still succeed in finding out the details about the crimes as they have unprecedented access to information about what is happening in the world. It is important that these novels written for young adults reflect the lives of their readers, which includes portraying traditional themes, such as identity, alienation from one's social group, ethical dilemmas and relationship breakdowns (Herz

1996), as well as portraying subject matter that is relevant to the current social climate, such as criminals using the internet to target children and adolescents, the mental health issues that affect young people and the changing concerns of young adults in relation to our changing society. Koss & Teale (2009) suggest, 'Teens today need to discover who they are in relation to these new media – do they accept them or reject them? As their lives become more complicated, so too does the literature written for them that reflects their lives' (p. 569).

Arguably, the greater the range of subject matter in YA realistic fiction, particularly that which is portrayed in a complex manner, the better equipped YA readers could be to handle different situations.

Earlier works of YA realistic fiction focussed almost solely on the 'problems' the protagonists faced, concentrating on one problem after another to the point that they often neglected to portray fully developed characters, accurately portrayed adolescent narrative voices or carefully considered storylines. The issues themselves were initially limited to a narrow range of topics including the protagonist trying to distance themselves from their parents, the breakdown of friendships and their first experiences with death. When the subject matter did begin to broaden it had usually already occurred outside of the novel and was just referred to, or happened to a secondary character within the novel. At other times the broadening subject matter was written in such a sensationalised manner that it made the overall outcome of the novel ineffective.

Those in the YA publishing industry have acknowledged the complexity of YA readers and the genre has shifted to represent this. Accordingly, recently published works of YA realistic fiction portray a very wide range of subject matter, where it seems that no topic is off limits and do so using challenging narrative structures, such as multiple narrative voices, multiple storylines and non-linear narratives.

However, as the complexity of the subject matter in YA realistic fiction has shifted, the debate surrounding whether or not these texts are appropriate for their implied readers has continued. Shivaun Plozza (2015) questions:

The nature of the debate remains the same: should YA be an extension of a child's moral education, shield them from difficult, contentious and morally ambiguous topics and provide an unrelentingly redemptive and positive outlook? Or should it present its readers with an uncompromising and realistic exploration of some of the negative aspects of real life in order to prepare, inform and empower emerging adult readers? (p. 3).

These questions are ones that have existed since stories began to be written specifically with the child or adolescent reader in mind and are not likely to be answered conclusively in the near future. However, the arguments of many would-be censors (Graham 2014, Cox Gurdon 2013, Tucker 1998, Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997), are limited and do not consider the novels they are challenging in their entirety.

Writing about the shift in subject matter in YA realistic fiction, Lisa Habegger (2004) suggests that 'the end result of this change opens the door for writers to expand into the realm of potentially unhappy endings, lack of morality and loss of sense of hope' (p. 37). This is the focus of the following chapter which explores the ways in which the shifting complexity of the subject matter in YA literature has had a direct effect on the resolutions of YA novels, offering readers representations of all possible outcomes not just happily ever afters.

CHAPTER THREE: THE SHIFTING RESOLUTIONS OF YOUNG ADULT REALISTIC FICTION

And who am I? I may not know what I want to do or where I want to be. I may not have my whole future mapped out. But I know who I am.

Somewhere between (Farrow 2017, p. 130)

There has been some debate, as discussed in Chapter Two, about the appropriateness of both the subject matter and the endings of more recently published novels for adolescent readers. Arguably, this emotive debate has resulted from the rise of the problem novel. The problem novel emerged from the bildungsroman genre, adding increasingly difficult subject matter to the rite of passage novels that had become associated with adolescent readers, resulting in the destabilisation of the lives of adolescent protagonists and causing many critics of the genre to argue that the endings portray hopelessness and uncertainty (Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997). Marc Aronson (2001) suggests that, in contemporary YA realistic fiction, the fairy tale happily ever after is becoming non-existent. These unresolved and unhappy endings with increasingly absent points of reassurance, such as the ending portrayed within *Somewhere between* and the other contemporary novels to be discussed within this chapter, demonstrate the shifting subjectivity which has been discussed earlier in this exegesis. This subjectivity, where protagonists are aware that they have not reached a fixed period of development, embodies a liminal space which many adolescents and YA protagonists occupy. This liminal, fluid space is portrayed within these unresolved and unhappy endings.

As contemporary YA realistic fiction novels have changed to portray increasingly more complex subject matter, the ability to neatly conclude their storylines has become significantly more difficult. This is explored throughout this chapter, through a discussion of the history of unresolved and unhappy endings in the YA realistic fiction genre. This chapter also demonstrates how this shift can be seen within the endings of the Australian YA realistic fiction novels being discussed within this exegesis. My analysis shows that the endings of the novels published between 1986 and 1994, including *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987), are highly didactic when compared to the endings of the novels published more recently. The endings of the novels published between 1995 and 2004, including *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), *Night train* (Clarke 1998) and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), are more consistent with those of the problem novel genre, as mentioned above. These novels present a number of complex issues, yet fail to discuss the resolutions of these issues in enough detail to maintain their significance, resulting in the endings being

contrived. In contrast, the novels written between 2005 and 2013, including *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) and *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), offer endings which often highlight the destabilisation of the lives of their protagonists because they lack the points of reassurance often preferred in the YA realistic fiction novels which were published prior to this period. I also situate my novel within this discussion of the genre's trend towards unresolved endings and discuss how my analysis of the novels mentioned above influenced my writing. The chapter then examines the debate surrounding how satisfying the endings of YA realistic fiction novels should be to their readers, with reference to The Great YA Debate, as sparked by Ruth Graham (2014), which was discussed in the introduction of this exegesis. This examination also considers how hope is portrayed within the YA realistic fiction genre, as some critics (Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997) argue that the genre is lacking in hope which often manifests in the censorship of YA realistic fiction novels. However, this chapter maintains that, while many of the issues presented within these novels are unresolved, this does not necessarily render the novels devoid of hope, arguing instead that hope comes from the reader. Finally, the chapter considers how the shifting concepts of adolescence, and the perception that adolescents exist within a liminal space, have contributed to the changes in the genre's resolutions.

This shift in the certainty of the endings in YA literature was first discussed by Shelia Egoff (1981) in the seminal text, *Thursday's Child: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children's Literature*. Egoff (1981) affirms that the most evident and significant change between contemporary writing for adolescents and its predecessors was the ultimate fate of its protagonists. This finding led Egoff (1981) to coin the terms 'safe survivors' and 'dangerous survivors'. 'Safe survivors' referred to the protagonists of earlier novels which depicted 'happily ever after' endings, where the young protagonist was safe because their happiness at the conclusion of the novel was assured. In regard to 'safe survivors', Egoff asserted that 'whatever the degree of suspense, the reader could be wholly certain that the hero or heroine would safely survive all perils' (1981, p. 34) and would do so unharmed and unchanged. These 'safe survivors' began to stand out in direct contrast to the protagonists of contemporary realistic fiction, particularly those of the problem novel genre, whom Egoff labelled 'dangerous survivors' (1981). These characters became known for the threatening situations they faced, usually without adult supervision or support and without their safety being assured. Egoff (1981) noted that while these 'dangerous survivors' 'may gain a courageous independence, a self-reliance and resourcefulness, they also suffer the loneliness of isolation and the heavy insecurity and responsibilities of that independence' (p. 35). Egoff's (1981) research does not extend to a discussion of YA protagonists who do not survive at all, similar to Luke in *Night train* (Clarke 1998), or possibly Celia in *Cry Blue*

Murder (Kane & Roberts 2013). It can be argued that this is because, at the time Egoff's work was published, YA protagonists typically survived at the end of the novels. Egoff's (1981) work refers to YA problem novels published in the USA prior to the 1980s: problem novels were not published in Australia until after the first YA publishing imprint originated in Australia in 1986. The shift in the assured safety of YA protagonists, as discussed by Egoff (1981), demonstrates the shifting perception of adolescents within society, as has been previously discussed throughout this exegesis, and has also been affirmed by several researchers (Cart 2010, Nilsen & Donelson 2001, Apse 1991) since first being argued by Egoff (1981). The novels analysed in this chapter demonstrate these changes in the safety of the main protagonists, where the survival of the protagonists from early works is much more certain than those of contemporary novels.

This change in the safety of the protagonists is also discussed by Patty Campbell (2010), in *Campbell's Scoop: Reflections on Young Adult Literature*, where she suggests the typical narrative strategies of current YA novels. Campbell (2010) suggests that the rule is that the storyline moves quickly towards the climax which sees the YA protagonist mature as a result of solving a problem and reaching an epiphany. However, Campbell argues that, '(v)ery occasionally the protagonist may reject the epiphany, which leads to an ending that is ironic and unhappy' (2010, p. 75). It is because of this change that Campbell (2010) suggests that there is no longer a prerequisite for there to be hope or happiness at the conclusion of a YA novel. Due to these changes, the shift towards 'dangerous survivors' and the shift away from endings steeped in optimism towards endings which portray the destabilisation of the lives of adolescent protagonist often draw the attention of censors, for example Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997, who argue that these endings are inappropriate for YA readers.

This brief history of the endings of YA novels, as considered above, reveals how the resolutions of these novels have changed throughout time, particularly since the introduction of problem novels. When considering the endings of the novels published between 1986 and 1994, particularly *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987), my analysis found that the resolutions of the novels are too neatly concluded. Despite the many issues that are introduced within each novel, they are all usually resolved by the final chapter, rendering the conclusions limiting and trite. The challenges and issues faced by the characters are typically resolved with little effort on behalf of the character. This narrative tendency often makes the conclusions seem didactic, as if they are more concerned with presenting a moral message to their YA readers than developing an ending that is consistent with the rest of the novel. Catherine Sheldrick Ross argues that this narrative convention is a 'way of providing a carefully controlled framework in which the crisis of

identity portrayed in the book is kept within manageable and acceptable proportions for the reader' (1985, p. 84). These safe endings, where from the beginning of the novel it is often made clear that the well-being of the protagonist is guaranteed, is one of the identifiable characteristics of the novels from this period. It is also one of the main drawbacks of the novels, as it often results in the novels being didactic –too focussed on presenting a moralistic ending for its implied readers. These didactic endings are limiting, instead of allowing their readers the opportunity to question the outcome of the novel the endings tell YA readers how to think.

The literature review briefly discusses how the novels selected for discussion within this exegesis do not rigidly fit within the time frames specified, particularly in relation to the trends being discussed. This is evident when considering *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992) and the way the issues of the novel are resolved. While some of the issues exposed throughout the novel are resolved, such as Josie's relationship with her father, her worry about her VCE results and her self-image issues, the novel departs from the trend of neatly resolving almost all of the issues being faced by the protagonist at the conclusion of the novel. In the final pages of the novel, Josie is overcoming a failed relationship and is grieving the death of a friend. *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992) demonstrates that some YA writers, including Melina Marchetta, were aware of the complexity of YA readers earlier than some other writers. Yet, the differences that exist between Marchetta's two novels being considered here, *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992) and *On the Jellicoe Road* (2006), are still pronounced. Both novels are effective, however *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) represents the shifting trends which have influenced the YA realistic fiction genre and is subsequently a more complex novel.

The resolutions of the remaining two novels selected from this period are didactic, demonstrating how the genre has changed over time. In *Blue days* (Sharp 1986), Marie laments that she is alone for most of the novel. This is due to the death of her father and the strained relationship she has with her mother, who accuses her of being 'a nothing' (Sharp 1986, p. 35). She also complains constantly about all the problems she has: 'conflicts don't ever get solved, just shuffled around' (Sharp 1986, p. 38), wondering whether life is worth it. However, without much outside help or effort she is able to find positivity at the conclusion of the novel, 'I knew I'd grown up a lot tonight, and things had, at long last, taken a turn for the better. Everything felt so incredibly right' (Sharp 1986, p. 97). Despite the grief she experiences, due to losing her father and the breakdown of her relationship with her best friend, the limited sympathy or support she receives from her mother after her father's death and her overall attitude towards life throughout the majority of the novel, which is one of

disillusionment and despair, by the conclusion of the novel all has been resolved without much effort and Marie manages to look forward to her future at the end of the novel with hope, 'I just couldn't get over this wonderful feeling inside me. So many things felt right. I felt sure of so much, of things that didn't even make sense before' (Sharp 1986, p. 93).

The ending of *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987) is also didactic, too focussed on presenting a moralistic ending, which results in the resolution seeming disconnected from the exposition portrayed throughout the rest of the novel. For example, in the beginning of the novel Marina's life is in upheaval and she is suffering from selective muteness. However, despite this, and with minimal discussion of her psychological treatment or medication and despite the fact that Marina had spoken about taking her own life and being scared of her father throughout the novel, by the final page her feelings seem to have been resolved conveniently and in an unconvincing manner. Early in the novel the reader learns that Marina's face is horribly disfigured after an incident where her father threw acid in her face while he was aiming for her mother and as a consequence is now incarcerated in a low security prison farm. Following the incident, Marina spent some time in the hospital and then in a mental health ward before starting at Warrington, an all-girls boarding school. Through her writing in a journal given to each of the girls by their English teacher, Mr. Lindell, the reader learns that Marina thinks of herself as being dead, metaphorically, that her previous identity died as a result of the incident with her father. She refers to herself throughout the novel as being 'the nut-case, the psycho with the deformed face' (Marsden 1987, p. 13), as 'one of the living dead' (Marsden 1987, p. 33), 'the Phantom' (Marsden 1987, p. 34) and 'the Ghost Who Walks' (Marsden 1987, p. 34). Although there are occasional allusions throughout the novel that the state of Marina's mental health may be improving: 'It startles me to realise it, I guess I'm starting to feel mildly safe' (Marsden 1987, pp. 33-34) and 'I guess it's been a pretty good day' (Marsden 1987, p. 83), these are usually followed by setbacks: 'Not good, not good, things are not good' (Marsden 1987, p. 64) and 'I wish I was dead. I keep trying to figure out ways of killing myself' (Marsden 1987, p. 88). Psychological help is provided for Marina throughout the novel, she continues to see Dr. Harvey from the mental health ward and she regularly sees Mrs. Ransome, the school counsellor. However, despite this Marina shows minimal progress. Towards the end of the novel she has only communicated to others directly, not including writing in her journal, on a few occasions. Yet, in the final page of the novel, after Marina researches and goes to considerable effort to find and make contact with her father, she finds and speaks to him. Even though he has permanently disfigured her, is the reason for her psychological problems and was violent to her on several occasions prior to that incident, she appears to have forgiven him, although she hasn't shown any anger towards him or even spoken to him about the incident, she simply says 'Hello, Dad' (Marsden 1987, p. 141) and hugs him before saying, 'I've got so

much to tell you...’ (Marsden 1987, p. 141). This interaction, between Marina and her father, suggests that Marina has forgiven her father enough to create a connection with him again. The interaction is too brief and uncomplicated; it fails to show the difficult road to reconciliation that the rest of the novel has portrayed. Had the ending instead explored the reconciliation in more detail, it may have more appropriately befitted the rest of the novel’s exposition and seemed less didactic and moralistic. Like *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), the novel’s ending does not match the exposition that has preceded it, it is concluded too quickly and without full consideration of the extent of Marina’s mental health issues that have been previously disclosed. It is worth mentioning that another of John Marsden’s novels published during this period, *Letters from the inside* (1991), does not subscribe to this tendency towards neatly resolved, didactic endings. *Letters from the inside* (Marsden 1991) ends abruptly and ambiguously, alluding to the fact that one of the main protagonists, Mandy, is killed by her brother at the end of the novel before he kills himself. Although the novel was first published in 1991, its ending is more consistent with the endings of the novels published between 1995 and 2004.

Throughout my analysis of the novels written between 1995 and 2004, it became clear that the endings of the YA realistic fiction novels from this period changed significantly when compared to those published between 1986 and 1994. The endings of *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), are more consistent with the description of the ‘dangerous survivor’ as suggested by Sheila Egoff (1981) above. However, it is clear from the beginning of *Night train* (Clarke 1998) that Luke does not survive the novel at all. Increasingly, in YA realistic fiction published within Australia during this time, the safety of the main protagonist wasn’t assured. The endings of these novels are not neatly concluded like the endings of many novels published before them, the issues presented within the novels are not all resolved by the final chapter and a moral is not always included. Instead the novels from this period are consistent with Egoff’s (1981) description of the problem novel, they focus heavily on the issues the character’s face, but when there is a recovery depicted it is often rushed and underdeveloped. If a character is to resolve their issues their recovery should be portrayed in comparative detail to the exposition of those issues. Otherwise the process of their recovery can be considered didactic. Catherine Sheldrick Ross suggests that one way to make a novel seem *realistic*, which was one of the main aims of problem novels, is ‘to overturn existing conventions or break taboos: if books for adolescents always have had a happy ending, then an unresolved ending or an ironic ending will seem realistic’ (1985, p. 181). Therefore while many of the novels discussed within this exegesis published prior to 1994 rely on neatly concluded, didactic, happily ever afters, the novels published between 1995 and 2004 are more likely to end abruptly, leaving

their readers with little to reflect upon after they have finished reading. Their endings show minimal character development or growth, which can be seen to suggest that the characters are in a fixed state which will lead to another stage: adulthood. The most recently published novels of the genre, however, suggest a trend towards viewing the subjectivity of the characters as a process, and reflect this in the relative indeterminacy of their endings. These contemporary YA realistic fiction novels are not preoccupied by neatly concluded endings, nor are they focused on the character's transition to adulthood, instead they acknowledge that this transition is not a neat or simple process. This acknowledgment portrays contemporary YA realistic fiction novels as being consistent with traditional children's fiction. Although traditional children's fiction often provided their readers with neatly concluded endings, unlike many of the YA realistic fiction novels published between 1995 and 2004, they weren't preoccupied with the suggestion of the character's transition into adulthood. As Jackie Horne (2011) suggests, traditional children's literature written in the 19th century focussed on the entertainment and liberation of the child, instead of the transition from child to adult.

Unlike the earlier novels, *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997) does not end with a fully resolved conclusion. This is in direct contrast to Marsden's earlier work, *So much to tell you* (1987), which is didactic in comparison and ultimately demonstrates the shifting narrative trend present in the Australian YA realistic fiction genre. In the first few pages of the novel the reader becomes aware that Tony's safety within the novel is not assured when the reader finds out that he is in an unidentified institution where he does not have autonomy and where those in charge are making him write in the journal that provides the medium of the novel. Soon after the reader becomes aware that, due to an accident, Tony's life has changed dramatically and that he is severely depressed and wants to die. By the end of the novel Tony has shown no signs of improvement and expresses that he has no hope for his future. Instead, right at the end of the novel, readers learn that Tony has lost his legs and is in a wheelchair after attempting to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train. Then on the final page, Tony's last letter is a rant aimed at those working in the facility he is confined to, after he finds out that they have been reading the letters he has been writing to his ex-girlfriend Miffy. He is irate and promises to stop writing any more letters: 'Well, fuck you all. That's the last time I write anything. Just so you bastards can read it' (Marsden 1997, p. 112). Tony's attitude in this quote demonstrates his continued aggression, showing that he has not changed since the beginning of the novel. This suggests that his state is fixed and shows no indication of him changing in the future. Even though Tony's issues are unresolved, the abrupt ending of the novel does not result in the reader being presented with much to reflect on after they have finished reading.

The ending of *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999) demonstrates the contrast between the significantly didactic works of earlier YA realistic fiction novels and those resembling the problem novel genre. Instead of focussing on presenting YA readers with a moral message, like earlier works of YA realistic fiction, the ending of *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999) reduces, even trivialises, the significance of Aurora's eating disorder by portraying the process of her recovery in a casual, easy and quick manner. Instead of presenting a didactic, overly explained resolution, like novels from the previous period, the novel's ending is rushed and does not fully show the development of the characters. For example, the novel suggests that Aurora has overcome her anorexia, she has been released from hospital and has regained weight, however, the process of her recovery is not explored in any detail. Instead Aurora is depicted as wishing she was back in the hospital ward eating stewed fruit and having her hospital band to remind her of who she is, then further down the page she is described as, 'Aurora wears a black mohair jumper and a leather dog collar, tight in the flesh of her neck. She lights a cigarette with plump fingers, flashing dirty fingernails' (Barnes 1999, p. 220). In a single page, with no explanation of the amount of time that has passed or the specific details of her recovery, Aurora is portrayed as having gained a substantial amount of weight, overcoming her control issues and having significantly shifted her personality, from being health conscious and obsessed with popular culture and fashion, to being portrayed as a 'goth girl'. Although Aurora's shift in personality at the end of the novel is possibly an attempt to demonstrate Aurora's recovery from her eating disorder with irony, or as an attempt to normalise her circumstances by situating Aurora's story within a larger social context, it instead reduces the significance of the detailed exposition presented throughout the rest of the novel in relation to Aurora's eating disorder. It trivialises important challenges faced by many YA readers, such as eating disorders and mental health issues.

Aurora's recovery is further trivialised by the amount of presumption that is placed on Web's capacity to be the catalyst for Aurora's recovery. Despite the fact that the doctor has told Aurora's mother that she needs to be hospitalised or she may die if she continues to starve herself, her mother does nothing. Instead, Web starts going to Aurora's house every weekend, even though she is uninvited. Aurora starts to relinquish control to Web, because the novel suggests that Web does not 'respect' Aurora's condition, 'But she (Aurora) hardly resists because somehow it feels just the tiniest bit good, being able to break her laws by only breathing too close to Web' (Barnes 1999, p. 191). The novel suggests that it is Web, not Aurora's mother or her doctor, who is able to get Aurora to start relinquishing her control. It is implied that by simply being around Web that Aurora's recovery begins. Aurora finally gets the help she needs, in the hospital, not because of her mother or the doctor, but because she sets her house on fire, nearly killing herself, and Web saves her. Aurora's relationship with her mother is an important aspect of the novel, their interactions, Aurora's

mother's own unhealthy relationship with food and her ineffectiveness in response to Aurora's eating disorder, all contribute to the reader's understanding of Aurora's condition. While Barnes (1999) may have intended the characterisation of Aurora's mother to demonstrate that carers are often ineffective, or that parents do not always act as parents should, the emphasis on Web's role in Aurora's recovery undermines both the importance and the struggle of the recovery process. It is while she is in hospital, recovering from smoke inhalation from the fire that Aurora finally gets treated for her eating disorder. While Aurora's act of arson may have been an example of her externalising her pain, instead of internalising it through her eating disorder, the amount of emphasis given to her struggles throughout the novel still outweighs the exploration of her recovery, which proves to undermine and sensationalise the process.

In *Night train* (Clarke 1998) we see an example of a character who extends beyond Egoff's (1981) description of a 'dangerous survivor', whose death is made evident in the beginning of the novel. Readers are told in the first few pages of the novel that Luke is dead. There are references to hearses, a funeral, mention of a coffin and descriptions of Luke's corpse. The novel then goes back in time to depict the lead up to Luke's death, to where Luke is now attending his third school, after being expelled twice and is afraid that he will be expelled from his third school after the school principal catches him trespassing. The majority of the novel's exposition centres around Luke's mental health issues, 'He was all bits and pieces; worries and doubts and fears and little hopes all jumbled up together, like bits of a puzzle rattling round inside a box' (Clarke 1998, p. 11). Most of Luke's anxiety stems from the uncertainty about his future, and about whether he will pass year 12 and be accepted into University, 'You got the feeling you couldn't do it and the feeling became part of you, as if that was how you were. That was you. You were the kind of kid who couldn't cope, who would fail things' (Clarke 1998, p. 59). Luke's concerns about his future build, so that he mentions hearing the night train to several people, but each time it is dismissed and his anxiety intensifies:

'Didn't you hear it? Just then?' She shook her head impatiently. 'I didn't hear a thing.' That was the second time, thought Luke. Mum hadn't heard it either, last night when they'd been standing outside Naomi's room. And yet it was so *loud*. A frightening idea slid into his mind, a drowned face rising in the water. What if – he pushed the thought away from him (Clarke 1998, p. 124-125).

Luke begins to believe that he is hearing things, that the night train is a manifestation of his anxiety. Finally, the pressure of school, the fact that no one understands him and the idea that 'he was the only one who heard the night train because it was in his head. There was something wrong with him' (Clarke 1998, p. 164), compel him to find out whether the night train is real or not. And although the reader already knows of Luke's death, they then become aware of how he died:

And there it was above him; the night train, the 1:30 postal van from the city...It was real. The night train was real. So they hadn't been right. *He'd* been right. So now he could – Luke heard the thump. They always said it didn't hurt, the blow that smashed you up for good, that made your soul come flying out – but it did hurt, it did (Clarke 1998, p. 167-168).

Although Luke realises that the night train is real and that he is not suffering from delusions, his death prevents there from being any character development beyond this. Luke's death does not add any value to the story, his shoelace gets caught in the train tracks and he is hit by the night train. Through the use of deception, the ending of *Night Train* (Clarke 1998) undermines the reader, by insinuating throughout the novel that Luke has killed himself due to his mental health issues, when actually his death is an accident. Instead, similarly to *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), this ending reduces the impact of the novel's exposition relating to Luke's mental health issues by failing to work through the character's issues.

The endings of these three novels demonstrate how the introduction of the problem novel has contributed to the change in the resolutions within YA realistic fiction. Unlike the didactic endings of the novels written before the introduction of the problem novel, the endings of YA realistic fiction novels written in Australia between 1995 and 2004 show minimal character development or growth, often reducing the significance of the issues presented throughout the novels. This is evident in there being no suggestion of Tony's improvement in *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997), no explanation of how Aurora transitioned from having an eating disorder to being recovered or a discussion of the extent of her recovery in *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999), and little help offered to Luke in relation to his mental health issues in *Night train* (Clarke 1998). These endings finish abruptly, providing minimal answers to the issues the characters face. A more extensive, introspective portrayal of each character's recovery would allow the reader of these novels to delve further into the subject matter, instead of avoiding, or taking lightly, the struggles of the character's recovery, demanding a deeper, more critical reading.

The analysis of the three novels being considered from 2005 to 2014, including *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) and *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), found that these novels often end without resolving the issues presented throughout the text. When compared to the novels published between 1986 and 1994, their resolutions are carefully considered and consistent with the exposition of the entire text. Marc Aronson (2001) explains, in *Exploding the Myth: the truth about teenagers and reading*, there is a credibility in contemporary works of YA fiction which acknowledges the intensity of the darkness within adolescents yet still recognises that YA readers have the wisdom and ingenuity to deal with uncertainty. On reading each of the novels being analysed from this time frame, it appears that the author of each novel has considered and acknowledges the darkness which Aronson (2001) mentions and recognises the capacity of YA readers to be able to handle the open-ended nature of the novels' endings. These endings reflect the shifting subjectivity which was discussed in Chapter One, they demonstrate that the conclusions of the novels do not signify the end of the protagonists' development. Mary Owen (2003) suggests that the unresolved endings of YA realistic fiction novels do not always offer solutions, but instead depict a YA in pursuit of them. These resolutions are consistent with the knowledge that the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood are blurring, that adolescents exist in a liminal space where the transition to adulthood is not clearly defined or neatly completed. *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) ends with the abduction of Celia, the protagonist, by a middle-aged murderer who has been masking himself as a teenage girl and corresponding with Celia via email for several weeks. Although the reader may assume that Celia will die, her safety at the conclusion of the novel actually remains unknown. In *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), while Gemma has been released by her kidnapper, the novel ends before the trial therefore the reader does not learn of Ty's fate and Gemma's emotional wellbeing is still uncertain. Although *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) finishes with less ambiguity, Taylor has found her mother, learnt who her father was and that Hannah is her aunt, it does end with the death of Taylor's mother resulting in her becoming an orphan. Other novels of the genre, also published during this period, which are not neatly concluded by the final page include Bill Condon's *No worries* (2005) and Vikki Wakefield's *Friday Brown* (2012).

The central component of the resolutions of many recently published YA realistic fiction novels, such as those referred to above, where the endings acknowledge the liminality of the characters' lives and that their growth continues beyond the final chapter, informed the writing of my own novel. From the analysis of the novels discussed above, a great deal of planning went into the final conclusion of *Somewhere between* and the consideration of its resolution. Initially my intention was to end the novel after Jem's suicide attempt, with Lucy

ringing her father requesting to come home. I had originally decided to end the novel this way in order to keep the storyline unresolved, for it to be unknown to the reader whether Jem lived or died and how Lucy is coping in the aftermath. However, after writing earlier sections of the novel and developing Lucy as a character, it became clear that this ending would not be consistent with the rest of the novel. A major part of Lucy's characterisation is her tendency to analyse, or at times to over-analyse a situation, a conversation or her own feelings. It was because of this tendency that I decided to add the epilogue to the novel. Although the storyline still remains unresolved, with readers knowing that Jem survived but not the details of how her suicide attempt has affected her health or her relationship with Lucy, and not knowing what direction Lucy's life will take, in terms of studying or working, I believe that including Lucy's final monologue stayed consistent with her earlier characterisation. With the inclusion of the epilogue, the storyline became more complete, as a novel's ending can remain unresolved yet still be considered complete, even with the outcomes of story arcs left ambiguous or the fate of certain characters left unknown. For example, in Lucy Christopher's *Stolen* (2009), although the reader is unaware of Ty's fate because the kidnapping trail has not yet taken place, the story can still be considered complete as Gemma is no longer his captor, she is back with her family and beginning to reconcile her feelings towards Ty. Where ending *Somewhere between* after Jem's suicide attempt would have resulted in the novel seeming unfinished, including the epilogue has resulted in Lucy's characterisation and emotional development being more complete.

This chapter considers the effects of the trend towards unresolved endings in YA realistic fiction novels and the possible reasons for such a shift. There is a great deal of research and scholarship written about children's and YA literature each year, particularly in regard to the age range and vulnerability of the implied reader of these novels. Despite this however, the literary merit of texts written for children and adolescents is often dismissed. Tim Morris (2000) claims, in *You're only young twice: children's literature and film*, 'high literature is at one pole of a continuum and the other pole is occupied not so much by *bad* literature as by *children's* literature' (pp. 5-6). This can be seen in academia, where the scope of the curriculum of adult literature outweighs that of children's literature. It is also evident in the publishing industry, where authors' advances, the funding for publications, shelf space in bookstores and libraries, media attention and the distinction of awards for general fiction are greater than those available for children's literature. These claims are discussed by Mark Carthew (2010), in his article for TEXT entitled 'The blue between: children's writing in the margins', in which he contends that Australian academic writing courses, as well as state and federal governments need to actively recognise and support creators of children's literature, acknowledging the imbalance that exists between the children's literature and

works of literary genres. Tilghman (2011) suggests that the argument that adult fiction is intrinsically superior to children's and YA literature (Graham 2014) contributes to the widespread condescension and prejudice that exists about fiction written for children and adolescents.

The belief that children's and YA literature is inferior to literature written for an adult readership, which is held by some YA literature critics, contributed to what became known as The Great YA Debate, which began in the USA in 2014. Writing for *Slate Magazine* online, Ruth Graham (2014) makes claims about the literary merit of YA novels and very generalised statements not only about the YA genre, but also their readers – whether they are adolescents or adults. In her article, Graham (2014) also makes some unconsidered generalisations about the resolutions of YA novels. She claims that YA titles consistently give their YA readers the endings they want and that they are too simple to satisfy adult readers. However in the next sentence Graham (2014) criticises YA endings for being 'uniformly satisfying, whether that satisfaction comes through weeping or cheering'. Graham (2014) continues by asserting that the endings of YA novels 'are for readers who prefer things to be wrapped up neatly, our heroes married or dead or happily grasping hands, looking to the future'. My analysis of contemporary YA realistic fiction novels demonstrates that Graham's (2014) views are outdated, her knowledge of current YA novels is minimal. Her views are also limited because they do not consider how the endings of the novels within the genre have shifted over time or how the endings relate to the subject matter present within the novels. During my analysis above, of the YA realistic fiction novels published since 2005, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that the texts being considered, along with my own novel, do not have uniformly satisfying endings. For example, a satisfying ending for many readers of *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) would be for Celia to be home safe and the Cocoon Killer in jail. For readers of *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) it would be for Gemma to no longer be suffering the psychological effects of her kidnapping. A satisfying ending in *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) might see Taylor's mother survive cancer. Similarly, in my own novel, a reader might find it more satisfying to know what happened to Jem, to know her physical and psychological state following her suicide attempt, and to know how Jem and Lucy's friendship will be affected. When those in favour of YA literature wrote out against Graham's article, many of them wrote in defence of the genre's endings. In *The Conversation*, Rebecca Ciezarek (2014) contends that, labelling YA novels as simple because of an assumption about the limited capabilities of their readers, 'denies the connections young adult readers will make for their own lives, as if childhood and adolescence are not complicated and meaningful'. I refer to the independent news site, where articles are written by researchers, *The Conversation*, in the place of papers from a refereed journal, when providing Australian responses to Graham's (2014) article, as the

topic has not been covered in academic refereed journals published within Australia.

Another flaw which exists within Graham's (2014) argument is the fact that she seems to have little regard for adolescents and their ability to process, contextualise and reflect on the literature they are reading. In response to this argument, YA author Non Pratt (2014) implores Graham (2014) to read Melina Marchetta's *On the Jellicoe Road* (2006) and Patrick Ness's *The knife of never letting go* (2008) in order to reconsider generalisations about satisfying endings. From my analysis throughout this chapter it is evident that many contemporary YA realistic fiction novels offer challenging and sometimes even disappointing endings, where the reader may wish for an alternative fate for the protagonist or desire more answers, but is nevertheless stimulated to consideration and examination.

While Graham (2014) argues that the endings of YA novels are unvaryingly pleasing, some other critics of the YA genre argue that the endings of the novels are too bleak, hopeless or even nihilistic. Writing about John Marsden's *Dear Miffy* (1997), Kate Legge claims that the novel ends where there is 'no bloody hope' (1997), while Jameyson (1997) states that 'surely no life can be so dismal; surely no group of characters can be so totally lacking in redeeming features; surely no slice of life can be so void of that controversial critical commodity: hope' (p. 550). Lisa Habegger (2004) argues that some of the issues that have been, and indeed remain, at the centre of the controversies and debates regarding the YA literature genre are the absence of an ethical direction, any overall sense of hope or endings that are uplifting for the reader. In order to present YA readers with a diverse range of reading options, these novels offer an alternative to novels that end with a 'happily ever after', ultimately demonstrating to YA readers that horrible things do happen and that not all problems can be solved.

As I have demonstrated, it is evident that the narrative conventions of YA realistic fiction, specifically the degree of resolutions offered by the novels, have shifted over time. Although this shift has resulted in contemporary novels sometimes having less clearly or neatly resolved endings, this does not automatically render the conclusions as bleak or hopeless. Often this shift results in the endings being more ambiguous, meaning that the reader has to rely on their own understanding of the novel to determine what they believe will, or has, happened to the characters at the conclusion of the novel, such as in *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013). It is necessary to note here, that while the plot of *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) is not typical of YA realistic fiction, portraying a serial killer with the very specific habit of making his victims weave the fabric he wraps their bodies in after he has killed them, it still portrays the themes that are usually associated with the genre, such as the pressures of starting a new school and making new friends and adolescents being embarrassed by, and trying to distance themselves from, their parents. It is all important to

explain here, that while *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) still attempts to acknowledge the complexity of the YA realistic fiction novels by employing the trends of contemporary novels of the genre through the portrayal of characters with increased subjectivity, discussing difficult themes in a complex manner and presenting an ending which acknowledges the destabilisation of the lives of adolescents, it does however have its shortcomings. It could be argued that the novel relies on deception, based on the interpretation that Alice is not convincing as a middle-aged man mimicking an adolescent girl, and that he is too adept at the impersonation. However, I argue that this characterisation is fitting, that it demonstrates how the Cocoon Killer has been able to kidnap three other girls before Celia. It also shows generic elements which are in line with the characteristics of the crime fiction genre, which David Glover, in the *Cambridge companion to crime fiction* (2003) explains is 'marked by the way in which it persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock' (p. 137). Although I argue that the other two novels from this time frame, *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006) and *Stolen* (Christopher 2009), are more developed and complex in their execution, *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) is effective in demonstrating the vulnerability of adolescents when they lack meaningful connections with their families and find it difficult to communicate with them.

In the conclusion of the novel Celia has been abducted, resulting in an unresolved ending because her fate is unknown, however this does not result in the ending being without hope. Some readers may think the fact that three out of the four girls who have been abducted by the Cocoon Killer have been murdered leaves little hope for Celia's safe return. Other readers may believe that due to the evidence that the police have, such as a description of the suspect and the car he was driving, CCTV footage from major roads in the area, photos of Celia and the Cocoon Killer and access to the emails exchanged between them, they may be able to identify who the Cocoon Killer is and save Celia. Astute readers would be aware of these clues, as well as those that were subtly planted throughout the novel, such as Alice's mention of Adeline who was yet to be abducted, that Alice knew Celia's middle name without Celia telling her and that the Cocoon Killer didn't realise that Jamie, Celia's sister, is a girl despite the fact that Celia has spoken about her going to an all-girls school. This information is optimistic, particularly considering the fact that the Cocoon Killer keeps his victims alive for several days before he poisons them. It suggests that the police still have time to find Celia alive. Although *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013) does not have a 'happily ever after' such as those which were often portrayed in early works of YA realistic fiction and Celia is not a 'safe survivor', the conclusion of the novel is not void of hope.

Shivaun Plozza (2015), YA fiction writer and editor, in the special YA edition of the creative writing journal *TEXT*, directly references this debate surrounding the amount of hope in the endings of YA novels. She considers the views that exist at the two opposing ends of the argument: those who believe novels written for young people must be morally absolute, where they demonstrate redemption and offer their readers hope, and those who believe in the principles of free speech, who acknowledge the complexity of YA readers and believe that they are capable of reading morally ambiguous novels. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, due to the lack of control and autonomy adolescents have over their own lives and the perception of some adults that they need to be protected from harm, debate about the purpose and content of novels written for young people and the often subsequent censorship of these novels continues. This exegesis has maintained a stance against censorship, instead acknowledging the complexity of YA readers and their ability to navigate the often difficult subject matter portrayed in YA realistic fiction novels. When discussing the ongoing debate surrounding YA literature, Plozza (2015) claims that 'fiction for a young market should accurately reflect the real world and should therefore tackle difficult topics in order to help, teach and prepare young adults for inevitable ups and downs of life' (p. 4). At times Plozza presents a moralistic perspective, which only considers realistic fiction as a legitimate genre, and sometimes implies that YA authors have the same moral duty as parent or teachers, instead of discussing the proficiency of YA novels to encourage readers to both question and develop viewpoints about themselves and the world around them. This quotation however, does serve to prompt further consideration about the debate surrounding the YA genre. One issue is the idea of morality, specifically the question of whose morality should be portrayed within YA realistic fiction. When critics of YA realistic fiction, such as Jameyson (1997) and Legge (1997), condemn the genre for its hopeless endings they argue in favour of the genre portraying more moralistic endings. I question whose moralistic endings they believe should be portrayed within the genre, as the concept of morality is inherently problematic because, just like reality, it is subjective. There is no single uncontested definition that is applicable to all. The same issue relates to the concept of hope. Individuals find hope in different ways. Therefore, it could be argued that the amount of hope which exists at the ending of a novel could differ based on the individual reader and their interpretation of the text. Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1985) states, as discussed in Chapter Two, the final process of meaning making within a text is the actual act of reading which is performed by the reader. Instead of the meaning of a YA realisticfiction novel being predetermined and rigid, rendering the reader submissive, the genre acknowledges the complexity of YA readers and their roles as active readers. This would suggest that the hope which exists at the conclusion of a novel is constructed by the reader themselves, not dictated by the content of the novel. An example of this, using my own novel, is the limited

information given relating to Jem's recovery. Although some readers may see the ending as lacking in hope because the state of Jem's health is unknown, my aim was that the sense of hope at the conclusion of the novel would come from the reader, not necessarily the novel itself, that because the reader may have begun to empathise with Lucy and her friendship with Jem, the hope would come from them wanting Jem to survive.

Consistent with Plozza's (2015) argument, that YA readers are intelligent and mature enough to handle unresolved endings and those which offer little hope, is the argument that such endings are suited to the subject matter of the novels. This argument contends that the unresolved endings of YA realistic fiction are consistent with new developments of the YA novel as a whole. Lisa Habegger (2004) argues that this is an important issue which should be considered in relation to the debate surrounding the morality and the sense of hope within YA realistic fiction novels. Habegger (2004) states that, 'A "bleak" book will lose its impact if the reader does not perceive it as being "real"' (p. 39). Habegger (2004) is ultimately suggesting that YA readers will reject a novel's ending, questioning its credibility, if they do not believe that the ending suits the rest of the novel. This can occur if the ongoing conflicts are all resolved too quickly and easily, such as in *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) or *So much to tell you* (Marsden 1987). Such resolutions often result in the ending of a novel seeming like an afterthought. The endings of YA realistic fiction novels tended to be more complex as the conclusions began to be less resolved.

This chapter has already discussed the tendency of several YA critics (Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997) to argue that the YA realistic fiction genre has endings which are too unresolved and often offer little or no hope for their readers. One of the possible reasons for a shift in the genre's narrative preoccupations towards unresolved endings could be the shifting subjectivity which was discussed in Chapter One of this exegesis. The change in subjectivity of the characters within the genre throughout the last 30 years, has resulted in the protagonists becoming increasingly more self-aware and cognisant of the fact that their sense of self is not fixed and will continue to change throughout their lives. This has had an effect on the character development throughout the novels and on the characters' sense of self at the conclusion of the texts. Characters no longer see themselves as being complete, fully formed individuals. At the completion of the storyline they know that there are more changes to come. Consequently, the storylines themselves have shifted away from having complete, fully resolved endings to more ambiguous, open-ended resolutions. Author Gail Gauthier (2002) suggests that such YA realistic fiction novels are a reflection of YA culture,

where ‘adolescents are caught in inbetweenness’ (p. 75), a liminal state in which they are changing from children to adults. According to anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), those in the liminal space are ‘neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony’ (p. 95). From this definition it is clear how adolescence can be considered a liminal space, where young adults are neither children or adults, they do not have the rights that adults have in relation to the law or society’s customs and conventions, nor are they still protected by the constraints of childhood. For example, in Victoria, individuals under 18 years of age are legally not able to: buy or consume alcohol, obtain a driver’s licence, vote, apply for a passport without the approval of a parent or guardian, make a will or get married without the permission of their parent/guardian or the approval of the court (Victoria Legal Aid 2014). The adolescent protagonists of the YA realistic fiction novels discussed within this exegesis are in a liminal space. In *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), Taylor has no obvious parent or guardian yet is obliged to stay at the boarding school. In *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) Gemma is placed between her old life with her parents and her new life with Ty, fluctuates with her feelings towards Ty and is caught between whether she wants Ty punished for abducting her or not. In my own novel, Lucy is deliberately placed between childhood, with her fixation on her mother, and adulthood, with her need to distance herself from her father. She is positioned between country and city and at the conclusion of the novel is situated between education and employment. The unresolved endings, such as Lucy’s and those others discussed in this chapter, demonstrate this liminality, where the YA characters are still evolving. In the YA special edition of *TEXT*, Jessica Seymour and Denise Beckton (2015) discuss how it may be useful to view YA literature as operating within a liminal space instead of as a coming-of-age literature which exists in between the two established stages of childhood and adulthood. Seymour and Beckton (2015), editors of the special edition, acknowledge that the research areas of liminality and liminal spaces are ‘useful devices by which conceptions of adolescence and adulthood (and the boundaries between them, perceived or otherwise) might be shaped’ (p. 11). Theories of liminality and liminal spaces relate well to YA literature, reflecting a phase that depicts the indeterminate position of its characters and readers. Antony Eaton (2013), in his article ‘From transition to threshold: redefining ‘young adulthood’’, published in *Write4Children*, explains that the idea of liminality is applicable to young adult fiction due to the fact that the genre exists due to and in spite of its position between the fields of children’s and adult literature:

Young adult fiction concerns itself with the notional boundaries between worlds; most commonly the polarized worlds of adulthood and childhood but, importantly, the central concern of many works

of 'Young Adult Fiction' might be argued to be not so much with the facts of the individual character's journey (the 'classic' YA bildungsroman narrative) but with the boundaries and thresholds crossed during the course of that journey, and the impact of those crossings upon both character and society (Eaton 2013, p. 11).

The tendency towards unresolved endings in YA realistic fiction, as discussed throughout this chapter, may be a result of the understanding of liminal spaces and how the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood are blurring, ultimately changing the perception of adolescence within society. This tendency towards unresolved endings may have also influenced the introduction of the New Adult genre and its similarities to YA realistic fiction.

Another result of YA realistic fiction novels shifting from resolved to unresolved endings, is the changing demographic of the genre's readers. As was discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two of this exegesis, studies have found that there has been an increase in the adult readership of YA novels (Beckton 2015, Bowker 2012). Adults seem to be drawn to contemporary YA fiction at a higher rate than ever before. This increase in adult readership separates contemporary YA realistic fiction from earlier examples of the genre. Tilghman (2011) suggests YA novels and works of adult fiction can no longer be differentiated by their endings. Perhaps the increased complexity, the destabilisation of the lives of the adolescent protagonists and the greater number of questions created by the unresolved endings of contemporary YA realistic fiction novels have contributed to the genre's appeal to adult readers.

This chapter has explored the contention that the endings of YA realistic fiction have shifted away from the 'happily ever afters' which were often employed in coming-of-age novels and bildungsroman and replaced them with endings that portray the destabilisation of the lives of their adolescent protagonists and the increasingly absent points of reassurance within the novels. The YA realistic fiction novels discussed in this chapter that were published between 1986 and 1994 presented their readers with didactic endings which focussed on resolving all the issues presented throughout the novel and instilling their readers with a strong moral message. The novels published between 1995 and 2004 rejected these moralistic endings, instead depicting protagonists who, at the end of the novels, showed very little development. In contrast, contemporary YA realistic fiction novels, published between 2005 and 2014, end with more consideration. Although they may still be targeted by censors (Graham 2014, Cox Gurdon 2013, Tucker 1998, Jameyson 1997 & Legge 1997) for being unresolved or lacking in hope, they offer a more credible resolution that is more consistent with their exposition

and with the liminal nature of adolescence, which acknowledges that not all the issues that adolescents face in their lives can be easily resolved, if in fact they can be resolved at all.

CONCLUSION

It has been the aim of this exegesis to consider and discuss the current trends affecting the narrative structures and preoccupations of Australian YA realistic fiction novels, published between 1986 and 2013. The exegesis provides a critical commentary on the ways in which the creation of my novel, *Somewhere between*, has been influenced by, examines and furthers the discussion regarding the current trends in the genre. This creative writing thesis, as a whole, considers changes in relation to the level of self-awareness and subjectivity portrayed by the main protagonists, the increasing complexity of the subject matter discussed and the propensity of contemporary novels towards unresolved conclusions which portray the destabilisation of the lives of the adolescent protagonists. The exegesis serves to provide a reflective background to my creative process and offer insights into my novel, while placing it within a body of work. It also aims to bring together creative practice and theory, by discussing the various aspects of my novel, including its planning, writing and redrafting, in light of the characteristics of the YA realistic fiction genre that it employs, the influence of the genre on the novel and how it contributed to and shaped *Somewhere between*. This conclusion discusses both the novel and exegesis and the ways that they have contributed to the already existing discourse related to the YA realistic fiction genre. This conclusion also identifies a number of additional, related trends currently having an impact on the genre, which the scope of the exegesis within a creative thesis could not include.

I first began studying literature, specifically children's and YA literature, as an undergraduate student in 2007, and continued through the writing of my Honours thesis in 2010. My interest in children's literature continued in my role as an academic tutor, while teaching creative writing and children's literature units, working at a literary agency and at a bookstore. Ultimately this interest led me to enrol as a PhD candidate, after having observed a significant development in the narrative techniques of the YA novels being published. It was this observation, my own love of reading, which began at an early age with children's literature, and my research interest in furthering the academic discussion about literature written for adolescents, that led me to begin my research for this thesis. Haney Tilghman (2011) asserts, YA literature 'deserves the opportunity to be looked at as critically as any work of literary fiction. Such review will only legitimate young adult literature in academic circles and improve the overall quality of writing for youth' (p. 42).

Somewhere between, the major component of this thesis, was written in order to create an original and unique YA realistic fiction novel. The writing process was assisted by my

knowledge of the narrative trends currently influencing the genre and my interpretation of the elements that constitute a YA novel. During the earliest planning stages of *Somewhere between*, I knew I wanted to write a novel which not only had a significant impact on its readers, both adolescent and adult, but made its readers question and extend their own views about what literature written for adolescents should, and indeed could, be. Just as Cole (2009) claims: 'The day is not far off when YA masterworks will be seen not as "kids" books, but simply as great works of literature' (p. 69), my thesis, novel and exegesis, aims to contribute to the increased appreciation of how dynamic and complex YA realistic fiction can be.

One of the key narrative structures and preoccupations of the YA realistic fiction genre that has been considered within this thesis is the shifting self-awareness and subjectivity of the main protagonists.

My own creative writing practice, specifically the development of my main protagonist, Lucy, was informed by some of the portrayals within contemporary YA realistic fiction novels of characters with increased self-awareness. Chapter One of this exegesis explores how this shift is evident in other YA realistic fiction novels. In order to depict the shifting self-awareness in *Somewhere between*, it was necessary to portray Lucy, in the beginning of the novel, as a character similar to those depicted in earlier works of the genre, such as *Blue days* (Sharp 1986) and *Dear Miffy* (Marsden 1997). The development of the characters within these novels is limited, particularly in terms of their influence from external sources such as events and other characters within the novel. In the early chapters of *Somewhere between*, Lucy's characterisation demonstrates this limited awareness particularly in her relationship with her father. However, in order to portray the increasing sense of self-awareness and subjectivity which I have argued characters in contemporary YA realistic fiction novels, such as *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) and *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta 2006), now often possess, it was necessary to demonstrate this development through Lucy's characterisation. Contemporary novels depict characters that are distinctly more aware of their own identities. Where contemporary YA protagonists have agency and acknowledge that their sense of self is fluid. This can be seen most clearly in Lucy's realisation of the extent to which her mother's death affected others beyond herself, and in her understanding that she does not actually want to be a nurse, that she only started a nursing degree in an attempt to make herself more like her mother. Lucy's characterisation complements my research into the shift in the self-awareness and subjectivity of characters in YA realistic fiction novels.

This exegesis also discusses the ways in which the complexity of the genre's subject matter has increased throughout the time frame being considered. As is argued in Chapter Two of the exegesis, contemporary YA realistic fiction novels have shifted to consider a broader range of increasingly complex themes and their impact on the protagonist's development, not as plot points which drive the novel such as in a number of earlier works of the genre, such as *Night train* (Clarke 1998) and *Killing Aurora* (Barnes 1999). The subject matter and themes of contemporary YA realistic fiction novels, such as *Stolen* (Christopher 2009) and *Cry blue murder* (Kane & Roberts 2013), are more complex, akin to those of fiction written for adults. It was central to the planning of *Somewhere between* that the novel demonstrated this more complex subject matter, that it centred on difficult themes and events which helped to contribute to the acknowledgement that YA readers are complex and able to understand and reflect on complicated subject matter.

Finally, in Chapter Three, this exegesis considered how this portrayal of more increasingly complex subject matter and the increased subjectivity of YA protagonists within contemporary YA realistic fiction has contributed to a shift within the genre towards unresolved endings. The phenomenon of the 'happily ever after' which was once typical of children's and YA literature is no longer the norm. Instead, contemporary YA realistic fiction novels are ending where many of the issues experienced by the characters throughout the novels remain unresolved, resulting in the destabilisation of the lives of adolescent protagonists as identified in the increasingly absent points of reassurance within the novels. With this in mind, I decided to finish the novel with Lucy's return to Warrnambool, not directly after Jem's suicide attempt. The details relating to Jem's health and recovery are still unknown, as are the finer details of Lucy's future, such as where she will live long term, whether she will return to University and what she will study. The ending, however, still portrays a turning point in Lucy's development, where she realises that, while she has a support network she can draw on for advice and support, such as her father and Jodie, ultimately she needs to make her own decisions.

Throughout the writing of this exegesis I observed a number of additional trends and research topics, related to the YA realistic fiction, which could also be explored in order to further extend the discussion of the genre. A study of the representation of gender and class, and their impact on self-awareness and subjectivity would be a useful extension, but were beyond the scope of this exegesis, which is the shorter component in a creative thesis. Further research could also examine the relationships between adolescent protagonists and their parents/guardians, as of the nine novels discussed within this exegesis only two, those written by Melina Marchetta including *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992) and *On the Jellicoe Road*

(2006), represent the parents/guardians of the protagonists in a complex, yet positive manner. It would also be pertinent to explore the shifts in the narrative structures and preoccupations of YA realistic fiction published outside Australia, particularly in relation to character diversity as, with the exception of Josie in *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992) and her Italian heritage, the characters in the novels discussed within this exegesis do not present much diversity in terms of gender, class, race, religion or sexuality. Chapter Three of this exegesis also briefly discussed the notion of extending Egoff's (1981) discussion of safe and dangerous survivors, to consider protagonists in YA realistic fiction, such as Luke in *Night train* (Clarke 1998), who do not survive at the conclusion of the novels. The breadth of further research that could arise from this exegesis further demonstrates both the complexity and significance of literature written for young readers.

The discussion of the three narrative trends explored within the exegesis, as discussed above, led to a consideration of both the impact of the trends on the genre and its readers, as well as the possible contributing factors of the shifts. Both my novel, *Somewhere between*, and the exegesis, engage with the shifting notions of childhood and adolescence within the Australian publishing industry. As is discussed throughout the exegesis, adolescence in its sociological position as the precursor to adulthood is often relegated to the position of 'other', due to it being considered disassociated from adulthood. Throughout the exegesis I argue that contemporary works of the genre, those published since 2005, depict characters with greater self-awareness and subjectivity. This suggests that the perceptions of adolescents within the Australian publishing industry, and their literature, is also shifting. By portraying adolescent protagonists who are intelligent and have agency over their actions and their consequences, these novels acknowledge that adolescents are more than the clichéd representations that exist in earlier works of YA realistic fiction novels. My novel, *Somewhere between*, contributes to this change in the perception of adolescents by presenting Lucy as a strong, independent and intelligent protagonist who is able to reflect on her actions and learn from their consequences.

When considering the reasons for such a shift, the exegesis also discussed how these changes have been influenced by the introduction of the problem novel and how the debate surrounding the appropriateness of discussing increasingly complex subject matter in YA literature often manifests in the censorship of the genre. Within the exegesis I maintain that adolescent readers should be able to gain access to stories that depict both the positive and challenging aspects of contemporary society, including crime and violence. The perception of adolescents in society is changing, resulting in an acknowledgement that YA readers have the intelligence and capacity to manage the increasingly complex themes of the genre.

Overall, this exegesis has demonstrated that there has been a significant shift in the narrative strategies and preoccupations within the YA realistic fiction novels published in Australia since 1986. These shifts are as follows: the subjectivity of the characters have shifted away from depictions of protagonists in fixed stages of life, to instead portray characters who exist in a liminal, fluid space, who are aware that their sense of themselves will continue to change throughout their lives. The themes of the genre have become more complex, depicting not just the themes that had become typical of early coming-of-age novels written for young readers, but also themes usually associated with fiction written for an adult audience. The inclusion of these themes, and the complex ways they are portrayed, indicates an acknowledgement by many within the YA literature industry, such as authors, publishers and researchers (Beckton 2015, Plozza 2015, Eaton 2010), that YA readers are able to consume and consider this often difficult subject matter. This exegesis also argues that there has been a shift in the resolutions of the novels published within the YA realistic fiction genre, towards endings where the issues exposed throughout the novel are often left unresolved, portraying the destabilisation of the YA protagonists and the increasingly absent points of reassurance within the texts. These endings further demonstrate the acknowledgement that adolescents exist within a liminal space. The liminal space, portrayed within these endings, suggests that there is no longer a clearly defined transition between adolescence and adulthood, and that adolescents no longer solve all of their problems as a rite of passage into adulthood. Ultimately, my novel, *Somewhere between*, and the findings and arguments presented in this exegesis consider and expand upon the YA realistic fiction genre's narrative structures and preoccupations, in an attempt to both continue and extend the discussion about the genre and the knowledge that exists in relation to it. This knowledge can be used in order to understand the current trends in what is being written and published for YA readers.

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Appendix A

Novel Shortlist

The final shortlist of novels was selected after reading the following YA novels. The list below was compiled using CBCA award winners or commended texts from the time frames outlined.

1985-1994

Blue Days by Donna Sharp (1986)
So Much to Tell You by John Marsden (1987)
Letters from the Inside by John Marsden (1991)
Came Back to Show You I Could Fly by Robin Klein (1991)
Speaking to Miranda by Caroline MacDonald (1992)
Looking for Alibrandi by Melina Marchetta (1992)

1995-2004

Peeling the Onion by Wendy Orr (1996)
Dear Miffy by John Marsden (1997)
Night Train by Judith Clarke (1998)
Killing Aurora by Helen Barnes (1999)
The Song of an Innocent Bystander by Ian Bone (2002)
How to Make a Bird by Martine Murray (2003)

2005-2014

No Worries – by Bill Condon (2005)
On the Jellicoe Road – by Melina Marchetta (2006)
Stolen – by Lucy Christopher (2009)
All I Ever Wanted by Vikki Wakefield (2011)
Friday Brown – by Vikki Wakefield (2012)
Cry Blue Murder – by Kim Kane & Marion Roberts (2013)