

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved sweater, is lying on her back in a field of dry, golden-brown autumn leaves. She is holding a large, vibrant pink rose with both hands near her chest. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting. The overall mood is peaceful and romantic.

Melina
Marchetta

on the
**jellicoe
road**

From the best-selling author of *Looking for Alibrandi*

Jellicoe Road

Melina Marchetta

For Daniel and for max

Prologue

My father took one hundred and thirty-two minutes to die.
I counted.

It happened on the Jellicoe Road. The prettiest road I'd ever seen, where trees made breezy canopies like a tunnel to Shangri-la. We were going to the ocean, hundreds of miles away, because I wanted to see the ocean and my father said

that it was about time the four of us made that journey. I remember asking, "What's the difference between a trip and a journey?" and my father said, "Narnie, my love, when we get there, you'll understand," and that was the last thing he ever said.

We heard her almost straightaway. In the other car, wedged into ours so deep that you couldn't tell where one began and the other ended. She told us

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her name was Tate and then she squeezed through the

glass

and the steel and climbed over her own dead--just to be
with

Webb and me; to give us her hand so we could clutch it
with all

our might. And then a kid called Fitz came riding by on a
stolen

bike and saved our lives.

Someone asked us later, "Didn't you wonder why no one
came

across you sooner? "

Did I wonder?

When you see your parents zipped up in black body bags
on

the Jellicoe Road like they're some kind of garbage, don't
you

know?

Wonder dies.

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Chapter 1

--TWENTY-TWO YEARS LATER--

I'm dreaming of the boy in the tree and at the exact moment I'm about to hear the answer that I've been waiting for, the flashlights yank me out of what could have been one of those perfect moments of clarity people talk about for the rest of their lives. If I was prone to dramatics, I could imagine my sighs would have been heard from the boundaries of the school to the town down below.

The question begs to be asked, "Why the flashlights?" Turning on the light next to my bed would have been much less conspicuous and dramatic. But if there is something I have learned in the past five years, it's that melodrama plays a special part in the lives of those at the Jellicoe School. So while the mouths of the year twelves move and their hands

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threaten, I think back to my dream of the boy, because in it I
find

solace. I like that word. I'm going to make it my word of the
year.

There is just something about that boy that makes me feel
like I

belong. *Belong. Long to be.* Weird word, but semantics
aside, it

is up there with *solace*.

Somewhere in that hazy world of neither here nor there, I'll
be

hanging off that tree, legs hooked over the branch, hands
splayed, grabbing at air that is intoxicating and perfumed
with

the sweet smell of oak. Next to me, always, is that boy. I
don't

know his name, and I don't know why he comes calling, but
he

is there every time, playing the same music on one of those
Discmans for tapes from the eighties, a song about flame
trees

and long-time feelings of friends left behind. The boy lets
me

join in and I sing the same line each time. His eyes are
always

watery at that point and it stirs a nostalgia in me that I have
no

reason to own, but it makes me ache all the same. We
never

quite get to the end of the song and each time I wake, I
remind

myself to ask him about those last few bars. But somehow I
always forget.

I tell him stories. Lots of them. About the Jellicoe School
students and the Townies and the Cadets from a school in
Sydney. I tell him about the war

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between all three of us for territory. And I tell him about
Hannah,

who lives in the unfinished house by the river at the edge of
the

Jellicoe School, and of the manuscript of hers I've read,

with its

car wreck. Hannah, who is too young to be hiding away from

the world and too smart to be merely organising weekend passes for the kids in my dorm. Hannah, who thinks she has me

all worked out. I tell him of the time when I was fourteen, just

after the Hermit whispered something in my ear and then shot

himself, when I went in search of my mother, but got only halfway there. I tell him that I blame the Cadet for that.

The boy in the tree sobs uncontrollably when I tell him about the

Hermit and my mother, yet his eyes light up each time I mention

Hannah. And every single time he asks, "Taylor, what about the

Brigadier who came searching for you that day? Whatever became of him?" I try to explain that the Brigadier is of no importance to my story, that the Brigadier was just some top brass, high up in the army, who had been invited to train the

cadets that year, but the boy always shakes his head as if
he

knows better.

And there are times, like this time, when he leans

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forward to remind me of what the Hermit had whispered. He
leans so far forward that I catch his scent of tea-tree and
sandalwood and I strain my ears to listen so I will never
forget. I

strain my ears, needing to remember because somehow,
for

reasons I don't know, what he says will answer everything.

He

leans forward, and in my ear he whispers ... "It's time!"

I hesitate for a moment or two, just in case the dream is still
floating around and I can slip back into it for that crucial
moment. But the flashlights hurt my eyes and when I'm able
to

push them away I can see the ignorant impatience in the
faces

of the year twelves.

"If you want us to scare you, Taylor Markham, we'll scare you."

I climb out of bed and pull on my jumper and boots and grab my

inhaler. "You're wearing flannelette," I remind them flatly.

"How

scared should I be?"

They walk me down the corridor, past the senior rooms. I see

the other year-eleven girls, my classmates, standing at their door, watching me. Some, like Raffaella, try to catch my eye, but

I don't allow it

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to hold. Raffaella makes me feel sentimental and there is no place in my life for sentimentality. But for just one moment I think of those first nights in the dorm five years ago, when Raffaella and I lay side by side and she listened to a tale that

I

have no memory of today about my life in the city. I'll always remember the look of horror on her face. "Taylor Markham," she

had said, "I'm going to say a prayer for you." And although I wanted to mock her and explain I didn't believe in anything or

anyone, I realised that no one had ever prayed for me before.

So I let her.

I follow the seniors down two flights of stairs to a window that is

supposedly the least conspicuous one in the House. I have actually mastered the climb down from my own window but have never dared to tell anyone. It gives me more freedom and

means that I don't have to explain my every move to the year-

seven spies in the dorm. I started off as one of those. They hand-pick you young out here.

A thorn presses into my foot through the soft fabric of my boot

and I let it for a moment, pausing until they push me forward. I

walk ahead, allowing them to play out their roles.

The trail that leads to the meeting hut is only

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distinguishable in the pitch black by the sensation of soft dirt

under my feet. In the darkness, one of the seniors stumbles behind me. But I keep on walking, my eyes closed, my mind focused. Ever since they moved me from the communal dorms

to my own room in year seven I have been trained to take over,

just like the protégés in the other Houses. Five years is a long

time waiting and somehow during that time I got bored. So as

we reach the hut and enter and I feel the waves of hostility smack me in the face, I begin to plan my escape from Jellicoe.

Except that this time I will not be fourteen and there won't be a

Cadet who tags along. There will just be me. According to Dickens, the first rule of human nature is self-preservation and

when I forgive him for writing a character as pathetic as Oliver

Twist, I'll thank him for the advice.

Candles illuminate the canvas-covered dirt floor where the seniors from all the Houses sit with their successors, waiting for the verdict.

"This is officially the passing-on ceremony," the one-in-charge

says. "You keep it simple. It's not a democracy. Whoever's in

charge rules. They can only be superseded if five of the six House leaders

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sign a document deeming him or her incompetent. The one-in-

charge has final say in what gets traded with the Cadets and

the Townies. He or she, only, has the right to surrender to the

enemy."

Richard of Murrumbidgee House makes a sound as if he's holding back a laugh. I don't know whether it's because he's sure the job is his or because he is laughing at the idea that anyone would ever surrender to the enemy, but the sound grates on me.

"The important thing is to never give anything away," the one-

in-charge continues, "especially not to teachers or dorm staff.

Every time your dorm coordinator calls a meeting, just sit there

and look like you're taking in every word but don't let them ever

understand what goes on around here after hours."

"Which is?" Ben Cassidy asks politely.

"I beg your pardon?" says one of his seniors.

"Well, what exactly does go on here after hours?"

"What are you getting at?" the senior persists.

Ben shrugs. "Everyone's always going on about what goes on

after hours but nothing actually seems to go on at all, except

maybe meetings like this."

"Then to begin with," the one-in-charge says,

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"don't discuss these meetings."

"Well, it's not as if they don't know what's going on," Ben continues. "This one time I was with Hannah and we were eating her scones and she was asking me one hundred and one questions, as per usual." He looks around at the other protégés as if we're interested. "She makes them herself.

Hmm

hmm. Beautiful. Well, we got to talking and I said, 'Hannah, you've lived in this house ever since I've been here and it's got

the best bird's-eye view of all the Houses, so what do you think

goes on here out of school hours?'"

"That's a great question to be asking someone who's constantly

speaking to the principal," Richard says. "You're a stupid prick,

Cassidy."

"We didn't have much to choose from," the leader of Clarence

House says, sending Ben a scathing look and whacking him across the back of the head. Ben looks resigned. In year seven

he got bashed up at least once a month, mostly by his seniors.

He'd go visit Hannah, which I found irritating because he had

his own adult looking after his House and the one thing I hated

in year seven, after living with Hannah in her unfinished house

for the whole year before, was

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sharing her with the rest of the school. The revelation that she's

a question-asker is even more irritating. Hannah *never* asks me

anything.

"What type of scones?" I ask him. He looks up at me, but his

senior whacks him again.

"Okay, I'm over this," Richard says impatiently. "Can we just get to the point?"

Those-in-charge look at one another and then back to us. And then at me.

I hear the curses instantly, the anger, the disbelief, the hiss of venom under the breath of almost everyone in the room except the seniors. I know what is about to be said but I don't know how I feel. Just numb like always, I guess.

"You're not a popular choice, Taylor Markham," the one-in-charge says, cutting through the voices. "You're too erratic, have a bad track record, and running off with one of the enemy,

no matter how young you were, was bad judgement on your part. But you know this place inside out and you've been here

longer than anyone else and that's the greatest asset

anyone

can have."

One of my seniors nudges me hard in the ribs and I guess I'm

supposed to stand up.

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"From this point on," the one-in-charge continues, "we answer

no questions and offer no advice, so don't come to find us.

We

don't exist anymore. We go home for study tomorrow and then

we'll be gone and our role here is over. So our question is are

you in, or do we give this to our next candidate?"

I didn't expect a question or an option. I would have preferred if

they just told me to take over. There is nothing about this role

that I desperately want. Yet being under the control of any of the

protégés in this room for even the slightest moment is a

nauseating prospect and I know that if I'm not in charge I'll
be
spending many a night on surveillance, freezing my bottom
off
in the middle of the bush.

When I'm ready, I nod, and the one-in-charge hands me a
purple notebook and a thick crisply folded piece of paper,
which

I suspect is the map outlining who owns what in the territory
wars. Then the year twelves begin to leave and, like all
things

insignificant, the moment they're gone it is like they never
existed.

I sit back down and prepare myself for what I know is
coming.

Five House leaders ready for a battle. One common enemy.
Me.

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"You don't want this. You never have." I think the comment
comes from the leader of Murray House, who has never
really

spoken to me. So the idea that he thinks he knows what I want

interests me.

"Step down and the five of us will sign you out," Richard says,

looking around at the others. "You'll be put out of your misery

and we'll get on with running the underground."

"Richard's got some great ideas," the Hastings House girl explains.

"You don't have the people skills, Taylor."

"And you never turn up to meetings."

"And not once did you gather intelligence against the Cadets

last year."

"You spend too much time in trouble with Hannah. If she's on

your back, she'll be on ours."

"You just don't give a shit about anyone."

I block them out and try to go back to the boy in the tree....

"Are you even listening to us?"

"Let's just take a vote."

"Five says she's out and she's out."

Back to the tree ... inhaling the intoxicating perfumed air
and

listening to a song with no end and to

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a boy with a story that I need to understand.

"This is the worst decision I've ever known them to make."

"Everyone calm down. We just vote and it'll be over."

"She burnt down the bloody laundry when I was in her
House.

Who can trust her?"

"They were sultana scones."

The voice slices through the others and I glance up. Ben
Cassidy is looking at me. I don't know what I see in his
eyes,

but it brings me back to reality.

"What are you doing, Ben?" Richard asks quietly,
menacingly.

Ben takes his time, then looks at Richard. "The one-in-
charge

gave it to her, so we should respect that."

"We haven't agreed that she's the leader."

"You need five votes against her," Ben reminds them.

"Murray? Hastings? Darling?" he says to the others in turn.

They refuse to look at me and I realise they've rehearsed this.

"Clarence ..."

"Raffaella reckons we need to get the Prayer Tree," Ben cuts in

before Richard can drag him into it. I

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can tell they haven't discussed this with him. He's considered

the weakest link. Except when they need his vote. Big mistake.

"That's all we want back from the Townies," Ben mutters, not

looking at anyone.

Richard glances at Ben in disgust.

"And of course the Club House is a priority." Ben starts up again, and I can tell he's enjoying himself.

Silence. Tons of it, and I realise that I have my one vote that will

keep me in. For the time being, anyway.

"Who's in charge of the Townies this year?" I ask.

I'm staring at Richard. He realises that I'm here to stay and despite the look in his eyes that says betrayal, backstabbing,

petulance, hatred, revenge, and anything else he's planning to

major in, he lets me have my moment.

"We'll find out sooner or later," he says.

But I like this power. "Ben?" I say, still staring at Richard.

"Yes?"

"Who's in charge of the Townies these days?"

"Chaz Santangelo."

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"Moderate or fundamentalist?"

"Temperamental, so we need to get on his good side."

"Townies don't have a good side," Richard says. I ignore him.

"Is he going to be difficult?" I ask Ben.

"Always. But he's not a thug," Ben says, "unlike the leader of

the Cadets."

"Who?" Richard barks out.

I see Ben almost duck, as if a hand is going to come out and

whack him on the back of his head.

"First thing's first. This year we get the Townies on our side," I

say, ignoring everyone in the room but Ben.

The chorus of disapproval is like those formula songs that seem

to hit number one all the time. You know the tune in a moment

and it begins to bore you in two.

"We've never done that," Richard snaps.

"And look where it's got us. In the last few years, we've lost a

substantial amount of territory. It's been split up between the

Cadets and Townies. We haven't got much left to lose."

"What about the Prayer Tree?" Ben asks again.

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"The Prayer Tree is not a priority," I say, standing up.

"Raffaella reckons the trade made three years ago was immoral," he argues.

I try not to remember that Raffaella, Ben, and I spent most of

year seven together hiding out with Hannah. I can't even remember Ben's story. Heaps of foster parents, I think. One who

put a violin in his hands and changed his life.

"Do me a favour," I say to him, a tad on the dramatic side.

"Don't

ever bring morality into what we do here."

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Chapter 2

When it is over, when I'm the last person sitting on the canvas-

covered dirt floor, when the candles have burnt out and the sun

has come up, I make my way towards Hannah's house by the

river. Hannah's house has been unfinished ever since I can remember. Deep down I think that's always been a comfort to

me, because people don't leave unfinished houses.

Working on her house has been my punishment ever since I got

to this place six years ago. It's the punishment for having nowhere else to go in the holidays or breaking curfew or running away with a Cadet in year eight. Sometimes I am so

bored that I just go and tell her that I've broken curfew and she'll

say, "Well, no Saturday privileges for you, Taylor," and she'll make me work all day on the house with her. Sometimes

we

don't say a word and other times

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she talks my ear off about everything and nothing. When that

happens, there's a familiarity between us that tells me she's not

merely my House caretaker. In that role she works out rosters,

notifies us of transfers between Houses or exam schedules or

study groups or detentions. Sometimes she sits with the younger kids and helps with homework. Or she invites them to

her house and makes them afternoon tea and tells them some

bad news, like a grandparent being dead or a parent having cancer, or makes up some fantastic story about why someone's

mother or father couldn't come that weekend.

Absent parents aren't a rare thing around here, probably

because a tenth of the students are state wards. The

Jellicoe

School is run by the state. It's not about money or religion but it

is selective, so most of us are clever. The rest are a combination of locals or children of alternative environmentalists who believe that educating their children out

in the bush is going to instil a love of nature in them. On the contrary, most of the students run off to the city the moment year

twelve is over and revel in the rat race, never looking back.

Then there are those like Raffaella, who is a Townie and is out

here boarding with the

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rest of us because her parents teach at Jellicoe High School in

town and they thought it would be better for her not to have to

deal with that. Richard's parents are embassy staff who live overseas most of the time, but his grandparents live in the

outer

district of the area so it seemed like the best option for him.

I don't know where I fit in. One day when I was eleven, my mother drove me out here and while I was in the toilets at the 7-

Eleven on the Jellicoe Road, she drove off and left me there. It

becomes one of those defining moments in your life, when your

mother does that. It's not as if I don't forgive her, because I do.

It's like those horror films where the hero gets attacked by the

zombie and he has to convince the heroine to shoot him, because in ten seconds' time he won't be who he was anymore.

He'll have the same face but no soul. I don't know who my mother was before the drugs and all the rest, but once in a while

during our splintered time together I saw flashes of a passion

beyond anything I'll ever experience. Most other times she

was

a zombie who would look at me and say things like, "I didn't name you. You named yourself." The way I used to see it

was

that when I was born she didn't take time even to give me

an

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identity. Of course there's a story behind it all and she's not that

cut-and-dried evil, but my version keeps me focused.

Hannah,

of course, knows one of the other versions, but like everything,

she keeps it a mystery.

Usually, especially these days, we seem to be angry with each

other all the time, and today is no different.

"Transfers," she says, handing me the sheet. I don't bother even

looking at it.

"My House is full. No more transfers," I tell her.

"There are some fragile kids on that list."

"Then why transfer them to me ?"

"Because you'll be here during the holidays."

"What makes you think I don't have anywhere to go these holidays?"

"I want you to take them under your wing, Taylor."

"I don't have wings, Hannah."

She stares at me. Hannah's stares are always loaded. A combination of disappointment, resignation, and exasperation.

She never looks at anyone else like that, just me. Everyone else gets sultana scones and warm smiles and a plethora of questions,

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and I get a stare full of grief and anger and pain and something

else that I can never work out. Over the years I've come to accept that Hannah driving by on the Jellicoe Road five minutes

after my mother dumped me was no coincidence. She has never pretended it was, especially during that first year, when I

lived with her, before I began high school. In year seven,
when I

moved into the dorms, I was surprised at how much I
missed

her. Not living in the unfinished house seemed like a step
farther away from understanding anything about my past.
Whenever I look for clues, my sleuthing always comes back
to

one person: Hannah.

I take the list from her, just to get her off my back.

"You're not sleeping." Not a question, just a statement. She
reaches over and touches my face and I flinch, moving
away.

"Go make yourself something to eat and then get to class.
You

might be able to make second period."

"I'm thinking of leaving."

"You leave when you finish school," she says bluntly.

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"No, I leave when I want to leave and you can't stop me."

"You stay until the end of next year."

"You're not my mother."

I say that to her every time I want to hurt her and every time

I

expect her to retaliate.

"No, I'm not." She sighs. "But for the time being, Taylor, I'm

all

you have. So let's just get to the part where I give you something to eat and you go to class."

At times it's like sadness has planted itself on her face, refusing

to leave, an overwhelming sadness, and sometimes I see despair there, too. Once or twice I've seen something totally different. Like when the government sent troops overseas to fight, she was inconsolable. Or when she turned thirty-three.

"Same age Christ was when he died," I joked. But I remember

the look on her face. "I'm the same age my father was when he

died," she told me. "I'm older than he will ever be. There's something unnatural about that."

Then there was that time in year eight when the Hermit

whispered something in my ear and then shot himself and I
ran

away with that Cadet and the Brigadier brought us back. I
remember the

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Brigadier's hard face looked as if he was trying with all his
might for it to stay hard. Hannah didn't look at him and I
remember it took a great effort for her not to look at him.

She just

said, "Thanks for bringing her home," and she let me stay at
her

unfinished house by the river. She held on to me tight all
night

because somewhere in the town where the Brigadier found
us,

two kids had gone missing and Hannah said it could have
easily been me and the Cadet. They found those two kids
weeks later, shot in the back of the head, and Hannah cried
every time it came on the news. I remember telling her that

I

thought the Brigadier was the serial killer and it was the first

time I saw her laugh in ages.

Today there is something going on with her and I can't quite figure it out. I glance around the room, noticing how tidy it looks.

Even her manuscript seems shuffled neatly in a pile in one corner of the table. She's been writing the same novel ever since I've known her. Usually she keeps it hidden, but I know

where to find it, like those teenage boys in films who know where to find their father's porn. I love reading about the kids in

the eighties, even though I can't make head or tail of the story.

Hannah

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hasn't structured it properly yet. I've got so used to reading it out

of sequence but one day I'd like to put it in order without worrying that she'll turn up and catch me with it.

She sees me looking at the pages. "Do you want to read it?" she asks quietly.

"I don't have time."

"You've wanted to read it for ages, so is it okay to ask why not,

now that I'm offering?"

"That's new," I say to her.

"What's new?"

"You asking me a question."

She doesn't respond.

"You never ask me anything," I accuse.

"Well, what would you like me to ask you today, Taylor?"

I stare and as usual I hate her for not working out what I need

from her.

"Do you want me to ask where you've been all night? Or do you

want me to ask why you always have to be so difficult?"

"I'd prefer that you asked me something more important than

that, Hannah!"

Like how am I supposed to lead a community? I

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want to say. Or what's going to happen to me this time next

year? Am I just going to disappear like our insignificant leaders

did last night? And where do I disappear to?

"Ask me what the Hermit whispered in my ear that day."

I can tell that she's stunned, her hazel eyes wide with the impact of my request. She takes a moment or two, like she needs to catch her breath.

"Sit down," she says quietly.

I shake my head and hold up the list she gave me. "Sorry, no

time. I've got fragile kids to look after."

When I get back, classes have just finished and everyone's making their way back into their Houses. Jessa McKenzie is sitting on the verandah steps. Despite her being in year seven

and in Hastings House, somewhere in my worst nightmare she's become surgically attached to me and *nothing*, not anger,

not insults, not the direst cruelty can dislodge her.

"Don't follow me. I'm busy." I keep walking. No eye contact because that will encourage her. That someone can want something out of another person who gives absolutely

nothing

in return astounds me.

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I want to say to this kid, "Get out of my life, you little retard."

Come to think of it, I have actually said that and back she comes the next day like some crazed masochistic yo-yo.

"They reckon the Cadets are arriving any minute and that this

time they mean business." Jessa McKenzie always speaks in a

breathless voice, like she hasn't stopped speaking long enough

to take a breath her entire life.

"I think they meant business last year when they threw every

bike in the school over the cliff."

"I know you're worried as well. I can tell you are," she says softly.

My teeth are gritted now. I'm trying not to but they grit all the same.

I get to the front door, dying for an opportunity to shut it in

her

face, but Jessa McKenzie still follows, like those tenacious fox

terriers that grab hold of the bottom of your pants and tug.

"The kids in my old dorm are scared, you know," she explains.

"The year sevens?" As if I've asked a question. "It's because

the older kids are going on about the Cadets coming and how

bad it is. I think you should speak to them, Taylor. Now that you're

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leader"--she leans forward and whispers--"of the Underground

Community."

My hand is on the door, almost there, *almost...* but then I stop

because something lodges itself in my brain like a bullet.

"What do you mean 'in my old dorm'?"

She's beaming. Freckles glowing.

I look at the transfer paper in my hands and then back at

her. I

open it slowly, knowing exactly whose name I'm about to see

there, transferred to Lachlan House. *My House.*

"You have no idea how much I can help," she says.

"Raffaela

thinks I'll be better off in the senior rooms than the dorms."

"What would Raffaela know?"

"She reckons she can work out where the tunnel is," I hear Raffaela say behind me.

"My father used to say ..."

But I'm not listening to what Jessa McKenzie's father used to

say. I'm sandwiched between my two worst nightmares.

"Congratulations," Raffaela says, "although I think Richard and

the others are already organising a coup." Raffaela always has

this weight-of-the-world,

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old-woman thing happening.

"Congratulations from me, too." Jessa McKenzie is still beaming.

"We're going to work out where the tunnel is," Raffaella says,

"and get back the Prayer Tree and learn how to ..."

I want to be sitting in front of my computer, where you can press

a button to block out your junk mail. These two are my junk mail.

"But Taylor," Jessa continues in that hushed annoying voice of

hers. "You have to get to know the kids in your House because

Chloe P. says they hardly know you down in the dorms."

"Incoming!" This comes from one of our guys sitting in the surveillance tree.

Raffaella and I exchange looks before she begins bustling the

younger lot into the House.

The Cadets have arrived.

I'm in charge.

The territory wars are about to recommence.

They met Jude Scanlon for the first time exactly one year after

the accident. At that time Webb thought nothing would make

sense ever again. The pain was

30

worse now because up till then Narnie and Tate and Webb had

all just felt numb and if it hadn't been for Fitz's spirit blasting them out of their grief Webb honestly believed that the three of

them would have made some crazy suicide pact. But during that

year, when they were fourteen years old, the numbness went

away, replaced by memories that made Narnie disappear inside herself and him ache. He saw the same in Tate.

Despite

her ability to enjoy most of their days, sometimes her despair

was so great that, in a melancholy moment when she'd

allow

herself to think of her family, she'd almost stop breathing and

he'd hold her and say, "I'm here, Tate. I'm here, Tate. I'm here."

Tate had lost her younger sister as well as her parents in the

accident. "We were playing Rock, Paper, Scissors," she told him once. "I was paper and she was rock so I lived and she died."

That year, a boys' school from the city had decided to experiment and send all their students from year eight to eleven

on a six-week life-education project as part of the Cadet program. They were to live by the river from mid-September to

the week after the October holidays ended.

"We can play skirmish," Fitz said, clutching his

31

gun, his eyes blazing with the possibilities as the convoy of buses drove into town.

As his Cadet troop jogged along the Jellicoe Road, their

boots

thumping the ground, eliminating anything in their path,

Jude

Scanlon noticed the damaged poppies. There seemed to be five, bent out of shape, fragments on the bottom of the boot

of

the kid in front of him--damaged beyond repair. For reasons

he

couldn't understand a sadness came over him and it was

then

he saw the girl standing on the other side of the dirt road,

her

eyes pools of absolute sorrow, her light brown hair glowing

in

the splinters of sunlight that forced their way through the

trees. It

was as if he had seen a ghost, some kind of apparition,

which

haunted him through that night. The next day he found

himself

returning to the very same spot, after hours, with five seeds

in

his pocket. Then, on his knees, he planted something for the

first time in his life.

"They have to go deeper," he heard a voice say. "Or else the roots won't take."

There were four of them. Two boys and two girls. He recognised one of the girls from the day before

32

and something inside him stirred. He could tell the speaker was

related to her, his hair was the same golden brown, his eyes,

though, were full of life. The girl on the other side of the speaker

was smiling gently and then there was a boy with a wicked grin

and laughing eyes.

"Tate," the smiling girl said, extending her hand. "And this is Webb and Fitzy and you kind of met Narnie yesterday."

Narnie.

"I didn't... we didn't mean to ..." The boy, Webb, shook his

head.

"It always happens."

"Maybe you should find another spot to plant your flowers."

"There can be no other spot," Webb said quietly.

Jude pulled the rest of the seeds from his pocket and they
all

took one each then side-by-side on the Jellicoe Road they
planted the poppies.

Each day, at the same time, Jude would return and each
day

they would be there, led by Webb, whose life could not have
been more different to his. Where Webb's memories of
childhood were idyllic and

33

earthy, Jude's reeked of indifference. Webb read fantasy;
Jude

read realism. Webb believed a tree house was the perfect
place

for gaining a different perspective on the world; whereas
Jude

saw it as perfect for surveillance and working out who or

what

was a threat to them. They argued about sports codes and song

lyrics. Jude saw the rain-dirty valley; Webb saw Brigadoon. Yet

despite all this, they connected, and the nights they spent in the

tree house discussing their brave new worlds and not so brave

emotions made everything else in their lives insignificant.

Somehow the world of Webb and Fitz and Tate and Narnie became the focus of Jude's life.

The next year, as the Cadet buses drove into Jellicoe, Jude was desperate for a sign. A sign that would tell him that things

would be the same as the year before. He'd spent most of the

year wondering about them. Had they fallen out of love with one

another? Did Narnie still have that half-dead look ? Had Fitz got

himself into trouble ? Had they outgrown him ?

But there they were, on the steps of the Jellicoe General Store,

where the Cadets always stopped to

34

pick up supplies. Waiting. For him.

"Who are they?" the Cadet sitting next to him asked.

Jude looked at Webb's face, the grin stretching from ear to ear.

"They're my best friends. I'm going to know them until the day I

die."

35

Chapter 3

The territory wars have been part of the Jellicoe School's life

ever since I can remember. I don't know who started them.

The

Townies say it was the Cadets from the city who have been coming out here for the last twenty or so years. They set up camp right alongside the Jellicoe School for six weeks each September as part of their outdoor education program. We

say

the Townies started the wars because they think Jellicoe belongs to them, and the Cadets blame us because they

say

we don't know how to share land. All I know is that they

began

sixteen years ago because that's what the Little Purple Book says. In it the founders wrote down the rules, the maps, the boundaries.

The wars take place only for the six weeks the Cadets are here

and mostly they are more of a

36

nuisance than exciting. It takes us double the time to get to town

because the Cadets own most of the easy access trails. It's always around that time that we get pep talks from the teachers

and the Principal about getting out there in the fresh air and taking bushwalks. What they don't know is that most of the House leaders confine their younger students indoors in case

they trespass onto enemy territory. That is one thing you don't

want happening. Because after the Cadets are long gone and

the Townies are back in their rabbit holes, the real war begins.

The Houses are at one another, particularly if one was responsible for losing us territory. When I ran away with the Cadet three years ago, Raffaella and Ben went looking for me

and trespassed onto Townie territory. We lost the Prayer Tree

because of it. Raffaella and Ben were completely ostracised and

when I returned we didn't talk to each other much. Then we stopped talking altogether. And now here we are leading Houses together and about to fight a war.

There are Cadet sightings on the northern border of our boundaries for a whole week. The area is at least a kilometre

away from where they are camped so allowing themselves to

be sighted is a deliberate

37

attempt at intimidation. Just between you and me, it works every

time. The other House leaders want me to begin acting on the

intelligence we're receiving, but premature action in the past has been the Jellicoe School's downfall and I'll be damned if

I make the same mistakes the leaders have made in the past.

On her weekend visit home, I send word through Raffaella to the

leader of the Townies that we'd like to make contact. We receive no answer and the cat-and-mouse games begin.

Waiting for war is a killer. Not knowing when the first strike will

happen, not knowing what the outcome will be. The build-up makes us tense. Sometimes I want to walk right out there and

yell, "Bring it on!" just to get the suspense over.

But it's the home front that's the worst. The school has always

had a policy that the House leaders, with the help of the rest of

the seniors, take care of their own Houses with the assistance

of an adult. Every student knows that the leader has been chosen in year seven and is groomed for the next five years.

But every year we have elections and pretend that the House

leaders and School leader have been elected by the people

for

the people. The teachers fall for it. They're pretty young and clueless. Most

38

of them only stay three years maximum to fulfil the Board of Education's employment requirements, so patterns among the

students aren't really picked up. They are diligent, though.

Each

time a Lachlan student forgets to turn up to a sports training session or music recital or debating practice, I get harassed

by

the teachers. From the junior dorms on the first floor all the

way

up to the year-elevens rooms on the third, those in my

House

drive me insane with their expectations. Questions about

television privileges, duty rosters, computer access, and

laundry. There are tears and fights and tantrums and

anxiety.

And Hannah is nowhere to be found. I'm furious that she

has let

me take care of this all by myself--almost like some kind of
payback for the last time I saw her. In the past Hannah
spent

most of her spare time in Lachlan, helping out the House
leader, but now that I'm in charge she's gone into hiding.

A year-ten girl knocks on my door. "Evie from year seven
just

got her period."

"So?"

"You have to speak to her. She's crying."

"Go get Raffaella."

"She's not around. Where's Hannah? How come

39

Ms. Morris is doing roll call?"

"I have no idea where Hannah is."

I recognise the look on the girl's face. It's a do-you-have-
any-

idea-about-anything look.

"I'll go get Hannah," I say finally, just wanting to get away.

Except when I go down to her office and turn the handle to
walk

in I find it locked. In my whole time at the Jellicoe School I don't

ever remember Hannah's door being locked and I put it down to

an extended tantrum, which sits uneasily with me because Hannah never has tantrums. I'm about to head back upstairs but

I see Jessa McKenzie coming my way, so I walk out, get on a

bike, and ride down to the unfinished house by the river.

At this time of the day our grounds are at their most sinister.

I can handle it at night but there's something about this time, when the sun begins to disappear, that makes me think the grounds have so much to hide. There's just endless silence.

No

birds, no crickets. Nothing.

I dump the bike on the ground beside the house and make my

way to the front. "Hannah," I yell out angrily.

But the echo of my voice is the only response.

"Hannah, this isn't funny!"

I stand in the silence, waiting for something. For her head to

appear out the window on the first floor, looking exasperated

and saying, "Help me with these skirting boards, Taylor."

I look around, sensing something ... someone. The house has

an area around it that Hannah tends and mows. "It'll be my garden," she tells me constantly, where she'll plant lilac and lilies and she'll sit there, on the front verandah, like in that

Yeats

poem that she sometimes recites to me:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:

Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade. And I shall have

some

peace there ...

But beyond the tamed area there is dense bush-land,

uncultivated, without even a walking trail. Three kilometres

of
that is what separates us and
41
the Cadets. Rumour has it they've been creating a secret
trail
for years, which would make getting to us as easy as. The
quickest way for them would be via the river, which flows
directly behind Hannah's property. But it belongs to us.
Here,
near Hannah's house, the river is at its narrowest and
there's
only about twenty metres between the banks. In the last
couple
of years, because of the drought, the river has been not
much
more than a trickle. Once in a while, over time, we've
almost lost
it through poor leadership but somehow we've always
managed
to hold on to it and maintain that physical distance between
us

and them. Today, though, somewhere in that dense uncultivated labyrinth, something or someone is watching. I can

feel it with everything I have inside of me that keeps me alert to

malevolence. "Who's there?" I call out.

I think of the cat. Although Hannah has never claimed him as

hers, she feeds him every time he comes into the area. I hate

the cat and the cat hates me. He's feral, with a tail that always

looks like it's been caught in a state of fright, and, like everything to do with Hannah, I fight him for her attention.

"Why does he look like that?" I asked her once.

42

"Because I think he saw something that scared the hell out of

him a very long time ago."

The cat has been dying for years and sometimes Hannah wants

to put him out of his misery, but she doesn't have the guts.

Sometimes, when I get up close to him, I see the suffering in his eyes, but then he'll scratch me on the face and I am forced to forgo the sympathy.

But whatever is out there now, it's not the cat.

I shiver. Whoever it is has the advantage of being able to see me when I can't see them. I decide to turn around and walk away but just as I do, I hear the crunch of footsteps somewhere behind the bushes, moving towards me, slow and measured.

"Jessa McKenzie, is that you?"

If it was Jessa, she'd answer, and there is no answer, just the sound of a presence that keeps me rooted to the spot. I want to walk towards my bike, but I dare not turn my back and I'm too much of a coward to step forward to investigate. So I stay,

for

what seems like forever, staring at that one spot, frozen like

a

soldier who's stepped on a landmine. I don't move. I try to convince myself that it's just my imagination. That there's nothing there but some kind of wildlife

43

with a size-nine foot.

The cold begins to snap at my skin and it's getting darker.

Cautiously I take a step back and then another and another.

I

can make a dash, grab the bike, get on it, and take off

before

whoever it is can make it out of those trees, but some kind

of

eerie fear keeps me transfixed. I count to ten but I reach

eleven

and count to ten again and reach eleven again. Eleven.

Eleven.

Eleven. Eleven. Eleven.

Ten!

I bolt, turning, racing round the back of the house, straight

to the

bike. My stomach turns. No bike. Any chance of it all being
my

overactive imagination is quashed when I see that empty
space

under the tree. I hit the path with all the speed I can muster,
my

heart thumping like a rampaging jackhammer. The trail is
an

obstacle course of tangled twigs and assaulting branches,
but

I'd know this area with my eyes closed. I can hear only two
sounds: the pounding of blood in my brain against my
temples

and the footsteps behind me. One pair. If there were two or
more I think I'd be less afraid. I'd just allow myself to be
captured and reinforce the rules of the Jellicoe Convention
about diplomatic immunity. But one

44

pair means either a rogue operative ... or something worse.
When I reach the clearing that leads to the Houses and I

see

the lit path in front of me, there's no sense of relief. My lungs are

bursting and every part of me aches. I just want to reach that

door and the closer I get to it the farther away it feels.

Then I'm there, flying through it, slamming the door shut, locking

it. Only then do I lean against it, sliding to the floor, taking deep

gulps of air, slowing down my heart rate, pushing my perspiration-matted hair off my face, and bending my head between my legs, feeling for the reassuring shape of my inhaler....

Three year-seven girls are standing in front of me, Jessa McKenzie in the middle of them.

"Someone used up all the water," Chloe P. tells me.

"Celia's got matches," the other one, whose name I don't know,

says in a hushed voice.

I get up slowly, ignoring them, dragging my body up the stairs,

but they are still there beside me.

"Where's Hannah?"

I stop and look into Jessa McKenzie's eyes and suddenly I see

someone ... something that I have

45

seen before. I feel an anxiety I can't explain.

I push past them and escape to my room and when it's securely

locked, I walk to the basin and lean over it, nausea rising in me.

I want to see Hannah. I'm not sure why but I find myself repeating the need over and over again. Because it's like a voice whispering in my head telling me that there is something

so unnatural about her absence. It's like the last line of Hannah's Yeats poem.

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

At lunch I'm forced to sit with the other House leaders in the food hall as part of our "official" prefect initiation. The Principal

makes a speech about unity while Richard whispers to the leader of Hastings. She giggles at something he says and they

look at me until she passes it on to the person next to her. Richard has the rest of the House leaders eating out of his hand, except for Ben who is hoeing into his lasagne with a passion. I know that I need to act quickly before there's a coup

and as I glance around the table I realise, once again, that my

only potential ally is a drop-kick moron with
46

tomato sauce all over his face.

"Ben, make contact with the Cadets. Tell them I'm ready to make a deal."

Ben looks up, in the middle of wiping the plate with his bread,

his eyes wide with shock.

"Me?"

"Him?" Richard exchanges glances with the others.

"You," I say.

"What are you doing, Taylor?" Richard asks in that voice of

his

with the warning in it.

"I'm asking my deputy to do what deputies do. To negotiate," I

say politely, standing up.

Ben mouths *deputy* to me like it's a dirty word and then Raffaella

walks by and he mouths *deputy* to her as well and even she looks a bit worried.

"And by the way, Murrumbidgee and Hastings House," I say,

looking at both the girl and Richard. "I read the Little Purple Book last night. Written in 1986 by the first of the UCs. The leader, I think, referred to himself as Chairman Meow.

Pretty

bad handwriting, but it's all there, including the fact that no House leaders can fraternise with each other in a romantic sense. Don't know why but probably

47

because it takes away the competitive edge." I look at Ben.

"Let's go."

Raffaella follows us as well. I don't say a word until we get outside.

"Where were you last night?" I ask her.

"I got town privileges. My best friend's brother's best friend's teammate--"

"Get to the point."

"--had a message for me. The Townies are ready to meet us.

Tonight."

The halfway hut where negotiations take place with the Townies is dark and musty. The flashlights offer little light and

no one dares sit down for fear of sitting on the unknown. In front

of us there are three Townies. I only recognise Chaz Santangelo, far too handsome for his own good, but at least he

doesn't have that mean, hard, feral look that Townie leaders from the past have had. Santangelo's sidekicks are typical hoons. Is there a manual out there that says Townies have to

have mullets ? Raffaella beside me is fidgety and I figure

that

they are all waiting for me to begin negotiations.

"So let's make a deal," I say.

48

"What makes you think we're here to make a deal?"

Santangelo

asks.

"Because river rats don't usually warn us that they're coming up

to see us. They usually cruise around the place and create havoc and then expect us to negotiate just to stop the mayhem."

"I don't operate that way ... we don't operate that way."

Judging by his sidekicks I'm not too sure.

"Well then, Santangelo. Is that what I should call him?" I turn to

ask Raffaella. She doesn't answer. She's still fidgeting.

"Chaz," he answers for her.

"Santangelo ... Chaz, whatever they call you down there, let's

make a deal."

"Then you start. Tell us what you want."

First rule of negotiation: never let them think you want something.

"We want access to the Prayer Tree," Raffaella blurts out.

Raffaella failed negotiating class in year eight. The seniors in

our House once had her in mind for leadership after I went through my arsonist stage and burnt half of the oval. We have a

collection of arsonists

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at our school. There are at least two in year seven in my House

who are going to set fire to us in our beds one day.

"We want access to the Club House," Santangelo states bluntly, looking at me and not her.

"Club House isn't ours. It belongs to the Cadets."

"Yeah, but it's a massive hike for them unless you let them use

the river. They want access to the path that leads to it, and you've got that."

"Why the Club House?" Ben asks.

"Limited options. We can't get into any of the pubs, so it's hanging out at the Seven-Eleven at night or the car park at Coles. We're looking for peaceful coexistence, here. One night

a week, Saturday night, maybe even two."

"You're talking to the wrong people. The Cadets will never allow you in."

"They might if you give them access to the path."

I shake my head. "The path is too close to the school boundaries."

"And the problem is?" he asks.

"We have junior girls," Raffaella says. "We don't want strangers

that close to our boundaries."

50

"Why? Because last time the Cadets got that close you ran off

with one of them?" The three Townies exchange looks and I am

suddenly suspicious.

"You don't know who you ran off with, do you?" one of the

Mullets says, stepping towards me. "You are one stupid--"

"Is this the best you can do?" Raffaella snaps at Santangelo, pointing to his morons, her finger almost an inch away from the

bigger Mullet. He growls and makes a bite for it and Ben drags

her back.

Still nothing from Santangelo and then I realise he's deliberately ignoring her and that they have some kind of history.

"You two know each other well, I presume."

Just a sigh and pursed lips from her and a hellish scowl from

him.

"This is ridiculous," I say, walking to the door.

"No it's not. It's called coexistence." Santangelo blocks my exit.

"Once you and the Cadets get it right, we might even try to sell

the idea to the Israelis and Palestinians. What do you reckon?"

"You haven't told us what you have to offer us yet," I say.

"The Prayer Tree," Raffaella says immediately.

51

"I'm not negotiating with her."

I glare at Raffaella. Personally, I'm not interested in the Prayer

Tree. I'm curious about what they're going to use as a bargaining tool.

"I've got information," he says to me, "that you might want."

"About?"

No answer, and for a moment I think we're dealing with an amateur who has come with nothing to offer.

"What?" Ben asks.

I glance at Santangelo and I get a gut feeling that it's not about

the territory wars or the Club House.

"We have a map that could possibly be the draft for a tunnel,"

he says, suddenly focusing on Raffaella and Ben.

A ploy. Doesn't mean the map is non-existent but he's holding

back and I want to know why.

"Means absolutely nothing to us because they never finished it

beyond your school boundaries," he continues. "But it might be important to you."

"The tunnel's a myth."

"Are you calling him a liar?"

The Mullets are angry. Their teeth are showing

52

again and they almost back us into the door. Ben tries to stand

between us but they shove him out of the way.

"Set up a meeting with the Cadets and maybe we'll talk again," I say.

"That might be hard," Santangelo says. "Make it easy, then."

"I don't think you understand. My father was the cop who dragged you back when you ran away a couple of years ago."

I chance a glance at him again. He knows something about me;

that I can tell. Being the son of the cop in charge would mean

he knows a lot about most people around here.

"Well, you just make sure you thank him for me and tell him I

said hi," I say with mock sweetness, although I do remember

the cop's face, kind in a stressed-worried-angry way. The Brigadier, though, was a different story. Cold and tense.

"I don't think you're getting my drift. The guy my father and that

Brigadier dragged back with you? Remember him? Well, he's in

charge of the Cadets now and rumour has it that none of us want to be dealing with him."

53

I can't believe what I'm hearing. The Mullet Brothers are smirking. Raffaella and Ben look confused.

"Griggs?" I ask, feigning indifference. Chaz Santangelo nods.

"Jonah Griggs."

54

Chapter 4

Jonah Griggs.

Not just a name but a state of mind I never want to revisit, although I do keep him at the back of my mind for those times I

get my hopes raised about something. So then I can slap myself

into reality and remind myself of what happens when you let someone into your sacred space. Jonah Griggs is my second

reminder to never ever trust another human being. My mother

was the first and these days I feel like Hannah might have joined that small and intimate group of traitors.

Raffaella and Ben haven't said a word, but I can hear what they're thinking as they follow me out into the clearing. I want to

tell their brains to shut the hell up but I know the only way to do

that is to speak and I can't.

The lights of the Houses beam through the bush and mark out

the path. Finally, after fifteen minutes, silence takes its toll.

"Did you make contact with the Cadets, Ben?" I say finally.

"Me?"

"Me?" is Ben's standard response to everything.

"Ben Cassidy, could you please tel the class why crossing the

Rubicon was considered the catalyst for the fall of the Roman

Republic? "

"Me?"

"Ben Cassidy, someone's on the phone for you."

"Me?"

"Ben Cassidy, I think one of the Darling girls has a crush on

you."

"Me?"

"Ben Cassidy, who's the biggest loser in the Western World?"

He'd have that "is this a trick question?" look on his face.

"Me?"

"Seeing as Raffaella made contact with the Townies, you can

make contact with the Cadets," I tell him now.

56

"I think that Cadet might want to talk to you, Taylor."

I stop and he walks into me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ben shuffles for a moment, looking at his feet, before he dares

look at me. "Well, rumour has it he's not the easiest person to

speak to and seeing you guys have a history it might make some sense...."

"Do you know what a history is? It's what Raffaella and Chaz

Santangelo have. Lots of stories to tell, lots of anger to vent, lots

of baggage to check into I-Don't-Give-a-Shit Airline. The Cadet

and me ? Nothing to tell. I ran away one day. He was running in

the same direction. We ended up on the same train in the same

carriage. The train derailed, we walked the same road and hitched a ride with the same postman in Yass. We got caught

because the Cadet got scared and rang the powers that be. We

came home in Santangelo's father's paddy wagon. End of story.

No history. No sequel. Nothing."

I can't see their faces because it's too dark but they know I'm

lying. I lie all the time about those three days. Probably because

I can't explain it. It reeks of supernatural bullshit and hunches. It

stars the boy

57

in the tree in my dreams who took me by the hand and made

me stand on a branch and asked, "What can you see?"

"Nothing," I had said.

"Know what I can see? From this distance, everything is so bloody perfect."

And I looked harder into the distance and what I saw was my

mother. There was a radiance about her that I had never seen

before. So I went looking for her and in that dream I found her

soul, but when I woke up in the morning, I knew that I had to go

looking for the rest of her.

That's when I first saw the Cadet, on the platform of the Jellicoe

Station. I knew who he was in an instant. It's not every day that

you hear a story about a boy who killed his father. That was the

rumour, anyway. Standing on the platform alongside him, I believed every word of it. There was a caged fury to him. A feralness that seeped out of every pore.

"Do you know when the next train to Yass is coming?" I had

asked.

"Go to hell," he said, but there was a desolate fear in his eyes

and I couldn't look away.

"Been there. Trust me. It's so overrated."

58

And for reasons I will never understand, I received a smile from

Jonah Griggs, and there was a yearning in it, touching a nerve

inside me that still freaks me out to this day. On that train something was unleashed in both of us. He didn't say much about himself except that it was his first time away from his mother and brother and he had a desperate need to know that

they were all right without him. And I told him everything. About

my first memory, sitting on the shoulders of a giant who I know

can only be my father. Of touching the sky. Of lying between two

people who read me stories of wild things and journeys with

dragons, the soft hum of their voices speaking of love and serenity. See, I remember love. That's what people don't understand. And what I also remember is that in telling that tale

to the Cadet on the train I got a glimpse of peace.

When the train derailed and we decided to hike, there was never a question that we wouldn't stick together and find my mother. Except on the third night he had a dream and betrayed

us.

"What do I say to him?" Ben asks, bringing me back to the real

world.

What should he say to the Cadet? Ask him why

59

he called his school to come and get us when we were so close

to wherever both of us wanted to be. Ask him why he had made

that call when he knew I was two hours away from my mother.

"Tell him we want to make a deal."

I walk past the year-seven and -eight dorms, where Jessa McKenzie has already taken over. The others hang off her every word and I haven't seen them this animated ...
actually

ever. The Lachlan House leaders were always strict.

Commandments number one to ten ranged from No Fun to
No

Fun. But down here, Jessa McKenzie and her posse are
either

giggling hysterically or spooking one another out. The rest
of

the girls are engrossed in her tale and I even notice
Raffaela

amongst them, sitting on one of the beds, intrigued.

"He's killed ten people in twenty years," I hear Jessa say.

"But nowhere near here ?" That comes from Chloe P. who,
in

all probability, will now be paralysed with fear all night.

"Those kids who went missing a couple of years ago were
from

Truscott, which is halfway between

60

here and the city," one of the year eights says. "That's close enough."

"Lights off," I say.

They look my way. Scrubbed little faces of kids who don't really

know who I am. Just that I'm in charge.

"I'm telling them about the serial killer, Taylor, and how he--"

"Is nowhere near us," I interrupt.

I walk over to her as they begin to disperse. I catch a glimpse of

the newspaper clippings spread out all over her bed. The faces

of the dead or missing, so young and happy that all I can think

of is, how can they be dead? Toothy grins, mostly those school

photos that you keep hidden.

But the worst photos are those of the parents. Their faces are so

drawn and grief-stricken. They want their children back. I

look at

the faces of the girls around me and wonder who would look

that grief-stricken for half of them. If something happens to me,

whose face will be on the front page of the paper begging for

me? Is a person worth more because they have someone to grieve for them?

I look at Jessa McKenzie and I wonder what type

61

of warped person carries around newspaper clippings of dead

kids and despairing parents. "What kind of a freak is this kid who's giggling hysterically with the girls in the neighbouring beds, each with a crush on the other for being the same age

when the rest of the world seems so old?

The three of them are snuggled up together, talking like they

haven't seen one another in years. Sometimes I look at the girls

in my form, in my very own house, most of them now on the
third

floor with me, and I realise that I hardly know them.

For the first time since they made me leader of the
community, I

realise why I told Hannah I was thinking of leaving. It's fear.
Not

of having to negotiate territory, fight a war, and make sure
we

come out of it with more land than when we started. I can
do

that blindfolded.

It's this that scares me.

My seniors have left the House.

I'm in charge of fifty kids who don't give a shit about the
territory

wars. They just want to be looked after.

And I have no idea how.

62

Chapter 5

He went missing on one of the prettiest days Narnie could remember in her whole sixteen years. One of those days when

she woke up and actually wanted to be alive.

Over the next twenty-four hours the four of them called his name, first with annoyance, then urgency, hysteria, rage, grief.

And then with despair.

By the third day everyone else at the school joined in, as well

as the Townies and the Cadets.

But the birds still sang and the river still flowed and the flowers

were in full bloom.

And then their voices stopped and their souls stood still and

they ceased being who they had been.

Because who they were had always been determined by him.

*Five days after his disappearance she scraped the words
and*

numbers on the trunk of the Prayer Tree. Matthew 10.26

*And she vowed that she would never leave this place until
he*

returned.

64

Chapter 6

The boy in the tree in my dreams comes calling again. His visits

are more frequent these days. I ask him why and he tells me it's

because he's waiting for someone. For the first time ever I feel a

chill slice through me. I ask him who it is he is waiting for but he

doesn't answer. For some freaky reason, Hannah comes to mind and just when I'm about to ask him another question, I sense that there is someone else in the tree with us.

Someone

at the edge of the branch, like a shadow, but I can't quite see

their face. The boy stands up tall on the branch and dives into

the water below and I hear a whimper from the shadow at the

end of the branch. It frightens me so much that, with shaking

legs, I stand as well. Ready to jump. Just about to. "Taylor?"

65

I look at my clock. Six a.m. Raffaella is standing by my bed.

"It's

Ben. You should see what the Cadets have done to him."

They went for his fingers like they knew how much he needed

them. His House leaders would always do that to him, too.

Ben's a muso. Loves anything that produces a tune, so naturally

it's always his fingers that get smashed when someone is pissed off with him, and Ben has one of those personalities that

invites pissed-offness. Raffaella has his fingers taped and it's a

while before he looks up at me. I flinch at what I see.

I'm presuming the eye will go a purply colour and that it will be

difficult for him to eat for a day or two, judging by the amount of

blood around his mouth. Raffaella cleans him up with the practicality of someone who has spent a lifetime doing it

and I

try to keep my mind on the semi-carnage in front of me but I

just

can't help thinking back to my dream.

"So you made the offer," I say.

He nods but even that seems painful.

"And they didn't like it?"

"He wanted the negotiations to take place

66

between him and *the girl*. 'Isn't she in charge over there?'

That's

what he said. Like I thought he would. Remember that part where I said he'll want to speak to you?"

"And he's a coward who gets his thugs to do the dirty work for him."

"Oh no," Ben says, trying to shake his head and pushing Raffaella's hand away. "He did all this himself. You've got to hand it to him. He does his own dirty work."

I can tell Ben's angry.

"I am allowed to delegate," I say to him, speaking more

sharply

than I should.

"Yeah, I know. But you weren't delegating. You were avoiding

someone and I got caught in the middle. Look at me. I'm five

foot four. I'm a weakling. My specialty is medieval jousting and

violin. I'm not built for pain. He, on the other hand, is a ten-foot-

fricken-tall unit."

"Then we try again and give him what he wants for the time being," Raffaella says.

"We have no idea what he wants."

"Did this happen on our territory or theirs?"

"Does it matter? It hurts the same. They have

67

booby traps everywhere. It's like one of those bad Chuck Norris-

Vietnam War movies from the eighties."

"So they're bored?" I ask.

"Out of their tiny brains. They just worked out that you can't

get

mobile coverage out here. So no text-messaging means more

terrorising. You can't walk a metre without a trip-wire getting you. You need to call a meeting with Richard and the other leaders. Remind them of exactly where the boundaries are because if one of the younger kids gets caught in the wrong area, there'll be casualties and the teachers will start asking questions and the other Houses are going to go apeshit."

"Then we'll go check the boundaries later today."

"I'm not going!"

"Yes you are, Ben. You're my second-in-charge."

"Only chosen because you didn't want Richard. Don't think for

one moment that I thought you picked me for any other reason. I

don't get chosen for things unless there's a motive. You know

why I'm head of my House? Because Number One Son found

Jesus Christ and is now a happy clapper with

68

those Hillsong People in Sydney, and I'm about this close to joining him."

"I'll get Richard, then. He'll be the best of a bad bunch of backstabbers. Is that okay with you?" I snap. I walk out and slam the door, thumping furiously down the stairs.

The teacher who has replaced Hannah is calling the roll in our

dining room and everyone acts as if it's the most natural thing in

the world. Everyone except for me and Jessa McKenzie. She

sits at the bottom of the stairs wrapped in her nightgown, with

that perfect yearning concern on her face.

"Go get some breakfast," I say firmly.

"Are you going to Hannah's?"

"It's none of your business where I'm going," I mutter, slamming

out the front door.

Hannah's house has begun to lose her scent. These days it smells musty and still. I walk to her room in the attic and lie

on

her bed. It's been a week since I've seen her and I know that it's

time to go and speak to one of the teachers. To ask casually where she is. I bury my face in her pillow. I can't remember

one

day in the last five years that Hannah hasn't been around

69

and for a moment I want to cry. I'm angry that I want to cry

because I feel like I've been manipulated by the soundtrack

in

my head--the same one that made me cry in some shit

sentimental movie with Julia Roberts where the mum is

dying of

cancer. I get off the bed and walk down to the kitchen.

Hannah's

manuscript is there on the table, but it seems thinner and

the

pages are spread out like someone's just read them, like

someone's just been here, which makes me feel uneasy.

The

pages aren't numbered, so I don't know whether I have the beginning or end or whether it's in sequence but these days I'm

not really looking for continuity.

All I'm after is something that makes sense to me.

In between setting up a bilateral agreement with the enemy, banning rumours about serial killers, and fobbing off an attempted coup d'état by Richard and the other House leaders, I

go to see our Principal about Hannah and realise that in the whole time I have been at the school, I've been in this office only once. John Palmer moves from behind his desk and sits

me down in one of his "guest" seats like he's promoting the notion of some

70

kind of warmth and familiarity. It's not that I don't like the adults

around here; it's just that they don't stick around long enough.

The Jellicoe School is their stepping stone to some other place

and there have been three Principals since I've arrived.
That's

what makes Hannah different. Rumour has it that Hannah
went

to school here and just never left. That's another of what I
call

the Hannah mysteries. Why would a woman who's not even
in

her mid-thirties hide herself away from the world out here?

Worse still, why would she choose to leave out of the blue
and

not tell me?

"You're not privy to that type of information, Taylor," Mr.
Palmer

says gently but firmly.

"She's been my House co-ordinator for five years, sir. She
brought me to this school. I think that entitles me to be privy
to

something. Added to that, I have a House of kids who need
her."

He's nodding, like it's all occurred to him already. "Ms.

Morris

will be staying at the cottage just outside Lachlan House, so anything you need, you just call her."

"Do you know whether Hannah's coming back? Did she put in

notice or warn you? Anything?" I am

71

desperate for something.

"Let's just say that she was in a rush. She left a letter saying that

she had something to attend to in Sydney and that she'd contact

us when she knew her plans. She apologised for any inconvenience and signed it."

"Can she just do that? Walk out on her job without an explanation? Has she been picking up her salary?"

"Taylor," he says, a perplexed look on his face. "Hannah's not

an employee. She doesn't work for the school. She owns the

property by the river and has helped out around here for as long

as anyone can remember. She can come and go as she pleases, something she hasn't elected to do in the past, so I'm

certainly not going to turn around and demand that she return

here, even if I did have her number. You know Hannah better

than I do; it would have had to be something important for her to

have left. She'll ring you at your House any day now. You're panicking for nothing."

"Did she mail the letter?"

"It was hand-delivered by a friend of hers."

"Who? Who's her friend? I know all her friends.

72

I promise. Ask me any question about her and I'll be able to answer. Just let me speak to this friend of hers."

He leans forward in his seat. I am humiliated by the pity in his

eyes. "I promise you that if she contacts me I will tell her that

you want to speak to her."

I nod again, swallowing. "Can I just see the letter?" There's
a

pleading tone in my voice and suddenly I am every pathetic
kid

who has ever been dumped in this place. I'm the pining in
Jessa McKenzie's face and the desperation in those poor
kids

who would hang off every one of Hannah's words just
because

she took notice of them. I always felt that I was above that.
I'm

not sure why until this moment. From the day Hannah
picked

me up from that 7-Eleven I knew I meant more to her. That
we

were somehow connected.

Mr. Palmer walks away for a moment and retrieves
something

from a filing cabinet. He returns with an envelope in his
hands,

which he shows me and I take in every detail. On the

envelope,

in writing not belonging to Hannah, are the words To be given

to John Palmer . The writing

73

is amazingly neat and precise. Mr. Palmer sees the look of doubt on my face and takes the letter out of the envelope and I

recognise the handwriting instantly. Hannah's.

I stand up, nodding again. "I'm sorry."

"What's there to be sorry about Taylor? That you miss a friend?"

There's been too much sentimentality for me already, so I walk

to the door. "If you hear from her ... "

"You have my promise."

When I get back to the House the juniors are doing their homework.

"If Hannah rings," I say from the door, "you make sure you call

me."

Jessa McKenzie looks up and, like every single time she looks

at me, I get a sense of familiarity. She holds up her hand and

gives a small wave. Unexpectedly, a fierce sense of protectiveness comes over me. Except I fight it back because I

can hardly look after myself these days.

I lie in bed and words silently tumble out of my mouth. Some

people say their prayers at night. I

74

don't. What I say is always the same. *My name is Taylor Markham. I live on the Jellicoe Road.*

In the tree hanging over the ridge, Webb made his plans to build a house. He'd make it out of gopherwood, like Noah's ark,

two storeys high, with a view he could look out on every day

with wonder. His father had built their home on the farm. It was

one of the things Webb had loved about him and the times

he

missed him most were when he remembered the sounds
of

hammering and the humming of a saw and his father's
voice

joining in the harmony of some song that seemed to play in
all

their minds. Webb remembered how he and Narnie would
hold

nails between their teeth just to be like him, tapping away
with

their hammers, knowing they were part of something big.

He told Narnie and Tate his plan. Sitting in that tree, he
told

them he was going to build a house and that he needed
their

help. For a long time Narnie didn't say anything. She just
curled

up around the branch, staring into the valley below. She
told

him that from this angle the treetops looked like cauliflower

and

she had once heard them beckon her

75

to jump, promising her that if she did, they'd bounce her
back in

the air again. Some days, like today, he was petrified she'd
listen to them.

So he made them both stand on the branch, tightly holding
their

hands.

"Don't worry. I'll never let go."

"What can you see ? " Narnie asked.

"Nothing."

"Know what I can see?" Tate said. "From this distance
everything is so bloody perfect."

76

Chapter 7

The next afternoon I walk to Clarence House to find Ben.

With

hands shaking, I knock on the door and wait. The kid who answers looks at me nervously and I wonder why, until I remember how often I'd come across the UC leader in the past.

Rarely. They didn't do house calls. Even within their own Houses they became deified. The kid doesn't move, still staring

at me, and thankfully Ben appears and puts his hand on the kid's shoulder.

"Go back to study," he tells him. "I'll be in soon."

Ben doesn't say anything to me, but his look says, *And?*

"So what did you tell your House co-ordinator," I ask, pointing to

his face, "about that."

"That I've taken up football." I nod. "Naturally. You look like a
footballer."

"He was very grateful for the lie. Means he doesn't have to investigate."

We look at each other for a moment and for once I feel awkward. It's not that I'm not into humility; I've just never had to practise it.

"You want me to come out there with you?"

"Yes I do," I say honestly, realising there is no point beating around the bush.

"Year eight have assignments due tomorrow," he says, pointing behind him. "It's not really a good time.

"You do homework with them?"

"I'm their House leader."

"My House leaders never did homework with us. Hannah did."

"And my House leaders used to flush our heads down the toilet.

Consequently I'm going for a more pastoral approach."

"Consequently? I would have used 'naturally.'"

"You've already used it. Anyway, as a consequence of how I was treated I have chosen to act in the exact opposite way,

so

I'm sticking by 'consequently.'"

"If I send Raffaella over to help these kids, then will you come?"

78

"Raffaella's probably sitting there helping your year eights."

"Naturally."

More silence. Humility now has to give way to begging.

"Ben, my first seven days on this job are over and I have nothing to show for it. In the past, our leaders have always made contact with the Cadets and succeeded in at least re-establishing boundaries. I don't even know what to say to these

guys. I'm admitting that to you, and I don't know why I'm admitting it to you."

"Because you have no respect for me and you don't care whether I think you're weak or not."

I resign myself to the fact that I'm down to one ally: Raffaella. But

Raffaella isn't a House leader, she's my second-in-charge, and

there's no way she can save me from defeat at the hands of Richard and his five signatures.

"Fine," I say, turning away. I make it to the bottom stair and turn

to find him still there at the door. "And for your own information, I

don't know whether I have respect for you. But I chose you over

Richard and the others because I trust you. That's my motive

79

and at this moment, trust is beating anything else in my life and

if it's not good enough for you then I don't know what to say." I

begin walking.

"What's in it for me?" he calls out.

"Nothing," I call back to him. "I'm not even going to pretend there is."

He catches up with me. "No. That's what you have to say to them when you negotiate. I always used to hear the leader say

it. 'What's in it for me?'"

He keeps on walking farther away from his House and I experience a sense of relief when we reach the clearing and he's still with me. My stomach begins to twitch and I realise I'm

nervous about the prospect of the Cadets.

"We could be lucky," Ben says, sensing my nervousness.

"They

might be carving up a pig they've just slaughtered for dinner and ripping the flesh off the bones with their teeth as we speak

and--"

"--as a consequence?"

"--Won't be interested in us lurking around." I'm unconvinced.

We're out there for quite a while, marking the map with all the

important checkpoints. For most of the

80

year we don't have to worry about boundaries, but come

September the map is our bible. I follow its instructions and

I

don't realise how close I am to the edge of the ridge until

Ben

grabs my shirt and pulls me back. But I like being this close.

Just one step and those cauliflower trees below could bounce

me right back up again.

Ben is staring at me. "Are you blind? You almost went over."

I'm about to tell him not to be ridiculous when he holds up a hand.

"Did you hear that?" he whispers.

"What?"

"That?"

He looks at me and I open my mouth to say something but he

puts two taped fingers to his lips. "I think we've crossed the boundary without realising," he continues, whispering.

"According to the map, this eucalyptus tree is the boundary."

"According to the map there are two trees this size and we passed the other one about ten minutes ago."

I stand still for a moment. Birds sing, trees rustle

81

in the wind, but there's something else. The feeling of being crowded in, despite one hundred acres of bush around us, stretching as far as the eye can see.

I hold up one finger, then two, then three, and we bolt. But not

even one step later I'm flying through the air. I make contact with

the ground in no time, face first in an exfoliation of dirt, leaving

my face feeling scratched and bruised.

I try to kneel but I realise that some kind of trap has grabbed hold of my foot and then I see the boot in front of me. Big, black,

laced-up, army regular, polished clean, with the ability to wipe

out a whole universe of ants in one step. I look a tiny bit farther

up and I see the khaki pants tucked in but I stop there. This is

not the position I want to be in for this meeting. So I keep
my

eyes forward as I slowly raise myself, and then we're eye to
eye, give or take the ten centimetres he has on me.

Jonah Griggs is a tank. His face is blunter, meaner than I
remember. Hair cropped. Eyes cold. Arms folded. He has
perfected the art of looking straight at someone while
avoiding

eye contact.

Two of his Cadets have Ben by the arm and I can tell by the
look on Ben's face and the angle of their

82

strongholds that he's in pain. "Let him go," I say.

Jonah Griggs looks over my head, as though he's
contemplating my request. As if. He ponders for a moment,
placing his thumb and finger on his chin, and then shakes
his

head.

"Maybe another time," he says, his voice so unlike the one
about to break three years ago.

"We might just take him around for a tour of the boundaries
and

when he comes back, he can pass them on to you," his second-

in-command says.

"I'd prefer you took me for that tour."

Jonah Griggs feigns contemplation again and leans forward as

if he didn't hear but still there's no eye contact.

So I grab his face and look straight in his eyes and it's like a punch in the gut holding that stare. "You want to make this personal, Jonah? Then let him go."

I don't know what possesses me to say his name but it slips off

my tongue easily and I watch him flinch.

"No deal," Ben calls out. "I don't go without you."

83

"That is very touching," Jonah Griggs says, shaking free of my

hand. "There is so much love in this space."

Ben blows him a kiss and all hell breaks loose. The impact of

boots on fingers makes it clear what happened the night

before.

I jump on Jonah Griggs's back but I can't even pull his hair because Cadet regulation haircut doesn't allow for it. He shrugs

me off easily and I land on the ground for the second time in less than five minutes.

"What happened to the scary folk that we were warned about?"

he mocks, looking down at me. "You and the Townies are making this too easy for us."

"You want scary? We can do scary." I pick myself up. "Let's go,"

I say to Ben, who is almost speechless from the pain.

"Scare me, then," I hear Jonah Griggs say.

I turn around to face him. "The treaty? The one that says we

control any access with water? The one that you guys have been able to violate for the last four years because there has

been no water? Well, while you were away it rained. That means there's a river. That means you have no access

unless

we give it to you. That means you are restricted to a tenth of

84

the land you've been used to using in the past."

"So what are you saying?"

"This is war."

Griggs shrugs arrogantly. "Well, I guess we're better
dressed for

it."

85

Chapter 8

She stood at Webb's door: Tate, with the wild hair and the grin

that went on forever. Sometimes Webb believed that he would

never experience a better feeling than when he was looking at

her, would never see anything or anybody bursting with more

life and spirit. Sometimes he felt he needed to inhale it and place it in a storage area in his soul. Just in case.

When he said that to Tate she'd be perplexed. "But Webb, I'm

like this because of you. You're everything to me."

On Narnie's sad days, he wished he could be all that to her, too.

"Is that what you want? " his sister had asked once while they

sat dangling their feet in the river.

"In a different way because you're my sister but

yeah. If it keeps you happy... or wanting to live, yeah, I'd want to

be everything to you."

"You do all the work, Webb," she said tiredly. "Don't you get sick of that?"

He shook his head. "Not if you and Tate are okay."

"But what happens to all of us when you're not okay? What then? We'll become pathetic. Even more than I am now. So why

would I want someone to be my everything when one day they

might not be around? What will be left of me then ? "

"I'll never ever leave you, Narnie. You're my sister. You're all I've got."

And Tate, standing at his door now, smiling her hypnotic smile.

"The Cadets are here," she said. "This is going to be our last

year doing this. Let's go get Narnie and make some trouble."

The three of them stood their ground on the Jellicoe Road, directly in front of a bus-load of Cadets. In the distance the

sound of a shotgun rang out and a cloud of dust hovered just

above the trees in front of them.

"Townies," Tate said. "At full throttle, by the looks of things."

87

The bus driver kept his hand on the horn, lazily.

"Surrender," Webb yelled. "Send out your leader! "

"You get off this road or you'll be the ones surrendering your

little arses," the driver yelled back.

The doors opened and after a moment a boot appeared on the

road and then another.

Tate and Webb exchanged looks. Narnie felt her heart knock

against her chest.

A Cadet stepped out from behind the bus door, dressed in full

military school uniform. He strode towards them, only looking

back once when he realised that the car that had been

making

the ruckus up the dirt road was almost upon them. He reached

the trio and searched their faces.

"I've never understood the strap across the chin," Webb said. "It

has to be the most moronic thing I've ever seen."

"How can we take you seriously ? " Tate said. "Bloody uncomfortable, too," Jude agreed, taking it off.

When the shooting got louder they all turned in the direction of

the on-coming car. "Fitz?"

88

"Psychotic as ever. He got expelled from his school about three

times this year."

"And you know how excited he gets when you come a-calling."

Tate grinned.

Jude grinned back. He punched Webb in the shoulder and Webb punched him back.

"Where are the others?" one of the Cadets called from the

bus

window.

"Parent weekend," Webb called back. "We're the only ones around."

As the bus drove off, a car swerved around it, twisting to a halt.

Then Fitz was out of the car, jumping on Jude's back with the

feverish madness they were all used to.

"Why haven't they arrested you yet?" Jude said, throwing him

off and diving on top of him. They wrestled until Fitz victoriously

had Jude straddled.

"Loving that position, are we?" Tate laughed.

Webb helped them both up and the five of them made their way

down the Jellicoe Road towards the school.

"Guess what?" Fitz said.

"I don't know," Jude said. "What? Narnie smiled?"

He glanced at her for the first time.

"When you guys see a Narnie smile, it's like a revelation,"

Webb said, gathering her towards him.

Jude stopped in front of her and, with both hands cupping her

face, tried to make a smile. Narnie flinched.

"Leave her alone," Tate said.

"I need a revelation," Jude said. "And you're the only one that

can give me one, Narns."

"Let's get back to 'Guess what?'" Fitz said, hyped beyond control.

"What?"

"Phase one of the tunnel," Webb said in a low voice. "It's finished."

Every year the town puts on a welcome for the Cadets and invites us along for the gala event, if one can give a sausage

sizzle and rugby league game such a title. I get word halfway

through the day that a meeting is to take place between the three factions after the official part of the ceremony. I send

Ben

around to gather the other House leaders and we work out our

strategy, which none of us can agree on. In the end we decide

that a rental of the river may be allowed;

90

however, the numbers of Cadets using it at any one time is to

be no more than twelve.

As usual, the Cadets are in their fatigues and the bulky frame of

Jonah Griggs stands out among them. He surveys the field and

beyond, handling his team as he would his troops. I can tell that

his team is first-class. Santangelo is tenacious and what his team lacks in skill, they make up for in endurance and speed.

Our league team is abysmal and, halfway through the round robin, I realise that we are not even players in this whole

territory war.

When the games are over, the official part of the ceremony begins. Behind the microphones, a band sets up and I see the

Mullet Brothers tuning their guitars alongside a girl with dreadlocks and heaps of piercings.

Santangelo's mother is the mayor and I hear her whisper, "Behave," to her son as she lines us up for a school captain photo. She's indigenous, which makes sense when I think of his

colouring. Even for an Italian, his skin seemed dark. We have

photos taken with her and then they place the three of us in front

of the stage and take more photos.

"Chaz!" Santangelo's mum is trying to get his

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attention from where she's standing with some of the school

officials. She mouths *smile*, waving her fingers under her mouth.

"Chaz," Jonah Griggs says snidely. "Your mum wants you

to

smile."

"And yours wants you to eat shit and die."

I'm standing between these two intellectuals while the local photographer snaps away, asking us to say words like *holidays* and *pornography*.

"Yours thinks you should loosen up," Griggs continues to bait.

"Really?"

"Yeah. She told me last night."

The first strains of the national anthem screech across the stage, causing everyone to wince.

"What did you say?" Santangelo asks quietly.

"Your mum. Nice lady. *Really nice.*"

Santangelo flies into it first. Fist straight into Jonah Griggs's stomach and next minute they're both rolling on the ground pounding each other. Then there's a war cry and it's a free for

all, present company excluded, of course, and believe me, I do

feel excluded but there is no way I'm joining in. The leader
of

Murray House goes flying through the air

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and lands at my feet, groaning. I try to help him up but then
I

realise he's getting off on this. They all are. It's like some
Neanderthal skirmish for the pathetic. Some of the Townie
teachers try to stop it. Big mistake. It gets boring for at least
four

more minutes and even the girls from Jellicoe High
acknowledge me with a roll of the eyes. Judging by
Santangelo's mum's expression, I wouldn't want to be at her
dinner table tonight.

Then the police arrive. I recognise Santangelo's dad, who
saves police brutality for when he gets to his son. Then I
see

Ben disappear under a heap of bodies and I go in to assist
because the Mullet Brothers have fallen into the body jam
with

their guitars still attached to them, causing more pain than
is

necessary. Except just as I'm about to pull Ben's head out of the

scrum, a whistle shrills in my ear and this cop is grabbing me by

the arm. And then it's over.

They separate us into groups. The Ringleaders and the Others.

I belong to the Ringleaders because my weak, pathetic, traitorous, fundamentally base peers point to me when someone asks them who is in charge. The only positive thing in

this whole situation is that because this stupid town is so small,

you

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don't have to actually get into the paddy wagon to be taken to

gaol. They march you there. The worst thing is I'm placed in the

same cell as Jonah Griggs and Chaz Santangelo and they are

still so filthy with each other that I know it's not over and somehow I'm going to be caught up in it. In the cell next to ours

there are about thirty other kids, combinations of all three factions. I look for Ben but can see only some of the other House leaders, who are proudly comparing scars.

In my cell I don't even seem to exist. The dust and grime begin

to get to me and I feel a shortness of breath that I know spells

trouble. On the other side of the cell Jonah Griggs and Santangelo are too busy sizing each other up like two demented pit bulls who have to prove who's got the biggest...

attitude.

I lean against the bars that separate us from the others. "So let

me get this right," I say to one of the Townie girls. "All it takes is

to insult someone's mother?"

"No," she explains. "That's the beauty of it. They don't actually

have to insult. The words *Your mother* are enough."

"So if I said to you, 'Your mother is a ...?'" I shrug.

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"Just 'Your mother.'" But it doesn't work if girls say it to each other," she continues. "You have to have a penis for it to affect you in such a way."

"Oh funny, funny," Santangelo says.

The bonding with the Townie girls is a highlight. I spend my first

hour of incarceration in conversation with one of them--who happens to be the girlfriend of one of the Mullet Brothers--about

the myths around eyebrow piercing. When I have the courage, I

ask her the burning question about why the Mullets but I'm short

of breath and I can recognise the tell-tale signs of an asthma

attack coming on, so I have to go and sit down and don't get to

hear the answer.

The first lot of parents come in at around five p.m., including the

House master of Murray House, so within half an hour the cell

next door is empty and it's just Griggs, Santangelo, and me. They put me in the cell next door on my own and we get to order takeaway for dinner.

"You promised us a negotiation about the Club House,"

Santangelo says, still eyeing Jonah Griggs, but speaking to me.

"Negotiations are over," I say flatly.

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"You can't do that."

"Any which way, we've got the Club House and you can't stop

us from getting there," Jonah Griggs says arrogantly.

"Watch me."

"If we make a deal over the Club House, it will be profitable for

all of us," Santangelo says.

"Come within an inch of our property ..."

"And what?" Jonah Griggs calls over to me.

"Unfortunately the state persists in using our school as a juvie

centre when it suits them. We have arsonists."

"So you'll burn us down?" he says, feigning fear.

"No, but we will burn down every single building you own on our property. Beginning with the Club House."

Now I have their attention.

Raffaella is allowed to see me based on the fact that she knows

how to sweet-talk Santangelo's father, who I find out is her godfather.

"We've called Mr. Palmer but he's at some Rotary Club do and

Mr. Grace from Murray House says he's not authorised to bail

you out so we have to

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wait until Sal-- sorry, Constable Santangelo," she says, looking

up at him and smiling, "speaks to Mr. Palmer ... which could

be

after midnight."

"Where's Ben?" I ask.

"I think I saw him go after the Mullet Brothers."

"As if he can take on the Mullet Brothers. Is he insane?"

Find

him, Raffaella. He could be hurt."

"I'm staying with my parents tonight so he can bunk at my place."

I hear the sound of heavy boots enter the station and the next

minute Jonah Griggs jumps to his feet saluting, a shocked look

on his face. Santangelo mocks the salute behind his back.

"Hey!" his father bellows, and Santangelo sits back down, sulking.

I strain my neck to see what has surprised Jonah Griggs so much and my heart begins racing wildly.

It's the first time I've seen the Brigadier this close since he delivered me back to Hannah's place three years ago. In my memory he has always been a giant but today I notice that Griggs towers over him. I slouch against the gates,

watching the

interaction between him and Griggs.

"I don't think it will kill you if you stay the

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night," he says to Griggs in a tone that isn't open for negotiation.

I don't know how it is that a voice I've only heard once can stay

in my mind, but it's as recognisable to me as Hannah's.

I see a flicker of shittiness on Jonah Griggs's face but he holds

the salute. "Yes, sir."

"You, too," Santangelo's dad says, pointing at his son.

Santangelo swears under his breath.

"Sorry, what was that?" his father asks loudly.

"Nothing," Santangelo mutters.

And then the Brigadier is looking at me and I hold his stare, despite the fact that a part of me feels sick. He looks younger

than I've remembered him to be all this time. Younger than Santangelo's dad, anyway.

"Do you want me to take her back to the school?" he asks Santangelo's dad. "No!" I almost yell.

Santangelo's dad shakes his head. "John Palmer's coming down soon. She'll be fine."

The Brigadier continues to hold my stare, like he's taking in every detail of me and it seems like a million years later that he turns to go.

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"I hear you're going to be sticking around for a couple of weeks," Santangelo's dad says to him as they both leave.

Only then does Jonah Griggs relax.

"Since when do real army brigadiers run the Cadets?" Santangelo asks.

"They don't."

I can tell that Griggs is confused about the Brigadier's presence.

He looks at me and I walk over to the other side of my cell, settling myself as far away as possible from both of them.

Gaol's not that bad, especially when you're used to crap food at

school and you get Thai takeaway.

"How's Hannah these days?" Santangelo's dad asks me as he

hands it over.

"You know Hannah?"

"Since she was your age."

I shrug. "She's away."

The phone rings and the other police officer comes in holding it.

"It's Clara," he tells Santangelo's dad. "She wants to talk to Chaz." Santangelo takes the phone through the bars and Jonah

Griggs snickers and makes himself comfortable on the bunk

while Santangelo tries

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to speak as quietly as possible.

"Hi...look ... I know ... Yeah, like I did it on purpose,

Mum....Okay ... *you're what?* Don't go to their place....She's a

liar....She only pretends to be that sweet in front of ...Oh,

good,

believe her over your son....No. He's being an a-hole....I didn't

say "arse," you did....Fine, take his side...."

He hands the phone to his father. "She said not to forget to pick

up the bread." He sulks.

By ten o'clock I make a pact with myself that I will never commit

a crime because gaol is the most boring place on earth. Even

more boring than the Jellicoe School on a Sunday afternoon.

It's so boring that when Santangelo comes over to my side of

the cell, I welcome the conversation.

"Chewy?"

I reach over and take a stick. Up close he is truly a good-looking

guy and I'm curious about the Raffaella connection but don't dare ask him about it. Santangelo has this way of looking at me,

not in a pervy way or like someone who's interested. He's staring at me like he did in the negotiating hut. Like he has a

question to ask or something to say, but

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doesn't quite know how to say it.

"Spit it out," I say.

"Spit what out?"

"Whatever you want to say."

He's about to deny it, but then he seems to change his mind.

"The guy ... the Hermit? My dad used to take me out there sometimes, to see how he was going."

I move closer. No one at the Jellicoe School has ever mentioned the Hermit. Their way of dealing with it has always

been to pretend it never happened.

"You knew him?"

He nods. "He was a bit mad. Like obsessive compulsive, you

know. He'd stand on a tree branch and dive into the river in

the

same spot all the time and just let the current take him away. I

thought he'd die doing that, not... "

We don't say anything for a while.

"Do you remember much about that day?" he asks.

Only that when I woke up I was in Hannah's bed and I heard

someone crying like an animal. I remember opening my eyes

and seeing the blur of

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her body holding on to another--a man. He was clutching onto

her with grief and they were both so distraught. I wondered if he

was a friend of the Hermit. I remember that I never saw the clothes I was wearing that day ever again, which was a pity because I so liked my Felix the Cat T-shirt and grey cord jeans

and whenever I asked Hannah for them, she'd just shake her

head.

I don't answer. "What did your dad say?" I ask instead.

He doesn't look at me. "I don't know. Just that it was messy," he

mumbles.

"How messy? What do you mean 'messy'?"

He looks up at me. "You know ...messy."

I see Jonah Griggs get up from his bunk and walk towards us.

"Why are you telling her this?" he snaps at Santangelo.

He ignores Griggs. "My father cried.... I'd never seen him cry....

He told me that the Hermit had a kid...."

I feel sick. Up till now the Hermit had never possessed a life. He

was just this madman who lived in the bush. But to know that he

left someone behind ... And then a horrific thought enters my

head.

"Was he my father?" I whisper. "Is that what your dad said?"

"Why would you think that?" he asks, surprised.

Griggs grabs Santangelo by the arm. "You're stressing her out."

"Why is this your business? You don't even know her."

I feel my windpipe constricting and I know what's about to happen. I'm trying to work out where my backpack is so I can

get my inhaler but I realise that it's out there with the cops.

Jonah Griggs looks at me for a moment and I see a frown appear on his face. "Sit down. You're going to faint."

The chewing gum makes my mouth feel sweet and next minute

I'm throwing up mucus that is making me gag.

"Look what you've done, you asshole!"

I can see them both glued to the bars that separate us. The retching never seems to end, like it's carving out my insides and

I can't breathe. My windpipe feels like it's choking me and I can

smell the Hermit's blood, the sickly sweet smell of it, and

suddenly I

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see it, plastered all over my clothes, and I see the Hermit
out

there on that day when the sun was so hot and I hear his
whispers and I try to keep my eyes closed, but I can't and
there

are parts of him around me and the blood smacking at my
face

and I can't breathe and I can hear Jonah Griggs shouting
and

Santangelo calling out, "*Dad, Dad, get in here.*" I'm making
this

gurgling sound because I just can't breathe and although
I'm

bent over away from the bars I feel hands grab hold of me,
pulling me towards them. I feel arms around my chest, a
mouth

against my ear whispering ... whispering ... Jonah Griggs
whispering, "Just breathe, just breathe, come on, Taylor,
just

breathe ... just breathe."

Mr. Palmer is wiping my face. Santangelo's dad is there as well,

placing a glass of water in my hands and helping me drink.

I'm

gulping it down, feeling weak and pathetically teary.

"We're going home," John Palmer says quietly. "Can you stand?"

I nod. "I'm sorry about the mess," I tell Santangelo's dad.

He smiles. "We'll live."

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As I walk past the other cell I see Santangelo sitting on the floor

with his back against the bars, his head in his hands, and

Jonah Griggs standing, watching me. Like he did on that station

platform. Like he did those times we lay side by side on our way

to Yass. Staring like he's never stopped. For a moment the mask slips from his face, but by that time I'm almost out the door.

It's not until we reach the Jellicoe Road that Mr. Palmer

speaks.

"Hannah's fine."

"How do you know?" I ask, raising my head from where it's been leaning against the door.

"I spoke to someone who knows her. She's in Sydney looking

after a friend ... who's sick."

All of a sudden Hannah has all these "friends." Friends who have known her since she was seventeen. Friends who hand

over letters. Friends who are sick.

"Who? You don't understand. I know everyone she knows."

He is keeping something from me. I can tell by the way he can't

look me in the face and that scares

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me. He seems to sense this and once again I'm surprised by his

kindness.

"She calls her friend, 'Mrs. Dubose.' That's all I know."

Mrs. Dubose.

"Have you heard of her?" he asks. "Yes," I say sleepily.

"She

lived in the same street as Jem and Scout Finch."

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Chapter 9

I'm riding as fast as I can. The faster the pace, the less thought-

process, and being thoughtless suits me fine. I pedal hard, my

face sweating, my hands clenched on the handlebars until I feel

the blood stop in my fingers. I pedal on with eyes closed and we

travel, the bike and I, as if it has a mind of its own and I have no

control. I skid suddenly to the side and realise that I've reached

the ridge, an inch away from going over the edge. My face is

drenched with perspiration and I look at the space below. The

world sways and I sway with it until it's like being in a hypnotic

dance, almost enticing me to step over.

But my attention is drawn away by the rustling above me. In

the

tree. There's something watching. I throw the bike to the side

and crane my neck, my heart pounding hard. For a moment I

think I see the

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boy, his limbs nimble and quick, his eyes piercing into me, and

then he's gone. The knocking at my ribs in no way subsides and for a moment I don't move because I'm petrified. Until there,

in the corner of a branch, I see something else. The cat. Without

thinking I start climbing. I don't know why but somewhere at the

back of my mind is the thought that the cat was the last to see

Hannah. When I reach his eye level, I straddle the branch and

get as close to him as possible, my arm stretched out as far as it

can go. I find myself having to lean my torso onto the branch to

balance and for a moment I get close, but he hisses and swipes

at me and goes flying through the air, while I half fall off the branch, hanging on with both hands.

I see his shadow first, and the shock of what I see makes me

gasp.

Standing under the tree, holding the cat, is the Brigadier.

With

the cat so compliant in his arms, he resembles some kind of

Mephistopheles. As I cling on for dear life, I try to control the

breathlessness within me that spells trouble.

"It's an easy drop," he tells me. "You'll be cushioned by the leaves."

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I'd be happy to stay hanging off the tree for the rest of my life just

so I don't have to deal with him. But my hands begin to hurt
and

I know I have to let go.

There is nothing easy about the drop. It hurts when I land
and

when he holds out a hand, I ignore it.

He's looking at my face closely and like every other time this
man is around there is havoc in my stomach. Like a
warning

against malevolence. I could easily put it down to the fact
that

I'm still angry at him for being the one who stopped me and
Jonah Griggs that time. But it's more than that.

"Give me the cat," I say when I get to my feet.

"Mightn't be a good idea. He doesn't seem to like you."

I grab the cat from him and he goes back to his feral self,
scratching and writhing in my hands, but I'm not letting go.

"Hannah--who lives here--she wouldn't want you hanging
around her place or stealing her cat," I say.

He's still looking at me. It's unnerving and although I don't
want

to have my back to him, I turn and walk away, clutching the

cat.

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The strange thing is this. In crazy dreams when I relive that moment when Jonah Griggs and I were sitting in the postman's

van in that township two hours away from Sydney, ready to set

off on the final leg of our journey, I remember the Brigadier.

I

remember the look on his face when he pulled up in front of the

postman's van and got out of his car and walked towards us in

that measured way he has. That look was directed at me and a

thought has stuck in my head for all these years: that maybe the

Brigadier did not come looking for a Cadet that day.

That maybe, in some way, it was me he was hunting down.

The next day, Raffaella, Ben, and I decide to do an inventory of

every piece of property the Townies and Cadets own on our land. We split the page in three and list them, beginning with

the most valuable: the Club House. There are bike trails, walking trails, bridges, and sheds. Finally there is the Prayer Tree, which Raffaella believes should be on the top of the list.

We discuss and argue about the importance of each item. The

access path for trail bikes owned by the Cadets. The falling-down shed owned by the

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Townies. The more we discuss, the more I am convinced of the

stupidity of my past leaders. The access for trail bikes, for example, would be our quickest way to town. During the Cadet

season our means of transport is limited and our journey to town is twice as long. The shed once housed a car for us, which

the leaders would sneak out in during the night, especially if a

band was playing in one of the larger towns. But Raffaella always comes back to the Prayer Tree.

"What's so important about it?" I ask Raffaella on one of our morning checks around the river. Apart from the fact that all three of us feel somewhat guilty that it was handed over because of us.

"Spiritually or pragmatically?" she asks.

"What do you think?"

"I swear to God, if you go out there it will change your perspective on the world."

"Don't believe in God. Love the world just the way it is."

"Okay, then come and look at it from a pragmatic point of view."

"Townie territory," Ben says. "If it's booby trapped ..."

"It's seven o'clock in the morning," she reassures

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us. "They'll never be up this early."

The Prayer Tree is located smack in the middle of the property

within easy distance of the Jellicoe Road. It's the area I am the

least familiar with because it's closer to the township and there

are no proper tracks to reach it from where we are. In actual fact

it is a chore getting to it and in the future Ben advises that we

should hit the Jellicoe Road and access it from there.

By the time we reach the clearing we have grazes from flying

branches and our bodies itch from insect bites. The clearing is

small and the tree takes up most of it. I look up and am shocked

at just how massive it is. It's almost like Jack's beanstalk and

probably one of the highest trees I've ever seen on this property.

Right at the very top, lodged amongst the branches, is a small

house, cleverly camouflaged by a creative paint job. But it's the

trunk that fascinates me the most. There are carvings and

symbols and messages and history.

So much romance and so much ugliness. A girl named Bronnie,

her name in love hearts with almost every boy around; a boy named Jason who hates wogs, Asians, coons, and towel heads. And poofers,

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too. The patience it would have taken him to carve out so much

hate.

The messages are everything rolled into one. Wise and uncool.

Profound and repugnant.

We circle the tree over and over again, trying to decipher all the

messages.

Do you remember nothing stopped us on the field in our day ?

I stare at the words, tracing my fingers in the grooves created by

the carving.

"Your hands are shaking," Ben says.

Because I've heard these words so many times before.

"Check this one out," Ben says to me. *Kenny Rogers Rules.*

"Who?" I ask, still wanting to return to my dream lyrics.

"You don't know who Kenny Rogers is ? " Ben asks like he can't believe it. "'Coward of the County'? 'Don't Fall in Love with

a Dreamer'? 'Islands in the Stream'? 'The Gambler'?"

It's like he's speaking another language and he shakes his head with great disappointment.

"You need to get in touch with the seventies and

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eighties, my friend."

I find myself reaching up and touching words engraved right in

the middle of the tree. It's bigger writing than the rest.

MATTHEW 10:26.

"Maybe it's one of those 'God is Love' quotes," Raffaella says,

coming up behind me. I think of Hannah's manuscript until I realise that Ben and Raffaella are staring.

"So where's the pragmatism you promised me?" I ask.

She points up. "We have to go up for me to show you that."

Hanging off the tree is one of those floppy rope ladders like
in a

trapeze act, except that here there is no net. Raffaella grabs
hold
of it.

"How do you know it's secure?" I ask.

She tugs at it and shrugs. "I just do. Santangelo's anal
about

things like this."

She begins climbing and the ladder swings around. "One at
a

time, though," she yells down.

I look at Ben. "You're next."

It's not like I'm scared of heights. There's been many a night
that

I've climbed out of my window and swung off the tree just
outside it. But this

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thing is massive and I think I'd rather be climbing branches

than

a flimsy ladder that's attached to nothing I can see.

By the time it's my turn, Ben has already freaked me out with his

dramatics. I begin the ascent, concentrating hard on each step,

making sure that my foot is on the next rung before I step off the

previous one.

When I reach the top, Raffaella and Ben help me up.

"Close your eyes," Raffaella instructs. "Are you insane?"

"You're on solid timber," she reassures me. "It's very sound and

we're holding on to you, anyway. You've got to close your eyes."

I'm convinced that if I hear something about being able to see

tomorrow and it's bloody beautiful I'll throw myself off. I stand up

straight, however, and close my eyes.

"Open."

I'm standing on a landing, the wall of the tree house behind

me.

Directly across my torso is a piece of wood, preventing me from

falling over the side.

Raffaela points in front of me. "The town." She

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turns me to the left. "Cadets." Then she turns me to the right.

"Us."

The tree house has the most amazing and comprehensive view

I have ever seen. Hills and valleys and houses and steeples, symmetrically cut farm blocks and vineyards. It is lush and hazy

in the morning glow and I feel a rush of something inside me. I

turn to the right and look in the direction of our Houses. I can

see the six of them, looking closer than they actually are to each

other. I see the little cottages in between that belong to the

House co-ordinators and beyond that I see Hannah's unfinished

house by the river.

"They can see everything," I say.

"With a good pair of binoculars they'd be able to see inside our

rooms," Raffaella says.

I turn to look at the Cadets, already out of their tents and preparing for the day.

"Who needs satellites?" Ben says.

"That's what interests them the most," Raffaella says pointing.

The Jellicoe Road.

"They have a bird's-eye view of every single part of this area. If

they are up to no good, they know exactly when someone's coming up or coming closer."

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"So they're spying on us."

"I actually don't think so. I think they love the view and it's a pretty good space for just hanging out," she says, walking inside the tree house. Surprisingly it is solidly built and we

follow her in, sitting on the floor, taking in the space and possibilities. "I think the eighties mob named it and built a makeshift something up here. I don't think it's ever been as solid

as it is now, but that's a Santangelo thing. I think he even wants

to tile it. That's the wog in him."

"So you used to come up here when we owned it?"

She nods and smiles. "Anyone who was at the school and came from the town did. Come on. Look at the view. It's awesome. God's country."

"You can take the girl out of the town but you can't take the clichéd Townie out of the girl," Ben says.

"Well, it is!"

"Bet you've been up here with Santangelo," Ben says.

She goes red and walks out onto the landing. We follow her and breathe in the freshness.

"They want to meet again. Tomorrow night. This

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time in the Club House," she says.

"Have the Cadets agreed?"

"They think so. They reckon you're never too sure with
Jonah

Griggs."

On the Jellicoe Road a car appears in the distance.

"Townies," Raffaella says. "We've got about ten minutes to
get
out of here."

I go down last, taking a closer look at Hannah's unfinished
house by the river. Except I realise that it's almost finished.
It's

only the stuff inside that needs to be done, and the idea of
its
near-completion frightens me beyond comprehension.

Later on that night, I'm awakened by a sound. I stay still for
a
moment, my ears alert, heart racing, wondering if it was just
one

of those loud bumps in dreams that don't actually exist.
When I

can't get back to sleep, I get out of bed and quietly make my
way down the stairs. I hear the breathing of those in the
dorms

and stand at their door for a while, watching them. I notice
Chloe P. in someone else's bed, clutching onto her for dear
life,

and there's Jessa in the corner, snoring quietly and
contently.

The music

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of it all brings a smile to my face. A candle burns in the
corner

and I go over and blow it out.

I open the front door and step outside and the cool wind
brushes my face, almost caressingly. As I stand looking out
into

the darkness, it's like I can hear the pulse of everything out
there. I remember the Prayer Tree and all those names and
scratchings, every one of them with their own story, and I
wonder where they all are now. Is Bronnie still in love with
any

of those boys? Does Jason still have so much hate? Do any
of

them still think of their time on the Jellicoe Road?

I'm about to go inside when I notice that at the bottom of the steps of the House is my bike, which had disappeared from behind Hannah's house. I look out again, wondering if whoever

has returned it is out there watching.

When I walk back inside, I pass the common-room and I find

myself looking for a bible. Matthew, chapter ten, verse twenty-

six. *Whatever is now covered up will he uncovered and every*

secret will he made known. I wonder where such a message

belongs amongst the Bronnies and Jasons of the world.

I go to sleep thinking of Hannah's character, Webb, who speaks

of things I sometimes dream, and

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suddenly I'm sitting in the tree with the boy. He leans towards

me and speaks but no sound comes out of his mouth and I ask

him over and over again to say it louder, until I exhaust myself.

So I read his lips, my eyes straining, every part of my senses

aching, until I'm miming his words, and when I wake, Jessa and

Raffaella are standing at the end of my bed, staring.

"Was I shouting?" I ask, my voice croaky.

"You were crying."

"The whole time?"

Jessa shakes her head. "Your mouth was moving but nothing

was coming out," she says.

"What was I saying?"

Raffaella shrugs. "I'll get you some water."

She leaves the room and Jessa sits on my bed. After a moment

or two I know that she's worked out what I was mouthing.

"Taylor," she says quietly, confused. "You said that your mother

wants to come home."

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Chapter 10

I'm dreaming. I know I'm dreaming because I'm in a tunnel
and

in reality I don't do tunnels. And down in the tunnel I smell
something vile. I can't identify it, but it consumes my whole
being and I start to choke, unable to breathe. But then a
hand

grabs me and pulls me out and I know it's the boy in the
tree in

my dreams and he tries to resuscitate me, but his mouth is
rotting and his breath is foul. And I scream and I scream,
but

nothing comes out.

Thoughts of my mother begin to consume my every
moment

and they sweep me into an overwhelming feeling of
bleakness

and a desperate need for Hannah. Sometimes in the middle
of

the night, Raffaella knocks on my door when she sees the
light

coming from my room but I ignore her. I just sit up

121

and try hard to stay awake because sleeping isn't safe anymore. I find myself Googling any name I remember my mother using. It was never the same name for long and that probably had to do with the profession she was in. She tried

to change my name once or twice, convinced that someone was

after us.

"They'll take you away from me," she'd say. "They've done it before."

But I didn't want my name changed. It was all I had.

The cat is no more settled than when I brought him home but I

refuse to let him go. Sometimes I head to Hannah's place straight after school and try to get some rest there or I sit up

in the attic and read. In this room I feel comforted. I like the box-

like quality of it, the way the roof slopes, the perfectly cut square

in the floor, the trapdoor that blocks out the world below, the skylight that on a clear night allows you to see every star you

would want to see in the galaxy. Sometimes after we had been

working all day on the house, Hannah and I would sit up here

and just talk. She never spoke much about her family except a

few times in this room. If I asked her anything about them she'd

just say they were all gone and that if she allowed herself to give in

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to the whole sadness of it, she'd never ever be able to operate

like a normal person again.

"I've been in that void," she told me once. "Don't you ever give

in to it."

But I want to give in to it sometimes, only because I'm tired

and

the feeling that I've had for a while-- that something is hunting

me down--becomes all-consuming and I'm frightened that one

morning there will not be enough to keep me going. Except maybe the pages I'm holding in my hands. They comfort me,

these characters, like they're my best friends, too. Like Jude felt

when he returned that second year and they were waiting for

him. Give me a sign, I keep on saying to whoever can hear me

in my head. Give me a sign.

But most of the time I wonder how much Hannah is a part of this

story and this school. Was she the leader of a community who

thought she was weak and usurped her first opportunity they

got? Did she experience a coup at the hands of a Richard-

like,

fascist-loving, backstabbing creep? And where did she get this

idea that there was peace between the Townies and Cadets and us ?

I find some chapters to read that seem intact.

123

I'm running out of them because so many are half-finished or

written in a scrawl that I can't quite understand. There's this part

of me that doesn't want to deal with the fact that one of these

characters is lost to them and I'm frightened that I will come across the chapter where they find him, because I know,

deep

down, that it's not going to turn out the way I want. That someone in this story is not going to get out of it alive. It's

how I

feel when I think of the boy in the tree in my dreams. Is he there

to prepare me for something so devastating that it will lodge
me

in that void that Hannah spoke about?

Just when I'm about to work out a sequence of pages, I
hear a

window smash and I jump. I had locked the front door on
purpose. Because Hannah's house without her didn't seem
so

safe anymore.

Quietly I crawl to the hole in the floor and peer all the way to
the

bottom. I see nothing but shadows and hear nothing but the
sounds of breathing. I want to call out but something
frightens

me into silence and I sit and wait. Listening. I hear the
heavy

sound of footsteps on the wooden stairs as they make their
way

to the second floor. My heart is rattling uncontrollably. I
reassure

myself that nothing out here can be too

frightening but I'm anxious all the same.

There seems to be nowhere to hide except under the
stretcher

bed in the middle of the room. The space beneath it is tiny,
but I

squeeze myself under and take a deep breath and then
there's

total silence. From where I'm lying, I can see half the
manuscript

sitting on the floor. The other half's with me. I reach out my
hand

until it aches, trying to touch it to drag it over, but as I do,
my

shoulder lifts the stretcher bed above me. I drop my arm
and the

stretcher bed hits the floorboards. Suddenly the footsteps
begin

again, slowly ascending.

Whoever it is has reached the second landing. I can
imagine

them standing there, looking up at the hole in the ceiling,

taking

hold of the ladder--one step, two steps, three steps, four.

And

there it is. The back of a head appears through the trapdoor

but

I can't quite make out who it is. He lifts himself up and then crouches to pick up the pages on the floor and I know what

his

next step will be. To turn around and look in the only place there is in the room to hide.

I know it's the Brigadier. I know because of that thumping sound

inside of me and the only option I have, apart from being caught, is to lift the stretcher

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bed across my head and just throw it. Quietly I roll up the papers in my hand and stick them down my jeans and I get ready. The footsteps come closer and the boot stops right in front of my nose. I can hardly breathe but I need to move.

Just

do it, I tell myself. Just do it and bolt!

"Are you okay under there?" I hear him ask. He uses a soft

tone,

like he's trying to entice me out with the good-guy approach.

But

good guys don't smash windows to get into someone's house

and good guys don't freak me out as much as this man does.

"It's okay. You can trust me."

Just do it, I tell myself again.

"I don't want to scare you but I'm coming down," he says, and I

block out his voice because it is so familiar and the familiarity

makes my heart beat fast and I know I have to get out. *Just do it*,

I tell myself. Slowly I watch him crouch and then there is his hand on the sheet ready to pull it up, ready to grab me out of

that space and do whatever he wants to do, whatever he may

have done to Hannah. The rage inside of me at the idea of it

makes me scream and I shove the legs of the stretcher to
the

side. I hear the impact of steel on his head and a grunt of
surprise and next

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minute I bolt, crawling to the trapdoor, down the ladder,
down

the stairs, out the front door, and racing for my life, my
hands

flailing as if I am trying to grab as much air as possible to
pull

me forward, like freestyle swimming on land. When I feel as
if

I've run as much as I can without being winded, I take a
detour

off the track and huddle under one of the oaks and I stay
there.

Just breathing. Softly.

I realise, after a moment or two, that I am not alone. Slowly
I

look up, beyond the tree trunk, higher than the branches, to
the

very top. There, in broad daylight, is the boy in my dream
staring down at me. It's like he has climbed out of that
nocturnal

world that I refuse to visit anymore and has decided to track
me

down. The sun blinds me as I look up, trying to cover my
eyes,

but then I hear a sound and I realise that he has brought
the

sobbing creature from the tree.

I feel hunted, with no place to hide. No solace, no
belonging.

Just an empty need to keep moving away from whatever or
whoever it is that's after me.

As usual, what awaits me when I get home is dependency.

Ten

questions before I can even get to the bottom

127

of the stairs. About maths equations and parent pick-ups
and

permission to go to town and laundry crap. Then there is

the

nightly job of looking through every item of clothing and through

the cupboard of our latest resident arsonist, checking to see if

she has attended her weekly counselling session and having

her sign a contract stating that she won't burn us in our beds

that night.

Once I've been assured of that I go to the kitchen to see if those

on duty have prepared dinner. There are about sixty kids in the

House usually, but with the year twelves gone we're down to

fifty until next year's year sevens arrive. For dinner, mostly, we

have spaghetti bolognese or risotto, and jelly for dessert, so hampers sent by parents are quite popular, as are the recipients.

On most days the roster works perfectly and on other days

it is a

total disaster. By six that night I haven't even reached the stairs

to my room and when word comes that our House coordinator

is coming around to check our rooms, the juniors especially are

in a frenzy.

Later, I pass the phone stand and give it a glance before I begin

walking up the stairs and I see two

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words on the notepad that stop me dead in my tracks.

"Who wrote this?" I manage to say, breathlessly.

No answer because I don't think they've heard me.

"Who wrote this?" Still nothing. "*Who fucking wrote this note ?* "

Silence. But a different kind. The year nines, tens, and elevens

appear on the second and third landings, their faces shocked.

The juniors come out of study, standing in the corridor watching

me.

"I ... I did." Chloe P. stands there, Jessa next to her, an arm on

her shoulder like some kind of angel of mercy.

"When did she ring?"

"I don't... I could hardly hear ... "

I walk over and grab her by the arm. "What did she say?" I'm

shaking her. "I told you to call me if she rang. Doesn't anyone

listen to me around here ?"

I don't realise until she's crying that my fingernails are pinching

into her and Jessa is gently trying to dislodge me. She's crying

as well, as are half the year sevens. The rest of my House are

looking at me like I'm some kind of demented monster. I leave

them standing there and start to walk upstairs, my

hands shaking, clutching the note, wanting it to have more than

the words hannah called on it. I want a number or a message. I

want *anything*.

Raffaella comes down the stairs towards me. "You look terrible.

What's happening?"

I want to slow down the pace of my heart but I can't. The more I

hear her speak, the harder it beats.

"Everyone's ..." she begins.

"*What?* Everyone's what? Disappointed? Thinks I've lost it?

Thinks someone else should be doing this?"

She stares at me for a moment, a cold angry look on her face. A

look I've never seen before. "You know your problem?" she asks quietly. "It's that you're never interested in what anyone

else is feeling. What I was trying to say before you rudely,

as

usual, interrupted me, is that all of us are worried about *you, not*

about this situation, and we think you should just try to get some

sleep and let us take over but you don't care because the difference between you and us is that you fly with ... with ...

I-

Don't-Give-a-Shit Airline and we fly with a friendlier one."

It draws a crowd. I think Raffaella raising her

130

voice tends to do that. It's mostly seniors and year tens, but

I

know that the juniors are listening from downstairs. The past

leaders of my House would be rolling in their graves if they knew about the shouting and mayhem that has taken place

in

this House since they left.

"You're right," I say, walking up the rest of the stairs. "I don't give

a shit."

In my room I lie on my bed, sick to the stomach, and I want to cry because my mind is working too much. All I know is that there is something not right. It's in my dreams, it's inside my heart, and without Hannah here, it's an all-consuming feeling of doom. Like something's coming and it's something bad. I try to feed the cat but he scratches me until my arms are red raw, and I let him because I want to feel something other than this emotional crap. Sometimes we sit, the dying cat and I, staring at each other like in a Mexican stand-off and more than anything I want to ask him what he has seen. What was the last thing Hannah said to him? But he stares at me; even in his sickly old age he is feral with fury, his hair matted beyond the point of no return. I try again and even though he seems as if

he's

going to drop dead at any moment, he scratches until I feel
tears

in my eyes, my bloody hands trembling with despair.

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Chapter 11

It is dark, surreally dark, and I'm hanging upside down from the

tree. My legs are hooked over a branch and my arms stretched

as far as they can go. From upside-down I see the silhouette of

the boy, but this time he is on the ground.

"If I fall, will you catch me?" I call out to him.

He doesn't answer and begins to walk away. I feel myself slip.

One leg first, the position so painful that I am perspiring like hell.

"Hey!" I call out again. "Will you catch me?"

He turns around. "Catch yourself, Taylor."

I can no longer hold on. My scream hurts my own ears. The ground comes quickly and I hit it with a sickening thud.

I avoid the House front. I notice that most of the students have

started eating dinner in their rooms.

Probably to avoid me. The common area is empty and silent.

News has already hit the streets that I'm losing control of my

House and Richard is all ready to take the reins.

I begin to develop a pattern. During the day I hide outside Hannah's house. The peace I feel here is overwhelming.

Monkey Puzzle trees and rose bushes are scattered all around

and the result is a mix of scents and colour and sounds of birds

flying low and nature in such perfect harmony that it seems wrong that the very person who created it is nowhere to be found.

There's a point just outside Hannah's house where the river makes a sand bar. I sit there often and one day I see Jonah Griggs standing on the bank on the other side, against a gum

tree. I don't know what to feel. For a moment it seems like the

most natural thing in the world for him to be there, for one of us

to call out a hey rather than ignore or accuse each other.
The
distance between us is no more than twenty metres and
neither
of us move for what seems like hours. There is a question
in his
eyes; I can see. That and something more. I can hear the
ducks
in the distance but no one stirs, except for the finches,
which
have no idea about the
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territory wars and boundaries. They leave my side and
make
their way over to his, as if to say, "Don't involve us in this;
we're
just enjoying the view."

At night the Prayer Tree becomes my shrine. I spend most
of my
time searching the carvings on the trunk while the rest of
the

world is dead silent, sinister phantoms seemingly absent
from

their sleeping dreams. Unlike mine. I look for anything.
Links, I'd

call them. There are phrases that sound like song lyrics and
the

biblical references are there and as I shine my torch on
every

single carving, I come across another piece of the puzzle. I
find

the names. Narnie. Jude. Fitz. Webb. Tate.

All scattered but there. Like they exist, not just in Hannah's
imagination but in real life. A little voice tells me that the
Prayer

Tree could easily be the inspiration for her story but I know
deep down it's more than that. Worse still, one of them is
dead. I

know that from the story. And I grieve like I've known them
all

my life. I copy down the song lyrics and back in my room I
enter

the words in a search engine. I find the bands and the

songs

and in one there's a line about Brigadoon and a rain-dirty
valley

135

that reminds me of something in Hannah's manuscript. I
download them all, creating a soundtrack of the past. When
I

finally hear the song that the boy in the tree in my dreams
plays

to me, I cry for the first time since being on the train with
Jonah

Griggs. I wrap myself in the music, curled up in my bed,
thinking

of Hannah, eyes wide open, forcing myself to keep awake.
Unlike Macbeth, who has sleep taken away from him, I take
sleep away from myself. And Hannah's sick pathetic cat sits
in

the corner, still huddled in its state of fear.

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Chapter 12

Over the weekend Ben gets word through Raffaella that the Townies and Cadets want to meet at the scout hall in town.

It's

about the last thing I want to do but these days I can't give

Richard any more of an excuse to take over and I certainly

don't

want to be at home.

I don't talk much on the walk there. Ben keeps on stealing

glances at me, about to say something a few times and

then

changing his mind before finally giving in.

"Rough week?"

I shrug.

"Raffy's worried that the Townies and Cadets will have more

to

bargain with," he says.

"I don't think Raffaella has much faith in me."

"Well, you're wrong," he says, serious for a change.

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"I don't think anyone in my House does."

He grabs my arm gently and stops me from walking any farther.

"Don't say that. Because I know it's not true."

"You weren't there this week, Ben," I say quietly.

"No, but they told me stuff and all I remember hearing was concern in their voices. And I remember something else.

Hanging out with you and Raffy in year seven, skating around

that Evangelical church car park. All those Christians were praising the Lord at the top of their voices and you stopped for a

moment and asked us, 'Who do you believe in?' I wanted to be

all mystical and Mr. Miyagi-like from *The Karate Kid*. Do you

remember what Raffy said?"

But we reach the scout hall and I see Raffaella waiting there for

us.

"People like Raffy don't lose faith," he says quietly as we walk

in.

Santangelo and the Mullet Brothers, who are clutching guitars,

are sitting on the stage and then Jonah Griggs enters with his

second-in-command, Anson Choi, and we all sit down at a trestle table.

"You guys don't seem happy," Santangelo says.

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"It was a long walk. We need some of those trails," I say.

"I've got a proposition, so can we begin?" Santangelo asks.

"It would be smart of you," Griggs tells him. "Because out of everyone here you've got the least to offer."

There's a silence between them and I know that at any minute

there will be a full-on brawl.

"Wouldn't you say that letting *any of you* walk down our streets

on weekends is a great deal to offer?" Santangelo threatens icily.

"You can't control that. Too many of us belong here,"
Raffaella

says.

"You haven't belonged here for years." He sneers.

"What are you implying?" Raffaella asks, and I see hurt there as

well as anger.

"Accusing, not implying. Would you like me to point out the difference?" he asks.

"He beats me in one spelling bee and now he's Mr. Intellectual,"

she says, looking at me as if I'm really going to get involved in

this ridiculous exchange. "In second grade," she continues.

"Get over it, Chaz!"

"Are we finished?" Griggs asks politely. "Because

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we'd like to get into a discussion about having access to at least

one of the water ways."

I look at him, shaking my head. "No chance. It'd be like cutting

off our hands."

"Then learn to live without your hands."

"No, because then we won't be able to do this," Ben says, giving him the finger. Jonah Griggs calls him a little bastard and

almost leaps across the table and everyone's either pulling both

of them back or swearing or threatening.

"Let's talk about the Club House!" Santangelo says forcefully.

"Then talk!"

"I don't want to talk about the Club House," Griggs says. "We

want water access. That's what we're here for."

Santangelo is shaking his head. "You know what you are? You

are a--"

"What? Say it!"

They are both on their feet now, fists clenched and it's on for

young and old. Yet again.

"Santangelo!" I yell above it all. "The proposition. Now. Or we

walk and we are not coming back. *Ever.*"

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It takes him a moment to calm down and I point to the chair.

"No interruptions," he says, sitting down. He stares at
Raffaela

and I turn to her and put my finger to my lips. She takes a
deep

breath and nods, as if it's the most difficult thing she'll ever
have

to do. Anson Choi gets Jonah Griggs back into his chair and
it's

semi-calm again.

"Okay. Seniors only and that means year eleven. We open
three nights a week, hours eleven thirty to two a.m . Cover
charge five dollars. No more than a hundred people per
night.

For each of those nights, one of us is in charge so that
means

organising entertainment, food, alcohol, et cetera."

"Alcohol is an issue," I say. "First, how do we get hold of it,
and

second, what happens when some moron gets plastered,

breaks his neck trying to get back into dorms and Houses or ...

tents, or drives back to town under the influence? The teachers

will be on us like flies and we'll get stuck inside for-ever.

"She's got a point." This from Jonah Griggs. "Anyway, Cadets

signed a contract saying no drugs or alcohol while we're out here. If we get caught, it's

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zero tolerance expulsion."

"Where's the fun?" Ben asks.

"It's not as if we have to give up alcohol, Ben," Raffaella says.

"We never had it in the first place."

"But if we're going to socialise and there's going to be live music...."

"Hold on, hold on. What live music?" Santangelo asks.

"As if there isn't," one of the Mullet Brothers argues. "We've got

a band ... kind of."

"What you have is *not* a band. It's two guitarists," Santangelo says to them.

The Mullet Brothers are offended beyond words, staring at Santangelo as if he has betrayed them, and without even having to consult each other they turn and walk away towards the stage in a huff.

"Let's get back to the plan and work out the lack of entertainment later," Jonah Griggs says. "We might contemplate sharing the Club House, but it's them that control most of the space around it."

Then they're all looking at me. "Seventy foreigners on our land three nights a week? That's a lot to agree to."

"Plus access to the river," Jonah Griggs persists.

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On the stage the Mullet Brothers are rehearsing and the amps are so loud we can hardly hear ourselves.

"I want to know one thing," I say. "What's in this for me? For us?" I say, pointing to Ben, hoping he likes the fact that I'm using his line. Except Ben is too wrapped up in what's happening on stage.

"Put the amps on two. It'll sound better," he calls out to them, as if they asked him.

"Ben?" I say, looking at him, reminding him why we're here. I can tell by the expression on his face that I've lost him for the afternoon.

"And put the electric guitar amps lower than the bass amps!"

Choi shouts out. Jonah Griggs doesn't say anything to him. Just stares.

"Find us a venue where we don't have to put up with this crap," I say, standing and starting to leave.

"I know the perfect venue," Santangelo calls out. "It's called the Club House."

I swing around. "Once more with feeling. What's in it for me?"

I realise Ben isn't even following me. He's already close to the stage, arguing with Choi and the Mullet Brothers about the amps.

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Instead, Jonah Griggs and Santangelo are standing there, almost side by side. Almost.

"Information," Santangelo says. He has that look again, as if he wants to tell me something but doesn't know how. He shakes his head, like he's changed his mind.

"Chaz? What?" Raffaella snaps. "Nothing."

"Well, call me when you've got something," I say, walking away again.

"The Brigadier knew your mother," Jonah Griggs says,

dropping

what he knows is a bombshel .

I don't want to stop, but I do. Because I can't believe his audacity and I'm curious to see where he's going with this.

"Do you want me to let you in on a little secret?" I say. "Lots of

men knew my mother. So don't go there."

"You wanted to go there three years ago," he says, walking towards me.

We are so close we're almost touching. My fists are clenched at

my side, and I'm trying to find the right words.

"Oh, so you think I'm still that person I was on

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the train?" I say, seething with anger. "My needs have moved

on, thank you very much. It's what happens when you're betrayed."

He doesn't even flinch. "What I know is a whole lot more than I

did back then and I can tell that this dickwit knows

something

about you, too," he says, glancing at Santangelo. "And I think

it's pretty obvious that you're still an emotional mess looking for

your mother and you know that if you find her, you'll find your

father as well. So let's talk about river access and the Club House," he continues coolly, "and I'll tell you what you've been

desperate to find out for most of your life."

I'm staring at him, so angry I can barely speak. "You know what

I'm desperate to know, Griggs ?" I spit at him. "What did you use

on your father? Was it a gun or a knife?"

The room goes sickeningly silent except for the sound of Choi's

footsteps hurrying towards us, like he knows what Griggs's next

move is going to be. But he is too slow, because Griggs has me

pinned against the wall, my feet dangling so that we're eye to

eye.

Ben is on him and then Santangelo. Raffaella is

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clutching onto me but I don't break eye contact with Griggs.

Choi shakes a finger at me, like he's saying that my time will

come and then pulls Griggs away and they walk out.

Ben, Santangelo, and Raffaella are looking at me in shock.

"Are you insane?"

I don't know who asks and I don't answer because I feel nothing

but a need to get away from everyone. Instinct tells me to go to

Hannah's, but she doesn't live there anymore and that's when I

realise the major difference between my mother and Hannah.

My mother deserted me at the 7-Eleven, hundred of kilometres

away from home.

Hannah, however, did the unforgivable.

She deserted me in our own backyard.

As I walk back to the school on my own, I realise I'm crying.

So I

go back to the stories I've read about the five and I try to make

sense of their lives because in making sense of theirs, I may

understand mine. I say their names over and over again.

Narnie, Webb, Tate, Fitz, Jude; Narnie, Webb, Tate, Fitz, Jude;

Narnie, Webb, Tate, Fitz, Jude; Narnie, Narnie ...

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"Narnie! Open the door, Narnie, please!"

Webb's face had a sick pallor. Tate held on to him, crying, while

Fitz paced the corridor outside Narnie's room.

"Get out of the way," Jude said, pushing Webb aside. He pounded on the door over and over again. "Fucking open it, Narnie."

After a while they heard the click of the lock and Jude yanked it

open before she could change her mind.

"Narnie?" Webb said, holding her. "Don't do that to us. Please."

"What did you take?" Tate asked, shaking her gently.

"Panadol. I had a headache," she murmured. "How many ?"

"I need to sleep," she said. "If I sleep, everything will be better."

Webb led her to the bed and Tate sat down beside her.

Jude watched them fussing over her like they always seemed

to. He remembered the story Webb had told him about Narnie in

the car on the night

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of the accident. It was after Fitz had come by to free them. How

Narnie was stuck, frozen with fear, refusing to move. Narnie the

fragile one who couldn't cope with living.

"If you're going to kill yourself, don't do it until tomorrow night at

ten," Tate said.

"Promise ? " Webb begged.

"I had a headache and it wouldn't go away. That's why I rang

you, Webb."

"Cross your heart, hope to die."

"But she does hope to die," Jude snapped.

"She knows what I mean," Tate said.

Narnie crossed her heart.

"That's not where her heart is," Jude said bitinglly.

"Scano, leave it," Webb said tiredly.

"Well, it's not. She just crossed her shoulder blade. What kind of

a suicide victim are you, Narnie, when you don't even know where the life force is that you're dying to squash ? Right here."

He poked her in the heart. "You want to do it properly, you make

sure you get yourself right there."

Narnie looked at him and he felt a wave of self-hatred, but he didn't care.

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"You're an asshole, Jude. Big time," Tate said, almost in tears, putting an arm around Narnie.

"Yeah, I probably am. But I can't be apart of this deal-making.

Screw you, Narnie. If you die, a big chunk of us dies with you."

He slammed out of the room and even Fitz seemed speechless.

Narnie curled up on the mattress and Tate lay beside her. "We'll

see you guys tomorrow," she told them.

Webb leaned over, kissing Narnie and then Tate.

" You can keep Chairman Meow with you," he said, snuggling the cat in next to Narnie before leaving.

Tate smoothed her brow. "Maybe it's a good idea not to go

to
sleep for a while."
"I can't stay awake."
*"I'll tell you about To Kill a Mockingbird. You might get in
trouble
if you don't read it for English by tomorrow," Tate said. "Do
you
remember what you're up to?"*
Narnie thought for a moment and then nodded. "Atticus
makes
Jem read to the old woman."
Tate settled in next to her. "Well," she began,
149
"Mrs. Dubose is really nasty. She lives next door and calls
out
to them every single time they walk past the house about
how
disrespectful they are and blah blah blah. Anyway, every
afternoon Jem has to read to her and sometimes he takes
Scout
along and what they discover is that Mrs. Dubose is dying.
But

there's a problem. You see, she's been addicted to morphine

most of her life and because she's such a proud woman, she

figures that she doesn't want to die beholden to anything or anyone."

"Even though the morphine would ease the pain of her dying?"

Narnie asked.

"Uh-huh. So her pain-killer is actually Jem reading to her. It takes her mind off it. At the end of the chapter she dies, but she's free and Jem's respect for her is intense."

"My father... he would have made us do that as well." After a

moment Narnie smiled. "Read to me, Jem."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Dubose."

So Tate read to Narnie all night and in the morning, when Tate

could hardly keep her eyes open and Narnie could actually see

some kind of light, they both closed their eyes.

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"One day, if you need me to, I'll be Jem and you be Mrs. Dubose," Narnie promised sleepily.

"I'll hold you to that," Tate said softly, and they both slept.

Back in my room, the stand-off with the dying cat ends. It's listless as I hold it in my arms and suddenly I'm engulfed with a

feeling of love for it and a need to set it free. I consider the best

place and take it out to a spot in Hannah's garden, near the river.

For a long time I sit and watch it, but it doesn't move. It doesn't

run away, like I expected. It doesn't hiss or snarl. It's like it wants

to give up but doesn't know how.

"Go!" I tell it, but it's shivering, its misery so visible that for the

second time today I find myself crying. I remember what Hannah said once, that it had been dying for years and should

have been put out of its misery long ago. But she didn't

have the

guts. So I need to. I gather the cat in my arms, whispering soothingly in its ears, and take it to the river. I can't bear the idea

of it being under the water on its own so I go down with it, clutching it, whispering, "I'm here, I'm here," over and over again until we are

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underwater, eyes open, watching each other. I want to know its

secrets and for a moment I sense something unexplainable. Peaceful. It makes me want to stay down there even after the

cat stops moving. But above me I see the sun push its way through the branches of the oak tree and it's like a light beckoning me to something better. I swim us both to the surface, my lungs exploding, and suddenly I can breathe in

a

way I haven't been able to for a while.

Later, I lie on the sand bar in the river, my body shaking from the

cold, but I feel a peace come over me. As I drift off to sleep,
I
sense that I'm not alone and I feel myself being carried and
it's
like I'm back in my childhood, on the shoulders of a giant
again,
happy.

When I wake up I'm in my room and Raffaella and Ms.
Morris are
there.

"Would you like something to eat?" Ms. Morris asks gently.
I nod. She walks out and Raffaella fusses with the blankets
around me, avoiding my gaze. We don't talk for a moment
or
two and I take her hand to stop the fussing.

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She clutches onto it and it's the safest I've felt since
Hannah left.

It's the power Raffaella has always had and maybe that's
why

I've spent most of our lives together pushing her away.
Because

being so dependent on people scares me. But I don't have the

energy to keep Raffaella out anymore.

"I'm going to look for my mother," I tell her quietly.

"No," she says, and I can hear her frustration. "This is your home, Taylor, regardless of what you think it is. When school

finishes next year, we'll go to uni in Bathurst and then you can

come back here and stay with Hannah. Because this is where

you belong. In this town."

But Raffy knows it's a lost cause.

"Raffy," I ask, "remember the dorms? I told you something about

what happened in the city when I was young. You cried. Do you

remember?"

She doesn't move for a moment. Her face is pinched and tense

and then she nods.

"Well, I can't remember and I need you to tell me what it was."

She shakes her head emphatically.

"That's my memory," I say firmly. "*Mine*. You

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need to give it back to me."

"What you told me," she begins, "won't lead to your mother. It'll

just make you remember something that should be forgotten

and never spoken about again. You're right. It is your memory

and you have more right to it than me but I'm holding this one,

Taylor."

"You need to ask Santangelo what he knows," I try instead.

"Santangelo knows nothing," she says, and she's crying.

"He's

an idiot. He thinks he's going to be a big-shot Fed and he thinks

he's too good-looking and he feels too much and never forgives

anything and I hate him because he's going to make you go crazy."

I hold on to her tightly. "Don't," I say. "I need you to help me run

this House ... this school and I can't do that if we're both crying."

"When the Brigadier carried you in here ... I thought you were

dead.... I always think you're going to do something to yourself,

Taylor...."

I let go of her and shake my head. "Not interested in dying just

yet," I say, getting out of bed.

When I walk out of my room, I stop suddenly.

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They all seem to be there. The seniors in my House. Some sitting on the steps, leaning on the railing, standing around.

As

if they've been waiting for me. I don't know what to say to them

but as I make my way down the stairs, I realise they are all looking for something in my face to show that I'm okay.

There's

so much silence that it eats away at my skin and leaves me exposed.

Do I remember what Raffaella said in the car park of the Evangelical church?

"Who do you believe in?" she had repeated as if it was the dumbest question she'd ever heard. "I believe in you, Taylor Markham."

"Dinner is in an hour," I say to them all firmly. "Seniors are on

duty. And we eat together tonight."

I walk into the dorm study towards Jessa and Chloe P. I sit down next to Chloe, take the protractor out of her trembling hand, and make a perfect circle. My hand is shaking, too, and

when I look up, I see fear in Jessa's eyes. I feel like those psycho fathers in movies: one minute abusive, next minute human.

"I'll come and find you next time Hannah rings, Taylor,"
Chloe

P. whispers. "I promise. Wherever you are."

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I nod, swallowing hard. My hands are still shaking.

Jessa takes hold of both my scratched hands, pressing them

until they stop. "That's what my dad used to do when I was scared," she tells me.

Later, I stand side by side with Ms. Morris and Raffaella and the

other seniors preparing dinner while Jessa and Chloe P. and

the rest of the juniors annoy us with ridiculous questionnaires

from teen magazines and force us to listen to bizarre hypotheticals. But it calms down my heart rate and it makes me

laugh and each time one of them walks by, I feel a hand on my

shoulder or a squeeze of my arm and it makes me feel that tonight it will be safe for me to go to sleep.

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Chapter 13

Three things happen in the next week that keep us tense and on edge.

First, we hear on the news that two girls have gone missing from the highway near a town named Rabine. It's nowhere near

us but Jessa manages to convince everyone that we could be

next. Second, Richard attempts a coup and sends out word to

the Townies and Cadets that, due to unforeseen circumstances,

he is taking control of the UC. And finally, the Cadets, true to

form, exploit the situation and take three Darling House girls hostage.

"What are they playing at?" I say to Raffaella and Ben as we race towards the clearing.

"They sent a message back with Chloe P."

"Is she okay?"

"Kind of. She's halfway between total hysteria

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and total excitement, so it could go either way."

"Richard thinks he's in charge," Raffaella says. Like hell he is.

News has got around quickly and a mass exodus from the Houses takes place, with most people joining up in the valley

outside Murrumbidgee House where Trini, the leader of Darling

House, is being consoled. Ben gives a wave to two of the teachers who are looking at us suspiciously, and the sobbing

from Trini is put on hold.

"Bushwalk!" he calls out to them. "You interested?"

They wave us off and walk away and once they are out of sight

the sobbing re-commences.

"Let's go," I say, breaking into a run. We take the trail just behind Murray House, which is probably the densest and least

cultivated.

"What kind of a deal are they looking at?" I ask Chloe P.

"He just said that negotiations for a possible release of hostages would take place at four thirty," she says, panting alongside me.

"Are you sure they weren't taken by the serial killer?" Jessa pipes up. She's torn between excitement

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and concern. I hear gasps of dismay from the younger kids.

I

stop to catch my breath and I'm amazed at just how large a crowd has gathered, squashed into almost single file on a track

that hasn't seen too many walkers in its time.

"Get back to the Houses," I say firmly. "All juniors back to your

Houses!"

There are complaints and pleading and the younger boys especially are begging me to let them come along.

"We need to have the Houses guarded as well," I tell the leaders standing around me. "I read about this happening in ninety-two. They kidnapped three students and while the

leaders went to negotiate, they invaded the Houses and the teachers never found out because the students were kept hidden."

"Why would we hide them?" the leader of Hastings asks.

"No choice. The rules of invasion allow the invaders twenty-four

hours of diplomatic immunity within enemy territory,"

Raffaela

explains to them.

"Any point of entry in every House is to be locked and all juniors

are to be confined indoors. Raffy, I want you back home."

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It takes us a while to get to the boundary and I have to spend

most of the time listening to the threats from some of the senior

boys about what they'll do when they come across the Cadets.

Which is slightly amusing because, knowing these guys, one

look at Jonah Griggs and they'll be pushing me forward as a

human shield.

We reach the clearing and Chloe P. is brought back up to me.

"Is this the place?" I ask patiently.

She nods solemnly. "See, there's Teresa's beret."

More sobbing from Trini, who clutches the beret tragically.

Ben

exchanges a long-suffering look with me and I push him towards her. While he methodically pats her on the back, I walk

away and check the markings of the boundaries. I can't help thinking how petty the Cadets have been on this occasion.

The

girls would have taken no more than two steps into their territory

before they were on them. I begin to wonder what Jonah

Griggs

is up to. I try to listen out for their approach, giving the others a

silent *shush* gesture. But staying inconspicuous is not going to

work. Trini is hyperventilating and some of the senior boys are

continually swinging around in

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a paranoid attempt to see who's behind them. Even I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Outside the dramatics of the Jellicoe students, there is a stillness around that makes it seem as if no one else exists, but

the Cadets are cunning and knowing Jonah Griggs, he's probably watching us already.

"This means we're going to lose another trail or part of the property," Ben says to me quietly.

"Shhh." I take a few steps back. "Who knows," I whisper, "but

we're running out of things to trade with them."

Four thirty comes, as does five o'clock, but nobody surfaces. I

stay, standing the whole time, on guard, but by five twenty I'm

exhausted and almost ready to give in to the suggestion of one

of the guys that we invade.

"It's best that we stay put on our side of the boundaries," I tell

them. "I don't know what Griggs's game is, but we need to know

what we're up against and I'm betting that the moment we cross

that line they'll be on us like a ton of bricks and trying to negotiate back seniors is going to be a lot harder."

"I don't think they're around, Taylor," the leader

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of Murray tells me. "Don't bet on it."

After sitting for almost an hour, Richard comes to stand alongside me. It's his way of making it seem that we're equal

and of asserting some kind of power in this whole farce.

"If they want something from us," I tell him calmly, "I'm going to

give them the trail closest to your House so that every time you

see them loitering behind those trees you'll remember how

your

little coup attempt contributed to this."

"Why don't you just go and have a breakdown somewhere?"

he

says, walking away.

By five thirty I'm pissed off and bored and I have absolutely

no

idea whether these guys are going to jump out of the sky or walk straight out of the bush-land in front of us.

"Jonah Griggs!" I call out.

"Taylor Markham!" he answers from the bushes right in front of

me.

Ben looks at me, rolling his eyes, and I turn around and motion

for the others to step back.

"Stay here," I say to Ben, stepping over the boundary lines.

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Griggs comes out of hiding and approaches me as if he is on

some Sunday afternoon walk, appreciating the nature around

him.

"Where are they?" I ask, seething.

He peers closely at my face.

"Don't like these things," he says, pointing to what I'm presuming are the rings under my eyes. "You really need to get some sleep."

I slap his hand away. "Where are they?" I ask again, forcefully.

"You didn't warn them about the boundary lines. Those girls had absolutely no idea, whereas my juniors could point them out in their sleep."

"Why don't you just give yourself a pat on the back for being the world's best leader, then." He gives himself a pat on the back

and I can tell he is enjoying himself at my expense.

"I can't believe how petty you are. They're in year seven!"

"Why is this a surprise to you?" he asks. "This has always happened. One of you ventures into our territory and there's

payback. Do you remember that?" he calls out to Ben.

"Payback for trespassing?"

"With alarming clarity," Ben calls back.

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"Same with us. Happened to my friend Choi here, last year.

Do

you remember that, Choi?"

Behind him I notice at least one hundred Cadets either sitting in

trees or coming out from behind shrubs and branches. I have to

hand it to them. When it comes to camouflage, they certainly

know what they're doing.

"He ventured into your territory and our leader had to go fight

your leader to get him back."

Anson Choi nods solemnly. "Traumatic time. They put me into

Murrumbidgee House. Very uptight bastards in there. They thought I'd be good at chess and they forced me to play all night."

"So you and I are going to have a punch-up?" I ask Griggs.

"What do you propose I do?"

"Hand back my year sevens."

"This is how the territory wars have always been fought," he says firmly. "It's in the handbook. Do you think they're just about

threats and 'don't walk on our boundaries'? It's hand-to-hand

combat. Someone is always going to lose. Sometimes it's just

one to the jaw. Other times a few to the gut and, presto, we hand back the hostages. The only thing

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is that for the past four years the leaders have been male."

"Let's change the rules this year. Because just between you and me, you're scaring me."

He looks at me closely again. "You need to put all your shit behind you because we've had at least two meetings about the

Club House without you there and Santangelo and I are about

this close," he says, indicating a couple of centimetres with his

fingers, "to breaking each other's necks."

"Jonah, hand over the kids," I say tiredly.

He turns around and gives a whistle. The three Darling kids are

taken out of their hiding spot and I relax slightly, a bit grateful, a

bit surprised. This is a good victory for me in front of my school.

All done with not one drop of blood or petty skirmish.

"Are you in charge?" he calls over my shoulder.

I turn around and watch Richard nod smugly. "Technically," he

says, walking towards us.

"Technicalities rarely interest me," Griggs says, and then he smashes Richard in the face.

"We don't really like scaring the kids," he says patiently, looking

to where Richard has fallen. "So you need to warn them that for

every one of them

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who enters our territory, their leader gets payback. You, of course, can distribute punishment to them for your troubles.

I've

found in the past if I have to be the punching bag for one of my

juniors, I usually get him to polish my shoes, maybe do my washing-- the petty things, you know. But it rarely happens.

You

see, my juniors know who's in charge. We try not to confuse

them because it puts them in danger." Griggs feigns confusion.

"So who is in charge around here?"

"I'm in charge," I say, staring at him, bristling with fury.

He looks down at Richard and extends a hand. Richard is still

stunned and doesn't know whether to take it or not.

"You okay with that decision, Dick? Can I call you that? Her being in charge?"

Richard mumbles something unintelligible.

"Good to hear." Griggs walks away.

Richard sways slightly so I hold him up. He puts his sleeve to

his nose. "Maybe we should meet tonight and discuss the boundaries," he says.

"Clear this area now," I tell him before turning to Trini, who is

clutching the three kids to her breast.

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"You okay?" I ask them, but they're too busy trying to disentangle themselves.

"Make sure you debrief them and that they're okay," I tell Trini.

"I'll come and speak to them later."

"I don't want them hassled," she says, leading them away.

I walk back towards the disappearing Cadets. "Hey," I call out

after Jonah Griggs. He stops with Anson Choi by a tree and leans against it, a ghost of a smile on his face. He looks pleased with himself and I give him that little moment of triumph

before I get up close and slap him hard across the face.

"Don't you ever do that again," I say, furious.

"Ouch, that hurt!" he says, rubbing his cheek.

"I can fight my own battles."

"I wasn't fighting your battles," he argues.

"Yes you were. That's my business," I say, pointing to where the

others, except for Ben, have retreated, "and your little patronising act could put me in a weak position with them."

"I don't think they realised he was protecting your interests, Tayls," Ben calls out. "They're too stupid."

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"I wasn't protecting her," Griggs argues angrily over my shoulder at Ben.

"It kind of came across as if you were," Anson Choi explains to

Griggs patiently.

"Did I ask your opinion, Choi?"

"No, but just from my perspective and what I know about your

history," Anson Choi says calmly, "it came across like you were--"

Griggs gives him a look and Anson Choi puts up his hand and

nods as if he understands that silence is required.

"Protect your boundaries and it won't happen again," Griggs tells us.

"If you think you're scaring us, think again, GI Jerk," Ben says.

I look at Ben, impressed with his wit and force. "Let's go," I say

to him, and we walk away.

When we reach the bend and they no longer can see us, Ben

gives a laugh. "How bloody impressive was that?"

"I thought you were very impressive," I say. "No, I mean him giving Richard a biff." I stop and stare at him.

"He had it coming to him, Taylor. While you've

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been so tragic for the past week with the whole death-by-eighties-music thing, Richard was an arsehole. I was bloody impressed with Griggs," he says to me. "He's gone from a

zero

in my eyes to a two."

"How does he get to a ten?"

"If he did to Richard what he did to me. I got the full enchilada,

you see. One to the face and the two to the gut, plus the stepping on the fingers."

"So when it's happening to someone else it's all cool?"

"Any pain inflicted on Richard warms my heart and it warms yours as well. Go on, admit it. When he hit the ground and the

blood went flying and you knew in your heart his nose was broken, didn't you just want to jump for joy and stomp on his ugly face?"

I look at him, shaking my head. "Actually, no, Ben. I didn't. I was

thinking that I'd rather be in the common-room watching *Home and Away*."

"You know what your problem is? You don't know how to enjoy yourself. That was fun. That was better than *Home and Away*."

Later I go see the Darling girls and take Jessa and Chloe R
with

me, only because they're convincing

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about their ability to ask questions of people their own age
as

opposed to my question-asking, which Jessa points out
could

be intimidating.

Darling House is a touchy-feely House. Everyone is really
sweet and they even say grace before meals. It's interesting
to

see how other Houses work. The past leaders of my House
were so hell-bent on being the best that there was no room
for

anything that didn't have to do with power. Here, every
emotion

and talent and opinion is nurtured and supported.

"I'm grateful for what you did," Trini says to me, offering me
tea

and jam tarts, which are served to me on what looks like
their

best china.

"I'm not really here for your gratitude," I say honestly. "I need

your support and frankly it hasn't really come my way."

"Well, change is scary," she says, as if she's giving a lecture to

her House. "The past leaders have always been despots. We

feel safe that way. Richard is exactly like them and it's better the

devil you know."

"But you don't run this House like a despot."

"Of course I don't. It's against our ideology. But outside this House we still need order. Just say you let the Cadets run around our property and I have

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to worry twenty-four-seven about the girls. It's bad enough keeping those Murray and Clarence guys away from them."

"I would never let the Cadets run around our property."

"Well, Richard said-"

"Screw Richard, Trini."

"Taylor, we don't use that type of language in our House," she

says reprovably.

She leans forward and stares at me intently. "I'm responsible for

these kids, Taylor. Like you are for yours. When I leave for holidays, those who don't have a place to go, they come home

with me. So if those Cadets ever come near my year sevens

again, I will maim them."

I nod.

"Would you like to see them now?"

We walk into the junior dorms, where Jessa and Chloe P. are

deep in conversation with a cluster of the juniors who are bombarding the hostages with questions.

"Tell me about the set-up," I say to them, sitting down on one of

the beds where some of them are congregated.

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The girls look at me blankly.

"What she actually means, girls, is what was it like out there?"

Kind of describe it to us," Jessa says, beaming at them and then

at me. Trini beams at her and there's a lot of beaming happening.

The spokesperson for the three sits up. "They had us in a tent

and they had two senior boys guarding us and all these boys

wanted to come and look at us because they don't get to see

many girls but the two boys guarding us wouldn't let anyone near us because someone told them that Jonah Griggs said that

if anyone touched us they were to break their arms."

"Jonah Griggs is their leader," another one of them explains to

me.

"Did they scare you?" I asked.

"When they first caught us, it was a bit scary."

"They have a barbecue every night. That's what the Cadet guarding us said."

"Wow," Jessa says. Chloe P. is equally impressed.

"So what was it like out there?" I say brightly, repeating Jessa's words. "Kind of describe it to us."

"There are six boys to each tent and about fifteen tents per form.

The year-eleven tents are the closest to

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the bush trails and the teachers' tents are right in the middle of

them all. They have this Brigadier from the real army staying

with them and everyone thinks it's cool but they said he can be

a bit scary. You should see his tent: it's massive and always locked up."

"And where is the Brigadier's tent?" I ask innocently.

The girls draw me a diagram and I'm impressed at just how much they took in.

"She's very impressed," Jessa tells them, beaming.

Everyone's still beaming and this time I beam back.

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Chapter 14

The look on the constable's face said it all to Jude. Another fifteen minutes of their life would be wasted by indifference. But

*he could see the younger cop sitting at a desk behind him-
-the*

one who always stopped Fitz in the street to make sure everything was okay. The young constable caught Jude's eye

and after a moment he wandered over casually.

"You want me to take care of this?" he said to the officer on duty.

"It's all yours."

Jude noticed that the constable didn't look much older than them. Up close, his olive skin was smooth and his dark eyes

were questioning but kind.

"So you want to tell me what's going on?"

"You're kind of the fourth person and no one's really listening,"

Jude said.

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"I'm listening."

"We're missing someone."

"Not Fitz?"

"No, but he's gone AWOL. Our friend Webb-- Narnie's brother--

he's gone. You've probably received word from the school. We

don't know where he is but it's been two days."

The young cop's stomach turned. He knew these kids--the girls,

anyway. During his first week on the job five years ago he had

been called out to an accident on the Jellicoe Road. It had been

the first time he had ever seen dead bodies and he remembered how he had thrown up on the side of the road while his sergeant had told him to pull himself together. He remembered these faces. He remembered Fitz with them, a new look in the troubled kid's eyes.

"I know what you're going to say," Jude said. "Some shit about

him being seventeen and probably taking a bit of 'time out.'

But I

bet if his parents were beating down your door, you'd be listening."

"I said I'm listening," the constable said firmly.

His gaze went from Jude to the girls. "Who was the last to see

him ? "

175

A muffled sound came from Tate but Jude could hardly look at

her. It was as if she had disappeared in the last two days.

Like

the light had gone out of her eyes. He couldn't handle Tate like

this. Narnie, he was used to but not Tate.

"Was he acting strange ? " the cop asked. "Did he take anything

with him ? "

"Nothing's really missing," Jude said. "Probably what he would

always have on him. Like his Felix cap and he always had his

Walkman and that's gone. But nothing else."

"What about money ? "

Jude looked at Narnie and she numbly shook her head.

"There's no money until we're eighteen."

"But that's soon, isn't it?" he asked gently.

She gave the young constable the full force of her stare.

"Why

are you asking us this? He didn't leave. He would never leave.

Something has happened to him. Something bad."

"Look," he said. "I'm not saying I don't believe that but we hear

stories like this all the time. That there's no way someone would

run away or just take off, but they do. Stuff happens that not

even the closest person to them knows about."

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"You don't know my brother."

"Tate, you were the last to see him," Jude said. "Can you

remember? "

She looked at Jude, bewildered. "Remember? I can remember

everything I've ever said to him and every single thing he's ever

said to me."

They looked at her, waiting. "He told me about his university choices and that he was looking in the city papers for a place to

live for me and him and how Narnie would come and join us next year when school was out. And how we'd stay in the city

for just four years and then we'd come back here because he's

going to build me a house. A house for me and Narnie and him.

And that it was going to be hard leaving Fitz behind but maybe,

just maybe, we could convince Fitz to come to the city with us

and that Jude would be there, too, and then I told him... I

told

him we were going to have a baby."

"Tate." Narnie breathed softly. "Oh, Tate."

"He was... I don't know, shocked. Like he couldn't believe it.

I

mean, we've been together... in that way ... forever...

because

there was never going to be anyone but Webb. That night,"

she

said, looking at Narnie. "Remember that night? I heard

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his voice and it was like... it was like God spoke and I knew, from that moment on, that I'd be with him for the rest of my

life.

That's the only reason I lived. To be with that boy with that voice. Remember, Narnie? He climbed through the window, through all that glass, just to hold my hand."

"No, Tate, you climbed through the window to hold our hands.

You cut your arm, remember? Just to be with us."

Jude watched Narnie put her arm around Tate. He didn't know

this Narnie. Her voice was stronger and he had spent the last

two days not being able to look at her because her gaze was so

sharp and focused that it pierced through him.

"Maybe he decided-- " the cop started.

"No," Narnie said, staring at him as if warning him against saying anything that would upset Tate. "My brother would never

in a million years leave us. You quote all your statistics and what you've seen on this job but you don't know Webb."

The constable picked up his pen and began to record details,

adopting an air of professionalism but deep down he felt a sorrow for these kids that made his insides churn.

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"I need a photo," he said, "and can I suggest a GP? My wife's

having a baby as well, you see." Narnie looked at Tate and nodded. "Let's start with his name," the constable said.

We attend another meeting with the Townies and Cadets in

the

scout hall, ready to talk real issues and make intelligent demands. When Raffaella, Ben, and I arrive, some of the Townie girls are hanging around the entrance where Jonah Griggs and Anson Choi are just about to walk in. One of the girls approaches Jonah Griggs and just hands him her phone.

No warm up, no "Hi, how are you, can I call you sometime?" She just hands over a mobile phone so he can record his number. I want to be petty and tell them we don't have coverage

out off the Jellicoe Road but that would just mean I cared.

"Sorry, we don't have phone coverage off the Jellicoe Road,"

Jonah Griggs says, handing it back and disappearing beyond the doors.

As I walk past the girls, I hear one say, "That's his girlfriend,"

and I stop and face them.

"What did you say?"

They ignore me with that wide-eyed how-uncool-is-this-girl-for-

responding look on their face.

"I'm not his girlfriend," I say forcefully.

"Well, good for us," one of them says snidely.

"Not really," Raffaella tells them. "He's got a girlfriend and he's

madly in love with her. She lives next door back home."

I am surprised by this news. Even more surprised that Raffy knows but then again Raffy has this way of knowing everything.

As we enter the room, I ask the burning question as indifferently

as I can. "How did you find out all that stuff about Griggs and his

girlfriend?"

"It was easy. I lied."

The meeting is a farce from the moment things get started.

Santangelo is babysitting three of his sisters and they practise

Beyoncé dance movements while the Mullet Brothers insist

on

playing their guitars.

"Your mother told my mother that she wants Jessa McKenzie for

the holidays," Raffaella tells Santangelo above the noise.

"Do

you guys know her?"

It's the first I've heard of the plan and I feel an anxiety that I can't

explain.

"Oh, bloody wonderful," he says bitterly. "Because

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there just aren't enough women living in my house already."

The Mullet Brothers fight amongst themselves the whole time

and at one stage Anson Choi and Ben are trying to keep them

off each other while having an argument themselves about musical pitch and when Jonah Griggs yells, "This is ridiculous!

I'm not coming back," I have to agree for once.

Outside, the Townie girls are still hanging around and while

we

wait for Ben, I notice them speaking to Griggs, who is very amused at what they have to say, which has to be fake because

there is no way these girls would be witty.

We walk home, the Cadets behind us and, not really wanting

the Cadets to listen to our conversation, Ben, Raffaela, and I

walk in silence.

"You know what I'm going to do when I get back to camp, Choi?" Griggs says a bit too cheerfully.

"What, Griggs?"

"I'm going to write a letter to my next-door neighbour. She's my

girlfriend. We're madly in love."

Raffaela gives me a sideways glance and I can tell she's trying

not to laugh and I realise what Griggs

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found so amusing when he was talking to the Townie girls.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend, Griggs." Anson Choi feigns

surprise. "What's her name?"

"I didn't actually catch her name," Griggs continues.

"Lily," Raffaela says over her shoulder and this time I give her a

sideways look.

"Great to know that I'm in love with a girl with a cool name."

"It's Taylor's middle name," Raffaela calls back again.

Placing Raffaela in the path of an oncoming car becomes one

of the major priorities of the next ten seconds of my life.

"So apart from writing letters home to your fantasy girlfriends,"

Ben says, walking backwards, "what do you guys do out here

without television and phones?"

"Men's business. Bit confidential," Griggs says patronisingly.

"Wow, wish I were you," Ben says, shaking his head with mock

regret. "All I'll be doing tonight is hanging out in Taylor's

bedroom, lying on her bed,

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sharing my earphones with her, hoping she won't hog all the

room because it's such a tiny space."

He gives them a wave. "Now you have fun with your men's business and spare a thought for my plight."

Griggs and Ben compete in a who-can-outstare-each-other-longer competition until Anson Choi drags Griggs away to the

other side of the road.

I look at Ben then Raffaella. "What was that all about?" I whisper

angrily. "The Lily thing and the hanging out in Taylor's bedroom?"

They both have a what-did-we-do look on their faces.

"He just went from a zero to a two in my eyes for not smashing

you, Ben!"

"How does he get to be a ten?"

I look over to the other side of the road and watch Griggs as

he

walks. It's a lazy walk but so full of confidence that you want to be standing behind him all the way.

How does Jonah Griggs get to be a ten? He sits on a train with

me when we're fourteen and he weeps, tearing at his hair, bashing his head with the palm of his hand, self-hatred pouring

out of him like

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blood from a gut wound in a war movie, and for the first time in

my whole life I have a purpose. I am the holder of the grief and

pain and guilt and passion of Jonah Griggs and as we sit huddled on the floor of the carriage, he allows me to hold him,

to say, "Shhh, Jonah, it wasn't your fault." While his body still

shakes from the convulsions, he takes hold of my hand and links my fingers with his and I feel someone else's pain for

the

first time that I can remember.

The knock at my window that night frightens the hell out of me.

I've used the window for years as an exit point, but nobody has

used it as an entry and for a crazy moment I convince myself

that the boy in the tree in my dreams is coming after me.

I get up from my computer and peer out and there, crouching on

the ledge, is Griggs. He doesn't ask to be let in. He just stands

up, expecting me to step aside. Technically this could be considered against the rules of the territory wars but I open

the

window. He looks down at my singlet and underpants and stares for a long time as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Then he climbs in and looks

around the room without commenting.

I walk to my drawers and put on my jumper, which hardly reaches my thighs.

"Hope you didn't do that on my account."

I don't say anything and he casually leans against my desk, picking up the novel that's sitting there.

"It's bullshit," he tells me, flicking through it. "There's no such

thing as Atticus Finch."

I shrug. "It'd be good if there was, though. Why are you here?"

"Why else? The Club House," he says.

I nod. "If we agree on this, we need to explain the rules to the

Townies," I tell him.

"Okay," he says. "No ridiculous dress codes concocted by irrational women."

It's like he's making things up off the top of his head.

"It's our men who are irrational," I explain to him. "We prefer to

be labelled as pragmatic and long-suffering."

"So how do they get in here?"

"Who?"

"Your irrational men. Cassidy? The rest?"

For a moment I get a sense of why he's really here.

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I feel my face flushing and see that his is, too.

I clear my throat and get back to business. "Ban for life on anyone who gets drunk."

"No boy-band music."

I don't know what to say to that one because I'm making all this

up as well. "No ... Benny Rogers."

"Kenny," he corrects.

"We insist that the Mullet Brothers don't play every night."

"Mullet Brothers?" After a moment he works out who I'm talking

about and he nods. "We call them Heckle and Jeckle."

"And you never step on my second-in-command's fingers ever

again."

He nods once more. "My second-in-command? Choi? He DJs.

He'll want to do that at least once."

I nod. Lots of nodding. It's all too awkward. A few days ago I had brought up one of the most taboo subjects of his life and he had me pinned against the wall and here we are pretending it never happened.

"If this backfires, there'll be a war," I say.

"There already is a war. I think you forget that at times."

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"And you don't?"

"Never. And you can't afford to either."

"Is that a warning?"

"Maybe. But let's not make it complicated. Let's just make sure it doesn't backfire."

He holds out a hand and I shake it and as I do he stands up from where he's leaning against my desk and it's like he hovers over me, which is strange because I've always been at eye-level with the boys around here.

I feel his fingers on my collarbone, faintly tracing the marks where my buttons scratched my skin when he grabbed me days before.

"I shouldn't have said what I said," I say quietly. "I don't know why I did."

He shrugs. "I didn't come here to ask or give forgiveness." And it's like a trigger word, making every pulse inside of me throb. "Forgive me," I whisper, dizzy from the sensation. He leans forward and our foreheads are almost touching and for a moment, a tiny moment, a slight vulnerability appears on his face.

"Nothing to forgive," he says.

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I shake my head. "No. That's what he said. 'Forgive me.' It's what the Hermit whispered in my ear before he shot himself."

"My father took one hundred and thirty-two minutes to die. I

counted. It happened on the Jellicoe Road, the prettiest road I'd

ever seen ..."

Jude sat still, listening to a memory so sad that he wondered

how Narnie could tell it so calmly, with so much clarity and detail. Over the years he'd had a fair idea of what had happened that night on the Jellicoe Road and sometimes he hated himself for wanting to be part of something so tragic.

He

wanted to be the hero riding by on a stolen bike. He wanted to

be the one carrying their parents and Tate's sister out of the cars. He wanted to belong to them. With them he found solace.

They sat by the river and he wanted to take Narnie's hand but

didn't dare.

"Do you know why I couldn't count how long it took my mother

to die ? "

As much as he knew that he didn't want to hear the answer,

he

shook his head.

"Because she flew out that window. I could see

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her the whole time. From where I was sitting. And I knew she

was dead straightaway because she didn't have a head, Jude,

and I stayed in that spot, not moving a single inch and everyone

thought I was scared but I wasn't. Because if I moved an inch,

Webb would see her and you don't know how much Webb loved her, Jude, and I would have died right there if I knew that

Webb saw her like that. I would have... I would have...."

It was a despair he could not comprehend, spilling from her mouth. Not knowing any other way to stop her, he covered her

mouth with his hand but she pulled it away.

"If he doesn't come back, there's no one left, Jude," she

whispered, the horror of it all there on her face. "They're all gone. Everyone's dead."

He held her against him and for once he understood what she

had felt every day that he had known her.

"Hold my hand," she said, sobbing against him. "Hold my hand

because I might disappear."

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Chapter 15

It's peaceful like this, on my back. A loving sun caresses my face and it wraps me in a blanket of fluffy clouds, like the feeling

of my mother's hands when she first held me. For a moment I'm

back there, in a place where I want to be.

But then somewhere up-river, a speedboat or Jet Ski causes a

ripple effect and miniature waves slap water onto my face, like

an angry hand of reprimand, and the shock of it almost causes

me to go under. I fight hard to stay afloat and suddenly I remember the feeling of fear in my mother's touch. Some say it's

impossible because you remember nothing when you're five seconds old but I promise you this: I remember the tremble in

my mother's body when the midwife first placed me in her arms.

I remember the feeling of slipping between those fingers.
It's
like
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she never really managed to grab hold of me with a
firmness
that spoke of never letting go. It's like she never got it right.
But
that's my job.
My body becomes a raft and there's this part of me that
wants
just literally to go with the flow. To close my eyes and let it
take
me. But I know sooner or later I will have to get out, that I
need
to feel the earth beneath my feet, between my toes--the
splinters, the bindi-eyes, the burning sensation of hot dirt,
the
sting of cuts, the twigs, the bites, the heat, the discomfort,
the
everything. I need desperately to feel it all, so when
something

wonderful happens, the contrast will be so massive that I
will

bottle the impact and keep it for the rest of my life.

For a moment I sense something flying menacingly low over
me

and I start with fright, losing my balance and this time I do
go

under. But the sky is a never-ending blue, no birds, no
clouds.

Just a stillness that tells me I'm the only person left in the
world.

Until I see Jonah Griggs.

On my side of the river.

I breaststroke over and attempt to get out with as much
dignity

as possible. One is always at a disadvantage

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when standing dripping wet in one's bathing suit, no matter
how

modest it is.

I try to think of the rules and begin to say in a strong

assertive

voice, "The Little Purple Book ..."

"... states that any negotiated land must not be accessed by the

enemy and, if caught, the handing over of territory is to take place with alacrity," he finishes for me.

"You know the water access belongs to us. You are tres--"

Before I can say another word, a body comes flying over the river and lands, expertly, just next to me. Griggs and Anson Choi shake hands, the enjoyment so evident in their faces.

For

a moment I'm reminded that Griggs is just a typical guy our age.

There's a softness to his face that's almost painful to see because it makes him vulnerable and to think of Jonah

Griggs

as vulnerable is to imagine him as a ten-year-old boy at the mercy of his father.

"So who does the air belong to?" he asks me. "Can't recall that

being in the Little Purple Book."

"This is private property."

"According to rule four-four-three of the Little Purple Book, private property is neutral ground."

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Nodding. Like I know rule four-four-three well. We are standing

approximately one kilometre away from the Jellicoe Houses.

The leaders would have a fit if they knew the Cadets were this

close. If they get inside our Houses, we have to trade. If we get

inside their tents, they have to trade.

I'm shivering from the cold and he must read a little panic in my

eyes.

"Don't worry," he says before his whistle pierces my eardrum. A

rope comes flying across and he grabs it. "Today, we're just practising."

Ben and Raffy are dumbfounded.

"They're planning an invasion, aren't they?" I nod.

"Pretty gutsy," Ben says with a whistle.

"How about the Townies?" Raffy asks. "We can ask for their

help and finalise this deal."

I shake my head. The Townies would want something from us.

We don't have much to give.

"Just say they get into the Houses?" she asks.

"Tell me the rule about invasion?" I say to her.

"You need six enemies in your territory to confirm it as an invasion. If they attempt twice and fail

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both times, we get to negotiate diplomatic immunity for the rest

of their stay."

"Today's attempt was just two of them, so it doesn't count."

I look outside the window. Any movement sets me on edge.

We're studying *Macbeth* in Drama and any moment I expect

Birnam Wood to come to Dunsinane. That would be just their

thing.

"I'm going to Hannah's," I say.

I see the disappointment on both their faces.

"Taylor, please. This isn't the time. We need to concentrate on

the territory wars just for this week," Raffy says.

I begin walking out of the room and they're on my tail. "I want

cows," I tell them. "Cows?"

Outside the House they are still trying to keep up. "This isn't going to be like ... that cat thing, is it?" Ben asks.

I see Raffy signal Ben to be quiet. Any talk of the drowning of

the cat has been off-limits. Like an unwritten rule.

"Hannah wanted me to work on the garden and I never did."

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"Hannah's house isn't the issue here, Taylor," Raffy says.

"Yes it is." I continue walking.

Ben grabs my arm. "Then I'm taking over," he says angrily. "Go

work on Hannah's house but I'm working on those Cadets not

getting within one metre of us. All you can think of is

planting--"

"Manure," I tell them. "All over her front garden. Perfect for growing vegetables."

It's like he wants to hit me with frustration. "You're losing it!" he

shouts. "No one wants to tell you that, but you ..." I see the light

go on. "... You are a genius."

Raffy looks at him confused. "She's a genius? I'm lost."

"What he means is that we're not giving in without a shit fight," I

tell them. "Literally."

Strategies come in all shapes and sizes and as juvenile as this

one is, it keeps me amused.

They come calling again late the next afternoon. Griggs is first.

Territory war aside, he is a pleasure to observe, like he was built for flying through the air.

He picks himself up from his landing, inspecting

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his fatigues. Then he looks up to where I'm sitting on

Hannah's

verandah, my legs dangling over the edge. He sloshes towards

me and I can tell it's not easy.

A war cry is heard from the other side and before he has time to

warn them, at least six Cadets come flying over the river and

land around him. They looked shocked, and I actually feel like

giggling at their horror.

"We're an Ag college," I explain to them. "Not as good as the

one in Yanco but we have livestock."

"Cows?" Anson Choi asks, covering his nose.

"Pigs, too. And horses. Great for growing tomatoes.

The Cadets are wanna-be soldiers. City people. They may know how to street fight but they don't know how to wade through manure.

"I'm going to throw up," one of the guys says.

"Don't feel too bad," I explain. "Some of our lot did while

they

were laying out this stuff. Actually, right there where you're standing."

The Cadets look even more horrified, peering down, imagining

the worst.

I point to the neutral path that is at least a forty-minute walk back

to their camp. "It's manure-free,"

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I offer. "And I do believe you have access to it." Griggs stares at

me.

"If you try to invade us again and fail, then we may have to talk.

Rule three-two-one of the Little Purple Book."

"This is war," he says quietly.

"Well, thank God you're dressed for it, Griggs."

And so the war games continue and sometimes it's so much fun

that Hannah and my mother disappear from my head for a minute or two. The Townies find out about it and are diligent

about neither of us using their territory as neutral ground,
so

game plans are drawn up by Richard, who is in his element.
Anytime now I expect him to start smoking a pipe and
wearing a
beret.

The plan is that we force the Cadets to invade, rather than
wait

for them to spring it on us. So on Saturday morning, when
we

know that Jonah Griggs's troops are on their morning drills,
Ben, Raffy, and I stroll onto Cadet territory. Accidentally.

The Cadet in front sees us almost instantly and I watch his
eyes

narrow. He looks behind, to Griggs, I guess. I stand on the
path

not ten metres

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away and I allow a tiny bit of fear to enter my eyes before I
turn

and bolt.

We run for our lives. The heavy footsteps of the Cadets
crash
behind us. Raffy knows exactly where to lead us. My heart
is
pounding with the fear that they will grab us before we
reach
our lines. Our only advantage is that we know this bushland
inside out. It's our playground for most of the year when
they're
not around. For them it becomes an obstacle course but we
know what to roll under and jump over. We know what trees
to
grab for assistance and which ones will let us down, caving
under the pressure of our grips. We know where the limbo-
stick
trees are and we shimmy under them like contestants on
Dancing with the Stars, and what plants to avoid for fear of
the
sticky hidden thorns. But they have speed and discipline
and
sometimes I can feel the breath of the first Cadet on my
neck.

Then, in the distance, I see the area we refer to as "no-man's

land." It's the strangest area of the property. Exactly one hectare

of land, devoid of trees but knee-high in wild grass on both sides of a path that looks like a dug-out trench. Our territory officially begins smack in the middle. My lungs are begging

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me for air but I know I can't stop, not until I get to our line.

More

importantly, not until the Cadets get to our line. The trenches

are tricky, but we can do "tricky" any day of the week. We make

it over the invisible line and a few seconds later, I know all eight

Cadets have, too. I hear the roar coming from the wild grass on

both sides and Richard's voice booms, "No prisoners! No prisoners!"--which is ridiculous, because it's not as if we're going to kill them, but he has this Lawrence of Arabia

obsession--and all of a sudden our seniors come flying out from all directions.

Later, I'm reminded that Jonah Griggs is a rugby league player

and if there's one thing he can do, it's tackle or dodge a bunch

of those of us whose closest thing to a contact sport is a biff

that might take place after a chess game. So it's not surprising

that when I look back for a moment, he's battling his way between our guys. It's like one of those scenes in slow-mo because our eyes make contact and I yell to Ben and Raffy to

keep running. There's something about the look on Griggs's face that tells me our army is not going to keep him back.

When

we make our way out of no-man's land, Raffy takes a detour

and I know

she's heading towards the Prayer Tree because it's too early in

the morning for the Townies to be out here.

The Prayer Tree is a kind of Jerusalem. It used to belong to us,

the trail leading up to it belongs to the Cadets, and now it belongs to the Townies. When I see it in the distance, a sense

of euphoria comes over me but when we reach the trunk, we

notice that the rope ladder is nowhere to be seen.

We stare up at it, our sides pained with excruciating stitches. I

look behind, waiting for Jonah Griggs to make an appearance.

Santangelo's head appears at the top. "If they get you, what's

the worst thing they can do?" he yells down to us.

We are standing on Cadet territory. Santangelo knows exactly

what they can do. He's our only hope.

"Let's make a deal," I say finally.

"Club House?"

I look at Raffy and she nods.

"Club House," I say between gasps.

The ladder comes down and we begin our climb. I'm
halfway up

when I see Griggs come out of the clearing and I try to go
faster

but my legs fall between the steps. Santangelo, Ben, and
Raffy

pull

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me up from almost the fourth step down and they grab the
rope

ladder and yank it up at the exact moment that Griggs
reaches

it. He's on his own but who knows how many Cadets have
broken through and are about to join him.

"They can't get up here. No chance," Santangelo says
behind

me.

I can hardly breathe and I feel Raffy take the inhaler out of

my

pocket and put it in my hands.

When we all have our breaths back, I look over the side.

"It's not as if he's going to chop us down," Raffy says.

"We're stuck here until he goes," Ben says.

"They're sticklers for time. As soon as their bugle sounds, they're out of here," Santangelo says. "One goes off at ten."

Two and a half hours.

Griggs stands at the bottom and stares at the trunk and I can tell

he's reading it. I wonder if he sees the names of the five or if he

understands about nothing stopping them in the field in their day. I wonder which statement is his favourite. I wonder if he

sees the blood of someone who cut themselves while carving

out their soul. Or if he's imagining

201

what he'd write if he had a knife in his hand.

But then he's gone and I panic more at the idea that I can't

see

him than when he was standing at the bottom. Knowing Griggs,

he's lying in wait for us.

Surprisingly, the time passes pleasantly, apart from Santangelo

going into specific detail about his plans for the Club House.

Half an hour later, though, Griggs is back. Holding a bucket.

"Great tree," he calls up to us.

"What's he got?" Raffy asks, trying to peer over my shoulder.

"Whatever it is won't get him up here," Santangelo says.

Suddenly my heart goes cold. In his hand he holds a paint roller. Jonah Griggs is either going to tar or paint over the trunk.

"You can't do that!" I yell out.

"Then come down and stop me!"

A rage comes over me but I don't move. Because deep down I

don't believe he'll wipe out those voices.

"Which one do you want me to go for first?" he calls out cockily.

"I don't give a shit!" I yell back, hoping he doesn't call my bluff.

"Really? Because according to my surveillance

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team, you're here every night."

I feel Raffy and Ben looking at me. Santangelo goes to say something but, by the sound of his "ouch," is slammed in the

ribs by Raffy.

From all the way up here I see Griggs place the roller in the bucket and it hits the trunk. The next minute I grab the rope ladder and throw it down. When it's securely in place, I begin

my descent, sick at the thought of what I'm about to see.

I reach the bottom and smash into him with my fists as hard as I

can. He falls and I can't believe he goes down so easy, caught

off-balance.

"You care about nothing, you piece of shit!"

I'm on the verge of tears, like I always seem to be these

days,

and I hear the catch in my voice and I hate myself for it. He throws me off him and I can tell there is a fury in him.

"*Never,*" he tells me in a tone full of ice, "underestimate who or what I care for."

I look over to where the bucket has tipped over and I notice that

there's no tar, no paint, there's nothing. Just water. I look up at

the trunk and everything is still intact, except for the glistening of

the drops of water lodged inside the carvings.

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He's lying next to me and I don't look at him but I hold out my

hand to him. "Truce?" I ask.

He takes my hand but doesn't shake. Just holds it and it flops

onto his chest, where I can feel his heart pounding. I'm not sure

how to break the moment or how long we're going to stay

here,

but there's something so awkwardly peaceful about it all,
lying

under the Prayer Tree.

"Coffee?" Santangelo calls down to us. We both look up.

He,

Ben, and Raffy are hanging over the side.

"Is it espresso?" Anson Choi asks behind us.

"Freshly percolated," Ben answers. "You should see the
gadgets they have up here."

Anson Choi aims a begging look at Griggs.

"You want to sell out over a coffee?" Griggs asks him with
disgust.

"They've got muffins as well," I tell them. "Double chocolate
chip. His mum made them."

Griggs gets up and holds out a hand to me. "Truce."

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Chapter 16

By the second day of the holidays everyone has left the House.

I ignore Jessa's protests that she'd rather stay with me, first because I know she'll drive me insane and second because I know she's lying, which is confirmed when I see the look of excitement in her eyes when Santangelo's mum and his sisters come to pick her up.

For the first two days I relish the peace and quiet and lack of questions and drama, and not having to share the television or the internet or even the snacks in the kitchen. By the time Raffy

approaches the front verandah on the Wednesday, though, the company of Taylor Lily Markham is beginning to wear a bit thin.

"I'm bored to death," she tells me. "Want to get out of town?"

Somewhere with a shopping centre?"

205

"It'll take us ages to get there. By the time we walk down to town

and take the coach ..."

"Just say we've got a car?" I look at her, puzzled.

"Santangelo has one," she explains. "Keeps it in the old shed

off the trail across the river."

"How do you know that?"

She shrugs. "I went to youth group on Saturday night."

"Santangelo belongs to youth group?"

"No, but his girlfriend does, and I swear to God, the stuff I can

get out of this girl is incredible. You see, Santangelo has to keep the car a secret because his father caught him doing five

Ks over the speed limit."

"Poor guy," I say, thinking what a bummer it would be to have

the police sergeant as your dad. But the sympathy doesn't last

long. "Keys?"

She scoffs at the idea. "No one in this town locks their doors,

plus we can hotwire."

There must be another confused look on my face because she

explains. "It's one of those Townie stories. Too long and insignificant, but being taught to hotwire has been pretty valuable."

206

I'm liking the idea. Having access to a car for the holidays might

even take me as far as Sydney.

The old shed is at least a thirty-minute walk, so we take the trail

bikes and trespass into Cadet territory, hoping we don't get caught. The Cadets are on a partial holiday. No school work,

but plenty of hikes outside the area; so there's no time like the

present to violate the treaty.

It's fun to be on the bikes again and I remember the times when

I was in year nine, before we lost the trail to the Cadets, when

we'd go flying over the twists and turns of the dirt road, racing

one another across the most ridiculously dangerous terrain around. I broke my arm once by flying straight into a tree and

Hannah didn't talk to me for a week. But Hannah's not around

and Raffy and I race each other, both of us skidding off the bikes at least once. The scrape on my leg stings but I get there

first and our adrenalin is so pumped that I'm ready to commit

any felony, including breaking into the illegal car of the local sergeant's son.

There's something about the shabbiness of the dilapidated shed that makes me think that nothing could be driven into it

without it falling apart. We

207

park the bikes at the back and with great difficulty pull open the

two wooden doors. By the time we get them open we are saturated with perspiration and exhausted. But once we step

inside, our fatigue changes to a sense of triumph. In front of us

is an old but incredible shiny dark blue Commodore. As Raffy

promised, the doors are unlocked and we circle it for a moment,

celebrating the audacity of what we are about to do.

Raffy climbs in and disappears under the dashboard. I lean on

the windowsill looking in as she pulls out wires and connects

them like someone out of those movies that I have always been

so dubious about because it's always looked so easy.

"You are impressing me like crazy here," I say to her.

"I can't wait to tell him one day," she says with a giggle.
"Hey,
Chaz, guess what? We knew where your precious car was
all
the time.' I'd like to take a photo of his face. What do you
think?"

The car begins to purr and I hear her "Yesss" of victory.
"I reckon I'd smile really nicely in the photo," Santangelo
says
behind me, yanking me out of the
208
way, "knowing that you'll be keeping it under your pillow for
the
rest of your life."

He opens the car door and pulls her out, bumping her head
on
the way. Jonah Griggs is standing behind him, equally
unimpressed.

"Don't you *ever* touch my car again," Santangelo says with
the
same fury he had on his face when Jonah Griggs made
comments about his mother.

Raffy touches the car with her finger in a very dramatic way.

"You've just made our hit list," he says, getting a hanky out of

his pocket and cleaning off some imaginary mark. I haven't seen a hanky in ages and seeing Santangelo with one makes it

really difficult to keep a straight face.

"Oh, scary, scary," Raffy says. "Let's go, Taylor."

"What are you guys up to?" I ask suspiciously. "Why are you

hanging out together?"

"We're not," Santangelo says.

"Well, it looks like you are," I say.

"We're not," Jonah Griggs says. "Believe me. His father's made

us paint half this town and if we stick around any longer he'll

make us paint the rest of it."

"As a punishment for Gala Day?" Raffy asks.

"No. I think it was the Seven-Eleven thing," he mutters, looking away.

"It could be because of that thing outside Woolworths," Santangelo says. We didn't know about that one. "My nanna

Faye saw it and told my mum and she told my dad."

"You guys have to stop the fighting," Raffy says. "It's passé. No one has punch-ups anymore."

"This whole bloody town is passé," Griggs says. "Can we just get out of here?"

"Are you going to smash him for that or will I?" Raffy asks Santangelo, glaring at Griggs.

I pull her away. "We're out of here."

We don't look back. The trail bikes are prohibited for town use,

so we go back to a world with no wheels but at least I have company in my boredom. Our shopping gets downsized to the

two or three dress shops in town. It takes us longer to get to

the

Jellicoe Road from the garage than it would from our House

but

when we get there, Santangelo's car is parked by the side

of the

trail.

"We can give you a lift," he says grudgingly. Griggs is looking

straight ahead as if he doesn't give a shit.

"But just say we get finger marks on the seats?" I

210

ask. "Can we borrow your hanky?"

Raffy and I are both amused by my humour.

"Just don't touch anything."

Apart from the ride with Mr. Palmer on the night of my gaol visit,

I haven't been in a car for ages, especially during the day.

There's something so normal about it all, even if the guys in the

front seat are your arch-enemies. Santangelo and Griggs

have

a massive argument about whose CD they put in first and Griggs wins, based on the logistics of Santangelo having his hands on the wheel. It's a New Order song and from the moment the opening strands are over and the full passion of the

music begins, I feel as if I am a thousand miles away from the

turmoil of the past week. With the window down and my head

out, I feel like everything inside of me is switched on.

Santangelo is a good driver and knows every inch of the road,

handling its turns and potholes effortlessly. I drift into a dreamy

mode, to the beat of the music, and the dual voices of the singers make me close my eyes but still the colours around me

penetrate my eyelids and I let them in. Flashes of greens and

browns and greens and browns and ...

"Stop!" I yell out. "Santangelo, stop!"

He comes to a screeching halt and we're all thrown forward
in
our seats.

"What?" they're all asking me at once.

"Are you okay?" Raffy asks.

I unlatch my seatbelt, get out of the car, and begin walking
back

down the road. I hear the slamming of three doors behind
me
and feel them following.

In front of us, on the side of the road, among weeds and
ferns

and rocks and tangled bushes, are a group of poppies.

Surrounding them is a pebbled border, which seems to
convey

the message to keep clear. I'm staring at the flowers in
amazement and then I look at Griggs.

"Do you guys jog along here?"

He shakes his head. "We go the other way."

"What is it?" Raffy asks. "One of those roadside shrines or
something?"

"Makes sense," Santangelo says. "There was supposed to be

the world's worst accident here about twenty years ago."

I turn to him. "Who died?"

He shrugs. "My dad would know, obviously. I think two families

got wiped out. But they weren't from here."

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Griggs is watching me carefully. "You okay?" he asks quietly.

There's a part of me that doesn't want to tell them the story. It's

like, it belongs to me ... and Hannah. I don't know what's true or

not. Did Hannah know about those families?

"There's this story," I begin, "that they were planted by these kids who went to the Jellicoe School and one day they were destroyed by the Cadets while they were jogging. It was the first

year the Cadets came. But the next day, one of the Cadets came back and he planted them again. With the kids, that is."

"Where did you hear that?" Griggs asks.

"From Hannah."

"The one who looks after you?"

I don't answer. There's just something about this spot. I turn around and look at the other side of the road where Jude first

saw Narnie, thinking she was an apparition. They're not real, I

keep on telling myself. Those people aren't real.

Griggs, Santangelo, and Raffy are looking at me closely and I

walk back to the car.

Griggs convinces Santangelo that he should drive,

213

in case Santangelo's dad sees us. "So where to?" he asks.

Santangelo turns around in the seat, looking at me. "I'll show

you the spot where they found something that belonged to the

missing kid."

"That's morbid," Raffy says.

"What missing kid?" Griggs asks.

Santangelo turns back around but I catch his eye in the rear-

view mirror and he looks away. Once again I get a sense that

he knows something more than I do about my own life. I can't

imagine what it is but I suspect as the son of a policeman, he

comes across all sorts of information. Stuck out at the school in

the middle of a territory war, I have never had access to any information from town. Then again, I've never searched for it,

because Jellicoe never seemed like anything more than a weak

link between my mother and Hannah. Over the years I'd wondered sometimes if they had met while Hannah was at university in the city or maybe working in a pub someplace.

Or

maybe Hannah was a neighbour who felt an affinity for a single

mother her age who couldn't get through her day without a cocktail of alcohol, drugs, and pain-killers. Hannah could have

214

worked at the methadone clinic one of the times my mother tried

to quit. But every time I spoke to Hannah about the connection

between her and my mother she'd just ask, "Do you feel safe?"

I'd shrug because I didn't feel threatened and she'd say, "Then

for the time being that has to be enough."

But it was never enough. And I resent her more for it now than I

ever have.

But Santangelo seems to know something and, more than anything, he seems willing to tel .

"Take us there," I say quietly.

The spot is way on the other side of town. As we drive I follow

the river, right through town and back out into the middle of nowhere again.

The place is almost as majestic as Hannah's property. Big weeping willows shade the area by the river. Ropes hang off branches ready for swimmers to throw themselves into the water.

We sit, the four of us, watching the river, not saying much because it's not as if we're friends who have things in common

to discuss. But strangely enough, it's not awkward--just silent,

apart from the typical nature soundtrack buzzing in the air.

Once

in a while

215

some little flying insect stations itself right in front of my nose

and then it's off doing a crazy three-sixty turn before flying away

in a manic direction.

"You're not another one who's obsessed with that serial killer,

are you?" I ask Santangelo.

"No."

"Then why mention a boy who disappeared almost twenty years ago?"

"How do you know it was almost twenty years ago?"

Santangelo asks.

"You said."

"No he didn't," Griggs says, looking suddenly interested.

"And I didn't say it was a boy."

"Was it?" Griggs asks him. Santangelo nods.

"I've probably been told about it before," I say. I didn't want to

tell them about Hannah's manuscript. "You?"

He shrugs, but I keep my focus on him until he fidgets uncomfortably. "I saw a photo of him once," he says quietly.

"It left an impression."

"Because he was our age?" Raffy asks.

Santangelo thinks for a moment, as if he needs to

216

figure something out himself while trying to explain it to

other

people.

"Do you ever wonder how someone our age can possibly be dead? There's just something really unnatural about it."

I watch his face as he tries to explain.

"If you saw the photo you'd understand. You'd want to say to the

kid in it, "Why weren't you strong enough to resist death? Didn't

that look in your eye stop anything bad from happening to you?"

"But you're not talking about someone's age; now you're talking

about their spirit," Raffy says.

"Maybe I am. It's like when I was in year eight and we had to

study *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I mean, she died of typhoid.

Can you believe it? How could Anne Frank die of typhoid?

The

girl never kept her mouth shut, she was bloody annoying, and it

was like nothing could kill what was inside of her. I thought,

okay, maybe a gas chamber or a firing squad could kill her
but

not an illness that other people survived."

I'm very disturbed to find out that the leader of the Townies
has

a soul and I'm beginning to develop a bit of a crush on him.

217

"At the end of the day it's about heart beats and blood flow,"
Griggs says flatly. "People's spirits don't keep them alive."

Santangelo looks at me again. "The kid in the photo ... his
hair

was kind of wavy, like a golden brown, and his eyes were
that

colour that's not blue or green and he was smiling, so he
had

this kind of cut in his face. Not a real one. As if the smile
made

cuts in his cheek, but they weren't dimples."

Raffy and Griggs look at me. I stare out at the river.

"I saw you once," Santangelo says, and I know he's
speaking to

me. "It was about two years ago and you were sitting next to Raf. There was this performer at the Jellicoe fair. You know,

one of those travelling Shakespeare slapstick comedies and you were laughing and you kind of--well, not to be insulting or

anything because you don't look like a boy anymore ... the guys

always say, 'That Taylor Markham, she's not too bad-looking,'

so I don't want you to think that I think you look masculine because I swear to God you don't, you look--"

"Get to the point," Griggs interrupts.

"It was like I was looking at him," Santangelo

218

finishes. "The kid in the photo."

"This all based on one photo," Raffy says.

"You've got to see it to understand. Actually, there are two photos. The other is of the group."

"What group?" I ask. My heart is beating fast and ray mouth is

getting that churning sweet feeling of nausea.

"About five of them. One's a Cadet; I could tell by the uniform.

My father had the file out on his desk once when I was in there.

All I saw were the two photos and the cap, which was found out

there," he says, pointing to the river.

"What was his name?"

"Xavier."

My stomach settles back down and I take a deep breath of relief. "Never heard of him."

"Xavier Webster Schroeder."

I feel faint and my breath seems to leave my body with a speed I

can't control. I need it desperately to come back, because the

feeling that I'm breathing through a straw frightens the hell out of

me.

"Are you okay?" Griggs says, looking at me. He turns to Santangelo. "Why do you always do this?"

"Why do you always go berserk when she loses a bit of colour?" Santangelo asks back.

219

"Because she's an asthmatic, you moron, and every time you open your mouth and tell her something she forgets how to breathe."

I get this horrible feeling that while I'm in the middle of an asthma attack these two are going to thump the hell out of each other again.

Raffy fumbles through my backpack for my inhaler and I take a few puffs until I get my breathing back under control. She glares at both of them, a bit pale herself.

"What?" Santangelo asks again.

"Just drop us off at my place," she says, helping me up. "And if you guys have one more fight, I swear to God, Chaz, I will never speak to you again."

They stand staring at each other and I'm waiting for a comeback

from him. But Santangelo just looks a bit gutted and I realise it's

because Raffy looks just as bad and I get a glimpse of how things really are between them.

Without looking at Griggs he holds out a hand to him and Griggs shakes it, reluctantly.

We get into the car and I lean back, exhausted. Santangelo turns and looks at both of us. "So what's the story? "

I close my eyes and curl up on the seat.

220

"Our House guardian who lives by the river," Raffy says.

"Her

name is Hannah Schroeder."

We get dropped off at Raffy's place and her mother forces me to

have a lie down and then refuses to drive me home that night.

So I'm taken prisoner and made to wear a crisp white nightie for

middle-aged people that has pink and white bows on the shoulders. Raffy looks apologetic because she left any nightwear she could have lent me back at the school. We sit

watching television until late. I haven't said much since finding

out about the missing boy's link to Hannah and my uncanny resemblance to him. I don't want to even think about it right now,

so we lie in bed, pretending the conversation never came up,

and just concentrate on trivial stuff, like the guys.

"Do you miss being friends with Santangelo?" I ask her after the

lights are out and we're almost asleep.

"What makes you think we were friends?"

"Everything."

I hear her yawn.

"Being enemies with him is better," she tells me. There's a pause and I think she's going to say some

221

thing more but she doesn't and it's just silence for a long

while.

"My father..." I begin, realising that I have never said those words out loud. "If I look like that kid in the photo and he's disappeared ... "

She turns to face me and although I can't see her in the dark, I

sense her there. "Don't listen to Santangelo. Once he was convinced that a girl he was going out with looked exactly like

Cameron Diaz and, I swear to God, my father looks more like

Cameron Diaz."

I curl into the nightie, the crisp cotton cocooning me in a wave of

security and I go to sleep thinking of the boy in Santangelo's photo.

Because thinking of him brings me solace.

We're still in our nightwear at eleven o'clock the next morning.

Raffy's dad is making us breakfast. The doorbell rings and Raffy's mum calls out, "It's open." I just can't believe these

people invite people into their home without asking who it is. Santangelo and Griggs walk in and Raffy and I exchange looks

of mini-mortification. They're surprised to see me but Raffy's

mum is too busy kissing

222

Santangelo with such enthusiasm that it's like Jesus Christ has

just walked in.

"And this is Gri--Jonah," Santangelo says, trying very hard to let

the name roll off his tongue.

Jonah Griggs shakes hands with both Raffy's parents like they're in the military. As usual he is dressed in his fatigues and

looks away the instant someone tries to make eye contact.

Raffy's mum forces them to sit down and they get to see us up

close and personal in our nighties. I think I felt less self-conscious in my undies and singlet the night Griggs came to my

room.

I watch Raffy's mother standing behind her chair, holding on to

Raffy's long hair as if putting it into a ponytail and there's this

pride on her face while she's touching her, like she's saying, "Look at my beautiful girl." It makes my eyes fill with tears and I

quickly brush them away but as usual Jonah Griggs is looking

and I want to melt into the ground and have the nightie cover

the insignificant puddle that is me. It's not that I miss my mother.

It's just that I miss the idea of what one would be.

"We were just driving around ... in Jonah's car and we thought

maybe we'd pick Raffy up and then

223

Taylor at the school, but obviously she's here."

"What a pity. We've already made plans to go shopping,"

Raffy's mum says.

"Shame," Raffy says. "We'll see the guys out," she adds, standing up.

"Raffy, they might want some breakfast."

The boys speak over each other, explaining that they've already

eaten, and I walk out with Griggs while Santangelo has a twenty-minute goodbye with Raffy's parents.

"What's with what you're wearing?" Griggs asks while we stand

outside waiting for the others.

"It's pretty hideous, isn't it?" I say.

"Don't force me to look at it," he says. "It's see-through."

That kills conversation for a couple of seconds.

" Strange that you're hanging out with Santangelo," I say, trying

to keep the silence from growing even more awkward. It's much

easier dealing with him as an enemy in the territory wars than

like this.

"Strange? I don't think that word comes anywhere near it.

My

troops are on an overnight camp three hundred kilometres away

from here. I had to sleep at the Santangelo penitentiary for pre-

pubescent girls.

224

There are hundreds of them, including that annoying pest that

belongs to you. I have one brother and I live with four hundred

guys. Girls under the age of fourteen are the most frightening

creatures I have ever come across. They all insist on running

around the house in their underwear. Then Nanna Faye comes

over as well as Nonna Caterina and I have to drive them to Bingo in 'my car' and then they make us stay and we have to

call out the numbers and they have these Bingo codes like,

'Tweak of the thumb ... Stop and run ... Two fat ladies ...

Clickety

click,' and did you know Santangelo's black and Italian? Do you

know how many cousins he has as a result? Well, I've met them

all and they ask me a hundred questions and I rarely talk to anyone outside my immediate family or school so let's just say

that the past twenty-four hours have been somewhat on the traumatic side. And to top it all off there's the sergeant who looks at me like I'm going to wipe out his family during the night."

"As if Santangelo's dad would ever have you in his house if he

thought that," I say quietly.

He's not looking at me and suddenly I get why he doesn't look

people in the eye. It's like he thinks he'll

225

see the doubt or the distrust or the questions about his past.

"Okay, so it's not that bad," he says after a while. "So, like I

asked, what's with the nightie?"

"It smells like what I always think mothers smell like," I tell him

honestly, knowing I don't have to explain.

He nods. "My mum has one just the same and you have no idea

how disturbing it is that it's turning me on."

Before I can even go red, Raffy and Santangelo walk towards

us.

"Your nighties' see-through," Santangelo says, getting into the

car. He rolls down the window. "I have a plan," he says.

I shake my head. "I can't do territory wars at the moment."

"It's not about that," he says. "It's about those photos."

"Do you have a death wish?" Griggs warns. Santangelo ignores

him. "I'm going to get them for you," he tells me. "How?"

"Easy. I'm going to break into the police station."

226

I talk about going back to the school every day but I always end

up staying. On Saturday night they take me to a twenty-first party. I have no idea who it's for but it's at the scout hall and I'm

almost convinced that the whole town has been invited. Jonah

Griggs is sitting at a table with Santangelo, Santangelo's girlfriend, and some of her friends. "When he sees me, there's a

look of surprise and something else.

I'm self-conscious about the skirt I bought with Raffy and the T-

shirt that barely covers my midriff, and the fact that I let Raffy's

mum brainwash me into believing that no woman should leave

her house without wearing lipstick but I like the way it makes

me feel.

Senior Cadets are allowed out on a Saturday night during the

holidays and the place is packed with them. The music is loud

but the people's voices are louder and every one of them looks

happy. I haven't seen so many happy people all in one room,

except on television, but these people don't look like they're acting.

It surprises me to see Ben in a huddle with the Mullet Brothers

and Anson Choi and some of the Townies. I didn't know he was

back from holidays.

227

He walks towards me doing this salsa cha-cha thing and it makes me laugh and I dance back towards him. He drags me

over and introduces me to people he's just met. "They think you're a babe," he whispers in my ear, and because nobody has ever called me a babe before, I find myself charmed.

Then

Griggs and Santangelo are beside me and somehow Griggs has managed to shoulder his way between Ben and me.

Although I don't look at him, I feel him at my shoulder for most of

the night. The Townies poke fun at Griggs and Choi because

they're in uniform but the banter is good-natured and I'm surprised how clever Griggs is in his response to it.

We're in a world full of people Raffy knows. People who bring

her to life and it seems as if her feet hardly touch the ground

because every second person picks her up and twirls her around. While she's speaking to her uncle, friends from her primary school introduce themselves to me.

"I married her in grade six," one named Joe Salvatore tells me,

grinning.

"What did a wedding consist of in grade six?" I ask.

"An exchange of rings made of grass and a

228

reception of candy and sherbet," he explains. "Chaz refused

to

attend because she was his best friend since they were born

and he thought she was his."

"As if," Santangelo says, scowling. Griggs doesn't look too impressed, either, and Joe Salvatore seems to enjoy their irritation. When Raffy finally reaches us, he lifts her off the ground and smothers her with noisy kisses and she's giggling

in a way I've never heard before.

I talk local politics with Santangelo's mum and teacher shortages with Raffy's dad. I do the twist with Santangelo and

politely decline an invitation to go for a drive with one of his friends. I do the Time Warp with Jessa and the Zorba with Raffy

and, when I need to stop for air, Jonah Griggs is there and he

takes my hand and leads me through the crowd until we're outside.

I take deep breaths, looking at the town stretched in front of

me.

When I turn around, he cups my face in his hands and he kisses

me so deeply that I don't know who is breathing for who, but his

mouth and tongue taste like warm honey. I don't know how long

it lasts, but when I let go of him, I miss it instantly.

We end up with the Townies and Cadets at

229

McDonald's on the highway at two in the morning. I look around

at everyone and I can't help thinking how normal we look and I

don't think I've ever felt normal. I watch Raffy as she removes

the pickles from her hamburger and hands them over to

Santangelo without them exchanging a word and I realise again

there is more to that relationship than spelling bees and being

enemies. These people have history and I crave history. I

crave

someone knowing me so well that they can tell what I'm thinking. Jonah Griggs takes my hand under the table and

links

my fingers with his and I know that I would sacrifice almost anything just to keep this state of mind, for the rest of the

week

at least.

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Chapter 17

On one of those days during the holidays when they were completely bored, Webb came up with a plan. The five of them

sat by the river, at the very spot where Webb dreamed of building a house.

"We build a tunnel," Webb said. "It runs from my House to Tate

and Narnie's and then we take a detour and it goes from their

House, underneath the driveway and then to the clearing."

"Purpose?" Jude asked, practising his overarm with rocks against the tree.

"To get around after hours. It'll be tops."

"Tops, will it be?"

"The Great Escape. They built a tunnel," Fitz said, enthused.

"They needed to, morons. It was a matter of life and death,"

Jude said dryly.

"We're bored to death, Jude, so isn't that a matter of life and death ? " Tate asked.

Webb was grinning. Tate, too. They always grinned in unison.

Like they were thinking with the same mind, sharing the same

heart. Ever since any of them could remember, Webb and Tate

had been like that. Jude knew it was why he was drawn to them. They were like beacons for Narnie, who couldn't seem to

operate without them and Fitz and Jude loved the three, unashamedly.

"They think I saved them but they saved me," Fitz once told him.

"I didn't exist before I belonged to the Fucked-Up Four."

"Five," Jude had corrected.

He could hear Webb, Tate, and Fitz discussing the tunnel as if it

already existed.

"Narnie, explain to the delusional trio why the POWs

needed

that tunnel more than we do," he said.

"Nazis," she muttered, sitting against the tree. Bad day for Narnie.

"Weren't your grandparents Nazis f" Fitz asked, lining up at least five imaginary enemies and, with his finger and popping

sounds, eliminating them one by one.

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"They were Germans," Narnie said. "Big difference."

"Although Oma Rose was a Nazi when it came to eating za sauerkraut," Webb said in a bad German accent, and for the first

time in a long time, Narnie laughed.

"I'm all for the tunnel. It could save our life one day," Tate said.

"We could be chased by evil and have to hide down there."

"Evil out in Jellicoe? I wish," Fitz said.

"Think of how tunnels saved people from Hitler," Tate said.

"Yeah, but last I heard Hitler was dead. The bunker, a gun, Eva.

Ring a bell? "Jude said.

"Cyanide," Narnie corrected.

"We'll pretend we're the East Germans trying to escape to West

Germany. No Nazis."

"Just Communists."

"All we need is to be able to get from one House to the other

and then from that House to the clearing," Webb said, slightly

frustrated by the fact that nobody but Tate was taking him seriously.

Jude looked from Tate to Webb, shaking his head.

"You know what?" Webb asked. "I'm getting

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another fantastic idea." The seven p.m. call bell rang in the distance but Webb was in another world.

"Skirmish," he said, impressed with himself. "Let's have a war."

There was a new plan every day, bigger and better than the day

before. Each afternoon at four o'clock they would meet to

discuss it.

On Jude's last day they met at midnight and camped under the

oak by the river. Fitz handed them a bottle and Webb took a swig, spitting it out instantly.

"What the hell was that, Fitz?" he asked, trying to regain his breath.

"Grappa. Got it from the Italians next door. Burns your insides out."

"And the enjoyment is?" Jude said, taking a swig, his eyes instantly tearing up and his breath coming in gasps.

"I reckon if I put a match right here, you'd see fireworks," Fitz

continued, taking out his matches and breathing heavily into the air.

Still trying to recover, Jude stared at him. "Why would you want to do that, dickhead?"

"Live on the edge, GI Jude. That's my motto."

Fitz took out a cigarette and Jude grabbed it out of his mouth.

"You're going to set us all on fire, you homicidal feral fruitcake."

"Hand it over," Tate said, taking a few deep breaths before swigging from the bottle. She stared at Narnie in shock and started coughing out of control. Narnie fanned her down, patting

her on the back until the coughing subsided.

"Can we stay focused?" Webb asked, taking out a purple leather book.

"Mate, no one is going to take you seriously with a book that looks like that," Jude said.

"Yeah, Chairman Mao and his little purple book," Fitz said, laughing at his own joke.

"It's Chairman Meow to you, and I've got a system set up that's

going to blow your mind."

"I wouldn't mind other parts of me bl-- "

"Fitz!" Tate said. "Grossed out. Majorly."

"Is anyone listening to me ? " Webb asked, annoyed. "Is

that too

much to ask ? "

"I am," Narnie replied.

Webb leaned over and grabbed her face. "Then I can die happy."

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Narnie patted the space next to her and Fitz sat down obediently.

"Okay, we play skirmish," Webb said. "Cadets, Townies, us.

We

split this area into territories and anyone who tries to invade loses ground. We have rules of engagement, diplomatic immunity, and one or two fisticuffs."

"What part of this are we going to enjoy?" Tate asked, pointing

to Narnie and herself.

"The part where we take you hostage and ravage you," Fitz said.

"You're an animal."

Fitz did gorilla impersonations and Narnie shushed him gently.

"Fitz, you head the Townies, Jude heads the Cadets, and I'll get the Houses together back here. We need to get the six Houses working, so we need rules."

"No fraternising with leaders of other Houses," Tate said. "Rule number one."

Webb looked taken aback.

"What happens if you do ? " he asked, jumping on top of her and trapping her with his arms and legs.

"The two leaders get placed in exile... together.

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For the rest of their lives."

"Okay," he said with enthusiasm, jumping off her. "I'm writing that rule in. 'No relationship between leaders of opposite Houses'."

"I've got one for the territory wars," Fitz said, his eyes bloodshot from the spirit. "If trespassing occurs, there's payback." He

jabbed at thin air. "One to the jaw, two to the gut."

"So what does the winner get in the end?" Tate asked.

"They get to sit around with the losers and say, 'I am King Xavier of the world.' Repeat after me."

"And me?" Tate asked.

"You get to be my queen."

Tate looked pleased with the idea.

"How come you're the leader of the community?" Narnie asked,

almost smiling. "Why can't Tate be?"

Webb looked at his sister, grinning. "Why can't you, Narnie ? "

Fitz leaned his head on Narnie's shoulder. "And I'll be your queen ? "

"You can be the eunuch," Jude said, shoving him out of the way, "and I'll be her prince." He bowed and took Narnie's hand,

kissing it, and their eyes

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met. It was awkward for a moment until Narnie looked away.

"So how long will it take to get your troops in gear?" Webb asked him. "We're serious here, you know."

"Mate, we've been ready for years."

*"By the time you come back next year, we'll be ready--
tunnel
and all."*

*"If it's going to be like The Great Escape, make sure there
are
trail bikes," Jude said.*

"So you're in?"

He shrugged. "As long as I get to play Steve McQueen."

Spending days with Santangelo and Griggs becomes a
habit

for the rest of the holidays. Most of the time the Mullet
Brothers,

Choi, Ben, Santangelo's sisters, and Jessa McKenzie come
along as well. We end up either at Santangelo's place or
Raffy's, but mostly the former because Raffy's mum and
dad

teach the Townies and keep on asking them for overdue
homework.

The Santangelo home is like a madhouse. I'm not quite sure

how his mum finds time to be the mayor

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of the town as well but she manages. She's the only person who gets away with calling Santangelo a "little shit" and once in

a while she'll go for the collective and refer to both Griggs and

Santangelo as those "two little shits." Most of the time the "two

little shits" take it on the chin but sometimes Santangelo says,

"I'm fucking out of here," and his mum warns, "Don't you dare

swear, you little shit." The Santangelo sisters, Griggs, and Raffy

ignore it all, but Jessa and I are fascinated and frightened at the

same time. We wait for a showdown but it tends not to happen

and then everything's all calm again and the only two left in a

mess are Jessa and me. Sometimes we are very relieved to escape it all.

It's during those moments that I notice how similar we are.

Both

Jessa and I have spent almost half our lives brought up by people other than our parents and neither of us have siblings.

She has no recollection of her mother, who died of cancer when

Jessa was two years old, and I have too much recollection of

mine. Jessa lived with her aunt but hero-worshipped her father,

who died when she was nine in some apparent freak accident,

and my only memory of my father is of being on his shoulders

and touching the sky.

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Though after Santangelo's revelation about the boy in the photo, I'm not too sure anymore. More than anything, we have

Hannah in common, and somehow during these holidays I begin to see Jessa as a kind of link to whatever it is out there

that I need to work out.

"Do you think of Hannah a lot?" she asks me when we move

back to the House close to the end of the holidays. I'm letting

her sleep in the spare bed in my room because everyone else

isn't back until the weekend and there's no one else in the dorms.

All the time, I want to say.

"Sometimes."

"Do you think something's happened to her?" she asks quietly.

All the time, I want to say. "Sometimes."

"Taylor, just say the seri--"

"Don't," I say, irritated, turning over, away from her. "Jessa, forget the serial killer. There are enough other things to worry

about."

"She'd never leave us, so it can only be the serial killer."

I grit my teeth and count to ten so I won't yell at

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her. "He only takes teenagers," I say, not so reassuringly.

"She's in her thirties."

"But I read on this website that, in the townships stretching from

the Sturt to the Hume Highways, there have been eleven attempted kidnaps and three actual kidnaps of women over twenty-five in the last ten years."

"Can I suggest another website? It's [www-dot - shutupabouttheserialkiller-dot-com](http://www-shutupabouttheserialkiller-dot-com)."

She is silent for a moment and I feel guilty about the aggression.

"If Hannah doesn't come back, I'll have no one," she says in the

smallest voice I've heard her use.

I reluctantly turn to face her again but looking at Jessa's face

always has this sledgehammer effect on me, so I lie on my back

and stare at the ceiling.

"Hannah's coming back. Anyway, you've got whoever looked

after you before you came here."

"My aunt. But she has my cousins and I know she likes me, even loves me, but it's not like I felt as if I belonged. Until Hannah turned up."

"She turned up one day? Just like that?"

"Uh-huh. I just thought she was so beautiful. She said, 'Let me

look at you,' and then she cried and

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held me and said that if she had known about me, she would

have come much sooner."

"Funny. She turned up just like that for me as well."

"Maybe she's like in that TV show where those angels moonlight as people and they come down to help others. You

know. Like in *Touched by an Angel*"

"I don't think she's an angel, Jessa. She swears worse than

Santangelo and Griggs." I turn and lean on my elbow, facing

her. "So what did she say when she showed up ?"

"That she was a friend of my dad's, but I don't really believe that. I couldn't imagine Hannah knowing my dad and she seemed much younger than him, anyway."

"I've never known my father," I tell her.

"My aunt said mine was a crazy man and that he lost his marbles years ago, but I don't think he was, you know. I think he

was just really sad."

"Maybe because your mum died."

"I don't know but when he came to visit, he'd tell me the best

stories about growing up around here. When Hannah told me

I'd be coming here

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when I was twelve, I was ecstatic."

She looks at me intently. "She used to talk about you. She'd tell

me that when I came to the school, I would have you and

that

she'd be the luckiest person in the world because she'd have

both of us. I used to think she was your mum."

"I have a mother and she's not Hannah."

"But don't you ever wish she was? I do."

I don't answer. I just wish Hannah would come back and tell me

off like she used to. Or even keep me a little at arm's-length,

which she always seemed to do with me. Not like Jessa. I'd watch them together: Hannah would smother Jessa with kisses

and cuddles and they'd giggle like kids. Maybe my guard was

up all the time and she was reacting to that. But I wish she had

seen through it and I wish that once, *just once*, I had told her

how I feel. That I feel safer when she is around. Sometimes I

had tested her, wanting so desperately for her to let me down so

then I would have an excuse to walk away. But she never did. I

wish I could tell her it breaks my heart that I miss her more than I

ever missed my mother and that the thing that frightens me the

most about next October when I graduate is not that I won't
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have a home, but that I won't have her.

"You know what?" Jessa says after a moment, yawning. "I reckon that Brigadier knows where she is."

My pulse does this thumping thing that happens every time I

think of him.

"Why do you say that? Has he ever hassled you? Tell me!"

She frowns and I don't know whether it's because she remembers something or because of my aggression. "He looks

at me all the time."

"Does it freak you out?" I ask, not wanting to put more fear

in

her head.

"No, but Chloe P. reckons he could be the serial killer."

"Oh, please," I say, even though I once thought the same.

"She reckons whoever it is lives between Sydney and Truscott."

"Which covers seven hundred kilometres, narrowing our suspects down to about one million people."

"And the kidnappings have always taken place between September and the end of the year and would

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probably be committed by someone who drives those seven hundred kilometres. The Brigadier would get to cover at least

five hundred of them. He goes back and forth from Sydney to

here all the time. Well, this year he has, anyway. Last year he

wasn't around, or the year before, and there were no kidnappings."

"How do you know?"

"That he wasn't around last year? Because Teresa, one of the hostages, is going around with one of the Cadets and he told her and she told me."

"Can you point out to Teresa that the Cadets are our enemy and she's not allowed to 'go around' with one of them?"

"But you pashed Jonah Griggs and he's the leader of the enemy."

I stare at her in amazement with absolutely no comeback.

"We saw you at the party on Saturday night," she says, grinning, "We thought it was really romantic."

"Who's we?"

"Mary and Sarah and Elisha and Tilly Santangelo and their cousins and some of their friends from school. How can you

breathe when his tongue--"

"Go to sleep," I say, turning over again.

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I wanted to say that I didn't need to breathe on my own when

Jonah Griggs was kissing me, but seeing he hasn't touched me

since that night, I can't even bring myself to think of him. It's not

like he's ignoring me, because that would be proactive. It's like

I'm just anyone to him. Even when we were squashed in the back seat, our knees glued together and our shoulders touching

and my insides full of butterflies, he was speaking over my head

the whole time with Santangelo about some ridiculous AFL/ Rugby League thing. Somewhere along the way, Jonah Griggs

has become a priority in my life and his attitude this week has been crushing.

On the last Saturday of the holidays, Santangelo takes Griggs,

Raffy, and me back to the place by the river on the other side of

town. He's convinced that there is some other clue down there

to do with the missing boy and if there is one thing I've noticed

about Santangelo, it's that he has a touch of obsessive compulsive about him and won't let an idea go.

"Apparently the Hermit was obsessed with this river," he tells

us. "Why do you think that is?" he persists.

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I just shrug but I can tell Raffy and Griggs are trying to come up

with something intelligent. When nobody answers he holds out

his hands as if to say, "Go on, answer."

"Santangelo, you're dying to tell us, so just tell us," Griggs says,

irritated.

"Because I think he knew that kid, Xavier."

"Webb," I say, and the three of them look at me. "That's what

they called him."

"Webb." He nods. "Well, think of this river. There are so many

bends where stuff going down the river gets lodged."

"Stuff?" I ask. "Wow. Hold back on the jargon."

"So let's go in," Griggs says.

"It's deep and by the time you get to the bottom and check out

what's down there, you'll have to come back up again for breath."

"I'll go down," Raffy said. "I'm the fifteen-hundred-metre swimmer and can hold my breath the longest."

I watch the guys. It's as if she's stripped them of their masculinity.

"It's no big deal. It's just about better lungs," she reassures them, turning to face me and rolling her

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eyes as she takes off her shoes and socks. The guys are not

coping and I sit back and hug my knees to watch the show.

"How do you know Griggs isn't a long-distance swimmer who

has fantastic lungs?" Santangelo asks.

"Because he looks like a Rugby player, not a swimmer,"
Raffy

tells him. "You look like an AFL player, not a swimmer. I
look
like a swimmer."

"What about me?" I ask.

The three of them look at me. Being tall has never meant I
was

labelled as athletic. Just lanky.

"You look like someone who can wipe out the opposition in
a

chess game," Raffy says.

"I won the table tennis title two years in a row," I remind her.

"But you're not a swimmer," she says.

"You only beat me in the fifteen-hundred that one time,"
Santangelo says.

I can tell this could go on forever and I'm not in the mood.

"Look," I say, "he beat you in the spelling bee. She beat you
in

the fifteen-hundred metres. Let's just get this Fab Four
adventure over and done with and go home."

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"I think two of us should go in," Raffy says, taking off her top.

"Look the other way," Santangelo tells Griggs as she unzips her jeans.

"As if."

When Raffy is down to her undies and singlet, she dives in with

ease. Her head emerges, her teeth chattering. Santangelo begins to strip as well and I certainly don't look the other way.

As soon as Santangelo and Raffy's heads go under, Griggs leans over and kisses me. It's a hungry kind of kiss, like he's

been dying to do it for ages and he can't get enough but after a

while I open my eyes and just stare at him.

"You're supposed to close your eyes," he says, a little unnerved.

"I'm not supposed to do anything," I say, moving away from

him

and looking into the river, waiting for Raffy and Santangelo
to

come back up.

"Is there a problem here?"

"There's nothing here."

"Really? Because that wasn't the message you were giving
me

last Saturday night."

"And between last Saturday and today there have

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been at least six days, so let's just say that I'm going by the
message that you've been giving me since then."

"We've been surrounded by the Santangelo circus and that
little

pest who is either attached to you surgically or me and then,
when they're not around, Casanova Cassidy is hanging off
every word you say or Raffy is giving me one of those 'girl

zone

only' looks," he says. "So if I haven't been giving you the
attention--"

"So you're admitting it. That you can just switch this on and

off?"

"Yeah, whatever you say. I'm over it."

"Good, because I was never into it!"

I feel like someone off Jerry Springer. Any moment now I'm going to be saying "boyfriend" with a bit of Afro-American attitude thrown in but I can't help it.

Santangelo emerges and I feel horrible because I've almost forgotten that they're down there. He swings around looking for

Raffy and I move closer to the river until her head appears.

"Anything?" I ask, as if there was a likelihood that they would

find something constructive, just

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because we were looking for it.

"No," Santangelo says, dragging himself out. "But there are heaps of tree trunks lying on the bottom and anything could be

stuck in or under them."

Santangelo comes up with yet another idea about getting some

diving material for a better search, but I'm not listening anymore

and neither is Griggs.

Santangelo and Raffy drop us off on the Jellicoe Road and I get

out without saying a word and walk away, but Griggs is right behind me.

"So explain to me again what I did wrong."

I don't stop. "You know what? You didn't do anything wrong.

I did. It's this dumb thing I do. I look into things and see more than

I'm supposed to."

"You're implying that last week meant nothing to me."

This time I do stop, staring at him. "It's not an implication. It's a

fact. Just like when we ran away. No big deal, Griggs."

"It was a big deal, so why are you pretending that it isn't?"

"No. It wasn't. It was just a coincidence. We were waiting for the

same train, for the same reason--to

go see our mothers--and maybe being together meant more to

me than it did to you. Maybe I've got to stop believing that everyone feels the same way I do about things."

Like my mother, I want to say to him. Like Hannah. Like you.

"I wrote to you for a year and you never wrote back," he says. 'T

rang you over and over again and you would never come to the

phone. What part of that gives the impression that I didn't care?"

"You know what I think," I tell him. "You thought I was too much

baggage. Or maybe you got bored. Like she would have. She'd

get bored being good. She'd get bored trying to go clean. She

got bored being my mother. And I wanted to ask her why, but

you switched off and you rang the Brigadier to come and

get

you when I was so close to where I wanted to be and I can't believe that you preferred to miss out on seeing your mum and

brother just so you wouldn't have to spend another moment with me."

He shakes his head like he can't believe what he's hearing. "I

didn't ring the Brigadier," he snaps. "I didn't even know him at the time and one day, when

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you're interested, I might tell you why I rang my school. But for

the time being why don't you just continue feeling sorry for yourself and comparing the rest of the world with your mother.

That will make you popular." He crosses the road, but not without a parting look of such hostility that it makes me ill.

"There will be no 'one day,'" I yell. "Because holidays are over,

Griggs, and you and I are never going to cross paths again.

Not

in the next ten days. Not ever! Have a fantastic life."

He walks back towards me and I take a step back, not because

I'm scared but because he doesn't give me much room and this

is Griggs without control. Apart from the train and that time in the

scout hall, I've never seen him like this. I've seen measured Griggs who provokes the fight, who is never taken by surprise,

who walks at his own pace to the beat of life. But not Griggs like

he is now.

"Be careful what you wish for," he says with quiet menace, "because I'm about this close to telling you to get the fuck out of

my life."

I stare at him.

"What do you want from me?" he asks.

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What I want from every person in my life, I want to tell him.
More.

But I don't say anything and neither of us move.

"What if I told you that I lied that day on the platform?" he
says

after a moment.

"You're lying now," I say angrily. "Don't you dare try to get
out of

the fact that you were missing your mother and brother and
you

wanted to see them. You were a mess. I was there,
remember?"

He shakes his head. "I lied."

"Am I supposed to think you're all tough because you don't
need people, Griggs? Is that what you're trying to do here?"

"No, that's your thing."

"Then stop lying, and admit you were there because you
missed your family."

"I've missed my mother and brother every day that I've been
out

here this time round. But not that day."

There is something in his eyes that frightens the hell out of
me

and I want to walk away. I don't want to hear another word
because I know that whatever he has to say is going to
destroy

a part of me.

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"I knew who you were before that day," he says. "Some
morbid

prick pointed you out to me in the street when I arrived here
that

first year. Told me how some Hermit had whispered
something

in your ear and then blown his brains out."

The words are brutal. I've never really heard it described
that

way. I block my ears for a moment but when you block your
ears

you tend to close your eyes and when I close my eyes I see
blood and brain-matter and I smell the sickly scent of blood.

"So you were at the train station and saw me come along

and

you thought I'd be a fun person to hang out with for a weekend?" I say snidely. "And you made up some story about

wanting to see your mother and brother? "

"No, I was waiting for the train. The three forty-seven to Yass.

Comes every afternoon and, according to the station master, it's

never late and I knew that. And then you came along and you

spoke to me and nobody had looked me in the eye for years. My

mum wouldn't. She told me later that she couldn't, because she

was scared to see that I might hate her. She feels like she didn't

protect me from him. But I remember you that day and you looked at peace with yourself

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and it made me reconsider everything I had planned to do.

Because I thought to myself, you can't do this to her, not

after

the Hermit thing."

"Do what to me? I don't think that leaving me on that platform

would have changed my life, Griggs," I lie.

"You being on that platform changed mine."

This isn't romance. This isn't a declaration of love or affirmation

of friendship. This is something more.

"I wasn't there that day to get on the three forty-seven to Yass,"

he says. "I was there to throw myself in front of it."

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Chapter 18

On the last day of the holidays, Santangelo sends word through

the Cadets that he has something I want. Which makes me wonder: how the hell does Santangelo know what I want when I

don't even know? And does getting what I want just mean more

confusion?

"It's a trick," Raffy says. "He just wants to talk Club House and

he thinks the territory wars are over because you and Griggs

pashed. Let's not go."

But she doesn't look me in the eye and I know that Raffy is scared that whatever we find out about Webb will change everything for me.

"I'm going," I tell her flatly and firmly. But I think I hear a pleading in my voice when I ask, "Are you coming?"

Santangelo organises to meet us at the scout hall,

except the scouts are meeting there, so it ends up being on the

steps of the water tower in the middle of town. I begin to understand his desperate need for the Club House and the Townies' need for a place to go.

Raffy and I take Jessa with us because not everyone's back yet

from holidays. While we wait for him, I tell them the story of the

kids in Hannah's manuscript. I try to tell it in sequence and at

times it gets hard, but they are mesmerised. Jessa makes me

repeat the story of the boy who came riding by on the stolen bike at least twice.

"He crawls in through the back passenger's window of the car

on top," I explain to them, "and the first person he finds is Narnie. Except Narnie won't move. She's petrified and he

begs

her to come out with him but she won't. The other two, Tate and

Webb, are pleading with her, 'Come on Narnie. Please.'

They

had begun to smell petrol and were terrified the cars would blow. Then Narnie leans over and she whispers something

into

the ear of the boy who came by on the stolen bike. Tate and Webb say later that the look on his face was one of horror

and

they just cried. They think that Narnie has

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asked him to let her stay there and die. So he begins with them.

First Tate and then Webb. He takes them out and places them

under a tree and he makes them promise not to move. He tells

them that if they don't move, he just might be able to convince

Narnie to come out. Five minutes later, Narnie comes out with

him and he lays her down beside her brother and tells

Webb

not to let her out of his sight. They ask him where he's going but

he doesn't answer. Then he goes back into those cars four more times and he carries out the bodies of Tate's mum and

then Tate's dad and then Tate's sister and then Webb and Narnie's father. He places them on the other side of the road."

"What about Narnie and Webb's mum?" Jessa asks.

I shake my head. It's the part of the story I do not want to tell.

"Anyway," I continue, "not even two minutes later, the cars blow up."

"He could have died," Jessa says in a hushed voice.

I nod. "And he knew that, but all his life he'd been treated like

crap to the point that he believed he was crap. He'd never done

anything good and nobody

had ever said anything positive about him. But that night, on the

Jel icoe Road, it was like he was reborn. The lives he saved gave him purpose and he loved those kids more than anything."

"So where's the rest of the story?" Raffy asks.

"I left the manuscript on the floor in Hannah's house and the

Brigadier stole it."

"Why?"

I shrug but Jessa can't contain herself. "Because he's the serial

killer."

Raffy is irritated. "Don't say that in front of Chaz. The Santangelo household is in a state of fear because of you, Jessa. Enough about the serial killer," she says firmly.

"Do you think they're real? Those people in Hannah's story?"

Jessa asks.

"Yes I do," I say. And it's the first time I've said out loud that Hannah's story is real.

"Why can't we just get the rest of the manuscript?" Jessa asks.

"How? Knock on his tent and say, 'Yoo-hoo, remember me? I threw a stretcher bed at you. Can I have the manuscript back?'"

"According to Teresa and the boy she's going
260

around with, the Brigadier hasn't been there during the holidays. He doesn't get back until tomorrow."

"How does Teresa know that?" Raffy asks.

"Teresa's in a relationship with one of the Cadets. They're going 'around' with each other," I explain patiently.

"The Cadets are the enemy," Raffy says. "We're not supposed

to be conducting relationships with them."

I nod in agreement.

"Although the whole town is talking about the snog you and Griggs--"

"Enough about that," I snap. "It was a one-off."

"What's a one-off?" Santangelo asks as he arrives.

Raffy looks at me, knowing I'll lose it if she mentions it

again.

"Nothing," she mutters.

Jessa has already run off with Santangelo's sister, Tilly, and the

three of us are left beating around the bush until Raffy holds out

her hand.

"What have you got?" she says to him.

"It's not about the territory wars."

Her hand is still out and he looks at me because mine isn't.

Then he reluctantly hands over an envelope.

261

"It's a photo," he says. "I got it from the file at the station."

A photo that I am dying to see, although I'm sure something inside of me will die from seeing it.

"What's the worst thing that can happen?" he asks.

I watch Jessa and Tilly swing off the stairs of the water tower

like monkeys without a care in the world. "Be careful,"

Santangelo calls out to them.

It takes me a moment to find my voice. "If I look at the photo

and

whoever it is looks exactly like me, that only means he can be

my father, and if he's the boy who's been missing for eighteen

years, it means that my father is dead and I've never thought

that. *Ever.*"

"Then don't look at it," Raffy says. "You know you had a father,

Taylor. You were on his shoulders and you lay between him and your mother. It was the first thing you told me in year seven.

Remember?"

I nod. "And then I told you something else."

She looks at me. "But the shoulders of the giant is a better story."

I remember love. It's what I have to keep on reminding myself.

It's funny how you can forget

262

everything except people loving you. Maybe that's why

humans

find it so hard getting over love affairs. It's not the pain
they're

getting over, it's the love.

"Then I'll take it back," Santangelo says. "Maybe memories
should be left the way they are."

I can feel Raffy's eyes on me and I lean over and take the
envelope gently out of her hands. "Thanks, Raf, but I think
this

belong to me."

I do the count to ten that always reaches eleven and then
begin

again. Until I find the guts to look.

He's the most beautiful creature I have ever seen and it's
not

about his face but the life force I can see in him. It's the
smile

and the pure promise of everything he has to offer. Like
he's

saying, "Here I am, world; are you ready for so much
passion

and beauty and goodness and love and every other word
that

should be in the dictionary under the word *life*?" Except this
boy

is dead and the unnaturalness of it makes me want to pull
my

hair out with Tate's and Narnie's and Fitz's and Jude's grief
all

combined. It makes me want to yell at the God that I wish I
didn't

believe in. For hogging him all to himself. I want to say, You
greedy God. Give him back. I needed him here.

There is total silence around me and I'm not sure

263

if I have said all this out loud or shouted it in my heart.

I hand the photo to Raffy and she does what I can't. She
bursts

into tears.

This is what I know. I look like my father. My father
disappeared

when he was seventeen years old. Hannah once told me
that

there is something unnatural about being older than your father

ever got to be. When you can say that at the age of seventeen,

it's a different kind of devastating.

Later we walk to the police station to ask Santangelo's dad if his

sister can stay at the school for the night. I feel numb with a sort

of anger at no one in particular but I feel it brew inside me and I

want to lash out at anyone.

Santangelo's dad comes outside. I watch his daughter jump onto him and he piggybacks her to us and I see the look on her

face that says that nothing can happen to her if she is holding

on to her dad. It kills me to hate them so much for having that.

"She can stay with us for the night," Raffy says. "There are spare beds in the dorm."

Tilly and Jessa are crazy with excitement.

264

"Take care of my little girl," Santangelo's dad says to me
and for

a moment my blood runs cold.

"What? What did you say?"

He is confused. "Tilly. Take care of her."

And then the moment is gone but the words still ring in my
ears.

"I think he's worried about the serial killer," Jessa tells me.

"No mention of the serial killer," Santangelo's dad says
warningly as he takes both girls inside to ring Santangelo's
mum.

The three of us sit on the footpath and I can tell they want
to say

something. *Anything.*

"At least it means that your father wasn't weak and didn't
leave

you," Santangelo says.

I stare at him. "Dead or weak? Are they my options ? I think

I

just might say yes to a weak father rather than a dead one,

if

you don't mind."

He tries to find something else to talk about and I want to make

it easier for him because it's not his fault, but all I can think of is

Hannah's story. My aunt's story. How strange it is to use those

words for the first time. I have an aunt and I don't even know

where she is. But I do know that I yearn for her in

265

a way I never thought possible, and that she's somehow written

the story of my family's life. And part of that story is sitting in the

Brigadier's tent. Halfway through Santangelo's spiel about Club

House stuff, Raffy looks at me and she knows exactly what I'm

thinking.

"We're going into Cadet territory," she interrupts him.
"Tonight.

And you're coming with us." I m sorry?

"I need to get something out of the Brigadier's tent," I
explain to

him. "He's not there and I'm breaking in."

"Are you nuts?" he says, as though we couldn't possibly be
serious. "Both of you?"

"He has something of mine ... well, kind of mine."

"I'm not breaking into the Brigadier's tent and neither are
you!"

"Come on, Chaz," Raffy says. "You and Joe Salvatore are
experts on locks." She looks at me. "Joe's father's a
locksmith

and Chaz worked there part-time for a while. He broke into
the

high school once for my mum when she left her teacher's
chronicle there."

266

"Wow."

"Breaking and entering is a crime," he reminds us, not
falling for

the feigned enthusiasm. "Can we just get back to what I was

saying? Stevie reckons he's got hold of an espresso machine

and--"

"You broke into your father's police station," I remind him.

"That's a crime."

"To help you," he says forcefully, giving up on telling us about

the Club House.

"Santangelo, I promise you," I say, "somewhere deep down I

have a feeling that the thing in the Brigadier's tent is going to

help me. Please."

"I'm going home," Santangelo says. "You're going back to your

House and no one is invading Cadet territory."

"What are you going to do? Arrest us?" Raffy asks.

Santangelo is irritated. "We're not supposed to be collaborating.

It's supposed to be a war and you're supposed to stick to the boundaries."

"We've seen you in your jocks," she reminds him. "Taylor and

Griggs have pashed. You've broken into your father's police station for us. Don't you think the war has lost a bit of its tension?"

267

"Yeah, well, it doesn't seem to have lost the tension between them," he says, presumably referring to Griggs and me.

"Why? What has he said to you?" I ask.

"I'm going home," he says, ignoring my question. "Count me out."

Raffy dismisses him with a shrug. "We'll do it on our own, Taylor. Joe Salvatore said he was hopeless under pressure, anyway."

It doesn't take Santangelo long to get the lock open. I am very

impressed by Raffy's and Santangelo's abilities to commit crimes with such finesse.

"You keep watch," I whisper, looking at the rows of tents around us. Once or twice I see a flashlight on in one of them, but the chances of anyone going for a walk at this time of night should be low. I find myself wondering which one is Jonah Griggs's tent. There's a part of me that desperately wants to see him, to make him promise two trillion times over that he will never do anything to hurt himself. But I'm a coward and I know that he will never realise how much he means to me.

"Griggs will kill us," Santangelo whispers back.

268

"You don't owe Griggs anything," I say as I open the flap. I walk into the tent, taking out the small flashlight and trying to be as discreet as possible. I'm surprised at how big the tent

actually

is--almost the size of an office, with a bed in one corner and a

desk and cabinet in the other, as well as tea- and coffee making

facilities alongside it. When I approach the desk, I look for locks,

ready to call Santangelo in, but there doesn't seem to be any

and there's no mystery about where anything is. In the largest

drawer I find the manuscript and alongside it is something else

that belongs to Hannah. It's a stationery box that she has always kept in her bedroom in the Lachlan House cottage, and I

realise that not only has the Brigadier been in the unfinished house by the river but on school territory as well. I've never been curious about the stationery box but I am now that the Brigadier thinks it's important enough to steal.

I open it slowly and shine the torch on the contents: Hannah's

passport and birth certificate and those of Xavier Webster Schroeder, a tape cassette, a couple of newspaper clippings,

and a few photos. My heart begins to beat hard as I touch the

photographs. I am about to see my first images of the five. I wonder

269

if they will live up to my expectations and answer my questions.

But the first few photos are of a child, about three years old, with

eyes that are big and wide and a mullet that the Townies would

envy. Although I have never seen a photograph of myself as a

child, I know it is me. Whoever I was back then, I looked happy

and whoever I was looking at was the very person who made

me happy. How can someone who made me look this

happy no

longer be in my life?

I turn my attention to the two newspaper articles. One is small

and looks older than the other. It's about the disappearance of

Xavier Webster Schroeder. Just fifty words or so. Is that all he

was worth? When I think of the screaming headlines of the teenagers who have gone missing over the years, I can't help

wondering how many words they would spend on me if I disappeared. It mentions the Jellicoe School and calls for any

information to be forwarded to the police station and I'm not surprised to see the Santangelo name there, back when Chaz's

dad was a constable. I pick up the second article but can hardly

read the print. It's as if the words have faded with too much sun,

but the photo and the headline are clear and they send a

chill

right through me. Because

270

looking straight at me, thinner in the face, younger by almost ten

years, is the Brigadier. But it's not the photograph that shatters

me the most. It's the headline above it. kidnapping charges dropped . I feel woozy and nauseous and for the first time in four

weeks I accept the fact that Chloe P. and Jessa might be right

about the Brigadier and that I may never ever see Hannah again. I feel a sob rising in my throat, but suddenly a hand is

placed over my mouth.

"Are you insane?" Griggs whispers in my ear. When he feels

me relax, he lets go and I pull away. I put everything back in the

box and pick it up, ignoring him.

"You can't take that," he whispers loudly, turning me to face him. It's the first time I've seen him in clothes other than his fatigues. He's wearing boxer shorts and a long-sleeved South

Sydney football T-shirt. He looks exactly how I feel. Like shit.

"It's mine," I manage to say.

"Why would the Brigadier have what's yours?"

"Because it's Hannah's."

"Then it's not yours."

"Well, it's not his," I say as forcefully as I can but I feel sick at

heart. I take a few deep breaths, still

271

clutching the box and the manuscript. "I need to go," I say, turning off the flashlight. He tries to take my hand.

"Don't," he says.

But I pull free again. "I need to go, Jonah."

"They must have a history, Taylor. It has nothing to do with you."

I switch the flashlight back on angrily and thrust the box in his

hand, pulling out a photo and holding it up to his face.

"Would you say this has something to do with me?"

He puts down the box and takes the photograph out of my hand,

looking at it carefully. All of a sudden I see the look on his face

that says it's not so simple anymore.

"What if I told you that I think the Brigadier is the serial killer and

Hannah knew and he's done something to her?"

"Jesus, Taylor! Please don't be crazy."

"Maybe I am," I say, nodding, and I'm trying so hard not to cry

but my voice keeps cracking. "What if I told you that some kid

who looks exactly like me is probably my father and probably

dead and I think

272

he comes visiting me at night and I'm going crazy because he's

trying to tell me that something bad is going to happen."

I grab the photo out of his hand. "What if I told you that
from

when this photo was taken until I was ten years old I didn't
exist? There is no proof of my existence. I didn't even go to
school, so no school records, no school friends."

"You have a mother."

"Just say I made her up ? Just say she doesn't exist, either?
Where's the proof? Where's my birth certificate? Where's
my

father? Where's Hannah?"

I try to control myself, attempting to concentrate on
something

else. A thought occurs to me and I move away, yanking
open

the other drawers of the desk. "I bet I know his writing," I
say,

throwing things out of the way. Griggs grabs hold of me and
I

pull away but I fall back against the chair and it tumbles,
making

a crashing sound and the manuscript and the box go flying.

He

grabs me again, pushing me against the table, trying to keep

me still and I try to break free, but his grip is hurting me and his

face is so close to mine that it's like he can see inside my soul.

273

"What if I told you that if you took me to that train right now, I'd

throw myself in front of it without a moment's hesitation?" I whisper. "I swear to God I would, Jonah."

Santangelo pokes his head through the flaps.

"Get out!" Griggs says forcefully, not looking away from me.

"Let go of her, Griggs."

"I said get the fuck out!"

"You've got one minute and I'm taking her with me," Santangelo

says just as forcefully.

I'm shaking so hard and it feels like I'll never be able to stop.

"Please don't be crazy, Taylor," Griggs whispers, leaning his

head against mine. "Please don't be crazy." He kisses me, holding my face between his hands, whispering over and over

again, "*Please.*"

It's the pleading in his voice that calms my heart rate.

"Will you listen to me?" I whisper.

He gently pushes the hair out of my face, tucking it behind my

ears and then he nods.

"I think he did something to my father and Hannah knew stuff

about him and now she's gone,"

274

I try to explain. "Remember when he picked us up in Yass and

the same day those kids disappeared? Do you think it's a coincidence he was in that town on the same day?"

"I was with him all night after we dropped you off. He drove me

back to Sydney."

"They could have been taken in the morning. Who knows how

long he was out there before he caught up with us in the mailman's van?"

"Taylor, he's sat at my table and eaten with my family, in my home."

"Your father was in your home and he ate at your table and he was your biggest threat."

He is silent for a moment. "There are no similarities between my father and the Brigadier," he says at last.

"I bet if I found his handwriting in this room it would be the same as the writing on Hannah's note."

"That only proves he's a friend of Hannah's."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "He's not. I remember the one time he was around her. She couldn't even look him in the eye."

He was all rigid and something else, like he knew that she was on to him."

"Maybe they've got a... thing going. You've only seen them together once. Maybe they see each other when you're not around. Sometimes he's come to my house after being 'out bush' as he calls it. He's more relaxed. Like someone's calmed

him down. Just say this place is 'out bush'?"

"Is he relaxed out here with you guys?"

"No. Do you know who he reminds me of? You. Distracted and

lost and whatever else. Has it occurred to you that the reason

you both keep on meeting each other around Hannah's house

might be because you are both desperately missing the same

person?"

I shake my head. "Why wouldn't she have told me?"

"The same reason she hasn't told you anything else. Maybe she promised someone she wouldn't. I was there when they returned you to her that day, Taylor. She was crazy. I've seen

that craziness on my mother's face when she thinks

something's happened to me or my brother. You and Hannah

are connected big-time in some way."

"I've just found out that she's my father's sister. I think I'm all she

has left. But I'll never understand

276

why she wouldn't tell me."

"Knowing what you've told me about her, there would have to

be a good explanation."

I show him the newspaper article about the Brigadier. "Can you

explain this?"

He takes a moment to read it. "No, but if I told you what the headlines were the day after my father died, would you think

I

was a murderer? "

Santangelo looks in again. "Let's go, Taylor."

I look at him and nod and he doesn't move.

"Can we have a bit of privacy?" Griggs asks him, seething.

"Why? So you can make her go crazy?"

"Who was the dickhead who let her break in here tonight?"

Don't

think for one moment that I've forgotten that!"

Raffy pushes Santangelo out of the way and pokes her head in.

"Someone is out here," she hisses, "so can you both tone down

the testosterone levels."

I look up at Griggs and disentangle myself from his grip.

"I've

got to go," I say, picking up the manuscript and the box from the

floor and trying to grab as much of the stuff that fell out as possible. Under the table in the corner, out of my reach, I can

see

277

some photos and I stretch to get them but Raffy is urgently beckoning to me and I can't quite reach.

As I turn to leave, Griggs catches me by the arm. "You've always had it wrong about that day," he whispers. "I had

never

seen the Brigadier before. He didn't come looking for me, Taylor. He came looking for you."

The next morning, Jessa comes into my room and climbs into

bed next to me.

"It was on the news," she whispers. "Two kids from Mittagong

have gone missing." She's shaking hard so I hold on to her until

I feel her heart stop racing and tell her the story of the boy on

the stolen bike who saved the lives of those kids on the Jellicoe

Road and became our hero.

278

Chapter 19

I go to see Santangelo's dad at the police station. He's working

with his head down and when he looks up, he is startled for a

moment, like he's seen a ghost.

"Who do I remind you of?" I ask quietly.

He grimaces, as though he regrets me seeing that look.

"Narnie Schroeder," he says with a sigh.

"Why did they call her Narnie?"

He walks to the counter and leans forward. I like his face. I trust

it.

"She told me once it was what her brother called her when they

were toddlers. Couldn't say Hannah; somehow it ended up being Narnie."

I nod.

"What can I do for you, Taylor?" he asks, like he's dreading the

answer.

What can he do for me? He can tell me everything he knows.

"I know you're not going to tell me where Hannah is because

she's probably made you promise not to, so I'm going to make

this easy for you. I want to make contact with Fitz and I know

you would know where he is."

He's shaking his head. The grimace is back but there is even

more emotion.

"Please," I say. "I just want to see him. I need to. Because I've

worked out that my father is dead and Fitz knew him and Fitz

would be here because he was a Townie and I want to know

someone who knew my father. Is that so much to ask?"

"I can't do that, Taylor."

"*Why?*" I say, and I realise that I'm close to tears. "Just give

me

one reason."

He pauses for a moment and I realise that the tears aren't just in my eyes.

"Because Fitz is dead." Nothing comes out of my mouth but a shaky breath. I feel gutted, but these days that's pretty normal.

"How?" I ask when I find my voice.

He shakes his head. "I can't tell you that."

280

"Can't because you don't know?"

"Why don't I call Raffy's mum and she'll come and get you?" he

says, and I know he's not going to give me the answers I need.

"Because I don't want you to call Raffy's mum. I want you to call

my mum and I know you can do that through Hannah. But you

can't, or won't, or would love to but not today, thank you very

much. Not a good day to hand out information."

He reaches over and touches my hand and I recoil. I'm embarrassed by my reaction but I keep my distance all the same.

"I promise you this, Taylor. Hannah's coming back. Hannah will

always come back for you. You are everything to her and Jude."

Jude. Jude's alive. I feel relief for the first time in ages. Narnie's

alive as well.

"And Tate?"

He hesitates for a moment and then nods and for the time being

that has to be enough.

I hear him dial the phone and I know he's calling someone to

come and get me so I turn to leave but then I see a poster on the

wall. It's old--I can tell by the edges--and it's drawn by a

child.

Or children.

281

There are two names at the bottom. Chaz and Raffy, 5 years

old, St. Francis Primary, Jellicoe . They drew trees, big ones,

filled with animals and bird life. So full of colour and imagination

and love for this place. I've seen this drawing before. My memory is like Hannah's manuscript--distorted and out of sequence--but instantly I know that years before my mother dumped me on the Jellicoe Road, I had been in this police station.

Narnie and Jude sat side by side watching the police divers. It was a week since Webb had disappeared and suddenly the

focus was on dragging the river. Even the press were there and

throughout the day Jude tried to get close to the action, if only to

catch a word or glimpse of something constructive he could bring back to Narnie.

"Keep her away," the young constable advised quietly. "You don't want her around if we find him."

"What makes you think you're going to find him here?"

"Take her home, Jude."

282

But Narnie wouldn't budge. She watched the divers move gradually down the river with a creased concentration on her

face, like she was trying to work out a puzzle.

Most of the time, though, they watched Fitz. He kept climbing a

tree to the very top branch and throwing himself into the river.

Then he'd swim to the surface and make his way up the tree

again.

Once Jude thought he saw Fitz watching them from behind the

branches and for the first time all day, he left Narnie and made

his way up. Climbing had always been Webb's forte, and both

Webb and Fitz could do it with an agility that Jude lacked. By

the time he heaved himself onto the branch at the top, the sound of his breathing was only surpassed by the sound of Fitz's sobbing.

"Fitz ? Mate, come out. Narnie and Tate need you."

There was no answer, just a muffled sound like Fitz was forcing

a fist into his mouth to stop himself crying.

"Come on, Fitz. "Jude straddled the branch and moved in closer

until he was able to see through to where Fitz was crouched.

283

But the Fitz in front of him was almost a stranger-- caked in mud, his hair matted with debris, his face streaked with dirt and grime.

"Fitz," Jude whispered. "Where have you been? Why are

you

doing this to yourself? "

Fitz stood up on the branch and looked at Jude through bloodshot eyes. Barely balancing, he leaned towards him.

"Listen to the sound, Jude," he said in a hushed voice.

"Listen."

And he threw himself over the side. Jude watched as Narnie

waited below, like she did every time, for Fitz's head to emerge

from the water. When Fitz reached the bank, he looked up to

where Jude still sat.

"Did you hear that, Jude? Did you?" he called out.

Jude looked down at Narnie again, who was now standing, waiting for what would come next.

"Did I hear what, Fitz ? " he called back, confused. To his dismay Fitz began climbing the tree again.

"No. Stay down there, Fitz! "

But Fitz was back up on the branch with Jude. There was blood

on his forehead from where he had hit the riverbed.

284

"I went back," Fitz whispered. "I went back, Jude."

"Back where?"

"For the fifth tin," he answered. "The one I missed. Ping
Ping

Ping Ping. Remember I missed the fifth tin ? " Fitz laughed.
His

normal crazy laugh. "That's almost a rhyme."

Jude's blood went cold. "What are you saying, Fitz?"

"And when I walked away, I heard something hit the water
and I

thought I must have killed a fucker of a bird. I looked but I
couldn't see anything."

"Fitz? What are you saying?"

"Do you want to hear the sound it made?"

Jude lunged, trying to grab him before he went over again,
but it

was too late. He looked at Narnie, still staring up at him, and
started to make his way down the tree.

"When is he going to stop ? " Narnie asked quietly after he
had

sat with her for a while.

Jude didn't answer.

"Fix things, Jude. Tell him to stop," Narnie implored.

"I can't. Let's go home, Narnie."

285

But Narnie shook her head. "I don't have a home."

So they stayed. Long after the police divers had gone. Long after the photographers had packed up and disappeared.

Long

after the Cadets and Townies and Jellicoe kids had headed home.

Watching Fitz. Jump from the top branch. Wade to the bank.

Climb up the tree. Jump from the branch. Over and over again.

Ten times, fifteen times, his grunts and sobs as he pulled himself out of the water were unbearable. Then Jude realised

that he was himself crying and the pain of it was like nothing he

had ever experienced. But then Narnie stood and made her way into the river, wading towards Fitz lying exhausted in

the

shallows. She pulled at his wet clothing with all her strength,

the bulk of him hard for her to manage. Then Jude was beside

her, dragging them both onto the bank, where Narnie cradled

Fitz in her arms, rocking.

"Shhh, Fitz. Shhh."

He shivered uncontrollably, but Narnie held him close.

"Narnie," he sobbed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Shhh, Fitz."

286

"Forgive me, please. Please. Please. Please. Please." The words were pouring out of him, soaked with tears and phlegm

and spit and blood, as she continued rocking him, while Jude

held onto them both.

And at that moment Jude thought something that he would never forgive himself for.

He wished that he had never met any of them.

When I was fourteen years old, I met the Hermit who lived at the

edge of the property at the end of the Jellicoe Road. Before I

met him, I sensed him, watching. Sometimes I'd call out, but

nobody would answer. But on this day, there he was. When I

looked into his eyes I saw genuine love. Not guarded love like

Hannah's or crazy erratic love like my mother's. I saw the real

thing. I don't know why I felt no fear. Maybe he reminded me of

the illustrations of Jesus Christ from Raffy's bible.

I sat with him and he showed me how to make a placemat out of

thistles. We let the thistles prick our fingers to make them bleed

because they made us feel alive.

Then we spoke about our dreams and how we

287

always felt safe in them, no matter how bad everything else seemed. He told me it was one of the best days of his life and

then he took out his gun. A .22 rifle. And he leaned forward and

whispered, "Forgive me, Taylor Markham." Before I could ask

him how he knew my name and what I was to forgive him for he

said, "Take care of my little girl."

And then he told me to close my eyes.

And I think I've been frightened to do just that ever since.

288

Chapter 20

Finally we came to an agreement about the Club House and a week before the Cadets are due to leave, we have the opening.

My heart's not really in it and the only people who seem enthusiastic are Ben and Anson Choi and the Mullet Brothers,

who have spent every possible moment with each other pretending they are a band.

It amazes me that we've got this far, so I suppose that's something to celebrate. But the thing is we don't know how to.

Thirty people from each faction, ninety people all up, stand around staring at one another with absolutely nothing to say.

There's a stage, a drink machine, and a few tables and chairs

but apart from that, there's nothing else. No personality. No conversation. No atmosphere. Nicht. Nix.

Raffy stands next to me, commiserating, and

289

for once I wish someone would start a fight just to introduce noise to the place. On the other side of the room, Griggs is standing against the wall with that stony look on his face while

the rest of the Cadets are huddled in his corner. One of the guys

next to him is even clutching a chessboard, like he was forced

here in the middle of a game. In another corner Santangelo looks slightly bored, even with his girlfriend hanging off him, and behind me I can feel Richard's eyes drilling into me as if I

am the creator of this hell.

But then I catch Griggs's eye and he looks at me in a way that

tells me exactly what he's feeling and I love that look. Suddenly

I want to yell out to everyone, *"It's a game, these territory wars.*

They loved each other."

Instead I turn to Raffy. "See the guy standing next to Jonah

Griggs?" I say. "Their chess champ. Apparently no one can beat him."

She looks at me as if to say, *Who cares?*

"As if," I hear Richard say.

"It's true. Jonah Griggs reckons he's a freak and that they've

beaten every GPS School in Sydney."

"You know what I heard," Raffy says, catching

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on. "That he thinks that no one in this area could possibly beat

anyone from the city."

Richard glares at the guy, and I see the challenge in his eye.

"It'd be great if someone took him down a peg or two," I say, walking away. I approach Griggs, watching as he lifts himself off

the wall, not quite sure what he has to prepare himself for, but

with a look of relief on his face.

"What?" he asks. There's vulnerability in his face and I

sense

that our last session together affected him just as badly as it did

me. There are a million things I want to say to him but in the end

it seems safer talking about this debacle.

I lean in, trying not to seem too friendly to the rest of the world.

"This is a disaster," I whisper.

"Seen bigger and better ones." He makes room between him

and the chess guy and I feel our fingers touch slightly but neither of us moves away.

"See the guy you punched out the other day?" I say a bit louder.

"He's our chess champ. He thinks no one can beat him."

He looks at me as if to say, *Who cares?*

"As if," I hear the guy with the chessboard say.

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"It's true. He's a freak and his team has beaten every school in

the country comp."

"He's up himself," Griggs says, catching on. "Choi reckons he heard him say that no GPS School from the city is ever going to beat him and his team."

The guy with the chessboard glares at Richard and I see that challenge in his eye. He moves away from us and stands huddled with some other guys, who follow his gaze towards Richard.

"I reckon I could take them all on," I tell Griggs quietly.

"You play chess?"

"I can beat him with my eyes closed. Why do you think Richard hates me so much?"

"Because you turn him on and it kills him that he doesn't turn you on," he says, looking at me.

"How do you know?" I grin. "That he doesn't turn me on, that is?"

He laughs and I see that people are watching us. "What do you

think would happen if we kissed right here, right now?" he asks,

digging his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants, grinning

right back at me.

"I think it would cause a riot."

"Well, you know me," he says, lowering his head

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towards me. "Causing a riot is what I do best."

Santangelo approaches before Griggs gets any closer and pulls

him away. "Are you guys insane?" he says, irritated.

"It's called peaceful coexistence, Santangelo. You should try it

and if it works we may sell the idea to the Israelis and Palestinians," I say, throwing his own words back at him.

"This isn't peaceful coexistence. This is the worst idea I've ever

come up with. Everyone's miserable."

"I'm not," Griggs says. "It's easy." He beckons over some of

the

Cadets and introduces me to the first two. "They guarded

the

hostages," he tells me. Santangelo already seems to know them. Some of the Townies, who I recognise from the night

at

the party, come over and shake hands with Griggs and his guys.

I see Trini from Darling House in the crowd and wave her over.

She looks hesitant so I drag two Cadets over to her. "These are

the guys who looked after our year-seven trio," I say, looking at

them with slightly exaggerated gratitude. "Guarded them with

their lives."

The boys blush in unison.

"Griggs was telling me how it keeps him awake

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at night thinking of the fear he put in the hearts of those

girls," I

say, looking at Griggs.

Trini and her friend look shocked at this news and Griggs gives

a shrug. "I presume you are the one responsible for how brilliantly they composed themselves in such a harrowing situation," he says with such charm. He even accompanies it

with a disarming smile.

The girls beam. "We are very strict but fair. Would you like to come and meet the other House seniors?" Trini asks the two

Cadets. They nod and another five or six guys follow them across the room.

"We are so sick of each other's company," Griggs tells us, watching his guys being introduced to the Darling House girls.

"Everyone's hanging to go home."

I look at him and feel a sick twist in my stomach. In ten days'

time I will never see Jonah Griggs again. Ever. He looks at

me

as if he knows what I'm thinking.

Even Santangelo seems flat. "I regret the no-alcohol rule,"

he

says as we make our way to where some guy is making espressos.

By the time we've had our second coffee, the

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chess game between the Murrumbidgee guys and the Cadets is

well and truly underway in one corner. On the other side of the

room the Darling girls are surrounded by Cadets while the girls

from Hastings House look on in total envy. Then the band comes on and I hate to admit it but they kind of make everything

worthwhile. It's hard to explain what happens when jazz and punk fuse with a violin twist but it works. Probably because Anson Choi takes off his shirt while he's playing the saxophone.

Whoever's not chatting up a Cadet or a girl from Darling House

or playing chess with the guys is watching the band. I turn into a groupie.

Ben plays his violin like a madman and even the Mullet Brothers look cool, having grown sideburns for the occasion.

One stares into space in that vacuous way most bass guitarists

do and the other does these pirouettes in the air every time he

jumps. Unfortunately they only have three songs but the music

helps break the ice.

The drummer waves at Raffy and she walks over to the side of

the stage to chat with him.

"Who's that?" Santangelo asks, offering me some chips.

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"The arsonist from Clarence House," I say with my mouth half

full.

From the stage Ben catches my eye. "This is for them, Taylor,"

he calls out as they begin to play. It's a song by the Waterboys

and, like each time I hear the music played by the boy in the tree in my dreams, I experience a bittersweet sense of nostalgia

I have no right to own. When it's time for Ben to play his solo--

his eyes closed, his mind anywhere but here, his fingers so taut

and precise that it almost looks painful--my eyes well with tears.

Because you know from the look on Ben's face that he's somewhere you want to be. Somewhere the five would be each

time they were together. The place goes off. I can feel Griggs's

shoulder against mine and I hear him mutter something under

his breath.

"What?" I say, irritated. "He's fantastic."

There's a look on his face that I don't recognise and I don't quite

get it until Ben jumps off the stage, surrounded by Townie girls.

"Hey!" Griggs calls out to him. "Violin guy!"

Ben points to himself with that *who me?* look, walking towards

us.

Griggs doesn't say anything for a moment, but

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then he clears his throat. "If I had known ... I wouldn't have gone

for your fingers that time."

"You would have just chosen another body part?" Ben says.

"Probably. But not the fingers."

Ben nods. "Cheers." He looks pleased with himself. "I have numbers in this phone that I didn't have at the beginning of the

night," he says, waving it around.

"No coverage," Griggs reminds him.

"And mobile numbers are blocked on our land-lines," I add.

"Thanks for the optimism."

Ben sees Santangelo still staring at Raffy and the drummer
and
pats him on the back.

"Nothing to worry about. He set fire to her hair once in
science
and I think that killed the romance for her."

"Why would I be worried?" Santangelo asks, irritated, as
Raffy
walks back towards us.

"You should be worried," Ben says. "Because you're going
out
with that chick and Raff will go out with some guy and you'll
spend the whole time with this 'thing' hovering between you
and
then you'll

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get married to other people and one day when you're
middle-
aged in your thirties, while both your kids are going to the

same

school, you're going to have this affair because of all the
pent-

up attraction and ruin the lives of everyone in the P and F."

"Your friends are freaks," Santangelo tells Raffy when she
re-

joins us.

"Chaz, I've always had freaks for friends. You should know
that."

I look over at Richard, who is clearly dominating the chess
game and I nudge Griggs. "Want me to teach you how to
play

speed chess?" I ask.

I spend the next half hour annihilating Richard and then we
play

doubles. The head nerd of the Cadets is my partner and
when

it's over he asks me for my number. I'm very flattered and
he

looks a bit crestfallen when I say no.

"It's because they don't have coverage out here," Griggs
tells

him.

"No," I say, looking up at Griggs. "It's actually because my heart

belongs to someone else." And if I could bottle the look on his

face, I'd keep it by my bedside for the rest of my life.

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Chapter 21

One day Tate was there, a ghost of Tate, sitting by the river

where Webb had planned to build a house--a dead look in her

eye, a thin grimace to her lips, a sick pallor to her skin that spoke of despair. The next day she was gone--bags packed, no

note. And for Narnie, hours without them went by, and then days, and then weeks. And in between those seconds and minutes and hours and days and weeks was the most acute

sense of loneliness she'd ever experienced. Sometimes she

knew that Fitz was watching her and she would call out, "Fitzee. Please! Don't leave me!"

But no one came back.

Except Jude.

As predicted, the Club House is profitable and after three nights

we split the money between the

three factions and then we split it again between the Houses.

The leaders have a meeting about what their Houses are going

to do with the funds and I nod with great approval as everyone

is united in their maturity and pragmatism.

Richard has made plans for a maths computer tutor for his house while Ben buys a guitar for his. Trini organises a year's

subscription with Greenpeace and I mumble about some books

and DVDs for our library or maybe some software for the computer.

"Let's get something we can have the bestest fun we've ever

had with," Jessa begs one night when we're on washing-up duty.

"We're not here to have fun," I say.

"Who said?" one of the year tens asks me. I think about it for a

moment and then shrug.

"I actually don't know. It's not that effective when you don't know, is it?"

So we get a karaoke machine.

On the first night, the year tens stage a competition, insisting

that every member of the House has to be involved, so we clear

the year-seven and -eight dorms and wait for our turn. Raffy is

on second and does an impressive job of "I Can't Live, If Living

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Means Without You" but then one of the seniors points out to

her that she's chosen a dependency song and Raffy spends the

whole night neuroticising about it.

"I just worked out that I don't have ambition," she says while one of the year eights sings tearfully, "Am I Not Pretty Enough?"

I start compiling a list of all the kids I should be recommending

to the school counsellor, based on their song choices.

"I think she's reading a little too much into it, Raf."

"No she isn't. Because do you know what my second and third

choices were? 'Don't Leave Me This Way' and 'I Just Don't Know What to Do with Myself.'"

"Mary Grace chose 'Brown-eyed Girl' and she's got blue eyes

and Serina sang 'It's Raining Men' and she's a lesbian. You're

taking this way too seriously. Let it go."

"What have you chosen?"

"I'm doing something with Jessa. Apparently her father was a

Lenny Rogers fan."

"Kenny," she corrects. "'Coward of the County'?" I look at her

suspiciously. "Why that one? Are

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you implying I'm a coward?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's just one of his well-known ones."

"Why didn't you say 'The Gambler'? That's pretty well known,

according to Jessa. I'd rather be a gambler than a coward."

"It's just a song," she insists. But I'm not convinced.

I get up and sing "Islands in the Stream" with Jessa. As usual,

she takes it all very seriously and she does these hands expressions as if she's clutching her heart and then giving it out

to the audience. I refuse to follow but I do enjoy it. We have knockout rounds throughout the week after dinner and it's during this time that I truly get to know my House. Their choices

make me laugh so much at times that I have tears running down

my face and other times they are so poignant that they make me

love them so much without even trying.

Raffy and I spend every other night in the Prayer Tree with Santangelo and Griggs. Each time we set out an agenda,

which

lists the Club House and the territory boundaries as items for

discussion, but it

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never quite happens. We just end up talking about stuff, like the

meaning of life or the importance of karaoke choices.

"Do you think they define you?" Raffy asks them.

"Hope not. I always end up singing some Michael Jackson song," Santangelo says.

"What did you pick?" Griggs asks me. "Kenny Rogers."

"'Coward of the County'?"

I sit back and don't say a word. I am wounded. Griggs looks at

me and then at Raffy. "I said the wrong thing, didn't I?" he asks.

She doesn't say anything out loud, but I know she's mouthing

something to him because next minute he says, "I meant 'The

Gambler.'"

I still don't say anything.

"At the end he saves Becky." Santangelo tries to help.

"Remember? Everyone considered him the coward of the county but he actually wasn't one."

"It's frightening that you've put so much analysis into it,"

Griggs

says.

"It's not me," Santangelo says. "You know what fathers with bad

taste in music are like."

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Except Griggs doesn't, and I can tell Santangelo feels like shit

for saying it.

"My mum's boyfriend listens to Cold Chisel," Griggs says, trying

to make Santangelo feel better. "He's taught my brother all the

words to 'Khe San.' They sing it all the time."

Santangelo doesn't say anything and I can tell he's angry with

himself.

For a while there is silence. Outside, the first cicadas of the season are humming and it's like there's no one else in the world but the four of us. It's Griggs who breaks the silence.

"I loved him, you know," he says quietly. The admission doesn't

surprise me as much as the fact that he's speaking about it.

"That would probably shock people. But I did. I look exactly like

him. Same build, same face. I know every part of my personality

that I got from my father. He was a prick, except even pricks don't deserve to be smashed over the head with a cricket bat."

"That's debatable," Raffy says.

"Do you want to know the worst part?" he asks. I can tell this is

so hard for him because he won't look at us. "Sometimes I forget just how bad he

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was, so all I can remember is that he's dead because of me. It's

unnatural, what I did. Sometimes I'm thinking about it in the middle of class and I'll walk out and ring my mum and say, 'I remember that he took us to the circus, and that we were laughing, so why did I do what I did?' She always has an answer. 'And that night he smashed my head against the glass

cabinet, Jonah. Do you remember that? And when he burnt your brother with the cigarettes, Jonah?'

"Other times I'll wake her in the middle of the night and say, 'He told me that no one loved us as much as he did.' And she'll say,

'And then he walked around the house holding a gun, threatening to kill us all, because he wanted us to be together forever.'"

Griggs looks up at us. "What happens when she's not my memory anymore? What happens when she's not around to tell

me about his belt leaving scars across my two-year-old brother's face or when he whacked her so hard that she lost

her

hearing for a week? Who'll be my memory?"

Santangelo doesn't miss a beat. "I will. Ring me."

"Same," Raffy says.

I look at him. I can't even speak because if I do

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I know I'll cry but I smile and he knows what I'm thinking.

"So, getting back to the karaoke thing," says Griggs, not wanting to deal with too much emotion. "I'd have to go with ... "

He thinks for a moment. "Guns n' Roses, 'Paradise City.'"

"Oh, please," I say. "I'd rather be the coward of the county."

"Guns n' Roses have such skanky hos in their film clips,"

Raffy

says.

"And the problem being?" Santangelo asks.

It's after midnight when Griggs takes something out of his pocket and puts it in front of me.

"You dropped them in the Brigadier's tent."

I stare at the photos in front of me. I'm not ready for more photos.

Not after we've been talking about Jonah's father and

unprofound lyrics and skanky hos.

"You can take them home with you," he says, "and look at them there."

I still don't say anything. I want to but I can't. I want to explain everything that's going on in my head but I can't find the words.

"Who are they of?" Raffy asks quietly.

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"Just a bunch of kids our age," Jonah says.

I reach over with a shaking hand and put the pictures face up on the ground between us. So I can introduce them to the original five.

They are everything I imagined and more.

"Hannah," I say, pointing to one. She's much younger but I'd know her anywhere. "This is the Cadet," I say to them. "He helped them plant their poppies at the spot where their

families

died."

"Is that Fitz?" Raffy asks, pointing to the tallest of them.

I nod, swallowing hard. "Who came by on the stolen bike
and

saved their lives." My voice cracks, just a bit.

I look at Fitz for a long time. He is as wild as I knew he
would be

but so cheeky-looking. I almost expect him to leap out of the
photograph and tap me on the face.

"I feel like I know him and I don't know why," Raffy says.

"He was a Townie," I say.

Santangelo looks at the photo and then at me, slightly
puzzled.

"Is he ..." I nod.

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"Who?" Raffy asks.

Santangelo holds the photo in his hand and I see a blurry
tear

that he, embarrassed, quickly dashes away.

"The Hermit," I say, and I hear a sound come from Raffy
but

before I react, I see something else. Standing next to him in the picture, with an arm around his neck, is Webb. A smile from ear to ear, a look in his eyes so joyous that a second wave of grief comes over me. To be that boy, I think. To feel whatever he was feeling. It makes me feel sick and overwhelmed at the same time.

"Webb," I say. "He began the territory wars," I tell them. "But it was a joke. I mean, his best friends were Cadets and Townies and the only reason the boundaries came about was because they were bored and just wanted to hang out with each other."

"Who's that?" Griggs says, pointing.

It's like my heart stops beating. All because of the person standing at the edge. Tate. Looking up at Webb with a

mixture

of love and exasperation, as if they are the only two in the world. She is so beautiful that it makes me ache and I can hardly breathe. The others look at me questioningly

because

there

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are tears in my eyes and I'm just shaking my head.

"She's so beautiful," I whisper.

I look up at them. "See how beautiful she was."

"Was? Who is she?" Griggs asked, confused by my reaction.

I pick up the photo and study it closely. But her eyes refuse to

meet mine because, for her, there was never anyone but Webb.

"Her name's Tate," I tell them. "She's my mother."

I lie in my bed, still clutching the photos. It's one in the morning

and I know what I have to do. All this time I thought the answers

were here. But now I know that Tate took those answers

with

her and that somehow Hannah's caught up in it. If I had to wish

for something, just one thing, it would be that Hannah would

never see Tate the way I did. Never see Tate's beautiful lush

hair turn brittle, her skin sallow, her teeth ruined by anything she

could get her hands on that would make her forget. That Hannah would never count how many men there were and

how

vile humans can be to one another. That she would never see

the moments in my life

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that were full of neglect and fear and revulsion, moments I can

never go back to because I know they will slow me down for the

rest of my life if I let myself remember them for one

moment.

Tate, who had kept Hannah alive that night, reading her the story of Jem and Mrs. Dubose. And suddenly I know I have to

go but this time without being chased by a Brigadier, without experiencing the kindness of a postman from Yass, and without

taking along a Cadet who will change the way I breathe for the rest of my life.

When I get to the end of the clearing that leads to the Jellicoe

Road, a part of me is not surprised to see Griggs standing there.

Even though it's two in the morning and pitch black, I know it's

Griggs. We stand looking at each other, not able to see much in

the darkness, but I can feel his presence.

I ask the inevitable. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you?"

"I asked first."

"Does it matter who asked first?"

I begin to walk away. "Don't follow me, Jonah."

"I've got a car," he calls out after me. "And you've

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got somewhere to go."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I have this amazing ability to read your mind,
that's

why."

I stop for a moment. "Do you want me to remind you what
happened last time? I don't ever want to be that angry with
you

again, Jonah. I just want to get past Yass this time and find
her."

"Maybe she doesn't want to be found."

"Oh, so you were reading her mind back then, too, were
you? Is

that why you cal ed your school?"

"No, but just say I was reading yours and it was kind of
saying,

'Whatever I find out there is going to kill me a bit inside.'

And I

know what you're thinking now. That if you can find Hannah,

you can find your mother."

"You're wrong," I say, but I walk back to him and we take the

track that leads to the garage.

And he *is* wrong. Because I was thinking the exact opposite.

If I

find my mother, it will lead me to Hannah.

Once we get off the Jellicoe Road, we stop at Santangelo's and

text him to meet us outside. He

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comes out, barefoot and bleary-eyed, holding something in his

hands, and Griggs gets out of the car to greet him. They talk for

a while but I don't want to join in. I'm scared that everyone's going to try to talk me out of this. Santangelo comes to my window and pokes his head in.

"Soon as I got home I burnt you a CD," he says, handing it

to
me.
I nod.
"Take this," he says, putting some notes in my hand. "It's
the
Club House share. GI Joe won't take it."
"No."
"Yes. Pay me back later. The petrol alone will cost you a
fortune
and I can't promise this car will last."
Griggs opens the car door. "We've got to go."
Santangelo leans through the window and hugs me. "Raffy
wil
kill me," he whispers.
He goes around to Griggs's side and they do that awkward
thing where they can't acknowledge that they actually have
a
friendship. After standing around for a moment or two, they
shake hands.
"You know shit's going to hit the fan, all in your direction,"
Griggs says to him as he gets into the car.

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"I'll deal with the sergeant. But I'll tell you this. I'm giving you three days. If you aren't back in three days, I'm going to tell them exactly where you are."

"Fair enough," Griggs says, and I nod.

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Chapter 22

Somewhere on the highway to Sydney I begin to cry and it's like

I can't stop. Griggs reaches over and touches my face, then reaches down and takes hold of my hand. We stay like that for a

while in silence. Like that time on the train, I feel whole and again it surprises me that I can feel so together when I am revisiting the most fragmented time of my life.

We listen to the CD that Santangelo burnt for us. A bit of Guns

n' Roses and Kenny Rogers and the Waterboys and at least three or four of the most tragically dependent love songs of all

times. I see a smile on Griggs's face and I am smiling myself.

We don't have much of a plan. An easy option would be to stay

at his house but he knows his mother will call the Brigadier as

soon as we arrive and he has promised me three days

without

voices of

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reason or authority. So the next seventy-two hours are in
my

territory with my rules. But remembering is difficult. Living
with

my mother meant we moved at least eight times, because
she

was obsessed with the idea that someone was after us.
Once, I

remember falling asleep in a squat in Melbourne and next
morning I woke up in Adelaide. Another time I stayed with a
foster family. I'm not sure how old I was but I remember
kindness. I remember another time, waking up in a police
station when I was about seven years old. I don't know how
I

got there, except that the trip back to my mother seemed a
long

way and now, when I think of it, I realise that police station
was

the one in Jellicoe.

My first clear memory of time and place was being in a hospital

when I was four because of my asthma. The walls were painted

with animals and trees and as I stared at one of the trees, I could swear there was a boy hiding in the branches. I didn't see

that boy again until I got to Hannah's. Except I was never frightened of him or thought it strange, because I thought all people lived the way we did. Then my mother taught me to read

during one of her more lucid times and I realised that there was

something a

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bit dysfunctional about our existence. When I think back to it

now, it amazes me that even when my mother left me at the 7-

Eleven off the Jellicoe Road she was only about twenty-eight

years old. Stranger still, that Hannah was even younger.

I sleep, one of those crazy sleeps where you think you're awake

but it ends up being like you're in a time machine and you look

at the clock and it's three hours later. The morning sun is blinding and there's a foul taste in my mouth.

"You were dribbling," Griggs says. He looks tired, but content.

"Thanks for mentioning it."

"Anson Choi dribbled on my shoulder the whole way down," he

says. He looks at me for a moment and I know he wants to say

something.

"What?" I ask.

"We passed Yass about half an hour ago."

I smile. Three years on and we've moved forward, past the town

where the Brigadier found us.

"If you weren't driving, I'd kiss you senseless," I tell him.

He swerves to the side of the road and stops the car

abruptly.

"Not driving any more."

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All I remember about the Sydney of my past is the last place we

lived in near the Cross. At one stage we're on a road with four

lanes of traffic on each side, in the middle of morning peak-hour

traffic. I see a Coca-Cola sign in the distance and I'm amazed at

what comes flooding back.

"We lived somewhere around here, to the left. Once we lived

just behind that sign."

I'm impressed with Griggs's ability to drive in the city. I feel claustrophobic and caged in. Drivers beep their horns impatiently and there are so many signs and arrows. We drive

around for ages, trying to work out where to park the car.

Everywhere we go there are parking meters. Griggs decides that we need to park the car in a quieter street just outside the city.

"Do you know where?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I don't want to be seen too close to home. Everyone knows everyone."

"Where's home?"

"Waterloo. About five minutes from here."

"Waterloo. Is it a tough place?"

"No, but some people have tough lives. I'll take

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you there one day."

"Turn left," I tell him. "There have to be some streets down here without parking meters."

The car isn't doing so well and I feel bad for Santangelo because he probably knew that a seven-hour trip would wipe it

out but he let us have it all the same. Just thinking of him makes

me think of Raffy and of how they would all be getting ready for school at the moment. I wonder what they're thinking. I left a note saying that I'd be back in a couple of days and for a moment I miss them all: Raffy and Jessa and Ben, and even Mr.

Palmer and poor Chloe P., and the other seniors of the House and the year tens, whose energy I love. I even miss Richard.

After we finally find a car park, Griggs is pragmatic and goes into sergeant-major mode. I can tell that he's already wound up tight. This is a world he can't control the way he does the territory wars or the guys at his school.

"We begin with people you remember, places you remember.

Houses you lived in, corner shops. Restaurants."

But I have no idea where to start because I recognise

nothing.

Even when we come across a playground

318

that looks familiar, I see that the units and terraces around
it

have been renovated. They look expensive and trendy and I
feel as if there is no way that we could ever have lived here
and

it begins to confuse me. The redevelopment around here is
mind-blowing. Restaurants and cafes and a massive
international hotel.

"Where did the other people go?" I ask Griggs. "The people
with nothing but their plastic bags and shopping trolleys fil
ed

with everything they own? What did people say to them?
'You

can't afford to be homeless here?'"

"Let's get something to eat. You haven't had anything since
last
night."

I don't answer and I realise that this was all a big mistake.
He

takes my hand but I pull away. I'm beginning to feel an anxiety

attack coming on and it makes me irritable and narky.

"Did you ever eat at a regular restaurant around here?" he asks.

"Jonah, who eats at restaurants?" I snap. "I've never eaten in a

restaurant in my life. So stop asking such stupid questions."

"I'm only asking because maybe someone might

319

recognise you and be able to help," he says patiently.

All of a sudden, everything about him annoys me. His pragmatism, his patience, his Levis, and his navy long-sleeved

T-shirt. I want him back in his fatigues. I know how to deal with

that Jonah Griggs. Out of uniform he's not playing a role anymore and the real Jonah Griggs is scarier than the Cadet

leader. His emotions are a thousand times more real.

I stare at him and he has that look on his face that asks,

What?

"Wherever we go or whoever we meet, promise me you won't

judge my mother." He doesn't say anything. "Promise."

"I can't," he says, not only irritated but dismissive. "Don't ask me

to do that."

"That's cold."

"Fine. Call it cold. But you've told me too many things that I'll

never forgive her for."

"Then I wish I hadn't told you," I snap.

"But you did," he snaps back, "so find someone else who will

love and forgive her, because it won't be me."

"Then why are you here?" I'm shouting now and

320

I don't know why, because the last thing I want to do is fight with

him in the middle of a Sydney street.

He stops and looks at me. "I'm here because of you. You're my

priority. Your happiness, in some fucked way, is tuned in to mine. Get that through your thick skull. Would I like it any other

way? Hell, yes, but I don't think that will be happening in my lifetime."

"Wow," I say sarcastically. "That's way too much romance for me today."

"If you want romance, go be with Ben Cassidy. Maybe he'll fawn all over you or play a beautiful piece of violin music. I never promised you romance. And stop finding a reason to be

angry with me. I didn't redevelop this place. I just asked if you ate at restaurants."

For a while we walk in silence, and it's uncomfortable and angry. We come across a cafe on a corner where business people are waiting in line to order coffee and two cheerful guys

behind the counter are fast and efficient. Sometimes they look

up at one of the customers and say, "Flat white and ham-
and-
cheese croissant?" before the person has even opened
their
mouth, and I wish they'd do the same

321

with me. Just look up and recognise me and know exactly
what

I order every day.

But they don't, because this is a whole other world to the
one I

lived in seven years ago. Griggs orders coffee and bacon
and

eggs for himself then looks at me. I shrug.

"White toast and marmalade and a hot chocolate," he says,
and

it doesn't surprise me just how much he's taken in about
me.

We eat in silence and then he buys some fruit and puts it in
my

backpack and we set off towards Kings Cross.

"Do you eat at restaurants?" I ask him quietly, wondering if

he

regrets coming with me.

"Yeah. With my mum and Daniel, my brother. Or sometimes

with Jack, my mum's boyfriend. At least once a week."

"Do you like Jack? "

"He's a great guy. He's fantastic with Daniel and he takes care

of my mum without trying to take over."

"Your brother sounds like he's your friend."

"My brother is my god," he says. "I can't begin to tell you how

decent that kid is."

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"I can't imagine him being more decent than his brother."

He looks at me and I can see his body relax a bit. He puts his

arm around me and kisses the top of my head as we walk.

"Jonah," I say quietly, never wanting him to let go. "Just say I

didn't exist?"

It's the longest day of my life. The lack of familiarity gets worse.

The main drag of Kings Cross gives me snippets of memory but

not enough. I feel like it's a foreign land. It's cleaner and the people look different: better dressed, better looking, comfortable. It's not as if there is something wrong about an area being cleaned up and gentrified, especially when it was famous for prostitution and drugs and corruption, but it has wiped out my history. Everything smells different and everyone

walks at a different pace.

"When we lived here her name was Annie," I tell Griggs. "She

used to change it all the time. She said that people were after

us and she'd say, 'Your name is Tessa today.' But I'd lie in bed

at night and I'd say to myself over and over again, 'My name is

Taylor

Markham.' I never wanted to be anyone else. She used to say

that I named myself. Like she didn't care enough to name me."

"It's probably a better reason than that. Did you hang out with

any kids around here?"

"Not really. There was one kid, Simon. His father was a transvestite and he'd let us wear his clothes. We'd go to video

arcades and games rooms. He was addicted to all the games.

Sometimes we'd just hang out in the parks. It's how I learnt to

play chess, you know."

"We can start there," Griggs says.

"I don't think I'd remember what he looked like," I say. "And I

doubt he'd still be around."

"Where else would he go aside from the park?"

We go to a Time Zone. It's the closest reminder of my

former life

so far. A couple of kids are off their faces and someone has spewed right near the entrance. Some are in uniform and I can

imagine them having left that morning pretending they were going to school. But the ones who leave the biggest impression

are those in casual clothes. They don't have to answer to anyone. I ask the guy at the register if he knows Simon and he

shrugs and carries on

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reading his magazine. "It's a common name," is all he says when I bug him again.

"If he comes in, can you tell him that Taylor Markham is looking

for him? That I'll be at McDonald's across the road at six thirty

tonight?"

It's like talking to a brick wall, actually even worse because at

least I could lean on a brick wall. I talk to a few other people

around and I give them the same information but by the time I

walk out, I accept that Simon is not an option.

We go to one of the homeless hostels in East Sydney. One minute we're walking down a street that Griggs reckons has million-dollar properties and the next we're turning into a lane

where old men lie on the road on filthy mattresses, garbage everywhere. When I look at them closely, though, I realise they

aren't so old. The hostel caters only to men and after we ask

around, we're directed to another one on the other side of the

main road. For the first time in what feels like ages, I find myself

thinking of the Hermit. In my memory he was old, but now I realise that he wasn't at all. He was like these men, who dirt and grime and neglect have made seem a thousand years older

than they are.

When we get to the top of the queue at the second soup kitchen, I take out the photo of the five and show the girl serving.

"Do you recognise this person?" I ask, pointing to Tate. "It's very dated but she may look familiar."

"Sorry, love," she says, shaking her head.

"I really need to find her," I say. "Could you ask the other people in there?"

What are the odds of anyone recognising my mother? What are the odds that these people have actually looked in the faces of

the people who walk into this place? I glance at Griggs, who is

looking around the room at everyone. I can tell he's a bit shell-

shocked. He tries to muster up a smile but there's not really enough to keep it there.

When we're not asking people questions or roaming the

streets

for any type of recognition, we sit in McDonald's because it's the

only place where they don't bug you to order or leave. By late

afternoon I'm tired and I want to go back to my room at school

and just lie down. I can sense that Griggs is exhausted, especially after driving all night. We make plans to book into one of the youth hostels in the street behind the main drag, careful of how we spend the

326

money. We find out where the food vans are, in case I recognise someone there who might know my mother or even

Simon, but my mind is a blank and I feel like there's no way I'll

ever know anyone. Each time I check my watch I think of what

Raffy and everyone else are doing back home. I have been away for not even twenty-four hours and I am homesick

beyond

comprehension.

At night the place begins to look a bit more like I remember it,

and Griggs suggests that we stick around because this could be

the time when people I might recognise come out of hibernation.

We stand by the fountain on Darlinghurst Road and for a moment I get a glimpse of who I was back then. Tagging along

behind my mother on these streets, our feet dirty, but our dresses so pretty. I wore a white one, once, someone's old communion dress that we had found in an op-shop and I thought I was a princess. Suddenly, for one incredible moment,

I remember something. That my mother smiled at me in wonder

that day and said, "Look at my beautiful girl."

He had been away from the Jellicoe Road for a year and, when

he finished his final exams, he came

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back because he had promised Narnie he would. Along the way he saw their ghosts--planting the poppies, waiting for him

at the general store, planning their tunnel, grieving for their dead. But living in the heart of Narnie was the only home he had ever had. Deep down he knew he wasn't enough to keep

Narnie alive for the rest of her life. But he could try.

"Promise me..." he said to her at her door, his heart aching when he saw Webb's soul in her eyes. But then he stopped himself. No promises about death or keeping alive. That had been Tate's job when Narnie seemed so fragile over the years.

It sounded weak coming from him.

"Promise me that you'll never go looking for Tate. Whatever you

do, don't go looking for Tate."

"Promise me that you'll never ask me that again," she'd replied,

her voice strong and clear.

He shook his head. "She's not Tate anymore, Narnie. She's someone else and that baby..."

"Promise me that one day we'll bring them back here, Jude."

He could tell her now what she'd find, because he had gone looking himself. In the city, the Tate they knew was gone.

Lost

to them. Lost to herself. But

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Narnie stared deep inside him and he remembered what brought him to this place now. This girl, standing on the side of

the Jel icoe Road like an apparition, promising him a richer life

than he ever dreamed of. And he couldn't help himself, couldn't

hold it back until they were in her room, tugging at each other's

clothing, breathing each other's breath, tasting each other's grief.

"Promise me ... promise me ... " he said between gasps, bunching up her skirt, removing anything that got in their

way.

The need to be inside her, connected to her, made his body shudder just at the thought of it. She clutched him, her fingers

digging in like she needed to gather parts of him to act as her

own second skin for the rest of her life. He had never heard emotion from Narnie before and now ... now it was so loud, so

gut-wrenching that he wanted to cover her mouth with his hand.

To hold everything within her. But Narnie had held it in for too

long and her rage, or pain or grief or love, pierced his ears and

he knew that, no matter what, he'd never be able to block it out.

That he'd never want to.

Then when it was over, she gathered him into her arms. And

told him the terrible irony of her life.

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That she had wanted to be dead all those years while her brother was alive. That had been her sin. And this was her penance. Wanting to live when everyone else seemed dead.

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Chapter 23

"Taylor Markham?"

I look up at the boy standing in front of me. One or two of his

teeth are chipped and his skin looks rough with broken capillaries. It's not acne but it looks raw and painful. He is small

and wiry and his eyes have that intense wild look that I've seen

on many of the faces at the soup kitchens and food vans. This

kid, younger than me by at least two years, looks like some kind

of Charles Manson copycat. I stare at him for a moment, totally

at a loss because I know it's not Simon. But then it hits me and

my heart picks up a beat of excitement.

Not because he means something to me but because he is proof that I existed. He lived in the room next door to us.

Him

and his mum. She'd leave him with me sometimes and the rest

is a blank.

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He knows I can hardly remember him. He has that disgusted

look on his face you get when someone forgets your name.

"You're supposed to be dead," he says flatly.

The shock of his words makes my blood run cold and I can feel

Griggs tensing up next to me. The kid is fidgety, like he's either

on something or just coming off it. I look at his arm and see the

bruising from the needle marks and he catches me looking but

there's no expression on his face. He's numb to the world.

I stare at him. How can you just forget a person completely until

the moment you see his face again? Who else is back there lurking in my head?

"My mother? Have you seen her?" I ask.

"Around. But not for a while."

"How long a while?"

"Don't care. I've got to be someplace," he says, and just like that he walks away.

I stand staring, my mind full of a thousand thoughts that I am so used to shoving into locked drawers. But this time I let those thoughts stay no matter how bad they may be.

Sam. I don't quite know where the name has come

332

from but it appears on my lips like a sob and I run after him.

"Sam!" The sound of his name stops him and for a moment

I see a flash of something like vulnerability.

"Go," I say. "Wherever you have to be. But meet us later. At the McDonald's."

He knows which McDonald's because we've been there before.

"My shout."

We wait for hours and then he's there. He totally ignores Griggs

and sits down opposite me.

I don't know what to say to him and I don't really get the sense

that he actually wants to talk to me but he doesn't move.

"Do you want something to eat?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Maybe a Big Mac."

I look at Griggs who keeps on staring at the kid like he doesn't

trust him for a moment.

"Jonah?" I say. He gives me one of those looks that say, *I'm not*

going anywhere, but after a moment he reluctantly stands up.

"Would you like fries with that?" he asks Sam sarcastically.

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"Large Coke."

"Same," I say. We're left alone.

"How come you thought I was dead?" I ask, staring at him the

whole time, not really wanting to hear the answer.

The kid shrugs. He scratches a scab on his finger and the crust

falls on the table in front of us. "Do you have cigarettes?" he asks.

"You can't smoke in here."

"For later."

I shake my head.

"Have you got ten dollars?"

I nod and we don't speak for a while.

Griggs returns and sits down again. Under the table, I squeeze

his hand.

"Sam's mother worked with mine," I tell Griggs, almost conversationally. "I used to look after him."

Griggs nods.

"I don't think he actually understands what you mean by 'work,'"

Sam says. "Do you, dickhead?"

"Maybe we can go outside and you can explain it to me,"

Griggs

says to him quietly.

Not now, Griggs, I want to say. I can tell it is

334

going to kill him to keep his mouth shut.

Sam concentrates on the food and wolfs it down almost in three

mouthfuls. I take small bites of mine.

"I need to find her, Sam," I say when he seems to be finished.

"It's really important. Maybe your mum will know."

"Eve? She's a fruitcake. It's like everything's fried up there, do

you know what I mean? Every time I ring her it's like, 'Sam, can

you lend me twenty dollars?'" He puts on a whining voice. "'Can

you buy me a case of beer? Can you buy me some ciggies?'"

He looks at me intensely. As if a thought has just occurred to

him. "And she never pays me back. She's a waste of space and

she keeps on having these fucking kids."

I remember Eve now. She lived totally for the guy she was with and Sam was the number twelve priority in her life. Sam was a pathetic kid, so tiny and needy. His nose was continually running and he was always getting bashed up by older kids in the area. The one thing about my mother was that she never formed emotional attachments to men, so I never had to suffer the consequences of her relationships.

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Sometimes when we were walking along, I'd see her looking in the distance as if she was searching for someone. I think now that she believed that Webb could have been out here and it's what kept her around this place for so long.

"Do you remember the last time you saw me?" he asks.

I don't answer and he continues. "Eve had left us at home with

Les, that arsehole she was going out with."

I shudder and I sense Griggs looking at me.

"The cops got him, you know. Part of the kid porn thing a couple

of months ago. Remember your mum came after her shift and

went berserk and she was belting Les with everything she could find and she was screaming, 'What the fuck have you done to them?'"

I shake my head. But I do remember now and I know it's the story I told Raffy that she'll never forget. The one she wouldn't

let me remember.

"And we were just standing there in our knickers crying because we didn't get why she was going apeshit and she grabbed you and dragged you out of there and Eve was shouting at her and calling her a

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crazy bitch and the neighbours went nuts."

"Whose mother was the bigger fruitcake? Yours or mine?"

Next to me I sense the change in Griggs's breathing.

"And I never saw you again. Two days later she came back without you. She was so off her face. Eve asked, 'Where's the kid?' and your mum said, 'She's in heaven,' and she just killed herself laughing for ages. Fuck, I cried for a week, you know."

I'm staring at him with my mouth open. "Why would my mother say something like that?"

Sam doesn't respond to questions and doesn't wait for answers.

He just speaks and I can't even block him out because it takes too much effort.

"You had a Spiderman outfit," he continues.

"Saving the neighbourhood from evil," I say weakly, remembering my line.

He stands up. "Got to be somewhere," he says. "You said you

had money."

I look at Griggs, pleadingly, but Griggs is staring at me like he's

been hit by a truck.

I glance back at Sam and there's a look on his face. Like he hates me. "You're angry with me," I say as he

337

begins to walk away.

"Let him go," Griggs says quietly.

But I can't. I jump out of the booth and go after him. "I didn't ask

her to take me out to a Seven-Eleven six hundred kilometres

from here and leave me there, Sam. At least your mother didn't

do that to you," I say angrily. Griggs tries to pull me away.

"Mine went to Canberra for two weeks," Sam says, looking at

me with massive cold eyes. "But she didn't leave me there. She

left me with Les."

I stare at him. Griggs is standing next to me, rubbing his

eyes,

like he'd love to just disappear. After a couple of minutes I take

some of Santangelo's money from Griggs and stuff it into Sam's

hand. Our fingers touch for a moment.

"You didn't even know who I was," he says. "I knew you straightaway." And that little hurt boy is back and I let myself remember things that I've been blocking for years.

"What do you want me to remember, Sam? That I taught you to

read? And we read the first Harry Potter book and when I finished you said ... you said ..." I can hardly speak because I'm

crying again.

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"I said, 'I wish I was a wizard,'" he whispers.

We stare at each other for a moment and he pockets the money.

"Do you know where Oxford Street is?" he asks after a moment.

I look at Griggs and he nods.

"Meet me there tonight at about ten thirty. At the lights outside

the Court House Hotel."

I nod again.

"I'll find out what I can from Eve."

Griggs and I walk in total silence. We're in a laneway where rubbish is strewn and bins are overflowing. Suddenly he kicks

one of the bins with full force and it goes flying. I stand and watch him. His back is to me. I walk up and put my arms around

him, leaning against him.

I feel his heart thumping hard and his hands take mine and they

are shaking.

"You okay now?" I ask him after a while.

He doesn't say anything, but just turns around and holds me.

"Jonah, regardless of what happened, I've spent the last six years living in ..."

I think for a moment and a little touch of hope makes itself felt.

"What?" he asks.

"I was going to say, 'I've spent the last six years living in paradise.' Do you get it? It's like heaven. That's what she meant."

"Except the kid thought you were dead."

"She took me out there and rang up Hannah because if there

was one place Tate loved, it was Jellicoe and she knew it would be the safest place for me."

"And when she came back, the kid said she was absolutely off

her face because you were gone from her life," he said.

I'm looking at him in wonder. "I never thought she loved me, you

know."

It's a quarter to eleven before Sam shows. He has that edgy look about him, unable to keep still, his eyes like a crazed rabbit

about to be caught.

"She's in a hos--hospice? Up the road. St. Vincent's."

"Hospital," I correct.

"Whatever."

"What's wrong with her?"

340

He shrugs. He looks around, edging away, but I catch a glimpse

of some need in his eyes. Like he hasn't given up completely.

Griggs takes my hand and pulls me away, but I don't want to let

go.

"Sam!" I call out and he turns around. "I live on the Jellicoe Road. Where trees make canopies overhead and where you can sit at the top of them and see forever. My aunt built me a

house there. Remember that."

He's staring at me but it's better than him walking away.

"Promise me you'll remember," I say forcefully.

He nods and we walk away but like Lot's wife I turn back. He's

talking to this middle-aged guy who has his hand on his

shoulder. The next minute they both get into a taxi and then they're gone.

"Let's go," Griggs says quietly.

At the hostel we get our own room. It's tiny with double bunks

but we climb into the same bed and Griggs holds on to me like

he's never going to let go.

"Do you want to know why I called my school

341

that time?" he asks in the dark.

"You don't have to explain."

"No, I want to. I had this dream. That someone-- actually it was

my father--spoke to me and he said, 'Jonah, if you go any farther, you will never come back,' and although I've been told a

million times during counselling that I don't need his forgiveness, I just thought it was the closest thing to it. That maybe he was protecting me from something out there and that

the warning was his way of saying that he forgave me. Then

I thought, if I'm not coming back, then you probably won't be either so I called the school and next thing the Brigadier and Santangelo's dad turn up."

He sounds so sad that it breaks my heart.

"But now that we're out here, as bad as everything seems, I don't think my life or yours was at risk. So I must have imagined

it all. There was no message. There was no forgiveness.

Nothing."

"You don't know that. We were younger then, Jonah. Maybe something would have happened to us if we had reached the

city. And, as Jessa would say, there is always that serial killer.

Maybe your dad was warning you because he cared."

342

He shakes his head and, although it's dark, I can tell he's crying.

"What are you thinking?" I whisper after a while.

"That you deserve romance," he says.

I trace his face with my fingers. "Let me see. A guy tells me that

he would have thrown himself in front of a train if it wasn't for me

and then drives seven hours straight, without whingeing once,

on a wild-goose chase in search of my mother with absolutely

no clue where to start. He is, in all probability, going to get court-martialled because of me, has put up with my moodiness

all day long, and knows exactly what to order me for breakfast. It

doesn't get any more romantic than that, Jonah."

"I'm in year eleven, Taylor. I'm not going to get court-martialled."

"Just say you get expelled?"

"Then so be it. I still would have driven for seven hours and ordered you hot chocolate and white toast and marmalade."

"And you don't call that romantic? God, you've got a lot to learn."

I sit up in the dark and after a moment I take off

343

my singlet and I hear him taking off his T-shirt and we sit there,

holding each other, kissing until our mouths are aching, and then we're pulling off the rest of our clothes and I'm under him

and I feel as if I'm imprinted onto his body. Everything hurts, every single thing including the weight of him and I'm crying because it hurts and he's telling me he's sorry over and over again, and I figure that somewhere down the track we'll work

out the right way of doing this but I don't want to let go, because

tonight I'm not looking for anything more than being part of him.

Because being part of him isn't just anything. It's kind of everything.

344

Chapter 24

During this time I start to get to know my mother again by piecing together fragments of our lives, snippets of Hannah's

story and Sam's miserable memories. What kills me most is my

inability to remember much of that journey when she drove me

to the Jellicoe Road. And I want to. I want to remember the look

in her eyes when she realised that she had to let go of the person who was her closest link to Webb. Did she look at me

and tell me she loved me? Or did she not speak at all because

the words would slice her throat, leaving her to bleed to death

all the way back?

While I sit in the foyer of St. Vincent's hospital, waiting for the

receptionist to finish on the phone, I think of everything I

have

always wanted to say to my mother and how in the past
twenty-

four hours

345

all of it has changed.

"You ready?" Griggs asks, coming back from ringing
Santangelo.

I shake my head.

"How about I go up and ask?"

I look at him, trying to manage a smile.

"What are you thinking?" he asks. I've been piecing
together

tiny details about him as well. That he always asks that
question because he has to see a counsellor every week at
home and that's what his counsellor asks him. And that
sometimes he's a bit shy, like he is at the moment and has
been

all morning. It makes me feel shy back. I wonder if everyone
else is shy the morning after or whether they chat and laugh
as

if it's the most natural thing in the world. I wonder if we're

unnatural.

"I'm thinking that after last night you shouldn't have to spend

your morning in a hospital finding out if my mother has tried to

OD."

"And I'm thinking that after last night I want to be anywhere you

are and if that means being in a hospital asking about your mother, then so be it."

But we know that we're both thinking about much more than

what we're doing here now.

346

"Just say after Wednesday we never see each--"

"Don't," he says, angry.

"Jonah, you live six hundred kilometres away from me," I argue.

"Between now and when we graduate next year there are at least ten weeks' holiday and five random public holidays.

There's email and if you manage to get down to the town,

there's text messaging and mobile phone calls. If not, the five

minutes you get to speak to me on your communal phone is better than nothing. There are the chess nerds who want to invite you to our school for the chess comp next March and there's this town in the middle, planned by Walter Burley Griffin,

where we can meet up and protest against our government's refusal to sign the Kyoto treaty."

"Gees, Jonah," I say in mock indignation. "I wish you'd put more

thought into our relationship."

"And then we make plans."

"As long as you don't have an affair with Lily, the girl next door."

"Her name's actually Gerty. She's bigger than me and can beat

me in an arm-wrestle. There is no way in this world that I will

ever, *ever* go out with

someone called Gerty because if I married her and she wanted

to take my name, she'd be called Gerty Griggs."

I laugh for the first time in days and then I take a deep breath

and stand up. "I'm ready."

We walk to the counter and I ask politely for Tate Markham, hoping she's under that name. The receptionist looks on a written list in front of her and shakes her head.

"Are you sure she's here?" she asks.

"No, but we were told she was."

She taps her keyboard and I'm beginning to feel sick. Don't let

me have to start again, I pray. She shakes her head and I hear

Griggs clear his throat.

"Is there a St. Vincent's hospice around?"

"Next door."

I breathe a sigh of relief and thank her before walking away.

"What's the cliff?" I ask him. He shrugs.

When we walk into the hospice, I go through the same

routine

again. After a moment I can see the receptionist has come across the name and she peers at it closely. "She was here," she says.

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I feel Griggs's arm around me. *Was*. What does *was* actually

mean? The verb *to be*. Past tense of *is*. Does it mean that someone is no longer *being*?

"She checked out."

The relief almost sends me over the counter to hug her.

"Checked out? Like not a euphemism 'checked out' but a real one?"

The woman looks confused. "She checked out six weeks ago."

Six weeks ago everything changed in my world. Hannah left.

Griggs arrived. The boy in the tree in my dreams began to bring

a sobbing creature to our nightly tête-à-tête.

"What was the date?"

She looks at us and I can see the shutter go down. "We have privacy laws and we can't just give out information.... "

"Please," I beg her, taking out my wallet and showing her my student card. "Our names are the same. I can show you a photo of her. She's my mother and I haven't seen her for six years."

She looks at me and then at Griggs and I feel as if she's going to get emotional as well but then she taps on her keyboard again.

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"She was signed out on the sixteenth of September."

I look at Griggs. "Last time I saw Hannah was on the fifteenth."

"Are you sure?"

"We have the Leadership Council on the fifteenth of September

every year and I saw her the morning after. We had an argument."

I turn back to the receptionist. "Did she sign herself out?" I ask.

"No," she says, reading the screen.

"Did Hannah Schroeder sign her out?"

"No," the receptionist peers closer at her screen. "Jude Scanlon did."

"Jude," I whisper, excited. "Oh my God, Jonah. I'm going to meet Jude."

"Jude Scanlon?" Griggs says. "You never mentioned a Jude Scanlon."

"Yeah I did," I look up at the woman and smile. "Thanks."

"Good luck," she says.

"He's the Cadet," I explain as we walk away. "The one I told you about who planted the poppies."

"Taylor," he says, and I can tell by the look on his

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face that something is not right. "Jude Scanlon is not just the

Cadet. He's the Brigadier."

I'm in shock but everything is starting to make sense. We go

back to where we parked the car and it doesn't start. While Griggs attempts to fix it, I sit on the kerb and use his phone to

ring home. One of the year nines answers and she puts me through a mini third-degree, questioning me about where I am

and when I'm coming back and if I'm coming back and something about Mr. Palmer and the Army man taking Jessa

that morning. I ask her to give the phone to Raffy and a few seconds later I hear her familiar voice.

"Where are you?" she asks, and there are five different tones in

her voice, including shittiness and concern and relief.

"What's happening there?" I ask.

"I don't know," she sighs. "Mr. Palmer and the Brigadier took

Jessa this morning and they haven't returned her. Please tell

me they aren't the serial killers."

"No, they're not. Promise me that you'll never repeat that theory."

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"Promise me that you're coming back."

"Of course I am. Why have they taken Jessa? Can't you find out

through Chaz's dad?"

"Chaz's dad is furious. I mean big-time furious with a big fat F."

"Did he find out that Chaz broke into the police station?"

I can see Griggs looking up from what he's doing and waiting

for the answer.

"Chaz is in so much trouble," she says.

"What? In gaol or painting the town," I try to joke.

"Taylor, his dad won't talk to him." I can tell that Raffy is in no

mood for any kind of humour.

I look at Griggs and cover the mouthpiece. "Chaz's dad isn't talking to him. Did he tell you that?"

"Shit, no," he says, shocked. "He's not going to cope with

that."

I get back to Raffy who is still talking. "... and Chaz is really cut

about it and worse still, he won't tell them where you guys are

so it's like the Cold War over there. He says his father reckons

he'll never trust him again. Are you sure you're okay? "

"Are you?"

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"Well, how can I be? You've run away, Jessa's been taken by

someone you've both told me is a serial killer, Ben's reading the

Old Testament and keeps quoting vengeance scenes and Jonah Griggs in the same breath, and Chaz is so down that he

didn't speak for half the time I was with him last night."

"What did you do for the other half?" I ask.

"Very funny, Taylor. Come home and stop making things complicated," she says angrily.

"I can't find my mother and things *are* complicated."

"Then make them simple and come home."

"Just get Jessa back. I'll be there soon."

Griggs sits on the kerb with me, holding something that he's yanked out of the engine. I can tell he has absolutely no idea

what to do with cars and the more he looks at it, the more confused he is. I don't know what to concentrate on and in what

order. Should I begin with my mother, who checked out of a hospice for God knows what reason? Or with the Brigadier, who

I've just discovered is one of her beloved childhood friends? Or

maybe with Raffy, who is worried about Chaz? Or Jessa, who is

being questioned as we speak? Or should I begin with

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Griggs, who I ... who I what? I don't even know what terminology

to use. Did we have sex? Did we make love? Did we sleep together? Is he my boyfriend? And Hannah? Where's

Hannah

in all this?

"We're going to have to take the train to Yass and then make

our way from there," Griggs says. "We'll have to leave the car

here."

I look at him and shake my head. "You've officially given me an

aversion to trains leading to Yass," I say. I dial directory assistance. "The Jellicoe Police Station," I say.

Griggs is looking at me as if I'm insane. They connect me and I

wait for someone to answer. I say who I am and then I ask for

Santangelo's dad. I wait less than three seconds and he's on

the line.

"Taylor? Where are you?" Shitty tone.

"In Sydney. Is Jude Scanlon there?"

"No. Is Jonah with you?"

"Yes."

I hear the first sigh of relief. Two missing kids located. Tick.

"Can we expect you back soon?" He's now using a measured tone.

"Depends on the Brigadier. Can you give him a

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message? Tell him that we'll be at the hospice. The one he signed my mother out of six weeks ago. He can ring us there or

he can ring us on Jonah's phone. Tell him I want to know where

my mother is and where Hannah is and I want Jessa McKenzie

back in the dorms ASAP."

"Anything else?" Now it's a dry tone.

I'm about to say 'No' and hang up but I change my mind.

"Yes,

actually there is something else," I say. "I met this boy here who

I knew as a kid and his mum left him with a pedophile for two

weeks when he was eight years old and I'm presuming you know everything there is to know about Jonah's father, and that

my father is dead, and my mother hasn't been around for years,

and God knows Jessa's real story. So what I'm saying here, Sergeant, is that we're just a tad low on the reliable adult quota

so you have no right to be all self-righteous about what Chaz

did and if you're going to go around not talking to him when his

only crime was wanting me to have what he has, then I think

you're going to turn out to be a bit of a dud and you know something? I'm just a bit over life's little disappointments right

now. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

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He's silent for a moment.

"We just want you back here." The caring tone in his voice

makes me want to cry but I need to keep my anger focused
or I'll

stop moving forward.

"Why?"

"Because it's what your mother wants and if she knew you
were

somewhere out there meeting up with God knows who, it
would--"

"No lectures," I say. "Just answers. *Please.*"

I hear him sigh.

"I'll talk to Chaz and I'll give Jude your message. He'll have
the

answers, Taylor."

I hang up, and Griggs looks at me, stunned.

"You are very scary sometimes."

I give him back the phone and lean my head on his
shoulder.

"Do you think the Brigadier will come and get us?" I ask.

"It's eleven thirty," he says. "It's a six- to seven-hour trip,
tops. I'll

bet you two trillion dollars that he'll be here by six p.m . on
the

dot."

When he wins the bet, I tell Griggs that it will take me a lifetime

to save up two trillion dollars and he

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tells me that he's only giving me seventy years.

The Brigadier pulls up in front of the hospice and as he gets out

of the car, it's very clear that he's not happy. Like Griggs, it's the

first time I've seen him out of uniform and it's really the first time

I've got a proper look at him. I must shiver because Griggs leans

over and whispers to me not to worry. The Brigadier notices the

exchange and I can tell he's unimpressed. There's a look in his

eyes that says *I know what you did last night.*

"Hannah's out of her mind with worry."

"Really?" I say. "Well, now she must know how I've felt for

the

past six weeks."

He dismisses me with a look and turns to Griggs. "I'll drop you

off at your home, Jonah. We'll be back in two days, anyway, so

there's no point you coming all the way back."

I can't move. I'm stuck to Griggs, not wanting to let go. I hate this

man for even suggesting it but Griggs gently pushes me to the

front passenger seat.

"I'd prefer to return, sir."

"It's not really an option, Jonah," he says quietly. "Sir, whether

you drive me there or whether I hitch, I'll be returning to camp."

Griggs doesn't even

357

raise a sweat, which is amazing because I know how he feels

about the Brigadier. He gets into the back seat and calmly

puts

on his seatbelt. The Brigadier looks at him through the rear-view mirror.

"It would have been better to have left this where it was three years ago."

"This," I presume, is my relationship with Griggs.

"Like you and Narnie did?" I ask. "You had a choice. You could have kept away but you came back."

He sits, staring ahead.

"Where's my mother?" I ask.

The Brigadier starts the car and pulls out of the narrow street.

"Where are they? My mum and Hannah?"

"We can't see them for now."

"Stop the car!" I say angrily.

He continues driving.

"I want to see them *now*." I take off my seatbelt. "Stop the car."

He doesn't stop and I hit him hard. The car swerves and

Griggs

comes over the back of my seat and grabs hold of me.

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"Taylor, calm down," he says firmly, not letting go. The Brigadier slows down and pulls over to the side of the road.

I'm

so furious with him I want to hurt him more than anyone I

have

ever known.

"Soon," he says, and I realise that I've winded him. "It's what

Tate wants, Taylor, and it might seem like the most unfair thing

in the world to you but we have to go by what she wants."

I relax a little and Griggs lets go.

"Sir," he says, and there's something different in his voice. "Tell

her the truth. Please."

I don't understand what he's talking about until Griggs leans forward.

"Her mum was in a hospice. My nan was in a hospice. I know

what that means."

The Brigadier looks at me and I see him swallow hard.

Slowly

things start falling into place. "She doesn't have long."

I hear a sound. Like some kind of animal in pain and I realise

that it has come from my throat. The next minute I'm out of the

car and I'm running hard. I hear the pounding of heavy boots

behind me and feel a hand snake out to grab me. It stops me

but I wriggle out of the Brigadier's grasp and smash him hard

over

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and over again. My hand is a fist and I'm yelling with rage and it

hurts to be feeling this much. For a while he lets me pound into

him, like he's resigned himself to this. Then he grabs my

arms

painfully and holds me tight, muffling my face against him and I

hear the beating of his heart against my cheek.

Suddenly, I'm somewhere else, in another time. On the shoulders of a giant. I had wanted them to be my father's shoulders and all this time they were Jude's. But he holds on to

me in a way that Hannah never has. I feel his relief, like he hasn't held someone in a long, long time. And he's wanted to.

We don't say much as we walk back to the car but he has his

hand on my shoulder and I can feel it shaking. When we're settled inside, he clears his throat and starts up the engine.

"She thought you were the serial killer," Griggs tells him.

"I heard. From Jessa McKenzie."

I don't want to talk just yet but I'm curious. "What were you doing

with her? " I ask quietly.

"Apart from questioning her about your whereabouts, I was listening to the most intriguing story about my life

moonlighting

as a kidnapper."

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"Based on incriminating evidence," Griggs adds. "Apparently you're always around or away when someone disappears."

"Yes, well, kidnapping's my thing," he says dryly.

"According to the newspapers, it is."

"That wasn't kidnapping. That was taking you to a safer place."

"Me?" I ask. "You."

No information comes easily. It's like he's spent a lifetime censoring himself. I can understand, having known Hannah so

long myself.

"How come?"

"You were seven. Tate rang Hannah, wasted, with absolutely

no idea where she had left you. By the time I drove down, you,

being so resourceful, had been found in one of the luggage carts at Central."

My mother leaving me places was nothing new. That it actually

meant something to her, however, surprises me.

"She was on a blinder for the next couple of days, so I stayed,"

he continues. "One day when she was out, I decided to take you back to Narnie's. Except

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by the time I got to Jellicoe, Tate had called the police and they

had to charge me with kidnapping."

I bring out the photograph of me when I was three and show it to

him. He takes it from me, glancing down at it for a moment before he looks back to the road.

"You took this photo?" I ask.

"Narnie did. You came to live with us. It was a bad time for Tate.

She made us promise not to give you back to her until she was

totally clean."

"Then why did you give me back?"

"Because she did get clean. If there was anyone who could make Tate feel anything it was you, Taylor, but then somehow she'd slip up and go downhill fast. Sometimes she'd disappear with you. We lost track of you both for a few years and then, one day, when you were eleven, she rang up Narnie, crazy mad, and said that she was to take you. She signed the papers and told us that under no condition were we to allow her ever to have you again. That she was poison. Her self-loathing was ... I can't explain. She wouldn't even meet Narnie. She told her that you'd be at the Seven-Eleven at twelve fifteen. But she made Narnie promise one more thing. That Narnie was never to be a mother to you. You had a mother, she insisted." And Narnie honoured that. Keeping me at a distance for as

long

as I can remember.

"We still have no idea what made her react that way," he said.

"It doesn't matter," I say quietly, thinking of Sam.

He looks at me carefully. "Oh, it does, believe me.

Everything

that's happened to you matters."

"But not today, sir," Griggs says firmly.

We're silent for a while and I want to ask one thousand questions but I don't know how. I watch him as he drives.

There's a hollowness to his cheeks and a bit of a sadness in his

eyes and although he is all muscle and no fat, he looks underweight and unhealthy.

He senses me staring and looks my way for a moment.

Then he

smiles and it's so lovely that it brings tears to my eyes.

"I look like Narnie," I say like I can read his mind.

"A bit. But you look a lot like Webb." When the silence gets too

much, I put on Santangelo's CD and he looks at me

bemused.

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"Kenny Rogers?"

"Jessa's a fan. I'm relating to some of the music," I tell him.

"'Coward of the County'?"

I glare at him and he looks uncomfortable and for a moment

I

see his eyes glance in the rear-view mirror at Griggs. "I

meant

'The Gambler.'"

"Liar."

But my tone is softer. We've reached some kind of truce

and as

he starts speaking again, I begin to remember his voice. I've

known it all my life. I realise that it is between this man and

Hannah that I once slept as a child. I remember waking up

from

nightmares, my heart thumping so bad, and how his voice,

reading me stories of dragons and wild things would calm

me.

Every time the character in the book, Max, would make the

journey back home I'd point to the page and say, "He's
going

home to his mum."

While Griggs sleeps, he tells me stories I've never heard.
About

all the films they shot on Super 8, of dancing among the
trees

like pagans, of Fitz's .22 rifle and the pot shots he'd take at
anything that moved, of sitting in a tree with Webb and
philosophising

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about the meaning of life. And of their plans to build a bomb
shelter in case the Russians and Americans blew each
other up

with nuclear weapons and the marathon scissor-paper-rock
competitions and the card games that went all night.

I fall in love with these kids over and over again and my
heart

aches for their tragedies and marvels at their friendship.

And it's

like we've been talking for five minutes instead of five hours.

The days they loved best were spent in the clearing,

talking

about where they would go from there. Jude especially enjoyed

these days because it meant he had something to offer them.

The city was a whole new landscape, one that Jude knew better than any of them.

Fitz was in the tree, strategically positioning the five tins.

"As

long as we don't live in some wanky suburb where people drink

coffee and talk shit," he called out.

"The gun has to stay behind," Jude said. "People in the city don't walk around with rifles, shooting tins out of trees."

Fitz swung off one branch to another and climbed

365

down the trunk a third of the way before diving off and landing in

a commando-style roll at their feet.

"Reckon I can be in the Cadets, Jude ?" he mocked.

"You have psycho tattooed on your face, Fitz. Of course

they'll

let you in."

Fitz picked up the gun and aimed and then fired, hitting two of

the unseen tins in a row.

"What happens to Narnie?" Tate asked. "If we leave in a year's

time, she'll be here on her own for the year after."

"You can't stay here," Narnie said quietly. "There's nowhere to

live and there are no jobs. You have to go to the city."

"But we've got money when we turn eighteen," Webb explained. "And we're buying the one-acre block near the river

on this side of the Jellicoe Road. The house is going to be three

split levels, the one on top like an attic. It'll have a skylight so

you can see every star in the galaxy. From the front window downstairs you'll be able to see the river and when all of us

are

old and grey, we'll sit by the window and die peacefully

there,

smoking our pipes, talking bullshit, bringing up our kinfolk--

"

His accent

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turned American and Narnie giggled.

A bullet hit the third tin and a few seconds later another one

hit

the fourth.

"Hey, GI Jude, can you beat that?"

"Hey, Fucked-up Fitz, don't want to."

"Good call." Tate laughed.

"When do we come back to build the house?" Jude asked.

"When we finish our degrees. We come back here and
build for

a year and then we scatter. But the house is always here to
come back to."

"Scatter?" Tate said. "Why? We stay here. Why go
anywhere

else ? "

"Because we'll never know how great this place is until we

leave it," Narnie said.

"I miss it more every time I go," Jude said.

"And you're not even from here," Fitz said.

Jude stared at him. "What?" he asked angrily. "Do you have to

be born here? Or do your parents have to be buried here? Or do

you have to be related? "

Fitz aimed again and fired and for a moment everyone stopped,

waiting for the sound of bullet on tin. But it never came. He looked at Jude and shrugged.

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"Naw. You just have to belong. Long to be."

"By blood?"

"By love," Narnie said, not looking up.

"Good call," Webb said to her, proudly.

"Then you're in, Jude," Fitz said jumping on him. "Because I love you. I love you, Jude; you're my hero. Kiss kiss kiss kiss."

"You wish." Jude threw him off and they wrestled amongst the

leaves good-naturedly. Webb threw himself in and Narnie did,

too, her giggling turning into a gurgling laugh as they tickled her.

And Tate just watched and listened and took it all in. "Can you

hear that?" she said softly, touching her belly. "Because you belong too."

Later, they walked back to the road to see Fitz and Jude off.

As

usual, their goodbyes took longer than the time they had spent

together at the clearing. And when the sun had gone down and

the trees swayed in the canopy overhead, they parted.

"You never got that fifth tin," Webb called to Fitz just before they

disappeared through the trees.

"Not to worry," he said with a wave. "I'll go back for a shot on

another day."

368

"How come you and Hannah aren't together anymore?" I ask

drowsily as we reach the outskirts of town.

"Hannah and I will always be together in a way. It's just hard,

that's all. By the time we lost Fitz ..."

Then there's silence again. Always silence.

"I know who he is, you know. But that's all I know. And that Webb is dead and that Tate is dying. But there's more."

"What else do you need to know, Taylor? I'm your guardian. So

is Hannah. We brought you up every second that Tate let you

out of her sight. If Hannah had you, she was happy."

"And if you had Hannah you were happy?"

He takes his eyes off the road. "Without you she felt guilt and

remorse and despair and she'd look at me and I knew what she

was thinking. That she wished I was her brother or Fitz or

Tate.

We weren't supposed to survive, Hannah and me. We had the least hope."

We drive onto the Jellicoe Road and I feel the presence of the five all around me but more than anything I want to tell Jude Scanlon that he is wrong about what's going through Hannah's head.

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I want to tell him that deep down each time Hannah looked at him she was grateful it was him because Jude did something that the others didn't. He came back for her.

"What happened to him?" Griggs asks quietly. "Fitz?"

"He went a bit crazy, on and off," the Brigadier says after a while. "Met a sweet girl, had a kid, and then the girl died. Cancer. And I think Fitz thought that everything he touched died, so he went into self-imposed exile, like he wanted to

remove himself from his kid in case he cursed her in some way.

But the thing about Fitz, and Tate, too, is that they loved their

baby girls and they couldn't let go. But one day when he couldn't take the demons in his head any longer... "

He doesn't finish the sentence. He doesn't have to. "What about

his kid?" I ask. "We should find her."

But suddenly a fire truck whizzes past us and then another and

then another.

"What the hell was that?" I ask, straining my eyes to see. The

Brigadier puts on his high beams but turns them off instantly.

Coming our way are

370

two more sets of headlights.

"What's happening?" Griggs says. "Why would people be on

the road at this time of the night?"

A third car drives by as we pass the only light on the Jellicoe Road. I see a face pressed up against one of the back windows,

a face so small and frightened that it sends a wave of shock through me that almost paralyses me. It's the face of one of my year sevens.

"The school," I whisper. "I think it's burning down."

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Chapter 25

There is a sick feeling in my stomach when we reach the driveway of the school. I know my world is about to come apart

and it renders me so weak I can barely breathe. At another time

I would have marvelled at the colour. The blaze is spectacular;

and there are slivers of light coming from trucks and cars and

floodlights and spinning red sirens. But the worst thing about

the slivers of light is that you get to catch people's expressions

for only a split second; then they disappear again, and in between you are forced to think about what it is that could make

a person look so devastated.

The Brigadier brings the car to a sudden halt. I yank open the

door and hit the ground running. I have no idea who or what

I'm

heading for but I'm flying and I follow the light, closer and closer

to the

372

blaze. My House is burning down. *My House*. Fire trucks are

parked on the lawn, pumping water into the bottom floor.

Around me there is bedlam. People are everywhere, holding on

to any pyjama-clad girl they can find. House leaders and teachers are keeping the students back, shouting orders for everyone to return to their Houses. The police are here, ambulance officers, fire fighters. I have never seen this

many

strangers at the school in my life. I want everyone to leave

so

that I can find my people. I get glimpses of them and I take

in

their faces, knowing that I need to tick off forty-nine names

in my

head. When the girls from Lachlan House see me, they call

out

or come racing over, some holding on to me with all their might.

Over their heads I meet the eyes of one of the teachers, who

looks shattered.

I help the girls into any of the jackets or jumpers given to us by

the other houses. Three of the year sevens don't move and I

kneel in front of them.

"I want you to go with these people. They'll take care of you. Tomorrow I'll come and get you. Every one of you. I promise. I

swear on the holy bible."

They look at me and nod, clutching my hand, their mouths quivering, tears spilling, sobs bursting

373

out, like machine guns of grief, creating their own carnage of

despair.

"We couldn't get to them," one of them whispers. "They were in the back room where all our junk is. One of them ran there when everything started going up. But I saw them. I saw them both and they couldn't get to us and we couldn't get to them and then the whole thing just--"

"Who?" I ask, trying to keep the horror out of my voice.

"... and she was saying, 'Don't worry'... and then everything collapsed and she was repeating, 'Don't worry, my father ... my father ... my father ... ' What did she always used to say about her father, Taylor? I can't remember anymore."

I feel someone put a blanket around me but I don't turn around to see who it is. I hold on to these three kids until one of the Townie parents comes to take them away. Then I see Raffy standing next to Ms. Morris, who is looking completely bewildered. For one moment my life goes back to the way it

was half an hour ago. My heart beats at a regular pace. I
make

my way towards them, watching Raffy's manic movements
as

she scribbles stuff down on a sheet of

374

paper. When she looks up, I almost don't recognise her. It's
like

I've been away for one million years and the world has
changed.

"I've got all their names down," she says to me and Ms.
Morris

in that practical tone of hers. "I've written down 'I if they've
gone

to the town or the House name if they've gone there. See.
So

we can keep count and we'll know where to find them all
later."

I can't read the list because her hand is shaking so much.
We

look at each other and I nod because I can't speak.

"I've got all the phone numbers as well," she says.

"How many are missing?" I manage to ask. "Two."

I hear my gasping and I think, Not now, Taylor. Not everything is

about your inability to breathe under pressure.

"Show me the list." I wheeze.

But she shakes her head over and over again. "Wait until everyone's here, Taylor. Just two more names and everyone

will be here. *Everyone.*"

I look over at the House as it continues to burn. I

375

look at the fire fighters hovering outside.

I take the list out of Raffy's trembling hands and I see all the names of every person in my House, except for two. A wave of

nausea comes over me. Please, not these two. Please, not any

of them.

"Let's get you out of here," I hear Ms. Morris say. "It won't do

your breathing any good with all this smoke."

But she's just one of the voices and one of the faces I see. Raffy busies herself, chatting incessantly, ushering the year sevens and eights into the trail of cars that have come from the town. I see Santangelo's mum arrive. I want to go back to two weeks ago when she was calling Santangelo a little shit and Jessa and I were giggling at the organised turmoil of their household, wishing we belonged to it but relieved that we were able to walk away.

Raffy continues with her instructions. "Georgina's a diabetic, no sugar, insulin first thing in the morning.... Sarah, put in your plate before you lose it.... "

I see Trini of Darling House. No hysterics from her. Just a practical business-like ordering around

376

and then we look at each other and she touches me, but I pull away because I'm a block of ice. I don't want to feel

anything. I

don't want to think.

"We'll take the seniors and the tens. Hastings will take the year

nines," she tells me.

I just nod at her and she nods back and gets down to business.

Behind me Raffy is still giving instructions. ". she's allergic to

penicillin ... and they've got an assessment task. It's about Me,

Myself, and I, and they have to collect at least five examples of..."

Everything is up close and then it swings away and the swaying

of it plays with my stomach. Then Chaz is there, looking at me

with such sadness, and then he sees Raffy.

"... no peanuts. Peanuts will kill her so don't even breathe peanuts on her...."

"Raf," he says in a tired voice. That's all. Just "Raf."

Then he holds her and for a moment I hear silence-- that

totally

silent part of a cry that announces that the most horrible
grief is

going to follow. And it does and he's muffling it but I can
hear

and I want someone to come over and jab her with a
sedative

because

377

its pitch pierces my soul.

I sway, watching Santangelo's father walk towards us. How
come everyone looks a thousand years older in just a
couple of

hours?

He kneels next to Raffy. "Are you sure you haven't seen
them?"

he asks gently, trying to make himself heard over the noise.

"They could have been taken by one of the parents into
town."

She's shaking her head over and over again. "Sal," she
whispers, horrified. "They're in the House."

I begin walking towards it, the blanket falling off my shoulders.

Jessa. Chloe P. Jessa. Chloe P. I'm walking towards the House. Jessa and Chloe P. are in the back room of the dorm.

I'm running. Their names are in my mind then I realise that I'm

not thinking them: I'm grunting their names and it hurts. Jessa

and Chloe P. Then I'm there, next to the fire trucks a few metres

away from the front verandah.

"Jessa!" I yell so hoarsely that it's like the sound rings through

my ears and makes them pop. "Chloe!" Someone's hands are

holding me back. The Brigadier's hands. Jude Scanlon's hands.

And then I see the fire fighters pour out of the house, racing
378

towards us, just as a crashing sound deafens our ears.

Everyone stands back, helplessly watching. Windows are

smashing under the pressure and the fire roars at us, like
some

ogre refusing to let us in.

I look around and the world becomes a hazy black blizzard. I
sink lower and lower. I hear "someone grab her" and "get a
bloody ambulance" and a claw-like hand finds its way into
my

mouth, down my throat, and into my lungs and it grabs my
breath and squeezes the life out of it and I let it and let it
and let

it....

I am with the boy in the tree in my dreams. I can breathe up
here

and I'm happy and I tell him that I had this dream where I
went

to a school off the Jellicoe Road and we fought a war with
the

Cadets and Townies and how I had lost because I had
surrendered myself to the leader of the enemy years before.

Then I hear the sobbing and we both look in the direction of
the

sound.

"Where does he come from?" I ask.

The boy looks at me, confused. "You brought him to me, Taylor.

Weeks ago."

379

"Me?"

"He won't come out," he tells me, "and I can't find my way in."

I crawl towards the sound, closer and closer, and when I'm a

breath away from it, I put my hand through the branches and I

leave it there and although it seems to take ages, he takes hold

of my hand and drags me in. Then I'm sitting face to face with

the Hermit and he's crying, "Forgive me, forgive me."

I realise that it's not me he's speaking to and I know what I have

to do. I hold his hand firmly and convince him to come out with

me onto the branch where the boy is waiting.

We sit there, the boy, the Hermit, and I, for a while.

Sometimes I

think I can hear people calling my name but I block it out

because at the moment there is no other place I want to be.

The

boy leans over and tells me to explain to the Hermit that there is

nothing to forgive and I do, and the look on the Hermit's face is

one of pure joy.

They reminisce about Tate and Narnie and Jude. They talk about the Prayer Tree and of the messages they wrote on the

trunk. They tell me about the tunnel and how once they timed

themselves getting from

380

one end to the other and how Webb fainted because he had never seen the world that dark. "We saw the devil down there,"

the Hermit tells me, and they laugh so hard that I'm jealous that I

can't join in.

I stand up because from here everything looks fantastic and the

boy smiles a smile that creases his cheeks and I will never see

anything more beautiful. Then he takes my hand and walks me

over to the edge.

I look at Webb and I say, "It was me you were coming for all along."

But he shakes his head and throws me over the side....

I open my eyes. The faces around me look shocked and ashen.

The Brigadier, Santangelo's dad, the fire chief. Raffaella is holding my inhaler to my lips. A second later, Griggs and Santangelo skid to a halt in front of me, staring. Griggs looks

like he's seen a ghost. Does he know something that I don't know? He tries to talk to me, tries to take hold of me, but Santangelo's dad pushes him away gently. "Give her room."

"We heard..." Santangelo begins, his breathing is

381

so heavy he can hardly speak.

I'm back in reality now and suddenly I remember everything.

But

there's too much noise in my ears and too many people talking

at the same time. I look beyond everyone to the House.

Back

there, everything seems to be under control but I know something is strange and I stare at the men in front of me.

"You

can't find them, can you? You can't find their bodies?"

I can tell the guy from the rural fire brigade is surprised because

he exchanges a look with Santangelo's dad.

"And there's no other way out of that dorm."

"They wouldn't have been able to get out," Santangelo's dad says, "They're two little girls."

But I'm looking at the Brigadier and I see something in his eyes.

"Except through the ground. 'My father said there's a tunnel somewhere down there,'" I whisper. "It's what Jessa used to say

and Fitz would know, wouldn't he, Jude? You knew who she

was, didn't you?" I say, turning to Santangelo's dad. "It's why

you guys took her in for the holidays. You knew she belonged

to Fitz."

"Let's get you to the hospital," Santangelo's dad

382

says, standing up and whistling over some of the emergency

crew.

"She's in the tunnel, Jude. It's under Lachlan House, isn't it? It

begins in the storeroom. Isn't that where they got stuck? Chloe

P. ran to the storeroom when the fire started and Jessa went

after her and that's where they got trapped."

Jude stands up, staring back at the house and then at me
and

then he turns in the direction of Murrumbidgee House.

"What's going on?" Santangelo's dad asks him quietly.

Jude shakes his head, confused. "Let's go," he says,
holding

out his hand to me.

The guy from the rural fire brigade looks irritated. "You're
trying

to tell me that you believe there's a tunnel that runs under
those

Houses?" he asks as Jude breaks into a run and everyone
follows.

"I should know," Jude says as I try hard to keep up. "I
helped

build it."

We tear into Murrumbidgee House and Jude leads us
straight

through the dorms into the laundry. The kids in the dorm
are

shaken and still in a state of

shock and I notice Richard with them, as if he hasn't left their

side all night. We throw everything out of the way and there, under five tiles in the corner of the laundry, is a hole in the ground.

"Jesus Christ," Santangelo's dad says, shaking his head.

There's a shit fight about who goes under. The guy from the rural fire brigade volunteers but Santangelo's dad tells him that

he's built like a brick shit house and can hardly get through the

laundry door, let alone a hole in the floor, so he's eliminated instantly. Even Mr. Palmer offers but he's a heart attack waiting

to happen, although no one says it to him in those words.

"I'm going," Jude says firmly.

"Sir, you've been driving for almost thirteen hours straight,"

Griggs says. "I'll go."

"I'm the fittest," Santangelo argues.

"I'm in the Cadets, you dick. Do you know how many times I've

had to crawl on my stomach?"

"You're not going down there," Santangelo's dad says forcefully. "Neither of you are."

"Are you?" Santangelo asks. "You've got high blood pressure

and mum will kill me if I let you go down."

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"I'm going," Jude says. "I built it."

Griggs is already poking his head down the hole. He looks at

Jude. "I'm presuming it's head first because there doesn't seem

to be any room to move your body around."

"Jonah..."

"Let me do this," Griggs says. He looks at me. "I need to do this."

Jude knows he has no choice and reluctantly agrees. "You'll be

on your stomach for most of the time."

"Hold on a minute," the rural brigade guy says, having watched

the whole exchange. "Chances are they might..."

... be dead. Jessa and Chloe P. could be dead. Worse still is the fact that Griggs might come across the bodies. That's what the fire chief doesn't want to say.

I want to say one thousand things to Griggs but Jude has already taken hold of his boots, ready to hold him upside down.

"We can't waste any more time. If you find the girls, you won't be able to turn around. There's absolutely no room. You'll have to travel backwards.

385

We'll try to get as much light as possible in there but for the time being you'll have our torches. It's darker than anyplace you've been in on drills, Jonah."

Griggs nods and he goes down before anyone says another word.

Looking at Santangelo's dad's face makes me realise that he

doesn't believe that anything good is going to come of this.

That's the worst thing about cops. They see so many bad things

and they rarely get a happy ending. Santangelo is the same.

He

spends the whole time with his head in the hole, shining the torch into the tunnel so Griggs can have a bit of light.

"When I fainted," I begin telling Jude, "I saw my father and I saw

the Hermit but it was really Fitz. I always remember him looking

old but it's only perspective. Like that time I saw him when he

had the gun and he kept saying, 'Forgive me, Forgive me,' but

he was never speaking to me. It was Webb he was speaking to.

All this time, I thought that Webb was bringing him along into

my dream but now I realise that I was bringing him along to Webb's. All he wanted was forgiveness and Webb said, 'Tell him, nothing to forgive.'

386

Santangelo's dad stares at me and then at Jude. I know they

think I'm crazy but I know I'm not.

"It was such a good dream," I tell Jude, wanting him to believe

me, "and I wanted to stay but he threw me off the tree and then I

woke up."

"You weren't asleep, Taylor," Mr. Palmer says flatly, "and you

didn't faint."

Someone comes in with floodlights and they put them down the

hole. Richard crouches next to me and we wait.

"You think Jessa and Chloe P. are down there?" he asks.

"I know they are."

He moves as close to the hole as possible and then crawls back to where I am. "Who built it?" he asks.

"Hannah, the Brigadier, Jessa's dad, and my mum and dad.

My

dad was the leader of Murrumbidgee House, you know," I

explain, and for the first time in my whole life I feel a sense
of

pride. "He was the one who came up with the idea."

"That explains your psychotic personality," he mutters
before

leaving.

I watch the rural brigade guy because he looks like he's
going

to be our number one prophet of doom.

387

"Jude? Can I have a word?" he asks. There's this look
between

them that I don't trust.

"You're going to ask him how long they can stay down
there,

aren't you?" I say, looking to Jude for the answer. "How
long

they have left."

There is silence for a moment and even Santangelo pulls his

head out of the hole just to hear the answer.

"Fastest anyone did it was twenty minutes: Narnie. It was because she was small so Jessa and the other little girl have

got that on their side."

"Her name's Chloe," Mr. Palmer informs him.

"Slowest?" I ask.

"Forty minutes. One of us fainted down there and by the time we

got him out he was having trouble breathing. You've got to understand that you're not actually crawling through a tunnel.

You're squeezing through a hole."

"Webb?" I ask.

He nods. "Webb was stocky."

"Why did you let Jonah go, then?" I ask, angrily. "He's massive

and he'll get stuck."

"Because he's still smaller or fitter than any of us. Besides he

won't freak out and he's got endurance

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and believe me, Taylor, down there ..."

"... you see the devil because it's so dark."

He nods. "I did the whole return trip only once and vowed I would never do it again. It was different when we were building,

because we started digging from both ends, so we'd only have

to crawl for half the way."

"So how long have they been down there?" Santangelo asks.

"I'm guessing they would have stayed in the room until the smoke became too much for them. I'd say it's already been thirty

minutes."

"Wouldn't they have got to this end by now?"

No one says anything. Santangelo's head disappears in the hole again and I look at Jude, wanting to read something, *anything*, on his face.

We sit next to each other in silence while the emergency

crew

comes in and out and the ambulance officers begin to arrive.

Sometimes I see Murrumbidgee faces at the door but Santangelo's dad instructs Richard to take them upstairs to the

senior rooms. Because he thinks they're going to be wheeling

out bodies through the dorm and he doesn't want the kids to see

them. For the billionth time I feel sick.

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"She didn't write about being in the tunnel," I say to Jude quietly.

"She didn't write about a lot of things."

"Why? Was being in the tunnel worse than seeing her mother

dead ... or more personal than what happened between you and her?"

I don't think he likes that I know the intimate details of their lives.

"When Webb didn't return from the tunnel and everyone

was

getting anxious, she went in. Narnie was bloody frightening when she was fearless. I remember their faces when we pulled

them out. She was--God, I don't know--stunned."

"Do you think he told her something?" I asked. "Maybe he told

her that he was leaving you all. Maybe he'd had enough of Narnie's depression or Tate wanting to consume him. Maybe it

wasn't Fitz after all...."

"No, I think he did something in the tunnel that Narnie had done

long ago. He lost hope. Webb without hope was like the engine

failing on a plane. He was our life force and I think she saw that

down in the tunnel and it frightened her."

"Shhh," Santangelo says to everyone. "I think I

390

hear something." He puts his head and half his body down

the

hole again and his father holds on to his legs, around the knees.

I can't hear a thing. We wait, my pulse beating out of control and

another sick feeling comes over me.

Just say Griggs loses hope down there. And Chloe P. And Jessa.

Just say Jessa never giggles again. Or sings karaoke or pesters

me with a trillion inane questions. Just say she never snuggles

up in bed with the other girls, whispering about the boys they

have crushes on. Just say she never grows up to be my age and just say she never falls in love or gets to know what type of

people her parents were. Just say she never gets to be someone's mother and someone's life-long friend.

Just say she never gets to hear me say that I always knew she

was something special and that's why I was so horrible to

her.

Because people with that much spirit frighten the hell out of me.

They make me want to be a better person when I know it's not

possible.

"Okay," Santangelo's muffled voice says, and they begin pulling

him up. He's holding Griggs's legs and there's dirt everywhere.

Everyone's hands are grabbing

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at anything, trying to get them out of there. I see Griggs's torso,

absolutely blackened, and then his arms and then his hands and then more hands and I can tell it's Jessa but she's not moving. He's panting and they're pulling Jessa out and the emergency crew are placing breathing stuff over both their mouths and they won't let me near until they have everything in

place.

Griggs looks shaken and I know that it's killing him but he can't

go down again.

He looks at Santangelo, who looks at his father, who reluctantly

nods.

"If you close your eyes, you get to control your own darkness,"

Jude tells Santangelo. "Do you understand?"

Santangelo nods and they help him in.

I don't want to feel relief, because Jessa isn't moving and Chloe

P. is still down there. I go over to Jessa but the emergency crew

are working on her and they need their space. I feel useless.

"Will she know your voice?" one of the ambulance people ask

me.

I nod. "Of course."

"I think I broke her arm," Griggs says, wincing

from where he is lying.

"Don't you move until we can check you out, too," one of the ambulance officers says.

We hover over them and the ambulance man looks at me.

"Talk

to her. We need her to respond."

I lie down next to Jessa and take her hand. For a moment I don't

know what to say. So I tell her the story she loves best. Of her

father who stole a bike and rode down the Jellicoe Road and

saved the lives of my parents and Hannah. I tell her that they

loved him like a brother and how that night changed their lives

forever. I tell her about Tate's sister, who was only eight years

old when she died, and how Fitz went into the wreckage for the

umpteenth time to carry out her body as well as the bodies

of

my other grandparents, knowing he could die at any moment.

And when I can't tell the story anymore because it breaks my

heart, Santangelo's dad takes over, because he was there that

night. The ambulance driver has his story to tell about Fitz McKenzie as well and Jude fills in the rest.

I sit there and listen to the history of my family, the Schroeders

and the Markhams, who set out on their separate journeys that

day not realising the tragic ironies

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and joys of that collision of worlds on the Jellicoe Road. And of

the people they would never have met if it hadn't happened.

Like Fitz and Jude. And me.

Of the people I would never have met if I had just belonged to

one half of them. Like Raffy and Jessa and Chaz and Ben.

And Jonah Griggs.

I look at him as they patch him up and he looks back at me
and I

know that it will be one of the last chances I'll have to see
him

this close for a very long time.

Again we sit in silence, waiting for Santangelo to emerge
and,

five minutes later, Chloe P. comes out of the tunnel crying
and

she clutches onto me while they check her out for any
broken

bones. Her face is caked with mud and she panics any time
they try to put the mask over her face.

And then, for the first time all night everyone breathes in
rhythm.

Mr. Palmer, like every other adult I've seen tonight, looks a
thousand years older but he's relieved and breaks the
hands-off

rule, hugging me so tight that I almost stop breathing.
Again.

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"Are they okay?" Richard asks from the door.

The ambulance man gives the thumbs-up and Richard disappears behind the door and a couple of seconds later we

hear shouting and cheering and stamping of feet from upstairs

and outside and the place becomes a circus.

When they wheel the girls out, the whole school seems to be

lining the driveway. Lachlan girls are jumping all over me, flying

at me from all directions. I look for Griggs but he gets swallowed

up in the mayhem and I feel a weariness that I can't shake.

When we get to the hospital, Raffy and most of the year sevens

and eights who had been taken down to the town are there.

I don't think anyone has the heart to tell them to stop making

a racket.

"This is the best night of my life," Raffy says, crying.

"Raffy, half our House has burnt down," I say wearily. "We don't have a kitchen."

"Why do you always have to be so pessimistic?" she asks. "We can double up in our rooms and have a barbecue every night like the Cadets."

Silently I vow to keep Raffy around for the rest of my life.

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I wake up in the waiting room of the hospital, leaning against

Jude's shoulder. He's reading a newspaper and glances at me

when I move. I look at him for a long time, maybe because for

so long, every single time he crossed my path I had looked away. I had misunderstood my anxiety.

"I remember ... being on your shoulders," I say sleepily.

"I remember you being on my shoulders," he says, putting down

the newspaper.

I sit up and stretch, my neck is out in so many places. "You were wrong yesterday in the car, you know," I tell him.

"About

how every time Hannah looks at you she's wishing you were someone else. I think that every time she looks at you she's scared you won't come back, like the others."

He doesn't say anything but after a moment or two he smiles

sadly. "Your mother rang Hannah six weeks ago. Told her that

she didn't have much time left but that Hannah owed her.

That

she wanted to die clean."

He stops for a moment and I know there'll be many of these pauses. For a second or two I close my

396

eyes because I want to go back to the tree but I don't. I go back

to the shoulders of the giant.

"Hannah was... inconsolable, like she was when we knew Webb was dead and when Fitz died. Worse still, Tate's plan was crazy. If there was ever a time that Tate needed drugs, it was now but you don't know your mother. She had it all worked out. Forget rehab, she wouldn't be able to cope with the affirmations and she couldn't deal with spending so much time in the end with strangers. She was going to go cold turkey, even the chemo was going to stop, and she wanted Hannah and me there with her. So I went and got her and Hannah came down and they've been up in the mountains outside Sydney."

"It's because my mother wanted to die beholden to no one. Like Mrs. Dubose."

"No, it wasn't that. When I signed her out she said, 'I want to die

clean for my baby girl, Jude. That's all I want. It's all I have to give her."

I wonder about things. Like what she thinks I look like and if she

and my father ever spoke about what they wanted for me. But

before I can say anything, Jude's looking over my shoulder and

I see a change in him. I've never seen this look on his face
397

before but I've imagined it. The way Jude Scanlon would have

looked when he saw Narnie standing by the side of the road when he was fourteen.

I turn in the direction of his gaze and there she is, coming through the hospital doors. Hannah.

I stand up and walk towards her because my days of waiting for

more are over. If I want more, I need to go and get it, demand it,

take hold of it with all my might, and do the best I can with

it. I

put my arms around her and hold her tight and for once there is

nothing between us. I'm holding one of only two people left in

the world who share my blood: my father's sister, who one night

sat in the same spot for four hours just to protect her brother

from a sight that would have killed his spirit.

"Is my mum here?" I ask quietly when she lets go.

"At the hospice. We can drive to Sydney tomorrow."

I shake my head. "Hannah," I say, "I think my father would want

her to come home. To the house by the river."

She nods. For once I get to make the decisions. "So where are

our little tunnel rats?" she asks over

398

my head, looking at Jude.

He takes her hand and draws her to his side. They don't say

anything as they walk with me, but I've been here before, so
I
know that words aren't needed. I remember love. These two
people taught it to me and when I see Hannah lean over
and
kiss Jessa's sleeping head, I know that for the rest of my
life, no
matter what, Hannah and Jude are going to be there. Like
they
always have been. And tomorrow I'll need them more than
ever.

When my mother returns home for the last time to the
Jellicoe
Road.

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Chapter 26

Aftermath. Everyone uses it all the time so I get very used to the

word. In the aftermath we face the reality that the downstairs

area of Lachlan is gutted. No photos, no posters, no fish, no clothing, no books, no diaries. Everything's gone. In the aftermath, when the walls of my world are blackened and the

taste in my mouth is of ash, my mother is due to re-enter my life

for what will be the last couple of weeks of hers. In the aftermath

Jonah Griggs prepares to leave and I have to take it on good

faith and a great gut feeling that we will see each other, maybe

for the rest of our lives. In the aftermath I finally accept that my

father is dead and that the legacy left behind by the person who

killed him is a thirteen-year-old kid who clutches my arm as
we

look at the space around us and whispers, "I knew you'd
come

and get me, Taylor. I

400

told Chloe P., 'Don't worry, Taylor will find us.'"

I hear Mr. Palmer tell Hannah that it was an electrical fault.

Five

arsonists in one school and it ends up being something so
technically boring. They promise us that the dorm and
kitchen

will be complete by the time we return from the Christmas
holidays in a couple of months' time and I miss the girls
already.

I miss everything in my world already.

We spend Griggs's last day at Hannah's house with
Santangelo

and Raffy. It's the first time he meets Hannah, apart from
when

we were fourteen, and the mood is cool and almost hostile.

"You seem to have a problem with me," he says in typical

Griggs fashion.

I can tell he regrets saying it when he is treated to one of Hannah's long cold gazes.

"I think it will be a while before I forgive the trip to Sydney," she

says flatly.

"Fair enough. I think it will be a while before I forgive you for what you put her through over the past six weeks."

I watch them both and for the first time it occurs to me that I'm no

longer flying solo and that I have no intention of pretending that

I am. I have an aunt

401

and I have a Griggs and this is what it's like to have connections

with people.

"Do you know what?" I ask both of them. "If you don't build a

bridge and get over it, I'll never forgive either of you."

From the verandah I watch Griggs inside, through the

window,

chatting to Raffy and Santangelo.

I can feel Hannah's gaze on me and I ignore it for as long as I

can.

"I know what you're thinking," I say.

She doesn't speak.

"Say something," I say, wanting to take every bad feeling I have

out on Hannah because she's so convenient.

"What do you want me to say?" she asks with that ever-patient

voice of hers. "What you're thinking."

"Okay. Why does it have to be so intense between you two?"

she asks.

"Because I have an aunt named Narnie and a mother named

Tate," I snap, and I want to stop myself from being like this but I

can't. I'm too sad. I look at her and I can feel tears in my eyes.

"Do you

402

think I don't want him to be gone more than you do? *I do.*

Because I need to know that I can still breathe properly when

he's not around. If something happens to him, I have to know

that I won't fall apart like Tate did without Webb. Even you and

Jude. It's not just my father or Fitz or even Tate you've missed

all this time. It's Jude not being in your life."

"Jude is in my life, Taylor."

"Then why aren't you together?"

"He's a soldier, Taylor," she says tiredly. "He goes where they

send him. East Timor. Solomon Islands. Iraq. Wherever they

need to keep the peace. Why is it that we always have to fight?"

"We're not fighting, Hannah. I just don't want to hold back

anymore and I don't want you to, either. I'm your only living relative and one day I'm going to have to visit you in a nursing

home and spoon-feed you custard and jelly, so I think I'm entitled to know what makes you tick."

She stares at me and I get this feeling of love because I know

her history now and understand how it has made her the way

she is at times.

"What makes me tick? Tate. Jessa. You. Jude."

"When you look at him, he thinks you're thinking

403

that you'd rather he was Webb or Fitz or Tate. Did you know that?"

"He knows how much he means to me. He wouldn't think that."

"He told me. I asked him why you weren't together and he said

you'll always be together but that's bullshit. I've worked it out and I'm presuming that you were a couple until I was seven, but

in the past ten years you've been apart and the only time
you

see each other is when it has to do with me. You wrote the
book

on all of this, Hannah. Did you never notice that he always
felt

left out? It's like he wanted to be in that accident or he
wanted to

be crazy like Fitz. Like being Jude Scanlon wasn't good
enough

for any of you."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Why won't you marry him?"

"Because he hasn't asked me. Maybe it was never meant to
be

that type of relationship. Maybe it was because we survived.

The bond--"

"Hannah, Jude and you don't have a bond because you're
the

only survivors. Jude and you have a *problem* because
you're

the survivors. It's like you can't forgive each other. How come

you can forgive Tate

404

for what she did and Webb for dying? And Fitz! How come you

can forgive him? He killed your brother! He shot him out of a

tree! You can forgive all of them but you can't forgive you and

Jude for living."

Hannah looks stunned. "What do you want me to say? That if

he asked me to marry him, I'd say yes? Okay. Yes. But grief makes a monster out of us sometimes, Taylor, and sometimes

you say and do things to the people you love that you can't forgive yourself for."

But I won't let it go. "I'd forgive myself. To be with Jonah I'd do

anything."

Jude pulls up at the same time that Griggs comes out of the

house.

"I've got to go," Griggs says from the door. Hannah turns and I

notice that she's more fragile than I've ever seen her. She's nursed a drug addict for the past six weeks and I can tell by her

gauntness that it hasn't been good for her. What went down between her and Tate, I wonder? Was Tate forever envious of

the bond between Webb and Narnie? Is that why she wouldn't

let Hannah mother me all those years?

"Have a safe trip, Jonah," Hannah says quietly.

"Thank you."

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He waits for me. "I'll catch up," I tell him as Raffy and Santangelo walk towards Jude, shaking his hand goodbye.

The plan is that Jude drives down with the Cadets and returns

tomorrow with my mother. It's what he always seems to be doing--saving us from ourselves. I remember the saints

from

Raffy's books in year seven. St. Jude was the patron saint of the

impossible--lost and desperate causes. I think he hit the jackpot

in that department when he met the Markhams and Schroeders.

"You need anything?" Jude asks from the bottom of the steps.

Hannah shakes her head. "Don't drive if you're tired tomorrow."

"I'd better be going," I say quietly, walking down the steps.

When I reach him, I stop.

I want to say a lot of things to Jude and Hannah. I want to thank

them and tell them that my life would be like Sam's if it wasn't

for them. I want to tell them that the brilliance of that memory of

lying between them won't be easily surpassed and that the stories of their love for each other touch me in a way I didn't think possible. I want to convince them that

406

my father comes to speak to me at night and that his love
for the

two of them is never-ending.

"Jude," I say, taking a deep breath. "Hannah reckons that if
you

ask her to marry you, she'll say yes."

I pat him on the shoulder and walk away, breaking into a
run

when I reach the clearing. Griggs is waiting. He takes my
hand

and we walk.

The Cadets leave from the general store. There is a crowd
outside the buses while goodbyes are said and much-
needed

munchy provisions are purchased. I stay close to Griggs
while

he talks to people around him and although we don't say a
word

to each other, we are never more than an inch apart. Every
now

and again, while he's speaking to Santangelo's mum or some of

the Townies, our eyes meet and I dare not open my mouth in

case I cry.

One of their teachers calls them from the bus and they begin to

file on, calling out last-minute goodbyes. I watch Ben give instructions to Anson Choi, and the Mullet Brothers argue with

them at the bus window. They have some gig planned in Canberra and they can't agree on the songs or their order.

But I

can tell they all like one another so much even if one

407

of the Mullet Brothers has Ben in a headlock, pretending to hit

his head against the side of the bus.

Ben pulls away and walks towards us, putting his arm around

my shoulder ever so innocently.

"I think you guys need to be on the bus," he says to Griggs.

"And I think you may end up under it," Griggs says, gently pulling me away from Ben.

We stand looking at each other and, as usual with Griggs, it's much too intense.

"So are you going to tell your mother about me?" he asks.

I look around to where Teresa, the hostage from Darling, is crying while her Cadet watches miserably from the bus window.

I shrug. "I'll probably mention that I'm in love with you."

He chuckles. "Only you would say that in such a I-think-I'll-wash-my-hair-tonight tone."

He leans down and kisses me and I hold on to his shirt, wanting to savour every moment.

I hear a few wolf-whistles but he ignores them and we linger.

My insides are in a million pieces and I feel like

408

someone out of one of those tragic war movies.

The bus driver honks the horn.

"You know on the Jellicoe Road where there's that tree that looks like an old man bent over?" he asks, holding my face between his hands. It's this feeling I'll miss most.

I nod.

"That's the closest mobile phone coverage to the School."

"Griggs, they're waiting," Santangelo says quietly.

"Let them wait."

We kiss again and I don't care who is watching or how late they'll be.

Slowly he untangles himself from me and turns to the others.

"See you, Raffy," he says, lifting her off the ground in a hug.

He

looks at Santangelo. "You drive them down at Christmas,"

he

says. "Promise?"

They grip each other's hands and hug quickly and then he kisses me again and he's on the bus. I can see him walking down the aisle, giving someone the finger, and I can imagine

what's being said inside.

Teresa is sobbing beside me and Trini is trying to console

her.

409

"He's in year eight, Teresa," I remind her. "That means he's coming back at least another three times."

"But just say he forgets about me or meets someone else or pretends I don't exist."

I look at her and then at Trini and Raffy.

"Teresa, Teresa. Have we taught you nothing?" Raffy says in

an irritated voice. "It's war. You go in and you hunt him down

until he realises that he's made a mistake."

Teresa looks hopeful.

"It's not as if men haven't gone to war for dumber reasons,"

Trini

adds.

The Mullet Brothers join us and we watch the bus as it leaves. I

can sense everyone's sadness.

We all walk towards town together.

"You want us to be there tomorrow?" Santangelo asks

quietly.

I nod.

"Done."

I feel tears running down my face and Raffy takes my hand and squeezes it.

"What are you so sad about?" Santangelo says to me.

"We're

going to know him for the rest of our lives."

410

The car pulls up in front of the house and I stand up. In the photos, when she was seventeen, she had lush black hair, white white skin, and dark blue eyes and a plumpness that spoke of good health. When I was young she had bleached the

hair, her skin was pasty, her eyes were always bloodshot, and

she was skinny. I can hardly ever remember her eating, just nervously smoking one cigarette after another. I don't know which image is stronger in my mind but I know I want the girl

with the black hair and the glow in her cheeks.

The person who emerges, though, has neither, courtesy of the

chemotherapy. She's even thinner than I remember and I'm amazed that she is actually as young as Hannah and Jude.

But

I can see from here that her eyes are sharp and bright. She looks beyond the house to the oak tree by the river, a ghost of a

smile on her face, and I know she's imagining him there, like

Hannah does on those breezy afternoons when it's just her and

her thoughts. And like I do when he visits me in my dreams.

She smiles at something Jude says and then she walks

towards the house, slowly. I stand at the top

411

of the stairs, looking for any sign of me in her face. I wonder

how hard it was for her all that time seeing Webb and Narnie's

face stamped on mine and not one single mark of her.
When
she's almost at the steps, she notices me and stops. There
is
wonder in her face, like she can't believe what she's seeing.
I
think she's expecting the sullen eleven-year-old that she left
behind and for a moment I'm scared that she doesn't know
it's
me. But then she starts to cry. Not dramatically but with
such
sadness, clutching at her throat, looking at me like she can't
believe her eyes. She tries to speak but she isn't able to. I
walk
down the steps of the verandah towards her and with
shaking
hands she holds my face between them, sobbing, "Look at
my
beautiful girl."
I take in every inch of her face, the sick pallor of her skin,
the
dryness of her lips, and I lean forward and I press my lips

against hers, like I want to give them colour again. I touch her face and the bristle of her hair that's growing back. I like the feel of it under my fingertips, like a massage.

"It's not good for Tate to be outside," Jude says quietly.

I take her by the hand, up the stairs and inside the house, and she looks around again in awe.

412

"It's just like he planned it," she says in a hushed tone as Hannah comes over and kisses her gently. I introduce her to Santangelo and Raffy and then Jessa comes running into the house, her arm in a sling, beaming that crazy beam of hers.

"I'm late and I didn't want to be but they had to fix my cast and Mr. Palmer was late picking me up." She looks at my mother.

"Did they tell you about the fire and tunnel and how Griggs

broke my arm?"

I take Jessa's other hand and bring her forward. "This is
Jessa

McKenzie. She belongs to Fitz."

My mother looks at Jessa, shaking her head like she can't
believe what she's seeing. Hannah comes over and helps
her

into the chair by the window, putting a pillow behind her,
and

we hover around her.

"Look at our girls," she says to Hannah and Jude. "How did
we

get to be so lucky?"

"I think we've earned it, Tate."

Later, she fills the spaces between Hannah's stories and
my

imaginings. She tells me about the time my father had a
dream

about me before I was born. How we were sitting in a tree
and

he asked me my name and I said it was Taylor.

Chapter 27

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. My mother urges me to

write them down because, "You're the last of the Markhams, my

love." So I record dates and journeys and personalities and traits and heroes and losers and weaknesses and strengths and I try to capture every one of those people because one day

I'll need what they had to offer. Worst and best of all, I get to see

who Tate Markham could have been and sometimes I feel so

angry that I only got to know this incredible person just when I'm

going to lose her. She has a belly laugh that Narnie wasn't able

to hear in her grief, so Hannah wasn't able to write about it.

But

414

if Webb had written the story, I would have known that
laugh

already. She tells me about her sister, Lily, who was only
eight

years old when she died, and of how she can still remember
the

day her father placed her in Tate's arms, when she was
four

years old, and said, "How blessed can one man be?"

And life goes on.

When some days are worse than others, I find myself
walking

out of school and sitting at that point on the Jellicoe Road
where I can ring Jonah. I'll feel his frustration and his sense
of

useless-ness at being six hundred kilometres away but I
need

to hear his stories about Danny and his mum and her
boyfriend,

Jack, and how they have Thai food on Tuesday nights and watch *The Bill*. I'll tell him about Jude moving in and how he sleeps in Hannah's room and of how Tate and I bullied them into going away one weekend by stressing our need to have time alone together. And of how Raffy and I have to share Trini's room while Lachlan House gets refurbished and how we

have to join Trini in prayer at night. And I can sense his envy

when he hears about our weekends with the Santangelos and

how Chaz's mum tells Hannah and Tate about

415

those "two little shits" driving around town in an unregistered

car.

And life goes on.

When one day fate visits us again, Jessa comes running into

Hannah's house to tell us the news that they've caught the serial killer. Her tone is hushed and I try hard not to look at

Jude, who is working on the skirting boards. But I can feel the

humour in his gaze as it falls on me and I know that I will never

live down the fact that I suspected him. When I ask her, "Who?"

slightly curious, she's already out the door looking for Hannah

and Tate. "No one important!" she shouts from the other room.

"Just some postman in Yass." I look at Jude's face and I see it

whiten and we vow never ever to tell the others. My mind that

night is full of images of those kids I once saw in the newspaper

cuttings on Jessa's bed and of the two who went missing from

Yass on the day Jude caught up with me and Jonah. And of the

voice Jonah needed to believe was his father, warning us not to

go any farther because we would never come back.

And life goes on.

When we know it's close I move into the house

416

and we lie there, my mother and I. I place the earphones in
her

ears and I let her listen to the music Webb was listening to
when he died. Of flame trees and missing those who aren't
around. I tell her that he's been waiting all these years for
her

and that ever since she's been with me he's visited my
dreams

every single night. I tell her that the euphoria he feels is like
an

elixir--one that I believe will be enough to keep her alive.

But one night he's not there anymore, nor is Fitz, and my
despair is beyond words and I'm screaming out for him, for
both

of them, standing on the branch where we'd sit. "Webb!
Fitz!

Please. Come back. Please." And I wake up and I hold her

in
my arms, sobbing uncontrollably, "Just one more day,
please,
Mummy, just one more day, please." And when it hurts too
much, I go up to Hannah and Jude's room and tell them
that
she's dead, and I climb between them and I am raw inside.
My mother took seventeen years to die. I counted.
She died in a house on the Jellicoe Road. The prettiest road
I'd
ever seen, where trees made breezy canopies like a tunnel
to
Shangri-la.
417
God's country, Raffy says. She swears to God it'll change
the
way I see the world.
Want to believe in something.
But love the world just the way it is.
Some ask me why she didn't give up earlier. The pain
without
drugs would have been bad. Others say that it was wrong

for us

not to ease her pain. But my mother said she wouldn't die
until

she had something to leave her daughter.

So we scatter her ashes with Fitz's from the Prayer Tree
and in

the summer we finish a journey my father and Hannah
began

almost two decades ago. Jude arranges a house by the
ocean

with Griggs and his brother and Chaz and Raffy and Jessa
and

Narnie and me.

While we watch the others throwing themselves into the
surf, I

sit with Jessa and Hannah, who cuddles us towards her.

"I wanted to see the ocean," she tells us, "and my father
said

that it was about time the four of us made that journey. I

remember asking, 'What's the difference between a trip and

a

journey?' and my father said-

She stops for a moment, to catch her breath. "He

418

said, 'Narnie, my love, when we get there, you'll understand,'

and that was the last thing he ever said."

Jessa leans her head against her. "Hannah, do you think that

your mum and dad and Tate's mum and dad and my mum and

dad and Webb and Tate are all together someplace?" she asks

earnestly.

I look at Hannah, waiting for the answer. And then she smiles.

Webb once said that a Narnie smile was a revelation and, at this moment, I need a revelation. And I get one.

"I wonder," Hannah says.

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Epilogue

He sat in the tree, his mind overwhelmed by the idea that growing inside Tate was their baby. The cat purred alongside

him, a co-conspirator in his contentment. Through the branches

he could see Fitz coming his way, his gun balanced on his shoulders, whistling a tune. So Webb closed his eyes, thinking

of the dream he'd had the night before where he sat on the branch of a tree and spoke to their child. In the child's voice there was so much promise and joy that it took his breath away.

He told her about his plans to build a house. He'd make it out of

gopherwood, like Noah's ark, two storeys high, with a view he

could look out on every day with wonder. A house for Tate and

Narnie and Jude and Fitz and for their families. A home to come

back to every day of their lives.

Where they would all belong or long to be.

A place on the Jellicoe Road.

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