

***Siren: A Novel and Exegesis Exploring Sexual Violence in
Australian Rules Football***

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Abstract

This thesis examines fictional representations of sexual assault (and specifically rape) in novels that are set within or explore as a central theme the culture of Australian Rules football (termed ‘Australian football’). This thesis comprises two components: an exegesis and a novel, *Siren*.

The exegesis is an examination of the way sexual assault in Australian football culture has been approached by the Australian media, and Australian adult novels written between 1964 and 2013 in which Australian football culture is a central theme. The exegesis is also an exploration of the challenges of writing about sexual assault and rape, and of representing women’s voices in a male-dominated sporting culture. It contributes to a wider discussion about the challenges of writing fiction that explores sexual assault and rape in an androcentric context such as Australian football.

The novel component, *Siren*, addresses these issues through various narrative techniques, including narratological perspective shifts between four main characters, exploring the problems associated with the mistreatment of women in Australian football culture, particularly in terms of sexual abuse and misogynistic attitudes. At the centre of the novel is the rape of a young woman, Jordi, and the effect of the rape on Jordi’s life, her family and Max, a footballer whose team mate is the rapist. An important consideration in the development of literature concerned with women’s sexual abuse, particularly rape, is a narrative that does not misrepresent the experience of women, but rather reveals the unimaginable horror of the event in a believable and realistic way. The novel makes an original and significant contribution to this body of literature since it has a young woman as one of the main protagonists and emphasis is placed on her experience of rape. Importantly, contrary to the majority of writing in this area, the novel is set off the field to highlight the effect of football culture on the wider community. This transfers the emphasis from the players on the field to broader social environments connected to the game.

For the doctoral examination, the novel is weighted 70% and the exegesis 30%. Although the exegesis is an integral part of the thesis, it is preferable that the novel is read first.

Declaration

I, Rachel Matthews, declare that the PhD thesis entitled '*Siren: A Novel and Exegesis Exploring Sexual Violence in Australian Rules Football*' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:

A black rectangular box redacting the signature.

Date: 17.2.16

Dedication

To the Australian women who dedicate their lives to recreation, sport and family, and to the men who work beside them in partnership, rather than expecting to be served. And to my mother, Valerie Matthews, and aunt, Rhonda Woodrow—strong, creative and clever women and role models who contribute to many lives on many levels: women from the Wimmera and lovers of football.

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Novel

Siren

By Rachel Matthews

For young women who get lost in the crowd.

Siren: A loud sound used to signal the start and end of an AFL game, and the start and end of each quarter.

Siren Song

Margaret Atwood

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who had heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,

I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.

Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!

Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas

it is a boring song

But it works every time.

From *Selected Poems 1965–1975*, Copyright © 1974, 1976 by Margaret Atwood.

Chapter 1

City lights flashed against the dark as Jordi stood at the entrance to the apartment building, trying to breathe. She pulled open the heavy steel door and stepped out onto the pavement, trembling in the cool night air. An ambulance sped past, pushing puddles of rain against the curb. Jordi moved faster, wrapping her arms across her body, the Chanel symbol on her fake bag bouncing loose. Tears muscled up her throat as her pelvis throbbed and contracted. She was on her way to Flinders Street station. She was on her way home.

An older woman wrapped in a tartan blanket watched from a nearby bench. The bench had been designed by a visual arts student who won a trip to Tokyo. It featured the face of Medusa, which the woman was sitting on. She turned towards Jordi, silver curls brushing her cheeks, her skin crepe-papered from sleep.

‘Are you alright, dear?’ she called out, her voice a crackle in the early morning.

Jordi stopped. The woman’s hands weaved through the air, gesturing for her to move closer. But Jordi stood still, brushing strands of hair out of her face. A smudge of mascara shadowed her eyes as tears peeked through long lashes.

‘You’re bleeding,’ the woman said gently, pointing at Jordi’s skirt.

Jordi looked down and gasped at the shock of red on her white cotton mini that she bought for three bucks at St Vinnies. She shoved her bag in front of the stain. A few people turned to look as they moved past, strangers stumbling home and wide-eyed joggers shaming the party crowd. The streets were awake now.

The older woman shifted her body forward.

‘Where’s Flinders Street?’ said Jordi, her voice barely audible against the footsteps of city workers and travellers. Early trams wheezed behind them.

‘That way,’ the woman pointed along Swanston Street. ‘Do you wanna sit down?’

Jordi wiped her eyes. ‘No thanks,’ she squeaked, and held her skirt as she kept walking.

The woman watched Jordi disappear through people and cars. She pulled at a chain around her neck and rubbed a silver Hamsa, an ancient symbol of protection. Then slowly, she lifted her body off the bench and began to walk towards the centre of the city, to find food and somewhere warm to sit.

Jordi hugged her arms around her body as she moved along the footpath and stepped off the corner of Swanston into Flinders Street. Bruises flowered across her thighs as the blood inside her underwear dried. A mangy Greenpeace koala held a pamphlet out as she made her way up to the yellow clocks. Jordi reached into her bag to find some coins and wiped her eyes. Seeing a smiling Met attendant, she asked them about the NightRider bus from Swanston Street.

Drunk people laughed and chatted and hugged each other, some stumbled around alone, stuffing themselves with hot jam donuts and chips—substitutes for lovers. Jordi slid her high heels back onto her feet and moved down some steps, her shoes making tiny scraping sounds against the cold stone. She shivered against the night and looked for bus stop twelve.

Only five hours earlier, a few blocks away in a city apartment building, Jordi climbed into a lift with two older men, laughing and singing all the way to the sixteenth floor.

Chapter 2

Jordana, or Jordi to her friends, didn't like her Spanish name. Her mother saw it in a seventies travel book she bought from an Animal Aid op shop because she loved the pictures. Her family lived in a West Meadows housing estate, and Jordi was sixteen years old.

As Jordi stepped up onto the bus, she decided to not tell anyone what had happened. Not even Shilo, her BFF, who she'd kissed once at a party for a twenty-buck bet and loved more than One Direction. Jordana May Spence went home from the city that early morning, in the dark on the NightRider, and sat very still in a seat near the front, while a young guy in a black beanie vomited, yellow and orange lava sliding down the aisle every time the bus braked. Eventually, the Sri Lankan driver, an Honours student in Engineering, swung his head around and punched a fist against the steering wheel. There was laughing and yelling; people were rushing out of their seats to move away from the noise and smell. The driver pulled the bus over to a stop at the side of the freeway and took a plastic bag and bucket up to the back seats, the bitter stench choking the air.

Jordi sat alone on her seat, dragging her shoes off to release swollen pink toes. It was 5.44 am and she was beginning to bleed again inside her underwear. The flimsy heels sat on the seat beside her, next to the vinyl handbag and a clump of used tissues. She rested her head against the cold window and waited like everyone else for the bus driver to drag the vomiting guy off and leave him at the badly lit stop. No-one helped. They just laughed and listened to their iPods and went to sleep. The driver stood outside, scratching his head as the young man stumbled towards a wind-whipped shelter, his body crashing down onto the seat. The driver leaned down and gently shook the young guy's shoulder, asking if there was someone he could call. The guy grunted and waved his arms, giving the driver a wild shove. This went on for ten minutes.

People called out from the bus, 'What the fuck!'

As the driver closed the door, passengers watched the drunk guy heaving out a brown liquid onto the pavement, his body folding.

‘Grosssss,’ someone laughed. Others said nothing.

Jordi held onto the seat in front of her as pain flooded her pelvis. She gripped the silver frame and took small, sharp breaths. She shut her eyes and tried to think about something nice. Like her Year 10 graphics teacher, Mr Dann, who had a glass eye and said her drawings were beautiful. And her neighbour Jamie Turner, who she secretly wanted to marry and live with in a house-and-land package at Patterson Lakes.

But it didn’t stop.

It sucked air out of her. She saw his face and his eyes. She felt his hands pushing down, gripping her wrists. Her punches and pushes were paper thin.

When it was over, he said, ‘You wanted that,’ before rolling onto a pillow. His muscular arms collapsed onto the mattress, his penis lying light and still, like a Chinese lantern. And then he released a long, deep snore.

Jordi lay on her back, shaking.

Max Carlisle’s body was spread across the bedroom floor of his city apartment, his face squashed against the grey wool carpet, little red-and-white pills sprinkled across the soft threads. His body shuddered in spasms, his breaths deep and long. The sounds of gospel singers floated in from the television in the lounge room, a broadcast from a US Baptist morning show. Morning light speckled the black city sky.

Jordi pushed herself out of bed and flung her arms around, looking for her underwear. The room was dark and reeked of sweat and bourbon. She took quick breaths as tremors filled her body.

She stepped into the dim spotlight from the kitchen, holding her shoes under her arm as she searched for her handbag. Lifting it off the large dining table, it fell open, a lipstick, tissues and a plastic white student card tumbling onto the floor. She grabbed

at the things, her hands thumping against the polished boards. Max appeared at the doorway, his eyes half closed and his skin ruddy from booze.

Jordi leant down to push her feet into the high heels.

‘Are you alright?’ he managed, croaking.

‘Which way is Flinders Street?’ Jordi mumbled, her fingers tugging at gold straps around her ankles.

Max took a step towards her, rubbing his eyes and leaning up against the wall. ‘Bit of a hike—about ten blocks.’ He pointed towards a window.

Jordi stood up.

‘Can I get you something to eat?’

Jordi turned her face away. ‘No.’

Max scratched his head. ‘I’ll call you a cab. Let me cover it.’ He took another step towards her. ‘Come and sit down.’ He pulled out a chair from the dining table.

Jordi jumped. ‘No, thanks,’ she mumbled, tears budding. She walked quickly towards the front door and reached for the chrome handle, her body unsteady like a newborn foal.

‘Please,’ Max said, following behind. ‘How about a coffee?’

Jordi was gone.

*

In the hallway on the ground floor, Jordi ran into a new resident, Ruby Westmore, a forty-year-old insomniac dressed in black exercise pants who had got lost searching for the building’s twenty-four-hour gym. It was just after 5 am. Ruby stopped in front of the girl and frowned. An industrial tang of floor polish filled the air, tiny spotlights along the corridor buttoning the dark.

‘What’s wrong?’ Ruby said, touching Jordi’s arm.

Jordi stopped, shaky breaths rattling her lungs, her cheeks shiny from tears. At that moment, the lift door opened and Max peered out, barefooted and dressed in a crumpled white shirt, jeans hanging around his hips. He took a small step as if to enter the corridor. Smelling stale-sweet from scotch, his grey eyes were lined with tributaries of veins, his hair spiked out in straw-coloured clumps. Ruby turned and looked straight at him as she handed Jordi a tissue out of her pocket. He disappeared back into the lift, the doors closing.

‘Was that your boyfriend?’ Ruby said.

Jordi shook her head.

‘I think I heard you guys partying earlier? Upstairs...’ Ruby yawned.

Jordi turned away. She wiped her eyes and gulped in the thick air of the building, thanking Ruby as she moved off down the corridor. Jordi stepped into the front foyer and looked up at the security camera, black and square and pointing right at her. She pulled up her silver strappy top, hiding the soft white edge of her cleavage. She pushed open the big glass door and walked out onto the streets, moving past people and rubbish and the remains of the night, into the chill of morning in Melbourne, her body shaking as the city came to life.

Chapter 3

Max Carlisle didn't imagine being thirty-four years old and off the ground. His wrist burned and throbbed for months. The pills helped in the night, when darkness opened up a new kind of pain that rang through his skin. And the pills crept into his daytime hours, where he popped them round the clock.

He was a *veteran*, they said. The word belted into his heart. *Don't worry, mate. It's respect.* But he was the old dog waiting for the trip to the vet. He sat and watched the young boys at training, drenching the ground with their sweat, and then he went home to eat nachos and watch *Breaking Bad*.

It was a Saturday night late in March when it happened. Earlier that day, Max had headed out to a city bottle shop for a six pack of beer, running into Florence on his way back. She was a woman in her late sixties, with eyes like black pearls and a tattoo of a dove on her arm. She sometimes slept in a laneway near his apartment block off Swanston Street. Their friendship had begun a few months earlier when Max stopped to help Florence near the Bourke Street Mall. She'd been knocked down by a cyclist in silver lycra who was running late for his Bikram yoga. Max had lifted Florence's body off the pavement and sat her down on a bench. He bought her a coffee and they talked for a long time.

That Saturday as he greeted Florence, Max leaned against a pole, slipping on his sunglasses and resting his beer on the ground. The city rattled with sound as sun warmed the concrete, fresh light bouncing off shop front windows.

'Where do you go this evening, *amante*?' Florence asked, biting into an apple. Each week she read the Tarot for Daisy, a woman who owned a stand near Collins Street, in return for fruit. They'd sit in the Swanston Street McDonald's sipping coffee while Florence spread the tattered cards across the table, techno music blaring and young people swallowing burgers in nearby booths.

'Bars, the usual garbage,' Max said. '*Amante*?'

She laughed. 'It's "lover" in Portuguese...my father's talk. My mum was an Aussie Sheila, but Dad always spoke to us in his language.'

People took second glances at Max as they walked past. He pulled his baseball cap down against the public's gaze.

'Have you still got family then, Flo? You've never told me.'

Florence took a breath. 'Yes, but far, far away,' she said, tugging at the Hamsa symbol around her neck. 'A story for another day.' She smoothed down the front of her t-shirt with a picture of 'Father Bob' on the front.

'Okay,' Max nodded, looking out towards people walking by, sunglasses sweating against his face.

'How are *you* then, mister? The wrist?' she pointed towards his arm.

Max sighed. 'You know the dream where you say, *It's okay, I'll wake*. Well, I'm awake now but that's it.' He rubbed his hands over his cheeks.

She slowly nodded, chewing on her bottom lip.

'Hey, you don't wanna hear all this crap,' he said, clearing his throat.

'I understand,' she said. 'You have all the money in the world but it doesn't solve your problems.'

'Ah well, it is what it is.' Max ran his fingers over his wrist-support. 'You love something. It gets taken from you. You realise maybe you shouldn't have loved it so much...' He rubbed his chin, scratching the dark stubble shading his cheeks.

She smiled. 'No, Max. We all need something to love. We need it more than air. So whaddya do? You risk it or stay lonely. And I'm not talking about romance,' she laughed, her voice raspy. 'That comes and goes. I mean something that connects you to everything, you know?'

Max smiled. 'Hmm...what do you love, Flo?'

‘Oh that’s easy.’ Her dry lips smacked together. ‘Faces. Hearts.’

Max gave a slow nod.

‘Don’t waste the opportunities, pet, even when things get tough. The *futuro*,’ she said, her eyes half closing, her long, thin finger pointing towards him. ‘Be afraid of nothing. Fear just makes us old.’

Max listened, then pulled an envelope out of his pocket.

‘No.’ Florence shook her head. ‘Please. I have somewhere to go tonight.’

‘Keep it,’ he said, ‘for whenever.’ Max leaned down and left the envelope sitting on Florence’s lap, then picked up his six pack and headed home.

Florence sighed. The slip of paper inside the envelope said IBIS HOTEL VOUCHER. She held it in her hands. She would give it to the young woman she met at the hostel, with lines on her arms like red wire, and a baby with tiny eyes.

Max stepped into the designer block of city apartments, *Blue Light Skies*. His place was decked out with big couches and a home cinema. The kitchen shone with stainless steel and European appliances. Protesting against contemporary minimalism were relics from cinemas and old cars, kitchen canisters and coloured glasses from the 1950s he liked to collect. Many of the old things were gifts from his grandparents.

Max liked to sit in darkness and watch the Discovery Channel, his bookshelf full of *Lonely Planet* collections, places he’d been to and places he’d like to see. Max loved astronomy and was transfixed by the mystery of space; the eerie white ring around Saturn, the angry surface of Mars. But when he watched the spinning colours of these worlds, his apartment felt so much larger. And he felt much more alone.

In the months leading up to his time off, Max swallowed pills around the clock to ease his numb and swollen wrist. His coach, Ronnie Sands, found him trembling with pain in the change rooms and told him to get the fuck home. He tried weed for a while, a substance he abhorred. Jacko, a ruckman from his team, got him a couple of bags from his dealer, Timbo, in Glen Waverly. It slowed down the agony inside Max’s arm but

it stole feelings. Everything around him blurred. He kept stashes of marijuana in his kitchen, in little vitamin jars and spice racks, until one weekend when his mother had come to stay. She sprinkled it into her zucchini quiche, later telling him she had wasted six eggs and his basil tasted off, and didn't he realise that herbs do go off, eventually? Then she went to sleep on the couch with her mouth open, for hours. Max didn't touch marijuana again.

So, on that Saturday night, Max sat down on his couch and sucked scotch out of a glass that read 'Under-16 Champions Benalla Bengals' in wonky silver engraving. A few of his team mates had invited him to some bars at Southbank but when he got home but he reneged. Conversations with them were getting harder the longer he was away. Plus *Dr Strangelove* was on TV, one of his favourite films. He leaned back into the couch and soaked up the sounds of Peter Sellers, resting his plastic wrist-support on a silk cushion from Thailand. His phone whistled the theme to *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*.

'Dirk D,' he said, resting the mobile against his ear, 'what the hell do you want?'

Dirk Davidson, a thickset ruckman with very white skin and curly black hair, laughed as he staggered into a corner of the nightclub. He made Max a little uneasy but Max liked Dirk's directness. It reminded him of his country mates. Dirk was getting old, too. Another panel show potential.

'Come and join me, Carls. I'm in King Street and I need a wing man,' Dirk chuckled. 'I got a girl standing right here showing me how to suck a straw.'

'Are you serious? I'm crippled. No thanks, mate.' Max kept his eyes on Sellers dressed in a sharp black suit.

'Come oooooonnnn, the chicks'll love that,' Dirk crowed. 'Your injury's the perfect pull. Oh, poor you, and all that shit.'

'Sorry, not tonight.' Max ended the call and got up to fetch more painkillers, with a scotch chaser to follow. He had never been a big boozier, but now he couldn't

remember when he didn't drink. An hour passed and his eyes glassed over, the warmth of the tablets flooding through his blood.

'Okay,' he sighed to himself, now swigging out of a bottle of white wine. He pushed himself off the couch. 'What the hell.' It was better than sitting alone.

The taxi driver, a one-time university lecturer from the Ukraine, recognised Max. 'You are a legend, my friend,' he said loudly with his hand in the air, 'a star.'

Max shuddered in the backseat, his eyes half-closed. His face pressed near the glass as he watched streets flashed past. He wound down the window and sucked in the cold night. He was no-one. He was nowhere. He gave the driver fifty bucks and got out of the cab.

Walking up to the club, he shook the hand of the bouncer on the door and slid inside. He wore a white shirt his last girlfriend, Hannah, had bought him. She was, a third-year linguistics student who organised the gift after reading an email from Max to his mum saying that his and Hannah's relationship wasn't going well. The shirt was Jag—she had told him that a person in his position shouldn't get his clothes at Target.

She sobbed when Max told her it was over. 'I thought you said I was *hot*!'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'We just don't seem to have much to say to each other.'

She smacked his face, then opened up her Tinder account.

The music thudded through him as he stepped into the shine and shadows of the club. The pills were in full flight.

'Dirk,' he said, whacking his mate's back.

A group of young women stood nearby practicing looks they'd seen on models. They were sprayed brown, breasts popping out of their tops like Easter buns.

'Where the hell've you been?' said Dirk, sliding an arm around a girl beside him. 'I can't manage all these honeys by myself!'

The women giggled and took long sips of their drinks.

Max stood next to Dirk, wavering a little. They spoke about things that didn't matter, chit chat about training and the new club building and lots of yelling over music. Dirk pointed at Max's wrist-support and gave him a rough squeeze. Max looked around their corner of the club and asked Dirk how old the girls were.

Dirk laughed and yelled, 'They're legal,' and gave him a big wink.

Max sat down, leaning his head against a cherry-red velvety wall. His eyes opened and closed slowly, as his body rocked to the beat of an early nineties Soul to Soul track. A brunette wearing a silvery halter-top sat alone at the end of the couch, pretending to check her Facebook. He smiled at her. She looked away and ran a hand through her fringe. Her girlfriends were out on the dance floor, moving their hips to the beats and flashing smoky eyes at the men who watched on, a scene from *Wild Kingdom*.

Max moved closer to the girl. 'Hey,' he said.

'Hi,' she mumbled, avoiding his eyes.

'Y'okay?' he yelled over a new track playing, a remix of Marvin Gaye hits.

She nodded.

'Yooooou don't look it.' His eyes were red. His body loose.

The girl shrugged and stood up to go to the restrooms. She was tall and toned. Max took big sips of his drink as he watched her walk past. Booze tunnelled through his body. The support band on his wrist itched from heat. He looked over at Dirk and shook his head. A bunch of girls circled him, laughing and playfully touching him. Max rubbed his face with his hands.

Later, he and Dirk moved into a downstairs bar, a place where people could talk and stretch out on big soft chairs full of cushions. Max lay down and shut his eyes. A few girls tried to lean over and chat but he was past that. After a while, he looked up and

saw that the brunette who had walked away from him before was now sitting nearby. She leant back into a beanbag, only inches away, holding a bottle of vodka mix.

‘Hello,’ he managed, ‘just having a grandpa nap.’

She stared for a moment. ‘You’re not *that* old.’

Max looked at her, squinting and rubbing his eyes. ‘How old are you?’

‘I got in didn’t I?’ she said, her lips tight.

Max laughed. ‘Fair enough.’ He lay his body back down into the darkness.

The girl relaxed.

Max leaned across and took her hand, brushing his fingers across her palms. ‘Your skin is beautiful,’ he said. ‘Look at my hands, they’re like old wool.’

She pulled away.

‘What’s your name?’ he yelled. He was nowhere. She was right there. The walls jumped from a nineties thump. Her skin smelt woody and sweet.

‘Jordi.’

He nodded and leant back, his eyes slowly closing.

‘And I know who you are,’ she said, with a yawn. ‘But I don’t like footy much.’

Max laughed out loud, his eyes still closed. ‘I’m glad, I’m soo glad.’

The crowds grew smaller around them. At one point Dirk called out to Max and raised his thumb in the air while two girls kissed in front of him. Max shook his head and rubbed his eyes with one hand. He turned his attention back to the brunette. ‘Tell me about you, Jordi,’ he said, as she leaned closer to him, resting into the chair they now shared. ‘Tell me all about you.’

Jordi sighed and leaned her head against the back of the couch. ‘Nuthin’ to tell.’

Max looked at her and smiled, Maxi Priest easing through the speakers. 'I don't believe that,' he slurred. 'What do you want, then? If you could have anything?'

Jordi lowered her head and pulled her skirt downwards, shielding the flesh of her thighs. 'Dunno. The list is too long.'

Max came closer as lights sent a sheen across Jordi's face. 'Tell me something you can do.'

'What?' She frowned.

'Something you're good at.'

She thought for a moment. 'Um, well...dunno. I can paint a bit.'

'There you go,' Max said loudly. 'What kind of stuff?'

'Don't know what you'd call it.' She shrugged. 'I like making things look the way I see them.'

'And how do you see them?' Max's voice was slow from the booze and hoarse from talking over the music.

Jordi was distracted, looking up as a few of her girlfriends trotted past in heels and short cotton dresses, blowing her kisses. Jordi brushed hair out of her face and turned back to Max. 'What?'

'What do you see then, when you paint?'

Jordi lowered her head a little. 'I just get a picture in my mind and add colours and stuff to how things normally look. I see other things...'

Max grinned. His skin was scarlet. 'That's good, I like that. You keep doing it.'

'Nah,' Jordi said, taking a sip from her vodka mixer bottle, 'It's stupid. It won't get me a job, hey?'

‘Don’t worryyyy about that,’ Max raised his voice over the music. ‘Just keep doing it, okay?’ He stood up and staggered a little, his body leaning forward. He took Jordi’s hand and guided her to the dance floor.

It was full of warm bodies and jewellery shining off lights, people moving to ‘I Feel Love’ by Donna Summer. With her eyes closed, Jordi slid her hips side to side, in time with the deep beats. Soon she had her head resting on Max. He put both arms around her. He was no-one. He was anywhere. There was skin against his face.

People disappeared after a few tracks and the music slowed. Max stumbled upstairs, holding Jordi’s hand. He found Dirk kissing multiple girls on a couch, his fingers wrapped around the throat of one while another lay across him, her head in his lap.

‘I’m outta here.’ Max stumbled, moving past Dirk and making his way towards the exit. Jordi followed closely behind. Her friends had already gone and she was alone now.

‘Hang on, mate, gotta ditch these Facebook hoooooes,’ yelled Dirk, trying to get his balance as he rose from his seat.

Outside, Jordi stood shivering next to Max. He put an arm around her and tried to stand straight. They waited with others in the taxi queue, where people stood in groups, yawning and chatting, fingers tapping against phones. A few guys made last-minute attempts to pick up women in the queue, roaring out their best one-liners. The women moved away. Music rocked through car windows.

‘You want me to get you a cab home?’ Max said, staggering a little as he reached into his pocket to find his wallet.

Jordi shrugged. ‘It’s okay.’

‘No, I’m not leaving you here, no, no, no,’ he mumbled, looking for notes inside his jeans, squinting against the street lights. Drunk people fell down the steps as they moved out of the club. Late-night traffic droned past.

Jordi clutched her bag against her chest and stood still. ‘I can’t go home.’

‘What?’ Max leaned down towards Jordi. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s too far.’

‘Oh...do you wanna stay at my place? No funny business though, I’m not that kinda guy,’ Max said, pulling a face and crossing his arms as he stepped away from her.

Jordi laughed, and turned her face away. ‘Okay.’

Dirk appeared, sliding his hands around Max from behind. ‘Looks like I’m set,’ he said. ‘Let’s share a cab, mate.’ Dirk turned his eyes towards Jordi. ‘Wow, hello, you are gorrrrrgeous,’ he growled.

‘Get offfff,’ huffed Max, pushing Dirk away.

A taxi pulled up. Max held onto Dirk’s shirt and tried to stop him from getting in the car with him and Jordi, but the booze took over and he gave up. They all slid into the backseat.

‘Mate, I’ve lost my keys,’ said Dirk, fumbling around in his pockets. ‘Can I crash at your joint?’

Max shook his head, ‘Nooo, you’ll wanna party all night.’

‘It’s awright, I’ll leave you two alone, I’m fucked,’ Dirk pleaded.

Max sighed and put his arm around Jordi as she sat between the two men. The taxi jerked its way through the city. They sang along to Richard Marx and Michael Bolton, and Jordi asked if the taxi driver could change from the GOLD 104.3 hits station to Fox FM. When he did, Max gave the German driver a Mintie from his pocket and a fifty-buck tip.

The group of three laughed and fell over as they crashed through the entrance of the apartment building, clomping their way over to the lift. Noise bounced around the corridor walls as they banged towards Max’s place. Dirk slid his hand around Jordi’s waist as they stood at the front door, music humming from speakers Max left on earlier.

Inside, Dirk snatched a half-drunk bottle of vodka off the kitchen bench, raising it in the air and making a loud grunting noise. He bounded over to the iPod stereo, turning up the Daft Punk track and thrusting his hips against a chair. He danced next to Jordi and held the bottle to her lips, tipping it back down her throat. She took a long swig, then fell down onto a couch. Dirk kept dancing.

Max crashed his way into one of the two spare bedrooms and flipped open a sofa bed. 'There you go, buddy,' he yelled to Dirk as he stumbled up the passage towards the ensuite toilet off his bedroom. He looked at himself in the mirror as he flushed, stubble sprouting over his cheeks. His eyes were red slits. He pulled a face and switched off the bathroom light.

Back in the lounge room, he could hear Dirk and Jordi out on the balcony, laughing and dancing together to a James Brown track. They crashed back inside through the glass door, Dirk pressing the vodka bottle on Jordi, forcing her lips open with his fingers. She spat out the alcohol and pushed him in the stomach. Dirk held Jordi's arms and shoved her up against the wall, his tongue sliding across her face and leaving a trail of saliva on her skin. Jordi slapped and kicked at Dirk, but he was taller and stronger.

'Jesus!' yelled Max, stomping over. 'Let her go, idiot.' Max held Dirk around the neck and pushed him off Jordi.

Dirk fell back, laughing as he rolled around the lounge room floor.

'Are you okay?' said Max, turning to touch Jordi's face. She nodded.

Max took Jordi to the other spare bedroom and opened the door to the dark, quiet space. The tones of the room were a soft blue-grey colour, the bedcover white cotton. He took her hand and led her inside.

'You sleep in here, I'll keep an eye on him,' Max said. He leaned over to kiss the side of her face, but Jordi looked up and touched his cheek, sliding a finger across his lips.

Max stepped back. 'Ah...you want some water?'

Jordi bit a fingernail, then shook her head and leaned towards him. 'Where's your room?' she said softly.

Max looked at her, squinting a little. 'I don't think that's a good idea,' he slurred.

'I don't wanna stay here by myself,' she said, flicking hair away from her face. 'Please.'

Max took Jordi's hand and led her to his room, which was dark and smelt of aftershave. A car alarm wailed down on the street below the large window. They sat down on the king-size latex bed.

Max pulled Jordi to him and began gently kissing her face. He started with one cheek, and then the other. Slowly, he dragged his lips towards her own. She fell into him, their arms wrapping around each other. Max groaned as he grew hard against her. Jordi put her arms around his neck.

'You're lovely,' he whispered, pulling her down so they were lying on the bed.

'I'm not,' said Jordi. 'I'm ordinary.'

Max looked into her eyes. 'No, don't say that.' He nudged against her ear, his body folding around her.

'I only want you to kiss me,' Jordi announced.

Max pulled back, his breath fast and heavy. 'Oooooookay,' he said, gulping for air. He pressed a hand down on his hard-on and sat up. 'I'm sorry, you've got me pretty worked up.'

Jordi turned her face away.

Max looked at Jordi as a silver glow from city buildings beamed through the window and across her cheeks. Her skin was soft and child-like. He frowned.

'Hey,' Max said, reaching a hand out to her. 'How old are you?'

'It doesn't matter.'

‘Oh god.’ Max put his face in his hands. ‘How old?’

Jordi said nothing. She ran her fingers through her hair as Max lay down, hands across his eyes, his breath slower.

Suddenly, Dirk stumbled into the room and fell onto the bed beside them, wiggling his hips as he balanced himself on his knees, fumbling hands grabbing at the buttons on his shirt.

‘Piss off, idiot,’ Max yelled, shoving Dirk away from them. ‘Have some respect.’

Dirk began dancing on top of Max’s bed, thrusting his hips and singing. Jordi laughed and held onto Max’s arm. Dirk moved towards her. ‘Just a kiss, babe, that’s all,’ he murmured. Jordi backed away.

‘Get out, dickhead!’ Max bellowed, his hands shoving against Dirk’s chest. Dirk wrestled back.

‘It’s okay,’ Jordi said, her eyes half shut and her knees drawn up to her chest.

Dirk pushed Max off the bed, his body thudding as it hit the floor, leaving him stunned. Turning to Jordi, Dirk held her face and rammed his tongue inside her mouth. He pushed her flat onto the silk Japanese comforter, crushing his body down on top and pulling her legs around his hips.

‘One of These Days’ by the Foo Fighters belted out of the iPod speakers. Max staggered up off the floor, his face sweating. Looking at the bed, he saw Jordi pushing against Dirk as he lowered himself down onto her harder, the kissing rough and wet, his hands inside her underwear.

‘Fuck!’ Max cried, and took hold of Dirk from behind. But Dirk was bigger than him and stronger. Max tried again, swinging a punch. He missed.

Dirk let go of Jordi and hooked an arm around Max’s neck, smacking a fist against his head. Max fell on the floor and couldn’t get up again. Gasping and rolling, he saw a

mass of colours and sound. He tried lifting his head and pushed his arms hard against the carpet. But his body collapsed as Jordi cried out. And then everything just stopped.

Chapter 4

Jordi limped through the streets due to a loose clip on one of her Prada-look high heels and blisters. She bought the shoes the day before at Price Right in the West Meadows mall. She felt very tall in them. Although they were vinyl and the black plastic surface was starting to crack, when she looked in the mirror at her long legs, she was a contestant on *Australia's Next Supermodel*. But now her shoes were like everything else. They were hurting, they were letting her down.

It was a fifteen-minute walk from the NightRider stop to home. Sun grilled the sky, warming the early morning air. Jordi stopped to take off her heels. She put them under her arm and sighed as she wiggled her toes. The concrete was hard against her feet, but she could move now.

Jordi wondered if her mum, Petra, was home. When Petra was away she usually sent Jordi a text to let her know, to make sure someone was there for the kids. This happened on nights when Petra stayed over at Boss Freyer's place. Since Jordi's dad Kane had been out of touch for months on and off, Boss was Petra's 'sometimes' boyfriend, but he hadn't been allowed to come to the house since the day Jordi's younger brother Ryan had found a machete in Boss's Ford Falcon ute.

When Petra came back after a night with Boss, she'd burst into the housing commission brick veneer with a bucket from KFC. She'd grab her five kids and hug and kiss them until they punched and pushed and yelled at her to let go. She was sorry, sorry, sorry—always sorry. Then, before her hangover kicked in too much, she'd sit down with her children and put on a DVD and tell them funny stories about when they were younger. They'd listen, chicken grease smeared over their faces, and say, 'You're lying,' when she told tales of toilet training or screaming at Santa at Westfield, or the time Ryan ate raw sausages in Coles and threw up on the checkout girl. Sometimes she'd have toys from Boss, zipped up inside large stripy plastic bags, little white security tags still attached. There were sets of Lego, dolls from China with outfits from different countries, video game equipment and new-release movies. Then Petra would

tell them that she loved them, before lying down on the blue cloth couch from the Salvos' Superstore and go to sleep.

Jordi walked quickly along the footpath, her bare feet slapping against the concrete as she took short, sharp breaths, wincing from her aching thighs. She wondered if her sister Breanna, aged fifteen, had kept her promise to stay with the other kids (Ryan, four, Cruise, three and Abbey, two) if their mother went out. She knew it was a risk to leave them last night, but she'd bought the new shoes, and a top from Best and Less. And her girlfriend Shilo had free passes to clubs in King Street.

Walking up to the house, Jordi passed Mrs Brayman, their neighbour, who stood at her front door holding Fanta, a large orange cat with a bung eye, waving to Jordi as the sky opened up with light. Mrs Brayman invited them in sometimes for cupcakes and made them bubble baths and read the smaller kids Dr Seuss books. She had eight cats, each with their own knitted blanket and hat.

Jordi pushed the metal gate, scraping it back against the concrete pathway. She pressed her hands down on her pelvis as another cramp shook her body. The front door was open. Loose on its hinges, it swung with only a slight push.

'Hey!' Jordi called out, peering into the lounge room. Her nose wriggled from the meaty stench of dirty nappies emanating from a plastic bag near the front door. Her brothers and sisters lay on the lounge room floor, curled up in little bunches of arms and legs like a Barrel of Monkeys game. Their heads rested against lumpy pillows, bursts of white feathers poking out of old doonas.

'Jorrrdi,' Cruise said, opening his eyes, 'where'd ya go?'

Jordi did a headcount. There was one missing, Breanna. The younger kids had been left alone. She walked over to Ryan and leant down to stroke his thin hair. He lay in a thinned-out sleeping bag, murmuring with his eyes closed.

'Hey Ry,' she said gently, 'where's Bree?'

'Dunno,' he said. 'I wanna sleep.'

Jordi lay down on the floor beside him. The house was still and dark and there was no sign of their mum. Her muscles unlocked as her body eased into the stinky fawn carpet underneath her, yellow Twisties dust from her brother's face brushing against her skin.

She felt hands across her body. She felt big, wide fingers gripped around her wrist. She heard breaths against her face, slow and loud...the thump of the Chemical Brothers. She saw Max, passed out on the floor in the bedroom as the other guy dragged her body towards him.

'No!' she said. 'I don't want to!' The footballer flattened her arms out straight.

Jordi shuddered as she snuggled against her little brother, waiting for her mother to come home.

Chapter 5

On the night that it happened, Ruby Westmore was home vacuuming her new apartment on the fifteenth floor, right below Max Carlisle. She hugged herself the day she bought it, in front of the agent. And she lit a candle for her Aunt Glad, who left her the inheritance. Later, Ruby cried as she sat in the kitchen and thought about how many Oxfam goats she could buy for the price of the lime-green splashback. And she cried because she was alone.

Ruby's desk sat in front of a big glass window looking over the skyline. She was sipping decaf green tea and listening to SBS radio news droning from her computer. *Three hundred dead in Syria.* She opened a Harris Scarfe catalogue. *Thirty Israeli children killed in a bomb blast.* She read an ad for George Foreman grills, fifty per cent off. A teenager with depression was interviewed, despairing about government cuts to HeadSpace, a program for youth. Ruby stared at the tiny speaker on her laptop. His voice was low and broken. She turned the radio off.

Warm lavender oil filled the room. Ruby logged into Facebook, noting she had twenty-two 'friends'. She read postings from strangers: 'Check out my cat Elvis eating Coco Pops!' Some guy she couldn't remember from high school had a picture of himself tipping beer over his head in Bali, two men beside him raising their thumbs. Underneath the sunburn, their flesh was white, like pigs on a spit. She knew that only one person from her 'friends' list was aware she was afraid of birds and clowns. And that she had fantasies about Obama, in the back of his limo—'Yes, we can, Ruby. Yes, we can.'

Ruby was not a good sleeper; she had never been able to get to sleep. Her insomnia was part of her now. It left her daytime in a haze. From the lounge room, a plasma TV screeched with a cooking show. Next to it sat a snow dome from the Big Pineapple, with tiny pineapples that fluffed up when it was shaken. She bought it on a school trip in Year 8, where she had sat on the bus beside Noreen West, a girl with a very bad home perm. People threw things at them and called them 'dags' and 'lesos'.

Ruby worked for a seniors' introduction service, Golden Dates. She had a fetish for men's watches and her blunt-cut hair was blue-black. 'Cool hair,' they said in the bars, the youngsters, when she slipped inside the doors sometimes on the way home from a Saturday night couples' dinner party (work colleagues or a few old uni friends), escaping discussions about house extensions and interest rates and how to grow coriander in pots. She wouldn't speak to the clubbers, just sat in a dark corner and sipped wine. She wanted to jump in and throw her arms around them and take their pills. She watched them hugging, male and female, female and female, like stardust, moving together, creating energy and something new.

Ruby was forty years old. She'd had one serious relationship and a few casual lovers. Two years ago, after a long stretch of celibacy, she'd drunk too many cocktails at a Desperate and Dateless ball in the city and went home with a fireman called Joe who bred Cocker spaniels. After two weeks, she couldn't bear his TV view of the world any longer—'Did you see that guy last night on *Funniest Home Videos*?' 'Did you hear what Darryl said on the *Hey Hey* reruns?' 'Did you see Eddie McGuire get stuck into Sam?' In the end, she decided he was good hearted and well built, and even though she could not bear speaking to him, maybe they could have some occasional fun. But even there, in the ruffle of cotton and lips and skin, he had still gone on, like someone speaking underwater: 'God your arse is great, it's like that chick's from *Underbelly*.' And so it ended.

Now it was six months since she'd been intimate. It happened at a New Year's Eve party in the city when a guy suddenly stood in front of her, right near the women's toilets. They danced together like fifteen year olds and walked down to the Fitzroy gardens where he kissed her wet and hard against the soft summer grass. His stubble scratched like a scourer against her neck as she fought his python arms and clung onto her underwear. For days afterwards her skin stayed warm and ready for more, but the Ab-buster exercise machine hadn't filled the void.

'This is a man.' 'This is a woman.' It was in the Eltham High School theatrette in 1981 where Ruby saw a man full-frontal naked for the first time. Screams erupted from the Year 7 students. She was shocked at the thickness of the pubic hair. It was rough and scratchy, like the bushes at the back of her Nana's house. Ruby's next sexual

awakening was in Year 9, via Mr Emerson, the good-looking PE teacher. He sometimes touched her backside as she reached up to her bag in the locker shed. He said things like, 'I wish I was that straw,' while she drank Orange Primas. Years later, she heard about girls that had gone to his office after school. She tracked them down on Facebook and sent them messages about speaking up. They never replied. She found Mr Emerson on the internet, now a minister with the Future Hope Church, a new faith springing up all over the outer suburbs with cafés and book shops. His program Spiritual Pilates promoted finding god in your core.

Ruby found it hard to be close. Her parents, Ronald and Elaine, would sometimes pat each other but never embraced in front of their daughter. They were polite and had dinner every night at six o'clock and there was never any arguing. Ronald was a train driver who, at the age of fifty-five, had run over an old man standing on the Williamstown line with his arms up in the air. Passengers said they felt a bump. Ronald never drove again and had been home on compo for years. He'd lose it if dinner wasn't on the table right on six. He'd fidget and pace around the kitchen area saying, 'Where's your mother?' and it might only be ten minutes past six and Ruby's mum might be out at the clothesline trying to fold sheets after spending the day working with Down Syndrome kids. 'Elaine, where's tea?' he'd yell with his face up at the window. And Ruby would get home from her part-time job at Big W and help her mum dish out the three veg and meat. Once she said to her dad, 'Why can't you cook? It's not hard. Mum's been at work all day.' He got out of his lounge chair and left the room, mumbling about insolence and being bloody ungrateful or something.

They were older parents. She wanted to tell them that kids at school called her lesbian and freak because she wore bright-coloured material in her hair and listened to *The Cure*. But she didn't know how to. When Ruby arrived late in life, Elaine ran a finger over her baby's lips and said they were a lovely cherry red, and because 'Cherry' sounded like a prostitute's name, they went for Ruby. It was the only radical thing they'd ever done. People at church gossiped about it. 'Sounds a bit hippie,' they said. 'Very unusual.' Ronald and Elaine had enjoyed the controversy at the time but in later years it made them a little embarrassed.

Today was Ruby's registered day off. She turned off her computer, remembering the to-do list: 'Finish *Great Expectations*' (sitting on the coffee table next to the *New Idea*). An ad came on TV for Botox in a tube. She tugged at her cheeks. Tim Costello talked about child sponsorship. Seven dollars a week. *That's one organic chicken*, she thought, *two packets of Tim Tams*. Then an ad about ocean creatures choking on waste products. Ruby turned off the TV and looked towards the plastic shopping-bag holder hanging near the door into the kitchen. She bought it from a lady at a craft market with holes in her jumper and clumpy fingers like ginger stalks. It was shaped like a rabbit with button eyes, the bags bursting out of it. *You fool*, it said, little black buttons watching. *You are still using the plastic. You will always use the plastic.*

Ruby imagined dropping out of her large window and disappearing forever. On a work trip to Sydney, she saw someone fall past her window at the Bondi apartment. As the shape hurtled by, just a blur of dark clothes, Ruby had lain on a micro-suede lounge eating a Wagon Wheel and watching *A Farmer Wants a Wife*.

Later that Saturday evening, as the sky turned to a summer trifle, shooting red and pink through the glass, Ruby looked out at the night and sighed. She hadn't opened the novel. She didn't finish the five-year plan or scrub the shower. She walked over to her desk. There were nine Facebook messages, including a 'Rate yourself in bed' survey and an invitation to join the 'Cyber Existentialists' group. She saw an email from her father, an update from her parents' trip around Australia. In the photo they stood in front of the Big Banana. The ends of the banana were chopped off, leaving what resembled a giant yellow monorail. Her mother wore high heels. Ruby walked over to her couch, turned on the TV and watched *When Harry Met Sally* but only got midway before she fell asleep.

Noise from upstairs startled Ruby, a heavy thump of music and laughter. She yawned and looked down at her watch. It was 3 am. The sound grew a little louder, vibrating through her ceiling. Ruby frowned and scratched her wrists until pink dots appeared. She sat up and picked up some eczema cream from the coffee table. It smelt like the inside of her dad's first aid kit, the one from the seventies he still kept in his car boot. She stretched her back and legs and looked out of the lounge room window, the city now puffs of black and silver.

And then she heard yelling and crashing from outside. Ruby sat up straight, her heart booming. She walked slowly over to the balcony and stepped out into the darkness. She looked up towards the lights and sound. She saw a young woman dancing, her arms waving around. Suddenly, the young woman bent forward over the balcony railing, spilling a bottle of vodka over the side. An older man appeared and put his arm around her waist, pulling her upright. Music blared from inside. Ruby stood watching until they disappeared, the door slamming shut. Then she waited, as the yelling and laughter vanished behind the glass.

Chapter 6

The air was quiet. Max stood still next to the other players. They were eighteen year olds from country towns, crossing their arms to stop the tremors from adrenalin. No-one spoke. They just watched and wiped the sweat out of their eyes and listened for the next drill. Whistles screeched and balls whacked against the ground. It was 1998.

He was a long way from Benalla and the early Saturday mornings. Far from the shiver of the first run on the ground and the heavy country sky, people clutching foam cups steaming coffee into the air. 'God,' they said to Roger. 'God, he's good.' Roger said very little.

On these days, the view from Max's ten-year-old eyes was of legs swinging and mud and he could hear the screams of other fathers, of other men. But Max could never hear his own dad calling. Sometimes he'd stop and catch the air, trying to breathe after a big kick that carried the ball straight through the goals.

On the way home, Roger sometimes commented on the umpiring but not much else. There were long stretches of nothing where Max turned on the radio and looked out the window. The day he was awarded Best and Fairest, his father said, 'Don't get cocky, mate.'

The Carlisles had cash. Jean inherited properties from her parents who, she said, had worked bloody hard for it and never had a holiday in their lives, apart from a weekend once at Rosebud. And Roger was a local lawyer with a reputation for getting results. The bluestone of their homestead was the colour of cornflowers, the surface cool and smooth. It was built by her great-grandparents. *Rich bitch*, said the women in town. But Jean bought her clothes from a hospice op shop, and she gave a lot to World Vision. She also had a secret account that Roger didn't know about.

Jean trembled when she went out in public. It got worse after the twins arrived, George and Bryce.

'What do you mean,' she said to the Melbourne doctor with a baby-skinned face.

Roger cleared his throat and spun his watch, making clicking noises.

Jean nudged him. 'Problems socially? But they're healthy,' she insisted. 'Can't you be specific?'

The specialist handed them some literature called 'The 123 of ADD' and said to stay away from naturopaths. 'There's programs,' he said.

And so, on Saturdays, Jean didn't come to the games. Roger sometimes rang from the club rooms and left a message with the scores, just a bunch of numbers. Sometimes Jean imagined her husband saying something like, *You're wonderful* at the end of the message. In the years following, when Jean had her own mobile phone, she imagined Roger sending her a romantic text message. She would sometimes type a message to herself, to see how it looked inside the little space on the screen. Once, she pressed send, by mistake. 'I love you,' it said.

In earlier times, Bryce and George screamed and kicked their mother, especially when she was alone. Once, they found her sobbing in Roger's office, slumped over a desk. They watched and wiggled their noses. Bryce, a bigger and louder child with arms like traffic poles yelled, 'Sorry,' and pushed his brother out of the doorway, dragging him up the stairs leading to the lounge. When they got to the top, they laughed and laughed.

Max looked towards the end of the ground, counting the seconds it took for the ball to land. The selectors stood watching, their heads slowly nodding. His parents watched from the grandstand. Sun gushed over him. Hard air filled his gut.

When he signed the contract, his mother cried. His dad shook his hand. And smiled at his son.

'Let's eat,' said Roger, as they left the city building and walked the five blocks that Roger said would clear their heads and save ten dollars on parking. Roger never celebrated much. His own father had stopped any fuss about birthdays, Christmas and other things when he had come back from Changi. Their house became quiet and still. But on this night, Roger swallowed as he held his head high and snuck little glances back at Max, eyes wide.

Max stepped away from his parents, moving behind them. They walked up to Chinatown and chose a place that looked good because a waiter stood out the front and Jean thought he was very polite. They shared a glossy meal with red tablecloths. A bus-load of people from the US sat nearby. Roger ate hungrily and didn't even notice the screech of conversations or the woman who turned to ask Jean where she could buy a *boooooomerong*. Their own meal was quiet. Jean beamed at Max as she chewed.

Roger suggested an ice-cream on the way home from one of those 'rip-off joints where you pay more for the bloody cone than the ice-cream'. He even let his wife have two scoops and a little Flake bar on top, while Max got a giant tub of takeaway. They listened to a Tom Jones CD and watched the stars through the windows as the vintage Mercedes bumped along the old country roads.

A half-hour from home, the car eased through a windy back dirt road to the homestead. Jean lay back against the front seat with her mouth open and eyes closed, honeycomb ice-cream caked around her lips. Max rested against his sports bag while his father drove, the radio on low with a cricket update from the Gabba.

'You did it, son,' Roger said. 'But don't get a big head.'

Max lay still in the darkness.

Chapter 7

Jordi opened her eyes around 11 am. She looked towards her younger brothers and sisters, cross-legged in front of the PlayStation that Boss brought back from Bangkok and eating cheese rings.

‘Is Mum back?’ she murmured, sitting up with her back against the couch that had chunks of foam falling through a gash at the front.

‘Nuhhh,’ the children said, in a chime of little voices.

Jordi stood up and stretched her body. Her back ached and her head rocked from alcohol. She rubbed a hand against her stomach and shuffled towards the kitchen. Pizza boxes with open lids sat on the bench, leftover pieces piled inside with little bite marks. The kitchen smelt of souring cheese. Jordi found some Homebrand white bread in the food cupboard, throwing out pieces showing tiny spots of mould.

‘You want some toast?’ she yelled, looking around at packets and dirty plates and pots with muck inside them.

‘Yeah,’ the young kids called back, their faces mesmerised by the screen as little fingers clicked the controllers.

Jordi slid the hard bits of bread into the squeaky old toaster, leaning forward and pressing a hand against her groin. The pain lasted a few seconds and then stopped. The television in the lounge room suddenly boomed, gun and truck noises shuddering through the surround-sound speakers.

‘Don’t play that crap,’ Jordi huffed, walking into the lounge room. ‘You know that’s not for kids.’

‘Ohhhhh,’ they said.

Jordi picked up a Nemo game off the floor and slid it into the PlayStation.

‘You’re not our mum,’ Ryan called out. Jordi sniffed the inside of a jar and smoothed 2012-expired peanut butter on the toasted bread.

‘Your mum,’ she hissed, ‘isn’t here.’

She took the bits of toast in to her brothers and sister on a big plate and sat it down near the TV. They reached over to grab the pieces, eyes stretching back to the screen. Then she went into the room she shared with her other sister and closed the door. The old brown carpet was wafer-thin and crowned with dust. There were chips in the walls where paint flaked against torn posters of One Direction. Bree had left a small glass on the bedside table full of cigarette butts. The metallic stench of ash made Jordi dry-reach.

She lay down on her mattress, listening to the sounds of her brothers and sister. The pain eased. She was home now.

A text beeped through from Shilo. *Hear about Hannah?*

Hannah Allen lived in Hoppers. Her parents ran a newsagency and had money. She’d paid for Jordi’s drinks at the bar that night. And she’d tongue-kissed five footballers during the evening before going outside to the bricked smoking area, where she gave one of them a hand-job. Hannah was given a cab voucher to get home, compliments of the club. Jordi wasn’t a close friend of Hannah’s. She found her confidence irritating. But Jordi felt sorry for her. Everyone at school now knew what happened and were calling her ‘Hand-Job Hannah’. Jordi felt guilty too. Part of her was relieved people were talking about someone else and not her.

As usual, Jordi had no credit so she couldn’t reply. A noise came from the lounge room.

‘Mum!’ yelled her brothers and sisters.

Jordi turned to face a wall and hugged a pillow against her body. After a little while, the door to her room slowly opened.

‘Hello, love,’ her mother said in a dry whisper, ‘how are ya?’

‘Alright,’ said Jordi, her eyes closed.

‘Sorry sweets, I got a bit off me trolley last night.’

Jordi said nothing as she breathed against her pillow.

‘Were the kids alright?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Jords, you know you can’t leave ’em!’

‘As if you give a shit.’

Petra sighed. ‘That’s harsh. You know how I get, love.’

Jordi sniffed.

‘Do ya wanna be alone?’ Her mum sat down on the bed and tenderly touched her daughter’s hair.

‘Yep,’ said Jordi.

‘Okeydokey.’ Petra slowly stood up. ‘I’ve got some Red Rooster, I’ll save ya’ some, hey?’

Jordi said nothing. Her mother closed the bedroom door, leaving a trail of Tabu perfume and the sour remnants of Jack Daniels. Jordi heard laughter and yelling and the stomps of little feet. She took a long breath, soaking in the sounds through the thin walls, listening to her family outside.

Chapter 8

After Jordi left in the early morning darkness, Max stumbled back to the apartment and crashed on the couch, his face sinking into the soft leather. Near midday, he wiped the saliva pooled against the curl of his lips and slowly pulled his body upwards, squinting away from sun spraying the windows. He stretched as he got up and thumped his feet across the slate tiles leading into his bedroom. A cleaner knocked twice on the front door and shoved an envelope through the mail slot.

Dirk was face-down on the bed in Max's room, wearing only socks. Max stared at him, Dirk buzz-sawing into the mattress. Max ran into the bathroom and threw up. *Happy Days* drifted in from the lounge room.

An hour later, Dirk stumbled out of the bedroom. Max lay slumped on a beanbag with his eyes closed. The apartment reeked of men's shoes and stale grog.

'Maxy, mate, you got coffee?' Dirk grunted with one eye open.

'Piss off,' Max snarled and squashed his face into the beanbag.

'Sooooomenone's dirty,' Dirk laughed as he rubbed his stomach.

Max said nothing, taking deep breaths against the fabric.

'What's up your arse?' Dirk scratched the top of his head, lying across the couch.

'What the fuck did you do last night?' Max pressed a hand across his forehead.

Dirk yawned again, staring at the television. 'All a bit o' fun. Don't stress, mate. We were pissed, hey?'

Max's hands balled into fists as he got up. Dirk stretched out on the couch, starting up the PlayStation. He stared at the screen, his fingers clicking the controller.

'I think you'd better go,' Max said through his teeth and thudded into the kitchen.

Dirk gazed at the video game and sniffed a few times. A red lipstick lid lay on a woollen rug, near his big toe. He scratched his foot and kicked it, sending the lipstick into a roll underneath the couch. He didn't flinch. He just kept clicking at the controller.

'Did you hear me?' Max yelled as he walked back into the lounge room sculling a glass of water, his fingers trembling against the clear surface.

Dirk looked over at him, frowning. 'What's goin' on?' he said, eyes on the TV.

'Get out.' Max trembled. 'Get the fuck out of my apartment.'

Dirk stood up and turned towards him, his eyes road-mapped and shiny. He shook his head, picked up a jacket off the couch and stomped towards the front door. He stopped for a moment and turned to look at Max, his eyes narrowing.

'You're lucky I'm fucked up, mate,' Dirk said, his body swaying a little from his hangover. He swung the front door open and let out a long, deep laugh, slamming it hard behind him.

The bang of the door needled through Max's body. He leaned back on the couch, slowly sipping from the glass of water. Video game zombies with blood-dripping faces growled from the television.

A few hours later, Max woke, his eyelids heavy with sleep. He dragged himself out of the lounge room towards the bedroom, his hair jutting out in angular chunks from styling wax and sweat. He slid on sunglasses and a black beanie, then left his apartment, thumping his way along the long corridor to the lift that cost him four hundred bucks a month. He needed to get out.

Max arrived at the Melbourne Central cinema with his body hunched over. He stepped onto the escalators, his eyes flickering from the artificial light. Rumba music played through speakers. In the mass of faces, he saw different women. He kept his head down low. He remembered the dark-haired woman's soft voice as she talked to the Jordi in the corridor. How she looked at him with big eyes, like he'd killed someone.

Jordi's cries clawed into his skin. He entered one of the cinemas to see a foreign movie he'd never heard of, part of a festival that week. The back of his head hurt. He remembered hitting the floor. He remembered the girl's voice, and slunk down into the velvet seat. 'Prick,' he muttered to himself. 'You pathetic prick.'

Max liked the hidden feeling of cinemas, the darkness and the peace. And he liked foreign films, the beauty of the camera work. But this movie was a wank. Self-indulgent. His head throbbed. He rested against the softness of the chair. On the screen, a couple sat at a kitchen table. An elderly man lowered his head, sobbing, while the camera panned out of a window towards snow. Amongst the blackness of winter trees, Vivaldi moaned sweetly as Nazi soldiers marched along village streets.

A cowbell ring-tone went off a few rows behind, jolting Max. The ten people in the cinema tutted, turning their heads towards the offender. Max rubbed his eyes and yawned, squinting at the screen.

He got up. A Crunchie bar wrapper stuck to his shoe made him slip on the carpet as he stepped out into the lights of the foyer. A group of teenagers clutching buckets of popcorn shouted as they ran by, racing to catch a session of the fourth *Fast & Furious*. The smell of butter made his stomach growl.

One boy turned his head as they banged past. 'Heyyy, isn't that Maxy Carlisle?' he said, tapping his mate on the back.

Before they could do a double-take, Max had decoyed into the men's toilets. He vomited into the low-sunk toilet bowl, waves of brown splashing down like canned soup. He held his face against the porcelain and gripped on as his body shook out the last bits. The acidic odour infected the restroom. Max wiped his face with toilet paper. He sat with the lid down, resting his head back against the hard tiles. The soundtrack of the latest *Twilight* film trickled out of speakers on the wall.

A large man, suffering from bad wind, burst into the bathroom and hurried into a cubicle. To Max, the sounds emanating reminded him of his uncle Lionel, who used to wrap a tissue around a plastic comb to make music by blowing against it. At Christmas and birthday gatherings, the family would nod along and smile as Lionel

blew his lips against the tissue and then asked, 'What song was that?' But as he got older there was little sign of a melody or note. Lionel moved on to using eucalyptus leaves, but suffered a stroke during a rendition of 'Anything Goes' and was now sucking soup through a straw. Max visited Lionel on his birthday, with a box of Roses chocolates and a collection of photos from his latest footy games. The last time he had visited, Lionel nodded and dribbled in his white-sheeted bed and smiled as he held onto Max's fingers.

Max could hear that the man had left the bathroom without washing his hands. He pulled his body up and opened the toilet door. Then Max rubbed a palm across his stomach and winced, the muscles still tender, his mouth trenched with fragments of spew. He shuffled over towards the hand basin and flicked the tap on to full force, splashing water over his face. He looked into the mirror. There were dark shadows under his eyes and his face was the colour of milk. He saw Jordi, her soft skin and pink lips. He felt the clutch of her hand against his fingers.

Max pulled black Ray-Bans out of his pocket and threw them on as he stepped out into the noisy ticket area of the cinema. He walked towards the escalators and into the sun on Swanston Street, his head lowered as he made his way home.

Something made him stop. 'Florence?'

'*Bonito*, it's you,' Florence said, smiling up at him from a bench.

'Sorry?'

'Handsome,' she said, lifting herself off her blanket and pulling a woolly orange jacket around her body. 'Sit down.'

Max remained standing. 'Sorry, Flo, can't stay long, been on the turps.'

She tutted. 'So what's new? Come sit down. I need to ask you something.'

Max sighed and slumped onto the bench next to her, pulling his beanie down over his face. He leaned forward and stared down at the pavement. Techno music shook the glassed entrance to a women's clothing store behind them. People hurried by, mobiles

pressed to their ears like air-traffic controllers. A woman in an electric wheelchair zigzagged past with her tongue hanging out, a sign bumping up and down: 'My name is Chloe, thank you for buying these sweets.'

'I saw a young girl leaving your building, early this morning,' Florence said quietly, looking away from Max.

He looked down at the ground and slowly nodded. 'Okay?'

'She was in a bit of a state.'

'Right.' Max pulled his jacket collar closer to his neck.

'Just wondered if you saw something? Were you out and about last night?'

'Don't recall anything.'

Florence cleared her throat, silver bangles clinking against her arm. She looked up at him, her round dark eyes blinking. 'She was crying. And she was so *young*.'

Max stood up, dark blue jeans sagging down around his waist. 'I can't help you. Sorry, Flo.'

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Florence muttered something in Portuguese and looked towards the sky.

Max pushed his trembling hands into his pockets, his voice dry and low. 'I gotta go, mate, not well. Look after yourself.'

Florence frowned. As he disappeared behind a group of school kids from the country, she watched until every inch of him was out of sight. She turned to look at a bunch of young women, laughing with their arms linked together, dressed in flimsy dresses and holding cans of cider. She examined each face. A twenty dollar note sat on top of her Woolworths bag. Flo reached down and lifted it into her fingers, scrunching it into a little ball inside her hand.

'*Bonito*,' she said, lowering her head. 'I pray.'

Max flicked the key into the front door of his apartment. He punched his fist on the kitchen table and slid down into a chair. And then he kicked something. It bounced off his shoe and flipped over onto the carpet. He looked down and saw a plastic card.

There she was, staring right at him in a dark blue school jumper. Hair pulled back and the big opal eyes. *Jordana May Spence*, it said, *DOB: 12 May 1998*. '98, '99. He did the maths and sat upright. 'Jesus!' People laughed out in the hallway as Max sat very still, bending the plastic between his fingers.

Chapter 9

Dirk pushed open the door of Max's apartment, peering into the stillness of the passageway. Yawning, his feet moved heavily along the shiny floors. As the lift opened, he gave his testicles a scratch and stumbled into the silver space. At the fifteenth floor, Ruby stepped in, pressing the G button that was already lit.

'It's so slow,' she sighed, as they finally hit the ground level.

'Very,' said Dirk, moving to let the woman out before him. 'You live here?' he asked as they walked towards the glass doors at the entrance.

'Yeah, it's good,' she said, 'close to everything.'

Dirk smiled at her, his Italian sunglasses reflecting light from outside. He was waiting for the comments: 'Oh my god! I've seen you on TV!'

Ruby said nothing and took off, her sneakers making squelching sounds along the footpath.

'Bye,' said Dirk with a sniff. Amongst the cruisy pace of Sunday shoppers, he made his way down Swanston Street to the taxi rank at Flinders Street station. He tripped over someone stretched out on the footpath and yelled, 'Fuck!'

A long-haired man in a black beret shook his fist and screamed something at Dirk that he couldn't understand. Homeless people made him angry. Not because they were homeless, but because they didn't seem to give a shit. He couldn't bear their filth. *Everyone can work*, was his mantra. The ex-treasurer was right. He stopped to watch an old man in pyjamas rummaging through a bin. He had the same wobbly skin as Grandpa Walter, who had passed away earlier that year while watching *Masterchef* in bed. Dirk threw a handful of coins at the old man's feet. 'Get yourself a shower,' he hissed. He continued past a group of young women. They huddled together around an iPad, laughing and smiling and tossing their hair.

Dirk sat on a bench with 'I love trannies' written in black texta, slinking his body down against the hard metal. His head fell backwards as nausea set in.

He saw the girl's face, her breasts and her scarlet lips, her eyes rimmed with makeup. She wanted him. She was one of those girls from school, the beautiful ones who loved being his friend and hugged him when they were drunk at parties. Sometimes they slept with him too, unconscious on cask wine.

'You don't wanna be one of those pretty boys,' Grannie Norma always said. 'They're not real men.' But with his pale white skin, droopy eyes and hair like a seventies perm, Dirk would have been happy with pretty. Instead, he'd been 'PastyFace', 'Frizz' and 'Ghostbuster', all his life.

He remembered her breasts, soft inside his hands. She kicked at him. She thrust her legs and yelled out. But her body was warm and he was sure there was a part of her that wanted it. Once he started, she'd relax. She'd enjoy it. He was muscled and tall and he was good in bed. He dated models. She'd feel special being under him. She could tell all her friends.

He remembered punching Carlisle. Why wouldn't he share? They were pissed, hey? He'd get over it.

Dirk rose, his stomach grumbling as he moved through the hot stench of takeaway food. He skidded on a pool of fresh urine near McDonald's. An Aboriginal man holding a bible asked him if he believed in Jesus. He stepped onto the pedestrian crossing and drew his eyes away from the sting of yellow from the Flinders clocks. He wandered over to join the queue at the taxi rank and listened to a man on a banjo sing a very off-key version of 'I Still Call Australia Home'. He surveyed the people in the grey mass of stone and glass of Fed Square. It had been one of those nights. He had a game to think about Saturday. It had just been one of those nights.

Chapter 10

Jordi arrived at West Meadows College on Monday morning with her uniform hem hanging down, her hair in two large plaits, long silver gypsy earrings flapping against her ears. The growing housing estates with their manmade lakes were creating a roll out of new schools.

Shilo slid an arm her around the waist. 'What happened, woman? Did you get my messages? I was sending you Facebook stuff.' Shilo was shorter than Jordi and olive-skinned from her half-Indian background. Her fingernails were painted bright green. 'What's the goss? I saw you talkin' to that footballer.'

'Nothing,' said Jordi, throwing her bag on top of the locker. 'And you know I never have credit. Or the internet.'

'Shit, mate, you gotta get a job. How can you survive without your phone?'

Jordi shrugged and chucked her ragged exercise books into her locker, screwing her face up at the sour smell of an old Big M container.

'What the hell is that?' Shilo retched, gesturing two fingers down her throat.

They had two minutes to get to class. The locker area spilled over with students, running and screaming.

Shilo clutched Jordi's arm as they headed out towards the science building. 'So tell me, tell me! He was cute. Don't hold back.'

'I don't wanna talk about it.'

Shilo stopped and held on to her friend. 'But it's *me*, Jords! Commmmme ooon!'

'Nothing to tell, okay?'

Shilo sighed and followed Jordi into a biology class, just making it as the bell rang.

Their teacher, Mr Roachford, stood mournfully at the front of the classroom in an eighties Ken Done jumper featuring the Sydney Harbour Bridge. His tired brown eyes looked out at the class as he cleared his throat, pointing at notes on cell division while students chatted and organised their social lives.

Ten minutes later, Jordi headed off to the toilet block. Pain waved through her pelvis. She pushed open the cold grey door of the girl's area and found a cubicle right up the back. She sat down on the plastic seat and leaned forward, her arms wrapped over her stomach. She inhaled slowly, shivering from the morning air sliding underneath the door. She dug inside her school jumper pocket and found a silver-foiled sheet of Nurofen. There were two left. Jordi swallowed hard to get the capsules down. Then she sat with her back against the toilet, her eyelids closing.

'Jords, are you here?' Shilo called out from the entrance.

Jordi sat in silence.

'Jords, the Roach said I could check. Are you okay, babe?' Shilo came up to the cubicle, her face pressed against the door.

'Yeah,' said Jordi, standing up and smoothing down the front of her uniform. She looked at the faded red squares of the second-hand material and sighed. 'I'm coming,' she said.

The day was long. Jordi sat quietly with her friends at lunchtime and listened to chats about urinary tract infections and Katy Perry. When she got home later, her mother was on the couch watching *The Bold and the Beautiful*, a flashback of Brooke and Ridge's first wedding.

'G'day, gorgeous,' said Petra, sucking the last crackle of tar out of a Winfield Blue cigarette and butting it into a chipped tea cup. 'How was ya day?'

'Awright,' said Jordi and walked straight past her into the kitchen.

Her younger sister Breanna stood in front of the fridge, holding the door open. 'Mum, there's nothin' to eat.'

‘Shit.’ Petra stood up, hitching up her hot pink tracksuit pants. ‘Better head down to Coles. Boss gave me some dosh, for all of us.’

‘Can we come?’ screamed the younger kids.

‘No, you stay here with Jords and Bree and I’ll bring youse a surprise.’ Petra held her car keys, the Van Halen medallion swinging as she marched her skinny body out of the house and towards the Datsun 180 parked on an angle in the driveway. ‘Be good,’ she yelled and started the engine.

Jordi went into her bedroom and slammed the door. It bounced a little, splinters dropping from the rotting wood around the handle. She let her body sink down into the old mattress. She turned on her clock radio and listened to a love-song station, slowly closing her eyes.

Her mobile buzzed inside her pocket. Jordi pulled it out, looking at the number coming up on the tiny screen. ‘Hey,’ she said, holding it next to her ear as she turned to one side. A Christina Aguilera track muffled out of the radio.

‘Jords, it’s me. I’m worried about ya,’ Shilo sniffled. ‘You know you can tell me, hun. You know you can trust me.’

Jordi swallowed, a tear dripping down one side of her face.

‘Jords, are you there?’

She held the mobile closer to her face. ‘Yeah.’

‘Aww babes. How long have we been friends?’

‘Ages...’ Jordi said. She could hear her brothers and sisters fighting out in the lounge room. A game controller made a cracking noise as it smashed against a wall.

‘Tell me.’

Jordi swallowed. A few seconds passed. ‘He forced me,’ she said, her voice quivering.

‘Who?’

‘Not the guy I left with. We went to his apartment.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, so, he passed out and then his mate—’ Jordi stopped.

‘I’m listening, hun. I’m here.’ Shilo’s voice was breaking into a little sob.

‘He held me down.’

Shilo went quiet. ‘Oh my god...’

‘Max, the other guy, tried to stop him.’

‘This is bullshit!’ Shilo yelled. ‘You should tell someone.’ There was a long pause.

‘Jords?’

‘No way. As if they’d believe me.’

‘Oh my god,’ Shilo repeated. ‘Are you alright, hun?’

Jordi pulled the doona up near her face.

‘Oh my god.’

‘Just don’t tell anyone, okay? I need you to promise,’ Jordi huffed.

‘K,’ Shilo sniffled. ‘Jorrds, some chicks are speaking up now. I’ve seen them on telly.’

‘No,’ said Jordi in a panicky voice. ‘Can you imagine? Everyone from school and all that shit?’

‘You could get some cash out of it. I’m sorry, but seriously, you could. You know, like, *A Current Affair*, I reckon they’d pay you.’

‘No.’

Jordi began to cry. Heavy tears ran down her neck.

‘Jords, I’m here.’ Shilo’s voice quivered. ‘It’s criminal, Jords, it’s fucked up. You have to say something.’

Jordi wiped her nose on the sleeve of her hoodie. ‘No, I can’t.’ She hung up, lay back down on the bed and listened to Phil Collins singing ‘In the Air Tonight’, followed by an ad for hair loss. She gripped the edge of her worn-out doona and tried to think about something happy, like last New Year’s Eve at Fed Square when she kissed Joel Sanders, a Eurasian-French hip-hop guy from Werribee. And when she spent the day with her dad at Luna Park for her fifteenth birthday.

But she could still feel the arms heavy down on her thin wrists and his hot breath against her neck. And the moment when she stopped fighting and closed her eyes.

Chapter 11

Ruby strode past Monday morning faces. The sounds of Melbourne rolled together in a wave of cars and voices. She watched two women in Kathmandu jumpers holding hands as they looked in shop windows along Swanston Street. She saw an older couple strolling past with their arms linked together. The man wore a dark purple suit. The woman's hair was shaped into a bouffant. Ruby turned away as wind smacked against her cheeks.

She stopped. A headline on a newspaper stand read, 'CARLISLE OUT?' It was him. The guy from her building who she saw Sunday morning as she stood helping the young girl. She pressed a finger against the photo. He wore a sleeveless football jumper and was smiling. She looked at the smooth definition of his arms. There was something nice about his face, but all she could think about was how he looked in the corridor that morning—frightened.

The news was everywhere: 'Mighty Max Out', 'Carlisle Canned'. She passed a huge billboard of Eddie McGuire looking like Chairman Mao, then clicked her heels up the steps towards her office. Golden Dates was on the seventh floor. There were only fifteen people working in the small office but business was going well. They were still the country's largest dating agency for the mature-aged and had even been advertised on *The Project*. According to their website, 'The Golden Years are a new and exciting part of your life. Don't spend it alone! Golden Dates brings mature people together for friendship and romance. Call us now for a free consultation.'

'Hey Rubes,' said Baden, a work colleague who sat frowning at his computer. Aged twenty-six, he was tall and proportioned like a jogger, his skin the colour of cream. Baden was studying Japanese online so he could visit his mother's family in Tokyo. He described his father's side as white trash.

'Hi.' She sat down at her desk.

They'd worked together for three years. Ruby managed the personal aspects of client visits, while Baden looked after the website. She was polite and understanding with

the seniors when they came in for a ‘chat and a cuppa’, while Baden was a highly skilled web designer who loved to offend. Management requested he be discreet in regards to his sexuality: ‘Nothing personal about you being gay. It’s just older folks aren’t always open to these things.’

‘Rubes, check this out. Vivienne Moore, eighty-three, admits to twenty-five facelifts and wants a toy boy.’

‘It’s honest.’

‘It’s gross. How was your weekend?’ Baden munched into a Mars Bar and then rubbed his eyes. He was still recovering from a twenty-four-hour rave at Docklands.

‘A bit strange,’ Ruby said, as her computer chimed with appointment reminders.

‘Do tell.’

‘You know that footballer, Max Carlisle?’

‘Yeah, I saw him in the *Age* this morning. Another one ready for the scrap heap.’

‘Yep, I hadn’t heard of him before.’

‘I swear, you live in a time-warp.’

‘Anyway, I think I saw him in my building. I was up really early Sunday morning and ran into a young girl near the front entrance. I think she knew him. She was in tears, distressed.’

‘What do you mean?’ Baden spun his chair around to face her.

‘Well, there was a lot of partying earlier that night, in the apartment right above me, and I’m sure I heard a young girl’s voice out on the balcony.’

‘Who knows? Probably just another footy tart making her way into a party. That apartment block is so bloody big, there’d be heaps of little tramps running around.’

Ruby shook her head. ‘Baden. She was *young*. You’re so judgemental.’

‘You’re so fricken *straight*,’ Baden sighed and kept typing, his fingers moving quickly across the keyboard. ‘Here, have one of these.’ He passed over a box of Krispy Kreme donuts.

‘That’s disgusting. It’s ten past nine,’ Ruby growled, reaching inside a bag of organic Goji berries.

‘Seriously, you are like an old block of cheese.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ she said, chewing on the hard, reddish lumps. Ruby watched Baden swallow a whole custard donut and sighed. She twisted a sapphire ring around her finger that had belonged to her Grandma Eileen, a German-Swedish woman who in her younger years had travelled with a group of dancers around country New South Wales. Ruby imagined for a moment the freedom of that.

‘I just mean you gotta get out and have some fun, woman. God, you’re not ninety! So why do you think the crying girl knew the footy player?’

‘When I was talking to her, someone peeked around to look at us in the corridor, and I reckon it was him.’

‘Sounds a bit dodgy,’ Baden nodded, rubbing a hand over his chest. His t-shirt had an image of a male and a female robot getting married with ‘GAME OVER’ written underneath. ‘Is he hot?’

‘What?’

‘You must have checked him out,’ Baden laughed.

‘No! And how is that relevant?’

‘Relax. You’re assuming things about this scenario. Focus on your own fun, before you can’t have any. Those girls shouldn’t get themselves into those situations.’ He scratched the shaved left side of his head (which Ruby called the ‘lobotomy’) and bashed his fingers across the keyboard.

Ruby looked across at the drawn faces of her colleagues in the now-busy open-plan office. Trevor Barnes, the public relations officer, wore a neck brace, the result of an accident from a weekend of medieval re-enactments in Daylesford. Eva Summers, in charge of mail and distributions was a very tall woman going through her third divorce. ‘Ironical, HEY?’ she said to clients. ‘Me working here!’

Ruby turned back to glare at Baden.

‘What?’ he said, ‘you don’t like the truth—you’ve just given up!’

She bit back. ‘I am sick of your smarmy attitude and your ageist remarks.’

‘Suck it up, Rubes. You got two choices. You’re in hiding or you’re out there taking a few risks. You can’t spend the rest of your life watching Foxtel and going to farmers’ markets.’

‘And your inspiring alternative is to get wasted every weekend and sleep around? Tell me how that makes *you* happy?’

Baden shrugged, ignoring her as he checked the Grindr account on his mobile.

Ruby picked up her *Star Wars* Princess Leia mug and thudded her way past the cubicles. In the small kitchen, a poster on the wall showed a cartoon of how to sit correctly at a computer. There was a calendar with ‘Staff Birthdays’ on top. The only date filled belonged to Bon Scott, the late singer of AC/DC. Through the tiny kitchen window, the sky was a soft aqua, spiderwebs of clouds moving by. Looking inside the fridge, Ruby shook her head as she noticed a small specimen jar. She picked up a packet cappuccino and went back to her computer.

At six-foot-eight Baden scored a customised work desk. This took months of hassling and charming the owner of Golden Dates, Delilah Rivers. ‘A great porn name,’ he said. Delilah, a short woman with an auburn bun, flirted with Baden and said he had beautiful teeth, like piano keys.

That morning, Ruby had a few client cancellations so took fifteen calls in an hour, mostly quick queries about the price of the service. One man she spoke to was aged

eighty-one, married and wanting to register. He was concerned though, about his wife finding out. He said she no longer shared intimate times and although he felt bad, surely he was entitled to a love-life?

Ruby went quiet. 'Mr Graham, Golden Dates doesn't sit in judgement but it's really not appropriate for you to present yourself as single if you're not. We ask for honesty from our clients.'

'Rightio then.' He hung up.

Ruby pulled a packet of pumpkin seeds out of her desk drawer.

'God, woman, how do you eat that shit? You need to let it all go a bit, have a Whopper.' Baden danced in his chair to Bobby Brown.

Ruby ignored him.

'I guess though,' he smiled, his head tilted to one side, 'at your age you have to watch your weight.'

'What has made you so bitter, so young?'

Baden laughed and checked his eBay account. He was bidding on a crumpet that looked like Bert Newton.

Delilah Rivers assigned Ruby the task of searching through clients' files to create a database of follow-up information. It was for their 'Golden Success' stories media campaign. Ruby yawned as she clicked the mouse and moved through different files, wondering if some members were still alive. She found an old set of images scanned in, people in shoulder-padded eighties looks and some very big hair. She felt the shiver of time through the faces, some smiling hard with teeth protruding, some with sad smiles. A few 'deceased' tags appeared.

Ruby opened a profile called 'Sunny Side Up'. The client's name was Wendy Wright, aged sixty-eight, passed 2005. The photo was taken on a cruise ship. She wore a bright green sundress and raised a cocktail glass in the air. Her profile read, 'The simple

things are what matter, a game of Scrabble, a kiss goodnight. I've been unlucky in love but still believe in it. Are you feeling lucky?'

Ruby pushed a tear from the corner of her eye. She imagined her own profile at the same age as Wendy. *Let's meet, what have you got to lose?* She thought about her parents. They went for walks together most nights but didn't say very much. Did it matter though? Could you love someone without knowing them? She thought about the brown-haired young woman and her tears that morning. Was that from love?

Ruby switched off her computer and looked out the window towards the black sky, tiny boxes of silver shining from sky-rise buildings. The city flickered against the night. She wondered if, somewhere out there, were moments and people and memories that were meant to be her life.

Chapter 12

When Jordi was seven, she asked her parents if they could get married. Kane had been home for a few months, doing nightshifts at a Kmart loading centre in Footscray. Jordi said other kids at school had mums and dads who were married. She wanted to have a wedding and wear a nice dress.

‘Aww, but why not Mum?’ Jordi pleaded.

Petra sighed. ‘It’d cost heaps, love. I’m sorry.’ Jordi hung her head and stomped her feet a few times and went out the backyard to whack the totem tennis pole with her sister Breanna.

A little later, Jordi ran back into the house. Petra sat on the couch, reading through shopper-docket vouchers from her handbag.

‘Mum, can we have a pretend one?’

‘A what?’ Petra turned to her daughter.

‘A pretend wedding, can we do that?’

‘Ohhh Jords, just leave it alone.’ Petra pressed the dockets out on a coffee table. She found some bills and Kane’s last pay slip and got a calculator out of her bag. ‘Shit,’ she said under her breath, covering her face with her hands.

Later that night, Kane’s old Charger rumbled into the driveway. Petra sat in the lounge room with a Vegemite glass full of Moselle, watching *Desperate Housewives*. The kids were in bed.

‘Hey hun,’ Kane boomed inside the front door. ‘How are ya?’

Petra put down her glass. ‘Did ya get paid?’

‘Yes, babes, what’s wrong?’

Petra sat up and pointed the remote at the TV, turning down the sound. ‘Come ’ere.’

Kane joined Petra on the couch, his body leaning in close to her.

‘See this?’ she said, pointing at his last pay slip. ‘Where’s the rest of the cash?’

Kane took the piece of paper out of her hands. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Things don’t add up. You only gave me three hundred last week, but you made a lot more than that.’

Kane rubbed his chin, staring closely at the pay slip and blinking. ‘I had some stuff to sort out.’

‘Kane, for fucksakes! We are gonna have our gas disconnected. It’s the last warning.’ Petra rubbed her eyes. ‘What the hell did you do with that money? No bullshit.’

Kane drummed his fingers on the vinyl couch. ‘You don’t need to worry about that.’

Petra punched her fist against the coffee table, sending little plastic toys from McDonald’s spinning all over the glass top. ‘Are you dealing again? You owe money? Fuck!’

Kane stood up. ‘Get off my back!’ he yelled and thumped his way into the kitchen.

Petra followed, clutching at paper copies of bills. ‘See theeese!’ she screamed. ‘All this shit is gas and water and electricity for your kids!’

Kane spun towards Petra, his eyes red and wide. ‘Move back,’ he said in a very low voice. ‘Get out of my face.’

Petra whacked his head with the paper in her hand, breathless as she reached up to meet his height.

‘I said stop!’ Kane trembled, grabbing Petra’s wrist and holding it hard. ‘Stop.’

Petra shoved Kane and lost her balance, her body tipping backwards. They both turned towards the doorway into the kitchen.

Jordi was sobbing, tears splashing down her cheeks. ‘Dooooon’t,’ she said. ‘Dooon’t dooooo thaaaat.’

She stood very still as her mother put her arm around her waist, leaning down to pull her daughter into the crook of her neck.

‘I’m sorry, bubs,’ Petra said. ‘We just got cranky with each other, awright? You don’t need to worry.’

Kane came over and hugged his daughter into his chest. Jordi breathed a little slower and held her Elmo toy, its red fur worn down and one eye missing. ‘Maybe if you got married,’ she snuffled into her sleeve, ‘you wouldn’t fight anymore.’

A few months later, a ‘commitment barbecue’ was held in the backyard. Petra wore a white sundress from Millers and got her hair done by Judy, a home hairdresser in their street. Kane wore a navy blue shirt from Dimmies and shorts, his hair pulled back in a ponytail. Jordi was in charge of the ceremony. She read out a poem she wrote as their friends gathered around a little white stand that Kane built from an old clothes rack and white tulle he picked up from a mate at work. She watched her parents hold hands and kiss each other as the little crowd cheered and raised their beer cans to the afternoon sun.

Chapter 13

On Monday morning, light shot through the glass doors of the clubrooms. Max looked out towards the pool-table green of the grounds, rubbing his padded wrist-support with his fingers. He'd finished a meeting with his coach. Ronnie was a man who shook your hand so hard you never knew when to let go. Ronnie said the club was behind him, but he turned his face away as he spoke. Max was booked in for surgery the following week. It was a delicate, three-hour operation involving grafting. The tendon wasn't healing.

'Chin up, mate,' Ronnie had said, and gave him a crack across the back.

Max made his way up a corridor to the exit, his eyes trailing the shine of the designer tiles. He looked up at the photos of players and coaches, some old shots in black and white. He quickly brushed a tear from his eye.

Dirk appeared near the doorway, pink-faced from a run. Max was only a few metres away. They stared for a moment in silence.

Dirk spoke first. 'Let it go, dickhead,' he said in a hiss. 'It was just a bit o' fun, you're being an idiot.'

Max took a step forward and got close to Dirk's face, his eyes bulging. 'She was sixteen,' his voice thundered. 'She was a kid.' He poked a finger against Dirk's chest. 'That makes you—'

'A normal bloke.' Dirk flared his teeth. 'And her a cock-tease.'

Max swallowed hard and bent his fingers together.

'And by the way, the only reason you're pissed off is cos it coulda been you,' Dirk snarled. Black curls stuck to his forehead. 'It could have been fucking you.'

Dirk went out the exit. Max followed. In the car park, he shoved Dirk into the side of his black SUV, holding back his injured wrist. Dirk pushed back, both men staggering from the exchange.

‘I know what you did,’ Max said through his breath, looking into Dirk’s face.

Some players appeared only metres away, waving at the two men as they climbed into their cars. Max and Dirk gestured back to them, standing with their faces downward as they waited for the cars to turn out of the driveway. Whistles pierced the air from the grounds nearby. Dirk got into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. Max walked up to the window and looked inside at him, his breath hot against the glass.

Later that night, Max and Dirk appeared on a TV football show filmed in an inner-city studio. Their skin shone from makeup as they sat puffed up in designer suits like kids in dress-ups while the older hosts steered the questions and cracked bawdy jokes.

Max was asked about his upcoming surgery. Dirk talked about a fundraising day for the Ronald McDonald House. He leant back in his chair, tapping a pen, on the makeshift desk. ‘Yeah, the boys had a good day. Was a real eye-opener to spend time with the kids. Makes you realise a lot of stuff.’

Max shifted his body away from Dirk as he spoke.

‘Nice one, Davo!’ said one of the hosts, ‘let’s take a look at the footage.’

The audience cheered as they moved onto the next segment, ‘Street Chat’. An older panellist and football legend took his camera into Footscray looking for people with disabilities or an odd dress sense. A man with Down Syndrome, dressed in a Carlton jumper and beanie, tried to hug the panellist, while an elderly woman with grey facial hair punched him in the arm. He flirted with a lady who had a stutter. The crowd laughed and clapped.

Max shook his head as he watched the footage. He answered a few more questions about his injury and kept quiet for the rest of the show. Later, he headed quickly out of the studio and drove home, listening to Black Sabbath turned down low.

*

Just after midnight, Max threw some dirty laundry into a wooden basket and snatched his keys from the kitchen bench. The shiny student card sat on top of the fridge, near

a tissue box. Jordi's face pointed upward towards the light. Max's fingers brushed against it as he reached to get an apple. He jerked a little and pulled his hand back.

Picking up the basket, he left to take the lift to the public laundry area in the basement of the building. Residents had unlimited access to large dryers and the best European machines, maintained by a man in a small white van who had scoliosis and six kids in high school. There were travel magazines and a coffee machine with twelve different flavours (including rainforest mint). Max stepped out into the cool of the large pale green tiles and pushed open the laundry door.

Ruby looked up. She was on her knees in front of a clothes dryer, pulling out the white flakes of a tissue from inside. The air smelt like apricots, a sweet scent from her organic detergent.

'Hi,' said Max and put the basket down in front of a machine. Then he realised: she was the woman he had seen that morning, talking to Jordi.

'Hello.' Ruby stood up and clicked the dryer door shut.

'Good time to come down here,' Max bumbled, stuffing tracksuit pants and t-shirts inside the machine, sneaking glances at Ruby as she folded soft, warm clothes. He noticed her round green eyes like shiny glass. She wore jeans and a t-shirt from Japan with cherry blossoms on the front. She didn't look like the model women who hung around the club. Her hips were curvy and her face was barely touched by makeup. But he couldn't keep his eyes off her.

'Yeah,' she said, 'it is good, there never seems to be anyone here at these funny hours.' Now she looked straight at him.

'I'm Max,' he said. Did she recognise him? His fingers shook as he pushed buttons, starting the wash. He winced from heat running down his arm, the twinge of pain making him blink. He flexed his hand and took a breath. The painkillers hadn't kicked in yet.

'I'm Ruby,' she said. 'I think I've seen you before.'

‘Oh right,’ he mumbled and pretended to look for something. ‘What number are you?’

‘Forty-two,’ she said, ‘on the fifteenth floor.’

‘Oh, okay. I’m number forty-eight, on the sixteenth.’

Ruby nodded and folded socks into her Oxfam clothes basket. She bit her bottom lip.

‘Was that you partying on Sat night, pretty late?’

Max’s washing machine had stopped. He lifted the lid and peered inside, pulling out a long sock that had become tangled. ‘It coulda been,’ he said quickly and stuck his head further down into the machine. ‘I’m sorry about the noise.’ Max’s voice echoed from down inside the metal. He stood up and leaned forward to inspect the lights blinking, his breath pacing. The machine started again.

‘It happens.’ Ruby watched him with steady eyes. ‘Actually, I think I saw you, really early Sunday morning, near the entrance? I was talking to a young girl, she was upset.’

Max turned away. ‘Um, yeah,’ he said, swallowing. ‘I was just, ah, I heard something in the corridor.’

They both went quiet.

Ruby raised her head. ‘She was in a bad way.’

‘Yeah,’ said Max. ‘No good.’ He flipped open the lid of the machine and began pulling out clothes that hadn’t finished spinning. They dripped all over the floor.

‘Do you know her?’ Ruby pressed her lips together and looked at him, her heart thudding.

‘No, sorry,’ he said and lifted the basket of wet clothes towards his chest, drops of water shining on the floor. ‘Nice to meet you.’

Ruby watched him push the laundry door open and chewed a fingernail. The door slammed shut and he was gone.

Chapter 14

Jordi woke up on Tuesday and told her mum she felt crook, a tummy thing.

Petra stood at Jordi's bedroom door. 'You got a test today at school?

'No. Just feel sick. It started last night.'

Petra sighed and closed Jordi's door, yelling out to the other kids as she shuffled into the kitchen to get their Fruit Loops.

'Muuuummmmm,' yelled Abby, Jordi's two-year-old sister. 'Muuuuuummmm, Jaden took my urrrrpee cup.'

Jordi put a pillow over her head.

A few hours later she woke up to silence. Petra had taken the kids to the local McDonald's playground. Jordi pushed herself off the squeaky old mattress and stomped along the dirty carpet leading towards the lounge room. She rubbed her eyes and yawned as Kerri-Anne beamed through the TV, all smiles in a shimmery tracksuit. 'Don't ignore the pelvic floor ladies.'

Jordi crashed on the lumpy couch. She looked up at a family photo on the wall. Her dad was in it. It was taken at the mall during Christmas three years back. The special deal included on the spot processing for ten bucks. Jordi took the original, only ten-by-ten centimetres, and printed it out at school in a much bigger size. She bought a frame from Coles. When she gave it to her mum, Petra couldn't look the picture without crying. 'Leave it, love,' she said, when Jordi tried to take it down.

Jordi hadn't seen her dad Kane now for a month, since her sixteenth birthday. He did that. He showed up. He left again. He was smart, her dad. He always got the answers right on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Jordi told him he should audition.

'Gawd no,' he laughed, little black spaces flashing where teeth had fallen out. 'Not good for this head to be on TV.'

Jordi tried to tell herself she was lucky. Some kids at school had never met their fathers.

Jordi wandered over to the orange-tiled kitchen, the pantry door's rusty hinge moaning as she pulled it. She found an old box of Milo flakes and filled up a bowl, shook the last drop of milk into it and went back to the lounge room. An infomercial appeared for a home will kit. Jordi wondered what would be left if something happened to her parents. There was nothing, she was pretty sure. She munched on the cereal and thought about some distant relatives. A few aunties and uncles, would they look after them? She changed the channel to *Bewitched* and decided to stop thinking.

Petra swung the front door open. 'G'day, love!' she said. 'Feeling better?' She jabbed her stubby fingers into spikes of dark hair, revealing a stream of studs along both ears.

The kids scrambled in, pushing each other as they headed towards the PlayStation, collapsing their little bodies onto the lounge room floor.

'Got ya something,' her mum said, smiling.

'What?' Jordi put her cereal bowl down on the floor.

Petra pulled a large white sketchpad out of the plastic bag from the Reject Shop. A packet of fine black felt pens followed, bouncing onto the carpet.

'Cool,' Jordi said quietly, reaching over to hold the pad and flipping open the crisp white pages.

'Haven't seen ya draw for a while,' said Petra, 'thought it might cheer you up.'

'Ta.' Jordi pulled a pen out of the box and slid it across the paper. She sat for a long time, sketching out faces and bodies and some stuff she'd seen in a tattoo shop. She and Shilo wanted tattoos. Shilo wanted a Chinese peace sign on her bum, while Jordi wanted a pink and green lily that she had seen once in a restaurant window. They made a pact to get them done before they turned eighteen.

Jordi was drawing with her legs tucked under her body and her back straight against a wall. Petra sat on a chair near her daughter, with a cigarette and a cup of Nescafé. She

looked over at her kids playing, shoving each other and laughing at the fish on the screen. Abbey, the smallest, whacked her older brother Ryan as he tried to take the controller out of her hands. She ran over to her mother with a scream. Petra put her cigarette down into the glass ashtray and hugged her daughter, kissing her forehead until she made no sound.

Jordi sketched for a few hours, her hands brushing ink across the page.

A few months earlier, Jordi's graphics teacher, Mr Dann, had asked to speak to her after class. She had swallowed hard and her hands shook. She thought it was a result of the Valium pills she'd dropped in class that day. They had been stolen from her mum.

'Jordana,' he had said. 'Have you thought about what you want to do when you leave school?' Mr Dann had a soft, long face and fingers like Chipolata sausages.

'No.'

'You enjoy this subject?'

'Yep,' she mumbled.

'You know what I think of your drawings. They are exquisite.'

'Thanks.'

'I reckon you'd have a chance at getting into the Victorian College of the Arts. You really are that talented.'

Jordi rubbed her black school shoes against the floor. 'I would never be able to afford that,' she said. 'And, it's not gonna get me a real job.'

'That's not true, it would give you a wonderful qualification. I understand it may seem a bit scary.' Mr Dann looked up at a painting by Jordi on the wall, an abstract of summer in Melbourne, full of blues and silver and shades of orange. 'You can defer your fees and there are scholarships. Anyway, most artists have some kind of day job, to pay the bills.'

Jordi shrugged.

‘Promise me, Jordana, you won’t give up on yourself.’

‘Okay,’ said Jordi, crossing her arms as Mr Dann walked past and patted her arm.

When Jordi returned home later that day, she found her mother in the front yard with her arms in the air. Debt collectors were taking things for Radio Rentals—the plasma TV, the stereo and the laptop. Petra stood in her little denim shorts and yelled as the broadly built men quickly slid the items into the van, death metal music blasting. Jordi hugged her mum and said it would all be okay. The Victorian College of the Arts felt far, far away.

‘Give us a look, love?’ her mum now said, leaning over towards Jordi, who was fixed on a swirl of black shapes in shades of dark and light. ‘What’s that?’

‘Dunno.’ Jordi pulled the drawings away from her mum.

‘Let me see.’ Petra moved closer.

‘Leave it!’ Jordi yelled, slamming the notepad down and storming off to the bathroom.

Petra picked up the notepad and turned her tired eyes to the page. There was the outline of a woman, with her arms outstretched. The face was hard to distinguish, with open lips and shadowy eyes. She held a gun against her head, shaped like a lily, and wrapped around her body were tiny leaves.

Petra closed the notebook and took a moment before going over to where Jordi hid in the old toilet near the laundry.

‘Love,’ Petra said, knocking gently on the toilet door. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I wanna be alone,’ Jordi muffled.

Petra put her ear against the door. She just stood and listened. And eventually went back into the house while her daughter sat in silence.

Jordi went back to school on Friday, after three days away. The sketchpad was full.

‘Babe!’ yelled Shilo from the bus stop. ‘I’ve missed ya.’

The two girls hugged.

‘What’s been happening?’ Jordi asked quietly, a black backpack on her back, hands flashing silver nail polish.

‘Nuthin,’ said Shilo. ‘Sweet FA. Hey, are you feeling better?’

‘Bit.’

As they made their way into the general assembly hall. ‘You know, you can still go the cops,’ Shilo announced.

‘Shut up,’ said Jordi, in a low voice. ‘I just wanna forget it, okay?’

Shilo sighed and squeezed an arm around her friend. They found a seat in the hall near some guys they liked in Year 12. The principal, Ms Doring, stood in front of the school, a slim woman, in her mid-sixties, who wore long boots with heels and had layered hair in different colours. A few female staff members called her Mutton. She told the students, with a big, wide smile, that they’d received funding for a cultural exchange program with a school in Kenya. A group of twenty senior students would spend six months in West Meadows.

‘Nigger exchange,’ a freckled kid in Year 8 yelled, and was dragged out of his seat. Students giggled into their hands.

Some girls next to Jordi wrote notes about how much Ms Doring’s hairdresser cost and whether she was gay and whether the program would bring some guys who looked like Jason Derulo. Jordi sighed as she shifted in her hard metal seat. The hall was hot and reeked from old gym equipment.

Shilo carefully pulled a phone out of her pocket and nudged Jordi. On the screen was a Facebook photo of Tina Peters, a very tall and loud student who liked to slap faces. In the blurry shot, Tina sat on a toilet and was trying to cover the camera with her hand. It was a revenge shot by Vicky Rollands, who had found out that Tina kissed her

boyfriend Carlos in front of McDonald's. Pockets vibrated at the speed of light and phones were quickly confiscated.

'How funny is that!' snorted Shilo.

Jordi shrugged. She didn't care about Tina or the photo or about Matt Barnes from Year 11 who was sneaking glances at her. She just wanted to get out.

At lunchtime, Shilo and Jordi walked over to a quiet spot near the oval and lay down on the grass. They closed their eyes and pulled out dry clumps of weeds.

'Did you know there's a rumour going around that we're lesbians?' said Shilo.

Jordi shook her head. 'No offence, Shi,' she said, 'but you're not really my type.'

A soft wind tickled Jordi's face as she lay still and silent, listening to her friend talk about a Jessica Mauboy's album and her dad's new girlfriend. And then Shilo started crying and said she was worried about her. As they hugged, some Year 10 boys yelled out, 'Carpet munchers!'

Jordi relaxed back down on the grass, her eyes closing against the sun. For a little while, she didn't have to think about it.

Chapter 15

The first time Max stepped onto a ground he shivered with excitement. Sun sliced the autumn air and freshly cut grass blew against his face. He marched alongside the other boys, their bodies like twigs underneath the red-and-white jumpers, little legs sticking out like pencils. Within minutes, he took hold of the football near the goal square and eased it under his hands. He was a magician spinning a plate.

‘Baaalllll,’ cried a red-faced father from the sideline, as another kid threw his hands around Max and tried to swing his body to the ground. Max kept his eyes on the goalposts and pushed his body back up off the dirt. With the football tight under his arm, he stretched away from the mass of hands.

Somehow, his legs and arms placed him in the right spot and everything worked. With a huge breath, he swung his right leg back and kicked the ball through the centre. He looked over towards his dad. The other fathers yelled and threw their fists in the air, turning their faces towards Max’s father. Roger gave Max a nod.

In the change rooms, chunks of oranges were passed around while the boys sat on wooden benches. The coach was a foil-haired man in his late thirties, with a big voice. He frothed at the mouth as he recalled the highlights. Warm breaths from squashed bodies and the bite of old sweat filled the small space.

‘Best and Fairest, there is no question, must go to Carlisle! An unbelievable result of ten goals, eleven marks and all the rest of it. Well done, mate!’ roared the coach, handing a voucher for Hungry Jacks to a blushing Max.

Parents and team mates whacked him on the back, scruffed his hair and yelled out, ‘Good one, Maxy,’ while he sat chewing on fruit and looking around for his dad.

Roger stood at the back of the change room and waited for people to leave before he moved up the front near his son, saying quiet hellos as he weaved his way through. ‘You got your stuff?’ he said to Max, who sat tugging at his muddy boots. Roger knelt down to help him.

‘Yep,’ said Max, fumbling his fingers around shoelaces.

Soon it was only the two of them left in the room. His father tapped him gently and pointed towards a Coke can lying on the ground. ‘Put that in the bin, mate,’ said Roger. ‘We’re off.’

Max sipped on a can of lemonade as he sat in the front of the car with his dad. The radio crackled out a Neil Diamond song as sun warmed the windscreen.

‘So whaddya reckon?’ Roger said, eyes fixed straight ahead.

‘What, Dad?’ Max sat up straight.

‘How do you reckon you went today?’

Max wiped a hand across his brow as the car bumped over some rubbish on the road. ‘I reckon I played okay. Yeah, pretty good.’

His father nodded. ‘Yep, well, it’s about how you reckon you went. That’s what’s important. Not what anyone else thinks.’ His eyes were steady on the road.

They arrived home to the sound of Jean Carlisle thumping around inside the house with the vacuum cleaner. ‘Maxy!’ she called out as the front door swung open. ‘How was it?’

Max stiffened as she threw her arms around him. ‘I kicked ten goals,’ he said.

‘Good for you.’ She flashed her front teeth and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Now get in the shower!’

Max climbed the carpeted stairs of the four-bedroom brick home, pulling his tired legs up towards the bathroom. Roger greeted his wife and placed his car keys on a shelf near the kitchen, next to Jean’s collection of ceramic elephants from around the world.

‘I wish I’d been there,’ Jean said to her husband. ‘What a little star!’

‘Yes,’ Roger said. And then he opened the back door and made his way towards the garden shed.

Max appeared at the top of the stairs, with wet hair and a shiny face. ‘What are we having?’ He rubbed his stomach.

‘Toasted cheese sandwiches and tomato soup,’ Jean said, humming as she pulled plates out of a cupboard. ‘Lunch!’ she yelled out to the twins. Max sat down on a stool at the kitchen bench.

‘Not hungry!’ his brothers yelled from a rumpus room. Bryce was entertaining his brother with a drawing of a large penis on their Etch A Sketch.

Jean sighed, tipping two bowls of soup back into the pot. ‘You know your dad is very proud of you,’ she said to Max, spreading butter over the top of the warm sandwiches and cutting them into four quarters, cheese oozing out the sides.

‘Yep,’ said Max, munching while his mother wiped the bench with a cloth. She dragged a sliding window open and called out to her husband.

Roger rubbed his hands over the wheel of a bike and frowned as air puffed out of the old tyre. He put it against the wall of the old shed and clicked the door shut behind him. Slowly, he made his way through the garden, past the rustling apple trees and dusky rose bushes. He entered the kitchen and sat down beside Max, pulling the bowl of steaming soup to his chest and dunking a chunk of homemade bread into it.

‘You gotta keep practicing your hand-balls,’ he said, turning his face towards Max. ‘You gotta learn how to keep that arm straight.’

‘Okay, Dad,’ Max said, his eyes watering as bread tickled his throat.

They ate quietly while Jean dunked the dishes in soapy water, singing a song from her church choir and rubbing the silver taps till they shone. Roger thanked his wife as he stood up and gave Max a little pat on the back. Then he went out towards the back door and into the yard.

Max sat on his stool and chewed the last of his sandwich, banging his feet against the stool and quietly humming his footy team’s club song. Jean put her arms around him, closing her eyes and kissing the top of his head. Max turned towards the kitchen

window and looked out. His father swung an axe over a stump, taking heavy breaths, then wiped his brow with the back of his hand and leaned against a tree. A shiny Christmas beetle crawled along his arm. He gently brushed it into his hands and stared as the insect buzzed inside his palm.

Max wouldn't see his dad till evening now. It would be dark before he would appear again, sitting silently at the dinner table while the twins yelled and punched each other. And Max's mother would stand at the stove, humming as she spooned food onto plates. While the dinner table remained quiet, Max would imagine talking to his father and asking him everything he could about the whole wide world.

Chapter 16

On Friday afternoon, six days after Jordi left the city apartment, Shilo and Jordi caught the bus from school to the shopping centre at West Meadows.

Shilo's mum had given her twenty bucks. 'No buying the evil drink,' she had said, pointing her finger at her daughter as soft brown skin poked out the side of her yellow sari. Shilo tickled her mum's bare flesh and then hugged her.

'Jords?' Shilo said as Jordi pressed her face against the glass of the bus window. 'You need to see a doctor. You know, get checked out.'

'Shut up,' Jordi hissed, biting her lip. She borrowed Shilo's phone to check her Facebook and was silent for the rest of the trip.

When the girls arrived at the depot, they went to the grimy public toilets and changed into jeans and singlet tops. Shilo pressed black pencil against her eyes and air-brushed deodorant over her whole body.

'Come ooon,' Jordi huffed.

'You have the best arse,' Shilo said, rubbing straightening cream into her big curls. 'You should put some pics on Snapchat.'

'Piss off. It's too big.' Jordi turned her bum towards the mirror. 'Can we just eat and go home?'

Shilo shook her hair as she tipped her head forward. 'Okay darls,' she said, reaching over to kiss Jordi's cheek. They left the toilet block, leaving a gassy trail of perfume and hairspray.

The elevators leading to the food court moved slowly. Shilo flicked a finger against her eyelashes and smoothed down her hair. Once in the food court, surrounded by the array of eating places with big discount signs and reheated, battered food, Shilo scanned the area for boys. 'Hey,' she said, 'check it out. Is that Marcus?'

Jordi squinted towards the back of the dining area. 'Yeah, I think so.'

Marcus Rogers was a Year 11 student from a local Christian private school, famous for his pierced tongue. The rumour was that girls who'd pashed him were left with injuries.

'God, he is so hot!'

'Settle,' said Jordi, rolling her eyes. 'He's a bit of a dick.'

'Jords, he's sweet. He just shows off. I've talked to him and he's different on his own. He told me about his Rottweiler called Britney.'

'That's weird,' Jordi said, gritting her teeth. 'He's an idiot.'

'Come on, hun, cheer up. You'll feel better soon. Seriously, it will just take time.'

Jordi turned to look at food prices. 'Let's get something different,' she said, 'I'm sick of Ali Baba's.'

'You want skip food? Chips and gravy? Awwwriigggh, maaaaaate,' Shiloh said in a mocking voice, revealing the very slight intonation of her mother's accent.

'No,' said Jordi. 'Not that either. Feels like I'm at home.'

They walked across to NoodleCity and got the late afternoon special, then found a booth with a good view of the food court.

A group of thick-necked young men, dressed in baggy pants and long shirts, came and sat near the girls. They smiled and pointed.

'Oh my god, don't look,' Shilo said, chewing on a piece of chicken. 'They're checking us out.'

Jordi glanced over and scowled. 'Ignore them.'

Shilo had already stuck her middle finger up. A loud cheer and whistles followed.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Jordi threw down her floppy spring roll into the polystyrene container.

Shilo pulled a face and kept eating.

One of the guys came over to their table. He was muscled and tall and wore a beanie pulled down over his forehead. His eyes were big and round like Maltesers and his skin was smooth.

‘What’s goin’ on girls?’ he said, sitting down at a plastic chair at their table. Shilo blushed.

‘None of your business,’ said Jordi, flicking hair out of her face.

The group of males yelled out to their friend and laughed. Calvin Klein aftershave oozed off the guy’s skin with a sweet, rich tang. He was nineteen, maybe twenty, and he didn’t flinch as Jordi pursed her lips.

‘What’s with your friend?’ he said, pulling a face at Shilo, who laughed so hard Coke came out her nose. And then they all laughed, even Jordi.

The other guys came over to the table. They didn’t say very much, just stood nearby, one fiddling with a cigarette behind his ear, another flicking a cigarette lighter.

‘What’s your names?’ the guy with the beanie asked.

Shilo gave her real one.

‘Sara,’ said Jordi.

Shilo looked across at her friend and frowned.

‘Do youse wanna hang out? I’m Tane.’

‘Who?’ said Jordi, ‘Lame?’

‘Bitch. It’s Maori.’

‘Cool,’ said Shilo. ‘That’s so cool.’

‘So do youse wanna come and see a movie? Our shout.’ Tane’s friends watched on.

‘We can’t,’ said Jordi. ‘We’ve got stuff to do.’

‘Maybe,’ Shilo shrugged, looking across at her friend.

Jordi shook her head. ‘You go by yourself,’ she said.

Tane got up and stood with his friends. Some security guards moving past took long, slow looks at them. Guy Sebastian screamed out of old speakers.

Shilo tugged at Jordi by the wrist, pulling her away from the table. ‘He is gorgeous,’ she said into Jordi’s ear. ‘Don’t wreck this for me.’

Jordi looked at her friend and frowned. ‘I don’t wanna go anywhere with guys I don’t know. Don’t you get that? Think about it! What’s wrong with you?’

Shilo slipped an arm around Jordi’s back. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said quietly. ‘But he’s just so hot.’

Jordi pushed her gently away. They looked over at Tane, now sitting with his friends and slouched back on a plastic chair. Two of the guys punched each other in the arm, laughing.

‘Jooords, it will cheer you up, hey? His friends are cute. And what can happen in a cinema?’

Jordi said nothing. She followed her friend over to the group who were old enough to vote. The girls walked behind the young men as they took the escalators up to the Village cinemas and stepped onto the red carpet, the air heavy with deodoriser.

Jordi and Shilo sat on a large round seat while Tane and his entourage purchased tickets to the new *Mission Impossible* movie.

One of Tane’s mates leaned over and said in his ear, ‘You won’t pull if you take the girls to this bro.’

‘Nah, they’ll love it,’ said Tane. ‘All that action hey!’ And then they both nudged each other and laughed.

A pale-faced girl wearing a satin vest with spots and stripes took their tickets, ignoring the winks and kissing gestures.

Jordi’s face flushed as she walked beside Shilo, taking a big sip from her jumbo Pepsi cup. She did the maths. Two girls. Six guys. Where would they sit?

Tane took Shilo’s hand and pulled her up the stairs towards the back of the cinema. Shilo spun around and waved down at Jordi before disappearing into darkness. Jordi watched as the other five guys headed towards the front of the cinema, motioning for her to follow. She waited until they all sat down and then found a seat a long way behind them.

The trailers started. Jordi clutched her soft drink and chewed on the straw. A few of Tane’s friends turned around to see where she was, one of them giving her a wave.

A tall guy appeared in the aisle seat near Jordi. ‘Hey,’ he said with a smile. ‘Thought you might be lonely?’

‘No,’ she said. She put her popcorn and Pepsi on the seat separating her and the guy.

‘I’m Cato,’ he said in a whisper.

Jordi stared straight at the screen. Tom Cruise was thin and spray-tanned as he jumped over buildings.

‘You got a boyfriend?’ Cato said, leaning towards Jordi’s ear.

‘Yes,’ said Jordi.

‘Is it serious?’

Jordi turned her body away from him. ‘Yes.’

Cato laughed, the messy curls of his hair shifting.

‘What’s funny?’ she said, her eyes narrowing.

‘You, baby.’

Tane’s friends had spotted Cato and Jordi. They laughed and snorted, turning heads around them. People told them to be quiet. T-bone, the biggest in the group, spilled popcorn all over the floor. White bits bounced and rolled underneath feet and flew out into the aisle. They all laughed again.

‘Shut the fuck up,’ T-bone said, scrambling around to grab what was left.

‘You’re cute,’ said Cato, leaning his body into Jordi. ‘Bet you’ve been told that a lot?’

Jordi said nothing.

‘You’re friend’s alright but she wears too much makeup. She looks slutty.’

Jordi screwed up her face. ‘Whatever,’ she said.

Cato stretched his arm across Jordi’s back. She jumped up and shifted away from him, moving several seats down.

Tane’s mates were still watching them, and were now bent over from laughing and wiping tears from their eyes. An attendant marched down to the front and asked them to leave. One said, ‘Fuck off, bitch,’ but when she threatened to get security, T-bone told her he had it under control. They got up and made their way towards the stairs.

‘Stick it in her,’ one of the boys yelled out to Cato. Then they called out to Tane in the back row. He had his tongue in Shilo’s ear and a hand crawling up her singlet top.

Cato reached over to touch Jordi’s hair. Within seconds her hand cracked the side of his face.

‘What the fuck?’ he hissed, holding a hand on his cheek. ‘Frigid bitch.’ He left.

Jordi’s body shook in her seat. Tom Cruise flashed white teeth as he jumped on top of a bus, wearing dark glasses and dressed in black. She stared at the screen and gripped

her fingers around the armrest. She took some deep breaths and let the noise and the warmth of the cinema nestle around her.

As the movie came to an end, Jordi watched couples kissing and chatting in the sleepy darkness. She sat alone in the velvet seat, staring at the empty screen. She sat very still and waited for her friend.

Chapter 17

Florence's stomach was bricked with hunger. She was on the grass at Saint Paul's cathedral, blinking at the sun and clutching a Beyond Blue pamphlet. Tucked in the pocket of her parka was a new phone, belting out a Black Eyed Peas ring-tone. She pulled it out and started pressing buttons, but it wouldn't stop. And then she heard a voice.

'Hello, heellooooo?' it said.

Florence held the device up to her ear. 'Yees? Hello?'

'Thank god, you have it!' a young-sounding female voice came through, breathless.

'Yes, found it on the footpath, dear,' said Florence, who considered its monetary value in relation to a hamburger and new underwear.

She began to wheeze as the young woman chatted about a meeting place. Within minutes, Florence was short of breath and retching. The phone dropped to the ground.

'God,' said the young girl on the other end, 'pleeaase, are you there? Shit, heellooo? For fucksakes!'

Florence once again pressed the mobile against her ear and heard the girl screaming obscenities. She decided she wouldn't tolerate this and that the manners of the younger generation had really slipped. She put it back in her pocket. A man walking past in a pinstripe suit, holding gerberas, leant down and handed Florence a ten-dollar note. She thanked him and clutched the money while the phone rang non-stop. She fell asleep.

*

Later that evening, Ruby sat at her work desk. It was quarter past eight and her hands were aching. She'd had a visit from some swingers who were adamant that their liberties were denied when their registrations were cancelled.

One woman, dressed in white PVC pants, pointed at Ruby. ‘You, hun, need to get with the times.’

This was followed by a call from an unhappy man who’d gone on first dates with fifteen women but had no luck with a second date. He didn’t understand. He had his own hair and teeth and an onsite van at Rye. During the conversation, there was a loud crashing sound in the background. He excused himself and asked Ruby if she could hold on. The boys had escaped for the third time that day, he said, the ferrets.

Ruby left work and stepped out into the darkness of city streets. The air rang with voices and laughter. She breathed in the oily aroma of kebabs and pizza and went into a deli to buy bread and cheese. Customers moved slowly as they gazed at the delights. Ruby left, clutching brown paper bags full of goodies with ‘Recycle’ on the side. As she walked along the pavement, she passed men with man-bags. Perfume drilled the air and the white shock of sneakers appeared underneath suits.

Florence now sat on her army blanket near Bourke Street Mall, counting coins in her lap. Her silvery hair was coiled into a bun. She looked up at Ruby who stood searching in her wallet for coins.

‘I’m not begging, love.’

‘Oh,’ said Ruby, taking a step back. ‘I’m sorry.’

Florence smiled. ‘It’s alright,’ she said and continued counting.

‘I’ve got some nice bread.’

‘No thanks,’ said Florence, her face fixed on her bony lap as the money jingled between her thighs.

‘Sorry,’ Ruby said and continued on towards home.

It was one of those nights. At around 2 am, Ruby was still up after trying for three hours to get to sleep. She’d watched a television program earlier on women’s health and the risks for females in their forties. The list was big now: hormones, heart disease,

diabetes, arthritis. She lay awake wondering which one she'd get first, by process of elimination. And then she thought about the woman out on the streets. Yawning, she got out of bed and found a scarf and her wallet. She pulled a long coat over her pyjamas and staggered towards the front door.

Clutching her coat across her body, Ruby moved along the dark parts of Swanston Street where lights had blown and shadows danced around her from moving cars. She soon spotted a figure inside some scaffolding in front of a building site. Ruby knelt down for a closer look. It was her. She lay on a rubber mat and was covered in a sleeping bag. Her eyes were closed.

'That's Florence, my mate,' a male voice announced from behind.

Ruby jolted backwards. It was Max Carlisle. He stumbled around, pulling a cigarette out of a jeans pocket. His eyes were a scratchy red. His wrist-support was undone, velcro straps loosely hanging down. The streets around them were empty now.

'Oh,' Ruby said, shocked at the sight of him. 'Do you know her?'

'We have chats. She shares a drink with me sometimes. She likessss a beer sometimes, does Flo, but only now and again,' he slurred.

'I don't get it,' Ruby shook her head. 'Why not buy her something healthy?'

'Piss off,' Max sneered. He stumbled off, jeans falling down over his bum. He stopped for a moment as a packet of pills fell out of his pocket and hit the ground. His fingers grasping at them like hundred-dollar bills. Ruby watched him and shook her head. Florence opened her eyes for a moment, shifted her body around a little and then went back to sleep.

Ruby returned home. She went to her linen cupboard and pulled out an old box. Inside was a knitted white rug, a gift from an old lady called Betsy who had lived in her street in Eltham. She had twisted old fingers. Ruby used to collect Betsy's *Herald Sun* from Mr Lu's milk bar and they would share cups of tea and Iced VoVo biscuits when Ruby finished school.

Ruby held the blanket against her body as she walked out of the building and back onto the street to where Florence was sleeping. Ruby laid the blanket over her.

Florence opened her eyes. 'Ah, the do-gooder.' She slowly sat up. 'Thank you.'

Ruby knelt down. 'Can't someone help?' she said. 'Can I take you somewhere?'

'I got myself here,' Florence whispered and leaned her head against the wall. '*Destino*.'

'STOP THE BOGANS' was painted across a FairStar billboard on a concrete wall behind them advertising cruises to Fiji.

Florence turned her body a little towards Ruby. 'So you live in the building too? With Maximilian?'

Ruby nodded.

'What's your name, missy?'

'Ruby.'

'I'm calling you Theresa,' Florence said loudly. 'As in Mother.' She laughed. 'I'm Flo, and I'm a Scorpio.'

Ruby smiled.

'Does it make you feel good,' Florence said, 'Doing this for me?'

Ruby thought for a moment.

'It's just sharing. That's all.'

'Ah but it must make you feel good.'

'Maybe it helps my middle-class guilt.'

'Ah yes,' Flo nodded.

‘Can I ask, Flo, how you ended up—’

‘Like this?’ Florence cut in.

‘Yes.’

‘I had a life once,’ she said, sniffing.

Ruby looked at her. ‘What happened?’

‘Oh, a lot of things. I wanted to live my own way. Soho. The dream. That is all I am saying about that.’

Ruby nodded. ‘It’s getting cold now, what do you do during winter?’

‘I move around,’ Florence said. ‘I heard today that a bed may come up tomorrow. The mission lady will tell me. There are some kind people who keep an eye out. *Angos*. You know? Angels.’

‘How long can you stay there?’

‘Only a few days,’ said Florence. ‘There are too many others waiting. Too many, much worse than me.’

When Ruby said goodbye, she told Florence she’d keep an eye out for her. She marched towards her building, stepping a little to the left as a black Monaro pulled up close, a young guy yelled out, ‘Show us ya tits!’ before the car screeched off.

*

In the early morning light, Florence sat up and pulled the mobile phone out of her pocket. There were ninety-four missed calls showing on the screen, but Florence didn’t really know what that meant. She gave it to a skinny kid with green hair who was passing.

Florence sat for hours and watched for the young woman with the long brown hair. The one she saw alone on the street and crying. She watched for her amongst the wave

of faces. But too many were alike with painted lips and short skirts, making their way home somehow. So many of them. Children. And alone.

Chapter 18

A yellow sign at the entrance to the West Meadows twenty-four-hour medical clinic read, 'No cash on premises'. Jordi asked her mum for a lift late Saturday afternoon. A week had passed by. Every night she felt his hands on her. And his breath next to her face.

Petra sighed as her daughter climbed out of the car. 'Okay, love,' she said, 'give us a buzz when ya done.'

Jordi nodded.

Petra sat for a moment, watching her daughter make her way towards the clinic. Cars pounded by on the main road.

The waiting room smelt of babies and bodies. People blew their noses and snivelled, flicking through old magazines and resting heads against the wall. A small television hanging from the ceiling played *Ready, Steady, Cook* reruns, the sound down low.

Jordi used the WiFi in the centre to scan through her phone, checking out messages and photos of her friends on Facebook. Someone from school had started a thread called 'Who Would You Rather?' a kind of game where the names of two people from Year 10 were posted and you had to choose who you would rather sleep with out of the two. She logged out and opened up some photos from the phone camera album. She found one of her dad blowing her a kiss, pink lipstick smudged across his cheek. It was over a year old. Next to her, a Sudanese baby rolled around on a soft blanket, her mother not much older than Jordi. She looked up and gave the baby a quick smile, then swiped through more photos.

An hour later, Jordi's name was called. The doctor nodded as he opened the door, pointing at a chair. He was an older man who wore Hush Puppies shoes. On his desk sat a plastic name holder, 'Dr Andersen'. The room smelt like coffee.

'Yes, young lady,' Dr Andersen said, with a rolling Scandinavian accent. 'What can I do for you?' Small dark blue eyes peered out from his round face.

Jordi cleared her throat. 'I've got some pain,' she murmured, looking down at the floor.

The doctor leaned forward. 'Yes,' he said. 'Tell me more.'

'Down there,' she said, pointing her hand towards her thighs.

'Right,' the doctor said quietly. 'I'm sorry, but you need to tell me where exactly.'

Jordi sighed. 'You know, down *there*.' She wriggled around in her seat.

'Okay, let's take a look.'

Jordi laid down on the examination table, covered in a white sheet. The doctor pulled on plastic gloves and asked which TV shows she liked. As his hand drew closer, she sat up abruptly and closed her legs. 'Sorry,' she said. 'Umm, I wanna get dressed.'

The doctor stood back. 'We can just talk.'

She nodded and reached for her clothes as he shut the white curtain.

When Jordi appeared and sat back down in her chair, the doctor opened a large jar of sweets and passed them to her. 'You like Fantails?' he asked. Jordi shook her head. 'So,' he said, his eyes crinkly around the edges, 'tell me more about this pain.'

Jordi inhaled. 'Um, I think it's in my pelvis.'

'What does it feel like?'

'Sharp at first but now more like a bit of an ache.'

'Right. And when did it start?'

Jordi looked down at her silver bracelet and gave it a twist around her wrist. 'About a week ago.'

'Any bleeding?' The doctor was writing on a notepad.

Jordi swallowed. 'Um, yes, for a couple of days but not now.'

The doctor tapped his pencil against the desk. 'I have to ask the hard questions.'

She nodded.

'Are you sexually active, Jordana?'

She scratched the side of her face. 'What do you mean?'

'When did you last have sexual intercourse?'

She hid her face in her hands. And then she began to cry, tears dripping through her fingers.

The doctor stood up and brought a box of tissues over to her. 'You just let it all out,' he said. A red light on his interphone flashed from reception, warning him of the queue. 'Take your time.'

Jordi screwed up bunches of wet tissue, her body quivering.

'If something happened we need to make sure you're okay.'

She rubbed her jumper sleeve against her eyes, eyeliner running like squid ink. 'What?'

'Well, if you didn't use any protection, we need to do some tests, just to make sure you haven't been exposed to anything like STDs, that kind of thing.' The red light flashed again 'And if someone has hurt you—well, that's another matter. I am sad to say you are not the first person to sit in that chair who I suspect may have been harmed and found it difficult to talk.'

Jordi's chin quivered as she released a deep sob.

The doctor leaned forward. 'Let the tears go,' he said quietly. 'But I need you to say what happened, Jordana, otherwise it makes it really hard for me to help.'

'Okay,' she sniffed. A baby screamed from the waiting room.

‘My concern right now is this pain and that you have had some bleeding. With your permission we really need to do a full pelvic examination. Have you spoken to your mum?’

Jordi shook her head.

The doctor sighed. ‘Okay, by law, as you are sixteen, I am not obliged to tell your parents. However, if there has been a violation...’ He cleared his throat. ‘I mean, if someone forced you to have sex with them, and I have knowledge of this, then I really have to speak to your mum and dad, and the police.’

Jordi looked to the floor.

‘And also, by law,’ the doctor continued, ‘If someone has hurt you, I (or another doctor) can take tests to see if there is any evidence, such as semen or body hair, even skin samples, this could help prove what happened to you.’

Jordi took a quick breath and looked at the doctor. ‘Nothing happened,’ she sniffled and looked again towards the floor.

The doctor sighed.

‘I’ll write down some phone numbers, Jordana, for where you can get some help. This is the WESTCAS, the Western Region Centre Against Sexual Assault. They have counsellors and other types of support.’

He scribbled the number onto a piece of paper and put it down in front of her. Jordi looked at it, but didn’t pick it up.

‘Would you let me just check out your abdomen? I’ll be very gentle and you can leave your clothes on,’ he said, his hands resting on the desk.

Jordi shook her head.

‘Alright, but please talk to someone. Someone you trust.’

Jordi nodded.

‘I want you to go home and have a hot bath, take some Panadol. And come back tomorrow.’

‘Okay,’ Jordi said very softly, ‘I will.’ She let out a long breath and rubbed her eyes. ‘Thank you,’ she said and got out of her chair.

The doctor walked Jordi to the door. ‘There’s no need to feel embarrassed,’ he said. ‘Sometimes things just happen.’

Jordi zig-zagged her way through the waiting room area of the medical centre as fast as she could and stood outside in the car park, her body trembling as she waited for her mother.

The Datsun pulled up. Petra reached over to unlock the passenger door. ‘Piece of shit car,’ she growled as Jordi slumped into the front seat. ‘You alright, love?’

‘Yeah,’ Jordi said quietly.

Petra’s hands wrenched around the steering wheel as they made their way home past giant takeaway restaurants and furniture centres that looked like theme parks.

Petra sang along to a Mariah Carey ballad and turned towards her daughter when they stopped at some traffic lights. ‘Can’t you tell me what’s wrong, love? I’m ya mum.’

Jordi looked out the window and sniffed. ‘Just a bug,’ she said. ‘Gotta rest.’

‘Right.’ Petra lit up a cigarette as the small car rattled into the outskirts of their estate, ‘Sunnybrook’. ‘Those big black bags under your eyes are worryin’ me.’

When they got home, Jordi went straight to her bedroom and slammed the door.

Breanna sat on one of the twin beds, painting her nails black. ‘Hey,’ she said, not looking up.

‘Hey,’ said Jordi, collapsing on her bed and turning to face the wall. ‘When’d you get back?’

‘Just before,’ Breanna mumbled. ‘Aunty Jude brang me.’

Breanna was two years younger than Jordi and had been away the past few days, staying with Petra’s sister Judy. Their aunty had money and lived closer to the city. Since Breanna’s diagnosis of chronic fatigue, she often let her niece stay at her place. The doctor at the Royal Children’s Hospital had commented on Breanna’s two-litre bottle of Diet Pepsi that she held in the waiting room. He said it probably wasn’t helping.

‘Where’d you go Saturday night?’ Jordi pressed her face into a worn-out pillow slip. ‘When I came home the kids were alone. You shoulda told me you weren’t coming home. I texted you.’

‘Yeah sorry, hey. I went to Stew’s.’ Breanna yawned. ‘He wanted to get back with me. Then I went down to Aunty D’s from there. I thought you were comin’ home.’

Jordi grimaced. Stewart Raine, an apprentice plumber, was Breanna’s nineteen-year-old on-and-off boyfriend. He promised her a five-bedroom house at Lorne but he was too young to settle down yet, he said.

‘Breeeeee, he’s a man-whore.’

‘Shut up!’ Breanna blew gently onto her nails. ‘He loves me,’ she mumbled, slamming the door as she left the room.

Jordi pulled some headphones out of her pocket and switched on the iPod her dad got her last Christmas—‘Off a truck,’ he said. She listened to Justin Bieber, imagining him singing into her ear with his arms wrapped around her. And then she saw the footballer, his hard hands around her wrists. She shivered and pushed her face into the pillow, holding onto it tight.

The sound of Zumba beats shuddered through the walls as Petra thumped her small, bony body against the floor. Jordi’s brothers and sisters made fun of their mother as she tried to co-ordinate her arms and legs, tracksuit pants swishing against the old carpet. As a child, Petra had won a dancing award at her school but her mum couldn’t afford to pay for lessons. Petra had cried for weeks and didn’t dance much after that.

One night, at her friend Kylie's wedding in Phillip Island, she and Kane had danced to Michael Bublé. Petra spun around in a long black dress she got from Kmart (not that anyone could tell). People stopped to watch them. 'She's so good,' they said, and clapped.

'Piss off will yas?' she yelled, red-faced and wheezing, her arms rotating in strange directions and her hips jutting out at various angles. The children laughed harder, jumping up and down and trying to mimic her.

Petra collapsed on the couch and pressed a hand against her chest. She joined in with the laughter. 'My god,' she said, 'I gotta get off the smokes.'

Jordi put her hands over her ears, then felt the buzzing of her mobile.

Shilo was breathless. 'Where are you? You're not answering! That Carlisle guy was on the news tonight, something about how he might be retiring or some shit? He's in hospital having surgery.'

Jordi said nothing for a moment, her fingers sweating and sliding around the phone. 'What?'

'Yep. It's everywhere.'

'Why do I want to know?' she sighed.

'Sorry, Jords, I just thought...'

They both went quiet.

'I don't care, okay?'

'Okay,' Shilo said, 'Sorry hey.'

There was a pause.

'I went to the doctor,' Jordi announced.

'Thank god! Did you tell?'

‘Kind of.’

‘What did you say?’

‘That I had some pain, that’s all. ’

‘Jorrrrrrds.’ Shilo blew air out of her mouth.

‘I know, I know. He asked me to go back.’

‘I’m worried about ya. Let’s go to the cops.’

‘I can’t.’

Jordi could hear Shilo banging the mobile against her forehead. ‘It’s not right, Jords!’

‘I’m too scared! I don’t want people talking about me,’ Jordi’s voice lowered as she curled her body up and rested her head against the wall.

‘I know. But I’ll be here for you, Jords. You don’t have to do it on your own.’ Shilo began to cry, angry tears spilling. ‘I could kill him. I could get my cousin Arnold.’

‘Shi,’ Jordi said, ‘I’ll be alright. I’m goin’ back. I promise.’

‘Good. Tell him what happened—or I will. It’s not right.’

Jordi lay back on the bed. ‘It wasn’t him, remember? It was the other guy.’

‘Does it matter? That bastard was meant to take care of you.’

Jordi said she had to go, she was tired. The two girls said goodnight.

Jordi listened for a moment to her family in the lounge room laughing at *Mr Bean*, her mother’s voice roaring. She imagined hearing her dad too, laughing along with them, his big voice booming through the cracked old wall.

A text message came through on Jordi’s phone, from her father. It was a tiny symbol of a heart. She pressed delete.

Chapter 19

Max opened his eyes. He was home now.

The rehab had been an offer of goodwill from the club: a few weeks of substance abuse treatment at a place in South Yarra, with high walls and Beamers parked outside. His coach, Ronnie, had read the report from the hospital of Max's splintered, tired tendon and traces of pills in his blood.

'You won't get ya head on telly if you're not cleaned up, right?' Ronnie had told him. 'Think *ahead*, son.'

The painkillers had stolen Max's libido. There were no morning erections. He sat up and scratched the hair on the top of his groin and swung his legs out of bed. He was eating like a student in a shared house: chocolate biscuits, microwave pies, Indian takeaway, all washed down with Coke. Gone were the usual bowls of brown rice and vegies.

Max pressed his fingers against the bandages and gasped from the tenderness. He walked slowly into his lounge room and sat down at the kitchen bench, reaching for an iPad. Emails crowded the screen. They were messages from team mates. *Hey buddy, hang in there, mate*. He missed a few of his mates. But he was over some of the new boys, loud-mouthed and fresh-eyed and getting in fights at the College Lawn hotel. He hauled through Viagra spam, some training information and more messages from friends and family. He'd been avoiding everyone, even his closer mates, like Greg Tenace, another country boy who joined the club the same year as Max and 'stayed sane' over the years.

Max logged into Facebook. There were photos from a recent charity fundraiser, a fashion show. In one snap, Max was posing with models made of botox. An ad popped up showing a teenager wearing coloured jeans. She looked like...the young girl. Her photo was in his kitchen. He closed the screen. Max buried his face in his hands and exhaled, letting his fingers slide through his hair. He thought about the new woman in

the apartment below—Ruby. He loved her warm voice. And her eyes, those eyes, like the emeralds from his Grandma Olivia's favourite brooch.

Weak. Prick. Pathetic.

Later that night, Max stood in his kitchen and listened for Ruby's sounds. He liked the different range of beats in her music: world music, eighties, Johnny Cash, Motown, Sinatra, Dolly Parton, Silverchair. He paced around his apartment as he heard movements from below that were not easy to distinguish. He tidied up his kitchen. He made his bed. Just knowing she was so close to him made his heart pulse.

Max looked up the body corporate directory. There she was. A search on Facebook showed there was only one member in Australia with her name. He sent a message.

About an hour later she replied. *Hello.*

He waited a few minutes. He felt nervous. He hadn't felt nervous around a female in such a long time. *I want to apologise. For last week. I was rude and a bit pissed.*

There was nothing for a little while, then: *It's okay. Sorry, got to go! Cleaning.*

Max got up from his desk and went into the kitchen to get some corn chips. He stuffed them into his mouth and reflected on the exchange. He'd blown it with this girl. *Cleaning. She thinks I'm a pig,* he whispered to himself.

He hopped into the shower for the first time in days. He let the hot spray cover his body as he held his arm out of the water, wrapped up in a plastic cover. He felt the heat hit his skin. He imagined stepping out of the bathroom and finding Ruby on his doorstep, in a white robe, asking if she could join him.

Max popped a pill and turned off the light. In the darkness, he looked at shadows and shades of moonlight peeking through a blind. All he could see was the face of Jordana Spence and her young, frightened eyes.

Chapter 20

On Sunday morning, Jordi took a twenty-five-minute bus back to the clinic. During the trip, an elderly man with eyebrows like white caterpillars sat down next to her and told her about the history of the Ventura bus line.

At the clinic, Jordi went straight to the front desk and spoke to a sharp-nosed woman eating M&Ms.

‘Yes? Do you have an appointment?’ the woman said, typing at a computer, her eyes fixed on a screen.

Jordi chewed her bottom lip. ‘Um, no, but Dr Andersen told me to come back today.’

The woman frowned and opened up a new screen on her computer. ‘I can try but you may have to wait.’

‘Thanks.’

Moving in the direction of the waiting room, Jordi accidentally knocked a pamphlet titled ‘Lydia has Chlamydia’ onto the floor. Sitting down into a plastic chair with worn-down arms, she put her phone away and reached over to a table with old magazines, grabbing a *Woman’s Day* from 2008 with the front cover missing. She was tired of looking at Facebook. She was tired of the brag fest and photos of people with stuff she would never have. Jordi read an article about people who claimed to have been taken by aliens, and another about the wedding of a man with no limbs. She pulled a book out of her bag. For Year 11 English, her class was reading George Orwell’s *1984*. Jordi stepped into the world of Oceania and escaped. Jordi loved the story, even though she didn’t understand some of the words. She felt Winston’s rage and fear; she wanted so much for him to be free, but she knew the ending wouldn’t be happy. Shilo refused to read it, she said it was too depressing. She didn’t need that shit, she said, she’d use the study guide. For Jordi, it was comforting to imagine a world where someone told you how to think. Shilo thought that was fucked.

Jordi began reading from where she had left off:

And perhaps you might pretend, afterwards, that it was only a trick and that you just said it to make them stop and didn't really mean it. But that isn't true. At the time when it happens you do mean it. You think there's no other way of saving yourself and you're quite ready to save yourself that way. You want it to happen to the other person. You don't give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself,

Caught up in the story, Jordi was unaware of an older man in a tracksuit staring at the soft whiteness of her thighs. His jaw hung open as he dug a toothpick into his gums.

The little TV announced a news update. Jordi looked up and saw a picture of Max Carlisle's face. She dropped her book and began to shake

'Jordana Spence,' someone called out.

Jordi picked the novel up and stuffed it into her backpack.

A receptionist with a bruised eye pointed down a corridor. 'Number five,' she said and passed Jordi a slip of paper. Along the corridor walls were pictures of body parts and advertisements from drug companies. 'Herpes isn't a life sentence.'

After knocking, Jordi entered the room where Dr Andersen sat, wearing a lemon hand-knitted jumper, white shirt and paisley bow-tie.

He smiled. 'Good to see you again.'

Jordi didn't say anything. She sat down in a chair opposite his desk and threw her backpack onto the floor.

'How are you?'

Jordi shrugged, concentrating on the snow dome from Las Vegas on his desk.

'My daughter bought that for me,' he grimaced. 'From a place with no humanity.'

Jordi shook it. 'I like these. My dad got me one from Ayer's Rock.'

The doctor nodded. 'So, how are the cramps?'

'A bit better.'

'If you're more comfortable, I can arrange for a female doctor? As I explained, you really need to a proper pelvic examination. Just to make sure you are okay.'

'Um, but if I tell you stuff it stays between you and me, right?' She stared at the doctor and sat up a little straighter in her chair. He remained very still and gave her a gentle smile.

'Yes, as you're sixteen our conversations can remain between the two of us, but if you tell me something and it involves abuse or force—that's different.'

Jordi sniffed. 'Okay.'

'It can feel good to get it off your chest. You're safe here.'

'How old are your kids?' she asked suddenly.

'All grown up,' the doctor said. 'I miss them very much.'

Jordi nodded.

The clock on the wall shaped like a sun made little clicking sounds as Jordi pushed her fingers up into her fringe and shuddered, catching her breath against her hands. 'Um...'

'Yes?'

Jordi hid her face. 'He was older than me.'

'Okay. Did he use protection?'

She shook her head.

'Okay,' said the doctor. 'You're doing well. Do you want to tell me more?'

'No.'

‘Alright, and how are you feeling now?’

‘What do you mean?’ she said, frowning. She chewed on her bottom lip and began to fidget. She’d said too much.

‘About it all. How are you feeling?’

‘I don’t know...stupid,’ she croaked.

‘Why?’

‘Dunno.’

Dr Andersen leaned back into his chair and rested a hand under his chin. ‘Jordana, like all people, you have rights. No-one is allowed to force you into doing something. It’s a crime. People can go to jail for these things. They are criminals, do you understand?’

She stared at him.

‘Yes,’ she said and leaned a little closer towards the desk.

‘Just because no-one knows it \happened doesn’t make it okay. Too many people get away with this, take men of the cloth, for example. They are criminals who turn to God.’

‘Who?’

‘Priests. People in positions of authority who take advantage of others.’ Dr Andersen wrote a few quick notes on a pad. ‘Jordana, is that what happened to you?’

‘No.’

She sat silently.

The doctor sighed. ‘Was it a boyfriend?’

She shook her head and looked down. ‘I have to go now.’ She reached for her bag.

Dr Andersen's short fingers rocked back and forth as he scrawled something in cursive script. 'I'm sorry, but I insist you get a proper examination. There are some nice ladies here at the clinic, and let's get some blood tests done.'

A Rhianna ring-tone hummed from Jordi's bag. She ignored it. 'Okay,' she said.

The doctor turned to his computer. 'These blood tests will check for any STDs, HIV, that kind of thing. Take this up to the receptionist and book in a time.'

Jordi took the piece of paper.

'You look after yourself, and I am always here.'

'Thanks,' she mumbled.

At reception, the woman behind the counter yawned as she typed Jordi's details and presented a form for her to sign, acrylic nails scraping against the desk.

After the paperwork was done, Jordi called her mum to pick her up and stood shivering in the car park. Petra appeared, the Datsun chugging as it pulled up beside her. Jordi hopped into the car, leant over and kissed her mother on the cheek. Petra looked at her daughter and ruffled her hair.

'What?' said Jordi.

'Are ya up the duff, love?'

'No,' Jordi said. 'Just a tummy thing, won't go away.'

'You reckon I was born yesterday?' Petra touched Jordi's cheek.

'Don't worry, Mum,' Jordi said. 'I'm not having a baby.'

'I was young when I had you, love,' Petra croaked. 'I was scared. But you were an angel.'

Jordi squeezed her mum's hand and wound down the window. The Datsun pattered back onto the highway.

On the way home, Petra pulled the car into a service station and gave Jordi a ten-dollar note. 'Get some bread, love.'

Jordi took the money and pulled off a curled-up receipt for Chemist Warehouse that was stuck to the cash. *Ansell Erotic Thins \$9.95*. 'Grosssss,' she moaned.

Inside the electric glass doors, Jordi stopped still in front of a stand of newspapers. It was him. On the front page of the *Herald Sun*. 'A CRUSH FOR CARLISLE'. Customers pushed past to grab items off shelves and hurry to the front counter. But Jordi didn't move. A whiny toot came from her mum's car. Jordi looked out the glass to see Petra tapping her watch. She turned and picked up a packet of Sunicrust. With trembling fingers, she gave the money to the attendant and moved outside.

'What were you doin'?' Petra manoeuvred the wheels back out onto the main road.

'Sorry.' Jordi turned to look out the passenger window, breathing hard and fast.

'You awright?'

'Yeah.' Jordi switched on the radio, flicking around stations and stopping at Cindy Lauper's 'Time After Time'. She turned it up loud and listened to her mother sing off key. She stared straight ahead as they skidded along some smooth new roads.

Inside the house, a smell made Jordi dry-retch.

'Jesus!' Petra screeched. 'What is that?'

Four-year-old Cruise blubbered and held his mum around the leg. 'I did poos.'

'Oh love, did you have milk?' Petra pulled him up and lifted him towards the kitchen, her arms extending away from her body.

Breanna appeared, Emo eyes rimmed in black. She'd been 're-inventing' herself during the past week. Her previous look six months earlier was biker chick. 'Shit, sorry, I forgot.'

'Bree, for fucksakes,' Petra cried. 'You know he can't have it.'

Bree slammed the bedroom door. Metallica roared through the walls. Jordi helped her mum take Cruise into the bathroom and put him under the shower.

‘It’s alright, mate,’ Petra said as she peeled off his stinking clothes. ‘It’s alright.’

Jordi checked the water temperature and lifted him in. As she gently rubbed shampoo into her little brother’s hair, Petra threw his clothes into the laundry.

‘Jorrrrds,’ Cruise sniffed, ‘have you got a boyfriend?’

‘No.’ Jordi said quietly.

‘Why not?’ Cruise splashed around in the water. The stench had gone and he smelt like strawberries. His skin was fresh and pink.

‘Dunno,’ said Jordi. ‘Maybe I’m fussy, hey?’ She helped him out of the shower, wrapping an old towel with frayed edges around his body.

‘You should have one,’ Cruise blabbered. ‘He can give you stuff and bring things for us and show you his car.’

Jordi hugged her brother, kissing the top of his head and sending him off to the bedroom.

The massive plasma TV (a little pick-up from Boss) blasted out the late afternoon news. Jordi collapsed on to the old couch and picked up the remote. *Not good news for Carlisle, thirty-four. An insider has reported that his injury means permanent damage—an end to a golden career.*

Jordi swallowed hard. The picture of him on the television made her whole body tremble. She changed the channel to a Video Hits special and slunk back into the couch. She watched Michael Jackson, Björk and Kanye West. She listened to her mum in the kitchen digging out frozen fish and chips from the freezer. Finally, Jordi turned back to the news. Another station ran the story on Max. She watched footage of him at the MCG and a Ronald McDonald House. She thought about him holding her hand in the taxi. Maybe Shilo was right though. Why didn’t he look after her? Why didn’t

he make it stop? Maybe it was time. Maybe it was time to tell Dr Andersen—with his gentle, kind eyes—the truth.

Jordi leaned over the smoky glass coffee table that was cracked down the middle. She picked up her mother's mobile phone to dial the number for the West Meadows clinic. Dr Andersen was busy with patients. She told the receptionist to tell him she'd called.

She stayed in her room that night, while her family ate dinner on the couch and watched *The Voice* and *Embarrassing Bodies*. The kids got their mum to dance hip-hop on the Wii mat that Boss had bought them on a trip to Vietnam. Even Breanna let out a big laugh.

Jordi listened to love-song dedications on the radio, a Beyoncé special. A rush of tears shook her from inside. And then she thought about Jamie Turner who lived two streets away and had money. He was off with his dad working on the mines in WA. He had a motorbike and a life and things to look forward to. He asked her once to go to a party with him. She said no because she was too shy and he seemed really grown up.

You wanted that.

She rolled into the foetal position and tried to breathe as her body shook. Jordi dreamed of Dr Andersen. She knew it was him, though she couldn't see his face. He was driving a big black car as she sat in the back, dressed up like Paris Hilton. He wore a cap and kept asking, 'Where now?' But then he turned, and it wasn't Dr Andersen. It was the footballer with the strong arms.

She woke herself with her own screams.

Petra came in to the room. 'Just a bad dream, love', she said, her voice croaky and thick as she hugged her daughter tight. 'Just a dream.'

Chapter 21

Ruby's coupled-up friends were perplexed by her single life. *Don't you get lonely, Rubes?* Tired of the interrogations, she saw them infrequently. She couldn't bear their sanctimonious tones, especially when Ruby knew that not all of them were happy. Some married men peered at her from behind their barbecues with staring eyes. Some of the women changed their hairstyles every month and went to Bali for girl's trips, sucking on cocktails and bitching about lazy husbands.

'Your friends mean well,' said her mum. 'They're just worried.'

'I worry about some of them,' Ruby said.

She tried online dating. The cyberworld of romance was a strange place. She was amazed by the profiles. There were men holding Rottweilers or standing on the edge of cliffs, some sitting on their cars and the occasional bare chest. And the names—DreamGuy, SagittarianSpunk, HotInTheCot. Some wore shirts buttoned up to the neck, tagging themselves as hopeless romantics. But she'd heard some good things too. Clara, a woman at her work, married a great guy she met online. It took energy and guts to be there, and a lot of patience. Clara said it was the law of frequency that in the end got the results. Ruby's online chats became twisted games. She'd turn off the computer and wake the next morning to listen to the sad clinking sound of a spoon inside her cereal bowl.

Now it was mid-week, and she sat at her computer, drinking an immune-boosting berry tonic recommended by her herbalist. She logged into the singles' chat-room, staring at the screen with heavy eyes. Someone called 'Dreamweaver' sent her a message. Within five minutes, he asked her if she wanted to see his massive boner.

Ruby logged off. Stepping into her slate-blue and silver-chrome bathroom, she splashed water on her face and flicked on the waterproof digital radio. A live cross to a press conference concerning another sinking asylum seeker boat. 'A tragedy,' said the Prime Minister.

Back in the lounge room, she opened her laptop and watched a news video—floating bodies bobbed up and down like plastic bottles. A woman from Pakistan was interviewed. ‘Yes, we are lucky we could buy plane tickets,’ she said. ‘But remember this is our home. It wasn’t easy to leave. Our house was bombed two times. And I ask anyone, what would you do?’

The calls started. ‘I’ve got nothin’ against ’em. I mean, good luck to ’em but won’t it put more people on the dole?’ ‘Both parties should be ashamed! These are human beings! I’m voting for the sex party!’

A YouTube video showed a child being pulled out of the ocean. Ruby saw the tiny little swollen pink lips of the young girl and her bulging eyes. She heard the sobbing of the rescue worker as she lay her tiny body down. Ruby closed the browser and opened up her emails. *You Didn’t Win—Suckitup Underwear* from eBay.

There was a knock at the door. Ruby jumped. It was just after 9 pm. She looked through the security peephole.

It was Max. He pushed fingers through his hair, tiny flecks of grey peeking through the dirty blonde. He held a shiny white box with a little silver ribbon on top. Ruby carefully flicked the locks and swung the door open, clutching onto the side.

‘Hi,’ he said, clearing his throat and giving Ruby a quick, nervous smile.

‘Hello.’ Ruby pulled up the elastic waist of her old pyjama bottoms.

Max took a breath. ‘I just wanted to apologise for the other night,’ he said, handing over the hand-made chocolates.

She looked down at the sweets. ‘There’s no need.’

Max scratched at his wrist-support. ‘Look, I’d had a lot to drink and was rude to you. I’ve had a lot going on. But that’s no excuse.’

‘It’s okay,’ Ruby said. Her black hair was poking out at funny angles. ‘Flo is very fond of you.’

‘She’s a good person who’s had a rough time.’

Max cleared his throat and shuffled his feet around. ‘Have you seen her? Flo, I mean, in the past few days?’

‘No, not for a while,’ said Ruby, pushing hair out of her face. ‘She moves a bit, anyway, I’m sure she’ll show up.’

‘Yeah,’ said Max.

‘Anyway,’ Ruby said, pointing at Max’s arm, ‘what’s happening with you?’

‘Well the papers will tell you I am done,’ he said and looked down at his wrist.

‘Oh,’ Ruby said. ‘Sorry to hear.’

‘It is what it is,’ Max shrugged and rubbed his lips together before looking straight at Ruby. ‘Just all part of it.’

She nodded and twirled a piece of hair near her neck. Then she looked at him. In the past, Ruby had always been attracted to tall, dark, lean men. Max was muscular, average height and fair-haired, features she normally took no notice of. He was handsome in a way that had caught her by surprise. And there was something that happened when he spoke to her. Maybe it was the smooth ease of his voice. And the way he talked about Flo. Just being near him felt amazing.

Their faces were flushed.

‘Anyway, I guess I’ll see you some time,’ he said, fidgeting uncomfortably.

‘Yeah, okay then, bye,’ she said and shut the door.

Ruby sat on her couch and scratched her head. She listened for sounds coming from Max’s apartment upstairs. Why hadn’t she invited him inside? Had he wanted to come inside? She listened to the noises of his shower. She thought about his big arms and his wide smile. But then she thought about the young girl in the hallway and tried to get him out of her head.

Ruby's mobile tinkled. It was her mum.

'Turn on Channel Nine,' she said, 'there's a show on about single mother adoptions.'

Ruby hung up.

*

A block away from the apartment building, Florence bent over a young boy who lay still on the concrete pavement. 'Wake up!' she cawed and looked around for someone. 'Help! Someone help!'

The young male suddenly sat up and pushed Florence in the chest. 'Piss off, bitch,' he spat in a drunken voice, stumbling to his feet and making his way towards Flinders Street station.

Florence watched his bendy legs move along left to right and somehow straight ahead. She thought of the young girl with blood on her skirt and how her legs had stumbled away that morning.

Florence spotted a two-dollar coin and picked it up, then began the slow walk along three blocks to the Swanston Street McDonald's, humming a folk song her mother used to sing about their trip to Australia by boat. She couldn't remember all the words. After a while, she just made noises and kept her body shuffling towards the bright lights of the takeaway place that would give her a seat for a few hours and something warm to drink. *Menina*, she said under her breath, her eyes watching out for Jordi. She had not forgotten. *Where are you?*

Chapter 22

The pathology nurse stuck a needle into Jordi's arm and told her to look away.

'It's okay,' Jordi said, 'I like to watch it.' It was Tuesday afternoon. Jordi had wagged her Home Room library session and caught a bus to the clinic.

The room reeked of the sour smell of disinfectant and instruments. Jordi ran a hand across her stomach as she looked at the vial of her blood, the colour of red wine. She turned her face to the wall. 'A Condom or Your Life', a poster read, with a cartoon of a girl throwing a pair of dice.

'What year are you in at school?' said the nurse, a young male in his early twenties with hair dyed platinum blonde.

'Ten,' she said, then stared at his wrist. 'What's that?' She pointed at a swirling tree-shaped tattoo.

'It's a Dara knot,' he said, pulling the needle out of Jordi's arm.

'A what?'

'A Celtic symbol. It's means strength beneath the surface, like a root system of a tree, that kind of thing.'

'I like it.' Jordi pressed down on the Band-Aid against her arm.

'You got any tats?' said the nurse, rubbing the side of his acne-scarred face.

'No,' said Jordi. 'But I've got one picked out.'

'What is it?'

'A lily, kind of.'

'Nice. But don't rush it. You might change your mind. And never get a boyfriend's name.' He winked.

Jordi smiled.

‘All done.’ The nurse walked Jordi towards the door. ‘The results will take a few days, but try not to worry about it.’

Jordi thanked him and left.

Out in the car park, Petra sipped from a bottle of Strongbow cider.

‘Jesus, Mum,’ Jordi hissed, as she got into the front seat.

‘I’m sorry, love,’ she said, ‘I’m upset. I got a call from your dad today.’

Jordi turned towards her, eyes wide. ‘What’d he say?’

‘Oh you know, he loves us all. Still trying to get work, rah rah rah.’ Petra wiped her eyes and turned the keys in the ignition. ‘Bloody bastard.’

Jordi shifted her body away from her mum. Petra looked at her daughter and took a deep breath. ‘Forget that prick. You gotta tell me what’s goin’ on, Jordana,’ Petra snarled. ‘Or I’m goin’ into the clinic. You’re only sixteen, remember?’

‘You can’t,’ Jordi said. ‘I have a right to privacy.’

‘Bullshit. I’m your mother.’

‘Why don’t you just worry about getting Dad back?’

Petra punched her fist against the steering wheel and pushed her foot down hard on the accelerator. No-one spoke as Pat Benatar screamed out of the cassette player. Petra squinted through her streaming tears.

The next morning Jordi refused to get out of bed. This continued for the next week.

Petra received a call from the year level co-ordinator. ‘A virus,’ she said.

Jordi stayed in her room and listened to her iPod. Petra bought her a *Dolly* magazine and McDonald’s. Shilo came around, but Petra said Jordi didn’t want to see her.

Shilo called out to Jordi from the front window of her bedroom. ‘Jords, it’s me. Let me in.’

Jordi turned up the music and waited until her friend had gone. She sent some texts to her dad but soon ran out of credit. He didn’t reply. Not even to the last one that ended with: *Please come home.*

Shilo sent random, frequent texts: *I love ya Jords. I’m here for ya. Your mum’s a bitch.*

A week and a half passed. Apart from using the bathroom, Jordi only got up once, when a daddy long legs spider climbed under her doona and she screamed out to her mum. Petra tried taking her to bingo and Savers in Footscray, but she wouldn’t move. Jordi’s brothers and sisters came into her room and hugged her. She picked at her food and drank flat Coke.

A youth worker from school knocked on the front door, after the tenth day of her absence. She was a curly-haired woman in her thirties with good posture, dressed in hand-made clothes from Brunswick Street. Petra took a peek through the front curtain, brushed cake off her jumper and stood for a moment with her face near the door.

‘Yes?’ she said sternly.

They spoke briefly through a wire screen door and then Petra invited her inside. The youth worker, named Keeley, stood just inside the entrance for a moment with Petra, showing her some ID. Then Petra took Keeley to Jordi’s bedroom. Jordi had a doona wrapped over her head.

‘Jordi, your mum says you’re not eating much and you won’t get out of bed. I think we need to get you back to the doctor.’

Jordi didn’t move, tiny jingles of sound coming from her headphones.

Back in the hallway, Keeley talked with Petra. Breanna played a Marilyn Manson CD loudly in the front room, making everything vibrate.

‘We may need to do a psych assessment,’ Keeley said.

‘What do you mean?’ Petra asked, alarmed.

‘It’s just procedure. She seems very depressed.’

‘It’s just teenagers, hey? Things are always up and down.’ Petra scratched a nail across her wrist. ‘She has been to the clinic down on Rooks Road. A few times.’

Keeley was writing something in her notebook. ‘Okay, but she didn’t tell you anything?’

‘Nah, I called them and they said cos she’s sixteen she has to consent to giving out info. It’s bullshit.’

‘Well, it depends on a few things. If something’s happened to Jordi there are some circumstances where the doctor by law has to report the situation to police. Have there been any major events recently? Any trauma?’

Petra shrugged. ‘Not that I know of. Things are tough at times, but I do love my kids a lot, you know? They always have food on the table.’

The youth worker nodded and scanned her eyes around the lounge room. ‘Look, I’ll stay in touch with you over the next few days. Keep trying to get her up and about, even if you have to use a bit of bribery.’

Petra’s eyes filled with tears.

Keeley took a step closer to Petra. ‘If nothing changes over the weekend, we’ll need to put the pressure on, just to make sure things don’t get worse.’

‘Worse?’ Petra wiped an eye, smudging her face with blue liner.

‘You don’t need to worry about that, not yet. But if needed we can arrange a trip to a psych clinic for adolescents.’

‘How?’ Petra frowned, as she leaned against a wall.

‘With a bit of force. But they would take good care of her. It’s just to make sure she doesn’t self-harm, that kind of thing.’

Petra nodded, sniffing as she walked the youth worker to the front of the house. She watched Keeley get into her black SUV, then closed the splintering old front door and stood with her head in her hands.

In the lounge room, the children wrestled on the carpet and screamed. Petra walked past them and then up the small passageway to her daughter's room. She stopped, pressing her ear against the door. She slowly turned the handle.

Jordi lay on her side, her legs pulled up towards her chest. Petra walked slowly towards the bed and sat down, resting a hand on her daughter's back.

'Tell ya mum,' Petra pleaded, her breath sour from cigarettes. A crash came from the lounge room, followed by a chorus of wails. 'Fuck.' Petra exhaled as she stood up.

In the lounge room, Abbey screamed, 'Ryan hit me!'

Petra stood watching with tired eyes, a thin figure in the doorway. Her children kicked and punched each other in holey tracksuit pants, their toes poking out of socks.

'Come on, you buggers.' Petra's throat barely made a sound as she squatted down amongst the rolling children. 'Bloody stop it.' She started to sob.

The children went quiet. Ryan stumbled over and put a hand on Petra's back. 'Sorry, Mum,' he said, pressing his face against her hair as the other children circled around their mother, little fingers squeezing her tight.

In the bedroom, Jordi pressed her pillow over her head, to block it all out. To stop the world around her.

Chapter 23

Since Max's operation and announcement of his retirement, Jean left daily telephone messages, some a little shaky. During a brief visit to his apartment, she'd found a document regarding rehabilitation for substance abuse. She didn't ask Max about it but her calls to him became more frequent. Once, she thought she'd finished a call and released a long sob, not realising that for one-and-a-half minutes she was still being recorded. Jean was still raw after watching a *Dr Oz* episode about high-functioning crack addicts.

Max sometimes rang her back. 'Mum,' he said, 'Please, I just need some time on my own.'

Max had begun private meetings with club officials and lawyers. He saw an occupational therapist and a media advisor. He had mates from the club calling and sending texts. But he just wanted quiet. He just wanted to be alone.

At night, Jean lay awake.

Like every night of their thirty-six-year marriage, Roger snored.

The day after Max's operation, news spread quickly around Benalla. There were tales of retirement and rumours of his wicked 'double life'. Jean swallowed and held her head high as she entered the local supermarket. She saw people whispering as she moved quickly by.

A woman from her local church, Dawn Miller, who wrote the monthly newsletter and knew for the past ten years who had or had not donated to the Christmas Appeal (she still had their names in pencil in an exercise book), walked straight up to Jean and stood with her hand on her chest.

'Are you alright, dear? Sorry to hear about your boy,' she said. 'He'll find something else, ignore the gossip, you know how people are.' She gave her arm a little squeeze and pushed her trolley in the opposite direction.

Later, in the dairy aisle, Jean saw Dawn talking to another woman, their faces quickly turning from her as she leaned down to grab cream cheese.

When Jean got home, Roger listened. 'They can all go to hell,' he said.

'Roger, please don't blaspheme. People are just being caring.' Jean shoved cans of soup into the pantry cupboard, her head buried deep inside.

'Pigs arse,' Roger yelled, and banged his fist down on the kitchen table, spilling a glass of ginger beer onto Jean's favourite tablecloth, a silk piece from Hong Kong. With a red face he sat and watched the liquid move across the green fabric.

Jean marched into the dining area, shocked at the sudden power of her own voice. 'Clean it up. You clean it up. I clean everything up and I'm not doing it!' She slammed the door and went into her sewing room. Roger sat at the table and watched his wife retreat, amazed at her outburst.

With a quivering hand, she picked up the landline phone on her craft table and dialled Max's number.

'Hello,' he sighed.

'What you been up to then? Did you see the doctor today?' she said in a forced, sing-song voice.

'Tomorrow, I go tomorrow.'

'Right, I get the days mixed up. What'd you have for dinner tonight? Are you doing your exercises?'

'Salad and steak,' he lied. 'And yes.'

'Good, that's good, some greens. Did you know your brothers are graduating soon?'

'No.'

'Anyway, I'll send you a ticket. It's at Melbourne Uni, if you're interested.'

‘Maybe,’ said Max quietly, considering the idea. ‘I haven’t seen the boys for a long time.’

‘Oh, you know,’ she chirped. ‘They’re a bit like your dad, work, work, work.’

‘They’re more like Bill Gates.’

‘How do you mean? As in clever?’

‘No, as in geeks.’

‘Max. They’re just a bit studious that’s all,’ she spoke quickly. ‘They do care about you, and it’s not been easy to study medicine, such long hours.’ Jean wanted her boys to get along.

‘Yeah, well, I’ve had a couple of texts in the past three months, but I guess I’m not much better. I did think, though, with the op I might have gotten a call.’

‘Maybe they don’t know what to say?’

‘I don’t give a shit. I’m over it.’ Max sighed.

‘Where’s all this coming from?’ Jean’s voice quivered a little.

Max banged his head against a wall.

‘Max? Are you there?’ Jean ran her hand across a gold trophy from 2001 in the shape of a football, a Best and Fairest. ‘What do you want to do now, love, for the future, what do you have planned?’

He sighed. ‘I’m not sure. Maybe coaching. No idea. Do you remember when I wanted to get into astronomy?’

‘Yes,’ his mother laughed, clutching a hankie in her skirt pocket.

Max went quiet. ‘That’s the problem. You and Dad found that amusing.’

‘But there’s no career path darling with that kind of thing.’

‘That’s not the point,’ Max’s voice grew louder ‘I enjoyed it, but ohhh no, that was an embarrassing possibility.’

‘Max.’ Jean whispered, a tear glistening in her eye.

‘You don’t bloody get it,’ he boomed.

‘Max.’ Jean’s said again, her voice sad and low.

‘No bloody idea.’

And then he hung up.

Jean opened up her craft basket and pulled out pieces of felt and ribbon. She began to cut pieces out at random, a song from a *Phantom of the Opera* CD played gently through her stereo. Jean always turned to craft when she was upset.

Roger stood behind the door. He had been listening, his hands clenched. He went into the family room and leaned against the mantelpiece above the big black pot-belly stove. He ran his eyes along trophies of all shapes and sizes, a long blurred line of silver and gold. He picked up a photo of his son and held it in his hands. It was a shot of Max in his school uniform. Roger held it for a long time and wiped his eyes.

Chapter 24

Jordi sucked two-minute noodles out of a bowl as she examined her fingernails. She only managed to eat a few spoonfuls. Her chipped nails had been painted purple a few weeks back for a performance of *Macbeth* in English. She played Lady Macbeth and loved every moment. Jordi wanted her nails to match the velvet purple dress from the Drama department. It showed cleavage. Shilo said it looked totally hot. 'Lady McSkank,' she sniggered.

Jordi loved the sleepwalking scenes, announcing, 'What's done is done.'

But now her body was heavy and still. It was the end of her second week home from school and the youth worker would be back the next day. She pushed herself out of bed and stomped towards the door, blinking against the light in the hallway. Julia Roberts' voice hee-hawed from the lounge room as her mum sat watching *Pretty Woman* for the fourteenth time.

'Is that you, love?' Petra called out. 'Do you want some lunch?'

Jordi said nothing as she got a can of Homebrand lemonade from the fridge and went back to her room. She sat on her bed and turned on her mobile, flicking the screen to a Pac-Man game.

Later in the afternoon, a male voice rumbled through the house. Petra jumped out of her chair. Jordi sat up and listened. The footsteps were loud and fast, coming towards her. Her bedroom door swung open.

'Hey baby,' Kane said with a crinkled smile, walking over to Jordi and holding her with his long, skinny arms.

Jordi made a soft sound and threw her arms around her father's neck, hugging him tightly. Petra watched from the bedroom door then walked away, slamming through the door into the kitchen.

‘What’s goin’ on, sweetie?’ Kane touched the top of his daughter’s head as she leaned against him. ‘You can talk to me. Tell ya dad.’ His clothes smelt of diesel fuel and Rexona.

‘Dunno,’ Jordi said.

‘Ohh kiddo, you’ve got good mates, haven’t ya? Is it school? Some people givin’ you a hard time?’

Jordi shook her head. The sound of a Queen CD screamed from the lounge room. Petra turned on an old vacuum cleaner, its body squealing from a bulging dust-bag. It hadn’t been used for months.

Kane shook his head at Petra’s commotion.

‘Dad,’ Jordi sniffed, ‘I want you to come home.’

Kane was silent for a moment. ‘Come, on babes, you know it’s complicated. Your mum and me still love each other but we end up wanting to kill each other. Sometimes it’s just like that.’

Jordi wiped her eyes. ‘But if you love each other?’

Kane kissed his daughter on the cheek, his tattooed fingers bunching into dark blue lines around her face. ‘Forget me and your mum, darls. Why don’t you tell me what’s goin’ on with you?’

Jordi didn’t say anything. Her dad squeezed her tight.

A little later, Petra jumped as Jordi’s bedroom door swung open and Kane stepped out, his eyes pale, his tall thin body moving quickly across the kitchen.

‘What’s wrong? Are you cryin’?’ Petra said, staring at him.

‘Here, love,’ he said, putting a wad of hundred-dollar bills on the kitchen bench.

He went into the lounge room and scooped up the younger children, hugging them tight.

They yelled, ‘Dad!’ and jumped up and down and wriggled inside his grip.

He went back through the kitchen and kissed Petra lightly, her hair brushing against his goatee beard. His body moved towards her. He held his arms out, but then pulled back in clumsy steps. And then Kane was gone.

Petra stood watching as the back door slammed shut.

Chapter 25

Jean Carlisle turned off the TV and pushed her feet up against the coffee table. She'd been watching a *Dr Phil* special on missing persons. Quivering parents sat in large velvet chairs, watching projected images of their kids. Jean clutched the Kleenex hard inside her fingers, shaping it like a dolmades. *What a terrible thing, to be watching television in the daytime. How had things slipped so much?* She bounced out of her seat and headed into the kitchen to finish colour-coding the spice jars.

Max hadn't replied to her messages for days now. She'd tried email, although it took her a long time to remember how to do it. She didn't like using the computer in front of Roger because he huffed and ended up taking over. She wasn't sure if the email had even been sent.

Jean needed to get to Melbourne. She could pretend it was a visit to the twins and then just call in at Max's apartment. A surprise! No, he wouldn't go for that. Did it matter though? She was his mum.

In the kitchen, the cupboards were covered in silvery snail trails of Spray and Wipe. Jean examined her monthly planner on the fridge. There was nothing circled in red for the weekend. Red was urgent, green was not really urgent and pink was things coming up. Jean wrote in birthdays, anniversaries, hard-rubbish days, Roger's prostate checks, Max's games for the year, the twins' uni breaks, visits to the specialist for her menopausal issues, planting dates for the garden, due dates of books for the library and some other things under 'miscellaneous', like 'join Jenny Craig'. Roger said he should kneel down below the monthly planner and bow his head each morning. Sometimes Roger made Jean laugh. But not often.

Jean Carlisle had been accepted into the Australian National Academy of Music at the age of seventeen. Her father Charlie said, 'That won't set you up for your future though, love. Don't you want to have a family?' He had squeezed her tight. 'Maybe it's something you could do later on?'

Jean's mother, Pearl, sat and listened while Jean's father listed the problems with living away from home before being married and the financial strain it would create. But of course he was very *proud* of Jean. Pearl had tugged at a tiny gold crucifix around her neck as her husband spoke, clearing her throat in little spasms. She leaned forward a few times as if to speak but the words just wouldn't come.

Jean said, 'Dad, this is all I have ever wanted.'

But Charlie just kept talking and that was that.

Jean's family had lived in the Benalla area for years, just on the outskirts where the lights went low in the early evening and people knew when someone was ill or getting divorced. Her parents owned a general store. Blakey's was part of the Blake family for three generations and was everything her parents and siblings lived and breathed. They'd even modernised, as her dad would say. They hired out lights for parties and sold beer. Men's magazines were kept behind the counter.

Once Jean turned twelve, she was old enough to help out. She made toasted sandwiches and milkshakes and blushed as boys from school came in to buy cigarettes. They said her dad was a legend. He'd been the lead goal-kicker for the Benalla Bengals for three years.

Every day, once her duties were over, Jean hurried home to play the piano. She closed the door and pressed her fingers into the old white keys of their Bentley. The music filled her body like air—she knew it all by heart. Pearl sat outside the study while Jean played. She sat very still with her eyes shut, tapping her fingers against the couch. And then she'd check her watch because it would be dinner time. It would be served at 5.30 pm. And Charlie would burst in through the front door with the last fragments of his hair flying high above his head, a handful of paperwork landing on the kitchen table. Pearl would call out to Jean. Her brothers didn't have to do a thing. They kicked a footy around outside while Pearl showed Jean how to make a cheese sauce and crisply roasted potatoes. She explained why apple crumble sometimes felt dry and demonstrated how to get air into scones by pushing her fingers right into the dough.

She smiled when Jean pulled her first *never-fail sponge cake* out of the old oven, puffed and golden, light as wheat.

Pearl sometimes mentioned a new song that Jean was learning. She'd say, 'That was a nice one, what was it?' and Jean would tell her all about it. Pearl listened to her daughter as she ran a big silver iron across Charlie's shirts, her face wet with steam.

Jean called Roger. For the third time that day. 'I'm going to see him,' she said, in a tight voice.

'For godssakes.'

'I'll be back on Sunday afternoon.'

There was a long pause.

'There's a lasagne in the fridge,' she said and hung up.

Jean leaned into the back of her white Sigma and picked up all her bits of wool and knitting samples, stuffing them into a plastic shopping bag. She placed her overnight bag down on the backseat, checking for a bottle of water, her menopause herbal mix and the double CD of *Cats*. She was on her way.

The little car buzzed down the dirt road leading out of town and turned on to the highway. Two missed calls blinked through on her mobile screen from Roger. 'Midnight,' she sang, loudly, pressing her comfort-walker down onto the accelerator.

Roger sat in his office with the blinds pulled down. He got up out of his chair and picked up his briefcase, stepped out into the reception room and told Fran, his loud but very competent assistant, to cancel his appointments.

The last time Jean had seen Max she took some food to his apartment and broke her promise to herself not to cry. The next morning Max found her sobbing into his toilet as she scrubbed it with Handy Andy. Roger said she was not to visit him again for a while. She nodded and agreed that it was probably best.

As Jean sang she kept her eyes on the white lines on the road. She switched over to the radio and munched on a Cool Mint. The easy listening station hummed out an ad for seniors' car and caravan insurance and then a plug followed for world cruises, hosted by Daryl Somers. Olivia Newton-John followed with 'Xanadu'. Jean turned up the volume and sang along, the music sparking a memory from years back.

On this night, Max was to be given a Best and Fairest award for the under-sixteens. The dress-up theme was 'Eighties movies and bands'. Some women in costumes that were hard to make out (enthusiastic efforts with makeup and scraps of material) danced in a little circle to 'Holiday' by Madonna. A small band of flashing coloured lights hung near the bar and black plastic had been stuck on the floor.

Jean went as Tootsie. Roger said she couldn't go as Tootsie because she was a woman, and he wouldn't do it so there was no point in asking him. Roger dressed as Darth Vader and left his mask on the whole night. No-one knew what Jean's costume was but went, 'Ohhhhh,' when she told them and laughed and kept dancing.

Max kept right away from his mother. He said she looked like a drag queen and it wasn't funny. Jean said it was his hormones that made him so mean. She went into the toilet block later in the evening, pulling off her wig as she sat down in a cubicle. A few women entered, the sting of cigarette smoke crawling under her door.

'I know, I know,' said one of them, 'the boys have had it as well. I mean, he's a nice kid but the coach is always on about Maxy this and Max that. It gets them down.'

'Yeah,' said the other woman, adjusting her Princess Leia sausage-curls in the mirror.

Jean sat on the toilet, very still, trying to hold in a tickle in her throat.

'His mum's a fruitcake,' the first woman said, blowing cigarette smoke.

'Jean? Oh she's alright, just gets uptight I think. Good hearted. I mean, look who she's married to? It must be hard, bloody Stonehenge.'

Jean sneezed.

‘Shit,’ said the second woman, and they both left.

Jean stepped out of the toilet and looked into the mirror. She leaned down to wash her hands and looked up again, adjusting her big round glasses and straightening the brown seventies wig. She splashed some water on her face and then patted it with some toilet paper, folded gently into a little wad.

As she stepped back into the clubroom, she saw Roger, dancing to ‘Xanadu’. His body was bent over like he’d had a stroke. Roger didn’t drink very often. Someone had given him scotch and Coke in a schooner glass and then told him to skull it. Roger was bored and hadn’t really spoken to anyone that night, so he did.

Farrah Becks, a mother of an under-sixteen player, was knocking back Island Coolers and grabbing Roger around the waist. Music boomed through the huge speakers. Max and his team mates were outside talking to girls and sneaking UDL cans under their jumpers. Jean saw her husband slide an arm around Farrah in response and then rub the front of his body up and down her thigh, his Darth Vader mask sliding off his face from sweat.

Jean put Roger in the car and yelled out to Max. They left just after eleven, while the clubrooms were still full of laughter and dancing. Her husband’s head hung to one side while his mask sat on his chest, the elastic thin and stretched out. Max slumped against the back seat.

‘You know, Maxy, you just gotta never listen to others. You just gotta do what you want and work hard at it. People won’t always be kind—’ Jean stammered as she slowly drove the car out of the footy grounds and into the fog on the old country road.

Max didn’t say anything as he lay down in the back seat. His body was soft from booze. Roger snored with fury, a wet line of dribble hanging down his chin, Darth Vader mask flapping. Jean hummed ‘Xanadu’ and guided the old Mercedes along, blinking against the dark corners and tangled old trees. She saw a Wallaby spring out from a bush and noticed the fresh green of some new trees sprouting. In the gliding space of headlights against dirt and creatures, she felt a little less alone.

Jean drove her little Corolla down the dark, empty highway. She was on her way to see her son. There were fifteen missed calls flashing on the tiny screen now and the radio was turned up high. Soon over the hills she would see the twinkle of the city. ‘What do you get when you fall in love?’ Jean sang. Her husband was now just a flashing number.

Chapter 26

Jordi rolled onto her side and looked at the clock: 4 am. The house was dark and Breanna snored in long bursts. Jordi had told her mum she was alright. She just wanted to leave school and get a job.

Petra had sat on the edge of Jordi's bed earlier that night and listened as her daughter talked. 'But love, these days you need to have your Year 12. Everyone's tellin' me.'

'I'm not interested,' Jordi said abruptly, turning her face away from her mother. 'I don't give a shit.'

Petra cleared her throat. 'How about talking to someone? The youth worker's coming back tomorrow. She seemed awright. Will you give her a go?' Petra rubbed her eyes. 'I try my best for you kids.'

Jordi sighed. 'Mum, I'm okay, I just can't face going back.'

Bree yelled out, 'Shut up!' in her half sleep.

'Jords, you look terrible. Look at ya black bags. If ya can't get yourself up and go in tomorrow, I'm gonna have to get some help. I'm worried sick.'

Jordi slowly rose from the bed and looked over at her sister. The corridor was dark as she bumped her way along to the bathroom. The door squeaked a little as it opened, Jordi's feet skidded across a used nappy on the floor. She pulled open a bathroom cabinet and packets fell out over the hand basin. There were empty Panadol boxes, Mersyndol tablets her mum used for hang-overs, a few tampons and a bottle of baby oil. Everything was grimy and expired. She found a little bottle of Serepax and held it up to the light. *Adults: Take two every six hours.* The date was faded. Jordi looked inside the container and stared at the tiny white pills. There must have been a hundred in there.

Jordi sat down on the edge of the chipped bath tub. She thought about her mum and her brothers and sisters, and the noise and the constant wondering about when the

groceries were coming. And she thought about her dad who wasn't there and her stupid shit school. And like every day and night and every breath she'd taken since it happened, Jordi thought about the footballer who held her arms down. She was so, so tired.

A faint beep of a text came from the bedroom. Early light shaded in through the old Venetian blinds on the bathroom window, sparkling balls of dust. Jordi poured out some of the pills and put them in her hoodie pocket. She tiptoed back to bed.

'What the fuck,' mumbled Bree, rolling around under a blanket.

Jordi lit up the mobile screen. It was a message from Kane: *Jords, in Gundagi. Love you lots. Call soon.*

Jordi read it several times and then laid down, the pills rolling around inside her pocket. She swallowed a couple and, within minutes, fell into a medicated sleep.

Around 8 am, Cruise ran into the lounge room and turned on the TV, yawning and rubbing his eyes. Jordi woke up to the sounds of *Sesame Street*. Her lips were dry and she couldn't swallow properly. She fumbled her way out of the dark bedroom and stomped towards the kitchen.

'Jorrdiii?' Cruise appeared and tugged on Jordi's tracksuit pants as she filled a dirty glass with water from the tap. 'Can you get me something to eat?'

Jordi reached up to a cupboard above her head and pulled out a box of Rice Bubbles, a little stale. She filled a bowl with milk and took it into the lounge room and put it on a plastic tray, moving some cans of bourbon and cola out of the way. Then she turned down the volume on the TV and went back to bed.

About an hour later the rest of the children appeared and sat down together to watch a DVD of *The Simpsons*. In her bedroom, Jordi opened her eyes, glanced over at her uniform hanging on the back of her door and dozed off again.

Petra let out a long yawn as she walked out of her bedroom and down the passageway towards the kitchen.

‘Youse kids had breaky?’ she called out.

‘Yeahhhhh,’ the children said in unison, laughing and pointing at the TV.

Jordi roused herself. ‘Bree, get up,’ she said to her sister and threw back the doona.

‘If you’re not goin’, I’m not goin’,’ Bree mumbled from under a bed sheet.

Jordi looked out the bedroom window. Cars and school buses rushed past and the sounds of radios and voices filled the street.

A text came through from Shilo: *Jords, need 2 c u so worried. Your mum won’t let me in the house. I’m ur BFF. WTF?*

Jordi sat back and waited. Soon her sister would leave to catch the train to see her boyfriend and Petra was due at morning bingo. There was only old crap in the fridge and her bed was saggy. She knew now, at least she was pretty sure, that her dad was never coming back.

Chapter 27

Jordi's favourite memory of her father was from Christmas Day 2007. She was ten years old and ran around the sprinkler with Breanna and some other kids. Petra played her Rolling Stones carols CD and sang along in her bikini top and denim skirt. Reindeer antlers bobbed from her head as she put the Red Rooster chicken in the oven and sipped her can of VB. Friends gathered in the backyard. They sat on plastic fold-up chairs wearing shorts and thongs, squinting against the December sun. Even the stubby holders were hot.

It had been a good year. Kane got work at the Ford factory and stopped smoking weed. He came home at night and kissed Petra and asked her what was for tea. He threw out his bong and bought Winnie Blues instead. He took his daughters to the skate park to watch the boys do flips and spins and he laughed when they fell off, shaking themselves like dogs in water. Petra cleaned up the house and smiled a lot.

On 25 December 2007, Santa came to Jordi's house. They laughed and laughed when a man in a loose red suit, black sunglasses and a very square-looking stomach appeared at the front door. His white cotton beard tilted to one side. Jordi and Breanna and the other kids screamed and jumped up and down as Santa ho-ho-ho-ed his way inside the house and through the sliding door out to the backyard. The adults raised their drinks and cheered. Jordi went up close to examine Santa and asked her mum where her dad was. Santa pulled his beard up to cover his face, but Jordi tugged it hard. It came right off.

'Dad!' she yelled, pointing at him. 'It's you!'

Kane laughed and went to hug his daughter, but she moved too fast and took off inside the house, tears falling. 'Oh shit,' he said, looking over at Petra.

The other kids fought over the little plastic toys inside the red sack. Breanna ripped open a water pistol and pointed it at the adults.

'Go away,' Jordi yelled from her room, as her dad pushed against the door.

‘Ohh I’m sorry, bubs,’ Kane said. ‘Let us in, will ya?’

Jordi let go of the handle and ran to her bed. ‘Isn’t he real?’ she sobbed, pushing her face into a pillow.

Kane sat down beside his daughter. ‘Has someone been tellin’ you that?’ His face was beading with sweat from the polyester material.

‘Yeah, kids at school reckon he’s not real.’ She took a few small breaths and sat up. ‘I reckon he is. But why are you dressed up like him?’ Her little face had softened.

‘Oh come here,’ Kane said, pulling his daughter into his chest. ‘You tell those other kids to piss off. If you wanna believe in him, then he’s real. If you wanna believe in anything, then you can make it real, bubs, awright?’

Jordi nodded and hugged her father. Outside, a Guns ‘n’ Roses rendition of ‘We Wish You A Merry Christmas’ thumped through the walls.

Petra came over to her daughter, giving Jordi’s head a little pat.

‘You okay, lovey?’ she said. ‘You wanna come and have somethin’ to eat?’ Petra was on her fifth beer and her face was crimson.

Jordi hugged both her parents and then ran out of the room.

Kane turned to Petra and pulled her down onto the bed. She fell on him and laughed.

‘What do yooouuu want for Christmas, hey?’ Kane growled in a deep throaty kiss against her ear.

‘Get awf,’ she giggled and pushed into the pillow at his front. ‘I just want no fights today and for your sister to shut the fuck up a bit.’

Kane laughed and stood up. ‘Just keep givin’ her Bundy and she’ll be sweet.’

Five weeks later, Kane lost his job. He came in late one day after rushing Breanna to the emergency ward at the Werribee hospital. She’d swallowed a charm off her bracelet that morning. Kane had been late a few other mornings over the previous

weeks. New Year's Eve he'd had a joint and went off into a day-and-night binge of marijuana. His boss, Trev, had noticed he wasn't concentrating on the machinery.

'You'll fuckin' kill someone or yourself,' he said, banging his fist on his desk. 'I can't have this, Kaner, sorry, mate.'

Kane packed up his water bottle and Zoo magazines, grabbed the three-hundred-and-twenty bucks owed to him and left. He went home to an empty house and lit up a joint. He watched *Carry On Up the Khyber* and *Get Smart* and then went to sleep.

When Petra got home later with the kids, she walked into the lounge room and saw her husband laid out on the couch. The sweet stench of weed filled the house.

'Not in front of the kids!' She punched Kane in the chest so hard he jolted upright. The girls ran to their rooms.

'Jesus, woman,' he yelled. 'Leave me the fuck alone.'

'Why are you home?' Petra said, her lips clamped together. 'What's goin' on?'

Kane rubbed his face with both hands. 'I got sacked,' he said, his head hung low.

Petra just stood and said nothing and then headed off towards the kitchen.

Kane stared at the TV, taking long, slow breaths while Petra banged cupboard doors and bashed things into the sink.

'Rent's due next week,' she yelled out, 'so you'd better have that sorted.'

Kane said nothing, his eyes fixed on the screen.

'I am sick of this bullshit,' she screeched from the kitchen. 'I am sick of hoping you'll get your shit together. You're turnin' out like your fuckin' dad.' Kane's father was a Vietnam vet who used to belt him so hard he had to stay home from school some days. And then he put a shot gun to his head in the back shed.

Kane walked into the kitchen. Petra turned towards him, swallowing air in deep gulps. His eyes looked unfamiliar, big and shiny. He raised his hand towards her face and

held it there, just for a moment. He held it there until his body stopped shaking. And then he slowly walked away.

Chapter 28

Ruby sat at her dining table eating organic muesli. It had been three weeks now since the early morning when she'd found the young girl near the building entrance. There were no sounds from upstairs. She imagined Max naked in his kitchen making toast, then stopped. Just the thought of him made her body hot—but there were too many questions. She ran a hand under her top and felt the loose, soft skin. She lifted up her pyjamas to inspect the pink stretch-lines on her stomach. Her breasts felt like deflated balloons. It was all too terrifying, to imagine someone with their hands on her. To imagine being close.

Later, Ruby walked into the Golden Dates office and paused. A huge bunch of orange roses lay on top of her manila folders, looking like something from a maternity ward. Baden laughed as she sat down, reading out the tiny white card stuck on the clear cellophane.

Dear Ruby,

Thank you for bringing love into my life, at the ripe old age of eighty-two.

Joining Golden Dates and taking Viagra has given me a new purpose.

Eternally grateful,

Gerald Miller.

Ruby looked sad as she picked up the flowers. 'I thought it was a secret admirer.'

Baden sniggered. 'You could still be right. Sorry to tell you this, babe, but Gerald is waiting for you over there.' He pointed to their consultation lounge. 'Can't you smell the cheap-shit aftershave? I told you, if you don't get yourself out *there*, you'll be picking up blokes from *here*.'

Ruby eased back so that she was out of view of the consultation area. 'Shut up. Did you tell him I was out?'

‘I tried that but he’s pretty keen. He was waiting on the steps when I got here at eight o’clock, and he’s brought a box of Favourites.’

Ruby put her head in one hand. Clutching her black organiser, she made her way over to the consultation room. She wore a black suit and red patent-leather heels that came from an op shop in Sydney.

Gerald Miller eased himself out of a soft chair. His big oval face reached forward like a sunflower as he held a hand out to Ruby, his fingers dry and crumbly. ‘Hello Miss Westmore, or is it Msss? I know you young ladies like to show your independence,’ he chortled.

‘Hello Mr Miller,’ Ruby smiled politely. ‘Thank you very much, but there’s no need. It’s my job.’

Gerald sat back into his seat and cleared his throat, motioning for Ruby to sit down. ‘Let me tell you something. When I lost my wife,’ he began in almost a whisper, ‘I couldn’t do anything. I was so afraid of being alone.’

Ruby nodded.

‘I’d never heard of the inter-node.’

‘The internet?’

‘Yes, yes that’s the one. Anyhow, now I am enjoying the company of a very wonderful lady, Vera. Vera Waters. Thanks to you!’ He pumped his wrinkled fist in the air. ‘And this marvellous service.’

‘I’m very glad,’ said Ruby, looking at her watch.

Gerald beamed. ‘And as for the magic blue pills, well!’

Ruby blinked at Gerald, ‘So,’ she quickly jumped in, worried he was going to provide more details, ‘are you wanting to terminate your contract?’

‘Oh no. Vera and I have an open relationship, you see.’ He gave Ruby a wink.

Ruby swallowed and reflected on her training program. There wasn't much in the three week course regarding these kinds of complexities. 'Oh,' she said and pretended to make notes in her folder. What she actually scribbled was 'Seek.com', the name of the job-search agency.

Mr Miller spread his legs out further and smoothed down the front of his silk tie from Bangkok. 'That's the thing, Miss Westmore, life has only just begun.'

Ruby clasped her hands and imagined for a moment grabbing him around the throat. 'Fabulous. All we ask is that you are honest with any women you date from our service. They should be aware if you're not being exclusive. We have an honesty first policy.'

'I never tell lies. All my life, I've known fellas who reckon it's better not to tell. What they don't know can't hurt...But that's rubbish—lying is just making a fool of your other half, a bloody fool. In the end, everyone finds out. People know. I've seen that rip people apart.'

Ruby turned towards Gerald and considered what he had just said, perhaps she had misunderstood him. She put down her note pad.

'I respect women. I just can't be pinned down to one. Now that I have discovered this new life—'

Ruby quickly stood up and looked again at her watch.

'I'm sorry but I have some urgent things to do,' she said.

Gerald stood up and leaned over as if to shake her hand but instead jumped forward and landed a big, wet kiss on the side of her mouth. She recoiled, her body stretching away from him.

At lunch time, Ruby clicked her way along Bourke Street Mall, descending into the David Jones food hall to buy some sugared almonds. Waiting at the counter, Ruby spied on other people's purchases. A tall man with a pot belly and red beard was holding five packets of liquorice. An elderly Greek woman pointed at white snow-caps

of ricotta. Private school kids pushed and shoved each other, clinging onto bags of freshly made Rocky Road.

Back in the mall, the crowd grew larger, somewhat blocked by a gathering of Tibetans clanging symbols and clapping. 'Freedom', the signs said. Further along, two women in Playboy Bunny outfits handed Ruby a voucher for free entry to Sexpo. One Bunny skidded in her heels as she walked over a chalk-drawn replica of a Van Gogh painting, almost knocking over the artist—a man in dark, dirty clothes. She squealed and laughed, apologising and handing him a voucher for a half-price vibrator.

Ruby stopped. Gerald Miller was standing only metres away from her. At first Ruby thought he must have been watching the Playboy girls. But when she looked more closely, she saw him move next to a very thin man with dreadlocks who was selling copies of *The Big Issue*. Ruby watched in surprise as Gerald pulled a fifty-dollar note out of his wallet. The man's eyes widened and he shook his head, putting the money back into the pocket of Gerald's shiny suit. Gerald took the note and gently gripped the man's arm and began to talk to him. Both men smiled and laughed. Finally, with a hand over his eyes, the vendor took the fifty-dollar bill. Ruby watched Gerald walk off, whistling and smiling and leaving his copy of the magazine with the seller. Ruby stood watching him until he completely disappeared into the bustle of the crowds, whistling all the way. And even when he was out of sight, she stood very, very still.

Chapter 29

Once the house was silent, Jordi sat up and read a text from her mum: *Keeley coming later have some breaky xx*. She knew where Petra was—out spending twenty bucks on bingo books. That could have bought cereal, bread, milk and cheese slices for all of them. Jordi threw the phone against the wall, then picked up the plastic pieces and began to put it back together, checking that it still worked. She sat in the dark room and looked over towards Breanna's bed, where a lacy bra lay across the pillow. The metallic smell of Charlie Red perfume filled the room like fly spray.

The phone in Jordi's hands rang. Unknown number.

'Hey you,' said the voice, a little distant and muffled. 'How are ya?' It was her dad.

'Awright, Where are you?' Jordi sat up, her heart thudding.

'On my way to Queensland. Got some work goin' up there. Will be able to send some money soon. Some good money.'

'What are you doin' there?' Jordi hung her head and her voice lowered.

'Just a bit of hard yakka, love. So how you travelling?'

'Awright.'

They both went quiet.

'You still don't want to talk about it?' Kane said, his voice lowering. 'What's goin' on, bub? Is it a bloke? Are you in trouble?'

'Nooo,' Jordi raised her voice a little. 'It's nothing.'

Kane cleared his throat. 'When I get back, bubs, how about you and me spend some time together?'

Jordi said nothing. She just hung up and ignored the nine times he rang afterwards.

Then she got up and went to the bathroom. She reached up to the cabinet and took the bottle of Serepax. She tipped a large handful of pills into her hand and shoved them in her mouth, some slipping out and bouncing against the bathroom tiles like buttons. She leaned into the sink and glugged water from the tap. She swallowed again and retched. Her hands went to shove in more pills. There was no air or sound.

She sat on the edge of the bath and waited, long deep sobs waving through her body. It had been over three weeks now since that night in the city apartment. A car rumbled out of the driveway next door. A lawn mower droned. As light fanned through the window of the bathroom, Jordi's body sunk slowly to the floor.

Chapter 30

Ruby exited the lift early morning and walked straight into Max, bed-haired and clutching a bag of rubbish.

‘Hey,’ he said with a slight smile, shuffling his bare feet that stuck out of tracksuit pants. ‘Off to work?’

‘Yes.’ Ruby clutched her work folders close to her chest and almost dropped them, rattled from the surprise of seeing him.

‘I’m doing the domestics. Taking this downstairs, checking the mail...life’s exciting.’

Ruby was suddenly lost for words and said something random about a meeting, moving towards the entrance of the building, her feet in full flight.

Max watched her disappear onto the street; her sweet shampoo smell still lingered. He wished he’d said something funny. Or smart. He wished he hadn’t been wearing his tracksuit pants with the holes. He went outside and dumped the rubbish into the chute.

Back in the apartment, Max checked his email on the iPad. There was a mystery link sent by a team mate, no message attached. Clicking on it revealed German porn. Max stared at the women lying beneath men like sides of beef. Their eyes were glass, their bodies bruised. They were being slapped, called whores and dirty sluts. One muscular man held down a woman and pushed her face into a mattress, pulling her hair back like reigns. Max sighed. After that he got a cold call from Yooralla. A woman with a voice like Hilary Clinton convinced him to donate a hundred bucks towards a new spastic centre in Roweville within ten minutes.

He thought of Jordi’s student card on top of the fridge, face-down, behind a box of tissues. Sometimes he’d touch it by accident and quickly pull his hand away. Some nights he’d take it in his hands and sit with it on the couch, flipping it over and over.

He opened up a bunch of snail mail: official correspondence from the club, and a large document from his lawyer. There were contractual issues and large sums of cash at stake. Max threw the papers onto the floor.

*

Later that day, Ruby went to a protest rally in the city during her lunch break. It was a 'Respect' session about the National Apology to Indigenous Australians. She'd asked Baden to come with her but he said no, his sinuses were playing up.

Ruby joined with the thousands of people gathered. A man using a loudspeaker read from a report by the Human Rights Commission, back in 2008, his voice mocking: 'The truth is, there were *very few* indigenous children who were taken from their homes because of concerns regarding welfare.' The crowd jeered.

Surrounded by people, Ruby felt so alone. She wanted so much to share the feeling of being there in the crowd. Her body slumped as she turned and made her way back to work.

On the way, Ruby spotted a shape propped up against the frame of a tram-stop shelter. She walked a bit closer. It was Florence, holding on to a Myer bag and sipping tea from a plastic cup.

'*Hola*,' said Florence, 'I've moved house.'

Ruby laughed. 'I was wondering where you'd got to?'

'Had a couple of good nights at the shelter, got hot meals and the lot. But it never lasts.' Florence slowly shook her head. '*Demasiado*. Too many people.' Florence began wheezing into a handkerchief. It sounded bad.

'You don't look well, Flo. You need a doctor,' Ruby said. 'Let me take you.'

Florence ignored this. She had bigger concerns. 'Listen,' she said. 'I want to ask you something. A couple of weeks ago...did you see a young lady around, in that building

you live in? She was very upset and looked really lost. She has brown hair and long legs, quite tall, a looker.'

Ruby bit her fingernail. 'I did see someone like that...yeah, a few weeks ago. I tried to talk to her in the hallway.'

'Yes?' Florence's eyes grew wide. 'A Sunday? Very early?'

Ruby nodded. 'Yes, it was still dark. She was very distressed, in a bit of a state.'

'I tell you, I haven't stopped thinking about that girl...I saw something very bad in her eyes. She was in real trouble,' Florence said, slowly. 'Every day I keep an eye out.'

Ruby thought for a moment. 'There was something else about that morning,' she began, clearing her voice.

Florence stared at her. 'Yes?'

'I saw Max. He came out of the lift...I don't know if he was following the girl, but when he saw us talking he disappeared...'

Florence shook her head. 'No, no, no, that boy would never hurt anyone.'

The two women were silent for a moment. Then Florence let out a loud rasp, like a seal, leaving a spray of blood on her sleeve. Ruby reached out to touch her arm. Florence swatted it away.

'You better go now, dear,' Florence barked, taking heavy breaths. 'I want to be alone. Please, no fuss, Theresa.'

Ruby pulled a twenty-dollar note out of her pocket and slid it into Florence's parka pocket. 'I'll be back soon.'

In the office, computers hummed from grey-walled cubicles, little rows of Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. After bickering with Baden as part of her usual afternoon routine, Ruby clicked through her email. There was a Facebook alert. She quickly

logged in, glancing at the time on her computer and the list of ‘must do before the end of day’ things stuck near the screen. She took a breath. The message was from Max.

Dinner tonight? I can't cook but will try.

Ruby read it a few times. Maybe it wasn't a good idea? Maybe he had young women in his apartment, footy fans or maybe he wasn't like that but then again, it could be an opportunity. She could ask him about everything, upfront.

Not sure if I I'm free yet. Btw saw Flo today. She's unwell.

His reply took a few minutes: *No good. If you're busy we could have a wander later, see if she's around, then a bite to eat? Let me know. M.*

Baden twirled a silver tongue-piercing as he watched on. ‘You're flushed, Rubes, what's happening?’

Ruby ignored him and kept typing. *Okay. C u then. Maybe just a drink, got lots of work.*

‘What's up?’ Baden said. ‘Spill it!’

‘The footballer's invited me for dinner!’ she blurted out.

‘Wow. Really? I thought he was caught up in dramas?’ Baden leaned over her desk, flashing his big white teeth from all the excitement.

‘I dunno, maybe he wants some company.’ Ruby shrugged.

Baden laughed. ‘Don't analyse, just go and enjoy. And wear your best knickers.’

Ruby shook her head. ‘It's not like that.’

‘What? You reckon he's invited you out just for a chat?’

‘Shut up,’ said Ruby. She went back to checking through her mail. ‘Anyway, I don't think it's right really, that I go. I have a bad feeling about everything...the young girl I told you about and all that.’

‘Nah, she was a groupie. That’s what happens.’

Ruby stopped typing and looked straight at Baden. ‘Who *are* you?’ She shook her head.

Baden gave a throaty laugh. ‘Rubes, stop over-thinking. Just go. There’s nothing wrong with a bit of filth. Keeps you sane.’

Ruby sighed and went back to work, opening a document from their manager titled ‘Bedrooms and Walking Sticks’. It was an article about sexual relationships in senior years—impotence, sexuality and dementia, fetishes, mature sex workers and elderly S&M. Baden said the document was terrifying. Ruby accused him of being narrow-minded. She argued that sexuality and intimacy should have no-age limits. Baden said she should practice what she preached. It was a long afternoon.

She made her way quickly up Swanston Street, towards the apartment building. And then suddenly, she stopped. Betsy’s knitted rug lay across a bench but there was no sign of Florence. She looked around nearby stairwells and a few alleyways and then picked up the raggedy blanket, heavy with grime and city air. After a half-hour of searching, Ruby went home. She put the rug into the laundry trough full of wool mix and pressed it down under the bubbles. And then she stood for a moment listening to the vibration of Led Zeppelin, directly from the apartment above.

Chapter 31

In Year 7 art, Jordi painted a picture of her mum and dad at the Melbourne Show, sitting together on the Ghost Train, Kane's arm around Petra while Jordi and Breanna looked on, pointing and laughing. Petra's eyes were big and round like wheels. Kane's mouth was as wide as a watermelon, his lips pink and soft. Her dad had been home on a break from his new job at the mines in WA.

Jordi's teacher, Ms Gullina, stood watching as Jordi made her finishing touches. 'It's stunning,' she said. 'I love the definitions, the tones. It has a modern feel. You have talent, Jordana.'

Jordi said nothing as she pressed the little brush against her sister Breanna's cheeks, rouging them with dabs of pink.

Ms Gullina smiled. 'It looks like a fun day out.'

Jordi nodded and kept flicking her brush in tiny strokes around her father's long face. She rounded her mother's swollen stomach, stretching the black t-shirt into a circular shape. Petra had been five months pregnant with Jordi's little brother Ryan.

*

Jordi remembered that day at the Show well. The morning of their trip, Jordi, twelve, and Breanna, eleven, woke around seven and began chatting about showbags. They'd heard Cadbury had a monster one for ten bucks and the Dolly bag had a free hair scrunchie. As they hurtled down the corridor past their parents' room, Petra lay on her back in tracksuit pants and a singlet, snoring like an old man. Kane's arm rested over her pregnant stomach.

As the older sister, Jordi managed the preparations for the day. They sat at the old dining table in the lounge room, counting coins and a few notes they'd saved from some odd jobs for Mrs Brayman. Breanna shook the porcelain pig until the last five-cent coins pinged out onto the Laminex. Forty-three dollars and sixty cents total.

‘Oh my god,’ Jordi said, whacking her sister’s arm. ‘We’re rich!’

Kane stumbled into the lounge room, half asleep. ‘What are youse two doin?’ he chuckled, rubbing the black hairs on his chest. His tracksuit pants slipped down around his flat bum, a little short around the ankles due to his height.

‘Counting our money,’ said Jordi. ‘We’ve got lots.’

Kane leant down to look at the pile of coins and smiled at his daughters. ‘Well good on ya!’ he exclaimed, pretending to grab the cash and stick it in his pocket.

‘Dad!’ they yelled, and chased him around the lounge room.

Petra watched from the kitchen, resting a hand on her stomach. Her husband would be leaving again in two days, to another state, for another month, so he could bring home some money. She lit a cigarette and took a few quick drags, then butted it into a beer can on the kitchen bench. She’d seen an *Oprah* show earlier that week on nicotine and premature babies and had to turn her face away from the telly.

Kane got off the floor and ended the wrestling game with his daughters. ‘Get dressed,’ he instructed and gave them a little shove. ‘So we can get goin’.’

A little while later, Jordi was on her way to the kitchen to get a drink, but stopped near the lounge room. Her parents were arguing.

‘I don’t know, darls. It will be around four weeks but could be longer. They tell me the next pay will be the big one.’

‘That’s no bloody help!’ Petra’s voice shook. ‘I got bills.’

‘You got bingo.’ Kane hugged her close to him. ‘Pets, that’s what this is about.’

Petra punched his arm hard, making Kane cry out. ‘What the fuck?’

‘Just promise me,’ she hissed, ‘just promise me no bullshit, that the money will come.’

Kane sighed and rubbed his arm. ‘I promise, babes, awright? I promise.’

Jordi peeked into the lounge room. She saw her mother crying as her dad slid on his sneakers.

‘Hey Pets, let’s go,’ he said. ‘We’ve got cash for today, let’s have a good one.’

Petra stood up, her mascara shiny and smudged.

Mrs Brayman stood holding Bruce, the oldest of her eight cats (named after her late husband), and waved from her window as they walked past her house. Jordi and Breanna were wearing sneakers and jeans and had their hair in plaits.

The train was full. They squeezed into some seats in the very end carriage and took a breath. Petra wheezed from the Melbourne spring air. An older man wearing a tux asked the girls where they were heading.

‘Ohhh,’ he said when they told him, ‘don’t you get sick on the rides! I remember in my day being covered in fairy floss after a spin with my dad on the Scenic Railway.’

The girls laughed and nudged each other. ‘Nuh,’ said Jordi, ‘we don’t throw up.’

The queue at the showground snaked into twists and bends. The girls waited with their mum on a nearby bench while Kane lined up for tickets.

Jordi linked arms with her mum and put her head on Petra’s chest. ‘Why does Dad have to keep goin’ away?’ she said.

‘For work, Jords,’ her mother’s voice quivered. ‘So we can have money.’

‘But other kids have dads that don’t have to go away.’

‘I know, love. But they’re lucky. Your dad has to work wherever he can. He left school early, remember, so it makes it harder to get a job.’

‘It’s not fair.’

‘No, love, it’s not,’ Petra said and kissed the top of her head. ‘He loves ya, you know that don’t you?’

Jordi nodded against her mother's arm.

'I would kill for a smoke,' Petra mumbled, 'but I'm not gonna.'

'That's good, Mum. It will make the baby little.' Jordi leaned down and kissed her mother's belly.

After an hour, they made it inside the gates. The sun shone all afternoon as the girls leaned over the fencing to pat the stinky farm animals. They ran their fingers through the soft fleece of baby sheep and pushed their faces against the nudging horses. Petra held Kane's hand and took photos on her old Kodak camera.

For lunch, they had chips and dimmies and some free yoghurt samples from a nice lady in the dairy pavilion. Jordi and her dad had two goes on the dodgems and chased Breanna. She screamed so much the supervisor banned her from the ride. Kane would have given the supervisor a blast, but he saw Petra's face and walked away instead, holding his daughter's hand.

As the afternoon sky darkened, they sat munching on Dagwood Dogs and watched young boys on motorbikes spin around in the air and fly through hoops. Later, the girls' hands ached from clutching showbags stuffed with food samples and plastic things made in China. They begged their parents for just another half-hour on the rides, ignoring the exhaustion in their mother's face and the pain of her swollen ankles. Kane held a large blue Dino he'd won on the lucky tickets, the synthetic fibres made his eyes water.

'Last one,' he said to the girls as they climbed onto the Ferris wheel.

Petra took off to the toilets for the fifth time, clutching onto Kane's mobile that she'd slid out of his pocket earlier. In the cubicle, she slammed the metal latch and sat down on a closed seat, scanning through the texts.

There was one from an unknown number: *I miss you so much*. Petra stared at it, her fingers quivering. She checked the date. September 7.

In the 'Sent' messages there was one from him, on the same day: *Don't call me*.

Petra dialled the number. It rang out, and she dialled it again.

‘Hello?’ It was a female voice. ‘Heelloo? Kaney?’

Petra hung up. She breathed in and out slowly and held her hand in a fist, wiping hot tears from her eyes. She waddled back towards Kane at the Ferris wheel.

Jordi looked down from the carriage to wave at her parents. She saw her father smiling up towards them, showing the white of his teeth, sweating underneath his baseball cap. And then she saw her mother hit her father across the face.

Breanna squeezed Jordi’s arm and pointed towards a plane moving across the sky.

Chapter 32

Max opened his pantry door, looking for ingredients to cook for Ruby. There were salt and vinegar chips, a jar of Nutella and lots of things that you heat up in microwaves. His Xanax tablets were kicking in. The doctor said they'd take away the anxiety that had escalated lately, without the dozy feeling of Valium. But he had to see this as short term, said the doctor. Xanax was addictive like no other drug. He gave Max a brochure to read, pointing at it with a pen from Pfizer.

How many had he taken that day? The warmth flooded through his body. It softened him, unwound his muscles and slowed his breathing. He stood in wonder at the design of his kitchen, as though he'd never seen it before. The silver streaks in the granite bench were beautiful. The lights were beautiful.

Max decided on a Thai curry for Ruby, something he couldn't screw up. He would have to go out to the local mini-mart to get the food, out in public, which he didn't enjoy. But Ruby was worth it. He thought about her sweet voice and her quiet strength. His pulse thumped a little faster.

The landline and two mobile phones buzzed and hummed with messages all day. He didn't answer. For weeks now he hadn't responded to most calls and texts, carefully screening each one. Ronnie Sands rocked up one Thursday evening, his fist pounding on the door. Max looked through the peephole and stepped away, waiting till he was sure his coach had gone. He had also avoided the news lately. He stayed off MSN. He got his groceries delivered and used the secret exit door to the apartment block. The Xanax was a strange friend. It took away the panic, but it didn't take away the girl's face. Or the muffled cry he heard as he lay sunken into the carpet.

Jean arrived the night before. She stood at the entrance to his apartment, her pink cheeks puffing. Max sighed when he opened the door and saw the Tupperware containers full of jelly cakes, laksas and homemade pies. Jean sat with him on the couch and talked about his father's new infatuation with Sudoku. She said he was talking even less now and, even though it was just his personality, it really felt lonely

at home. Max listened and made his mum coffee and gave her a big hug when she said goodbye.

A text beeped through from an old schoolmate, Harry Barnes. The last Max heard he was selling weed around Benalla and Shepparton. *Hey m8 how r ya?* He deleted it. There were more texts from team mates. A few invites to the Men's Gallery, a few *How's it going?* messages. He logged into Facebook, his body unfolding as the next Xanax pill did its job.

'You can take one every three hours,' the doctor had said. 'It is not a high dosage.'

The messages from girls he knew from nightclubs and dating ran for pages and pages. He tried to sift out ones from real friends but the names began to merge together. He didn't know these people. He'd just been drunk with them. One girl sent him an underwear pic with half her bum showing: *Hey babe, hope you are okay. Thought this might cheer you up ;) Remember, you owe me a dance, Love Bea x.* The message left him empty. He thought about Ruby instead and his blood pumped hard and fast. And then she sent him a message. *Found Flo's blanket on way home but no Flo :(*

It was 6 pm—Ruby was due in an hour. Max walked over to the large window and gazed at the street. The journos were long gone. His story was old now. He snatched his keys, pushed a baseball cap down low over his face and left the apartment. He walked a block, looking around the streets for Flo. He pushed open the door of the micro-supermarket with everything priced up and security cameras buzzing. He bought free-range chicken and coriander, coconut milk and rice. He bought noodles to make a soup and fresh chilli and lime. He found cream and a Toblerone to make a chocolate mousse. Max's wrist twinged as he used both hands to put things on the counter. He stood in line and stared at the colours of the shiny packets, passed some notes to the young cashier and left.

*

Ruby tried on a dress she'd bought at a Salvo's op shop but had never worn. It was orange and brown and hung in layers, with bits of lace and velvet across the bust. She liked the way the soft fabric hugged her body. She slid on some lipstick the colour of

a soft red wine and shook her blue-black hair, big chunks bouncing around her face. She typed out five texts, all variations on cancelling the dinner, and sent none. It was 6.50 pm. She wiped the kitchen bench, over and over and pulled a ginger cake out of the oven. Ruby couldn't remember the last time someone had cooked for her. She looked in her bedroom mirror and hung her head. She was dressed now. Her skin glowed. She would go to Max's apartment. But there were things that she needed to know.

*

Out on the city streets, Florence searched for her blanket. She'd never lost it before. She tried to remember where she last held it, breathless as she walked. She stopped to ask some familiar faces. Tired and short of breath, she sat down near Saint Paul's cathedral, pulled her scarf around herself and cried.

*

Clutching the bags of groceries, Max made a detour around the block on the way back from the supermarket. He went down smaller streets and laneways, but there was still no sign of Florence.

Back home, he flung the bags onto the kitchen bench, emptying everything out on the granite surface. Playing 'Help' by the Beatles on the stereo, Max heated a pan and fried a large chunk of curry paste, sprinkling coriander into the warm mush. He lowered his face against the steam, drawing in the sweetness of herbs and coconut milk.

The cooking nearly done, he raced around the apartment, picking up wrappers and dirty dishes and shoving things in cupboards. A vacuum cleaner that had hardly been used came out of the laundry. As a last touch, Max lit an orange-blossom scented candle in the lounge room. He thought about Ruby, the pills flooding through him. He was ready for her. He was warm, warm, like honey inside.

Chapter 33

When Petra arrived home and opened the front door, she called out to Jordi, but there was no reply. She walked through the house, opening doors to empty rooms, until she got to the bathroom. And then she screamed.

Petra lifted her daughter off the floor, wiping vomit from her lips and slapping her face. She ran to grab her mobile, dialled 000 and yelled her address at the operator.

‘Is she breathing?’ said the emergency operator. ‘Does she have a pulse? I can talk you through CPR, just try to stay calm.’

Petra followed the instructions. She turned Jordi on her back. She checked the airway was clear.

‘I don’t know what I’m fuckin’ doin’!!’ she screamed.

‘It’s okay. Now six short presses on her chest. That’s right. Now again.’

There was a pulse. But it was soft and fading. Petra sobbed as she kept blowing into Jordi’s mouth.

‘You silly bugger,’ she cried as she pressed her hands down on her daughter’s chest.

The paramedics hurried through the front door and began to work on Jordi. They asked Petra questions that she couldn’t answer. She sat convulsing in tears and gasps.

‘Take a breath,’ said an ambo, putting his hand on her back. ‘What time did you find her?’

Jordi’s face was white underneath the black plastic mask. They lifted her out of the bathroom and onto a stretcher. Petra followed them into the ambulance, sobbing as she watched her daughter holding on to life.

In Jordi’s bedroom, a text came through from her dad. *Hey bubs, why don’t you come up and stay with me for a while? Do ya good.*

*

Petra sat in the waiting room of the Royal Melbourne Hospital, chewing on her nails. The nurse asked if there was someone she wanted to call, but she shook her head. She and Boss weren't talking. Her mum was on a pokies trip to Corowa. Her friend Sandra was at a Bon Jovi concert. And that was about it. She'd sent Kane a text, not that he deserved it. And who knew if the number was right?

Petra asked the nurse if she could use a public phone as her mobile was flat. She was directed to a little alcove called 'Emergency Calls'. She leaned her body against the wall and waited while the call rang out. She tried again.

This time a little voice answered. 'Hello?'

'You home now, Cruisey? It's Mum.'

'Mum! Where are ya?'

'I'm at the hospital. Jordi's a bit sick. But she'll be alright. Is Bree home?'

'Yep.' Cruise dropped the phone and called out, 'Breeeeeeeeeeeeee, it's Mum.'

Petra waited for a few minutes until her other daughter picked up the phone. 'Brees, thank god.'

'What's goin' on? Who spewed in the bathroom?'

Petra went quiet. 'Listen, Brees, Jords is at the hospital.'

'What?'

'I'll talk to ya when I get home.'

'What's wrong with her?'

'She did something silly. I'll talk to ya later.'

'Mum! What happened?'

‘She took pills. She took bloody pills.’

Bree went silent. Then exploded. ‘What?’

‘Look, it’s gonna be alright. Just get some money out of the tin under my bed. And get the kids some Maccas. I gotta go, love.’ Petra looked up at a doctor standing right in front of her, his face hard and still.

Chapter 34

Max opened the door and stood back. 'Hey,' he said to Ruby, turning his eyes shyly away from her.

'Hello.' Ruby noticed Max had wax in his hair and his black shirt was well ironed.

They stood awkwardly in the doorway.

'Sorry, come in,' said Max, nervously clearing his throat. 'That smells amazing,' he said, looking down at the ginger cake.

Ruby stepped inside, clutching the warm cake to her chest. Bob Marley hummed out of the speakers in the lounge room. 'I like your music.'

'I thought you might.' Max added quickly, 'I mean, I've heard you play this kind of stuff.' He guided Ruby towards a coffee table where she could leave her things.

'You can hear my music?' Ruby raised her eyebrows, 'Sorry, I didn't know it was so loud.'

'I like it,' said Max with a quick smile.

'So you saw my message?' she said. 'I found Florence's rug.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'That's no good at all. We'll head out soon. What do you reckon?'

'Yes,' Ruby said and smiled at him.

The citrusy tang of coriander floated out from the kitchen area.

'What are you making?' she asked, putting her bag down on the twenty-seater leather lounge.

'Curry. Nothing special,' Max called out. 'Do you wanna drink?'

‘Thanks.’ Ruby followed him into the kitchen. ‘You have some interesting stuff,’ she said, scanning her eyes up and down the walls. ‘What’s this?’ she pointed at a sign on the wall.

‘That was my granddad’s. It’s a “Welcome” sign from an old cinema up in the country. I have a fair bit of his stuff. He was a very talented musician. And my grandma was a beautiful photographer. Those pictures of Tasmania were taken by her.’

Ruby smiled as she looked at the photos on the wall.

Max fetched two wine glasses and poured out a bottle he’d found in the cupboard. He knew nothing about wine, but Ruby said it looked good. They went into the lounge room and sat stiffly on the couch, a wide chunk of space between them.

‘You could fit your whole footy team on here,’ Ruby said and then covered her face with her hand. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to...’

‘Don’t worry about it. I just can’t throw a ball around anymore.’ He held up his arm, the plastic sleeve around it sitting tight. ‘Life goes on. Most footy players are done by their thirties.’

They began to relax. Ruby told Max about her job; he was fascinated. He leaned forward. ‘What do your clients want most, when they’re older?’

She thought for a moment and leaned back into the leather couch. ‘All the same things that younger people want. That’s the misconception. They don’t all want to go bowling. There’s some crazy sex lives.’

Max laughed, a bit too loudly, and his face went pink. He relaxed his arm and shifted around so he was a little closer to Ruby.

She turned to face him. ‘What they all mention, men and women, is being treated with respect.’

Max flinched a little and took a sip from his glass.

She wanted to ask him then about the girl, but she didn't have the courage. Instead, she changed the topic, and looking at his bookshelf asked, 'Reading anything good at the moment?'

'Nah. Just an occasional reader. I reckon some people just shove big novels on their bookshelves to make an impression.'

'Is that why you've got them here?' Ruby looked up at a small shelf across the other side of the room.

'God no,' Max said. 'I only keep books if I like 'em. That's it. I just like a good story.' He was about to give her his opinion on book clubs, when the smoke alarm in the kitchen went off.

'Shit!' Max jumped up and ran into the kitchen. The dinner was solid against the pan. Smoke was everywhere.

Ruby followed him. 'It's a bit nuclear,' she said looking at the burnt curry. She muffled a laugh.

'Yep,' said Max, tipping the pan into the sink. 'I was trying to show off.' The Xanax was waning.

They both started to cough.

'How about we get out of here?' Max suggested. 'Let's give up on dinner and go look for Florence.'

Ruby nodded.

'I'll just grab my gear. Back in a minute.' Max left the kitchen.

The metallic gush of burnt food made Ruby's eyes water as she stood looking at the disaster. She reached up towards a box of tissues on top of the fridge. Her hand knocked something to the floor.

It was a small white card. She leaned down to pick it up, then turned it over in her hand. Her eyes widened. She drew it closer to her face. It was the young girl from the corridor that morning, but this time wearing a school uniform. *Jordana May Spence*. She heard Max walking back towards the kitchen and quickly slipped the card back on top of the fridge.

Max and Ruby walked out onto the street. Max turned his face towards her, noticing that Ruby was keeping her distance from him and not saying much. The streets were quiet as they wove their way through places where Florence liked to sit. There was no one there now.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘What?’ Max moved closer and touched her arm. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Who’s Jordana May Spence?’

Max looked towards the ground, rubbing his chin. His voice became shaky.

‘Look, can we sit down and talk about this?’ he said, avoiding her eyes.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Actually, I think I better go.’ Ruby’s mouth was tight. She held back a swell of tears.

Max watched her walk away, her lace and velvet dress bouncing against her black leather boots.

A man in a cowboy hat approached him. Crocodile teeth dangled around the edges of the suede. ‘Carlisle,’ he boomed into Max’s face. ‘Sorry to hear about ya wrist, mate. Will we see ya on the telly?’

Chapter 35

Petra stood and listened as the doctor, eyes twitching, explained the term ‘drug-induced coma’.

‘She’s still unconscious at this stage. The ventilator is helping her breathe. And the tubes are keeping fluids in her body. We are hoping over the next twelve to twenty-four hours she will become conscious. In the meantime, try to stay positive. Your daughter is young and that helps.’

‘Can you talk to me in fricken English?’ Petra gritted her teeth. ‘What could go wrong still? Is my girl gonna live?’

The doctor sighed. ‘It is hard to know anything yet. In the worst scenarios there can be brain damage. We have just to wait and run tests as needed. She’s comfortable, her heart rate is being monitored and we’ve given her some morphine to keep her relaxed.’

Petra’s body shook in the waiting room. A woman with dark curly hair and rosy cheeks asked Petra if she’d like a cup of tea. Petra nodded.

The woman was a volunteer from the local Catholic Church, and she wore a name badge that said ‘Chook’. She handed Petra the tea. ‘Family?’ she asked.

‘My kid.’

The woman sat down next to Petra. ‘A daughter?’

‘My eldest. She’s beautiful.’ Petra shivered. ‘She’s a really good kid.’

‘Have you got anyone coming?’ the woman asked, looking down at Petra’s fingers to see if there was a ring.

‘No, on my own, the usual story. I try my best, you know.’ Petra looked down at a small crucifix on Chook’s shirt. ‘I wish I believed in all that crap. It would be handy right now.’

Chook laughed. ‘Yeah. I have my times though. From coming in here, sometimes I question a lot of things.’

The two women sat for a little while, silent. People shuffled past, murmurs and trolleys and lives being rescued. Finally, Petra was told she could see Jordi, and was asked to follow a nurse through to where she was staying.

‘Hang in there, darls,’ Chook called after her. ‘There’s always hope.’

Petra walked into her daughter’s room. And then she cried out with a sound deep from her gut.

Jordi lay with a mask on her face and a tube inside her nose. Her chest moved slowly up and down. Her eyes were closed and her skin looked a soft blue under the lights. A machine sat next to the bed, shooting coloured lines across a screen to show her heart was beating.

Petra lowered her head against her daughter’s body. ‘I’m here, baby. I’m here.’

Chapter 36

It was a slow walk home. Ruby kept stopping off at familiar streets to look for Florence. After an hour she headed straight back up Swanston Street, towards her apartment. She felt her hands tightening and a rage rise within her. *How stupid*, she thought, *to ignore my instincts. How stupid to get caught up again when it never works out.*

For Ruby, love felt like a holiday she had once, somewhere in the sun. Her first experience was at the age of twenty-one. His name was Aaron. A tall and lean computer programmer and competitive soccer player. He enjoyed *The Young Ones*, travelling and staying up late like Ruby did. He said she was funny and he craved her every day, but things changed by the end of their second year together. He decided they should stay home and watch videos on a Saturday night and have sex afterwards. And he started asking why she needed friends.

As Ruby stepped out of the lift to her floor, she saw a bright yellow sticky note had been placed near her door handle. 'Please come up ☺,' it said in messy writing.

She took the note and entered her apartment. As she kicked off her shoes, she glanced up at the silver clock on the wall. It was 10.37 pm. She looked again at the note. It was best to stay away. Wasn't it?

Upstairs in number sixteen, Max listened to Def Leppard and drank from a glass of straight scotch, his third cocktail of pills and booze. Screw the rehab. Screw them all. He stretched his body down on the couch and let the music thump through him.

There was a knock on his front door. Max whacked his glass down on the coffee table. He wobbled towards the doorway like an old man trying to dance. His legs moved sideways as he squinted against the light. His hair was wild.

He saw Ruby through the peephole. 'Heyyyy,' he said, as he swung open the door. 'Come in.'

Ruby looked in at the scotch on the coffee table. 'You partying on your own?' she said. 'That's a bit sad.'

'Naaasty,' he replied, stumbling a little as Ruby moved past him.

She sat down on the opposite side of the couch, her eyes fixed on Max.

'Sooooooo,' he said. 'I just wanna sayyyy I didn't mean to be ruuude. Jussst a lot's going on.'

Ruby looked unmoved. 'What happened to that young girl? What happened here?'

'I need you to trust me. That thing...welllll, that's complicated...there's someone else involved...it's pretty fucked up. I...I tried to stop him...'

Then Ruby realised he was crying. She took a cautious step towards him.

'I'm here,' she said quietly. 'If you wanna talk.'

'You're a good person...I can feel it,' Max said, turning his face away and wiping tears with his sleeve. 'And I can't...feel much at the moment.'

He looked into Ruby's eyes. And then he leaned forward and held her close, pressing his lips against her cheek. 'I need you to trust me,' he said.

He pushed his fingers through her hair, kissing her longer this time. Ruby lowered her body down beside him on the couch. Blood thudded through her skin. Max wrapped his arms around her, his face hot with sweat. Their lips moved together, hands touching skin under clothing.

'I really like you,' Max said, with his lips against Ruby's ear.

Ruby took a moment to catch her breath. Her mind said to stop. But she hadn't been close to someone for so long and the smell of him filled her body. Max rubbed his mouth against her neck.

They moved into the darkness of his room. Ruby stopped thinking and let her body move closer until everything became heat and skin and breathing.

But then she sat up, her bra undone and her chest heaving. She was too afraid of things that weren't yet clear.

Max reached out and called her name, but she was already up, moving towards the light streaking through the bedroom door.

Chapter 37

Kane lay on the vinyl bed of an old caravan. It was early morning and his eyes peeled open against the sun. He was in Nerang, just out of Surfers, waiting for a call from a guy in Buderim who said he may have work on a ginger farm. The Darwin job had fallen through. He scratched his chest and yawned, stretching his long back as he smacked his dry lips together. An old bloke who ran a pizza joint had given him a few nightshifts doing dishes, enough to get some food.

His looked at his phone. There was a bunch of missed calls, including ones from Petra's home number. He rang back.

'Hello?' said Bree, after only two rings.

'Breesy, it's Dad,' Kane huffed. 'Has something happened?'

Bree went quiet. 'It's Jordi. She took tablets.'

'What? What kinda tablets?'

'Dunno. She's at the Royal.'

Kane finished the call and reached for his old wallet sitting on the floor next to the bed. He tipped it out and counted up the money. He had thirty-three bucks and twenty-five cents total. A flight home on discount rates was at least a hundred. He got up, pulled on some boardshorts and swung open the door of the van.

*

Jordi lay still, her chest moving up and down. The intensive care ward was quiet, apart from the soft pad of nurses' shoes against the cold floor.

Just before dawn, an intern walked past. Petra grabbed his wrist. 'Please,' she said, 'Any news?'

He turned to Petra and shook his head, and kept walking.

Later, morning light warmed the windows. Petra opened her eyes, her head resting against a cushion as she sat in the visitor's chair.

Jordi turned towards her mother and blinked.

'Sweetheart!' Petra cried and stood up, calling out to the nurse.

Jordi's lips twitched as she closed her eyes again. Petra watched as the medical staff probed and poked Jordi and pressed buttons on machines.

The doctor turned to her. 'The blinking is good,' he said, 'but our concern at the moment is that there could still be some brain damage. Your daughter seems to be taking a long time to display normal responses. I'm sorry. You need to prepare yourself.'

Petra sat back down on the chair and held her fingers against her throat.

*

Kane stood at the steps of a weatherboard church with 'JESUS SAVES' painted on the side in blue. He knocked and peered through the glass window near the entrance.

An old panel van pulled up only a few metres away. A man got out. He wore a black t-shirt and a silver chain with a small cross. He smiled at Kane and walked over to him.

'I don't know where to go,' Kane said, trembling. 'I need to see my daughter.'

The man stood and listened, slowly nodding his head. He was sorry. He would give Kane the money himself, if he could, but there was nothing. Kane shook his hand and walked off, moving fast towards the main streets.

Chapter 38

Max woke about 2 am and flicked his eyes open to the darkness. His body felt dry as earth and booze flooded his veins. He thumped his hands around the bed, reaching for Ruby. Then he fell back with his face against the mattress and drifted off to sleep.

He woke again around an hour later and sat up, pulled on some tracksuit pants and a pair of black Crocs. He sent a badly spelt text to Ruby: *wehr r u?* He bashed his way out of the apartment, pin-balling his body up the corridor, each thump against the wall pushing him towards the exit.

The circus of his drunken mind somehow mapped out a route towards the 7-Eleven to buy Coke. Exiting the store, he heard a woman's voice crow.

'Hey there!'

Max turned around, stumbling a little and squinting as he looked closer. 'Yooooou bugger, where've you been?'

It was Florence. She was camped inside a large wooden crate.

'I've been worried,' Max mumbled.

Florence nodded and wiped her nose with a sleeve, sucking air hard into her lungs. Her eyes were sunken and grey around the edges.

'Floooo youuuuuu gotta see a doctor,' Max begged.

'No,' she insisted. 'I don't trust them, medicos. I'll be okay. A Salvos lady gave me some cold and flu thingos.'

Max sat down beside her. They watched people move past in darkness.

Florence's breathing eased. 'Listen, Max, you have choices. Find what makes you happy and forget everyone else. You are a little lost, that's all. *Perdido.*'

Max growled. 'Floooo,' he murmured, 'There's this nice girrrl. But it's not good.'

‘Amor! Do tell,’ she wheezed, turning her body towards him.

But Max had fallen asleep.

‘Go on, up you get,’ Florence said, giving him a gentle nudge. *‘You don’t want people seeing you here. Go home.’*

He stumbled his way back down the pavement then disappeared out of view. Florence nodded slowly, and then her body shook as she barked out clumps of blood into a handkerchief.

*

Ruby heard a loud knock. She slowly opened the door, moving bed hair out of her eyes and pulling a lime-green silk robe around her body.

‘Oh,’ she croaked, shivering from the early morning air. *‘What are you doing?’*

‘Why’d you leave?’ Max hissed. He stepped forward and put his arms around her face and tried to kiss her.

Ruby pushed him off. *‘We’ll talk tomorrow,’* she said.

Max tried a different way to get her attention. *‘I saaaaaw Florence,’* he slurred.

‘Where? How was she?’ Ruby’s eyes widened.

‘Ohhhhh sheeeee’s crook.’

‘What’d you see?’

Max said nothing, eyes closed. He was out of it.

‘Go back to your apartment, Max.’

He stumbled off.

Ruby got her coat and left the building. The streets flashed with the sheen of light rain. Ruby walked along with her arms wrapped across her chest. She scanned the

pavement. She looked behind stairwells and along the edges of buildings. Suddenly, she ran towards a bench. There was Florence, bent over. Her body heaved forward as she banged one hand against her chest.

Ruby leant down and put an arm around her. 'Try to breathe, Flo. I'm calling an ambulance.'

The driver laid Florence out on the stretcher and asked Ruby to stand back. They put oxygen on her face and a blanket over her body. Florence looked up at Ruby and blinked. A woman in a blue uniform explained that Ruby couldn't come with them. She wasn't family.

'But she doesn't have anyone,' Ruby said.

The ambulance moved off without a sound. She watched until it disappeared into a nearby street. On the ground, she saw a plastic bag covered in blood.

Chapter 39

Petra went home later that afternoon to check on the kids. She pulled up in the driveway and sat for a moment, staring out towards the carport and clutching the keys. Her hair was matted together like a stray dog and her eyes were red and swollen.

‘Muum!’ Cruise called out, as she stepped inside the door. He ran towards his mother and hugged her leg. Ryan and Abbey joined him.

‘Geez, Bree what’s the stink in here?’ Petra put a hand over her nose.

Bree appeared from the kitchen. ‘I was tryin’ to make pasta,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Bit burnt. How is she?’

The kids looked up at their mother.

‘Not sure yet.’ She turned her face away from the children and put her vinyl handbag down on the old dining table, her hands were jittery.

‘Can we get Hungry Jacks?’ Ryan begged.

‘Alright, matey,’ Petra said, kissing his cheek. ‘Just let me sit down for a minute.’ She kicked off her sneakers and lay down on the couch, her eyes closing as her head fell back onto the faded blue cloth.

Cruise dragged a blanket decorated with Sesame Street characters towards his mum and pulled it over her. Her eyes shut as her head pressed down against a cushion. Her body jerked as she fell into a very deep slumber. The children stood watching. Abbey poked her mother’s stomach each time she made a funny sound.

Bree brought the kids a large cracked dinner plate of warm toast, butter oozing and black strips of Vegemite on top. The kids jumped up and down, grabbing the food and running towards the TV. The PlayStation had been on for the past two days.

A little later, Petra woke, rubbing her eyes and pulling her body slowly upwards. Ryan and Cruise sat playing Donkey Kong while Abbey slept on the floor, making little puffing sounds with her mouth.

In the kitchen, Bree was sitting on a chair near the window, holding Jordi's mobile phone.

'Mum, read this,' she said, in a low voice.

Petra's eyes widened as she stood staring at the screen. She looked at the message from Shilo three times and then turned to face her daughter. 'What is it?' she said. 'What's it mean?'

He should be in jail.

Bree shrugged. 'Seriously, I have no idea.'

Petra scratched her forehead and sat down. She opened the 'Inbox' message folder and scanned through the texts. Her pulse accelerated as she kept reading. The other messages were too vague and didn't give much away. She found a text from Kane and bit down on her bottom lip. 'Typical,' she hissed. 'More promises.'

'What, Mum?' Breanna looked at her mum.

'Messages from your dad.' Petra kept scrolling. 'The usual shit.'

Petra walked into the lounge room to grab her own phone, clutching Jordi's mobile to her chest. She found Shilo's number and dialled.

'Hello, love,' she said when Shilo answered. 'Few things going on. I need you to tell me something. It's very important.'

Shilo went quiet. 'Okay.'

'I want you to tell me what happened to my girl.'

Chapter 40

Early the next morning, Ruby called Saint Vincent's several times but got the same response. 'We need a surname,' they said. She sent a quick message to Max on Facebook but he didn't know what Florence's surname was. He asked if they could catch up. She said she was busy.

After several days of Ruby's calls, a nurse told her that Florence had been released. She suggested Ruby look for her at a women's refuge in Carlton. Ruby rang the hostel. They said Florence had stayed overnight but left that morning.

Ruby searched the city blocks for days, but there was no sign of her. At night, she put on loud music to block out the sounds of Max upstairs. She began following a *Rumba Pilates* exercise DVD. She bent her body in front of the Brazilian woman dressed in lycra. The woman had pencilled eyebrows and skin like caramel cheesecake.

'Do it, that's it, one more, the CobbbrrrrrraaaAAA! That's it yes!' the instructor called through the screen, palm trees and crystal waves in the background.

Whenever Ruby drifted off into remembering their kiss, the moment Max pressed his mouth against her, she thought about Jordana Spence in her school uniform and it stopped.

Max sent her texts and messages on Facebook; she didn't answer. He left a pot of white tulips at her front door.

One Saturday, as Ruby was following the exercise DVD again, a crash came from upstairs, followed by a male voice, yelling. She looked up to the ceiling. Then the noises stopped.

The landline rang.

'Hello,' said her mum. 'I have some news. Your father has infected haemorrhoids but the doctor doesn't seem too worried. And your cousin Georgie has decided to put the

orphanage work in Tibet on hold. Can you believe it, at the ripe old age of forty-seven, she is getting married?’

‘Good for her,’ Ruby sighed.

‘Well, he is no oil painting. But he’s a chemist from Wantirna who owns four properties. The thing is, it is never too late.’

‘Mum. People can have fulfilled lives without long-term relationships. I have to go.’ Ruby put the phone down.

Checking the mail later that day, she pulled out a small pale green envelope and dragged her eyes along the black-inked writing on the front, ‘For Ruby’. Inside was a glossy card with a picture of a rainbow. ‘I need to see you.’ The writing was slightly slanted, the lettering soft and round.

Ruby ran her fingers over the surface of the card and stared at it, clutching it to her chest as she went back inside her apartment. She put the card into a drawer and slammed it closed, the legs of the desk rattling against the floor.

Chapter 41

Kane pushed open the door of the Centrelink in Surfers. He stood for a few minutes in the long queue, then made his way over to a booth under a sign that read 'Information'. A woman wearing a navy suit a little too tight for her nodded as he stood in front of the counter.

'I need an emergency trip. My daughter's in hospital, in Melbourne. I have no cash. Is there anything you can do?'

The woman looked at Kane, stone-faced. 'Is she terminally ill? This means a degenerative disease or cancer.'

Kane ran a hand through his hair and leant down on to the counter and shook his head. 'She's very sick,' he said, his voice almost a whisper.

The woman pushed a brochure across. 'We can only help if your daughter is terminally ill.'

Kane punched his fist on the counter.

A security guard moved quickly over to the desk. 'Sir,' he said, 'no aggressive behaviour.' He pointed at a sign on the wall.

Kane looked up at the sign and then turned towards the people waiting in the queues nearby. They all spun their eyes towards the front.

Kane took off back towards the main street, sun baking his arms. He walked behind a Coles supermarket and found a strip of charity bins full of clothes. He wriggled around as he reached inside a Diabetes Australia bin, grabbing at the plastic bags inside. But the chute wasn't big enough to pull anything out to sell at the vintage clothing joint. A lady walking a German Shepherd stared at him and shook her head. He kicked the bin, hard, and cried out from the throb to his toes.

Back in the main shopping area, he spotted the Happy Hens bistro and lounge. It housed the biggest gaming room along the Surfers strip. Kane stood at the entrance

with a hand in his pocket, feeling the couple of notes and coins in his fingers. He went in and sat down at an empty machine near the back called Arabian Nights. Willie Nelson played through the old speakers.

A woman beside him wearing a curly ginger wig turned towards Kane. 'Hello,' she said, 'I had a win on that last week.'

'You might bring me luck,' he said, his eyes fixed on the spinning numbers.

After ten minutes, he'd lost all his coins. He walked over to the change machine to cash in his notes. The tokens spilt into the tray. He pulled them out and dropped them into a plastic cup that had a number for Gambler's Helpline printed on the side.

The woman with the ginger wig took a sip on her brandy and dry and watched Kane as he fed the money into his machine. She crossed her legs, flashing shiny black heels from Hong Kong.

'You in a hurry, darls?' she said, wheezing a little as Kane stared at the little fruits rolling in front of him.

'Yep,' he said in a low voice.

Soon there were only two dollars left in the bottom of his cup. Kane reached in and took a breath as he held the money, hot inside his sweating hands.

'You know, it's all a scam, love.' The woman with the wig was facing Kane now, leaning forward a little so that her denim dress exposed her tanned cleavage. 'No-one ever wins. We're all suckers.'

Kane said nothing. He swallowed and watched the fruits spin. Five strawberries. He needed one more. He slipped the last twenty-cent coin into the slot. An apple. The machine tootled. 'Try again.'

The woman put her drink down and turned towards Kane, resting a hand on his arm. 'Hun, it's only a game,' she said. 'It can't be that bad.'

Kane asked her if he could borrow a few coins for the pay phone. To call his family, he said. To call home.

Chapter 42

Jordi's mum didn't talk much when her dad left the first time. He said he was off to find work up at Surfers. A guy he knew at the Ford factory was shipping in and selling souvenirs from China. He rang a bit during the first couple of weeks but then the calls stopped. For months they didn't hear from him.

And then he rocked up on New Year's Eve with a wallet stuffed with cash and some new tattoos. Jordi turned away when he went to hug her.

'Come here, love,' he said, 'I've missed ya.'

By then, Jordi was eleven and hated boys, and told her sister Breanna that they shouldn't talk to their dad.

Petra stood at the door and said nothing for a few moments. Kane had been gone for two months and the rent was overdue. He kept saying he was sorry. That he had been a bit off his head. But he was home now. He was home for good.

That night, they got a bucket of KFC and mashed potato and gravy, followed by ice-cream with Ice Magic. Nobody said much as they sat at the old table with wobbly legs, licking the chicken off their fingers. Kane told them stories about Surfers Paradise. Like the time they got chased by the cops after a late-night delivery and a box of clip-on koalas rolled all over the road. When he asked them how school was going, the two girls just mumbled and kept munching on their chicken until all that was left were gleaming bones.

When Jordi came home from school the next day, she found her father drawing on some blank bits of paper. Kane's dream was to be a tattoo artist, and a good one. At Northcote Tech, he was asked to design a mural for a new entrance sponsored by local businesses. He drew a kaleidoscope of colour and shapes, inspired by the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* album cover, and got his photo in the *Herald Sun*. He stood stroking his brush while teachers and students stopped to chat and pat him on the back. A few said it was 'chick shit', but they hung around and watched for a long time.

Jordi hopped up at the table beside her father. 'What's that?' she said, pointing at the sketches.

'It's ya mum,' he said, smiling.

'No, it's a mermaid,' Jordi said crossly.

'Your mum's a mermaid, darls,' Kane said. 'She's beautiful.'

Jordi watched her dad for a little while, her head turned on one side. 'Can you teach me how to draw?' she said slowly, her eyes fixed on his hands.

'Yeah, bubs, of course.' Kane reached over with his skinny fingers to grab some paper. 'Now, just start off with a person, awright? Make the parts of their body soft, not like stick men. Watch me.' He began to run his pencil across the page.

Jordi looked on, wide-eyed.

'See,' he said, 'you just round it all out: the arms, the body, the legs. Here, you have a go.'

Jordi bit the bottom of her lip and pushed her pencil over the page. She drew faces, shapes and animals.

'That's really good, sweetheart,' her dad said, 'I reckon you're a natural.'

Jordi smiled and held up the page. 'I draw lots at school, Dad.'

'You make sure you keep at it,' he said. 'Everyone's gotta have somethin' to do, and if ya good at it, well, that's a bonus.'

Petra walked into the lounge room and said a quiet hello, putting down a carton of smokes on the coffee table.

'Look, Mum,' yelled Jordi, holding up the page, 'Dad showed me how to draw. And Dad drew you, Mum, look.' Jordi ran to her mother to show her the picture. 'You're a mermaid.'

Petra looked down at paper and then passed it back to her daughter, her hands shaky. 'I'm off out,' she said. 'There's chops in the fridge.'

Kane looked up, wide-eyed. 'Where ya off to? Are you gonna be back for tea?'

'No,' she said and left.

Jordi got a bit of sticky tape and put the drawing on the fridge. Underneath it she wrote, 'My Mum the Mermaid' in crayon, while her dad grilled the meat and boiled some frozen vegies. They ate their dinner quietly, chewing on the tough meat till their eyes watered. And Kane turned from the table every time headlights flashed near the lounge room window, waiting for his wife to come home.

Chapter 43

Max stopped sending messages to Ruby, but he waited each evening for her to get home, listening for her voice, her music, sometimes even the sound of her shower. He was on a stronger dose of Xanax now. It took the shiver away, the ache in his stomach. He was more and more in a zone of numbness. He moved the student card to a new spot. It was now in his bedroom, on a ledge near a mirror that reflected the morning light.

After another visit from his mum, he drank a six pack of Blondes and fell into a slumber on his bed. A beep woke him. It was a text from a girl he used to date called Tatiana, who was in the area, asking if he'd like a visit. She had an hour before her flight back to Sydney. Tatiana was Russian and in her late twenties, a marketing manager with lips like red apples. They had met a year earlier at a social function and shared a very busy few months together, most of it in bed.

She visited for an hour and they had sex. It was fun, and Max felt warm from her skin, but as he moved inside her and kissed her neck, he thought only about Ruby.

Evening edged into the windows. Alone, he fell asleep again, then woke to a gentle knock. He wiped saliva from his chin and lifted his head off the big brown cushions on the floor. He yawned as he opened the security lock of his front door.

Ruby stood there, motionless. They stared at each other.

'You wanted to see me?'

'Yes,' he said, his hands trembling as he brushed fingers through his hair. 'Come in.'

'Sorry about the mess,' he mumbled, as she sat down on the leather couch.

Ruby sat with her body turned away from him. She glanced around the lounge room, her eyes scanning over empty beer cans and chocolate wrappers. She stared at a white satin bra on the carpet.

Max jumped up. ‘Oh shit,’ he said and picked up the garment, throwing it behind a table.

Ruby stood up, looking at her watch and smoothing down the front of her jumper. ‘I think you’ve got a lot going on here,’ she said. ‘I’d better go.’

Max rubbed his eyes and hung his head for a moment. ‘I know this looks bad. It was an old friend.’

Ruby turned her face away from him. ‘That’s what friends are for,’ she said. Then she left.

Max walked over to the full-length glass wall looking out over the darkened city. His head was heavy and pounding. A half-hour passed. He took a jacket and cap from his bedroom and left his apartment. As his feet hit the concrete of the footpath, he saw young women everywhere—in bunches and walking alone. They looked at him, a few pointed and giggled.

A couple of schoolgirls asked him for an autograph. ‘On my boobs!’ one screamed, the others bending over with laughter.

They all looked like Jordi. All of them.

You fuck up. You prick.

A few hours passed. He kept walking, alone in the city, turning his head around corners and into alleyways, all of Florence’s favourite places. And he wondered if she was safe. And then he thought about Ruby for a long time.

Chapter 44

Petra sat in the shadowy room at dusk. She watched her daughter's body move with the machine, the suck and pull of the equipment breaking the silence. She couldn't see Jordi's face amongst the plastic tubes. A little picture Jordi drew for her birthday years ago sat on the bedside table. The face was pink with a big red mouth. 'Mum' was written beside it, inside the outline of a heart.

She'd had a message from Kane. She wiped her eyes and read it one more time before deleting it.

A doctor examined Jordi for a while, reading numbers and charts and pressing buttons on the tablet. Then he turned to Petra. He sat down beside her, his voice low and steady against the gentle sounds of the equipment.

'It's good that she is responding to stimulus. But her progress is much slower than we'd hoped,' he said, 'I'm sorry. Not much else to report yet.'

*

When Jordi turned three, her mum took her along to the Jumping Jacks childcare centre in Werribee to start kindergarten. Jordi screamed and cried all the way in the car, Petra reaching behind to pat her little legs, telling her she was going to love it.

Kane was working down in Gippsland on a farm, shovelling shit. 'What's new,' said Petra, when he called to tell her about what the job involved.

At the kindergarten, Jordi punched at her mum, her face red as sunburn as the cries came deep from her gut. Petra pulled at Jordi's arms and blinked away her own tears. She had a new job packing meat. She couldn't lose this one.

A wide-faced woman squatted down in front of Jordi and took her hand. 'It's okay, love,' she said, gently pushing hair out of Jordi's eyes. 'We're going to do some fun stuff, alright?'

Jordi looked at the woman and gave a little nod.

Petra thanked her and leant down to kiss Jordi on the cheek. She closed her eye and turned her face away from her mother.

Jordi sat on a small chair in the corner of the room, with a young teaching assistant beside her dressed in hipster jeans, a star painted on one cheek. Jordi held a crayon in one hand and looked around the room, watching the other children.

A little boy with silver glasses and wearing a paint smock walked up to Jordi. 'Hello,' he said. 'Do you wanna play with me?'

Jordi nodded and followed him to the easels over on the other side of the room. Wiggles music chirped out of a small CD player. Children clapped and sang while others listened to a story.

The little boy handed Jordi a paintbrush. 'Let's draw cats,' he said, pointing at the blank bit of paper on the easel.

'I can't,' said Jordi.

'Come oooooonn,' said the boy, 'it's easy.'

Jordi put down her brush and watched. The little boy brushed lines of black paint against the easel, his tongue hanging out. Two large round eyes appeared on the head of the cat, big thick strokes indicating whiskers.

The assistant walked over and sat down next to Jordi and her new friend. 'Barnaby, that's lovely,' she said. 'What is it?'

'My cat, Stray.'

The assistant laughed. 'Is that his name?'

'Yep, Mum found him.'

'That's stupid,' said Jordi and threw her brush down on the floor.

'You're stupid,' he said, turning towards Jordi. She frowned and slapped his arm.

‘That’s enough!’ the assistant asserted, guiding the two of them into a chair. ‘Now you both say sorry to one another. We don’t have mean words here. And we don’t hurt each other.’

They both hung their heads. Jordi sat frowning. The boy snuck a glance at her, his eyes little slits. They stayed silent.

‘If you don’t say sorry, there’ll be no High Five dancing this afternoon.’

The boy looked up and scratched the side of his head with little fingers. ‘Sorry,’ he mumbled, his face turned away from Jordi.

‘Thank you, Barnaby,’ said the assistant. ‘Now it’s your turn, Jordi. I know it’s hard being new but we all need to be nice to each other.’

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,’ Jordi rocked her head from side to side.

The assistant sighed. ‘Jordi, I think you had better stay in this little area for a while, okay? And have a little think about the right way to speak to others. Barnaby, you can go and help Jan in the kitchen.’

The boy stamped his foot against the carpet before he left the room.

When Petra returned later that afternoon, she was greeted with a smile from one of the older assistants. ‘I want you to come and look at something,’ she said.

Jordi stood with a paint brush, dabbing colours at the white paper, the edges curling slightly. A few kids and several assistants looked on.

‘That’s amazing,’ said a mum with a toddler on her hip.

Jordi’s little hand moved backwards and forwards, shaping an orange and red sun, surrounded by deep blacks and blues, floating planets and tiny silver stars in between.

Petra knelt down beside her daughter, dry stains of blood on the front of her uniform from the meatworks. ‘You clever kid,’ she said, giving a deep throaty laugh.

Jordi didn't look up. She just kept swirling the paint onto the paper, shapes spinning and rolling to life in different shades and colours.

Chapter 45

It was Friday afternoon and Max was doing sit-ups in his lounge room. He hadn't exercised for so long. His body ached and buzzed all at once. The pain in his wrist was easing. It was good to feel sweat on his skin.

He finished the routine and walked over to the old oak desk near the big window looking down onto the city. It had belonged to his granddad and was almost eighty years old. Max loved the cracks and lines in the warm red wood and the heavy draws with brass handles. He slumped into the chair, leaning forward to switch on his laptop. In his hand was the student card. He logged into Facebook and typed 'Jordana Spence' into the search box.

A few faces appeared, two from America, one from France. Then he stopped scrolling and stared. There she was. His jaw clenched as he looked at her photos. In one shot she wore little makeup and sat on top of an old stone wall with another girl beside her. They smiled into the camera.

Max logged out and leaned back in his chair, reaching for some Xanax on the coffee table. The phone rang.

'Hello, sir, how is your day? My name is Sharika from EnergySmarts. Do you have five minutes for me to tell you how you can save a great deal on electricity?'

'Sharika,' said Max in a quiet voice, his body sinking from the tablets. 'Tell me.'

There was a pause and then great excitement. 'Excellent! Do you mind me asking first, who is your current provider?'

'First tell me where you're calling from.'

'India.'

'I hope to get there one day...'

'I recommend it,' she laughed shrilly.

‘Sharika, can I ask you a question?’

There was another pause. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘How many hours is your shift?’

‘Sorry, sir?’

‘How many hours do you have to work today?’

‘Just a normal shift actually. But perhaps we are getting a little off track.’

‘I’m just interested,’ said Max. ‘And how much are they paying you per hour?’

Sharika went silent and then gave a nervous chortled laugh. ‘Let’s talk about your electricity, shall we?’

Max breathed out slowly. ‘You know the problem, Sharika, with all of this, with you and I talking on the phone, and you trying to convince me of ways to save a hundred bucks so you can reach your target, is that in the end you are working your butt off so things are easier for me.’

Sharika laughed again. ‘I can assure you, sir, that we are treated well here. It is a nice place.’

‘Right,’ said Max. ‘Let’s get down to business then.’

Sharika signed Max up for a new electricity provider that came with two free movie tickets from Hoyts, and they chatted about cricket, curries and *Slumdog Millionaire*.

After Sharika hung up, Max looked up at the clock. It was just after 8 pm and the city sky was a jet black. There was no sound from Ruby’s apartment. But he didn’t deserve her time and space. She would float around him forever, and he would wonder what could have been.

Chapter 46

Kane left the club with his hands clenched and his pockets empty. He looked out onto the busy road in Surfers and rubbed his face with his hands. He walked along until he found a strip of shops. In front of a laundry called BusyBees there was a sign, 'Help wanted'.

Inside, a small dark-haired man walked up to the counter, squinting towards Kane. He had a large purple birthmark on the left side of his face. 'Yes?'

'I saw your sign,' Kane said. 'I'm a hard worker. What's the job?'

Steam and sweet deodorant gushed through the small space, making Kane's eyes water.

The man stared at Kane. 'Deliveries. Ten dollars an hour.' His lips smacked together as he spoke.

Kane laughed. 'Is that legal?'

The man looked at him. 'You a trouble maker?'

'No,' said Kane. 'I have lots of experience.'

'Can I see a resume?'

'For a laundry?' Kane frowned. 'Are you serious, mate?'

'Up to you.' The man turned to a wad of paperwork on the front counter and began to flip through it. On the counter was a framed photo of Prime Minister Tony Abbott smiling next to the laundry man, taken out the front of the shop.

Kane tried one more time. 'Look, I'm new here. I need the work. Can you give me a go for a few days?'

The man sighed and put his glasses down on the counter. 'Okay, but no trouble. The last person crashed my van.'

‘You have my word,’ Kane said, looking the man in the eyes. ‘I won’t let you down.’

The man pulled out a small exercise book from under the counter and began writing down the details Kane provided to him.

Kane quickly glanced at his phone. There was a text from Petra flashing on the screen.
Call me.

A woman appeared from out the back, thin and pale with long arms hanging from her body. She wore a short, strapless mint-coloured dress and had a wrinkly golden tan.

‘Hello,’ she said, running her fingers through her hair as she checked Kane out.

‘Hello,’ he replied, avoiding the woman’s eyes.

‘Felicity, go and do those orders please,’ the man mumbled. She went out the back.

‘My wife,’ he said, throwing his hands up in the air.

They finished the paper work.

‘Come back at 3 pm,’ the owner said.

Leaving the shop, Kane dialled Petra’s number. ‘You have no credit,’ said the message.

Kane threw the phone on the ground and let out a sob. He looked across the street to the BusyBees Laundromat, empty of customers, the yellow bee at the front faded and worn. Kane picked up his phone and headed back, his face beading from the Queensland sun.

‘An advance?’ the owner jerked his neck back, wide-eyed.

Kane stood at the counter, stone-faced. ‘I know it’s unusual. My daughter’s sick,’ he said. ‘Please.’ He blinked back tears.

‘But you haven’t even started!’

‘Please,’ he said. ‘I’ll do some extra hours, just a hundred bucks.’

‘I think you should go now, and don’t come back,’ the man pointed towards the door.

Kane gripped the front counter and breathed in hard, air escaping from his chest like a punctured old tyre. ‘Mate, my daughter is hospital.’

‘Get out,’ said the laundry man. ‘Or I will call the police.’

Kane clenched his fist, then turned his body away slowly and moved out the front door.

Watching from behind a wall of hanging clothes was the laundry man’s wife. ‘Just popping out,’ she said to her husband, who took no notice as she moved out the side door of the old bricked building, clutching a wallet.

She walked quickly along the footpath and saw the back of Kane’s head. Within minutes, she was only a few steps behind.

Chapter 47

After a busy Thursday, Ruby arrived home and threw her bag down on the kitchen table. She was having an old school-friend, Gina, over for a birthday dinner. Gina was an IT specialist who'd left her husband Stewart because she could no longer stand the way he chewed. There were other things. Like the way he made all the decisions, and if she questioned anything he said she was being a bra burner and seemed a little unbalanced, and maybe her women's things needed checking.

Ruby threw off her high heels. On the menu was carrot soup and sourdough bread grilled with oil and garlic, chicken breasts stuffed with cranberries and, for dessert, her Grandma Eileen's famous lemon-and-lime meringue pie. Ruby had made it the night before. It sat boldly in the fridge, a big white swirl of meringue with a slight golden top, gently shaking each time the fridge door opened. The chicken lay in little rows inside an oven tray, soft cheese and red berries poking from inside.

Ruby changed into tracksuit pants and a frayed old t-shirt she'd had since high school that pictured Madonna on the front in a cone bra. She thought about Max and his soft lips. She started peeling the carrots. As the little orange flakes flicked against the bowl, tears glassed her eyes.

And then Ruby thought about Florence. And wondered where she was.

'Why are you hanging around street people?' her mother tutted when Ruby mentioned Florence to her. 'She could have needles or SUV or other diseases.'

'HIV,' Ruby said, pressing fingers against her forehead.

'Yes, that. You just don't know where she's been. I mean, I know it's all very sad, but this person could find out where you live.'

Food preparation finished, Ruby reached for her new book on Buddhism that was sitting open on the kitchen bench. She read the quote of the day: 'The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, or

anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly.’ She slammed the book shut.

Ruby turned on the radio in the kitchen, an old transistor with a leather cover that her family used to take on holidays at Mornington. They were happy times, before her dad killed the man on the train track.

She checked the kitchen clock and went to take a shower, letting the hot water steam all over her body. She looked at the back of the shampoo bottle. There was so much to worry about now, foaming agents, chemicals, colourings and additives in foods that are banned everywhere except Australia. Warm plastic that becomes carcinogenic. Tumours from mobile phones and Alzheimer’s from deodorant. But then, what about healthy people who still get sick? Nada from her office was a vegan who dropped dead on the way home from work. Her brain haemorrhaged on the Frankston train. Why did she worry about anything? It was all stupid.

Finishing her shower, she got dressed and inspected her face in the mirror. She didn’t really like her nose—it was too thin and her chin always felt flat. In the lounge room, vanilla candles flicked shapes against the wall as the lights of the city shone silver and white through the big glass windows. She plumped cushions on the couch from the Oxfam shop, in bright greens and purples, the stitching a little wonky.

She heard a door slamming from Max’s apartment. Her hands shook. She got up and checked on the dinner, crackling and hissing, warm sweet aromas of caramelising onion and garlic filling the apartment. She was looking forward to seeing Gina. She was sweet and funny, but Ruby hoped the night wouldn’t be about how marriage was miserable. She didn’t need that.

Fifteen minutes later, the buzzer rang. Ruby flung open the door.

Max stood in front of her, breathing fast. ‘You’d better come downstairs,’ he said.

‘What’s happened?’

‘Let’s go,’ he said, his face shallow.

Ruby swallowed hard and followed him down to the lift. ‘Max? Is it Flo?’ He nodded. The silver doors closed shut and they moved down to the ground floor. When they hit the ground Ruby took a breath. Max gently took her arm and held it close to him.

Just outside the building were people in uniforms and police. Onlookers stood with hands over their mouths. A tram driver sat on the ground sobbing as a paramedic kneeled beside her.

There was a body covered with a white sheet. And a tram sitting still. There was blood sprayed over the grey road.

Ruby gasped.

‘It was an accident,’ Max said and put his arms around her.

They stared in silence.

‘The poor thing,’ Ruby said, wiping her eyes. ‘Oh no....’

Max nodded. ‘I’ve given some details to the police.’

They stood for a long time, watching. People stared from a distance. A few passengers who had disembarked from the tram had their hands over their eyes.

Max and Ruby were silent.

‘I can’t believe it,’ Ruby said. ‘I wanna talk to someone.’ She scanned her eyes around the police and paramedics. A few journalists were taking notes.

‘No. There’s nothing we can do here,’ Max said, ‘let’s go inside.’

They slowly stood up and walked back through the main entrance to the apartments.

Ruby stared at the floor of the lift. ‘Did anyone see?’

‘Yeah,’ Max sighed, as he pressed the button for Ruby’s floor. ‘One lady I spoke to had been on the tram. She said Florence was standing on Swanston Street, on the

tracks, looking confused. The driver put the brakes on but she just wouldn't move. She just stood there looking up towards the sky.'

'Oh,' said Ruby, turning slowly towards him. 'That doesn't make sense.'

Max said nothing as he walked Ruby to her apartment door.

'Do you wanna come in?' she said quietly.

Max looked at Ruby and cleared his throat. 'Yes,' he said and followed.

Ruby sent a message to her friend, cancelling dinner. She went into the kitchen and turned off the oven. The food was hard and dry.

'Would you like a drink?' she asked Max.

'No thanks,' he said. 'I'm staying off the booze, for good.'

Ruby pulled a bottle of juice out of her fridge and poured two glasses. She walked slowly over to the couch and put the drinks down on the coffee table in front of Max.

'Poor Flo,' Max said quietly. 'I told the police I'd like to pay for her funeral. We may be the only ones there, but I'll see if I can track her family down.'

And then Ruby started crying and couldn't stop. Max put his arm around her and just sat with her for a few minutes, until she took some deep breaths and wiped her eyes.

'I'm okay,' she said. 'It's silly. I only got to know her the past few months.'

'No, it's not silly. She had a big heart. We had some really nice chats.'

Ruby looked at him. 'You were good to her.'

'She was a friend,' he said. 'She told me one night how she left her husband. He used to belt her up. But then her family cut her off. Her courage, it makes you think.'

'About what?'

‘How much time we waste trying to please other people, instead of going after what we really want.’

‘What do you want?’ Ruby looked at Max.

‘A lot of things...I wanna work with young people. Youth stuff, sport, community programs.’

Ruby nodded. ‘I like that.’

‘There’s something else I want,’ Max said, looking intensely at Ruby.

She turned away but then got her courage up, lifting her face towards him as they sat side by side at the table.

‘What is it?’

Max smiled as they looked at each other.

‘Maybe you know the answer to that?’

Ruby flicked hair out of her eyes.

‘What do *you* want?’ Max asked, leaning towards her as Ruby took a breath.

‘Well...honesty,’ she said slowly, avoiding his eyes, ‘in every part of my life. And freedom...’

‘What does that mean?’

‘No guilt. No pleasing people just for the sake of it. Standing by the things you believe in.’

They sat for a moment, amongst the candle lights. Dusty Springfield played in the background. Everything was still.

‘Poor Flo,’ Ruby said softly. ‘I wish I’d done more to help her out.’

Max reached over and took her hand. ‘Ruby, you treated her with respect. It’s one of the things I really like about you.’ Max gave Ruby a hug. She briefly let him wrap his arms around her body, but then pulled away.

Max stood up. ‘I’m sorry. I have something I need to do.’

‘Okay,’ Ruby said. ‘Let me know about the funeral.’ She turned away from him.

‘Can I pop back a bit later?’ Max said.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I’d like to be alone.’

His face dropped.

Max left the apartment, and Ruby moved into the kitchen. She flicked on the hot water. As she scrubbed the crockery, little tears fell down into the soapy dishwater. Each time she wiped her eyes, white foam sprayed the side of her cheeks. The kitchen gleamed as the sky darkened outside.

Across the other side of the city, a large silver drawer slid closed inside the morgue.

Chapter 48

It was just after midnight. Max sat at the old oak desk, looking up at a black-and-white photo of his Granddad Bernie dressed in an army uniform, lined up to board a ship back to Australia after three years in Changi. His brown face thin as paper.

Max's eyes moved across to a wedding photo of his grandparents. Olivia's smile filled the frame as she and Bernie stood side by side in front of a rose garden. Olivia was dressed in a long creamy lace dress. Bernie wore a black suit. Their faces were smooth and young. He couldn't remember his granddad talking very much but he remembered one night, when Bernie was showing him some old photos, he turned to Max and said, 'There are things in the world you will never understand, son. Just work hard and look after the people you love.'

Max got up and walked into the bedroom, picked up Jordi's student card and his car keys. As he moved through the lounge room and towards the front door, he glanced at a snap of his parents and his brothers from their last Christmas Day together. They raised their glasses as his mum stood with a turkey on a tray. Next to that frame was a team photo from the club.

Max made his way to the underground car park and got into his black SUV. The sound of the engine bounced around the concrete walls, followed by a low thud and slow turn of wheels. He drove slowly along Swanston Street, his eyes steady on the road ahead. He crossed Flinders Street and continued onto St Kilda Road, the car moving in a straight line.

Max stopped in front of the large police complex. He turned the ignition off and sat amongst dark shadows and lights, staring straight ahead as life outside passed by. And then he got out of the car and walked up the steps to the entrance, not looking anywhere but straight ahead.

*

Kane sat with his arm around Petra as she slept, her head back against the padded chair in the hospital room. He quivered as he watched his daughter, her body very still. The doctor would see them in the early morning.

There was a knock on the door. Kane stood up.

A young girl appeared, dressed in a white puffer jacket and jeans, her hair pulled back tight into a ponytail. 'I'm Shilo,' she said as she slowly opened the door. 'I'm Jordi's best friend. You asked me to come.' She gasped as she looked over at the hospital bed. 'Oh my god.'

'Let's go outside,' Kane said.

They moved into a small carpeted room called the 'Family Conference Area,' with green walls and a few lounge chairs.

'Is she gonna be okay?' Shilo trembled. 'She looks bad.'

Kane sighed. 'Try to have good thoughts, love.'

Shilo let out a gush of tears.

Kane leaned forward and squeezed her hand.

'I know this is tough. But I need to know what happened to my daughter,' he said, with short, sharp breaths.

Shilo's face twitched as she wiped her eyes. 'I promised not to tell. She made me promise.'

'I get that,' Kane said through his teeth, his voice dry and throaty. 'But this is serious now, love, awright?'

Shilo nodded.

As she spoke, Kane only heard a few words. Only a few he could remember. 'Swanston Street, near the Vic Market. There's one of those weird statues out the front... Carlisle, the footy player...'

When she had told him all she knew, Kane looked at Shilo, his fingers tight inside his hands. 'Thank you, love,' he whispered, staring at the table in front of them. 'Now I think you'd better go.'

Chapter 49

Max drove back from the police station with his window slightly down, night air brushing over his face. He slowed down as he got closer to where Flo had lay down on the tram track, then he parked the car. The stop was empty. Lights shone off the timetable, reflecting white in the darkness. He could see her, smiling and singing strange songs from her father's country. Talking to anyone who walked by.

He wiped his eyes and rested his head on the steering wheel. He saw Dirk's face. And Jordi. And then he couldn't see anything at all.

He had a friend at the station who he spoke to outside, on the steps. An officer he'd known for years. 'Shit, mate,' he said to Max. 'In the end, it's up to the girl if she wants to lay charges. These things are messy. It'd be handled by a specialised team.'

Max nodded and listened.

A little later he got back into the car and slowly turned the keys in the ignition. He made his way back towards the underground car park of his building, not noticing a very tall, thin man, who had been sitting near the front of the apartment block for hours. The man walked up to the entrance and hesitated, trembling in the cold night air, his body leaning against a dark, concrete wall. His hands were clenched tight inside his tracksuit pockets, his breath heavy and fast.

*

A few hours after Kane left the hospital, Jordi opened her eyes. Slowly, she turned her face towards her mother.

'Hey,' Petra said, quivering as she walked over to her daughter. 'Hey, baby.'

'I...heard...Dad,' Jordi said, the muscles inside her mouth constricted.

Petra nodded and brushed tears from her eyes. 'Yes, love.'

'Is...he...commmming back?'

‘Yes,’ Petra nodded, stroking Jordi’s hand. ‘Shhhh, no more talking.’

‘Mmmum,’ Jordi managed, ‘I’m...scared.’

*

Kane slipped in behind him Max as he scanned his pass at the entrance to the apartment block and the big glass doors swung open. Max turned to glance at Kane and then walked a little faster towards the lift. They stood side by side at the silver doors.

‘Hey, mate,’ Max greeted Kane.

Kane looked upwards and said nothing, breath flaring through his nostrils.

Max stepped in first when the doors opened, pressed the button to his level and moved to the back. Kane moved in front of him, hands folded together, staring straight ahead. His eyes were heavy with sweat.

Kane’s mobile rang, making both men jump. He got it out, phone to his ear, following Max down the long corridor.

‘You better come,’ Petra said. ‘She’s awake.’

Kane watched Max open the door to number forty-eight, and saw the door slam shut. Kane walked up and put his hand against the smooth surface and rolled his fingers into a fist. His eyes burned with tears. He ran his finger over the ornate chrome of the numbers and stood back a little, taking a quick photo with his mobile, his hand barely able to hold it straight.

A message beeped. *Hurry.*

*

Early morning light shone across Jordi as she turned towards the window and saw a pink and orange sky. By her bed, her mother was lying in her father’s arms. A nurse checked the tubes pumping fluids into her soft body. Her left hand felt floppy. The nurse held it and gave it a gentle press. And then a charge spasmed through her skin.

She could feel it. Blood prickled as she took a deep breath and smiled. She turned towards her parents again as the nurse left the room.

Beside her on a bedside table sat a sketchpad with a page open, an image drawn across it. She saw herself, her face, turned slightly with a smile. The pencil shaded her eyes into a gentle grey. It was by her father. And Jordi knew he would be gone soon.

She ran her fingers across the paper and reached for a grey lead. With her right hand, she opened a new page and slowly drew her mum and dad with their mouths almost touching. She drew them with slow, soft edges. Her body hurt but her fingers kept moving. Petra opened her eyes and smiled at Jordi. She shifted away from Kane and stretched her body, leaning across to touch her daughter. The hospital hummed outside.

Jordi took a breath as her fingers slowly, carefully, kept moving across the page.

Exegesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

This exegesis examines representations of sexual assault in Australian Rules football¹ culture, and the silencing of women's experiences of this, both in the Australian media and Australian adult novels written between 1964 and 2013. This exegesis serves as a point of reference for the development of my own work of adult fiction, *Siren*, which features Australian sporting culture and sexual assault as a central theme. The novels explored in this exegesis are termed 'Australian football novels',² and are defined as narratives that take Australian football as their main focus or are set in this context, including those novels where football plays an integral role in the development of the central characters and/or narratology.

Throughout this exegesis, I incorporate my personal experiences as a woman involved in Australian football culture. Football has played an important part in the broader social context of my upbringing in country Victoria in the 1970s and 1980s. The continued sexual mistreatment of women within the male-dominated environment of football is a serious issue that I have seen first-hand, and thus has influenced my choice of this topic of enquiry. I have witnessed the shaming of women who are victims of sexual assault or other forms of abuse, women who are often silent because this abuse has fostered an inability to express fully a personal account of such experiences. This silence has formed part of my motivation in undertaking this thesis and its novel component, which presents the female victim's perspective on incidents of such abuse.

The following chapters present the research undertaken for the novel component of the thesis. This introductory chapter outlines my own context as researcher, the place of women in Australian football culture in the 1970s and 1980s and the role of fiction as a means of exploring sexual violence in this space. Chapter 2 explores the historical

¹ In this exegesis, I use the term 'Australian Football League' (AFL) to refer to the league, and the term 'football' to discuss the game more widely, as outlined in Section 1.1. While 'football' is also commonly used to refer to the game of soccer, when used in this thesis, 'football' means Australian Rules football specifically.

² This definition is also referred to in Section 3.5

and contemporary involvement of women in Australian football, their roles within this culture and the sexual abuse they have encountered within this environment. Chapter 3 explores in depth the fictional representations of sexual assault within Australian football novels, with a particular focus on the 1979 novel *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012) and *Eleven Seasons* (Carter 2012), a ground-breaking football novel set in 1980s Australia. Chapter 4 examines the challenges of writing *Siren*, with a particular focus on the representation of sexual assault and rape in the novel. Chapter 5 forms the conclusion to the exegesis.

1.1 Women and Australian Football Culture in the 1970s and 1980s

1.1.1 Context of the Researcher

Australian football originated in Victoria as early as 1841, as recorded in colonial sketches of Australian indigenous culture,³ and has been an important sport in my family since the turn of the last century. My father, Brian, a talented sportsman, played for the New South Wales (NSW) boys' state football team in 1956. My mother Valerie's brother Bob and her father, Raymond, were well known for their football prowess in the Wimmera. My son played junior league football in a local community, and my brother John and his family have been actively involved in a South Eastern Melbourne club. My great-uncle Jimmy Matthews played for the St Kilda Football Club in the 1930s, and was also a member of the Davis Cup tennis team, before being sent off to war as a fitness instructor for the Australian Army. He was a man of talent and grace, who later in life developed sports programs for disadvantaged young people in Albury, NSW. Jimmy played football at a time that family members refer to through tales of sporting folklore for being brutal, where rules were lacking and only the tough survived. Through these strong family connections to the game, I understand the

³ Dr Patrick Greene, Chief Executive Officer of the Museum Victoria, announced in 2007 that a sketching of what might be the earliest game of football in the state had been discovered, involving Indigenous Australians kicking around a ball made from Typha roots, near the settlement of Mildura. The image was created by Gustav Mützel in 1862 and is based on observations made by Victorian scientist William Blandowski while watching the game during an expedition to the Murray River in 1857 (Museum Victoria 2007).

important role that football plays within communities and its tremendous value in the promotion of health and social connections—but I am also acutely aware that the experiences of women in this culture need a voice.

Growing up in country Victoria (part of regional Australia), I observed first-hand the integral, supportive roles women played within sporting culture, particularly football, both as spectators and active volunteers in the club rooms and fundraising circles. For decades, the women in my mother's family were die-hard supporters of the Rupanyup Panthers Football Club, a team belonging to a small country town in the Wimmera. The women organised club functions and cooked food for social gatherings. From the 1950s, a local woman known affectionately as 'Mrs Isbel' would wash the red-and-blue woollen uniforms, drying them in front of her open fire. She did this for over 30 years. In my hometown in North East Victoria, and in the surrounding towns, I recall women huddling in groups and cheering on their husbands, boyfriends or sons as they ran across muddy ground on icy winter mornings. Women could also be found behind the scenes, busily wiping benches or serving up hot dogs and chips in the club canteen. On fundraising evenings, such as 'pie nights', it was often the women who would organise the catering aspects of the event, including washing the dishes once the festivities were over.

Where I grew up, football was about people coming together as a community and functioned as a distraction from the concerns and rigours of daily life. During my teenage years in the 1980s, Saturdays were spent with other girls watching our heroes play football after we had finished our netball games. In the evening, after the football was over, we would attend parties with the players, where we would stand in paddocks with drums full of fire and cans of UDL (a type of alcopop, a pre-mixed alcoholic drink). We would hear stories from the match, such as who kicked the most goals or who fought the hardest on the ground. We enjoyed watching the young men play, but never questioned our role as onlookers and background figures.

Spectatorship was an integral part of how I recall young women contributing to football culture during this period. They watched. They worshipped. That said, if they ended up in the back of someone's ute at one of the after-game parties, they were labelled by some groups of young men as 'sluts'. Monday mornings at local high

schools would often see the weekend's events retold in whispers, with a focus on the young women. These stories were all too often about what 'she did'—the question 'Did she really want to?' was never asked. There were also stories about bucks' nights at the football club, which often involved sex with strippers while team mates cheered on. I remember two young men discussing a bucks' evening where the groom had sex with the stripper while the brother of the bride was present. They recalled this evening with laughter. It seemed that the more misogynistic the behaviour, the more a player was revered by the rest of the team, with him becoming a 'legend', a 'classic', a 'pisser'. I would like to note that while there were many local young men who did not behave this way and treated females with respect, those men who followed these misogynistic codes of behaviour created a difficult space for young women.

1.1.2 Role of Women in Australian Football Culture—Know Your Place

This footballing world, which as a young woman I was so desperate to be a part of, is connected to a broader national sporting culture that often exemplifies a predetermined gender dichotomy of dominance and subordination. Writing in the late 1980s, Lois Bryson (1987, p. 349) considers this dichotomy as follows:

Sport is a crucial arena in which masculine hegemony is constructed and reconstructed. The effects of sporting activity are usefully analyzed in terms of two major dimensions. Those that relate directly to men, and those that serve dominant interests less directly, though no less effectively, through inferiorizing women and their activities. Processes through which sport directly supports male dominance are ones which associate males and maleness with valued skills and the sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence. Sport celebrates the dominant form of masculinity, though it must be noted that as well as women, some men are also excluded.

Bryson believes that sport fosters male aggression and misogyny, and positions women in the background, precluding them from active participation. She argues that sport is a means of worshipping the very elements of masculinity that reaffirm male dominance and render women inferior. Moreover, she stresses that both women and men are isolated within this culture. Murray Drummond further supports these claims in 1995, eight years after Bryson's article, suggesting that there had been little to no

progress in terms of how codes of masculinity dominated sporting culture. Drummond (p. 4) suggests that:

[i]n the sporting arena, the majority of men have been perceived as traditionally demonstrating such masculine traits as the development of character, violence, aggression, and domination over subordinate groups. Included in these subordinate groups are women, homosexual men, weaker men and some ethnic groups.

In Australia, football players are expected to be tough and resilient and not ‘play like a girl’, an expression that is often used around football grounds and one I have heard people using within a crowd of spectators. This expression implies that to play sport like a woman is to play badly and without prowess or stamina. Sadly, expressions such as this seem to reflect the prevailing attitudes of much of Australia’s sporting culture. Further, these belief systems and attitudes are firmly embedded in Australian culture, and appear to disconnect women and men through the application of codes of masculinity. When these codes are applied in football, for example, they result in ‘maleness [being] repeatedly linked with skill, strength, aggression, and often violence’ (Bryson 1987, p. 357). During my own adolescence, I can remember that the boys at school who did not play sport and who were not physically strong were sometimes labelled ‘nerds’ or ‘poofers’ (the latter meaning a homosexual or effeminate man), or were subject to other forms of ridicule by the athletic young men who excelled in sport.

1.1.3 Role of Women in Music—Girls Just Want To Have Fun

While my female friends and I were unable to verbalise the reality of the misogynistic attitudes and sexism within this space, as adolescent women from regional Australia we began to idolise pop-stars who were seemingly empowering us with anthems such as Cyndi Lauper’s (1983) ‘Girls Just Want to Have Fun’. However, these messages of female ‘power’ were contradicted by the essentially erotic appeal of the singers, their music videos and the music itself—features of the music industry that appeared to reinforce a reality that a woman’s worth was still measured by her sexual desirability. This was shown most clearly in music videos featuring scantily dressed female singers—one example being Madonna’s famous cone-bra underwear, which she first

wore in her 'Open Your Heart' music video in 1986. Although women in Australia were benefiting from the battles fought by feminists in the 1970s—a struggle that achieved enormous shifts towards equality for women in terms of the workplace, education, domestic surroundings and health—the rural environment of the 1980s maintained entrenched ideals of gender roles that remained unchallenged (Brentnall 2011).

Despite the presentation of female power by pop-star role models, these global forms of entertainment often proved illusory in their purported ideals because they failed to engage with and support the reality of the struggles women faced in their daily lives. For example, after watching Madonna and Lauper music videos and listening to lyrics about the free expression and independence of women, it might have appeared that women were in control of their lives during the 1980s. However, what I witnessed during this period was women often being treated as secondary to men, particularly in cases of sexual assault. Within the sporting environment that I was engaged in, sexual assault was never referred to as 'rape', but rather as an event involving 'someone ending up in the back of someone's car' or 'just one of those nights'. By euphemising the term 'rape' in this way, football culture perpetuated social and judicial indifference towards offenders, who were not confronted or held to account for their actions. A young woman who 'allowed' herself to end up in such a situation was seen as 'silly'; sometimes she was even considered responsible for the sexual abuse she suffered.

At this time, the lack of legal frameworks that applied specifically to the sexual abuse of women contributed massively to the silence, not only of the offender but more importantly of the victim. For example, until 1996, 'date rape' was largely an unreported crime in Australia and statistics on date rape incidents were not widely available until the release of an Australian Institute of Criminology report by Laura Russo (2000).⁴ The report indicates that it is difficult to present an accurate account of incidents of date rapes since only a small minority of victims reported the crimes to

⁴ Laura Russo (2000), Research Officer at the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, has defined date rape as a form of sexual assault that involves a personal connection between the victim and offender, which may take place during a first date or in an established relationship.

the police. Further, such incidents are only officially recorded if police believe there is enough evidence to support the claims. The paucity of statistics on date rape up until 1996 indicates that these crimes were severely underreported, and more importantly, that date rape was not considered sexual violence, thus increasing the silence of women regarding the abuse they suffered.

1.1.4 Role of Women in Film—*The (Boys') Club*

It is not surprising that young women in the 1980s were unable to speak about their experiences of sexual assault when there was such a limited exploration of the mistreatment of women in both football and in the wider community. An example of these limitations is *The Club* (1980), a popular film at the time of its release that was seen as a cutting-edge dramatisation of Australian football, as well as a celebration of a heroic, masculine Australian male archetype. The film is preoccupied with celebrating the Australian 'rugged male', as the hit song from the film, 'Up There Cazaly' (Brady 1979), demonstrates. The song became an incredibly popular anthem in the 1980s, blaring from television sets, cassette players and car stereos (*The Australian* 2013). The chorus from the song galvanises a decidedly male audience: 'Up there Cazaly, in there and fight...show 'em your might'.

The action of *The Club* (1980) revolves around the male characters, while the women are very much background figures. One female character, a stripper, is punched for rejecting the sexual advances of football club president Ted Parker, the assault leading to his forced resignation. The woman, who does not speak for the entirety of the film, has the story of her assault told only through tabloid reports, and thus, the audience is not given a sense of her own personal experience. This treatment presents the victim as a powerless and faceless individual in this sporting environment. The film also presents clear misogynistic attitudes from its male characters towards women, including demeaning labels such as 'slut', 'sheilas' and 'trollop', though viewers are not given access to how the women being discussed feel about their abuse, further highlighting the silencing of women in football culture. Film critic Adam Hartzell (2014) acknowledges that *The Club* is part of a tradition in film history that uses female characters primarily to emphasise the masculine identity of male characters. He notes

that, 'Women in this film are meant to reinforce the masculinity that sport defines through the objectification of the stripper.'

Much like the stripper character from *The Club* (1980), in the world of country football of my adolescence, women involved in drunken sexual encounters that escalated beyond their consent were silent victims and served to reinforce the masculinity of the football players who committed these acts of sexual abuse. The acceptance of this behaviour and 'sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence' by the players clearly indicated that women were seen as inferior to men (Bryson 1987, p. 349). When I think back to conversations I had with young women unable to take charge in these incidents, I remember some blaming themselves for their assault because they were inebriated at the time, and others not wanting to acknowledge (or attempting to forget) their assault by claiming that their experience was clouded by the effects of alcohol. Despite this, there appeared to be a constant theme in their recollections: their submission reinforced masculine identity. 'He forced me', they often said, or 'I was out of it'. Once, a girlfriend relayed a terrifying incident where she kissed a guy at a party and then had to fight him off as he took her affection towards him as a signal that she would 'go all the way' and became very aggressive. Tales of these weekend scenarios provided ample opportunities for gossip. If a woman had been known to have sex with more than one player from the club, she was referred to as a 'root-rat', a title that was never applied to the young men. Alleged events of sexual abuse were easily and quickly communicated and rumours spread quickly via word-of-mouth.

1.2 Fiction as a Method to Explore Sexual Violence in Australian Football

In addition to the negative female stereotypes inherent in music and film culture during my adolescence in the 1980s, there were very few works of fiction that explored the abusive incidents that young women experienced in male-dominated sporting contexts (and indeed, even fewer novels with football as a central theme), and of these few, the majority were written by men. This relative absence of fiction on this issue is significant since fiction is an incredibly useful tool for excavating women's abuse.

This is because it can offer a range of points of view and can delve deeply into the experiences of women (and indeed all those affected) from different angles.

One exception to this gap, and an example of the enormous potential of fiction to effectively examine this issue, is the novel *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012), which was first released in 1979 and offers a first-hand woman's perspective on a similar male-dominated environment where women are sexually mistreated. While the novel is not concerned with Australian football per se, the novel is discussed here because it explores a popular Australian sporting culture (in this case, surfing) within which women are abused. Further, like Australian football, surfing is associated with masculine archetypes, in this case the surf lifesaver, which Drummond (1995, p. 15) argues 'is important to Australian men because it promotes muscular, suntanned male bodies which appear to be the epitome of masculinity as they are pushed to extreme levels of physical endurance'.

At the time of its initial release, *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012) was seen as controversial due to its candid fictional account of 1970s teenager 'surfy' culture in Australia, a culture which was defined by the worshipping of male surfers by adoring female fans. In an ABC television interview as part of the *Australian Story* program (Grasswell 2002), Kathy Lette reflects on the autobiographical content of the novel, a feature of the narrative that arguably made the novel more accessible and believable for young female readers, as was noted within my own female social circles. Lette says:

The boys I grew up with in Cronulla disproved the theory of evolution. They were kind of evolving into apes. It would have looked much more natural if they squatted on their haunches and groomed each other, you know. And we girls were just second-class citizens. We lived vicariously through them. We were sort of nothing more than a life-support system to a vagina, and it was terrible. But we hadn't heard anything about feminism.

As a surfie girl, you know, the terms for sex were 'rooting', 'tooling', 'plugging', 'poking', 'stabbing' and 'meat injecting'. You know, it's not exactly a Shakespearean love sonnet. And the terms for women were 'bush pigs' or 'swamp

hogs'. If you were very good-looking you got called a 'glamour maggot' (Grasswell 2002).

While Lette is referring to personal accounts of her experiences within Australian sporting culture in the 1970s, a decade before the period of my own adolescence, the sexist attitudes and misogynistic language in the Cronulla surfing gangs appear to mirror my memories of women's mistreatment in country Victoria during the 1980s.

When the film version of *Puberty Blues* (1981) was released, there was great excitement within my adolescent social circles. As young women from country Australia, we had been presented with both a novel and a film that were revolutionary in that they offered a realistic portrayal of teenager life that highlighted the oppression of young women by exposing the misogynistic hypocrisy that was maintained through exchanges between the female characters and the idolised surfer males. The film and novel also portrayed how such an environment all too often resulted in the mistreatment of young women. That said, there was still an incongruity between the representation of women's abuse in cultural products like *Puberty Blues* and the experiences and attitudes of young women in my hometown. In the novel (and film), we were exposed to depictions of women's abuse, such as the gang 'bang' (rape) suffered by Frieda Cummins, who was also referred to by the characters as a 'moll' (meaning 'slut') (Carey & Lette 2012, pp. 57, 61). In my own context, as young women we were not equipped with the social and self-awareness to express candidly our responses to such depictions, nor were we able to effect meaningful discussion about how we felt.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated by *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012), the novel form can be used to explore serious social issues while providing a clear and central voice for the experiences of women who have faced abuse. I believe that fiction, particularly the novel, is a largely untapped tool for exploring the complexities and nuances involved in issues of women's abuse in Australian football that media modes such as news reporting often do not permit. Psychologists Mar and Oatley (2008) argue that fiction has the potential to foster a deep understanding of the social world through an immersive experience that simulates real-time communication. They contest that fiction 'offers personal enactments of experience, rendering it more comprehensible

than usual' and suggest that '[n]arrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it' (p. 173).

On a personal level, I discovered the enormous potential of fiction for exploring the complexity of problematic social issues when I began writing my first novel, *Vinyl Inside* (Matthews 2008). One of the novel's central themes is the adoption of babies who had been forcibly removed from their teenage mothers during the 1950s in Australia. After the release of the novel, I received many emails and letters and shared conversations with readers who said that I had told 'their' story. A colleague at the time said emphatically, 'That was me,' and with tears in her eyes said, 'I was taken from my mother during that decade.' These personal and emotional responses to my work demonstrate the ways in which novels are able to establish broad discussions about taboo topics such as adoption and sexual violence. As a writer of fiction, I felt a responsibility to research the theme for my first novel carefully, since I wanted to ensure that factual details such as federal and state laws were correct, and that the behaviours, feelings and responses of the people involved were believable, in the sense that there needed to be some accord between personal perspectives and what had been recorded through credible historical records. What appealed to me most about the novel form was that its fictional space allowed me to delve into the complexity of an issue like adoption, particularly the way in which it affected the lives of those involved.

The incredibly rewarding experience of writing my first novel encouraged me to return to prose to explore the sexual abuse of women in football culture. In surveying published Australian novels set in the world of football, I found that these novels, with the exception of Paul Carter's (2012) *Eleven Seasons*, have largely avoided exploring the problem of sexual violence against women. Further, while *Eleven Seasons* does explore in detail and with compassion the experiences of women who support the men involved in football, the male point of view dominates. While readers gain some insight into the women's experiences, we are not privy to their internal experience. The lack of women's perspectives in Australian fiction, not only in novels about sexual violence and misogyny in sporting culture, but also in media more widely, is a problem I hope to address in the novel presented as part of this thesis, *Siren*. Thus, *Siren* aims to give space for women's experiences of abuse to be heard. While those of us who

are not part of football culture can only observe from the outside, fiction allows readers to imagine themselves within the culture, and can provide the opportunity for readers to understand the complexities inherent in an environment that normalises and even encourages the abuse of women.

1.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the place of Australian women in football culture during the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, their mistreatment and experiences of sexual violence, and what I witnessed of this abuse during my adolescence in the 1980s. This chapter has also reviewed the role of fiction as a mode of representing these events, and has argued for the ability of fiction to valorise the perspectives and experiences of women in Australian literature.

The following chapter discusses the historical and contemporary involvement of women in Australian football, their roles within this culture and the sexual abuse they have encountered within this environment.

Chapter 2: Women in Australian Football

—The Illusory Embrace

2.1 Introduction

‘Football is a barometer of gender in/equality in Australia’ (Hindley 2006, p. 26).

This chapter explores women’s involvement in Australian football since its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, and aims to establish a historical context for the following chapters and the novel component of this thesis. This chapter documents some of my research in this area, including: the history of women’s involvement and their interest in the game, the wider involvement of women as supporters, women’s positions in executive roles, women as players of football, footballer’s wives and partners, the issue of sexual assault against women, sexism within football language, the AFL’s attempts to address these issues and finally, academic perspectives about women’s role in the sport. My hope has been to develop a deeper historical understanding of how women participate in football culture and, more importantly, how the roles of women are perceived within this culture.

2.2 Historical Context of Women’s Involvement—Always on the Sidelines

Since its origins in the 1840s, women have played a significant role within football culture in a variety of ways. Sports science researcher and media commentator Rob Hess (1996, p. 357) suggests that women began establishing a significant presence at these early matches:

In July 1859, less than twelve months after the first recorded game of football in Melbourne, *The Herald* reported that ‘a large contingent of the fair sex’ were in a crowd of two thousand people who had gathered on a Saturday afternoon to watch a match of the fledgling code.

The presence of women at football games in the nineteenth century was also captured by the poet Bill Newing (cited in Hutchinson 1983, p. 18), one of whose untitled poems

was first published in *The Australasian* newspaper in 1873. This poem is one of the few examples of literature from this period that refers to women as an important part of the crowd:

*Around the boundaries hundreds of spectators stand,
The scene presented to us strikingly beautiful and grand,
Our men are as tough as trees with deeply earthed roots
And the ladies quite mutually pronounced them really
'Killing' in their knickerbocker suits.*

Newing's references to the 'ladies' at the game, and the way in which they 'mutually pronounced' as attractive the 'tough as trees' male players, indicate that women at this time were both admirers of the physical aspects of the game and to a similar extent keen observers of the men. The word 'mutually' suggests that there was a considerable number of women at the game, rather than only a few individuals.

There are conflicting representations of female spectatorship at games stretching from football's colonial beginnings in the mid-1800s right until the 1990s. Sandercock and Turner (1981) argue that, from the very origins of the sport, women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds were spectators and the game continued to appeal to women of all ages as it moved into the 1920s. In contrast, historian Geoffrey Blainey (cited in Hindley 2006, p. 38) fails to acknowledge the presence of women in the early colonial years of the game, and as such is criticised by Hindley (2006, p. 38):

Blainey states that the number of spectators at football matches were between 2,000 and 10,000 depending upon which teams were playing. Crowds were made up of 'boys,' 'young men' or gender neutral 'adults'...Blainey does not mention women as spectators until page seventy seven where the first reference to women spectators is made to [the] South Australian Governor and his wife who 'sometimes attended', another woman attached to a man.

While there is a lack of attendance data from this early period, the most recent report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) states that from 2009 to 2010 there were 1.7 million men and 1.2 million women who attended AFL matches. These statistics show that women today have an important presence as spectators at football games.

2.2.1 Women and Australian National Identity

It is perhaps not surprising that there is little historical data concerning the numbers of women at football matches, when attitudes and behaviours directed towards women in football culture have been and continue to be derogatory, and in many cases, abusive, as will be discussed later. Moreover, it can be argued that the consequent suppression of women's voices and experiences are connected to how women have occupied a position in the background with regard to national identity in general. Kay Schaffer (1988, p. 2) argues that, throughout Australian history, human endeavour is celebrated as a 'white, Western and predominantly male activity'. Given that history in this context has been largely androcentric, it is perhaps unexceptional that from football's colonial beginnings there is a lack of data reflecting the presence of women at matches.

The conception of nationhood as a strictly male discourse is exemplified by the celebrity and sporting figures celebrated in society. These are almost exclusively male, and include the football or cricket hero, the Anzac battler and, reaching further back into Australia's colonial history, what journalist Francis Adams (cited in Schaffer 1989, p. 7) called the 'true Bushman' or 'the man of the nation'.⁵ These figures symbolise a male-dominated national identity and establish a sentimental worshipping of masculinity as a means of identification, which has become ingrained in Australian cultural understanding. Such worshipping of masculinity leaves little room for women, or for women to be seen as heroic, other than within the role suggested by Thompson (1990, p. 135), whereby women 'service the leisure of others' in the sense that 'the domestic labour done by women provides space for others to participate in sport and contributes directly to their sporting effectiveness'.

This issue of male-dominated nationhood has also been addressed by retired Australian Army chief David Morrison, who spoke recently at a public event for White Ribbon Day, which addresses the broader social issue in Australia of violence against women.

⁵ The familiar Australian military legend of the manly Anzac soldier is largely derived from the romantic imagery of the Australian bush. The events at Gallipoli in 1915 allowed writers, both English and Australian, to associate the Anzac soldier with the rugged bushman who was tough and athletic enough to cope with the hardships of warfare (Dwyer, 1997).

Morrison argues that ‘while the Anzac story was a “great Australian narrative”, the stories of women and others who were not white males needed to be included’ and that failure to do so could compound ‘this idea that Australia is a man’s country’ (Ireland 2014). Morrison also expresses his concerns that when recognising the ‘extraordinary bravery’ of those who fought in World War I, there is a danger of placing ‘too much emphasis [on] the masculine over the feminine’. Morrison’s comments are a reminder that male hero worshipping in Australia has always had repercussions for women, which can be seen in the way women in football have historically remained in the background.

2.2.2 Women as Spectators—Women Watching

Having established a lack of actual figures concerning the crowd participation of women in Australian football, the nature of women’s interest in the sport is even more difficult to discern. Hess (1996) notes that the media portrays the attendance of women at football games as being motivated often by the social appeal of football matches. He suggests that fashion at the games historically attracted much interest among women, since it reflected the development of ‘Melbourne’s social scene’ (p. 360). Hess theorises that football matches might have offered the genteel women of the Victorian era a voyeuristic opportunity to view a scantily clad male body, but also acknowledges that many women spectators attended matches because they derived a legitimate pleasure from ‘the actual game itself’. Thus, it is dangerous for women’s interest in football to be trivialised as merely ‘a discussion of the delights of male bodies in tight shorts’ (p. 357).

In her famous treatise on the role of women in Australian society, *Damned Whores and God’s Police* (first published in 1975), the feminist writer Anne Summers (2002, p. 124) suggests that women who attend football games are there as supporters of the men watching the game (such as boyfriends or husbands), or because they ‘entertain secret sexual fantasies’ about some of the players. Almost four decades later, Hindley (2006) challenges Summers’ disregard for the various points of interest held by female spectators of Australian football, many of whom genuinely enjoy and understand the mechanics of the game. Hindley (p. 22) categorises Summers’ approach as ‘a statement worthy of the most misogynist of men’. In this way, we can read Summers’ attitude as

suggesting that the disentitlement of women as genuine fans of the game is so widespread within football culture that it includes the views not only of women but also of recognised feminist writers.

Not all female critics consider the role of women in football in the same way. Sandercock and Turner (1981) argue that women have had a positively active place as spectators rather than simply as voyeurs. They suggest that woman spectators have been known to become just as excitable as male spectators during the match; some have even been noted for assaulting umpires: '[r]eports of violence at matches early in the century often indicated that a hat-pin-wielding female was the first to strike a blow at players or umpires leaving the playing area' (p. 250). I was fascinated to discover that in my own family history there is a story concerning my great grandmother, Violet Matthews, who one Saturday afternoon during the 1940s, while watching a game at the St Kilda football ground, attacked the umpire with her umbrella. There are also stories of women offering first-aid to injured players, such as the female spectator in the 1920s who was seen to climb over a fence and run onto the playing field to offer help to the injured men (Sandercock & Turner 1981). These stories are a reminder that, historically, women have been active spectators of the game rather than just voyeurs.

2.2.3 Women as Organisers—Behind The Scenes

In addition to the limited awareness of women's attendance at matches, as well as an ingrained cynicism about their interest in the game, women's contributions to the sport that extend beyond crowd participation have largely been ignored. Sheedy and Brown (1998, p. 1) acknowledge the significant contributions women have made to the game—forms of participation that go beyond the remit of the spectator:

The words 'women' and 'football' don't often appear in the same sentence. Football has been seen as an exclusively male domain, its world seemingly revolving around the intensely physical nature of the game, dressing-room antics, beer and mateship. One might imagine that there aren't many opportunities for women to become a part of this world, but in reality they play many important roles.

As this quotation suggests, women's participation in football goes much further than spectatorship. Many country and suburban clubs would not function effectively

without the support of women who are heavily involved in fundraising, organising the canteen at local matches and assisting in the transport of junior players to training and games. Traditions such as pie nights, soup nights and lamington drives (the selling of food to raise funds for the club) have customarily been organised by the mothers, wives and girlfriends of the players. Often there are roster systems within football clubs that delegate domestic duties, such as washing club jumpers or cleaning the club rooms; duties that are usually performed by women who dedicate their weekends and free time to ensure the smooth operation of clubs. As Hindley (2006, p. 213) says, '[w]omen support football at a grassroots level', usually by 'work[ing] on the sidelines of the game...where most women in football are placed by its administrators, on the periphery'. Hindley (p. 216) explores this argument further in an interview with a mother of a young footballer, who describes her duties as follows:

just get him up and make him have his breakfast...Make sure the shorts and jumper and socks are there and clean. You would get there and it would be 'I've left my mouth guard at home' and it was always when we were playing away not when we were at Ernest Johnson [Oval] which was three inches from home.

2.2.4 Women as Executive Managers—It's A Long Way To The Top

Women's representation at coaching and elite organisational levels has also been limited. However, notably, in 2005, Sam Mostyn was appointed as the first female commissioner within the AFL. In an interview with sports journalist Samantha Lane (2013), Mostyn stresses that the AFL would not operate without the incredible contributions that women make to the game and that there is still an urgent need for women to take up executive positions within the AFL. Despite Mostyn's achievement, Hindley (2006) suggests that the AFL's more recent attempts to acknowledge women as key figures at executive levels are questionable, including the appointment of Mostyn herself, who is known mostly for her experience in business and her role as a leading advisor in corporate governance. Hindley (p. v) states, '[w]ithout disrespecting Mostyn, this was a tokenistic cultural shift by adding a commissioner to the existing eight males with the goal of adding further business expertise, not a new insight or strategic cultural intervention'. With regard to key decision making on an executive level, Hindley argues that we should not look further than the AFL administrative

processes themselves as clear evidence that there is much progress to be made before women's contributions within football culture are fully acknowledged.

There have been public objections from key figures in the AFL and the media against the perceived encroachment of women in AFL corporate culture. In 1996, when Elaine Canty became the first woman to be appointed to the AFL Board of Tribunal, football legend Ron Barassi made his disapproval publicly known, even though there were very few members of the commission who had indeed ever played professional football (Hindley 2006; Sheedy & Brown 1998). Barassi's comments are perhaps a reminder of the embedded misogyny within sporting institutions. Some key figures from the AFL have openly admitted to the maintenance of a 'blokey' culture that historically has not welcomed women. Veteran AFL coach David Parkin (cited in Lane 2014), for example, has confessed to participating in the prevention of women entering into the so-called 'inner sanctum' of the AFL during his time as a coach in the 1980s. Parkin also acknowledges that a 'complicated, social, psychological attitude' has played a significant role in inhibiting the rise of women in the AFL. Is this 'attitude' that Parkin refers to as 'complicated' and 'social' simply misogyny?

Lane (2014) further outlines how highly qualified women in high-level coaching and training roles have been prevented from ascending the sporting ranks due to what Parkin believes to be a 'deeply ingrained prejudice'. For example, Peta Searle, a five-time premiership player and coach with the Australian Women's League, left her position as assistant coach with Port Melbourne in the AFL because she felt herself precluded from future career promotion. As a single mother receiving a wage of only \$5,000 a year from the AFL, Searle chose to return to secondary teaching. Parkin (cited in Lane 2014) acknowledges Searle's talents as a player and coach and suggests that her departure was because she felt disillusioned about her status as a woman in football culture. Parkin further acknowledges that he did not renew a female sports dietician's contract purely because of her gender. He refers to the 'angst' that her presence caused among the players, despite being a highly qualified and skilled dietician who is now part of a medical commission for the International Olympic Committee, working as an internationally recognised leader in her field. These experiences of women highlight an apparent disconnection between expertise in sport and the obstacles they face on a

broader scale that are largely due to their gender and ingrained misogynistic elements of sporting culture.

Women in sport also experience chauvinistic attitudes within popular media broadcasting. ABC journalist Rachael Brown (The World Today 2008) reported an incident involving retired AFL player and celebrity Sam Newman, whereby he publicly humiliated sports journalist Caroline Wilson and clarified his position on the place of women in football on the popular Channel Nine program *The Footy Show*:

RACHAEL BROWN: It began with a lingerie-clad mannequin.

Shock jock Sam Newman manhandled the doll on Channel Nine's *Footy Show*, in a send-up of the wardrobe of the *Age* newspaper's chief football writer, Caroline Wilson.

The stunt outraged some of the AFL's most influential women, who called for the network to counsel the show's cast on their attitude to women. Sam Newman hit back on Melbourne sports radio station, SEN (Sports Entertainment Network), claiming the women involved had a hidden agenda.

SAM NEWMAN: I've never heard of more contrived posturing by hysterical desperados as those women. They're a great bunch of people. I love women, been married to two or three of them. Tell me what they've ever done in football or for football, just tell me that.

RACHAEL BROWN: And apparently buoyed by Channel Nine's rejection of his offer to resign, he ventured even further on last night's *Footy Show*.

SAM NEWMAN: People at board level being women.

GARRY LYON: What's wrong with that?

SAM NEWMAN: They serve very little purpose at board level.

(Audience laughs)

They serve very little purpose.

GARRY LYON: Why is that so?

SAM NEWMAN: What do they do?

Newman's blatant questioning of the place of women in football dismisses the entire history of the participation of women in the game, not to mention the love that thousands of Australian women share for the sport, both as spectators and players. Newman's remarks also disregard the tireless work of women, at grassroots level, that keeps amateur clubs in existence. Newman's declaration that women 'serve very little purpose at board level' is not only a clear objection to women's contributions to the sport at corporate and operational levels, but also implies a rejection of the utility and expertise of women on a much wider scale. Further, his derogatory use of the word 'hysterical' implies a Freudian view of women who are unable to control their emotions as being insane (Tesca 2012). What is more concerning is the damaging effect that Newman's comments might have had on audiences, especially in light of his prominence as a former AFL player and because *The Footy Show*, in which he is the only remaining original panellist, has an enormous following and celebrated 21 years of programming in 2014 (Pierik 2014). The promotion of these kinds of views through mainstream media only emphasises the need for more acknowledgement of women in Australian sport. Further, as *The Footy Show* example shows, mainstream media portrays the chauvinistic 'humour' of the likes of Newman and others in such a way as to trivialise it as a form of light-hearted entertainment, rather than presenting it a reflection of damaging sexist attitudes.

2.2.5 Women as Players—Run Like A Girl

Given that women's attendance at football games and the support women provide for local clubs has been so alarmingly unacknowledged, I was surprised to discover in my research that women were keen to play football during colonial times. My surprise is perhaps a further reflection of the ways in which women in football remain unacknowledged, even to women. During the 1800s, there was noted interest from women in playing football in Victoria. Krein (2013, Chapter 20) notes that 'in 1876, according to a magazine published by a Melbourne private school, one girl was "bold enough to suggest" that a football club be formed for girls because she saw how much "fun, enjoyment and excitement" the boys got out of the game'.

The first women's football game in Victoria is believed to have taken place as an exhibition match in Melbourne, following World War I (the exact date is unrecorded), though the idea of women playing football at a national level around that time seems to have been subject to ridicule—the male umpire for the match was rumoured to be wearing a dress (AFL 2007, p. 8). Krein (2013, Chapter 20) also discusses 'footage of a fundraising game between the Newport Aircraft Girls and the Railway Girls during World War II' that was subject to ridicule since it "was accompanied by comments such as "Goody!", "Oh, Grace forgot her lipstick!" and, lastly, "This game is to prove that a woman's place is in the home"".

In 1981, the Victorian Women's Football League was formed, beginning with four teams. In 2012, there were 24 separate clubs listed in Victoria (Victorian Women's Football League 2014). The most recent statistics indicate that nationally over 136,000 women are counted as 'participants' in football, and that 'there are 12,000 registered female AusKick players, 5500 registered female coaches and 2000 registered female umpires' (Lane 2013), all of which are significant numbers.

The disregard for women within football culture can be considered part of a wider ignorance about woman players of sport at a national level. Dempsey (1990, p. 38) examines the role of women in a rural community setting and argues that these women are largely excluded from sporting activities as participants and do not receive the same encouragement to participate as men:

in Australia men control virtually all sport, including women's sport. In Smalltown [sic] men exclude women from many sporting activities. For example, women are eager to increase the number of golf and bowling events they play with the men but the men resist. They claim that the women's inferior play reduces the quality of their play and women's presence prevents them fully enjoying themselves.

Dempsey's argument that men in rural communities in Australia 'control virtually all sport, including women's sport' suggests that male control is derived from a deeper rejection of women and their worth—while women are viewed as supporters of men, they are not entitled to the same level of encouragement. Dempsey's study finds that although rural Australian women are involved in many auxiliary sporting activities,

these activities are constructed for the sole purpose of raising money for male participation in the sport and there is no such system in place for woman participants. There seems to be an expectation that women will provide unfaltering support and encouragement for their boyfriends, husbands and sons in sporting and community pursuits, yet such support and encouragement will not be reciprocated.

Thompson (1990) argues that there is also a lack of reciprocity in terms of praise for the sporting achievements of women. She suggests that the disparaging of women's sporting achievements is demonstrated most clearly in various forms of media broadcasts, whereby male sports occupy the central features on primetime television and radio, while women's sport, such as netball, is shown late at night and usually on non-commercial stations such as the ABC.

Of particular interest to this exegesis and its focus on the sexual assault of women by elite players is that, as Drummond (1995, p. 268) argues, 'it is commonplace for women to be perceived as inferior by the elite athletes'. Drummond suggests this is because the 'status and recognition' that elite male athletes receive is directly linked to women being ranked secondary in sport. He also asserts that it is a challenge for elite athletes to 'demarcate these notions of inferiority to the realm of sports'. Thus, the sexual assault of women by Australian football players is perhaps indicative of a wider problem within the national culture. Krein (2013, Chapter 20) also highlights this sense of privilege awarded to elite athletes when she refers to the 'Australian women's basketball team flying to the 2012 London Olympics in economy while the men's team flew business class'. Krein suggests that the secondary treatment of women in this way and others is 'surely an issue much bigger than football'.

O'Dwyer (2008) also addresses the issue of a lack of recognition for women sports players in general Australian culture. She highlights the incredible achievements of Cheryl Salisbury, a multi-talented sportswoman, an Olympian and the most successful female Australian soccer player in Australian history. However, Salisbury remains largely unknown, both nationally and internationally. While this concerns soccer rather than Australian football, the suppression of Salisbury's achievements is especially pertinent since it demonstrates the extent to which women's sporting achievements are dismissed by the media and therefore concealed from public view.

2.2.6 Women as Wives and Partners—Brownlow Babes

Another subset of women who lack recognition in the world of football is the wives and partners of AFL players; women who remain largely in the background, other than when they are paraded alongside their footballer partners and husbands at the nationally televised Brownlow Medal count. The Brownlow is a red carpet evening event that is characterised as a fashion extravaganza, which exposes these women as fit for the consumption of gossip columnists and television programs about football. The audience are invited to participate in this consumption, and are provided with a detailed review by the media on whether or not the designer dresses of the wives and partners have met expectation. Following their glamorous entrance on the red carpet, the men and women sit for several hours while the umpire tallies up the votes for the Brownlow Medal winner. During the entire broadcast, we hear nothing about the role of the women who sit waiting to hear the results; none of these women is interviewed about the support and encouragement they have provided and the sacrifices they have endured during the season. Instead, they are reduced to a grading system that establishes their worth in terms of their hair and outfit. Hindley (2006, p. 246) comments on this event as follows:

As the players tread the red carpet the waiting media ask, “How do you think you will poll? [sic] The cameras then turn to the player’s [sic] partners, and for a moment the focus is on them: the gowns, the hair, and the make-up...The “Brownlow women” are represented by the electronic and print media for their part in supporting the game in a hyper-feminine frame.

As a further way of repressing the true selves of these women and rendering them insignificant, *The Footy Show* sometimes includes short features on a footballer’s wife or partner as a tokenistic invitation to include women in their program. The presenter asks the female guest some brief questions, such as, ‘What’s his favourite food?’ and ‘Does he have any strange habits?’ These interrogations are designed to offer insight into the life of the footballer, rather than exploring the woman’s life and opinions. In addition, the women who are featured are often subject to the chauvinistic remarks and sexual innuendos of the male panellists.

2.3 Sexual Assault of Women in Australian Football—Blame Games

Having established that the participation of women in sport is ignored on the levels of spectatorship, support and active play, one might conclude that the mistreatment of women in Australian sporting culture can be categorised simply as a problem of recognition. Unfortunately, this is far from the case; sporting culture in Australia also exacerbates instances of sexual abuse against women. Not only are women the targets of sexual assault in the football environment, they are also ‘victim blamed’ and silenced in the aftermath of the violence.

While these issues are arguably entrenched in our broader social fabric and part of the widespread reality of violence against women, they are a particular problem in sporting environments. Karen Willis (cited in Summers 2003, p. 107), Executive Director of the NSW Rape Crisis Centre, states that ‘[wo]men in Australia are being gang-raped every weekend’. She further links this in some ways to Australia’s national sporting rituals, where ‘men are congregating after the cricket, after the footy, after a surf, at weekend parties’ (cited in Duff 2002).

Deb Waterhouse-Watson (2010), once a fan of the AFL, discusses the grief she experienced as an ex-member of the Hawthorn Football Club, during a time when she decided to give up football forever:

When the first highly-publicised cases of sexual assault came to my attention in 2004, I, like many others, took this loyalty a step further: I sided with the accused footballers against all outsiders, namely the women who made rape complaints against them. I recall now with shame the way I dismissed the complaints as false when I heard that, in both cases, the women had initially had consensual sex with one player. My research was in part motivated by that shame, and the desire to fully understand what I was involved with as a football fan. I also sought to explain how a series of seemingly simple newspaper narratives could so easily convince a professed feminist such as myself to dismiss women’s words out of hand.

In a later publication, Waterhouse-Watson (2013, Conclusion) suggests that despite alarming data about the number of cases of sexual abuse of women reported in football culture, players are often protected by the derogatory typecasting of women:

Despite more than twenty reported cases involving at least fifty-seven Australian football players and staff—notwithstanding the ‘dozens’ of other complainants who were reportedly ‘paid off’ to ensure their silence prior to 2003...and despite the public outrage provoked by ‘Code of Silence’ against footballers’ treatment of women, still no footballer has been convicted of sexual assault. Statistically, the likelihood of more than one of these cases being a false report is exceedingly slight, as studies from Australia and the UK have shown that only two to three percent of rape complaints are false, the same rate as for most other crimes.

Waterhouse-Watson (2013, Chapter 2) terms the kind of protection sports players receive against conviction in cases of sexual abuse as ‘narrative immunity’, and explains it as a method to protect the players ‘against being held accountable for alleged sexual assault’. Waterhouse-Watson suggests that club officials and the Australian media play a key role in influencing how sexual assault cases involving footballers are conducted. Moreover, she implies a strong relationship between these cases and the way in which the media derogates women who are involved in football by generating narratives that damage the reputations of those women who are sexually abused.

As members of the general public, we have become accustomed to reading reports of cases involving sexual assaults (such as the Milne and Montagna case and the Beams and McCarthy case, see sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2) via news and current affair programs and fast-paced social networking channels such as Facebook and Twitter. The latter in particular do not allow an in-depth examination of the serious social issues these cases present because of their limited-length text formats. The brief time that is usually allocated to reporting these incidents does not allow audiences to engage with the complexity of the cases on any meaningful level. Unfortunately, the ephemeral and virtual nature of our engagement with incidents of sexual abuse only exacerbates the suppression of the victims’ accounts. This is because media and social media outlets present a ‘guilty/not guilty’ verdict through the infotainment lens of video footage, text message transcripts and sensationalist tabloid detailing of the who, what, when and how of the so-called ‘events’ of a sexual abuse case. This is not to argue that these new media forms are themselves responsible for the generation of sexist attitudes within football; rather, they appear to act as a vehicle for existing sexist attitudes favoured by

those perpetuating such black-and-white views because they provide more compact and immediate forms of presentation.

2.3.1 Stephen Milne and Leigh Montagna

An example of a football-related sexual assault in which media coverage played a role in perpetuating sexist attitudes is a 2004 case involving St Kilda players Stephen Milne and Leigh Montagna. The initial complaint brought by two young women was that the players had forced them to unwittingly swap sexual partners while they were visiting Milne's bay-side home. One of the young women reported that she had penetrative sex with Milne while being led to believe she was with Montagna, who she had been dating for several weeks (Krein 2013, Chapter 1). When she discovered the mistaken identity, the woman claims she asked Milne to cease further penile penetration, but that he ignored her wishes. Although the footballers were initially acquitted of all charges, there was an appeal made in 2010 to re-open the case, amid allegations that there was police interference in the investigation (McMahon & Hunt 2010):

[former] Sen-Det Gladman told Nine News he was under pressure from the start, with a stream of calls from other officers telling him he would be 'looked after' if the case went away.

'She's just one of these footy sluts that runs around looking for footballers to f—,' one officer allegedly told him.

'You better do the right thing. You better make sure that this is done properly.'

That a person in a very senior position within Victoria Police was willing to make these claims on a mainstream news program says a great deal about societal and judicial prejudice against women who suffer sexual abuse. Gladman represents the voice of a male who is part of a system with ingrained prejudices against women, and yet clearly contests such attitudes. His interview on national television serves as a reminder that these issues also affect men within sporting environments, no matter how senior their position. It is also worth noting that he is now living in a remote part of Panama (McMahon & Hunt 2010), which could be seen as his attempting to escape possible repercussions for being a whistleblower. This notion of male exclusion from

sporting culture has influenced my own interest in presenting a range of viewpoints in the writing of *Siren*, particularly the character of Max, a man who also suffers due to another person's sexual assault of a woman.

Three charges of rape against Milne were ultimately discontinued on 6 November 2014, when he instead pleaded guilty to a single charge of indecent assault (Cooper 2014a). Indecent assault, according to the Law Handbook for Victoria (Fitzroy Legal Service 2014), is 'to assault someone indecently while being aware that the person is not consenting or might not be consenting. Such an assault generally involves some form of inappropriate touching of the genital area or of a woman's breasts'. However, since statutory rape is defined as the 'unlawful sexual penetration' of a non-consenting person's 'vagina, mouth or anus by a penis, or by another part of the body, such as a finger, tongue, or other object' (Fitzroy Legal Service 2014), what then did Milne do? While in physical terms there is a distinction between indecent assault and rape based on whether penetration occurs, they are both categorised as 'sexual assault' and both pertain to an individual being subjected to an act against their will. This means that indecent assault in the Milne case constitutes a form of rape. However, it seems that two separate terms exist for the same crime, whereby the conviction of indecent assault offers a far more lenient sentence.

In the *Age* court reporter Adam Cooper's (2014a) account of the court session, he highlights Milne's concession that he 'indecently assaulted the victim after she had earlier said no to sex', placing special emphasis on the fact that the woman did not consent to sex. Even setting aside the probable discontinuation of the rape charges against Milne, it is difficult to believe that a young woman would expose herself to the intensive scrutiny and harassment of the media by falsely publicly accusing Milne of an act of such a private and traumatic nature. Further, would she continue to bring such an accusation 10 years after the alleged abuse if she were simply a '[g]old [d]igger' or a '[w]oman [s]corned' (Waterhouse-Watson 2013, Introduction)? Milne's defence QC, Phillip Dunn, argued that 'Milne had "misread" the situation at the time, but his offending was reckless and spontaneous, at the lower end of the scale and no threats of violence were involved' (Cooper 2014a). It remains ambiguous what Dunn means by 'misread'; it seems unlikely that Milne could have 'misread' the young woman's

alleged negative response to Milne's advances. It is also unclear what Dunn means by 'spontaneous'; he seems to be implying that an aggressive and non-consensual sexual act that happens 'in the moment' is far from violent or threatening to the woman involved.

What is worth considering is the way in which the case is recounted in Cooper's (2014a) article. Throughout the piece, there is little reference to the claimant. In fact, Cooper refers in detail to Milne's experience from the initial accusations as if he were the victim in the case, particularly how 'Milne had been branded a "rapist" for 10 years and how his family had suffered constant anxiety and distress at the abuse'. In the opinion of Mr Dunn, '[Milne] had been condemned in the court of public opinion, which had a major bearing on his emotional, psychological and financial well-being, [and] which had extended to his wife and their children and the couple's extended families'. Much of the article refers to the effect of the case on Milne and his family, but says almost nothing about the suffering of the alleged victim, other than that the 'victim was in court and a victim impact statement was tendered, but not read aloud'. The article's focus on Milne as a football hero and the effect of the case on his private life, and the blatant dismissal of the voice of the female claimant, is an excellent example of Waterhouse-Watson's (2013, Chapter 2) 'narrative immunity', whereby the narrative techniques and language used to create the stories of sexual assault protect the perpetrator.

On November 18 2014, the case was closed when Milne appeared in the Victoria County Court and received a fine of \$15,000. Cooper's (2014b) article on the matter and the sentencing is a clear example of the ways in which the media and judicial systems favour football celebrities and give little attention to the experience of the women who allege sexual assault. In the article, Cooper focuses on Milne and his family, describing Milne as an upstanding citizen who has been victimised. He is also shown as a family man: Cooper describes Milne hugging his wife and labels him as a 'father of two'.

According to Cooper's (2014b) account, Judge Michael Bourke said 'he took into account Milne's good character, guilty plea [and] his relative youth at the time of the offence—he was 24'. This reference to the age of the defendant could be seen as

suggesting that a 24-year-old man is not capable of understanding a young woman when she says she does not want to have sex. This consideration of age seems particularly irrelevant since Milne is over 18 and can legally engage in sexual intercourse, as well as vote and drive a car. The judge is quoted as saying that the fine he imposed should act as a ‘substantial punishment’ and would serve ‘to remind the community that sexual offending against women would not be tolerated’. Given that indecent assault is a crime punishable by law and can lead to a jail sentence (Fitzroy Legal Service 2014), a fine of \$15,000 seems grossly unsubstantial, especially when considered the wages that AFL players receive.⁶ Further, Bourke also states vaguely that ‘sexual offending against women would not be tolerated’, but does nothing to emphasise the criminal nature of these attacks; these final remarks seem contradictory in light of the lenient sentence he has imposed.

It is important at this point to remember that, during a court appearance, Milne admitted to indecent assault and that the woman in question did not consent to sex. Bourke acknowledges Milne’s concession by stating that ‘[t]he victim did not consent to the act’ and that ‘she had been consistent on the night she didn’t want unprotected penetrative sex’ (Cooper 2014b). Despite both Milne and Bourke’s acknowledgement that the young woman was violated against her will, Milne has avoided imprisonment with a remarkably lenient sentence. Bourke also remarks to Milne that ‘[y]our act... was a non-violent but physical attempt to persuade her to have penetrative sex... and overcome her clear wish and right not to do so’. While the young woman claims rape (sexual penetration against her will) took place and Milne claims it was instead indecent assault, both are considered a sexual attack in legal terms. The Victorian Criminal Charge book defines assault as, ‘the direct or indirect application of force to the body of, or to the clothing or equipment worn by, a person’ (Victoria Legal Aid 2013). If under Victorian law, ‘assault’ pertains to ‘force’, then it seems incorrect for Bourke to state clearly that Milne’s attack was ‘non-violent’. Further, Bourke’s statement regarding Milne’s ‘physical attempt to persuade her to have penetrative sex’ implies the use of force. In addition, if this ‘physical attempt’ at persuasion was ‘non-

⁶ The average AFL salary in 2013 was \$265,179, up from \$251,559 in 2012 (Schmook 2014).

violent', then one wonders why there were claims of visible evidence (according to her mother) of the young woman's trauma post-event (Portelli 2013).

According to Cooper's (2014b) article, the judge acknowledged that 'Milne had been intoxicated at the time' of the alleged rape, but that 'he accepted defence submissions that the offending was "unplanned and spontaneous"'. When Bourke remarks that the 'offending was out of character', he is likely to be referring to the fact that Milne had no record of committing previous crimes of this nature, and also, perhaps, that it was simply just 'one of those nights' when young men have too much to drink. Bourke also states that he hopes that Milne will now be able to get a job, which indicates that in his opinion Milne is as much a victim of the assault he has pleaded guilty to as the young woman who has had to endure the humiliation of media scrutiny for 10 years. Again, Bourke's comments can be scrutinised in that they fail to justify the leniency of his sentencing. If an assault or rape is 'unplanned', its trauma for the victim is not lessened. Further, Bourke's use of the word 'spontaneous' implies that Milne's actions were accidental, thus absolving him of guilt. Bourke remarks that 'his task was to apply a proportionate sentence in the case, given both Milne and the victim had for years been subjected to the stress of publicity that surrounded the case'. This again dissolves the notion of Milne as the accused and positions him as a victim. While the judge does note that the 'offending and resultant publicity had had a considerable effect on the woman's work, social and family life and that she had felt both judged by the public and that she was the at the centre of an injustice', this is the sole reference made in the article to the young woman's suffering, which prefers to focus on the effect of the case on Milne and his family. Cooper's article ends with a reference to the ex-AFL star's supporters, 'including his father, brother and agent', and does not include details about the young woman's background nor her supporters. This is another example of where the woman's experience and her story appear irrelevant.

The imbalances indicated above are evidence of the way in which women involved in cases of sexual abuse in football are rendered voiceless within media-generated discussion, due to prominent focus given to the players (Waterhouse-Watson 2013). Moreover, Waterhouse-Watson suggests that the narrative form that the media use to report incidents of a serious nature encourages the silencing of the victim's claims

while protecting footballers through a dialogue that prevents the testimonies from being viewed as recognisable evidence. For example, to say that the young woman ‘did nothing wrong’ does not have the same resonance as to state ‘the young woman was violated against her will’, since it makes the assumption that women are to blame for the abuse they suffer rather than treating them with compassion.

Sports journalist and ABC radio commentator Geoff Lemon posted an angry response to the outcome of the Milne case in an article for ‘The Roar’, a leading sports opinion website that features professional writers and encourages commentary from fans, boasting ‘56,000 comments from about a million and a half visitors per month’ (The Roar 2014). In the opening lines of his article, Lemon (2014) says:

It’s hard to decide what’s weaker: Stephen Milne’s behaviour for the past 10 years, or the supposed punishment it received. In being sentenced for indecent assault, Milne received no criminal conviction, just a monetary fine. You know, like a big parking ticket, except that instead of parking it involved sexual assault.

Lemon’s scathing remarks regarding the outcome of this case supports the contention that women in football culture are often silenced, even when they are abused. Lemon comments that ‘[s]omehow the story, the focus and the court’s concern became more about the offender than the victim’, again supporting Waterhouse-Watson’s (2013) notion of ‘narrative immunity’. Lemon draws attention to what the young woman might have endured during 10 years and that:

the woman [Milne] assaulted would have had to live with it. Just as she must have lived with him popping up on television sets at pubs or at friends’ houses. How distressing it would have been, unable to escape someone you’d been wronged by, nor the knowledge that he was being lauded.

Following on from the previously mentioned claims by the former detective on the Milne case, Gladman, Lemon highlights that Milne’s ‘club allegedly tried to sink the investigation, evidence disappeared, and only the uncovering of poor police work years later revived the case.’ This suggests that there are wider issues in operation beyond the players’ involvement in terms of the broader club culture. It is also

significant that Lemon is a male sports journalist, as he represents the men in this sporting world who do not condone these crimes, like my character Max in *Siren*.

2.3.2 Dayne Beams and John McCarthy

In another case of alleged rape from 2010, a woman claimed that she was the victim of a sexual assault involving two Collingwood players, Dayne Beams and John McCarthy. The incident was believed to have occurred in South Melbourne on a Sunday morning, hours after Collingwood defeated St Kilda in the grand final rematch. In her article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, journalist Nina Funnell (2010) comments on the attitudes of some media personalities who appear to blame the victims for encouraging the assault. She refers to the response to this case by a former AFL star Peter ‘Spida’ Everitt, who suggests that the woman involved only claimed that she had been sexually assaulted because she felt guilty about having sex with the footballers. He tweeted, ‘[y]et another alleged girl, making alleged allegations, after she awoke with an alleged hangover and, I take it, an alleged guilty conscience’. Funnell also comments on Everitt’s appearance on the Channel Seven morning show *Sunrise*, when he stated that the true victims in this cases are the footballers, an argument supported by Channel Nine celebrity Kerri-Anne Kennerly, who expressed sympathy for the players who put themselves ‘in harm’s way’ when picking up ‘strays’.

Everitt’s apparent blaming of women for their experiences of sexual assault and rape can send a powerful, dangerous and inaccurate message that such abuses are not in fact violations but rather a result of a foolish woman’s choice to drink too much and go home with a footballer. Further, Everitt appears to suggest that for a woman to go home with a footballer means that she is expected to have sex with him, and that if the woman had originally consented to sleep with the footballer, at no later stage is she entitled to change her mind. This provides further evidence of the ways in which women are blamed for these assaults.

2.3.3 St Kilda School Girl

In May 2010, the ‘St Kilda school girl’ case received significant media attention when the then-unnamed 16-year-old Kimberly Duthie claimed to have slept with two AFL

players from St Kilda after they had visited her school (Beck & Khokar 2011). She also claimed to have been in a relationship with one of the men, Sam Gilbert, and declared that she was pregnant with his child (a comment she later admitted was fabricated). Of particular interest was the way in which the young woman was perceived to have manipulated the media, leading to a frenzy of stories about the network of alleged sexual relationships and debates about the protection of minors (Levy & Spits 2011). After Duthie confided in her school principal, the matter soon escalated, moving from the Education Department to public media outlets such as newspapers and television. While Duthie was at the legal age of consent, she was still a school girl and was therefore viewed as both a 'young woman' and a 'minor' (Holt 2011). Following a police investigation, there were no charges made as her contact with the players was seen to occur well after the school visit. Duthie then posted naked photos of three St Kilda players on the internet, until she was forced to remove them by a Federal Court ruling (Krein 2013, Chapter 19).

Krein (2013, Chapter 19) notes that in Duthie's life preceding the case she trained as an elite athlete:

When she was fifteen, she was the youngest mountain runner selected to represent Australia in Italy and became the Under 18 national champion. An interstate competitor for hurdles, long jump and running, she was a naive schoolgirl who ate, trained, studied and slept.

Surveying various media reports regarding the case, it is apparent that little focus is given to Duthie's impressive sporting successes. Women's lives beyond spectatorship, or in Duthie's case, sex scandal, are apparently insignificant. Journalist Stephanie Holt (2011) suggests that while '[a]dult protections rendered the young woman faceless and nameless', Duthie had a 'narrow and oppressive identity foisted on her by the wider—adult—world' and that she was reduced to 'an anonymous, sexualised body'. Krein (2013, Chapter 19) states that Duthie never wanted to be considered merely a 'sexual plaything' but rather wanted to be 'one of them'. This is perhaps evidence of how women in Australian football culture are positioned as faceless and are sexualised as objects instead of being acknowledged as individuals with the capacity for both sporting achievement and for lives beyond the sport.

The scandal developed further when Ricky Nixon, the AFL manager of the players involved in the fiasco, was reported to have become personally involved with Duthie. She claimed that he visited her hotel on a number of occasions and that they had had sex (Lalor 2011). Nixon responded by 'making threatening remarks to Duthie's school principal and showing the photos of the semi-undressed Duthie in his office to anyone who'd look' (Krein 2013, Chapter 19). As Krein details, Nixon was later investigated by the AFL Players Association, his accreditation was suspended for two years and his marriage came to an end as a result of his alleged affair. Publicly, he claimed not to have had an 'affair' with Duthie but rather 'inappropriate dealings'. Duthie was later caught up in another sex scandal when a 34-year-old police officer was 'suspended and charged with twelve offences, including sexual penetration' of the then-17-year-old Duthie, after arresting her for shop lifting (Krein 2013, Chapter 19). It was claimed by the prosecution that the constable had in fact communicated with Duthie's father, offering to connect Duthie with programs for troubled youths. Thus, both Nixon and the unidentified police officer had initially presented themselves as adults offering support to Duthie, but instead allegedly became involved with her sexually, suggesting further evidence of how women are sexualised and objectified in football and the general Australian culture.

2.3.4 Group Sex Culture

Another element of sexual abuse between AFL players and female fans is group sex. Liz Conor (2004, p. 75) argues that '[i]n male-only organisations women or images of women become sexually exchanged between members as a means to affirm and express that membership'. She suggests that these codes of masculinity are not just an aspect of football culture but part of a wider social culture in Australia: '[i]n recent studies Australia has the dubious distinction of being the only country in which men visit prostitutes in groups and have sex in each other's company' (p. 75). Kimberley Duthie reported to the *Age* that she had been involved in group sex with players from the AFL: 'There were five guys all together, three AFL players and two, like, normal people, who were just normal guys' (Milovanovic 2010). She also claimed that in a Facebook posting an AFL footballer allegedly wrote that he and the team 'all love it' and that it is just another aspect of team bonding. (Milovanovic 2010).

Delving deeper into group sex cases of sexual assault and rape, there are alarming descriptions of the immense emotional and physical pain that the women involved endured. One of the most horrifying accounts features in a transcript from an ABC television *Four Corner's* program called 'Fair Game?' (Fullerton 2004). The transcript details an incident involving a young woman called Sarah who was on holiday in London and was having a few drinks with Brisbane Lions footballers. Her boyfriend was not with her that night, though his best friend, Scott, a player on the team, was part of the group. At one point during the night, Sarah claims to have felt suddenly disorientated and the rest of her memories of the night are hazy. She remembers being in a taxi and then in a hotel. Hours later, she woke to find herself on her knees. She saw men watching her being raped—other footballers. At this stage in the transcript she breaks down and sobs.

At first, Sarah was frightened about going to the police, though after her broadcast many other women came forward with similar stories. The alleged perpetrators included several football celebrities, one of whom has been accused several times of similar crimes. The idea that someone who is only looking to consume a few drinks among acquaintances could end up in Sarah's position is frightening. It is very difficult to understand such barbaric acts of violence, in addition to the fact that the best friend of Sarah's partner was present and, according to her claims, did nothing to intervene.

In April 2014, the *Age* published an article online by the 'Secret Footballer' (2014), a regular anonymous columnist claiming to be an AFL player. The article comments on the issue of group sex within AFL culture and suggested that the practice had become increasingly uncommon since the rapid growth of social media and the creation of new levels of risk whereby information is accessed instantaneously by audiences worldwide. While the article acknowledges that group sex has been prominent in football culture, it fails to condemn sexual violation and rape. On the contrary, it attempts to justify an androcentric sense of entitlement towards women, rather than contesting sexual assault and rape as crimes:

[p]erhaps we shouldn't be surprised. These young men are elite athletes trained to excess. They've got substantial incomes—and egos to match. When they're

surrounded by a bevy of curvaceous beauties out at a nightclub, of course they'd consider that part of the spoils of a footballer's life (The Secret Footballer 2014).

2.3.5 Male Voices Speaking Against Sexual Abuse

The retired Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police, Ken Lay (2014), is highly critical in his response to the Secret Footballer's article, pointing out that the central problem in football culture is its misogynistic nature:

This article, no doubt read by many football fanatical young men, greatly saddened me. Readers of the article learnt that AFL footballers no longer readily engage in group sex or other 'sordid goings-on', compared with five or six years ago. However, this was not because of an understanding that the misogynistic behaviour and attitudes to women described in the article were inherently wrong.

Lay (2014) argues for a more respectful dialogue about women in AFL culture and the wider community:

What worries me, however, is that nowhere within the Secret Footballer's article is there an understanding that indecency against women is deeply shameful, and that women need to be treated compassionately and thoughtfully.

Much like Gladman in the Milne case, Lay contests the sexist attitudes towards women in football culture that the Secret Footballer fails to address, while reminding his readership that 'indecency against women is deeply shameful'. Lay also argues that the views expressed by the Secret Footballer 'erode community attitudes to women' and claims that violence against women is 'rampant' in Victoria. He cites statistics that are difficult to ignore:

In Victoria, for the year to March 2013, there were more than 60,000 recorded incidences of family violence. In the previous financial year, the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service received more than 50,000 calls to its crisis hotline in Victoria alone (Lay 2014).

Lay emphasises the urgent need for an open discussion to address what he considers to be a men's problem. He hopes that male attitudes can change and argues that there is a 'need to redefine the concept of manhood' by talking openly about the problem.

Australian Army chief Morrison (cited in Ireland 2014) further supports Lay's arguments by stating that statistics on domestic violence in Australia were 'terrible' and that as a society, '[w]e need to make a difference'.

There are also others challenging misogyny in football culture through an active approach to change. Paul Zappa is a former AFL educator and secondary school teacher who believes that an open discussion about misogyny is needed (NIRODAH 2013). He promotes the 'Be the Hero' program, run in partnership with The Victorian Women's Trust. The program was initially developed in 2008 to educate boys and young men about understanding violence but has since developed programs targeted at the education of young women as a means of establishing gender balance. This is an important development in regard to looking at the issue as something that broader society must deal with and contests the notion of women as helpless victims (Horeck 2004). At the time of writing, the sessions have been delivered in a number of different schools and organisations throughout Australia by the staff from NIRODAH, an organisation that provides proactive programs and counselling services that target issues of bullying and violence in schools and the wider community. The organisation sourced its name from a Buddhist term for dealing with pain through spiritual practices. The 'Be the Hero' (2014) website presents some sobering data, particularly the fact that '[s]tatistically men are the greatest cause of death and disability to women in the 14–44 age bracket and are the greatest contributor to all forms of violence against women'. Zappa, like Lay and Morrison, speaks about realities that are difficult to ignore, not only in terms of violence against women in football culture but also in terms of violence against women more generally. As Australian men, Zappa, Lay and Morrison and others are making important steps towards change by condoning misogyny and crimes of sexual abuse against women.

2.3.6 Sexism in Australian Football Language—Girl Talk

Critics of the misogynistic attitudes within AFL culture, like Lay (2014), often refer to the role of language in shaping these views. Peter Mewett and Kim Toffoletti (2008, p. 175) suggest that Australian footballers 'think that *being* footballers means that they *must* derogate women' and that '[t]his performance of masculinity manifests not only in physical actions, but [also in] the verbal discourse used by footballers to discuss

women'. In an interview with Krein (2013, Chapter 6), author and television sports commentator Tony Wilson reflects on his time as an AFL player during the 1990s and a regular social event referred to as 'camel night', which he describes as

a night where everyone was to get a hump [have sex]. Each player and club official had to invite two girls who were not your girlfriend or wife and presumably not females you cared greatly for. So you had this party with no prying eyes, no one would get in trouble with their missus and tonnes of alcohol were supplied for these girls, who were basically nobody's responsibility.

This description can be seen to exemplify how women are viewed in this environment as an entitlement. Blatantly, the language associated with these evenings encourages men to have access to a 'hump' (a slang term for sexual intercourse) with someone other than their partners; a 'camel' can have two humps, hence the suggestion of footballers having sexual access to more than one partner. I would argue that 'camel night' is also a clear example of the sexist elements of football culture that render women inferior sexual objects who seem only to be in attendance for players to access them sexually rather than as individuals with lives beyond the club.

In terms of media representation, Waterhouse-Watson (2013) argues that because most sexual assault cases are presented in the media largely as news reports, the incidences are often spuriously labelled as objectively true. She also stresses that the problem with the language of news reporting is that there is room for the influence of connotation, and that 'meaning is also produced through grammatical and narrative structures' (Chapter 7). In other words, the idealised and seemingly impartial intention of news journalism may ironically contribute to women's objectification by seeming to blame them for sexual assault. If a story, without further exploring the incident, states that a woman went home with a group of footballers, the stereotype of 'footy slut' might easily apply simply because the discussion involves the appropriate details (Krein 2013, Chapter 16). This simple approach is problematic because of the damaging cultural assumption that if a woman goes home with a footballer then she wants to have sex with him, and if she complains afterwards then she is to blame. The role of language therefore in maintaining these sexist attitudes towards women appears to be operating on a broad level that includes dialogue off the field.

A pertinent example of derogatory language on the football ground is captured by sports writer John Powers (1978) in his book *A Season with Ron Barassi*. Powers (pp. 23–24) witnessed a training session with the North Melbourne Football Club on a very warm evening in February 1978, when the temperature reached 38 degrees and players were complaining about the uncomfortable conditions:

There will be no concessions to the heat tonight!’ Barassi told the players defiantly...[‘]don’t whine like a pack of girls about the weather...nobody’s going to get away with being a weak sister and doing it easy tonight!’

Barassi uses the terms ‘girls’ and ‘sister’ as points of reference to establish what he appears to consider an intrinsic relationship between femininity and weakness. Forms of language such as this that belittle and derogate women are pervasive in the world of sport and elsewhere. For example, Krein (2013, Chapter 1) refers to her experience at a pub trivia night in Melbourne where a question was asked about the name of the girl who died of a drug overdose while in a hotel with football legend Gary Ablett. In response, someone called out ‘Alisha Horan’ and the crowd cheered. Krein notes the way in which the incident was relayed through a disturbing pop-cultured means of delivery that disparages the girl’s tragic circumstances; the calling out of the young woman’s name contributes to the belittling of women through verbal discourse. Horan was only 20 years old when she shared a concoction of alcohol and heroin with Ablett (provided by him) during a binge that lasted for several days. Tragically, Horan lost her life, while Ablett received a conviction for drug offences and was charged a fine of \$1,500. The coroner announced that Ms Horan had ‘become enmeshed in a culture of alcoholism and drug taking with her football hero’ and had been ‘partying out of her league’ (*The Age* 2003). These comments suggest that Horan was partially responsible for her own death because she made a conscious choice to carouse with her ‘hero’, remarks that dismiss the fact that she was a vulnerable young woman whose first-hand experience of abuse has been pushed aside.

2.3.7 Institutional Attempts to Address the Treatment of Women—Respect and Responsibility

Another way in which the voices of mistreated women in football culture have been ignored is by a lack of activity and initiative from key bodies and organisations within football. In 2005, the AFL (2014) presented their new ‘Respect and Responsibility’ policy as a ‘commitment to addressing violence against women and to work towards creating safe, supportive and inclusive environments for women and girls across the football industry as well as the broader community’. The policy includes an education program especially for players, and advocates the following goals:

Increase players [sic] understanding of how sexual assault, violence, harassment and abuse can affect the lives of women and girls.

Provide practical information that assists players to understand the meaning of consent, and identify situations that have the potential to go wrong.

Provide players with information that may assist them to build and maintain social relationships with women that are healthy and respectful (AFL 2014).

Waterhouse-Watson (2013) is critical of the program, claiming that focuses on the AFL’s actions taken in addressing the issue rather than exploring the issue itself. It is interesting that the development of such a program can itself function to suppress women’s mistreatment in this culture. The very fact that young men need to be educated on how to behave appropriately towards women is a reminder of the culture of misogyny that exists on a broader social scale (Lay 2014).

In their report for the AFL, ‘Building Cultures of Respect and Non-Violence—A Review of Literature Concerning Adult Learning and Violence Prevention Programs with Men’, Sue Dyson and Michael Flood (2008, p. 5) present the following findings:

Primary sexual assault prevention aims to lessen the likelihood of sexual violence through education, attitude and behaviour change strategies. One of the rapidly emerging areas of violence prevention concerns behaviour change education with men, which is informed by three insights:

1. prevention efforts must address men because largely it is men who perpetrate this violence;
2. constructions of masculinity play a crucial role in shaping sexual assault and domestic violence; and
3. men have a positive role to play in helping to stop violence against women.

Violence prevention efforts have been developed for particular institutional and cultural contexts, including college fraternities, sports, and the military, because of reports of high rates of violence against women.

Despite the introduction of the aforementioned ‘Respect and Responsibility’ policy, and despite the recommendations made by Dyson and Flood (2008), who promote a preventative approach to violence against women in football culture, the sexual assault and mistreatment of women by footballers continues at an alarming rate. There have now been more than 27 cases reported involving 57 footballers and club officials, and not one has resulted in an AFL footballer being found guilty of rape (Waterhouse-Watson 2013).

2.3.8 Institutional Codes of Silence

Although the AFL is seen to be making changes through the development of programs that promote respect towards women, the fact that the frequency of sexual abuse cases has increased over the past decade suggests that there is still much progress to be made (Waterhouse-Watson 2010). Part of the problem is that AFL players themselves appear unable to express their views regarding incidents of sexual abuse due to contractual boundaries that restrict a candid dialogue with the media, not to mention the unspoken codes of masculinity that protect the men involved from criticism and prosecution (Hindley 2006). One example of the way in which a football club ‘manages’ claims of sexual abuse was demonstrated in 2009 by the former Carlton Football Club president John Elliot, who openly admitted that there were a number of women who claimed to have been raped by Carlton players during his time in charge (Tedeschi 2010). Elliot states:

I think we had people who claimed to be raped by our players—women they were, not men—on four or five occasions...Not once did any of those stories get into the press because in those days we probably had only twenty people writing in the press and they weren't interested in all that sort of nonsense. We'd pay the sheilas off and wouldn't hear another word (Tedeschi 2010).

Elliot is surprisingly open about the way in which the club obstructed justice. As he says, 'the sheilas' are paid off to ensure that prosecution cannot proceed, thus protecting the club from disrepute. The \$5,000 of so-called 'hush' money was designed to keep stories of women's abuse out of the papers and away from court transcripts. Even more disturbing is the fact that Elliot and his television co-hosts laughed about the issue in a derogatory manner on their Channel 31 football program (Tedeschi 2010). At no stage did Elliot or the Carlton Football Club make any form of public apology, either for the obstructions put in place by the club or for Elliot's demeaning behaviour and use of misogynistic language. In the days following Elliot's remarks, AFL's Chief Executive Andrew Demetriou announced that these remarks did not represent the AFL's views on the matter, though the AFL did not take any action nor was there an investigation (Tedeschi 2010). Further, the AFL did not communicate with the alleged victims and dismissed the revelations as a police matter.

In one particular case related to the Carlton Football Club, a woman who claimed to have been raped by a Carlton player three days after the 1999 Grand Final wrote a letter to the *Herald Sun*, saying that she had not in fact received any 'hush' money, nor was it ever offered (Tedeschi 2010). According to her statement, she initially agreed to have sex with a Carlton player but then woke hours later to discover another Carlton player having sex with her without her consent. The former Victorian Police Commissioner Simon Overland conceded that the police investigation had been 'botched' and consequently the case was closed. At no stage did the victim name the players she claimed had perpetrated the crimes, possibly because she did not feel comfortable revealing their identities, another example of the silencing of women in football culture. The fact that the former Chief Commissioner admitted that the investigation was mishandled could be seen as further evidence that women are not considered worthy of rights and protections within this space, or that failure to provide them is not particularly shameful.

Tedeschi (2010) is scathing about how Elliot's remarks were handled by officials, the AFL and the media at large, particularly in light of the above case of abuse. Tedeschi refers to the Carlton Football Club's reneging of responsibility by dismissing Elliot as a representative of the club since he is from a different era; however, as the 1999 case indicates, these attitudes are pervasive. Further, in the 1999 case the AFL did not offer any help to the claimants nor were they investigated to determine if hush money had been paid. Also, there was no media investigation into the identities of the persons involved, and no public condemnation of the sexual violence that took place. As the above shows, one could argue that even if an AFL player wanted to oppose the sexual abuse of women, there are powerful systems of behaviour and belief in place that impede such resistance. These systems include the overarching misogyny of executive and well-respected sporting figures, as shown by Elliot's remarks, as well as ingrained codes of masculinity and stringent legal practices that suppress an open dialogue about cases of sexual abuse against women (Waterhouse-Watson 2013). All of these systems facilitate the concealment of claims of sexual abuse and contribute to the detriment of those men who are compelled to express the truth about such abuse.

2.4 Academic Perspectives on Women in Australian Football

For such a prominent cultural activity in Australia, it seems bizarre that sport garners such little interest from 'serious analysts' (Bryson 1987, p. 349). This is especially true if one considers how little attention football has received from academics, especially since football is such a prominent part of Australian culture.

Within the academic literature, there are contrasting perspectives about the significance of women in football and their abuse in this environment. Some of these perspectives fail to recognise both the important roles that women play in the sport and their pervasive mistreatment. James Mangan and John Nauright (2000, p. 114) stress that it is not only the football clubs and the media that have contributed to 'narrow perspectives' regarding women in football culture but also academia. For example, Sandercock and Turner (cited in Mangan & Nauright 2000, p. 114) have confessed that in their 1981 non-fiction book on the history of football, sections relating to women were given an inferior position in the appendix and that '[i]t somehow seemed

out of place in the body of this work to say anything much about the role of women in Aussie Rules'. This suggests that the voices of women and their mistreatment are not seen as deserving from all facets of sport, culture and indeed the broader academic community.

Thompson (1990) explores how sport places enormous emphasis on the body and how this emphasis contributes to the exclusion of women in football as described by Sandercock and Turner (cited in Mangan & Nauright 2000). Thompson suggests that the physical dominance of men within this culture might have justified their dominance of women on a larger scale. She considers the violence and power that are inherent in the male sporting world as reinforcing the notion that men are stronger than women, hence the perception that men are naturally dominant in sport. Sociologists Ian Burgess, Alan Edwards and James Skinner (2003) remind us that the conception of sport was not based on a natural predetermination but was engineered as a social construct. Thompson's argument about the connection between football's emphasis on physical strength and its glorification of masculinity might also be considered part of this social institution. In the contexts of the football and sporting culture at large in Australia, the notion that sport is a social construct could also suggest that the secondary role of women within this environment is also something constructed, rather than a naturally evolving process (Burgess, Edwards & Skinner 2003). Further, masculine power and aggression can be considered dominant characteristics of Australian sporting cultures, since they powerfully affect boys from a young age. It could then be argued that sport is sending dangerous messages to young boys about the place of women in such androcentric cultures. Notably, such cultures exclude and isolate both women and men, particularly those men who do not meet the requirements of masculinity as it is defined by traditional sporting beliefs and behaviour (Bryson 1987).

2.5 Chapter Summary

From its colonial beginnings, Australian women have been an integral part of Australian football. They have watched as part of the crowd, cooked and cleaned, bandaged knees, and have become players and coaches and AFL players' partners, yet

they have remained a comparatively silent and unacknowledged part of the popular and widespread sport. Women's participation in football has been dismissed in a masculine environment that arguably celebrates aggression and physical prowess, whereby women are positioned in the background and are considered only as supporters of men. Historic folklore, club environments, the media and academics have all failed to acknowledge the contributions of women in football culture in Australia. Perhaps more pressing is the fact that incidents of football-related sexual assault against women remain unexplored crimes that are reduced to a news reporting format that dismiss the women's experience.

As the following chapters detail, as a novelist, I am interested in examining these issues using a twofold approach: first, by reading other fiction that explores the abuse of women, and second, by writing a novel that explores the suppression of women's mistreatment and abuse, not only from intimate female perspectives but also from the points of view of all of those involved. The following chapter will examine the fiction that already exists in the context of Australian football culture.

Chapter 3: Novels Addressing Sexual Violence Against Women in Football Culture

3.1 Introduction

‘Sometimes in literature voices are allowed to speak and other times they are silenced. This is particularly true when reading rape’ (Davis 2013).

Sexual violence against women in football culture is a serious and ongoing issue. I argue that writers of fiction, whose work focuses on football and its wider culture, have a responsibility to explore the very real violence that women have faced and continue to face in the sport. Moreover, fiction writers have a responsibility to confront violence towards women despite challenges involving the appropriate representation of women as victims of abuse. In this chapter, by examining how other writers portray sexual violence, I seek to enhance my own understanding about the choices writers make when depicting such experiences.

I initially began this thesis with a survey of fiction that explored Australian football between 1964 and 2013, since I wanted to determine how writers in this period represented the misogynistic elements of the sport. The timeframe begins in 1964 because that is the date of publication of the first work of Australian football fiction, John Dalton’s (1964) *Violent Saturday*. I found that while most of the published fiction makes some reference to sexual violence, only one of the novels surveyed (*Eleven Seasons* by Paul Carter 2012) positions it as a central theme or narrative. Moreover, some of the novels I explored, such as Alan O’Toole’s *The Coach from the City* (1968), demean women by presenting them as passive victims and, in some cases, clearly eroticise the violence they suffer, as seen in Robert Bennett’s *The Big Ruck* (1974).

In this chapter, I outline some of the key concerns shared by feminist writers in terms of the risks involved in fictional portrayals of rape and sexual abuse. I also examine the techniques employed by fiction writers in this field, and review novels that are set in or explore sexism and sexual violence in Australian football culture. I have chosen to explore in detail two Australian novels set in sporting environments, *Eleven Seasons*

(Carter 2012) and *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012). Both of these novels make sexual violence central to their narratives and portray the horror of the crimes they describe. They also avoid positioning the female characters who experience these crimes as faceless victims without a voice, considerations that I considered essential in the writing of my novel *Siren*.

3.2 Writing Rape

Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson (2010) examine literary techniques employed by writers who have explored rape and sexual violence in a range of fictional modes. The challenges that writers of rape and sexual violence face have also been highlighted by feminist critics such as Tanya Horeck (2004) and Jyotika Viridi (cited in Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010), who consider the eroticisation of rape and sexual abuse whereby women are represented either as stereotypes or as passive victims. Representations of sexual violence in literature are problematic and the issues facing writers are complex. While there are differing views from feminist critics, most share a concern about the exploration of rape in literature and the potential for misrepresentation. There are three key strands to this concern, which I have paraphrased as follows:

1. The potential to create an eroticised or voyeuristic experience for the reader.
2. The risk of disempowering women through their presentation as voiceless victims who are unable to move forward from their experience.
3. The reinforcing of stereotypes.

According to Horeck (2004) and Viridi (cited in Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010), there is a risk that fictional representations of rape might offer readers a pleasurable experience. Horeck (2004, p. 4) questions the ethics involved in watching and reading depictions of rape, asking whether readers are actually ‘bearing witness to a terrible crime or [...] participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity’. This raises another important question for the writer: how can acts of sexual violence be represented appropriately in fiction? Both Horeck (2004) and Viridi (cited in Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010) argue that fictional representations of rape can eroticise female

victims and perpetuate myths that represent victims either as inherently damaged from their experiences, or as individuals who secretly derive pleasure from the abuse they have undergone. The idea of women receiving pleasure from abuse might also be connected to the antiquated myth that some women secretly desire sexual violation and gain gratification from it; a belief that has played a key role in some court cases where perpetrators have been acquitted (Horeck 2004).⁷ This myth has been appropriated in some cases as a way of alleviating the horror of the event while titillating spectators rather than encouraging concern for the victim. Viridi (cited in Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010, p. 3) describes the complexities of some of these concerns as follows:

As feminists we are caught between a rock and a hard place: the erasure of rape from the narrative bears the marks of a patriarchal discourse of honour and chastity; yet showing rape, some argue, eroticizes it for the male gaze and purveys the victim myth. How do we refuse to erase the palpability of rape and negotiate the splintering of the private/public trauma associated with it?

Despite Horeck's (2004) and Viridi's (cited in Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010) concerns about how sexual violence might be perceived, both are adamant that these experiences need to be addressed, whether in fiction or otherwise. In her Foreword to Gunne and Brigley Thompson's 2010 work, Pakistan-British poet Moniza Alvi reminds us that 'the sexually aggressive act itself [is] an invasion of a private place, yet to air such an issue is surely in itself valuable' (p. xi). Further, the failure to address sexual violence against women leaves the issue uncontested by allowing 'silenced narratives to go unheard and for violations to continue without challenge' (Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010, p. 16). I agree strongly with this view and believe that sexual violence against women is a serious social issue, and for this reason, despite its social sensitivity, I examine it in more depth in the writing of *Siren*.

⁷ According to Horeck (2004, p. 4), '[h]istorically, the idea that women secretly fantasize about sexual violation has been grounds for dismissing women's charges of rape in the legal arena'.

3.3 Women Writing Women

As a female writer, the most important questions that I have to address are:

1. How can I fictionalise rape while ensuring that I capture its horror and trauma?
That is, how can I use fiction to portray very real experiences?
2. How do I create fictional perspectives that represent the voices of real women?

Writing about the sexual abuse of women as a female novelist is an uncomfortable and confronting process. It exposes a writer's own concerns about abuse and makes them fear that they will fall into the kinds of behaviour and attitudes that they are attempting to understand and overcome. Further, the writer must confront the loss of a woman's power through the invasion of what Alvi (2010, p. xi) calls a 'private place'. In other words, as a writer exploring this topic, I am entering a very personal and traumatic experience. Writing about the sexual abuse of women is also often difficult because many of the victims are uncomfortable talking openly about the abuse they have suffered. I have met women who have been so traumatised by the brutality of sexual assault that the crime has gone unreported. I have also met men who have been victims of sexual assault, and even though this exegesis focuses largely on the experiences of women, the experiences of men have reminded me that both women and men are vulnerable to this form of violence.

Reflecting on my own rural upbringing where sport was integral to the community (see Section 1.1), I was aware from a young age that women play a crucial role in Australian football culture. I was also aware that certain aspects of this culture were and still are sexist, since they position women as secondary to men. However, I was not aware of the severity and extent of sexual violence within football culture. As I began to research the issue more, I found harrowing reports by women claiming to have been raped by AFL footballers (see Section 2.3), and there were times when I had to leave my desk to take a break from distressing material that divulged brutal psychological and physical details about rape.

As a woman reading about such atrocious crimes and the failure of the judicial system to serve appropriate punishment for these assaults, I felt outraged that misogyny and

sexual violence in football culture had not yet been examined in fiction in a way that considered the perspectives of all of those involved. It seems that since my adolescence in country Victoria, the abuse I witnessed in sporting environments has remained a problem. When I reflect on my teenage years, I feel saddened that as young women in the 1980s we were unable to report incidents of sexual abuse, either in the football club environment or elsewhere. One particularly disturbing memory from my high school involved a group of sporty young male students, some of them footballers, dragging young women into locker sheds to carry out what they referred to as ‘muffing’, where they would violate the girl using their fingers. One person stayed ‘on watch’ for teachers on lunchtime yard duty while the girl was sexually assaulted by the men. The girls who were subjected to such abuse were often referred to as ‘sluts’, and were subsequently blamed for the assaults; rumours circulated quickly that that they enjoyed the violation. Three decades later, women who have been subjected to sexual violence continue to be blamed for their own mistreatment, as I have explored in Chapter 2. Krein (2013, Chapter 11) notes various courtroom proceedings in which celebrity sportsmen sit by while young women bringing charges of rape are questioned by the defendant lawyer about the length of their skirts and whether they were intentionally flirting.

In writing abuse, some writers utilise figurative language and symbolism, whereby they ‘obliquely us[e] metaphors to represent [the] suffering and pain [of women]’ (Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010, pp. 12–13). An example of this is found in Alvi’s (2010, p. xv) poem ‘Mermaid’, in which a woman character who suffers sexual abuse describes her fear through metaphor as an ‘involuntary dance’, while her submission is also expressed using a metaphor as ‘she play[s] dead on the rock’. In Maya Angelou’s (1969) autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author utilises the imagery of a flood to depict the way in which her body has been controlled by others and to show the effect of the trauma of her rape as a young girl. Tessa Roynon (2010, pp. 39–40) explores how novelist Toni Morrison applies a range of literary devices in her representation of sexual violence, including ‘subversive techniques [that] include the deferring and/or displacement of a central action; the manipulation of narrative voice and point of view; the use of silence and euphemism as well as graphic detail’. Like Morrison, one of the techniques applied in *Siren* is the use of

silence to show the debilitating effect of rape on the protagonist Jordi. Her silence following the rape exemplifies her inability to come to terms with the perpetrator's violence against her.

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Colour Purple*, Alice Walker (2011, Chapter 1) uses the journal form to allow the protagonist Celie to speak to God about her rape, giving the reader access to a direct and personal reflection of the violence, establishing an intimate and highly credible depiction of Celie's experience:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties...He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it.

Walker's use of first-person perspective facilitates a detailed and confronting account of Celie's experiences, drawing the reader closer to Celie's trauma by adopting a believable voice. Walker (2011, Chapter 1) clearly describes the physical violence that Celie undergoes—'He start to choke me'—a technique that generates feelings of compassion from the reader. While my own depictions of Jordi's traumatic experiences in *Siren* are not presented in the first person, Walker's approach inspired me to write about Jordi in a way that establishes a sense of intimacy and believability in terms of the physicality of the event. For example, through a third-person limited narrator, Jordi's rape is relayed in a flashback while Jordi makes her way home on the NightRider bus. When she recalls the attacker's hands 'pushing down, gripping her wrists' and her attempts to stop him as 'Her punches and pushes were paper thin' (*Siren*, p. 8), the focus here is on the force and dominance of the perpetrator as well as Jordi's inability to fight back. Like Walker, I aim to describe Jordi's experiences using realistic language that emphasises the physical violence of the attack.

3.4 When Trauma Becomes Pornography

The release of British author Sarah Dunant's thriller *Transgressions* (2009) created a great deal of controversy in the UK media, since the novel challenged notions of what a feminist portrayal of sexual violence is, or should be. While *Transgressions* is not set in a sporting culture, it is of particular relevance to this research because it raises

questions about the stylistic and structural choices that writers make when attempting to portray rape. In the novel, the protagonist Elizabeth wakes to find a man sitting at the end of her bed. She is terrified and attempts to calm the man down in a bid to lessen the aggression of the rape that she fears will take place. As she tries to take charge of the situation, she describes momentary feelings of alarm and shock. Although it is clear that she is frightened, Elizabeth is also described as sexually aroused. The reader is presented with a concoction of sensory images: gentle touches, pushing tongues, a surge of adrenalin, Elizabeth's awareness of her own arousal, the quickening of her breath, the danger of weapons lying nearby, moaning, ejaculating, hugging and tears. While Dunant's intention to challenge the passive victim stereotype of the violated woman, and to acknowledge that some rape victims do feel genitally aroused even while terrified is appreciated,⁸ the presence of erotic, sensual language in an attack scene is disconcerting. It can be argued that such language eroticises the abuse women suffer, making readers voyeurs of sexual violence and exacerbating the notion that women secretly desire violation, that 'she really wanted it' (Horeck 2004, p. 4).

Reading *Transgressions* (Dunant 2009) and Horeck's (2000) in-depth critique of the novel serves as a reminder that, as a fiction writer, I have a responsibility to explore sexual abuse while being constantly aware of the different interpretations that a reader might have. In light of this responsibility, I am uncomfortable with how Dunant's erotic descriptions dominate the scene while the reality of what is taking place is comparatively underemphasised. While Elizabeth's arousal is a shock, both to herself and to the reader, the fact remains that an abusive and illegal act of rape is being committed by a stranger in her bedroom. Dunant's description of the sensual details of the rape is not a technique I emulate in the portrayal of rape in *Siren*, since my goal is to capture the violence and horror of an attack on a young woman, against her will. Unlike the middle-class writer protagonist in *Transgressions*, Jordi in *Siren* is a 16

⁸ In their 2010 study 'Prepared for Anything? An Investigation of Female Genital Arousal in Response to Rape Cues', Suschinsky and Lalumiere tested the hypothesis that women's arousal during sexual assault is a protective response to protect the genital area from injury. Their findings were that, in men, the triggers for genital arousal were more limited than in women, who were aroused on occasion to even non-preferred cues, such as violence and assault.

year old who lives in a housing commission area, has low self-esteem and lacks hope and ambition in her life. It is crucial therefore that her vulnerability and how she is considered an easy target for the perpetrator are highlighted in her response to the assault. I have chosen for Jordi to say very little and to be characterised as physically weak during the attack. By doing so, I hope to emphasise her youth and fear, and the ego of the footballer who feels entitled to violate her.

While I acknowledge the somewhat controversial and taboo nature of rape and sexual violence, I believe that it is the role of fiction to represent that which is unspeakable (Alvi 2010). Further, I believe that writers who explore cultures where sexism and sexual violence are prominent, like Australian football, have a responsibility to confront these issues in a realistic and beneficial way. It is this awareness that has encouraged me to explore how other novelists who write about football have, or have not, confronted sexual abuse and rape. Thus, in the next section, I give a brief overview of novels set in or exploring Australian football culture and their depiction of the sexism and sexual violence that is found therein. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of two novels: *Eleven Seasons* (Carter 2012) and *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012), which have been selected because both challenge the representation of sexual violence in Australian sport, and more importantly, because I feel their depictions of violence do not encourage a voyeuristic or erotic experience for the reader. Further, in both of these novels, the female victims of sexual violence and rape are given credible and realistic voices, which enables the reader to perceive them as ‘real’ people with a life beyond the assault.

3.5 Women in Football Novels

From the time I decided that I wanted to write a novel about the sexual violence in and around Australian football, I was curious to read other fiction that explored this culture. I wanted to determine the ways in which other writers represented women, sexism and sexual abuse. For the purposes of this research, I have defined the ‘Australian football novel’ as a fictional narrative set within the Australian football world. This includes novels where one or more of the protagonists is a footballer, or where football plays an integral role in shaping character development, the narrative and/or key events in

the narrative, or where football provides the main setting and/or theme. To identify these novels, I have used Tim Hogan's (2005) *Reading the Game: An Annotated Guide to the Literature and Films of Australian Rules Football*. Hogan (p. 135) defines the featured works within his collection as being 'either specifically about Australian Rules football, make use of football as a setting or theme, or refer to football in ways that are important to the structure of the work.' My reading has included: John Dalton's (1964) *Violent Saturday*, Alan O'Toole's (1968) *The Coach from the City*, Barry Oakley's (1970) *A Salute to the Great McCarthy*, Robert Bennett's (1974) *The Big Ruck*, Peter Fitzpatrick and Barbara Wenzel's (1993) *Death in the Back Pocket*, Alan Wearne's (1997) *Kicking in Danger*, David Farrell's (1997) *Beyond the Boundaries*, Tony Wilson's (2005) *Players* and Paul Carter's (2012) *Eleven Seasons*.

Most of the novels listed above, both literary and genre fiction, make some reference to sexism and sexual violence towards women in football culture. However, aside from Carter's (2012) *Eleven Seasons*, sexual violence is rarely central to the narrative. Some, like Tony Wilson's (2005) satirical novel *Players*, expose the sexist nature of football culture,⁹ while others, like Bennett's (1974) *The Big Ruck*, offer a limited critique of sexual violence. For example, Bennett's novel describes the moment when the protagonist Sam Archer has just been released from jail for having sex with a minor. His actions are then challenged by his father: 'Do you know how hard it has been for your mother? People can forget a thief—but a rapist!' (p. 6). That said, those novels that do critique sexual violence seldom offer the perspectives of women on the events they describe. Apart from *Eleven Seasons* (Carter 2012), most of the novels I have listed do not directly explore sexual violence, though many do highlight sexism in football culture by providing examples of the mistreatment of women. I do, however, have serious concerns that some of these novels misrepresent the experiences of women in the ways described by certain feminist writers (Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010; Horeck 2004). This misrepresentation reinforces female stereotypes

⁹ Such as in his depictions of misogynistic football television celebrities and their derogatory treatment of women in the workplace.

and eroticises the mistreatment of women. Further, the women are not perceived as individuals with lives beyond the football club but as faceless victims.

The women in many of the novels mentioned above, usually secondary or minor characters, are often portrayed as stereotypes, which restricts their representation. Stereotyping precludes a deep and authentic portrayal of the abuse of women within fictional narratives, and instead the incidences are shown as happening ‘in the margin of excess where forms become fixed and hardened’ (Amossy & Heidingsfeld 1984, p. 690). Wolff (1972, p. 207) argues that ‘[t]he stereotypes of women vary, but they vary in response to different masculine needs’. In the football novels I have examined, the roles of women bear out Wolff’s observation, and include: the supportive mother, the sexual predator, the trophy girlfriend and the good wife. These roles reinforce the notion that women within the football space are ‘perceived inferior’ (Drummond 1995, p. 268), and frequently the women are shown to be passive and incapable of taking action.

3.5.1 Sexual Predator

In a number of the novels, female characters are represented as sexual predators who chase young footballers—women who ‘revel...in men’s weaknesses’ (Savitt 1982). The sensuality of the women is held to account for both sexual violence and disparaging men’s reputation. This sensuality is considered disruptive as it is believed to affect men so pervasively, and is used to arouse men and to tempt them towards behaving badly. Due to this characterisation, the female characters are shown as being to blame when sexual abuse takes place and responsible for having a negative influence on the male characters’ lives. The woman as sexual predator is present in a number of football novels, including Alison Spooner in Farrell’s (1997) *Beyond the Boundaries*, Vera in Oakley’s *A Salute to the Great McCarthy* (1994), Paula Bristow in Fitzpatrick and Wenzel’s (1993) crime thriller *Death in the Back Pocket* and the young women from the town in Dalton (1964)’s *Violent Saturday*. Such women are also objectified through descriptions that sexualise the female body, such as ‘well-rounded breasts’ (Bennett 1974, p. 36) and a ‘soft promiscuous behind’ (Oakley 1994, p. 109). These characters are also referred to in derogatory terms: ‘cheap sluts out to get fucked’ (Farrell 1997, p. 25), ‘chicks, birds, sluts, moles, fannies, flanges, flaps,

tits, arses' (Farrell 1997, p. 15) and 'bitches' (Fitzpatrick & Wenzel 1993, p. 4). This further contributes to the notion that these women are to blame for their own mistreatment, and more importantly, that women are not worthy of protection from sexual violence.

3.5.2 Supportive Mother

Many of the female characters in the novels I discuss here are the mothers of footballers. These women are often portrayed as seeming to have no other life apart from supporting their husbands and sons who play in the local football league. Thompson's (1990) non-fiction paper refers to women discussing their evenings at the football club, where they would be shut away in a women's area, caring for the children while the men drank beer and socialised. These so-called 'supportive mothers' appear frequently in Australian novels about football, such as the 'squealing, rain-soaked women trying to smother everyone with over-enthusiastic kisses' in O'Toole's (1968, p. 122) *Coach from the City*. They are characters that are seen to be washing jumpers, waiting dutifully outside club rooms, serving hot meals and worshipping the local footballers. These characters remain on the sidelines and we never hear their opinions about the game, let alone their voices, nor do we see the complexity of lives that lie beyond maternal ideals of provision and support. If these characters have been exposed to sexual violence within football culture, which seems likely due to its prominence in the sport, they do not speak about it. As with the stereotype of the female sexual predator, the role of the supportive mother, a position characterised as passive and capable of providing nurture, exacerbates the notion that women in football are secondary to the men whom they serve and care for.

One particularly troubling representation of a mother is in Farrell's *Beyond the Boundaries* (1997). Shirley Radborne, the mother of 'Radish', a lead player with the Clayton Reds, is characterised as a woman who dedicates her life to the club. During a visit to the Radborne home, Paul Reilly (the protagonist, a new player in town and deeply religious) witnesses the verbal abuse of Shirley by her son, 'Where's my tea you big fat slut?' (p. 143). Shirley's response suggests that she is unable to defend herself against such abuse as she seeks direction from her husband, an action that further emphasises her subservience to male characters. Instead of challenging Radish

directly by addressing his use of derogatory language, Shirley asks her husband to remind her son not to 'speak to her like that when people are around' (p. 143). This suggests that Shirley accepts that the use of derogatory language to describe women is acceptable when it is not in a public space. Mr Radborne's response is disinterested as he remarks from behind his newspaper, 'Radish, don't speak to your mother like that when people are around' (p. 143). This scenario further perpetuates the idea that women who are mistreated in a sexist culture such as football are unable to contest the abuse they suffer because they feel as though they have no personal identity other than as a supporter and nurturer.

3.5.3 Trophy Girlfriend and Good Wife

The trophy girlfriend and the good wife are also damaging stereotypes that disparage the role of women in football culture. When these stereotypes are represented in fiction, 'the relationship between women and men is treated as if it were the only meaningful relationship that a woman has' (Wolff 1972, p. 207). Trophy girlfriends and good wives have been characterised in several Australian novels about football, such as Marion Cameron in Dalton's (1964) *Violent Saturday*, Carol Watson in O'Toole's (1968) *The Coach from the City* and Rose O'Malley in Farrell's (1997) *Beyond the Boundaries*. Often, these characters are described by men using language that implies ownership; for example, women are considered a 'momentary possession' (Dalton 1964, p. 15). In *The Coach from the City* (O'Toole 1968), Terry Green's fiancée, a school teacher, is presented as a woman he can't live without, though she is also someone who, despite being well educated and working, is unable to make significant life choices, either because of a lack of decisiveness or because she is not entitled to make such decisions. This inability is shown most clearly when Carol remains silent while Green discusses marriage with her parents.

3.5.4 Eroticisation of Female Characters—She Loves It

Another problem with these simplistic depictions of women is the way in which some writers eroticise female characters through the use of vivid, descriptive language that appears to promote reading as a titillating experience. This titillation relies on the emphasis of physical and sexual experience, particularly in terms of the male

characters' receipt of pleasure and/or that secretly the women desire this mistreatment (Horeck 2004). Perhaps if a woman actually desires sexual violation, then it alleviates any concern for her wellbeing and gives permission for the reader to be excited by the portrayal.

In Bennett's (1974) *The Big Ruck*, the protagonist Sam Archer, a football star, has an exchange with the daughter of the club president. Her age is clearly defined from the beginning of the novel through his observations: "'Who let you out of the nursery?'" he said to the teenager he estimated to be sixteen or seventeen' (p. 35). Despite the reader's prior knowledge that Archer has been imprisoned for what he refers to as 'unlawful carnal knowledge' (p. 6), his exchange with the nameless young woman is portrayed as an erotic experience, which distracts the reader from the reality of the situation—that a grown man is participating in a sexual act with a minor. Before this act takes place, physical details of the girl are described from the perspective of Archer in an overtly sexual tone, such as her 'tanned midrif' (p. 35) and the 'little nuts of her nipples' (p. 37). In the following example, their encounter reads like soft porn:

He leant back against the rocks while she unzipped his fly, slipped her hand inside and untethered his large prick. He felt her finger trace the keel of his organ to its base and then her small hand embracing it, rhythmically sliding along its length. He snatched at her jeans in an attempt to reciprocate the pleasure she was unleashing, trying to get to her damp pussy as the frenzy rose within them both (Bennett 1974, p. 37).

Bennett's use of descriptive language, such as the description of the girl's 'small hand' sliding up and down his 'organ', serve to titillate the reader and do not in any way contest the fact that Sam Archer is engaging in an illegal act by being pleased sexually by a young girl. Even when Archer appears momentarily to consider the inappropriateness of the situation, his hesitation is construed in the context of his past conviction: 'It had happened before, and, as before his own passions now took precedence over commonsense' (p. 37). Bennett's physical description of sexual acts focus largely on Archer's enjoyment as he 'snatches at her jeans in an attempt to reciprocate the pleasure'. Further, Archer considers the young woman responsible for

the exchange, his disdain for ‘that bitch, that fucking little bitch’ (p. 38) remaining uncontested, since the reader is not offered her point of view on the experience.

In *Kicking in Danger* (Wearne 1997), Dr Daisy Moomba is characterised as a strong woman of indigenous ethnicity who works as an academic. Despite her strength, Dr Moomba is objectified by private investigator and former AFL star Damien Chubb, and she appeals to him sexually rather than because of her achievements as an individual. While Chubb briefly acknowledges the intelligence and academic achievement of Dr Moomba, he quickly objectifies her by commenting on the ‘way her bum had been poured into her jeans’ (p. 36), an act that provides titillation for the reader. While passages like this highlight the sexism inherent in football culture, they do nothing to challenge it.

After examining these Australian football novels, it is clear that the problem of sexual assault in football is little understood and that writers are reluctant to consider misogyny and sexual violence as problematic. In the next section, I discuss Carey and Lette’s *Puberty Blues* (2012) and Carter’s *Eleven Seasons* (2012). I have chosen these novels as my central focus because they confront sexual violence directly and make valuable contributions to our understanding of the problem. Both novels portray sexual violence as central to the narrative, include a clear critique of sexual abuse and provide the reader with insight into the lives of the female characters. Both novels have had a powerful influence on the writing of my own novel. It is important to note that *Puberty Blues* (2012) is not set in Australian football culture, though it can be used as a point of comparison because it is a sporting novel that has been informed by feminism in a way that most Australian football novels are not. While a number of female writers have written emphatically about rape, including Toni Morrison’s debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1994) and Anita Desai’s *The Sea of Innocence* (2013), a novel that deals with gang rape in India, there are few novelists who have written about rape in the context of sport, especially in Australia.

3.6 *Puberty Blues*

Puberty Blues (Carey & Lette 2012, first published in 1979) was a ground-breaking work of fiction at the time of its release because it exposed the place of women in a

male-dominated sporting culture. During my adolescence, there was very little fiction that offered a realistic insight into the sexist aspects of sporting culture, and the release of *Puberty Blues* was a shock to us as young country women in the 1980s because it challenged the status quo. It was a particularly significant novel for its time and thematically has a strong synergy with my project. *Puberty Blues* was pioneering because it galvanised an uncomfortable discourse about the representations of young women in surfer culture in Australia. At the time of the novel's release in 1979, there were some of us who were entertained by the depiction of Frieda as a 'moll' (a derogatory Australian slang term for a woman who is seen as promiscuous). Our willingness to side against Frieda was perhaps due to discomfort that her 'acceptance' into the surfer gang was because of her availability for 'rooting' (an Australian slang word for sexual penetration), and may also have been an example of our own naivety regarding attitudes from young men towards ourselves.

In terms of my own reaction to *Puberty Blues* in the 1980s, I was unable to make the connection between the messages of the novel and the way in which our high school did not present education that explored female issues or texts, or encouraged respectful relationships between men and women. My high school environment even allowed mistreatment of young women by male staff and other students; sexual harassment and abuse was accepted behaviour that remained unchallenged, much like the treatment of the young women in *Puberty Blues*. In 1985, I remember a Year 11 teacher putting his hand on my behind as I reached up to retrieve a book from my locker. Another time, a sports teacher made a crude remark while walking past me as I drank fruit juice with a straw. As discussed in Section 3.3, girls were 'muffed' or sexually assaulted in locker sheds. At the time, no one told us that these behaviours were unacceptable since they constituted part of daily high school banter. Neither were we told that we could report these acts as incidents of abuse. Even if we had felt compelled to report the crimes, we did not have the education regarding laws designed to protect us from this mistreatment. Thus, girls in my high school experienced the same silent abuse that was represented in *Puberty Blues* in its novel form in 1979.

During the 1980s in Australia, surfing culture, unlike football, offered new opportunities for women to compete professionally (evidenced by the international

title won by Australian surfer Pam Burridge in 1980).¹⁰ While *Puberty Blues* does not describe young women competing against male surfers, it concludes with the protagonist Debbie and her friend Sue teaching themselves how to surf, as well as challenging the ‘groupie’ culture that had become a feature of surfing at that time. This was an important juncture. Even though *Puberty Blues* was written retrospectively by Carey and Lette, at a time when they were reflecting on the experiences of their youth, the immediacy of the colloquial 1970s language and the way in which they utilise descriptive detail confronts the reader with an authentic portrayal of what these experiences were actually like for the writers as girls. Moreover, these experiences are relayed from a young woman’s point of view, and as such, they describe how the authors felt at the time with a peculiar credibility. These feelings percolate throughout the text and include: the pressure to conform, the importance of belonging, peer pressure and the importance of feeling desired by men. The novel marked an important shift in attitudes towards women in sporting culture, because Carey and Lette do not dilute the relentless verbal and physical abuse that was such an ingrained component of surfing culture at that time. As a result, the reader is exposed to frequent sexism and sexual violence and comes to acknowledge that these forms of abuse suppress female expression and damage any meaningful sense of female identity. In addition, such exposure can have the power to spark a revolution of thought, whereby female readers begin to question their own mistreatment, as well as abuse in general.

In the novel, Debbie and Sue’s desire to be part of the surfer gang dominates their lives. When writing about how schools are represented in *Puberty Blues*, historian Josephine May (2008) expresses bewilderment at the girls’ attraction to the gang environment:

The protagonists are basically healthy young women, bright, well brought up, with disposable incomes (the source of which is never explained) and with attentive middle class parents. All this makes their desire to enter the vacuous and poisonous Greenhills gang so mystifying in the first place.

¹⁰ Bryson (1987) has documented a claim by an 84-year-old man who insists that his sister Violet Grover won the first Australian open surf championship before World War I, her competitors all men.

May is perhaps forgetting the natural, rebellious aspects of adolescence, hence the 'bright, well brought up' girl's interest in the 'poisonous' young surfer males. Lesley Speed (2004, p. 57) recognises the complexity of the girls' attraction to surfer culture more widely, and acknowledges their resistance to what the gang represents as the story progresses: 'the surfing subculture is depicted as both attracting the female protagonists and motivating their eventual defiance of its customs'. I found it both believable and realistic that the girls were intoxicated by the gang environment and that they were desperate to belong to something larger than themselves. In my own country Victoria community, I knew young women from middle-class suburban homes, much like Debbie and Sue, who were sneaking out at night to meet boys who socialised in gangs and lived in housing commission areas. Further, Carey and Lette are also from a middle-class background and were themselves attracted to surfing gangs and the social opportunities they presented (Grasswell 2002). In the novel, Debbie states why belonging to the gang is so important: '[i]f you weren't a surfie chick, you were a nobody' (Carey & Lette 2012, Chapter 1).

Puberty Blues is one of the few Australian novels that deals with sexual violence in sport in a way that questions a culture that gives rise to such abuse. The novel also serves to counter other novels about sexual violence, whereby abuse is eroticised and female characters are reduced to stereotypes, thus perpetuating the myth that victims of abuse are without identity. Of particular interest to my writing of *Siren* is the way *Puberty Blues* uses two key techniques to effectively portray sexual violence. They are: the use of verbs that emphasise male aggression, physicality and dominance as well as the struggle undergone by the women victims, and how point of view is constructed.

3.6.1 Verbs are 'Doing' Words

Carey and Lette use verbs that emphasise struggle and aggression throughout the novel to capture the physicality of the abuse that the female characters undergo. This physicality usually describes male sexual pleasure, as well as male dominance. An example of this can be found when Debbie is pressured to have sex with her 17-year-old boyfriend, Bruce, in the back of his panel van while two other people are sitting in the front:

It was easy enough taking all my clothes off but I couldn't always find them again, so I usually left my shoes and socks on...Bruce applied it to me then saddled his dick with a rubber frenchie from his 'Tool Kit'. After basting his utensil, it was a series of: 'Ugh...Grunt. Push. Ouch! Ugh! Ugh!'

'Move back,' Bruce complained. 'I'm hittin' me 'ead.'

Edging back, I tried to spread wider. I gritted my teeth and fixed my eyes on a poster on the panel van wall. 'Things to do today,' it said, with two stiff figures copulating in the traditional position (Chapter 9).

In this passage, Debbie is naked except for her shoes and socks, an image which evokes juvenility rather than sexual maturity. By contrast, Bruce is portrayed as sexually experienced; a male character who commands control as he 'saddle[s] his dick' with a condom. The use of the verbs 'apply' and 'saddle' imply physicality and depict sex as if someone were preparing a horse for an equestrian event, rather than as an intimate exchange between two people. The scene depicts Bruce accessing Debbie's body without tenderness and care, though he is able to tend to his own preparations before having sex. Further, penetration is described through the use of the verb 'basting', a metaphor that describes sex as if it were a cooking procedure and that relates more to the animal world than the human because it connotes the preparation of meat for eating. He is also shown to be in complete control while he and Debby are having sex. When Bruce asks Debbie to 'move back' because he is 'hittin' [his] 'ead', the imperative verb 'move' reinforces Bruce's dominance and emphasises his comfort rather than hers. By contrast, Debbie is described as 'edging back' in an effort to 'spread wider', actions that characterise Debbie as submissive to Bruce's commands as she attempts to facilitate his needs. The reader can easily visualise Bruce moving Debbie around at his will while she grits her teeth; the verb 'to grit' is a blatant expression of female submission to pain during sex.

Carey and Lette also use verbs that emphasise struggle and aggression during their depiction of the violation of Frieda the 'moll', while avoiding a titillating portrayal of the crime. The following passage is seen from Debbie's perspective, whereby Frieda's abuse is represented as a sporting ritual where men take turns to violate her:

Outside the boys were fighting over who was going next. Wayne came out. Johnno went in. Followed by Seagull. And then Dave Deakin. And then Jacko. And Danny. Then Boardie. Steve Strachan arrived late.

‘I’m not goin’ fuckin’ slops.’

It didn’t matter to Frieda. She couldn’t feel it any more. She’d done everything. Maybe now they’d let her in the gang.

Frieda finally staggered out of the bedroom.

‘You gunna drive me home now, Gull?’

He sniggered. ‘Rack off moll. No fuckin’ way.’

She walked through the kitchen, her raincoat still dripping.

‘See ya *slut*.’ Jacko thumped her hard on the back.

Strack fetched one up his throat, aimed, and a big yellow slag hit the back of her grey raincoat.

The thing is, she always came back for more (Chapter 11).

In this passage, Frieda’s abuse is clearly portrayed as horrific, rather than pleasurable or having the potential to be eroticised by the reader (Horeck 2004). This is immediately established in the opening sentence of the rape scene as the boys are described as ‘fighting over who was going next’. The verb ‘fighting’ ensures the reader understands that this is a rough, physical atmosphere, evoking a group of young men heading off to battle. Other verbs that collectively create the atmosphere of an aggressive, male environment include: ‘sniggered’, ‘thumped’, ‘slaps’ and ‘spits’. Strachan’s remark ‘I’m not goin’ fuckin’ slops’ is a crude and demeaning expression that refers to him being the last participant in the gang bang. Frieda ‘staggers’ out of the bedroom, a verb that implies she is hurt and immobile. Collectively, this language suggests force, aggression and misogyny, and exposes actions that emphasise Frieda’s treatment by the men as repugnant. The language also establishes a sense of aggression between the young men, who are ‘fighting’ and swearing at each other as though participating in a team sport.

In contrast to most Australian football novels, *Puberty Blues* provides an in-depth and intimate account of Debbie's experiences of sexual violence from her own perspective. Further, sexual violence is central to the narrative, which shows both of the central female characters surviving by taking action against their mistreatment. The sexual violence that is described in the novel, as with the passage above, emphasises male aggression and female violation through the unambiguous use of descriptive and visual language, while clearly refraining from eroticising such violence. By contrast, other Australian novels that I have read that are concerned with football do not, by and large, examine crimes of sexual violence against young women, neither do they take sexual violence as a central theme. Instead, many of these novels stereotype women by portraying female characters who suffer sexual abuse as faceless victims, while some eroticise the mistreatment they suffer and do not provide a clear critique of the sexism that is inherent in some sporting cultures.

3.6.2 Point of View

In *Puberty Blues*, an adult Debbie is looking back on her youth using a first-person point of view that engages the reader through a concern for the wellbeing of the young women, while highlighting the severity of their mistreatment using the naivety of a teenage voice. The reader can easily believe that it is Debbie who is speaking because her language is colloquial and makes use of teenage vocabulary and slang. That said, Debbie's experiences in youth are told with an undertone of maturity that is more adult:

When we were thirteen, the coolest things to do were the things your parents wouldn't let you do. Things like have sex, smoke cigarettes, nick off from school, go to the drive-in, take drugs and go to the beach (Chapter 1).

Through Debbie's perspective, we also understand that while she is aware of the mistreatment she suffers at the hands of young men, she has not yet developed a perspective that enables her to choose to react differently to her mistreatment. Another section of the book describes an afternoon at someone's home where the surfer gang are socialising; the young men are clearly disinterested in the young women, other than having them cook or having sex with them:

Us girls potted about in the kitchen. We spent three hours making a White Wings packet cake, to get the boys' attention, and it took them three seconds to eat and forget about us. We were left with crumbs, cracked egg shells and a huge mound of washing up. But we didn't even mind that. We were playing mother (Chapter 10).

When Debbie says 'We were left with the crumbs...But we didn't even mind that', she is reminding the reader that the young women do not yet acknowledge their right to reject this kind of treatment and that perhaps 'not minding' was really more of a case of not fully understanding. The girls' own perspectives on their ignorance about sexual mistreatment and abuse further highlights their innocence and vulnerability as secondary members of the surfing culture.

3.7 Eleven Seasons

Unlike many other Australian novels about football, the sexual abuse of women in Carter's (2012) *Eleven Seasons* is central to the narrative. Even though the story is told from a male perspective, Carter critiques certain sexist elements of football culture by providing a compassionate view of the sexual violence that the female characters undergo.

Eleven Seasons is a coming-of-age novel that is set in the mid-1980s to early 1990s and tells the story of Melbourne schoolboy Jason Dalton, whose adolescence is spent playing football, riding skateboards, spray-painting and obsessing over the Hawthorn Hawks, a professional Australian football club. Jason's mother Christine works long hours as a nurse to pay the bills in the hope of buying a home for them both. The story is told using third-person limited perspective, with the central focus being on Jason. We learn that Jason knows very little about his father and that he enjoys football because it provides him with an important sense of belonging. Later on in the story, we discover that Jason's mother was gang-raped as a young woman and that one of the perpetrators is his estranged father. One of the novel's main concerns is the aftermath of this crime and how it has perturbed the lives of Jason and his mother.

As in the analysis of *Puberty Blues*, the focus here is on the literary devices that are employed in *Eleven Season* to convey the inherent sexism in sporting culture, especially the rape scenes, since *Siren* also addresses this area. These devices include

the use of verbs that connote male aggression and physical struggle while precluding the eroticisation of such violence (Horeck 2004). In addition, there is an emphasis on point of view to capture Jason's perspective of this world as a young male, and colloquial dialogue is used to emphasise how the rape of the girl is normalised through everyday language.

3.7.1 Depictions of Rape

Eleven Seasons describes two rapes: one (in retrospect) is the rape of Jason's mother, Christine, when she was a young woman, and one is the rape of a young woman in a city nightclub.

The central focus of Christine's rape is on the effect the trauma has had on her years afterwards. While she does not talk about the actual rape or the immediate aftermath in any detail, the reader is exposed to the influence that the rape has had on her life through descriptions of her behaviour. She is characterised as withdrawn, socially isolated, constantly exhausted and anxious about any connection with football. Jason views his mother's exhaustion as part of her daily existence when he refers to Christine towards the beginning of the novel as seeming to have been 'tired all her life' (p. 10). Christine never attends his football games due to her long shifts at work and even misses Jason's grand final match, which is both painful and baffling for him. Importantly, the character of Christine challenges the notion of the supportive mother that I examined earlier in this chapter as a reoccurring stereotype in many other novels about football. Moreover, Christine's estrangement from her son's passion for football makes their relationship tense and fractious. The climax is the announcement of how he was conceived, which takes place during an argument when Jason confronts his mother about her rejection of his sport: "“He raped me, Jason,” she announces suddenly. “He and three of his mates from the club. They held me down and he raped me”” (p. 139).

The other rape described in the novel is that of a young woman in a city nightclub. In the lead up to the violence, Jason is out with his team mates on a drinking binge, visiting various nightclubs in the city. In one of the clubs, a young girl called Alex is standing with the footballers and is described as being in a very drunken state. Her

‘head lolls’ as she looks for her drink, and Jason notices that she ‘somehow manages to swing her glass to her mouth’ (p. 233), which again highlights her inebriation. In the rape scene later in the alleyway, Carter uses verbs that emphasise the physical and aggressive nature of the rape, in a similar manner to Carey and Lette (2012), a device that prevents the eroticisation of what takes place. Just before the rape is described, Alex is presented as having her eyes almost closed and her head resting on the shoulder of one of the young men, an image that suggests that the young men are aware that she is intoxicated and therefore vulnerable. This action is described as Alex ‘dock[ing]’ a player’s shoulder, with the verb ‘dock’ suggesting that Alex’s movements are much like a ship mooring safely as she falls onto the young man’s shoulder (p. 234). Carter also uses verbs to contest the mistreatment of Alex from the perspective of Jason. Before the footballers leave the nightclub with her, Jason says, ‘Grab her drink off her’ to his team mate Leon, who responds by pretending to buy her some water (p. 234). The imperative verb ‘grab’ emphasises the urgency of Jason’s concern for her wellbeing.

Later, outside the club, Jason hears his team mates’ voices as he describes the horror of Alex’s rape:

It’s them—belt’s open, flies undone...Ned has her on the bitumen, her upper body squashed between the lane’s right wall and the blue dumpster in front of it, his arse flexing against hers. All her hair has fallen forward. She’s still awake, though her body’s limp. Below Ned’s gasping they can hear her sobs occasionally broken by the wheeze of her breath into the wall.

‘I want in,’ Woosh says.

‘No, fuck off,’ Ned says.

Her ears and the back of her neck are crimson...One of her hands comes up from her chest to stop her face scraping the wall...Her knee jerks...Leon laughs again as she falls on her side, coughing. He taps Ned to make room. Woosh has her dress scrunched up to her shoulder blades (Carter 2012, p. 235).

This depiction of rape generates horror and repulsion largely due to the use of verbs that suggest aggression, dominance and struggle. Alex is described as ‘sobbing,

wheezing, squashed against a wall’, which highlights her pain and inferiority while the men laugh and bicker about whose turn it is next. The men’s laughter suggests that rape itself is risible and that Alex’s body, and her subordinate reactions to their violence, are a form of entertainment, what feminist writer Delys Bird (1983, p. 112) refers to as the Australian ‘sexist assumption that woman is the property of and subject to the acquisitive male world’. Further, the young woman attempts to stop her face scraping the wall’, and she ‘falls on her side’, suggesting a lack of physical control and, perhaps, a loss of autonomy and purity. The harrowing nature of this depiction impedes the eroticisation of sexual violence, and in no way can Jason’s description of Alex’s experience be interpreted as voyeuristic (Horeck 2004). Instead, the rape is portrayed as a blatant example of violence and trauma whereby the victim is silent, much like Christine, and also like Jordi in *Siren*. These are all women who cannot speak within their culture about their experiences of abuse because there is no available discourse for women to allow such a voice (Bird 1983).

3.7.2 Colloquial Language—She’ll Be Right Mate

Carter also employs Australian colloquialisms to convey the bonding of young men, not only as players in a football team and part of a wider sporting culture, but also as accomplices in acts of sexual violence against women. In the alleyway as Alex is being raped by Ned, Woosh says, ‘I want in’, a term used throughout Australia, usually to express a desire to be involved in a sporting or entertainment context (p. 235). The informal nature of his request reinforces the idea that Alex’s body is a form of entertainment for the men as a group. Moreover, his request engenders a sense of male entitlement to the female body: ‘[t]o the footballers her body is their—the footballer’s—space’ (Hindley 2006, p. 144). Woosh’s desire for participation in the rape serves to commodify Alex as though he were discussing the purchase of alcohol or as if the men were taking turns to score goals on the football field. The dialogue also trivialises their actions as a bit of fun:

‘Shove over,’ Woosh says.

‘I said, fuck off.’

‘Let’s check out her tits,’ Leon says.

‘How do you feel about that sweetheart? What have you got under there?’ (p. 235).

The blokey Australian vernacular creates a sense of male dominance that contrasts with Alex’s ‘sobbing’ as she lies in the alleyway with her body crushed against a wall. It is clear from her obvious trauma that Carter is tackling the invasion of a ‘private place’ (Alvi 2010, p. xi), where the victim’s dignity and right to safety as a young woman has been violated.

3.7.3 Point of View

The choices that Carter makes in terms of point of view are particularly significant in the gang rape scene. By using a third-person limited perspective, the male protagonist Jason is perceived as objecting to the sexist views and behaviour of the men who violate Alex. *Eleven Seasons* is distinct from most other football novels because a central male character disapproves of the abuse he sees women suffer. Throughout the novel, we experience Jason’s distress at and abhorrence of female mistreatment. For example, Jason witnesses the effect that sexual violence has had on his mother’s life when he ‘sees his mum’s face in her hands as she shakes on the couch in their Hawthorn flat’ and her ‘sobs pierce him’ (p. 139).

As previously discussed, when Jason discovers his team mates are involved in the gang rape of Alex, he physically demonstrates his anger at the scene and tries to physically fight the men off Alex: ‘Jason unbolts his feet from the ground and finds the wall opposite them. Crowding in, they don’t see him coming. After slinging a punch into Leon’s side he tackles Ned into the wall’ (p. 235). Jason’s intervention prevents the crime from continuing and functions as an explicitly male protest against the sexual abuse of women. Jason attempts to console Alex while the others watch on and laugh, and his concern for her through his perspective helps to highlight the violent nature of the crime. He calls out ‘Arseholes’ and staggers into the street after her (pp. 235–236). Jason is characterised as compassionate when he kneels down beside a bleeding and

defensive Alex in an attempt to comfort her. Further, by calling the young men 'Arseholes' (p. 236), he is clearly objecting to their behaviour. From his perspective, readers experience a sense of shame that is not shared by the other men, as well as a sense of the loss of Alex's dignity and her shock and physical distress at what has just occurred. She is described from Jason's perspective as dragging herself away from the scene of her abuse, with 'the back of her dress caught up in what's left of her underwear' (p. 236). This image is harrowing because Jason conveys that Alex is so damaged that she can barely walk, hence the description of her 'dragging herself' away. The visual of only some of her underwear 'left' highlights the barbaric treatment of her body and clothing and reminds the reader that this is a violent crime.

As a young male footballer, Jason's objection to the sexual violence that he witnesses, and his willingness to intervene, is hugely significant because it demonstrates that the sexual, physical and verbal abuse of women can also affect men who are part of a male-dominated culture such as football. Jason witnesses the horror but is positioned as being very 'alone' in his distress, indicating some distinctions between footballers who feel entitled to treat women this way and other men who clearly object to it. This is in line with Drummond's (2002) argument that the hegemonic space of sporting culture not only engenders destructive attitudes towards women, but also towards men. Allowing Jason's point of view also serves to contest chauvinist readings of the young woman on a number of levels and challenges the notion that Alex is to blame. This is because while Jason is 'one of them' and part of the football culture, he is presenting a clear protest to the act. Not only are we privy to his description regarding the nightmarish scenario, we are also witness to his attempt to physically stop it. The details he observes, such as Alex's 'crimson skin' and 'whimpering' (p. 235), tell the reader that Jason is acknowledging her battered physical state and her distress. This challenges the notion that Alex is to blame for what has happened or that she in fact invited the attack, as it shows her unable to defend herself against the force and aggression of the young men.

Elsewhere in the novel, Jason's objection to misogynistic behaviour is again emphasised. At one point, he observes the young men around him at the roller skating rink as they leer at the young women nearby:

Darren motions to girls on the rink and makes a composite girlfriend from them. 'Her tits,' he says. 'That chick's arse. That chick's face. Her legs.' He points out their faults as if he's shopping for a car (p. 49).

In this passage, it is clear that Jason is not merely recording his observations, but also critiquing the behaviour he witnesses as well as the objectification of women more widely. His comparison, 'as if he's shopping for a car', demonstrates his reproach of the men's commoditisation of the women they observe. By offering the reader the male point of view of a footballer, Carter employs the character of Jason as a non-participant in and objector to acts of sexual violence, though he remains a member of the culture that is being critiqued.

While *Eleven Seasons* is narrated from a male point of view, *Puberty Blues* is written from the perspective of a young woman. In *Siren*, I have chosen to use both of these points of view because my research has revealed that sexism and sexual violence involve both men and women. By employing both female and male perspectives in my narrative, I hope to examine sexism and sexual violence more comprehensively. *Eleven Seasons* has been a particularly important source of inspiration for my own writing, since according to my research it is the first football novel that contests the sexual mistreatment of women in football culture from the sympathetic perspective of a man. Jason's disapproval of rape and his attempts to comfort rape victims influence my own writing, since football is typified as an environment where 'such behaviour reveals, replicates and entrenches disdainful and socially unacceptable attitudes to the women involved' (Holt 2011). *Eleven Seasons* also highlights the ongoing trauma that victims of sexual violence suffer, as seen through the experience of Christine; in a similar way, I explore how Jordi's life continues to be affected by the rape in *Siren*.

3.8 Chapter Summary

While most fiction concerned with Australian football makes some reference to the sexism and sexual violence that is found within the culture, most novels surveyed do not portray sexual violence against women as a serious problem that requires any kind of resolution. In many of these novels, the role of women is portrayed as unimportant. Typically, women play secondary or minor characters that adhere to female

stereotypes whereby their opinions and behaviours are suppressed. Further, female characters are often represented as victims of sexual abuse but lack depth because they are void of any means of expression or identity. In addition, some of the mistreatment of female characters is conveyed as an erotic exchange, which serves to titillate a predominantly male readership. *Puberty Blues* and *Eleven Seasons* offer a deeper examination of the sexual abuse of women in sporting culture by depicting sexual violence as horrific and traumatic, while providing a clear critique of such violence. They both place sexual violence as central to their narratives and regard the abuse of women as a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Both novels challenge female stereotypes, chiefly by giving female characters active voices, rather than portraying them as passive and voiceless victims. Both novels also effectively convey the horror of sexual violence and explore abuse as affecting both the women and men involved. Crucially, the violence that these novels describe is never designed to titillate the reader; instead, it is judged intrinsically as a criminal act that demeans women.

In terms of the depiction of rape, each novel employs different techniques to convey the horror of the event and the lasting effect rape has on those involved. Both novels avoid the eroticisation of sexual abuse against women by utilising physically descriptive language that emphasises the physical distress of the victims. Further, both expose male attitudes towards rape as often derogatory and describe scenarios of sexual violence whereby male characters ridicule the pain and suffering of their female victims. *Puberty Blues* and *Eleven Seasons* demonstrate that it is possible to write about a sexist masculine culture in a way that raises these issues and gives a voice to women. They do this through the prominence of carefully constructed visual detail and dialogue throughout the novel that describes the misogynistic elements of the environment, and by positioning the sexual violence as central to the storyline. This signifies to the reader that the issue is important and needs to be examined. It also supports my view that writers dealing with particular cultures like Australian football, where sexism and sexual violence are prominent, have a duty to explore these issues in fiction.

In the next chapter, I discuss the influence of the literary devices employed in both of these novels on my own writing, and reflect on the challenges I faced when depicting sexual violence in *Siren*.

Chapter 4: Writing Sexual Violence in *Siren*—Jordi's Story

4.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I reflected on my personal observations about the roles women play in Australian football and explored the history of women's involvement in the game as spectators and players. I have suggested that the active participation of women in various levels of the sport, from grassroots teams to the AFL, has received limited acknowledgement. I have also examined sexual violence in football culture using various resources, including media reports, statistical data, academic papers, articles by literary theorists and fiction. While I had been aware that sexual violence was a serious and ongoing problem in football culture, I did not realise the enormity of the problem before: it has been both shocking and saddening to learn that such serious social issues continue, and yet footballers are not being fully prosecuted for sexual assault (Waterhouse-Watson 2013).

As a female writer, I have also been surprised by how researchers and writers of fiction address the sexual abuse of women, and the notable silences, particularly of the women involved. There were periods when the reading material was both distressing and disheartening, particularly in context of the violent and traumatic nature of the subject matter and its prevalence as a very current social problem. Both the lack of acknowledgement that women have received as supporters and players, and the compelling problem of sexual violence against women indicate an absence of meaningful insight into the experiences of women within football culture. This need to explore more in-depth revelations of these experiences encouraged me to create a fictional account of the rape of a young woman by an AFL footballer in my novel *Siren*. An important aim of my writing is to characterise the female protagonist Jordi as a person with a life beyond the violence she suffers; she is not merely a nameless victim without a voice, unlike the anonymous teenage girl in Bennett's (1974) *The Big Ruck*.

Siren utilises multiple viewpoints in an attempt to present the experiences of sexual abuse and violence in a candid and comprehensive way. One of my intentions is to

challenge the idea that rape is a ‘women’s issue’ by suggesting instead that it is part of a masculine sporting ethos that can be troublesome not only for women but also for men in regards to identity and belonging (Drummond 1995). Since rape and sexual assault are crimes that involve more than just one person, the presentation of a single perspective immediately dismisses an integral part of the event.

Sexual violence in football culture is a complex and deeply rooted issue because it involves many different perspectives and has been treated as a form of entertainment by the media, lessening its status as a crime. In this chapter, I consider some of these complexities and how they have challenged my writing process. These challenges include: the dilemma of being a female writer who explores sexual violence, the choice of appropriate literary techniques to convey the experience of my young female protagonist, and the choice of the novel’s title, *Siren*.

4.2 Constructing the Female Protagonist in *Siren*—Jordi’s Story

4.2.1 Creating an Authentic Voice

The voice of my young female protagonist in *Siren*, Jordi, was in part motivated by a number of young people I have known during my work as a teacher currently employed in a state Victorian school for students who cannot attend mainstream institutions because of social, physical, emotional and geographical challenges. The challenges faced by these students in their everyday lives and the tenacity with which they persist with their studies has and continues to be a huge source of inspiration. Some of these challenges draw parallels with those that Jordi faces in her own life, such as the struggles of poverty and having to care for family members. At this school, young people are offered both virtual classrooms and individual meetings with teachers at school or at home. While they enjoy the positive connections established through friendships developed online, they also describe the new social media frontier to be, at times, a frightening place. For example, young women in my classes discuss the deception of digitally altered images that can create false connections, such as in the practice of ‘cat fishing’, where people use false online identities in order to develop romantic connections. Like Jordi, who in the story makes a negative reference to her own body shape, many of these young women claim not to feel pretty or skinny enough

in such virtual environments. Some discuss their eating disorders and their relation to what they see online, such as photos of models and reality programs showcasing women who are recognised primarily for their fashion and wealth, such as the Kardashian family.

Even though technologies have changed and many young people communicate through virtual means, in many ways these young women are much like the young women I grew up with and the protagonist Jordi—they are seeking a true sense of themselves. *Puberty Blues* is now a primetime television series (Maier & Faithfull 2012) and its popularity suggests that the issues it raises are the same as during my adolescence when the novel was first released in 1979. That said, young women today not only want to be accepted by their local community, but also by the worldwide digital community.

My writing has also been influenced by my experience and observations as a parent of a young adult male and conversations with other young adults within his social circles. The professional and personal relationships I have formed with young women and men, as well as my concern about the increasing number of cases of sexual violence, and an awareness of a gap in Australian fiction that deals such violence, has led to the creation of my character Jordi, a young woman who has suffered sexual abuse and who struggles with her own identity.

4.2.2 Depicting the Rape and Avoiding Stereotypes

From the outset, I found Jordi's story difficult to tell. I was faced with such questions as outlined in Section 3.3: How do I present her story with integrity? How do I make it believable? Importantly, in relation to my readings of feminist writers, I asked myself: How do I avoid eroticising a fictional account of the sexual activity of a young woman? Many theorists warn against presenting rape as titillation as well as portraying women who have been raped merely as victims who have no identity beyond their assault, arguing essentially that the risk of misrepresentation does not warrant the dismissal of attempts to portray rape (Alvi 2010; Horeck 2004; Viridi cited in Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010). Thus, when writing about Jordi's experience, I have intended for her story to be about survival and overcoming the abuse she suffers, rather

than about her loss of identity and her submission to her experience of rape. Mindful of these warnings, I constructed the rape scene involving Jordi with a constant awareness that I had to prevent an eroticised experience, as well as avoid the depiction of a faceless victim and, of course, stereotypes of women (such as those outlined in Section 3.5).

I would like to note that while I am now more informed about the various approaches to depicting rape, I do not wish to suggest that there is only one effective mode of capturing the reality and the horror of such a manifold activity. In the following, I discuss the reasoning behind my own writing choices that relate directly to the scene showing the violation, flashbacks to that scene and chapters that feature the ongoing effect of the violence on different characters.

A key consideration in preventing the eroticisation of sexual violence is to establish a sense of believability and reality in terms of explicitly depicting the rape as a violent crime and not as an incident that could be misconstrued as something erotic. The choices in language (a system of symbols and signifiers) play a key role when attempting to portray events as closely resembling reality, albeit through a construction of a 'truth'. For example, *Siren*, unlike Alvi's (2010) 'Mermaid' discussed in Section 3.3, does not rely heavily on the use of figurative language to convey the trauma of rape, since I felt this could disguise the brutal reality of rape. My goal was to present action in concrete terms using verbs and physical description, rather than through symbols and metaphors. Thus, I used verbs that established a clear sense of the aggression and physicality of the crime, and the struggle faced by women who undergo rape, much like the rape described in *Eleven Seasons* (see Section 3.7) where the young woman is shown to be vulnerable, drunk and physically unable to overcome the aggression and dominance of the young men. When the woman in Carter's (2012, p. 235) story 'knee jerks' in protest, we understand she is powerless in this scenario.

As discussed, Carter's (2012) use of verbs and physical description to convey the horror of rape was influential in the development of Jordi's experience in *Siren*. Like Carter, my objective was to convey the horror of rape by emphasising male brutality and dominance. The following passage from *Siren* emphasises the physical strength of

Dirk, the perpetrator, as well as the subordination of Jordi, who is unable to resist such strength:

Turning to Jordi, Dirk held her face and rammed his tongue inside her mouth. He pushed her flat onto the silk Japanese comforter, crushing his body down on top and pulling her legs around his hips (p. 23).

Like Carter, I have used verbs that capture the force and aggression of the perpetrator. Here the verbs ‘rammed’, ‘pushed’, ‘crushing’ and ‘pulling’ all relate to Dirk’s physical mistreatment of Jordi, whereby she is powerless against his physical dominance. There is nothing in this passage to suggest any pleasure experienced by Jordi. Further, Jordi’s third-person limited perspective presents the reader with more details about Dirk’s dominance and physical strength:

But it didn’t stop.

It sucked air out of her. She saw his face and his eyes. She felt his hands pushing down, gripping her wrists. Her punches and pushes were paper thin.

When it was over, he said, ‘You wanted that,’ before rolling onto a pillow. His muscular arms collapsed onto the mattress, his penis lying light and still, like a Chinese lantern. And then he released a long, deep snore.

Jordi lay on her back, shaking (p. 8).

This passage emphasises Dirk’s physical handling of Jordi as brutal and relentless, much like when Alex is physically abused in the alleyway (Carter 2012, p. 235). Dirk pushes her down on the bed while holding her wrists down. Her attempts to resist the rape are futile as she cries out and punches him, and after Dirk has penetrated her, she is left shaking while Dirk rolls over and falls quickly asleep. Again, the use of verbs that emphasise aggression and struggle, such as ‘pushing’, help to depict the brutality of Dirk’s behaviour, while ‘shaking’ encapsulates the physicality of Jordi’s trauma, further emphasising the violent nature of the crime. In contrast, if I had not employed verbs that emphasise aggression and struggle, instead describing the scene using more figurative and vague language, for example: ‘The dark cloud moved over Jordi,

sweeping her up into the blackness’, I would not be presenting readers with an intimate and essentially physical portrayal of the aggression and struggle that she has faced.

4.2.3 Developing a Back-story—Countering Faceless Victims

Another important consideration when writing *Siren* was the depth of Jordi’s characterisation. I wanted to provide a clear description of her back-story in order to give the reader an insight into her life outside of the abuse she suffers, so that she is not just a nameless victim broken by her experience, but rather a young woman with a life beyond her victimisation. The development of Jordi’s character was influenced by the protagonists Sue and Debbie in *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012), particularly because they represent a shift towards a new understanding whereby young women have choices about their own lives and can respond defiantly to the mistreatment they suffer. There are a number of passages from *Puberty Blues* that demonstrate the increasing strength and self-awareness of Sue and Debbie as they begin to contest their abuse. For example, when Sue challenges Danny’s advances and has the courage to say no to sex with him in a moment of awareness regarding his treatment of her:

Suddenly it was all too much for her. She collected all her morals and movie lines.

‘Is that all you want?’ She jumped up, zipping her fly.

‘Huh?...Ar...Na’ (Carey & Lette 2012, Chapter 10).

When Sue asks the question, ‘[i]s that all you want?’, the reader understands that she has chosen not to comply with the expectations of the male characters any longer. Her interrogation also reproaches Danny’s behaviour by trivialising his desire for sex and she is empowered since she has the ability to remove herself from the situation as she ‘jump[s] up, zipping her fly’. When compared to earlier in the novel—where the girls are described as lying underneath the young men, who grunt and shove them around the back of panel vans and treat them as subservient—the reader understands that Sue and Debbie have undergone a transformation.

In *Siren*, I wanted to characterise Jordi as someone who is similarly strong and capable of making her own decisions. Despite the trauma of her experience and while still in a

state of shock, she reveals other aspects of herself to the reader that challenge the idea that she is a merely a nameless victim. Her inner strength is defined from the beginning of the story. In Chapter 2, we read that Jordi is traumatised as she leaves the city apartment in the early morning, her ‘body shaking’ as she steps out onto the city streets:

Jordi stepped into the front foyer and looked up at the security camera, black and square and pointing right at her. She pulled up her silver strappy top, hiding the soft white edge of her cleavage. She pushed open the big glass door and walked out onto the streets, moving past people and rubbish and the remains of the night, into the chill of morning in Melbourne, her body shaking as the city came to life (p. 10).

The significance of this passage is that, despite her state of shock, Jordi is able make her way back from the city to West Meadows. She returns home to find her mother has been out all night. Her younger siblings are alone. Despite the horror of her evening, she defaults into one aspect of her life in her role as a nurturer and care-taker. While this is traditionally a feminine, passive role, there are also other facets of Jordi’s life, such as her talents as an artist, that are signalled throughout the novel to remind us that, as a young woman, she is able to emancipate herself from poverty and repression.

Much like in *Eleven Seasons* (Carter 2012) and *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012), dialogue plays an important role in *Siren* in developing a character beyond those victims of sexual abuse who are often rendered faceless:

Jordi picked up a Nemo game off the floor and slid it into the PlayStation.

‘You’re not our mum,’ Ryan called out. Jordi sniffed the inside of a jar and smoothed 2012-expired peanut butter on the toasted bread.

‘Your mum,’ she hissed, ‘isn’t here.’ (p. 36–37).

When Jordi says the last line above, she is establishing her position as someone with authority but also as someone who is there to care for her siblings. We understand that this is not a new role for her, since her mother often stays at her boyfriend’s house. The dialogue between Jordi and Ryan informs the reader that Jordi has family responsibilities that are sharply contrasted with her nightclub persona, the ‘tall and

toned' young woman that Max notices in the club (p. 16). Moreover, these responsibilities help characterise Jordi as mature, strong and capable, and shows that she can easily assume an adult role while she is still only 16 years old.

Dialogue is also used to develop Jordi's character during the previous evening, when Jordi is at Max's apartment. She adopts a position of power when she is talking to Max about being intimate, saying, 'I only want you to kiss me' (p. 22). In this way, she is expressing her desire for security as well as a necessity to look after herself, an example of the way in which Jordi has learnt to manage herself and her younger siblings when her mother has struggled to do so. This serves as a reminder to the reader that Jordi is not a nameless young woman but rather a person who is capable of expressing her desire for safety.

4.3 Constructing Multiple Points of View

As with *Eleven Seasons* (Carter 2012) and *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012), point of view in *Siren* plays a key role in challenging a culture that blames women who experience sexual violence and rape. In my own writing, I prioritise presenting a range of perspectives, such as that of a compassionate observer who is able to register the horror of sexual violence, as well as the perspective of the person who is being abused. I believe that a combination of perspectives creates a space for the reader to consider the complexities of this problem. It is hoped that showing both the person who is targeted and another individual who is condoning the violence might help to define the aggression and distress that are intrinsic to sexual violence, and show that it is not something that has been invited or encouraged by the women victims.

There are several central characters in *Siren* who take a compassionate view of Jordi's experience of sexual abuse. These include Florence, a homeless woman who sleeps out on the streets near where Jordi is attacked; Ruby, a single woman living in the apartment block where Jordi is attacked; and Max, the footballer who is responsible for bringing Jordi back to the apartment block, but who also attempts to intervene when she is being raped. As well as perspectives that express compassion towards Jordi, the narrative also includes the perspectives of characters who have abused her. For example, in evidence of Max's turmoil about what has happened and his guilt over not

protecting Jordi, he begins to 'see' her in the faces of young women in the city streets. Jordi's attacker, Dirk, also has his point of view included because, as the perpetrator, he represents the Australian football players who commit crimes of sexual violence and appear to believe that they are entitled to physically access young women. Dirk only perceives Jordi as a body rather than a young frightened woman who is unable to defend herself against his aggression (Thompson 1990). Most significantly, Jordi's own account of the rape offers the reader an intimate and emotional account of her traumatic experience. As a collective mass of perspectives, these viewpoints establish empathy for Jordi's experience, and challenge the idea that she is just a 'footy slut' or a groupie who 'deserves' this treatment.

4.3.1 Florence and Ruby

In Chapter 1, Florence, the homeless woman, witnesses Jordi's departure from the apartment block where the attack took place and calls out, 'Are you alright, dear?', then notices 'You're bleeding' (p. 5). Her interrogation and observation suggest to the reader that Jordi has been harmed. Since this suggestion comes from Florence, who has endured a lifetime of hardship and is a stranger observing from the street, it serves to remind the reader that Jordi's trauma is significant because her level of distress is apparent to objective others with experience of hardship.

In Chapter 2, Ruby encounters Jordi in the corridor. Jordi is in a state of shock, having just left Max's apartment on the morning of the rape. Ruby is surprised and stops to look at Jordi, asking, 'What's wrong?' (p. 10). Again, like Florence's concerns, Ruby's fear for Jordi's wellbeing emphasises the fact that Jordi has been harmed, that she is vulnerable and in distress. A flashback to earlier that evening describes a foreshadowing of Jordi's violation when Ruby sees Jordi hanging over a railing in the apartment above her, drunk and being pulled back inside by an older male. Ruby's observation of Jordi being controlled physically by the older man emphasises her inability at this point to protect herself. The concern of the two older women contrasts with Jordi's young age and vulnerability, and highlights that she has been unable to look after herself. Further, the objective trauma of Jordi is confirmed by the fact that Florence and Ruby are of different ages and background, but form the same assessment of what has happened.

4.3.2 Max

Max's point of view is also significant since he contests the notion that Jordi is to blame for her sexual assault, despite his being part of Australian football culture (like Jason in *Eleven Seasons*). Max is able to demonstrate, through his distress and shock at what happens, a clear challenge to his team mate's actions. This reminds us that what has happened is serious and is a crime. While we are aware that Max is not innocent in this scenario, because he is responsible for allowing Jordi to come back to the apartment, he does attempt to physically stop the rape happening.

Not long after Max, Jordi and Dirk first arrive at the apartment, Max witnesses Dirk pushing Jordi up against a wall and attempting to force alcohol into her mouth. Max pushes Dirk away from Jordi and yells, 'Let her go, idiot' (p. 21), which clearly demonstrates his objection to her treatment. Later, Max takes Jordi into a spare bedroom as a way of protecting her from Dirk. Jordi, not wanting to be alone, asks Max if she can sleep in his room. They end up on his bed together. When Jordi says to Max, 'I only want you to kiss me,' (p. 22) his response is significant, because it represents men who respect the wishes of women in these scenarios. The fact that he does not force or persist with further intimacy shows an alternative to the blatant violence Jordi is subjected to from Dirk.

When Dirk enters the room and forces himself onto Jordi, Max uses physical force but is unable to protect her. Dirk swings back and Max falls to the floor following an intense blow to his head. Through Max's point of view, we are aware that the last thing he hears before he becomes unconscious is Jordi's cries. The sound of her calling out haunts him in the months following, alongside the discovery of Jordi's student card in his apartment, a reminder of her age and vulnerability and his shame for not being able to protect her that night:

There she was, staring right at him in a dark blue school jumper. Hair pulled back and the big opal eyes. *Jordana May Spence*, it said, *DOB: 12 May 1998*. '98, '99. He did the maths and sat upright. 'Jesus!' People laughed out in the hallway as Max sat very still, bending the plastic between his fingers (p. 44).

Thus, Max represents men who object to such crimes, and his assessment of events contests the notion of women being to blame for these acts of sexual violence (Waterhouse-Watson 2007).

4.3.3 Dirk

I have chosen to include Dirk's point of view because his sense of entitlement and distancing of himself from Jordi's sense of wellbeing represents footballers in this culture who believe they are deserving of sexual access to women (Waterhouse-Watson 2013). On the day following the rape, the reader is given Dirk's perspective as he leaves the building and is reflecting on what has happened. As he walks towards a taxi rank at Flinders Street station, he has flashbacks about Jordi:

He saw the girl's face, her breasts and her scarlet lips, her eyes rimmed with makeup. She wanted him. She was one of those girls from school, the beautiful ones who loved being his friend and hugged him when they were drunk at parties. Sometimes they slept with him too, unconscious on cask wine (p. 46).

When Dirk considers that 'she wanted him', he justifies his actions by holding Jordi responsible; essentially, it was her fault for 'wanting' to be raped. He then thinks about the attractive girls from his adolescence who would sometimes have sex with him, but only after getting drunk and not because they desired him. The reader is given an insight into Dirk's experiences with women and suggests a connection between unresolved psychological issues about sex and his tendency for violent behaviour against women. Nonetheless, Dirk's internal monologue is not presented to generate sympathy for his behaviour, but rather to reinforce the reality that the rape has occurred as a result of his own free will. While Dirk's perspective is that Jordi 'wanted him' (p. 46), her dialogue contradicts this—'I don't want to' (p. 27)—as does Max's perspective when he is knocked to the floor but hears her cry out (p. 27). We know from earlier in the evening that Jordi is wary of heavy physical contact when she says to Max that she only wants to be kissed (p. 22). When Dirk later throws her down on the bed, we are told that she kicks and pushes, which is a physical demonstration of self-protection. In the aftermath, we are shown Jordi's physical damage, such as her bruising and pain. It is clear that at no point in the evening did Jordi want to have sex

with either man. Despite this, Dirk clearly demonstrates a belief that it was her duty to comply and that he was deserving of her physically. In this way, Dirk is exposed as a delusional and troubled character who chooses to commit a violent crime.

4.3.4 Jordi

For the reader to be presented with the perspective of women who have suffered sexual abuse is, I believe, a significant means of challenging the idea that these women are in any way responsible. I believe that to dismiss the woman's view of sexual violence is to perpetuate the notion that she is not entitled to a voice within this culture and is therefore unable to challenge the idea that she is to blame for this violence (Hindley 2006).

In Chapter 2 of *Siren*, the reader is given Jordi's perspective as she makes her way home on a Melbourne NightRider bus in the early hours of the morning. She describes her physical and psychological suffering shortly after the rape: she is shown to be holding onto a seat as pain floods into her pelvis and she takes 'small, sharp breaths' (p. 8). Because it is Jordi who describes her own physical and psychological pain, the reader is privileged to receive a very intimate account of the aftermath of the rape. This allows a deeper understanding of her trauma, which is further emphasised when she arrives home and has horrific flashbacks while she tries to care for her younger siblings. Jordi can see 'his face and his eyes' and remembers 'his hands pushing down' (p. 8). These details are important in terms of challenging the idea that Jordi is responsible for her own abuse, as they highlight the physical violence she has undergone and remind the reader that she was held down on the bed, against her will. Once again, Jordi's perspective, and the way it is supported by other perspectives, is used to challenge the notion of women as responsible for their own experiences of sexual assault:

She felt hands across her body. She felt big, wide fingers gripped around her wrist. She heard breaths against her face, slow and loud...the thump of the Chemical Brothers. She saw Max, passed out on the floor in the bedroom as the other guy dragged her body towards him.

'No!' she said. 'I don't want to!' The footballer flattened her arms out straight.

Jordi shuddered as she snuggled against her little brother, waiting for her mother to come home (p. 27).

Language choices and literary techniques in this passage are crucial in order to clearly establish Jordi's point of view and objection to her abuse. For example, I chose repetition of the word 'she', which is positioned at the beginning of the first four sentences. The 'she' is designed to intensify that it is *her* experience, over and over—the voice of the woman's experience that we are exposed to. It is 'she', it is 'Jordi' who is being violated. It is 'she' who is unable to protect herself against Dirk's dominance and aggression.

In the next section, I discuss the choice of the novel's title, *Siren*, as a means of challenging the label of Jordi as a young temptress who has in some way incited the violence she suffers.

4.4 Selecting the Title—Why *Siren*?

The title of my novel has several meanings. In Australian football, a 'siren' is a sound that signals the end of each quarter, as well as the end of the match. Sirens of a quite different nature can be found in Greek mythology and are commonly understood as 'sea nymphs with the bodies of birds and the heads of women' who have 'voices of such sweetness that mariners who heard their songs were lured onto the rocks on which the nymphs sang' (Trigg 2002, p. 8).

In researching the latter definition, I was interested to discover that during the Victorian era there was a renewed interest in the classical period, and that the idea of mermaids and sirens in this period was connected to the patriarchal labelling of women as either Madonnas or whores (Trigg 2002). Trigg (p. 22) argues that the link between "bad" women' and 'animals/monsters' offers a way of understanding 'the anomaly of the existence of the virtuous virgin mother and the seductress' by associating women with dumb animals. She proposes that this categorisation 'validate[s] a social order that accords women less rights, less intelligence and less access to religion and other power structures' (p. 22). Trigg points out that this categorisation is still relevant today in western society, where historically the residual significance of mythical figures such

as sirens and mermaids are still present. These figures might perhaps contribute to the continued dichotomy of women and sexuality, in that the overtly sexual woman is a dangerous figure whose central drive is to lure men into risky scenarios. Women who socialise with footballers or become entangled in sexual situations are often viewed the same way—they are the predatory women discussed in Section 3.5.1. Further, the mythical siren is recognisable through certain characteristics, for example, as a blonde-haired woman with ‘full breasts’ (Trigg 2002, p. 16), much in the same way the ‘sirens’ in football culture are also easily identified through stereotypes and predefined gender roles.

In *Siren*, Jordi is viewed by many as being a siren in the classical sense, despite living in difficult socio-economic circumstances and being 16 years old. On football television shows and in discussions in pubs, she is the mythological creature luring in the men. These outsiders view her as dangerous, one of those ‘footy sluts that runs around looking for footballers’ (McMahon and Hunt 2010). They ask: What does she expect? Drinking with older men, in a nightclub and wearing a mini-skirt? (Krein 2013, Chapter 11). By drawing attention to this stereotype through my title *Siren*, I wanted to challenge the ways in which women like Jordi are portrayed in the media. I wanted to contest this label and show her life in all its complexities, rather than defining Jordi by her image and sexuality. While we see Jordi appearing as the glamorous stereotype in the nightclub, we are also shown her leaving the apartment the next morning, wobbling in her heels and dishevelled, mascara smudging her eyes from tears. There are also depictions of her home life where she is dressed in tracksuit pants, caring for her siblings, and visuals of her at school, unassuming in her tatty old uniform. These various roles collectively remind the reader that she is a teenager living in government housing. The intention of the title is therefore ironic, challenging the notion of a young woman as dangerously alluring and instead showing the reality that this ‘temptress’ is a vulnerable young girl who lives in poverty and misses her dad. ‘Siren’ also functions in the title in its football meaning: when Jordi says ‘No, I don’t want to’ (p. 27), it is the siren, her cry for help. The play must end, but due to Dirk’s entitlement, he will not stop. He does not hear the siren.

4.5 Chapter Summary

Sexual violence against women in Australian football culture is an ongoing problem and there is a lack of writing that considers the views of all involved; my novel *Siren* is an attempt to fill this gap. When creating my fictional depiction of rape, I have borne in mind the various challenges and limitations discussed in this exegesis, and I understand that ‘the act of writing, speaking or theorising rape can be a dangerous one’ (Gunne & Brigley Thompson 2010, p. 16). These challenges and limitations include: sexual violence having the potential to titillate the reader and dismiss the violent and criminal reality of rape; women being disempowered if they are characterised as victims without identity; and women being easily stereotyped. This chapter has outlined how I approached these issues with the aim of producing a believable and realistic depiction of rape that challenges the notion that women are to blame for these crimes and provides a voice for women’s experiences.

The writing of Jordi’s story within *Siren* has been an affirming experience. Fiction presents many opportunities to connect the reader to the realities of the horrors of sexual violence and to create a new space for women’s voices and for those of men who protest negative behaviours. The understandings I have gathered from the research process have allowed me to shape Jordi’s story in the hope that many more such tales will be told. As expressed by Gunne and Brigley Thompson (2010, p. 16), ‘Though such a project can be difficult, disturbing, horrifying even, it is worthwhile’.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This exegesis examined the history of women's involvement in Australian football, as well as various representations of sexual assault in Australian football, in order to inform the creation of my novel *Siren*. As this exegesis has found, sexual violence and discrimination against women is an alarming and ongoing problem that pervades all aspects of Australian football culture, from grassroots spectatorship and support, to participation on the pitch, to the executive boardrooms of the AFL. In my own rural Australian upbringing during the 1980s, I witnessed the abuse of young women in football culture and the silence that followed when women were blamed for these crimes. As a teacher of young women and parent of a young adult male, I have been concerned by how women in football are presented in the media as one-dimensional, and how it is rare that we are shown the lives of women beyond their experiences of rape and abuse. This exegesis has revealed that most media and novels that discuss sexual assault in football offer little insight into women's experiences on a deeper and more meaningful level, with the exception of *Puberty Blues* (Carey & Lette 2012) and *Eleven Seasons* (Carter 2012), novels I have analysed in depth to inform my writing.

Throughout this exegesis, I have argued that sexual violence and rape are complex issues that involve more than just the two (or more) individuals directly involved in the sexual act. Thus, to present a single point of view is to dismiss these complexities, while ignoring the point of view of the woman who has been abused is to reinforce the notion that women are not entitled to a voice (Hindley 2006). I believe that my novel *Siren* offers a new approach to writing on sexual assault in Australian football by emphasising the female point of view and presenting the collective views of all those involved, both men and women. Not only does *Siren* explore the sexism inherent in football culture and the effect and ongoing trauma of sexual violence and rape, it also offers a unique insight into female experience of such abuses—a first for Australian football novels. While non-fiction forms have explored these concerns, my hope is that *Siren* occupies a unique space within fiction that encourages open and candid expression about sexual violence in football culture. I wish to advocate both a deeper

understanding of the problem, and the perseverance and integrity needed to effect positive change.

It is important to note that it has never been my intention to demonise football, which is an important national sport, or the football players themselves, whether in the AFL or the vast network of local clubs. I recognise the tremendous value of sport, particularly as a means of uniting communities, a quality that I have witnessed first-hand in my own upbringing and within shared experiences with family and friends. Ultimately, because football is so important on local and national levels, it is paramount that misogyny and sexual violence are questioned in more depth, taking into account the experiences of all those involved, in order to encourage discussion and understanding from different perspectives. This is the intention of my novel *Siren*.

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