



**HOW  
TO  
GROW  
A  
FAMILY  
TREE**

**ELIZA  
HENRY  
JONES**

**Heart is  
where the  
home is**

## **Angus&Robertson**

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, Australia

First published in Australia in 2020  
by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited  
ABN 36 009 913 517  
harpercollins.com.au

Copyright © Eliza Henry-Jones 2020

The right of Eliza Henry-Jones to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her under the *Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

### **HarperCollinsPublishers**

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia  
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand  
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India  
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom  
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower, 22 Adelaide Street West, 41st floor,  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada  
195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

Cover design and illustration by Micaela Alcaino  
Typeset in Sabon LT Std by Kelli Lonergan  
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group  
The papers used by HarperCollins in the manufacture of this book are a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable plantation forests. The fibre source and manufacturing processes meet recognised international environmental standards, and carry certification.

## CHAPTER ONE

‘It’ll be like a holiday!’ my mum says, beaming at us with her head vein throbbing.

‘Fairyland Caravan Park?’ My sister, Taylor, looks across the table with such disgust that I almost feel sorry for Mum.

‘It’s the termites!’ Mum says, although we know it’s got nothing to do with termites. Having to sell our home has everything to do with Dad getting laid off and developing a strong attachment to the pokies down at the pub.

Which is why Mum’s telling us the bad news and Dad’s outside hiding somewhere. If he’d been in here, I’m pretty sure Taylor would’ve reached across the kitchen table and ripped out his eyeballs.

‘I’m not going,’ Taylor says. I’ve never met anyone else like Taylor. She’s short, like Dad, and wears her powdery-blonde hair very short. Although she’s got this very sweet, gentle voice, she’s extremely brutal. I spend most of my life walking into things and falling over, and yet Taylor’s still responsible for more of the scars and marks on my body than I am.

‘You don’t have a choice,’ Mum says, equally sweetly.

They stare at each other and then Taylor groans and stands up to peer out into the garden, and I hope Dad's hidden himself well. Or maybe I don't hope that. Maybe I hope she finds him.

I lean back in my chair and look up at the ceiling because ceilings have a sort of soothing effect on me. 'A caravan,' I say.

'It won't be forever,' Mum says, as Taylor disappears out into the garden and starts yelling at something behind the garden shed.

I keep staring up at the ceiling. There's the crack Dad plastered but never painted. There's the stain where Taylor used to throw the food she didn't like. 'A caravan, though.'

'It's not a caravan with wheels.'

'So it's a useless caravan.'

'What I *mean* is that it's got rooms,' Mum says. 'Two bedrooms. And a bathroom.'

'Whoop-di-do.'

'Stella, it's the best I could do.' Her voice is flat and I feel instantly awful because it's not Mum's fault that Dad's a latent gambling addict.

'I know,' I say.

'We'll get through it.'

I look at the tarnished light fitting and the crooked bulb above the dining table. It's getting dark. We'll need to turn it on, soon. 'I know that, too.'

\*\*\*

This has been a pretty bad week, even before the whole we're-moving-to-a-caravan-park thing. The piece of post

that I've been wishing for and dreading for as long as I can remember finally arrived.

The day the letter came was the day I'd decided to photocopy all my important documents. I'd watched a special on a news program that mentioned you should have copies of everything you'd need in an emergency and keep them in a separate location from the originals. I need to start thinking about these things. I'll be eighteen soon.

Mum's a bit sloppy with some stuff – mostly because she's so busy – but she's always been meticulous at keeping everything important in her desk, so I'd gone rummaging without really thinking about it. I'd been alarmed at the number of unpaid bills and loan applications, but that still felt like adult stuff that didn't really concern me. I mean, I had a plan for how to become an adult. And that plan started with copying my emergency documents.

When I picked up my original birth certificate, the unfamiliar name had snagged my eye, like a stranger posing in a family photo. *Kelly Russo*. But I'd known I was adopted since forever. It just wasn't a big deal. It almost felt like a fairy story. Kelly Russo – who had me too young and knew my parents really, really wanted a baby. The End.

I'd gone outside to bring in the mail before the snails ate them and there was that name again. *Kelly Russo*. For a moment, I'd been completely certain that I was going to throw up all over the letterbox snails, so I stood with my head curled in towards my chest, taking deep breaths, until the feeling passed. Until all I was left with was a pounding headache and the urge to both rip the letter into tiny pieces

and also shove it down my top, right next to my heart, because it felt so precious.

I'd meant to tell Mum and Dad about the letter and have a bit of a self-indulgent tantrum about the whole thing, but before I'd worked out the most dramatic way to do it, Mum had dropped the caravan news and then Taylor was having a self-indulgent tantrum, and self-indulgent tantrums are sort of Taylor's thing so I haven't told them. Not yet.

I've been keeping the letter close to me. I like to imagine what's written in there. Whether she's left-handed, like I am. Anything to distract me from the fact that it's taken her seventeen years to write me anything.

\*\*\*

Sutherbend is a weird place – a bit too close to the city to be considered a country town, but also a bit too far out to be considered the suburbs. It has a very big river and a very wide highway, and the caravan park is kind of wedged in between the two.

Our house is on the other side of town, tucked into a street that's not the worst (that honour belongs to Sunshine Road), but definitely on the lower end of the ladder. Both my parents had worked really hard to buy the place and I'm pretty mad about them losing it.

Fairyland Caravan Park. I roll onto my stomach and bury my head under my pillow. If anyone at school finds out, I'll be a social outcast for the rest of Year Eleven and the whole of Year Twelve.

Taylor comes into my room. She never knocks and I've

given up asking her to. She sits down on the floor with her head tipped back onto my bed. 'I don't want to leave here,' she says.

'Me either.'

We hear the squeak of the couch in the next room. Dad's been sleeping in the living room for the past month but pretending he's not.

'There's gotta be a way to get the money,' Taylor says.

'I think we're past that, Tay. I think that's what Mum's been telling herself for months.'

'But maybe ...'

'It's hundreds of thousands of dollars. I've got about two hundred saved up – how about you?'

Taylor sniffs, which I guess means less than two hundred.

'At least we'll be close to the river,' I say. 'We can swim over summer.'

Taylor looks at me with her eyebrows raised. It's one of the first things you're taught in Sutherbend – to never go into the river because you'll catch a dreadful disease and then you'll die. I mean, even the bravest kids only ever go as far as poking the shallows with a stick. Some people swear they've seen it glowing green at night, but I've never believed that.

Taylor starts picking the polish off her toenails and my voice gets louder. 'Mum says there're rooms and stuff. It's not a *caravan* caravan.'

'If it's in a caravan park, it's a caravan.'

'Apparently, there's a pool and a tennis court.'

Taylor sniffs again. 'I hate Dad.'

'He's seeing a counsellor. To help with his gambling.' I don't know why I always do this; try to spin things for her

so they sound better than they are. Maybe it's because I'm eight and a half months older, I don't know. It's just the way it's always been. The only reason that I know Dad's been seeing a counsellor is because I heard him telling Mum last night that it's a waste of time and he won't be going back. Mum had made this weird, cackling sort of laugh. Dad had asked her if she wanted some tea and she'd said yes. I don't get adults. I really, really don't.

\*\*\*

The next afternoon, Taylor climbs up onto the roof with a sheet to protect her from the sun. 'I'm not coming down until you *promise* that we're not moving!'

Mum stares up at her from the back lawn, and Dad stands near his shed and doesn't look up at all.

Mum cups her hands around her mouth. 'Taylor, come down!'

'No!'

Mum prods me. 'Get her down, Stell.'

'Me? I'm not going up there! I'll break my neck! Make Dad do it.'

Mum sighs. 'Taylor, you can't stay up there!'

'I can and I'm *going to*.'

'Leave her,' I say. 'She just wants the attention. If we go inside and ignore her, she'll come down.'

'I can't leave her up on the roof! What if someone sees?'

I shrug. I mean, we're about to move to Fairyland. A neighbour spotting Taylor on the roof (for what's probably the fiftieth time) isn't going to make much difference to anything.

‘I’m going to make chocolate *mousse*, Taylor,’ says Mum.  
I see Taylor stiffen for a moment. ‘You’re not.’

‘I am. And if you’re not down by the time it’s done, you won’t get any.’

‘I don’t care!’ Taylor bellows. ‘I don’t care about *mousse*! I’m staying here! I’m not bloody *moving*!’

\*\*\*

‘Good *mousse*,’ Taylor says grudgingly, setting aside her bowl. ‘You know, kids from Sutherbend High go and egg the caravans at Fairyland.’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘We’ll be there. We’re going to get *egged*, Mum.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

Taylor spins around to Dad. ‘It won’t be fine! We’re going to get *egged* and it’s all your fault!’

‘It’s not for long, Taylor,’ Dad says, his voice tired.

‘That’s not going to stop us getting *egged*, though.’

‘We’re not going to get *egged*,’ I say.

She glares at me. ‘Well, you’re such a giant the kids are probably going to be too scared to egg you. But *me*. I’m so tiny, I’ll be *egged* for sure.’

‘Hey!’ I say. Mum, Dad and Taylor are all pretty short. I shot up when I hit thirteen and I’m now hovering just over six feet.

‘No one’s going to be stupid enough to egg you, Taylor,’ says Mum.

Taylor crosses her arms. ‘I want more *mousse*.’

‘There’s no more *mousse*.’

‘I’m going back up on the roof if there’s no more mousse.’

‘I can make more,’ says Dad. He doesn’t look at Taylor, but he picks up her bowl very carefully. ‘I can make you some more mousse.’

\*\*\*

Before the letter arrived, I’d seen myself in my father’s nose and my mother’s eyes and Taylor’s wide mouth and crooked teeth. I’d seen myself in my father’s abiding love of chocolate crackles and Taylor’s habit of yelling out random words in her sleep. But for some reason, now I look at them and see them only reflected in each other. I’ve never known who I look like and it’s unnerving how much it suddenly bothers me.

The next afternoon, I’m on my bed, eating cereal and reading an article on adoption, when Taylor throws my bedroom door open. ‘I’ve been thinking,’ she says. ‘Are you listening? I’ve been *thinking*.’

I shut the old laptop we share. I’m careful to close the browser window, first. Taylor gets really impatient about anything related to my adoption. We had a newer laptop that had mysteriously gone to get serviced and never came back. Come to think of it, I’m not even sure laptops *need* to be serviced.

Taylor and I had got into the habit of keeping our rooms very neat and running regular inventories of all our stuff. If something wasn’t where it was meant to be, we quickly banded together and hunted around for it. Very occasionally, we’d find that we’d just put it somewhere by mistake, and

sometimes we found it in Dad's black backpack and then most often we never saw whatever it was ever again.

She tugs me upright. 'There's a pub next door to the caravan park. With pokies.'

'Oh.'

'I want to go down there and talk to the management.' She straightens. 'If Dad can't sort himself out, we'll just have to sort him out ourselves.'

'Taylor ...'

'Come on.' She tosses some of my clothes onto the bed that she's decided will best complement her outfit, and I pull them on without complaint because there's no point complaining to Taylor.

'I can't wear this,' I say when I see myself in them.

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's too short.'

Taylor turns around to inspect the dress I'm wearing. 'You need to stop growing!' she says.

'How am I meant to stop growing? Far out, Taylor. I'm not doing it on purpose.'

She sniffs. 'I guess you can wear something else. But make sure it's serious looking, okay? We can't look like kids. We've got to look like we mean business. I've printed this out,' she says. It's an unflattering print of Dad's face. I nod. It's kind of giving me a rush if I'm honest. Mostly, Taylor and I haven't done much about Dad's gambling, beyond protecting our stuff. It's seemed like an adult problem, something between Mum and Dad. But the whole moving-to-Fairyland-Caravan-Park has changed things. I can feel it and so can Taylor.

‘We should start going through his bag,’ I say, pulling on a pair of jeans. ‘Not just when something’s missing, but regularly.’

Taylor brightens. ‘Alright. We just need to try to control him a bit, until he sorts all this stuff out.’

\*\*\*

We walk past Fairyland on our way to the River Pub. Like swimming in the river, walking past Fairyland is something kids in Sutherbend have been told to avoid.

Sagging wire fence; old cabins and caravans with red-and-pink flowers in pots. A pool with strange-coloured water and an old tennis court that has weeds growing through the cracked surface. My arms are covered in goose bumps. I feel like I’m being watched. Taylor doesn’t say anything as she walks by, but I see her shoulders and jaw tense up.

There’s an arch over the gate. When it was put up, it would have read *Fairyland*. The letters have dropped off since then, though. The archway now reads *airyla d*.

‘They say it’s not going to be for long,’ I tell her. I’m more than a head taller than Taylor, but when she’s on a mission I struggle to keep up with her.

‘Unless we stop Dad gambling, we’ll be here forever, Stella,’ Taylor says, powering across the pub car park. ‘You’re so dense, sometimes.’ She pauses at the door. ‘Keep your mouth shut, okay? I’ll do the talking. Just try to look big and tough.’

I don’t know how tough I’m capable of looking, even with my height. Before I can speak to Taylor, she’s squared

her shoulders and disappeared into the pub. After a moment where I count quietly to ten and square my own shoulders, I go in after her.

\*\*\*

At school the next day, I'm staring up at the ceiling, not really listening to anything, thinking about gambling. I mean, how hard could it be to stop? I had to stop eating gluten for a whole month when I couldn't quite get over a case of tonsillitis and Mum made me go on a special diet that was meant to boost my immune system. I'd done it. I'd managed. And I knew Dad could too if he just tried. Pokies couldn't be harder to give up than doughnuts.

Clem flicks me in the head. 'What's up with you today, Price?'

Clements, Lara, Zinnia and I are sitting in the technical section of the library on account of the air-conditioning vent right above it. Clem and I have been best friends since kindergarten. Back then, he'd lived on our street, but in the years since, his parents had saved and his mum had been promoted at work and they'd bought a nicer place near the cinemas. We stayed friends, though. Clem came over all the time, even though it was a long walk and our house was messy and cramped compared to his. But when stuff started getting awkward with my parents – both of them randomly bursting into tears and Mum rage-cooking dinner at seven o'clock in the morning on a Saturday – I'd stopped him coming over, and he hadn't said anything about it, just gone along with things.

Clem's like that.

'Just Year Twelve,' I say. I hadn't really thought through how to tell them about the move – I just assumed that I would. And then the morning had passed and I hadn't.

'Um ... Year Twelve hasn't started yet. You know that, right?' Clem says.

'It has! It has. This is our Year Twelve orientation,' Zin says. 'Year Eleven's gone. It's over.'

Lara rolls her eyes. 'You're so dramatic.'

The letter's in the pocket of my school dress. I haven't opened it yet and I also haven't let it get further than a metre away from me.

I imagine telling Clem about Fairyland. He wouldn't really get it. For a moment, I try to imagine him having to move to Fairyland Caravan Park. He'd just shrug and get on with things and it wouldn't be a big deal to him. That was Clem. When the apocalypse comes, he'll probably steal ten bags of chocolate snowballs, shrug and settle in somewhere comfy with his soccer ball and some Lego.

Lara says that Clem's only good at soccer because his feet are so huge that it's impossible for him to miss the ball. He's always moving, always causing trouble, but never meaning to. And it's the adorable sort of trouble that the teachers just roll their eyes at. He loves building things and wants to get into construction when he finishes school.

'It's just surreal,' I say. 'It's freaking me out.'

Zin sits up. 'Oh, Stell. Me too. It's stressful, right? Like, where's all the time gone? I used to think the Year Twelves were all grown-ups and now we're *there* and I don't feel grown up. At all.' She looks a little teary, but Zin's always

been a crier. Sometimes she cries in the middle of the Sutherbend High school anthem because it makes her feel nostalgic for the school we haven't left yet.

'What do you lot know about Fairyland Caravan Park?' I ask, not looking at any of them.

'I'm not allowed to walk past there,' Lara says. 'One of the caravans exploded last year because the tenant was cooking drugs.'

'Yeah, but they ended up in jail,' Clem says soothingly.

'So?'

'So, they're not at the caravan park anymore.' He pats her head.

Zin puts her hand to her mouth. 'I'd die if my neighbours cooked drugs,' she says, her voice catching. She blinks, like she's about to get teary. 'I'd just *die*.'

Zin comes from a huge family and she's the youngest, so I guess crying is a valid strategy for her. She has this lovely bronzy hair that you just want to run your fingers through, and somehow always looks amazing and glamorous, even when she's just in her school uniform.

Lara plays just about every sport on offer at Sutherbend and got on the news last year after being rejected from the boys' soccer team. Lara and Clem argue ferociously, even though they agree on everything. It's the only time either of them gets really worked up over anything – when the other one's aggressively agreeing with them.

'The Year Nines like to go and egg the caravans,' Clem says. 'Can't be that bad if it's the kind of place you can get away with egging. None of them have even been bashed.'

‘They’re all going to wake up dead one morning,’ Zin says. ‘Every single one that did the egging.’

Lara snorts. ‘You can’t wake up *dead*.’

‘Just think,’ says Clem, his voice light, ‘We’ll be finished school soon. A year from now – fancy-free.’

‘Clem, stop talking,’ Zin waves a finger at him. ‘Just stop.’

Clem looks at me. ‘You really don’t look good.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Seriously. What’s up? It’s not just Year Twelve.’

Lara groans. ‘We’re not *in* Year Twelve, yet!’

‘It’s just so depressing at home at the moment,’ I say. ‘Mum’s been fighting with Dad. It’s been rough since ... since he lost his job. He’s sleeping on the couch. Depressing, that’s all.’

‘That sucks,’ Lara says. ‘Although, if I ever move in with anyone, I’m keeping my own room.’

Clem starts picking at a loose thread in his tie. ‘You do know that that defeats the purpose of living with someone, right?’

‘Oh, whoever it is will be able to *visit*, but sharing a room permanently?’ Lara shudders. ‘Why do adults *want* that?’

‘I think it’s romantic,’ says Zin. ‘Talking until the middle of the night, listening to the rain falling on a tin roof, other stuff ... And honestly, I can’t wait to get married and organise all the decorations. And the bouquets! They’re going to be *amazing*.’

‘Your future wife’s not going to get a look-in, is she?’

‘We’ll have the same taste in flowers,’ Zin says. ‘She won’t care. We can’t get married if she doesn’t have the same taste in flowers as I do.’

‘You’re such a traditionalist,’ Lara says, shaking her head. Despite the fact she’d much rather kick a ball around the oval than study, Lara’s pretty amazing at all her classes. Everyone knows she’ll be one of the Sutherbend kids who end up going to university. Lara’s parents both work at the local Lexborough University campus. Her mother lectures in human rights law and her father’s a receptionist, and every afternoon they walk to their car holding hands.

Clem nudges me. ‘And ...’

I smack at his hand. ‘Stop picking your tie! You’ll ruin it!’

He glances down at his tie. ‘It’s alright.’

‘Then you’ll have to buy a new one,’ I say.

He drops his tie and looks at me blankly. ‘What’s up with you?’

I think about Fairyland, but it still feels like something that’s not quite real. ‘My biological mother wrote me a letter,’ I say.

All three of them look at me. Clem opens his mouth and closes it again and then looks at Lara, who frowns, and no one knows quite what to say. I think of Clem with his parents who look just like him, and Zin with her mum and her brood of brothers and sisters, and Lara with her parents and uncles who are all like fathers to her. I wonder if adoption is something they’ve ever really thought about. At all.

Clem swears softly and starts picking at his tie again.

‘What did it say?’ Lara asks.

‘I didn’t know you were adopted!’ Zin says.

I slap Clem’s hands away from his tie and he shakes his head. ‘How can you possibly have known Price for this long and not know that she’s adopted?’

‘It doesn’t come up much,’ I say. ‘It’s just not that big of a deal. Until now, I guess.’

‘It *is* a big deal!’ Zin says.

‘It’s not,’ Lara snaps.

‘I haven’t opened it yet,’ I say, pulling the letter out of my pocket.

Lara runs a finger over the envelope and glances at me. ‘What does your mum say?’

‘What does *Taylor* say?’ Zin asks. ‘Did she lose it? Did she break something?’

I squeeze the bridge of my nose. Zin has been morbidly fascinated with Taylor since we were in kindergarten and Taylor melted three of my plastic dolls. She was devastated when Taylor got kicked out of Sutherbend and had to go to Ascott. I think most other people just sort of breathed a sigh of relief.

Clem reaches up for his tie and then stops himself and sits on his hands.

‘I haven’t told anyone yet.’

Lara frowns. ‘Why?’

‘They’ve got ...’ I think of Fairyland and swallow. ‘Just, they’re busy at the moment, that’s all.’

‘How are you feeling?’ Clem asks, his fingers working back up towards his tie.

‘I don’t know. Alright. Bloody hell, Clem. Just leave your tie *alone*.’

Clem takes the letter from my hands and gives it a squeeze. ‘One page, maybe two.’

I roll my eyes. ‘I know.’

He squeezes again, his head tilted. ‘There’s something else in there.’

‘What?’

‘Something crunchy.’

‘You’re imagining things,’ says Lara.

‘I’m not!’ He holds it out to me. ‘Go on – give it a squeeze.’

‘No.’ I cross my arms.

‘Go on! Squeeze it! Please?’

Zin snorts.

‘Grow up, Zinnia.’ Clem hands the letter to Lara, who inspects it closely and drops it into my lap.

‘There’s definitely something crunchy,’ she says.

I squeeze the letter and realise they’re right – there is something in there other than paper. My palms start to sweat. I put it down on the floor between us.

Clem tugs at my sleeve. ‘You okay?’

‘Fine.’

‘She has neat handwriting.’

‘Yeah, I know. I’ve been staring at it non-stop. Her writing’s burned into my brain.’

Clem stares at the letter. ‘So, are you going to open it? Or just wait for it to disintegrate so you don’t have to deal with it?’

I reach out and take Clem’s tie off him. ‘Stop *picking* at it!’

The bell rings, but they keep staring at me, and eventually I clear my throat and get up. Clem hands me the unopened letter without a word. ‘We’ll be late,’ I say.

\*\*\*

That afternoon, we're just heading into a talk on study methods when the school alarm goes off. Our school alarm goes off a lot. Particularly when there's an exam or a test or something else that people aren't interested in doing.

'Ugh,' says Lara, and we start trooping across the grounds to the oval, where we huddle in the sun and wait for the teachers to give us the all clear.

They look as bored as we are. I mean, it was exciting the first few times and it felt like a massive bonus to get out of whatever class we were meant to be in, but I'd honestly rather be taking notes in front of a portable fan right now.

I take a hat around school with me in summer because there's nothing worse than the sun baking down on your uncovered head on the oval while the teachers wearily try to confirm that there's no bomb. Lara, Zin and Clem all tease me about the hat, but I never stop wearing it.

Zin's somehow got a box of still-warm chips in her pocket.

'How did you *get* these?' Clem asks. 'We were just in class together.'

'Witch,' says Lara, stuffing a handful into her mouth. 'She's a witch!'

Clem nudges me. 'Reckon it's someone in Year Ten – they were meant to have an English exam today.'

'Which book?'

'Play – *Much Ado About Nothing*.'

'Fair call,' says Lara, licking salt off her fingers. 'But I reckon it's probably the Year Twelves swinging by the school and getting nostalgic. I mean, it's probably their last bomb scare.'

‘Can you even imagine?’ Zin shakes her head. ‘I’m going to miss this place.’

‘We shouldn’t be out in the sun like this,’ I say.

‘There’s nowhere shady out here,’ Clem says flatly. He tends not to burn, even when we’ve been stuck out on the oval for two hours.

‘We’ll go back in soon,’ says Lara. Her fair skin’s already going pink. She’s the sort of person who’s eternally hopeful every time she accidentally gets sunburnt that *this* time she’ll get a tan. All that ever happens is that she peels and gets a fresh scattering of freckles.

‘Hey! I nearly forgot!’ Clem pulls a hat out of his back pocket. It’s one of those floppy, wide-brimmed ones. It doesn’t fit his head properly, but he puts it on and beams at me.

Lara groans. ‘Take that off.’

‘No.’ He adjusts the string under his chin. ‘I’m taking care of myself. I’m investing in my *future*.’

Lara shakes her head.

Someone from the soccer team walks by and laughs. ‘Nice hat, Liu!’

Clem bows, keeping his hat on with one of his hands. ‘Jealousy is unattractive, Steven!’

‘Oh, Clem,’ Zin sighs.

‘Can I have my tie back?’ Clem asks, swinging around to face me. ‘I *promise* not to pick at it.’

‘You swear?’

‘Yeah, I swear.’

I hand him the tie out of my pocket, feeling the letter against my fingers.

‘Check out Matthew Clarke,’ Zin says.

I crane my neck. Matthew Clarke is talking to the teachers like he's one of them. Matthew's tall and blond. I don't know what colour his eyes are; I've never been game enough to look at him that closely. He's one of those people who are involved in absolutely everything – backstage at musicals, athletics, choir, water polo, soccer and the school's fundraising. He doesn't really seem to have friends or get along particularly well with anyone in our year. Matthew Clarke has fascinated Zin and me since we started high school. Lara gets very impatient about it all – I think because they'd been on the soccer team together before Lara got turfed. Lara gets impatient with everyone on the soccer team, including Clem.

'Can we go back in now?' I call out. 'We're burning!'

Across the oval, the Year Tens are sunbaking on the grass with their shirts pulled up nearly to their bras. I see one of the teachers take a step towards them, then she stops and pulls out her phone and it's just another afternoon at Sutherbend High.

\*\*\*

I stay at the library for a little while after school, partly because I love the library and partly because the bank's sending someone to value our house this afternoon. The computers are all being used by kids on detention, so I sit in my favourite aisle, under the air-conditioning vent, and play with the bouquet of flowers Zin had left in my locker. I have no idea what any of them are, but I'd never let Zin know that.

‘Richard!’ the librarian yells. ‘Put him down *right now!*’

I crane my neck to see one of the Year Nines lifting another Year Nine up by his shirtfront. He says something to him that I can’t hear.

Clem, who’s on detention for being disruptive during final-period maths, glances up from his computer game.

At about five the library staff start making their daily everyone-out signs. I hitch my bag up onto my shoulder out in the yard and Clem falls into step beside me. We walk in silence for a while.

‘Hey,’ he says.

‘Hey. What was that all about?’

‘What?’

‘The Year Nines.’

‘Oh. Think Carl’s been doing crap at Fairyland. And that kid, Richard, isn’t happy about it.’

‘Right.’ I swallow. ‘What sort of crap?’

‘How would I know?’

‘Why’s Richard not happy about it?’

‘I dunno. Maybe he lives there?’

‘I thought all the Fairyland kids went to Ascott.’

Clem snorts. ‘That’s stupid – they probably go to lots of different schools. Who’s going to broadcast that they live in Fairyland? Anyway, wanna do something? My tutor’s not coming till seven.’

‘Which one?’

‘The physics and chemistry one.’

‘You don’t get a break over summer?’

‘Are you kidding? It’s all being ramped up so I’m set for next year.’ He rolls his eyes.

I'd asked Mum for a tutor, just after Clem started with one. I wanted to learn how to craft my essays better. I wanted to learn how to structure things in a way that made sense, like the books I read. She'd looked at me, her expression completely bewildered. 'But you're doing well enough, aren't you? You don't need a tutor. Just talk to your teacher if you're confused.'

I don't think Clem's parents are really on board with the concept of 'well enough'. He and Lara complain bitterly to each other about the tutors they have to see, and I sit there and seethe and wish my parents were the type who saw value in that sort of thing.

Clem nudges me with his shoulder. 'Hey, Price?'

'What?'

'There's something else bothering you, isn't there? Other than the adoption stuff?'

I hesitate. Telling Clem about moving to the caravan park isn't going to change anything. It's not going to stop my dad from gambling, or stop the bank from coming out to value our house. I keep thinking of the way they'd all stared at me about the letter stuff. And Fairyland is much, much worse.

'No,' I say. 'That's it.'

Clem looks at me and I think he's going to keep pushing, but then he suddenly runs off and latches onto the low branches of a tree on the nature strip, his hat swinging from his neck by its string. 'Wanna climb it?'

'No. I don't want to climb it.'

'It'll cheer you up.'

'Clem – c'mon. You'll rip your uniform. *Again.*'

He ignores me and pulls himself up onto the branch. The tree trembles alarmingly, but he just keeps climbing up and up until I can't see him anymore. 'Clem?' I call, hating how uncertain my voice sounds.

'It's very green up here!' he calls back. 'Green's the most soothing colour, remember? You told me that! Remember when you wanted me to paint my room green?'

'Come down,' I say, but he doesn't and I think about walking off, but I don't do that, either. I stand by the trunk with my arms crossed and watch two little primary school kids and their mother unlock their front door across the road and go inside. I wonder what the kids are looking forward to. I wonder what they're worried about. I wonder whether their mother has dozens of overdue bills fanned out like playing cards on her cluttered desk.

I kick the trunk of the tree so hard that all the leaves shake. 'Clem!'

He lands on the ground next to me, grinning and covered in leaves and sticks.

'You're an idiot,' I say as he dusts himself off and puts his hat back on.

'Race you to that car?'

'I'm not running in my stupid school shoes!'

But he's off, bag in hand, running full-pelt down the footpath as though he's being chased by things that only he can see.