

Snapshot

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For Skye and Maria

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CHAPTER 1

THE NIGHTMARE

“No one ever told me grief felt so like fear.” – C.S. Lewis

‘If a picture paints a thousand words, then a thousand pictures are worth a million words, still not enough to bring you back.’ I kiss the photo of my dad as I do every night before going to sleep. ‘I miss you more than ever.’

Other than an album, I keep one photo of my dad in a frame on my bedside table. It’s a picture of me on his shoulders at the football grand-final when I was six and a half. Some nights it’s hard to look at, tonight is one of those nights.

It was all okay until *he* came to stay. I hate *him* being here.

Whenever I have one of my nightmares, I always end up in Mum’s bed. Since Mum invited *him* to stay, I pretend not to have the nightmares anymore.

I can’t bring myself to accept him being in the same bed as Mum. He’s not my dad.

No one will ever replace my dad.

My head sinks into my pillow, and I look at Pinky, my cuddly pig teddy. ‘Counting sheep is meant to help you get to sleep Pinky,’ I say. ‘I wonder if counting horses will give you nightmares?’ Pinky just stares.

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2.00 AM

I'm tumbling, tossing, and turning over and over like being dumped by a wave.

Squealing and screaming.

Crash ... thunder ... bang!

Raining fragments of glass.

An abrupt stop.

Intense petrol fumes fill my nostrils.

Tightness clasps my chest, and I gasp for air.

A rush of pain hammers my head.

My dad's grip on my hand weakens before he lets go and I fall ... into darkness ... silence ... emptiness.

So empty it hurts.

...

I'm awakened by my own sounds of terror and despair.

It's that horrible nightmare again! I hate it! I HATE IT!

Where's Pinky? I need Pinky.

My bedroom door handle clicks.

I tug my doona up off the floor and snuggle under it.

The door creaks open.

My eyes are closed, pretending I'm asleep.

'You okay Maddy?' I hear Mum's voice but say nothing.

Mum has picked up Pinky and put him back on my pillow. I must have lost him to the floor as I was turning over and over in my bed. The softness of Pinky on my face is comforting.

Mum whispers, 'Love you, sweetie.'

With my face turned away, my anguish and tears stay hidden.

The door closes. Teardrops moisten my pillow as I cry myself back to sleep, again.

CHAPTER 2

BREAKFAST JOKES

“A sense of humour needs a little attitude like an old camera needs film.”

Today is the first official game of the footy season. I’m pumped.

I spring out of bed like Mystery, my grey kitten, trying to pounce on his wind-up toy mouse.

Since Hemi has been staying over, I get dressed before going to brekkie instead of rocking up self-conscious-like in my jarmies. I’m not used to having a man around the house. Hemi comes over most Friday nights, sometimes Saturdays. His canary yellow Monaro takes up a good chunk of our driveway. Mitch tells me, anyone who owns a car like that must be super cool. He said it’s a gen 3 CV8Z, and it’s not canary colour, it’s Devil Yellow. He has a model one. Whatever.

As I splash water on my face to wake up, I stare at the mirror. Shouldn’t have. My hair is a cyclone aftermath. It’s always like it after having one of my nightmares. I do the best I can to calm the storm on the top of my head with my hairbrush. An uncomfortable sensation grumbles in my tummy, but I guess it’s just hunger pains, so I don’t think much more about it. I smile at myself in the mirror to erase any bad thoughts before heading to the kitchen.

Hemi has made himself at home at the breakfast bar. ‘Morning Maddy,’ he says in a polite deep, calm voice.

Mum tells me he speaks like George Clooney with a Kiwi accent. She pointed George out once when we were watching a coffee ad on TV. ‘He’s the guy from the movie Tomorrowland,’ I told Mum.

Even though he doesn't look like George Clooney, Mum says he's a hunk. He's Maori, has big muscles and a small tattoo of a Tiki on his right shoulder. He says it's for protection.

Protection from what?

'Yo Hemi.' I barely acknowledge him, trying not to give him any eye contact, wishing he wasn't here.

Hemi is the first of Mum's dates she has let stay at our house. It was only halfway through last year she had her first date since Dad died. She's only had a few, and none ended up going anywhere. She always says she'll never find someone as wonderful as Dad. Duh yeah. Dad is irreplaceable.

Mum's in the kitchen cooking up something for Hemi. We are now both sitting at the breakfast bar, me with my cornflakes and banana. Mum hands Hemi a plate with two poached eggs and some bacon on toast. I hate the smell of bacon, the idea of cooking a pig is gross. Pigs should not be food. I'm not a vegetarian, but we shouldn't eat pigs or deer or rabbits.

Mum sits on the third barstool. In front of her is a glass of what looks like green snot. It's some kind of health drink concoction she whizzes up in her blender. She tells me I should try it. *Nope!*

Mum's always on a health kick. She says it helps her to keep young and fresh. She is a beautiful lady, well at least I think so, and I guess Hemi does too. She is thirty-two years' young. Hemi is younger than her, but they won't tell me by how much.

No one said much until Hemi opened the conversation by cracking a joke. I'm not sure if he knows, but telling jokes was something special Dad and I shared.

‘What’s a dog’s favourite breakfast?’ He asked.

‘Brick fast?’ I sometimes tease Hemi about his accent.

I think it’s kinda quirky how Kiwi’s mix up their u’s with their i’s and their i’s with their e’s.

Like fush and chups, chully bun and brid and butter.

‘I said *breakfast*.’ Hemi tried hard to speak Aussie.

‘Pooched eggs.’ I sighed. Mum rolled her eyes at me.

‘What’s a comedian’s favourite breakfast?’ Hemi was quick to bounce another.

‘Corny flakes.’ I gave a mocking chuckle. I think I knew every breakfast joke invented.

Hemi bombarded me with a bunch of jokes like he was firing them from a machine gun.

‘What’s a cow’s favourite breakfast then?’

‘Mooslie.’ I knew that one. Big sigh.

‘Horse?’

‘Nuuuuutrigrain.’ That one too. *Why doesn’t he just stop?*

‘Cat?’

‘Mice bubbles.’ *Please stop.*

‘Bird?’

‘Tweeties.’ Another eye roll.

‘That’s it. My repertoire of breakfast jokes is depleted.’ Hemi’s bottom lip dropped, defeated.

‘Okay. Here’s one for you.’ I shot one back with *madditude*, as Mum calls it, though I don’t like it when she says it. ‘What’s a dung beetle’s favourite breakfast?’

‘Dunno.’ Hemi shrugged.

‘Cocoa poops.’ The smugness on my face must have been obvious.

‘You’re as funny as a sock full of frogs.’ Hemi was quick-witted, but he couldn’t outdo me.

‘Well, your jokes only have one leg.’ More *madditude*.

Hemi scratched his ear. ‘Why’s that?’

‘Cos’ they’re lame.’ I did spiteful lips.

Mum glared at me. Daggers.

Joke sparring is one thing I miss about my Dad. He left me a joke book with over five hundred of the *best dad jokes for kids*. I didn’t like Hemi trying to be like my dad. He will never replace him.

Mum diverted the tension. ‘How do you feel about your first club game of the season?’

‘I’m so pumped, but I’m a bit worried,’ I said between spoonfuls of cornflakes.

‘Why’s that?’ Mum asked licking the green stuff off her lips.

‘Cos Jason’s not playing.’

‘Oh. That’s right, poor guy.’

‘Six weeks before he can play again.’

‘What happened to Jason?’ Hemi asked.

‘He broke his arm at the school lightning carnival last week,’ I said, tapping my arm.

‘Ouch.’ Hemi grabbed his own arm. ‘He must be p’ed off.’

‘Like yeah. He lives for footy.’

‘Mind if I come along to watch the game today?’ Hemi tried to be dad-like again.

‘If you have to.’ I wanted to say no. There was no way I was ready for someone else to come into our lives. Mum and I were doing just fine. *Why did she have to start dating?*

This big hunk of a guy looks more serious than the others though. I’ve a whole lot of new feelings about this, but I’m keeping them to myself. I don’t want to upset Mum.

I lifted the cereal bowl and poured the rest of the cornflakes and milk into my mouth.

‘Manners young lady!’ Mum snapped. ‘We have visitors.’

‘Where?’ I was showing my *madditude* again.

She gave me *that* look. The one where you know you have overstepped the mark.

‘I better go and get ready,’ I said as I snuck off to my studio.

CHAPTER 3

ONE THOUSAND PICTURES

“You can’t be what you can’t see.” – Marian Wright Edelman

My bedroom is full of pictures. It’s why I call it my studio. My favourite thing is my LIKE wall. On my tenth birthday, Mum gave me a cool Instamatic camera. I love it. My dad was a photographer and Mum took it up after Dad died. Mum inherited Dad’s old Box Brownie Camera collection. She is now a camera enthusiast. I think they have passed the photographer genes onto me. I have an eye for a picture, but I only add pictures of special memories to my LIKE wall. My aim is to take one thousand pictures. One thousand memories. All memories of my life I wish Dad was here to see.

The oldness of an Instamatic camera and seeing the picture develop in front of my eyes is something I like, and the fact I can then stick it on my wall is a bonus. If I ever want to post a picture on social media, I take a photo of the snapshot with my phone without having to put it through a filter. It already looks cool and retro.

My latest addition to the my LIKE wall is the snapshot of my new fluoro orange footy boots under the *footy* section. I have a *school* section, *home* section, *nature* section, *family* section, *antiques* section, *markets* section, *random* section, *Pinky* section, *Mystery* (my cat) section, *friends* section, a *charm* section, a *selfie* section, and a *LIKE LIKE* section. There is one other section with a big question mark. It’s my *unsure* section for when I haven’t decided where to put the snapshot yet.

My Mitch snapshots moved from my *friends* section to the *unsure* section just over a week ago when he acted strange at school and avoided me. Not long after, at the beach, he told me

he LIKE liked me for the first time. So, I made a separate new section and called it my *LIKE LIKE* section. His snapshots are now there.

I don't have a *Dad* section. Just the one on my bedside cabinet and the ones in the album.

Memories of Dad flooded into my mind as I got ready for footy. When I was little, he taught me to be super organised, so I laid out everything I needed on my bed.

✓ Instamatic camera, I take it wherever I go.

✓ Footy boots, check.

The new ones Mum bought me last weekend are awesome. They're fluoro orange, the same colour as the ones I once spotted Tayla Harris wearing. She's my favourite female AFL player. I've a poster on my wall of her taking a spekky mark and another of her kicking a footy. She kicks her leg as high as a ballet dancer.

Online I read something she said. *'You can't be what you can't see. I took it as if you don't have an idol, you're kind of trying to pave the way yourself. But if there's someone who has already done something you want to do, you can be like, then I want to be like them.'*

I don't want to be exactly like her, she's a boxer, and I'm not a big boxing fan. But she is an amazing footballer. Even though she is kind of a role model, I want to be myself, after all, I'm better at it than anyone else. Being me, that is.

I wanted to show Mitch my new footy boots when I bought them, but he and his family spent the day at Northpoint. Wish I could have gone. Mum and I visited once for the day when Mitch's family was camping. It was awesome swimming, snorkelling and boogie boarding.

Instead, Mum and I went shopping. I suppose I shouldn't complain 'cos I got a new pair of footy boots, a matching sports bra (my bumps are getting bigger) and some cool new tops.

Back to my list:

- ✓ New sports bra.
- ✓ Mouth guard – blue and white.
- ✓ Shorts, with the secret pocket to carry my footy charm to help boost my confidence.
- ✓ Blue ribbons for my messy blonde hair to tie it up in piggy tails like wings in the wind so I can take spekkies.
- ✓ Blue and white striped socks.
- ✓ Skins.
- ✓ Liniment, in case I get a corky or pull a muscle.

The smell of liniment brings back strong memories of my dad when he played footy.

Dad was a great footballer. He got drafted to play AFL but didn't take it up because it meant moving to Melbourne to play for Richmond. He and Mum were also about to get married. It was a choice between his photography career or football career. He chose photography and of course getting married.

Mum was twenty when they married, and Dad was twenty-one. Dad was way better looking than Hemi. Mum said Dad's baldness started when he was twenty-one, so he shaved it all off. I think it was a number one. He was prickly, but a nice prickly, like the feeling of the soft half of a Velcro strip.

Most weekends Dad played footy for the local league team, Bayside Blues, unless he was on a business or photography trip over east or overseas. He always tried to get home for the weekend. I loved hanging out at the footy club as a little kid. I still do.

- ✓ Towel, soap, shampoo, deodorant, hair brush.
- ✓ Change of clothes, something a little dressy as Mum and Hemi said they would take me out for lunch after the game.

The new club rooms are so awesome. They have separate showers and changing section for the girls! *Yay finally!* We used to take it in turns with the boys, with someone to stand guard.

The best thing about the new club rooms is the writing in big letters above the entrance. *The Graham Fairweather Pavilion*. Named in honour of my dad. The locals call it *Stormy's Shed*. My dad's nickname was Stormy. I love the way Aussies turn humour on its head, like calling a tall guy *tiny* or a redhead *blue*. I just get called Maddy though. Mitch tried to get everyone to call me *Cyclone* for a while, but it didn't get momentum. There I go, being funny again. I try to find something funny in everything.

It's great Mitch is playing footy again. Since the school lightning carnival, he appears to be a lot more confident. I suppose kicking the winning goal helped. He also told me he's getting on better with his dad.

Mitch's dad is the closest thing I've had as a dad-kind-of role model, and his little sister, Megan is like a sister to me.

I've known Mitch since we were babies. Our mums knew each other when they were young and have stayed friends for years. Mitch's Mum was so helpful after the accident.

Mitch doesn't know about my LIKE wall because he's never been in my studio. My favourite picture of him is a twosie I took at the beach with both of us wearing sand beards after falling over. I put it in the new *LIKE LIKE* section rather than the *selfie* section. Well, a selfie is a selfie - of yourself. If someone is in the shot, then it's no longer a selfie. If two people are in a selfie shot, you can't call it a selfie. So, I've invented a name for a two-people selfie, a *twosie* and a three-people selfie a *threesie*. Anymore in a shot is just a *groupie*.

A selfie – one snap.

Twosie – two snap.

Threesie – three snap.

Groupie – big snap.

CHAPTER 4

STORMY

“A snapshot captures a moment you want to treasure as a memory.”

‘Mitch is playing today,’ I called out to Mum from the back seat as she and Hemi were driving me to the footy.

‘I thought you said he wasn’t playing this year.’ Mum planted her foot on the accelerator in Hemi’s canary car.

‘Yeah, I know, but he changed his mind,’ I replied.

‘Who’s Mutch?’ Hemi butted in.

‘A friend and his name is Mitch, not Mutch.’ I didn’t want to say anymore in case he pried where he shouldn’t. But he did anyway.

‘Boyfriend?’

‘I said FRIEND!’ My knuckles clamped tight. ‘Remember, you met him at The Ship Hotel two weeks ago.’

‘Oh Meetch, the bro who kept asking me questions about my car.’

‘Yeah, him.’

‘Sorry Maddy. I do remember him. I just thought you and he were ...’ Before he could say anything else, Mum looked across to him. Her hand lifted off the steering wheel as she waved it back and forth in front of her neck. He went quiet.

‘So, what made Mitch change his mind, Maddy?’ Mum asked.

‘Long story. The reason he didn’t want to play this year was because of Jason.’

Hemi butted in again, ‘What? And now Jason has broken his arm Meetch decided to play?’

‘No. It’s not like that!’ I said between clenched teeth. I was having a conversation with Mum, and he interrupted.

I made a mean face behind him. ‘Jason actually asked Mitch to play. After the fight at school, they’ve been getting on better with each other.’

‘Oh, sorry.’ Hemi apologised a lot. I think he was trying hard to get me to like him.

‘Mitch kicked the winning goal in the last game of the school lightning carnival. The same game Jason broke his arm,’ I added as I let some anger go by tugging on my seatbelt.

‘It would have done Mitch’s confidence a world of good,’ Mum said as she turned into the car-park.

‘What? Jason breaking his arm?’ I replied.

Mum shook her head. ‘No. Mitch kicking the goal.’

‘Oh yeah.’ I could’ve added that the goal was a real team effort, with Jason’s ruck tap down to me and my lightning handball to Mitch. It’s what makes the team work well when everyone plays their part. Sometimes we only remember who kicked the goal. I didn’t want to take the limelight from Mitch, it was an awesome goal any day.

The car park was chokka’s, but it didn’t matter. The club gave Mum a member’s parking bay, right near Stormy’s Shed.

As soon as I opened the door, Mitch came running up to the car.

‘Yo Maddy. I got new footy boots. Check ‘em out,’ Mitch puffed out. ‘Hello Mrs Fairweather and that guy I met at The Ship with the cool car.’

‘Hemi,’ I reminded Mitch.

‘How’s it going Mister Hemi?’

‘Sweet as Meetch.’

‘How’s the Monaro bro?’ Mitch was trying to act cool.

‘Purrin’ beautifully bro.’ Hemi was also trying to act cool.

Mitch pulled a pair of blue fluoro footy boots out of his bag.

‘Awesome. I love the colour.’ I pulled out my camera and took a snapshot of his boots. ‘I got some too.’ I showed him mine, already on my feet.

‘Whoa, they’re cool.’ We both knuckle-pinkied each other. It’s something Mitch and I do. A fist pump mixed with a pinky finger grab, like when two people say or experience something at the same time. We don’t say the jinx bit though.

‘Hey Mitch, what kind of boots do koalas wear when they’re playing footy?’ I asked.

‘Is this a joke?’ His eyebrows almost crossed.

‘Seriously Mitch.’

‘I dunno.’ He shrugged.

‘Gumboots!’ I said as I flicked him on the shoulder.

‘Funny. You said seriously.’

‘Yeah, seriously funny.’

Mitch laughed at the same time as he shook his head.

‘See ya mum, bye Hemi,’ I said as we both headed to the clubrooms.

‘Catch you after the game. Be careful.’ I wish Mum wouldn’t say that.

She’s still worried I might hurt my neck and head because of the accident. How can you be careful in a game of footy? Sometimes I imagine speaking to the opposition saying, *‘Excuse me, can you please not tackle me hard because my mum worries about me getting hurt.’*

I do have a strategy; not to let any tackle stick or get rid of the ball so fast they end up holding me without the ball and I get a free kick.

‘Have a great game,’ Hemi called out.

The clubroom was buzzing as they allocated our jumpers for the year. New jumpers, but with the same design. Dark blue for the sea, light blue for the sky and a white line in the shape of a wave separating the two blues, the same as our school ones.

I got number two, my dad’s old number. Totally awesome! Selfie snapshot.

Mitch got number twelve which is the one he wanted because he was born on the twelfth of the twelfth and this year he will be twelve years old. Snapshot.

As it was the tradition, they announced the decision about club captain and vice-captain before the first game of the season. We all voted last week at training.

It was no surprise when they announced Jason as captain. He's the tallest in our school and team and the best footballer. Mitch thinks he shows-off a lot. He came forward to shake Coach Fraser's hand, which he had to do with his left because his other arm was in a sling. He was so unco trying to shake, so he gave the coach a high five like the bros.

Jason's speech was brief. 'Yo, thanks. You're all cool, go the Blues. Sorry I can't be out there with you today.'

Coach Fraser stepped forward again. 'The next announcement will be for the vice-captain, and because Jason cannot play will act as captain on the ground today.'

I expected Ryan's name to get called out. He's also an excellent footballer.

'This person is a real team player with leadership potential. They always turn up and put in 100 per cent at training. I would like to announce our vice-captain for the year drum roll Maddison Fairweather.'

At first, I wondered, who's Maddison Fairweather. Then it sunk in. It was me. *No way!*

Coach Fraser added, 'Maddy is the first girl in the club's history voted as vice-captain and the first girl to lead the team as captain on the oval.'

As I stood up and walked forward, everyone was cheering. I didn't realise I was that popular. I get on okay with the boys, and the girls on our team all look up to me because of my experience. Ryan hi-fived me as I walked by and Mitch and I did our usual knuckle-pinkie.

I shook Coach Fraser's hand. 'Well done young Stormy, you deserve this.'

I'd never been called Stormy before, it was my dad's nickname, but coming from Coach Fraser's mouth, it sounded special.

'Speech, speech!' Everyone called out.

Being in the limelight is not something I'm thrilled about. My head was down, and I went all goose-bumpy. As I my eyes lifted, I noticed everyone gawking at me, waiting for me to say something. My tummy was tight. I guessed it was just nerves. I swallowed the lump in my throat and opened my mouth.

'Um. Hey, this is a total surprise. Thanks.' I tried to figure out what else to say. 'Um. I can't believe you voted for me. I hope I do a good enough job.'

We were playing the Dune Buggies. It would be like a grudge match since their school team beat us by two points at the inter-school lightning carnival. As I was thinking this, I gained a little bit of confidence.

'Yeah, one other thing. Let's show those Dune Buggies some serious four-wheel driving as we plant the foot and show them our tails.'

'YEAH!' A mighty roar erupted.

This was the best I could do for my maiden speech as vice-captain, but I think it hit the mark.

As I walked back to my spot, Jason gave me a high five with his good arm. 'On ya Maddy.'

I sat back down on the bench between Mitch and Tiana. 'One for the girls,' she whispered in my ear. I liked having Tiana on our team. She's new to footy this year and has caught on well. She hangs around with the popular girls, or should I say the self-professed popular girls like Crystal and Rachel. Tiana is a left-footer, fit and fast.

Coach Fraser brought us all in together. Fraser's his first name. He used to play for the Bayside Blues League team with my dad, but several injuries sidelined him too often, so he retired. He loves his footy so much he took on coaching the twelves. That's us. He's a great coach. Everyone respects him, and he knows the game.

The other thing I like about him is the way he gives everyone a good run and tries everyone out in different positions.

I leant across to Mitch, 'Why couldn't Cinderella's football team win any games?'

He shrugged his shoulders and braced himself.

'Because her coach was a pumpkin!'

'Is there ever a time when you can't tell a joke?' Mitch said.

I like telling jokes at random times. It keeps Mitch on his toes, and it's a good way of calming any nerves.

'Yeah, when I'm asleep.' Mitch didn't know about my nightmares, and I wanted to keep it that way. As I said this, a tightness gripped my stomach again. *I hope I'm gonna be okay.*

After Coach Fraser's pep-talk we all lined up to run out of the rooms. They made me go first. I got to hold the club's two-tone blue footy. I hand-balled it to Jason and made him run with us, at least to the boundary.

As I was about to charge onto the oval, I spotted Mum with her camera taking zillions of shots as usual.

‘Way to go Maddy!’ I guess she must have realised I was acting captain because I led the team out.

I imagined seeing my dad standing on the boundary calling out my name, but jerked back to reality when I heard Hemi’s voice instead, ‘Go Maddy.’

We did our warm up. The umpire called the captains to the centre for the toss. My tummy started to tie itself in knots. I guess it’s nerves. Why am I so nervous? How hard is it to call heads or tails?

As I approached the Buggies captain, he said, ‘Must be a team of girls if they have a girl for the captain.’

With my best fiery look, I pursed my lips and held back the words stewing in my head. No way was I going to let it get to me. It made me more determined to play better.

As it was, the umpire asked the Dune Buggies captain to call the toss because they were visitors to our home ground.

‘Tails,’ he called.

‘You’ll be chasing ours all day.’ I was cheeky as the coin spun through the air.

‘You wish,’ he said.

It was all friendly, kind of. He won the toss. Bummer.

I wanted to call out to him, *that’s all you’ll win today*, but one sledge was enough for now.

Despite his comment, he stuck out his hand for a handshake. He tried to squeeze hard like he was all macho like, but I could match it.

The umpire held up the ball for the game to get underway.

The siren, if you can call it that, sounded.

‘Blaaaaarrruu..splutter splutter ..urrrruuuiittt.’

The noise was like one of those old car horns underwater. If rust and gravel had a sound, that’s what it would be like.

The game and the season are underway. *How will we go? How will I go as captain? Can we beat the Dune Buggies?*

CHAPTER 5

GERONIMO

“Try not to be like a ball, never let someone throw you around. If someone tries to, speak up.” Maria Pineda-Meneses (11)

Before the first toss-up, I reached into the top corner of my shorts and felt the football charm in the secret pocket.

The charm thing started on my fifth birthday when my dad gave me a bracelet with a small love heart charm. Whenever he went away on a work trip, he would buy me another charm to add to the bracelet.

The Tree of Life, a pig (to remind me of Pinky), the Eiffel Tower (after his Paris trip), the Sydney Harbour Bridge (Sydney trip) and a Merlion from Singapore – he promised he would take me there one day. The football charm came from Melbourne. Dad went to a game at the MCG, West Coast Eagles played Collingwood. The Eagles won. I’ve taken a snapshot of each of the charms and have a special section on my LIKE wall.

When I was a skinny-legged six-and-a-half-year-old about to play my first game of Auskick, my Dad handed me a small box. I remember my dad’s words as I opened it, ‘This will give you wings.’

I was so rapt when I realised it was a football charm. I handed it to Mum to look after while I played the game. I didn’t know at the time, but it was to be the last charm my dad gave me. It’s the reason it’s special to me. It’s not a lucky charm. I don’t believe in superstition, but it helps bring me confidence, and it gives me wings.

Mum sewed a small hidden pocket into my shorts so I could carry the charm with me whenever I play. I take it off the bracelet and put it in the pocket for each game.

As I touched the charm, I closed my eyes and could see the image of my dad's face. I imagined hearing his voice. *Get in there and give it your best. Fly like an eagle.*

The umpire tossed the ball up.

Ryan won the first tap-down. Straight to me. I grabbed the ball and got tackled. One advantage of being a girl playing football is that some boys don't know how to make a tackle on a girl, so I broke free. Yeah, the first kick of the season came from my new boots.

Game on.

Mitch kicked the first goal of the match. An excellent way for him to break-in his new boots. It must be his new-found confidence. I could hear his mum and sister cheering from the sideline. I reckon he would have been a bit disappointed his dad couldn't be at the game. His dad works FIFO, and this was his first of three weekends away.

At quarter time, the scores were level, 3.4 (22) each.

The second quarter was a bit tougher. The Dune Buggies got the best of us. At the toss-up, after they got the last goal of the quarter, the captain of the Dunes said, 'You play like a girl.'

Every muscle in my body tightened. No way was I going to let him get away with saying that. 'Well, if you practised more and improved your skills, you could play as good as a girl too.'

'Whatever,' he said.

‘Irrespective,’ I shot back.

He gave me a strange look.

The siren did its thing for halftime.

At the main break, we were trailing by three goals. We only just missed out on beating the Dunes school team at the lightning carnival and Jason was on the team then. We were up against it, but I didn’t show it to the team. As we walked off, I pat each one of our players on the back and said stuff to encourage them. As acting captain, I believed it was what I should do.

We came together in a huddle. Coach Fraser was still upbeat. He told us to keep running, use our ball carriers, including Tiana and me.

‘Keep the flow going like we did at training. Keep backing each other up. Remember to show ‘em your tails,’ He said as he tapped his finger on his clipboard.

The smell of liniment and the girl offensive comment by the Dunes captain got me fired up.

‘CAR’N the BLUES.’ A mighty roar erupted from the huddle, and we launched into the second half.

The third quarter, known as the premiership quarter, was a cracker. I kicked my first goal of the season, and Ryan kicked two. Tiana had an awesome run on the right wing with three bounces. We kept the Dune Buggies to one goal for the quarter.

At three-quarter time, the scores were; Bayside Blues 7.6 (48) to the Dune Buggies 8.7 (55).

It looked like the Buggies were running out of steam. Without Jason in the team, Ryan was doing a lot of extra ruck-work. It must have exhausted him, but he didn't show it.

Coach Fraser was full of positive comments as he went around to each of the players, thanking them for the effort they were putting in.

'We can do it. We've got their measure,' he said from the middle of the sweaty huddle.

My stomach tightened, but it wasn't a nervous knot. It was more like a cramp. Maybe I got hit in one of the tackles. Three deep breaths didn't make the pain go away. No way was I going to tell anybody, I wanted to play out the rest of the game. I sucked it in and ran onto the oval.

The gravelly siren sounded for the last quarter to commence.

It was a tight quarter. Mitch took an awesome overhead mark (must be all the extra coaching I gave him) and kicked another goal which brought us to within a point. All the other boys on the team ran up and hugged him. The girls gave him a high five. It's funny, when the boys kick a goal, they all hug each other as if they're AFL players. When a girl kicks a goal the boys give the girls high fives. The girls hug each other though.

We had three other girls in our team including Tiana, the fastest girl in the school. I've only just got to know her. She was new at school last year but was in a different class, same again this year. I like her even though she's a bit of a girly-girl at times.

The game was in the balance. Each team kicked another goal. My tummy was still crampy.

With less than a minute to go, we were still down by one point.

I was determined not to go down to them again by less than one goal.

We had possession on the right forward flank. They smothered Patrick's kick, and the ball rolled over the boundary. There must be seconds to go. It was tossed back in. Ryan went up for the ruck and grabbed the ball out of mid-air. He threw the ball on his boot, and it wobbled toward full forward.

As I reached to feel the football charm in my shorts, I got a boost of confidence. I was in the perfect position to go up for the mark.

The ball floated, floated.

'Geronimo!' I called out and leapt high imagining I had wings, using whoever was in front of me as a step-ladder.

I snatched the mark. The ball spilt out as I came down and landed on someone. The umpire's whistle sounded.

'Mark. Number two Bayside.' I must have held the ball long enough.

There was some poor person under me as I tried to get up. It was Mitch. His face said, *awkward*. It reminded me of the time at the beach last Saturday when he tackled me to the ground, and we both ended up with sand beards. But this time I was at the top.

'Sorry Mitch,' I said as I reached out my hand to help him up.

'Great mark,' he said, 'now put it through the big sticks.'

I picked the ball up off the ground and moved back behind the mark. The umpire moved me around on an angle. About forty degrees, twenty meters out.

The player on the mark was the Dunes captain. ‘You kick like a girl.’ He tried to put me off. But his comment only made me more determined.

As I was lining up for the goal, the rusty siren sounded. Talk about pressure. The tummy pain tried to distract me. I bent down and pulled up my socks. I then touched the charm for a little extra boost of confidence.

I sucked up the pain and boof. I kicked the ball. Straight through the middle. *Like a girl!*

All our players came running at me.

‘What the heck.’ Ryan shrugged and threw his arms around me.

All the others followed suit, except Mitch. ‘We won! We won! He said as he gave me a high five instead of a hug. Probably because he knows I didn’t want others thinking we are boy and girlfriend.

An awesome victory - by five points. Was it the start of a great season?

CHAPTER 6

EATING HORSES AND ELEPHANTS

“I hate my moods, they never ask permission before they change.” - Unknown

As we shook hands with the players from the Dune Buggies, their captain came over. ‘Good game,’ he said, ‘not bad for a girl.’

My fists tightened and my tummy simmered with rage. I wanted to say, *what do you mean FOR A GIRL? I held back.* Under my breath I said, *you’re just a Cinderella.*

I think he was surprised a team with a girl captain could beat his team. I hate it when boys think they’re better than girls.

‘Good game for a boy,’ I said squeezing some of my rage and tummy pain into his hand to make a point.

Jason was standing at the door of the clubrooms giving everyone high fives as we entered. You’d think we just won the grand final the way everyone was celebrating.

Coach Fraser gave us a post-game debrief. He reminded us it was the first game of the season and not to get ahead of ourselves.

‘An excellent start,’ he said, ‘we showed those Buggies who’s boss.’

Ryan was voted best on the ground for the Bayside Blues. Mitch and I both got mentioned for our great games, along with Tiana for her first game for the club team and Patrick who always throws himself into the packs like he’s diving into a pool.

After showering, changing, and saying bye to everyone, Mitch asked me if I was going to the park in the afternoon.

The zip on my bag was stuck. My tummy hurt as I grunted trying to make the zip do its thing.

Mitch moved his hands in a gesture to calm me down. ‘Well? The park? You coming?’

I snapped at Mitch. ‘Mum and Hemi are taking me out for lunch.’

‘Whoa!’ He put his hands up in surrender. ‘After that?’

‘I’m not sure how long we’ll be there.’ I grunted as I got the zip to close.

‘You know where I’ll be if you wanna catch up.’

‘I’ll think about it.’ I was crabby.

Mitch was persistent. ‘Tiana and the others are coming.’

‘I’ll let you know,’ I huffed.

Mitch was like a deflated balloon.

I felt bad about the way I spoke to him. After being picked vice-captain and winning the game, I should have been feeling tops. Something was wrong, but I’m not sure what. The pain in my tummy like a fly stuck in a honeypot.

Mum and Hemi met up with me on my way to the car.

‘I’m so proud of you Maddy. I heard you were voted as vice-captain.’ Mum was beaming.

‘Great game,’ Hemi added, offering his hand for a high five.

I lifted my hand half-heartedly to meet his. ‘Thanks.’

Hemi didn’t know much about footy. He used to play rugby when he was back in New Zealand. Mum told me he was pretty good at it.

‘I took a few photos of the game, including the spekky at the end,’ Mum said. I bet she took a few hundred. She has a selection of massive lenses she inherited from Dad including one that needs a monopod. It’s awesome for close-ups. I hope she didn’t take a close-up of me on top of Mitch.

‘Where are we going for lunch?’ I asked as we approached the canary car.

‘Top secret,’ Hemi spoke like a special agent.

‘You’ll see when we get there,’ Mum added.

I chucked my bag in the boot and climbed in the back seat. I wasn’t feeling well. I had the pain in my tummy, and my head was hot.

‘Mitch played a good game,’ Mum said as we headed out of the carpark.

‘Probably those new blue fluoro boots and my coaching,’ I said as I struggled with the seatbelt.

‘What did the captain of the other team say to you at the end of the game?’ Mum asked.

‘Nothin’.’ I didn’t feel like talking about it.

Mum wanted to. ‘I could tell you were annoyed.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, when you get annoyed you stand with clenched fists.’

‘He said I played pretty good for a girl!’

‘I can understand why you’d be annoyed.’ Mum’s eyes caught mine in the mirror.

Hemi stayed quiet till now. ‘What did you say back to him?’

‘Nothin’. You wouldn’t understand, being a bro,’ my words came out mean and narky. It’s probably because I wished my dad was here instead of him. I bet Dad would have been proud of me.

‘Maddy, why are you speaking like that?’ Mum snapped.

‘Like what?’ I yelled back.

‘With *that* tone of voice. That madditude!’

‘What tone of voice? And you know I hate it when you say *that* word.’ Everything tightened.

Hemi butted in again, ‘Madditude? Ha, I think it’s quite cute.’

‘Who asked your opinion?’ I gave my best snarly face behind his head.

‘Maddy!’ I caught Mum’s eyes in the rear-vision mirror and could sense the invisible daggers.

I fizzed inside like a shaken cool drink bottle. ‘Just leave it Mum. Gosh, you’re such a stress head.’

‘You shouldn’t speak to your mother like that.’ Hemi was getting over-involved.

I exploded, ‘You can’t tell me what to do! You’re not my dad!’

‘MADDY!’ Mum hit the brakes. My seatbelt clicked tight and squeezed my stomach. *Great. More pain.*

‘She’s right Heather. I’m not her father. I had no right to butt in.’

The conversation stopped there, followed by an awkward silence.

I sat in the back with my tummy ache, churning over all the mixed emotions whizzing around in my heart and brain. I was happy we won, but I was mad at the other captain, and I was sad because Dad wasn’t here. It wasn’t Hemi’s fault. I felt bad about the way I was speaking to him, but I was too ashamed to admit it. I’m not sure why, but my moods were like a rollercoaster. *Why did I have to go and spoil it?*

Earlier I was kinda looking forward to lunch with Mum and Hemi, but I’m not sure now. I’d rather be at the park with Mitch and Tiana and the others, but I know there’s no point asking.

Mum turned the car into the Jetty Beach Café car park. One of my favourite spots. *Yessss!* It cheered me up a little.

The first thing I did was head to the bathroom. I wanted time to myself and a little cry.

The mirror revealed my red eyes and a tear on my cheek.

As I wiped the tear, I thought about the way I spoke to Mum and Hemi. After the hype of the game and being chosen vice-captain, I strong thoughts about Dad not being here to share the memories. It’s like there are little pockets of mad inside of my heart still trying to squeeze out. I guess it’s part of missing someone. It reminds me of the part in the Next Karate Kid when Miagi says to Julie’s grandmother, ‘*grief trapped in the heart, become big anger.*’

Why did it have to be my dad who was killed in a car accident?

I sucked in the feelings, and after splashing water on my face, I was ready to face the adults.

‘Be nice Maddy, be nice,’ I said as I walked toward Mum and Hemi, sitting at the table near the window, overlooking the jetty.

‘You okay Sweetie?’ Mum asked as I sat down.

‘Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry about what happened in the car.’

‘It’s okay,’ Mum said as she examined her menu.

‘I was annoyed at their captain, and I was missing D.....’

Mum cut me off, not in a rude way. ‘Wanna talk about it later?’

‘If you want.’ I quickly moved on. ‘Right, what’s to eat? I’m starving.’

Hemi handed me the menu. ‘The Ragu Beef burger looks good,’ he said

‘I could eat a horse,’ Mum said.

‘Ewhh, gross Mum, you shouldn’t say that, and besides, I can’t see them on the menu.’

The grownups chuckled. I still had my sense of humour.

It didn’t take long for me to decide. ‘Spag Bog please!’ The Jetty Café’s Spaghetti

Bolognaise was the best, actually second best. I had some of Mitch’s Mum’s once, it was awesome, better than the Jetty Café’s.

Mum chose the Barramundi fillets with salad, and Hemi picked his Ragu Beef burger with chunky chips.

During the meal, my phone buzzed. I reached into my pocket and snuck the phone up to my lap just under the table so the adults couldn't see. Mum has a ban on mobiles and devices when we are out for a meal.

It was a text from Tiana.

Hey Stormy. At the park You? 🐶

Stuck at café. Who else is there? 🐶

Mitch Jason Ryan Coby 🐶

'Maddy, what's our rule about mobiles?' Mum caught me.

'Sorry Mum, an important message from Tiana.'

'Back in the pocket,' she ordered.

I was obedient after sneaking a reply:

Mum sprung – gotta go 😞 🐶

Bumma 😞 🐶

CUL8R 🐶

While the adults were talking, I thought about Tiana. She called me Stormy. Looks like coach Fraser started something. I'm not sure I was comfortable being called Stormy, but coming from Tiana, it was okay.

Tiana's becoming a good friend. Although she hangs out with the *popular* girls, she still has time for me. I've classified the girls at school into five groups.

1. *The plastic populars* – the girls who try to act cool and think they're better than everyone else. Some are real girly-girls, like Crystal. They talk about boys a lot. I don't. I think they're immature about trying to be mature.
2. *The sporty populars* – the girls who are athletic and talk about netball and a bit about boys.
3. *The nice nerds* – the girls who are nice to everyone like Li Tan and Fleur and some other student leaders. – I don't like it when they get called nerds by the plastic populars and the sporty populars.
4. *The In-betweeners* – the ones who don't fit into a group, they're floaters – I suppose I belong to this group, which isn't a group if you know what I mean.
5. *The Loners* – NF (no friends) (some people call them the losers, which isn't fair) – some girls never smile and never seem to care about themselves or anyone else.

The group system sucks. I wish everyone just got on with anyone.

Fleur once said, 'If everyone is friends with everyone, then everyone would have a friend.'

Although Tiana hangs out with the plastic populars, she seems to be less false than them.

Most of the time I hang out with Mitch and the boys. The boys have similar groups just different names. Jocks - sporty, nerds, in-betweeners, losers and the like. Mitch is an in-betweenener, sporty mix.

When I hang out with them, I get teased. Some girls call me TB. (Tom Boy) So yesterday. I consider myself independent. No need for a definition, except being me. Sometimes I do wish

I fit in with the popular or sporty girls, even having a girl I could call a best friend would be nice. I don't want to be like them; I just want them to like me.

Tiana invited me to a sleepover a few weeks ago, but I told her we had a family thing going on. Sleepovers petrify me. I didn't want to tell her about my anxieties, I've told no one the truth, it's a big secret between Mum and myself.

After Dad died, I went to a psychologist for over a year for my anxiety issues. It took ages for me to settle back into school. Mum would always walk me from the school gate to the classroom. Somewhere in the middle of year four, it got worse. I think around about the second anniversary of the accident. It continued till year five. It got so bad I wouldn't let Mum go. The psych, Raelene, helped me to be confident enough to come to class on my own. She told me I should try one step at a time. I remember the conversation I had with her over a year ago.

'It's like eating an elephant,' she said

'Why would you want to eat an elephant? That's gross and mean,' I replied.

'It's a metaphor,' she said. 'If you had to eat an elephant, just saying. How would you do it?'

'It's too big.'

'Exactly, when you look at the whole problem at once it can be overwhelming. The best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. It may take a long time, but each bite is progress.'

'Progress?' I asked.

‘How about starting by saying goodbye to your mum in the classroom for a few days, then at the door of the class for a few days, then at the end of the veranda, then at the school gate, then the car park, then in the car.’

‘I’ll give it a try,’ I said

‘You’ve gotta take the first bite when you’re ready to make that choice,’ Raelene told me.

It did help. It took about a month, each bite, each step. Yeah, it made sense, this progress thing.

I now come to school on my own. Most of the time I ride.

Even though I got over this, the idea of a sleepover still freaked me out.

CHAPTER 7

DJIDI DJIDI

“I love catching a snapshot of something that is just about to happen. Or maybe something that just happened, you know. But I like especially that just-before kind of feeling.” – Demitri Martin

Somewhere between eating spaghetti bog and getting back in the car to go home my tummy ache disappeared. When we arrived home from the café, I asked Mum if I could go to the park.

‘I knew you were going to ask that,’ she said with a smart-mum look on her face.

‘How did you know?’

‘Mother’s instinct.’ She fluttered her eyelashes at me.

‘Yeah right.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘Well, I guessed the text from Tiana was something about that.’

‘Please, mum?’ My hands were in a begging position.

‘Put your footy things away first and be home by five.’

‘Cool, you’re such an excellent mum.’ I gave her a speedy hug.

‘Hemi is going at five-thirty, and I want a mum and daughter night. Movies and mallows.’

‘Okay,’ I said as I headed for the door. Movies and mallows means a mum and daughter talk.

I don’t mind, I kinda like our mum and daughter talks, although I’m worried she might talk about my *madditude* today.

When I arrived at the park, Mitch, Ryan, Tiana, Jason, and Coby were there. Since Jason and Mitch were getting on better, Coby was hanging around with them. And Jack, who used to follow Jason like a puppy dog was now hanging out with the boys who get in trouble a lot.

We kicked the footy for a while, kinda like a game cool-down, then hung out at the picnic table, catching up on the latest post-game talk.

‘Anyone want something from the deli?’ Tiana pulled out a ten dollar note.

‘Dardy, I’ve got some cash too,’ said Ryan, flashing a fiver.

Everyone was rolling in money, so we hit the deli across the road from the park for an ice cream. We headed back to sit at the picnic table.

As we slurped and licked, a little black and white bird pranced and bounced around. It was a Willy Wagtail, chirping and jittering. It was like it was calling me to follow, so I stood up, grabbed my camera, and pursued.

‘What are you doing Maddy?’ Ryan's voice was full of concern.

‘It looks so cheeky. I’m gonna take a snapshot of it,’ I said, getting my camera ready.

‘Djidi Djidi,’ Ryan said.

‘What are you talking about?’ I spun my head to Ryan.

He was frowning. ‘When I was a little kid, my mum told me to watch out for the Djidi Djidi, Willy Wagtail, because it might take you away.’

‘Yeah right!’ I said.

‘You notice they don’t fly away when you try to follow it?’ Ryan’s voice had an eerie tone.

‘It’ll bounce a little and lure you further and further away. It’ll keep on bouncing, and before you realise, you get lost in the bush.’

‘There’s no serious bush here you can get lost in.’ My eyes flicked from side to side.

‘Djidi Djidi can also steal your secrets,’ Ryan whispered. The others said nothing, just sat licking their ice-creams looking freaked out.

I hesitated. *Was he serious?* I didn’t want anyone to know my secrets, especially about my nightmares, about the accident and my fear of sleepovers. And what if Crystal finds out about Mitch and me being *in a relationship*? As the queen bee of the plastic populars, she sees it as her job to spread hot gossip.

‘I don’t believe in superstition,’ I said back to Ryan sounding more like I was asking a question than making a statement.

‘It’s not superstition. My culture believes these stories.’ Ryan is proud of being Aboriginal.

‘Do you believe them?’ I asked Ryan. Everyone’s eyes switched from me to Ryan.

‘Sorta. Some stories are unusual, I agree.’ Ryan’s arms moved like he was dancing as he spoke. ‘Dreamtime stories aren’t about being true but more about helping explain how the world is or how the world was made.’

‘I believe in superstition,’ Jason piped up. ‘Like if a black cat walks in front of you, it brings bad luck.’

‘Yeah sure,’ I mocked.

‘Well.’ Jason held his plastered arm. ‘The day I broke my arm a black cat ran across the road in front me when I was riding to school.’ His good arm moved to his hip.

‘It’s just a coincidence,’ I replied as I turned my camera on.

‘My mum believes in ghosts,’ added Coby, making ghostly spirit finger movements with his hands. ‘She said there is one in the old haunted house near the wetlands park.’

‘No such thing,’ I said.

‘My sisters said they saw mummies,’ Ryan added.

‘Saw what?’

‘Mummies. Dark spirits, but I’m not supposed to talk about it, it’s taboo.’ Ryan had a spooky expression on his face as he held one hand forward and one in front of his chest, both hands shaking.

‘This is all weird stuff. Kinda freaks me out,’ Tiana put her bit in. ‘My Dad told me if a Willy Wagtail bounces around you, it means you’re a special person, like a chosen one.’

‘I like that story better than the secret stealing one,’ I said.

The more I got to know Tiana the more I grew to like her. Could she be a real bestie? I’ve never had a bestie, except Mitch, but he’s a boy, I can’t talk to him about girl stuff.

In the meantime, the Willy Wagtail was watching us like it knew we were talking about it. It was so cute with its chubby white tummy and cheeky white angry eyebrows, jiggling its body and tail from side to side. It allowed me to get close. I was about to take a snapshot when it darted off and grabbed a small insect in its cute little beak.

‘Stay still,’ I said.

‘Not gonna happen,’ Ryan replied, shaking his head. ‘They’re always bouncin’ and flittin’ about.’

Up till now, Mitch said nothing, licking his pop-stick till it was dry. ‘They sometimes follow you when you walk,’ he said. ‘Your feet sometimes stir up the insects in the grass and when you move on the Willy Wagtail skits in and snapples them up.’

‘How come you know so much about birds Mitch?’ Jason asked as he spun the football with his good hand.

‘My dad and I watch the birds out the back of our house,’ Mitch replied.

‘Yeah, he’s got a pet Koolbardie, it’s dardy,’ Ryan added.

‘Koolbardie?’ Tiana scratched her noggin.

‘Magpie. He isn’t really a pet; his name is Maximus.’ Mitch lowered his head and kicked a gum-nut. ‘He doesn’t come around anymore.’

He’d told me about Maximus occasionally. I never got to meet him though. He said the Magpie helped him when he was going through a tough time. Since he had the Magpie as a kinda pet, Mitch did grow in his confidence.

I looked at the Willy Wagtail and wondered if it had some sort of power like Mitch’s Magpie.

It fluttered away from the picnic table.

Checking my watch, I noticed it was getting close to five. I’d have to get a snapshot some other time.

‘Gotta be home by five,’ I announced as I put my camera back in the bag.

‘Me too,’ said Tiana. ‘Can I walk with you?’

‘Sure.’

Tiana got in first to ask if she could walk with me. Mitch could have come as well, but he sat there and said nothing, like a pouting blob. I’d often walk home with Mitch. Well, he’d walk his bike till he got to my corner before saying goodbye. He gave me a strange look. Is he jealous of Tiana? This is new territory.

We said our goodbyes as Tiana and I walked off together.

‘Wanna come over for a sleepover tonight?’ Tiana stab passed the question as we were out of earshot of the others.

I froze. She’d asked me *that* question again. What excuse could I make this time? Wait. I didn’t need an excuse.

‘Sorry, Ti Ti, Mum and I are having a Mum and daughter night. Movies and mallows, she calls it.’

‘Aw, your mum sounds so cool. What about next Saturday?’

My heart raced, and my hands were sweaty. ‘I’ll ask Mum and let you know.’

The last thing I wanted was for anyone to know my hidden secrets. Most knew my dad died in an accident but didn’t need to know the gory details. No one knew I won’t do sleepovers because I’m afraid I might wake up at two in the morning screaming.

I also don't want the other girls to find out I sleep with Pinky. I'll probably get teased if they find out.

CHAPTER 8

THE MEAN POST

“It is a hurt heart that applies pressure to the finger that pushes the button.”

Pinky has a small bloodstain from the accident. I never want Mum to wash him. She tried to wipe the blood stain off once, but only smudged it. She said if we took Pinky to the dry cleaners they'd make him look brand new. I don't want him to be brand new, I like him just the way he is.

Pinky was with me when we had the accident. At the hospital, the first thing I caught sight of was Pinky on the pillow next to my face when I gained consciousness. Mum told me the paramedic at the accident found Pinky in the wreckage and made sure he stayed with me all the way to the hospital in the ambulance.

The nurses put a bandage on him, it was sad but kinda cute.

The nightmares come and go. They've come back more since Mum started going out with Hemi and because the fourth anniversary of Dad's death is close. Maybe I'm worrying too much. I haven't been my bubbly self. I'm not sure why. Sometimes, for no reason, I get angry and moody. Not now though, spending time with Tiana is cool.

'See you at school on Monday,' I said as Tiana turned to go down her street.

'Bye Stormy,' she used the nickname again.

'Whatever,' I called.

'Irrespective,' she called back.

Mr Thomas had corrected Mitch one day when he'd said *whatever*. He said the proper English word was *irrespective*. The boys, Tiana, and I say it for a laugh from time to time.

When I got home, I mumbled a hello to Mum and Hemi and headed straight to my room.

Even though I didn't have a snapshot of one yet, I made a new sign to put on my wall. DJIDI DJIDI. Google helped me find the right spelling for the *aboriginal word for Willy Wagtail*.

My determination will make sure I get a snapshot one day.

It was time to check the latest online. I grabbed my iPad and opened Instagram.

'What? How come there are all these comments?'

I discovered Mum had posted a picture of me taking the specky mark at the game today.

The text Mum posted:

Proud of my girl. 🏆

Some of the comments included:

Sweet! 🍬

Awesome! 🏆

Specky Stormy 🐾 (from Tiana)

Dardy 🐶 (from Ryan)

One message stuck out. It read,

Butch loser 🐱

I didn't recognise the account. *kisscreen4me* was the profile name.

What? I can't believe someone would say that. In amongst all the positives, there was one negative, but it was the one with the power. It was like one rotten apple in a basket.

Who's kisscreen4me? 👁️ I posted.

A reply arrowed back,

Your worst nightmare 🐱

Who could it be? Whoever it is, obviously doesn't know what kind of nightmares I have.

If U don't have D guts 2 say who U R don't post anything 👁️

I assumed it might put a stop to it.

D butch is also a bitch 🐱

My fuse was lit. My fingers pounded the glass keyboard.

Ouch. Get a life U R D bitch 👁️

No one likes you TB 🐱

That hurt. It must be someone I know to use the initials TB (Tomboy). I made up some of my own acronyms.

LGOMIA  (Loser get off my Instagram account)

The reply:

TBIABWNF 

WHAT? 

TB is a bitch with no friends 

The comment hit me like a punch in the stomach. The tears welled in my eyes, and the whites of my knuckles were showing. I wanted to press everything on the glass keyboard. Hard!

Who could be so mean? Maybe it's Crystal?

Should I reply? Should I ignore it? My fingers were shaking as I tried to think of a nasty comeback when I heard a knock on the door.

'Maddy.'

Mum doesn't like me being on social media in my bedroom, so I quickly put my iPad under my pillow and tried to wipe away the tears.

'I'll be there in a sec.'

'Hemi's going now,' Mum called.

'Tell him I said bye.' I didn't want to face anyone, especially Hemi.

'Come out and say goodbye properly,' Mum's voice raised.

‘Okay, I’ll be there in a tick.’

I was torn between wanting to get back to the Instagram conversation to have the last say or doing as Mum asked.

I left the hurt, the anger and the tears under my pillow for now.

CHAPTER 9

MOODS AND MALLOWES

“A wish is a wand in the wind. Hope is wings in the wind.”

I was glad Hemi left.

After scrumptious nachos for tea, Mum and I flopped on the sofa, a big bowl of marshmallows sat in front of us. Tempting, but I wanted to get back to my bedroom, back to the Instagram conversation. Back to the hate. I’m not sure why. Maybe I should have deleted it in the first place. I suppose I wanted to find out what else was being said, and I wanted to have the last say.

Before I could ask Mum what movie she had chosen, she twisted herself on the sofa to face me. ‘You okay Maddy?’

‘Yeah, fine,’ I said moving as far back as I could on the other end of the sofa.

‘Sure?’ Her fingers clasped together.

‘Sure.’ I clasped my fingers too.

‘Just that I noticed you’d been crying when you came out of your bedroom to say goodbye to Hemi.’

I thought I’d wiped the tears away.

‘I’m fine.’ I squeezed my fingers tight.

‘And you don’t appear to be quite with it like you’re distracted or something,’ Mum added.

‘I’m okay.’ My nostrils flared.

‘Did something happen at the park?’ *She’s so persistent.*

‘No, everything was fine there.’

I wanted to keep the Instagram thing a secret, but it was part Mum’s fault for posting a picture of me to start with. So, I came out with it, ‘Why didn’t you ask me first?’

‘About what?’ Mum put her hands up as if protecting herself.

‘Posting a picture of me at footy today on Instagram.’ If I squeezed my hands any tighter, I might break my fingers.

‘Oh, I thought you’d like it.’ She frowned and her bottom lip lowered.

‘It complicated things.’

‘Sorry. I just wanted everyone to know how proud I was of you.’

‘Well not everyone took it that way.’ I didn’t like the way I was talking to Mum.

‘What do you mean?’ Mum clenched her fingers again and placed her hands on her lap.

‘Someone decided to say something mean about me.’

‘What’d they say?’

‘They called me a butch loser.’ I grabbed a cushion and squeezed it.

‘I hope you deleted it.’

‘No, I let ‘em know they can’t say that to me.’

‘Did you take the bait?’ Mum folded her arms.

‘What bait?’

‘It’s like they’re fishing to get a response. People who say those things get power out of a reaction.’

I punched the cushion. ‘But someone needs to tell them they can’t say that.’

‘I’m proud you have the guts to stand up for yourself, but sometimes it’s best to ignore, as hard as it might be.’

‘It’s a bit hard to ignore when it’s in your face.’ I hugged the cushion to my chest.

Mum’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Ignoring is a choice *you* make.’

I took a big sigh. ‘Yeah, I noticed the more I replied, the worse it got.’

‘You should never post something in the heat of the moment.’

‘I know, but when I’m angry, I don’t think straight.’

‘You and a trillion others.’ Mum chuckled. ‘Do you know who it was?’

‘No, it has a mystery account name, *kissscreen4me*.’

Mum pointed at me. ‘Did you check the profile?’

‘When I checked it out, the profile picture was the evil emoticon, that’s all there was, but it was like she knew me.’ The cushion was now on my lap, hands on top.

Mum asked me to get my iPad to show her. I was reluctant.

When we checked at the conversation, Mum was shocked at some of my replies.

‘You fell into her web, didn’t you?’ Mum peered straight into my eyes.

My head dropped. ‘I was desperate to find out who it was and why they were so mean to me.’

‘Unfortunately, people who do this kind of thing don’t stop easily. Best to not give them any power and not let them suck the power out of you,’ as she said this, she gestured for me to sit closer. She put her arm around me, and I snuggled in.

Mum got me to focus on all comments from other people, which I hadn’t, maybe because I was so caught up in the mean stuff.

Whoa. It appeared as if the whole footy team had entered the conversation and were giving a piece of their mind to the mystery meany.

Tiana’s comment was the most interesting.

Leave Stormy alone. She’s a much better friend than you’ll ever be 

‘You and Tiana are good friends now?’ Mum asked.

‘It’s getting that way. She asked if I could come for a sleepover.’ I grabbed a handful of marshmallows.

‘What did you say?’ Mum squeezed me.

‘She’s asked twice now.’ I mumbled through a mouthful of mallows.

‘Twice?’ Mum sat back in surprise.

‘First time I made up an excuse about having a family thing and the second time was this afternoon on the way home from the park.’ I clawed another handful of mallows.

‘Well, what did you say this time?’ Mum grabbed my hand, preventing the marshmallows from entering my mouth.

‘I said we had a Mum and daughter night. She asked if I could come next Saturday instead.’

‘What did you say then?’

My hand broke free. ‘I said I’ll ask my Mum.’ The mallows invaded my mouth.

‘Well?’ She eyeballed me.

‘Well, what?’ I tried to say with white stuff trying to escape my lips.

‘Well ask me then?’

‘Ask you what?’

‘What you told Tiana.’

I swallowed what was left in my mouth and folded my arms. ‘But I don’t do sleepovers. You know how anxious I get.’

‘Do you think it’s time to move on?’ Mum flicked my hair out of my eyes.

‘Are you serious?’ I tried to push away from her.

‘I’ve noticed you’ve been a bit moody lately. Remember when you last saw Raelene?’ Mum reminded me of my psychologist.

‘That was over a year ago.’

‘Well, she said when you enter puberty you might need to come back for more counselling.’

I glared at Mum not wanting to hear the word that just came out of her mouth. ‘Puberty?’ I said it myself.

Mum had an *I know something you don’t know* look on her face. ‘Yes, when a girl goes ….’

I rolled my eyes, ‘I know what puberty is mum.’

‘And you’re aware your hormones will affect your moods?’

‘Yeah.’ More eye rolls and a body shimmy. ‘Do we have to talk about this?’

‘Well, I think you’ve hit puberty.’

‘More like, puberty has run *me* over.’ It was making sense though, with all the feelings I’d been having including the funny aches in my tummy.

‘I didn’t know it’d be this hard.’ I welled up with tears. Mum drew me in closer with her hug, and it opened the floodgates. I had a big cry. A massive proper bawl.

As she caught a tear on my cheek, she said, ‘Everything’s going to be okay sweetie.’

‘How do you know that?’ I sniffled.

‘I don’t, but I just know it’s supposed to help when you say it.’

‘Thanks.’ I was exhausted, but there was one more thing I wanted to say. ‘I wish Dad was still here.’ I grabbed Mum’s arms and wrapped them tighter around me, and we sat in a comforting embrace.

Mum whispered, ‘I used to have that wish too.’

‘What do you mean *used to*?’

‘Are you able make Dad come back?’ She asked.

‘Oh, course not.’

‘Then aren’t you wasting your wish?’

‘What?’ I said wondering where she was taking this.

‘When I last went to my counsellor the conversation was useful.’

‘How?’

‘Well, it helped me to realise if you wish for something that can’t happen then isn’t it a waste of a wish?’

‘That’s the whole idea of a wish.’ I looked her in the eye.

She stroked my cheek. ‘Who has the power in a wish?’

‘Well, the person who grants wishes.’ I shrugged.

‘Who’s that?’

‘I don’t know, the wish fairy I suppose.’

‘So, you don’t have the power?’

‘No, not really.’ I wasn’t sure where Mum was going with all this until...

‘There is something more powerful than a wish.’ Mum had a glimmer in her eye.

I gave her a quizzical look.

‘Hope,’ Mum added.

‘Hope?’ My eyebrows tried to meet in the middle.

‘Hope is more powerful than a wish.’

I let it sink in for a while.

Mum added. ‘A wish is something you long for you know may never happen, and hope is something you know *can* happen. You have the power.’

‘So, I should change my wish into hope?’ I asked.

‘Not easy to do but will make a world of difference when you do.’

I understood my dad couldn’t come back to life, and I was in a way, wasting a wish. As I pondered it, I also realised wishes were like superstition, and I’d been telling everyone I didn’t believe in superstition.

‘What do you hope for Maddy? What hopes are in your heart?’ Mum asked.

I brought my hand up to my chin. I had to think long and hard.

‘Don’t tell me now. Write them down in your journal when you’re ready,’ Mum said.

‘My journal?’ Of course, the one Raelene gave me.

I like Raelene, and the idea of revisiting her cheered me up. She is a sweet lady. The best way to describe her is to mention the Mona Lisa painting. Not only does she look like her, she sounds like I imagine Mona Lisa would talk. And she is a good listener. Other than Mum, she's the only one who knows my deepest secrets, especially about blaming myself for Dad's death.

Mum and I sprawled on the sofa and talked for hours. It's like we talked about everything in the world. She told me when she was a girl they called the *puberty talk* the *birds and bees talk* and back in those days it was all hush hush.

At first, it embarrassed me because my mum was talking with me about all the *private* stuff, but after a while it made sense. Mum is the best person to talk about all that stuff, especially if you don't have a big sister.

I also mentioned I was having the nightmares again; she knew. I was struggling with Hemi coming into our lives; she knew. About Mitch telling me he LIKE liked me; she had her suspicions. Thinking more about Dad lately; she knew.

She said, 'Me too. I've been thinking about your dad a lot since I started seeing Hemi.'

She talked about how hard it was for her to have a relationship with another man and she wasn't taking things too fast. She said Hemi's different and he makes her feel like she hasn't felt for ages.

'It frightens me, but I feel safe at the same time,' she said.

'I do like Hemi Mum, but I'm scared to tell him because I don't want to betray Dad.'

‘Is that why you give him attitude?’

‘I suppose. I don’t mean to be mean.’

‘I totally understand. Honey, you won’t be betraying Dad. Sometimes I imagine your dad speaking to me and saying, *I want you to be happy.*’

‘Me too.’ We hugged again.

We talked more about all the ins and outs of puberty, the time of the month, about being and staying healthy, about mood swings.

She told me she’ll arrange a check-up with the doctor and get a new referral to the psychologist.

‘What about asking Tiana if she’ll come *here* for a sleepover next Saturday night?’ Mum suggested.

‘What about Pinky? What about the nightmares?’ I said freaking out a little.

‘Well, if Tiana is becoming as good a friend as you say she is, it might be time to share some of your secrets with her.’ Mum took a deep breath. ‘After all, it’s what best friends are for.’

‘But next Saturday’s the anniversary.’ I sat cross-legged and glared at Mum.

‘I am aware of that.’ She moved to sit crossed legged in front of me.

‘But we usually go and visit Dad’s grave.’ I was still finding reasons not to move on.

‘We can do it on Sunday instead.’ She gestured to hold my hands.

‘But it won’t be right. Dad will think we don’t care about him anymore.’ I wanted to push her hands away.

‘Sweetie, there isn’t a day goes by without me thinking about your father.’

‘Me too.’ I accepted her invitation to hold hands.

‘I think it’s time to move onto the next chapter of our lives.’

‘And forget about Dad?’ I gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

‘No, not at all. It’s been four years now. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to Dad. He would want us to be happy and live our lives to the fullest.’

There was a hesitation before I answered. I wanted to get my head around her proposal.

‘Okay, if we go on Sunday can we drop Tiana off at the markets first?’

‘Sure. So, you’ll have her over for a sleepover?’

I let go of Mum’s hands and put my index finger up. ‘One condition.’

‘What’s that?’ She looked surprised.

‘Hemi doesn’t stay here that night.’ I squinted at her.

‘He’ll only be here Friday night like usual.’

‘Just making sure.’

‘Deal. Girls night only.’ Mum had a mischievous look in her eye.

‘Mum, you can’t do everything we wanna do. We’ll need some privacy.’

‘You spoil all the fun.’ Mum grinned.

‘What happens if I have a nightmare?’

‘How about we set up the mattresses in the lounge? I’ll let you and Tiana do your thing, and then I’ll join you when it’s time to go to sleep if it’s okay with you.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ I said as I yawned. ‘By the way Mum, why did the elephant sit on a marshmallow?’

She glanced up in the air and scratched her chin. ‘I don’t know.’

‘So he wouldn’t fall in his hot chocolate.’

‘Of course.’ Mum chuckled.

We didn’t end up watching a movie. We ate all the marshmallows, and we both fell asleep on the sofa.

CHAPTER 10

HONEYCOMB AND HIPPIES

“What I like about taking snapshots is they capture special moments that may never happen again.”

Somehow, I was in my own bed the next morning. No nightmares, just a good night’s sleep.

I woke to the sensation of being massaged by tiny little padded feet. It was Mystery. She often sneaks into my room when I don’t wake up early. Sunday mornings are for sleeping in, but Mystery doesn’t know. Mum lets her into my room to get me up.

Mystery purred like a mini motorbike. It’s a nice sound to wake up to in the morning. *How do cats do that?* It’s like her little heart is beating a thousand times a minute. Hey, it’s a clever idea for an alarm. The sound of a cat purring and then for snooze you could have a cat *meow*.

I played with Mystery for a while before getting out of bed. I think she’s jealous of Pinky. Every time I cuddle Pinky she pounces on him. I hadn’t taken a snapshot of Mystery for a while, so I reached across to my camera and waited until Mystery was about to pounce on Pinky. Snap! The blank image whirred out of the camera, and I waited for the magic as it developed. Great shot. I stuck it on my wall between the Mystery and Pinky sections.

The temptation to get my iPad out was strong, but Mum and I decided a few months ago we should have regular social-media free days. At first, I thought it was dumb, but I’ve got used to the idea, and it’s kinda good to have a day break. I’m less stressed, like being let off a leash. We call it our CLOUD stress less day which is an acronym for Celebrate Life Offline Unplugged Detox day. Today, being Mothers’ Day is a CLOUD day.

Mothers' Day! I sprung out of bed and threw on some clothes. I reached into my third drawer and pulled out a bubble-wrapped package I had been saving for the occasion.

Mum was in the kitchen whizzing up her green concoction.

'Happy Mothers' Day Mum.' I handed her the special gift I had behind my back.

'Thanks sweetie.' Mum gave me a hug and a mooshy kiss. 'What have we here?'

'Open it.' I couldn't wait to see her face.

Mum unwrapped the bubble wrap to reveal a little Box Brownie Camera.

'It's Box Brownie Junior. Where did you get it?' Mum had delighted eyes.

'Top secret. It's a genuine antique.'

Old Basil who runs the antique stall at the markets knew Mum treasured Dad's old Box Brownie collection. He must have known Mum didn't have this one.

I love looking at all the old items on Basil's stall. One Sunday when I was looking at the antique bangles he passed me a bubble-wrapped package.

'This is for your mumma. Please give it to her on a special occasion,' he said in his strong Greek accent even though he'd been in Australia for most of his life.

She would have guessed where I got it. A tear trickle out of Mum's eye. 'Maddy, this is a collector's dream. It must have cost you at least two weeks' pocket money.'

'Mum! Isn't there some rule about not asking the price of a gift you receive with the person who gives it to you?'

‘Sorry, but it’s so nice.’

She placed it in a prominent position with the collection. Mum told me her grandma used to take pictures of Nanna, mum’s mum with a Box Brownie when she was a child.

There are now twenty-seven Box Brownies in the collection, including Great-Grandma’s.

Mum and I hit the markets most Sunday mornings. She gets her fruit and veggies there. She says they’re organic and healthy, pesticide and chemical free. It’s also where she buys the green stuff for her morning frog-like slushy. I think it’s called Kale. That’s weird because there is a boy at school named Kale.

I didn’t have a lot to eat before going to the markets. A banana, a tub of yoghurt and some toasted muesli. Here’s how it works: Get a bowl and pour muesli in it. Open a tub of yoghurt. Peel a banana. Dip the banana in the yoghurt, then dip it into the muesli. Tada! It’s yummy and easy. To make it extra sticky, I sometimes use honey.

The markets are a smell factory. The air is full of the aroma of freshly cooked doughnuts, vanilla soy candles, Indian incense, lavender soaps, German bratwurst sausages, cheeses smelling like wet nappies, pongee fish, baskets of sourdough bread, and newly brewed Yahava coffee.

My favourite smell is honeycomb, honeycomb, honeycomb. There’s a cool stall with home-made honeycomb chunks, honeycomb ice-cream, honeycomb flavoured milkshakes, chocolate coated honeycomb, honeycomb lollies, honeycomb lip balm, and my favourite of all favourites, honeycomb fudge.

We made our way past the second-hand boutique clothing stall, the *Junk to Jewels* second-hand jewellery, the pottery and pots stall to *Honeycomb Land*, as I call it. That’s when I

noticed Tiana with some of the *popular* girls including Crystal, Rachel, and a girl I haven't seen before.

The clique walked past, and Tiana said, 'Hey Maddy.'

As I waved, Crystal leant across and whispered to the other girl. I couldn't hear what she said but watched her lips move. The shape of her moving mouth suggested she said *TB*.

Maybe Crystal is the mystery Instagram meany, but she already has an account name. Maybe she has two accounts. I've heard people like to create an alias like a secret second personality, so they get away with saying mean stuff.

The girls walked off. Tiana glanced around at me as they left and pointed to herself and then back at me and then linked her two index fingers. I tried to work out what she meant.

After buying a chunk of honeycomb fudge, Mum and I made our way to the makeshift café under the shade of the big Peppy tree.

Mum bought her usual Chai Latte thingo drink and me with hot chocolate, without the mallows, I think I had too many last night.

As I was dipping the honeycomb fudge in my hot chocolate, out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a black and white flitter and heard a chitty sound. *Willy Wagtail*. I put my hand on my camera thinking *now might be the chance to get a snapshot*.

As I brought the camera up to my eye, to my surprise, I spotted Tiana walking toward us.

'Hey Maddy,' she called.

‘Hey Ti Ti.’ I said as I scanned either side of her hoping to catch sight of the Willy Wagtail.

It was gone. *Strange.*

‘This your mum?’ Tiana asked.

‘Yeah, mum this is Tiana, Tiana this is my mum.’

‘Hello Mrs Fairweather,’ Tiana said.

‘Heather, just call me Heather.’

‘Nice to meet you Heather.’ Tiana put emphasis on *Heather* as she nodded her head.

‘You too Tiana. Maddy has mentioned you a lot lately.’

‘Hope it’s all nice.’

‘She told me you’re the fastest runner at school and you’re good at footy, and you’re a nice person.’

Tiana blushed a little.

‘Where are the others?’ I asked.

‘Rachel, Crystal and Keeliana? They wanted to go into town.’ Tiana lifted one side of her lip up.

‘You?’ I wondered why Tiana didn’t join them.

‘I wanted to stay here, and when I saw you, I decided to hang out with you. If that’s okay?’

Ah ha, that’s what the hand and finger gesture was about.

‘Sure.’ I turned to Mum. ‘That okay mum?’

‘Yeah fine, would you like a drink Tiana?’

‘No thanks Mrs Fair... Heather. Just had a slushy, brain freeze.’

It was nice of Tiana to join us. I was nervous about having her as a friend. Perhaps anxious about trusting anyone other than Mum. I didn't know enough about Tiana yet.

I gave a piece of my honeycomb fudge to Tiana and finished my hot chocolate. Mum started talking to an old friend of hers. I knew once they got talking we could be stuck here for ages.

I took the chance to ask Tiana about the other girl.

‘Keeliana?’ She said.

‘Where's she from?’ I asked.

‘She's from Dunes.’

‘Dunes?’ I licked the last of the fudge off my fingers.

‘Yeah. A friend of Crystal's. Only met her once before. Apparently, she was at the game yesterday.’

‘What was Crystal saying to her when you saw me earlier.’

‘Dunno. They whisper to each other a lot and giggle. It's annoying.’

I've always wanted to ask her this question, so I went for it, ‘Why do you hang out with Crystal?’

‘She’s okay most of the time.’

‘She can be pretty mean,’ I said.

‘She can’t help it. Have you met her mum?’ Tiana’s eyes rolled up.

‘I’ve seen her around.’

‘She’s the bossiest, bitchiest lady I’ve ever met.’ Tiana’s head moved from side to side.

‘Maybe explains why Crystal is the way she is.’ I flicked my hair with the back of my hand the way Crystal does.

‘Probably. I don’t like going to Crystal’s house because of her mum, but I haven’t told her. Please don’t tell her I told you.’ She put her hands together under her chin.

‘Your secret is safe with me. But why do you hang out with her?’

‘Because she’s actually fun when you get to know her. She just likes people to think she’s important.’

Mum leant across to us, ‘Why don’t you girls go and check out the new funky clothes stand? I might be a while.’

‘Sure Mum.’

‘I’ll catch up with you somewhere.’ She waved us off.

‘See ya Mrs Feather.’ Tiana turned her head toward Mum as we left.

‘That’s funny.’ I laughed at Tiana.

‘What?’ Her head shrank into her shoulders.

‘You just called my mum Mrs Feather.’ I laughed again.

‘Did I? I think I got mixed up. Oops, sorry.’ She glanced back, but we were too far away from Mum.

Ti Ti and I had the bestest time trying on all sorts of tops, crops, skirts, and sarongs. We dressed up with sunnies and hats. I hadn’t laughed so much for ages. I thanked her for sticking up for me on Instagram. She said she didn’t know who the mystery mean person was though.

Mum caught up with us as Ti Ti and I came out of the makeshift change room with the most outrageous outfits. We looked like hippies - me in a huge flowery hat, monstrous sunglasses, and full-length tie-dyed dress. Tiana was wearing tie-dyed flares and top as well as a colourful beanie and a feather boa scarf.

Tiana took a photo of us both dressed up. I got my camera out and took a *twosie* snapshot. When it developed, Mum joined in for a look.

‘Looks like you were both born in the wrong era,’ Mum said.

Tiana did a peace sign, ‘Groovy, man.’

‘Love and peace,’ I said.

Mum also whipped out her camera and took a photo.

‘Mum, don’t put that on Instagram,’ I ordered.

‘I’ll send it only to you two, okay.’

‘Okay, but not public,’ I said squinting my eyes at her. ‘Hey, why do hippies wave their hands when they’re dancing?’ I moved my arms around giving peace signs as they passed my eyes.

‘Dunno Maddy?’ Tiana and Mum said.

‘To keep the music out of their eyes.’ Mum rolled her eyes. Tiana shook her head.

‘Okay then, why don’t hippies get rescued at the beach,’ I asked.

‘Is this better than the last joke?’ Tiana screwed up her face ready for the impact.

‘Because they’re too far out.’ Another peace sign.

‘Where do you get these jokes from Maddy?’ Tiana asked.

‘I have an archive.’

Her eyebrows danced all over her forehead and rested together with a quizzical expression.

After we had changed back to normal clothes, Tiana bought the beanie and wore it.

I asked Mum, ‘Hey can Ti Ti come over today?’

‘Remember we are going to Nanna’s for lunch for Mothers’ Day,’ Mum replied.

‘Oh, that’s right. Sorry Ti Ti.’ I faced her with my bottom lip protruding.

‘It’s okay anyway, my mum is picking me up soon to spend the rest of Mother’s Day with her,’ as she rolled her eyes she added, ‘and the step and halves.’

About now I remembered, I was supposed to be looking for a gift for Nanna from the markets. She collects old silver stuff, so Basil's antique stall was the ideal place to get something.

'Have you thought about the sleepover on Saturday?' Tiana asked.

My mind came back to the moment. 'I talked with Mum, and we thought you might like to come to my place instead.'

Tiana gave a fist pump. 'Like yeah, sounds awesome. I'll check with Dad tonight when I get home from Mum's.'

'Gotta go, my mum should be waiting for me near the fruit and veggie stall by now.'

'We'll walk you there,' Mum offered, 'We've gotta do the fruit and veggie shopping.'

When her mum arrived, Tiana introduced my mum and I to her. I found out she has a step-dad and half-brothers, twins, five years old.

After saying goodbye to Tiana, Mum took off to get the fruit and veggies, and I headed to Basil's antiques stall, hoping to get something cool for Nanna.

CHAPTER 11

ESPRESSO AND PUMPKY SCONES

“You don’t take a photograph, you make it.” – Ansel Adams

‘How’za my favourite antique shopper?’ Basil said when I rocked up to his stall.

‘Totally incredible Basil. What’s new?’

‘Nothings a-new, it’z an antique stall.’ Basil held his rotund tummy as he laughed.

‘Very funny, I see what you did there Basil.’

Basil has a raucous laugh. I’m sure his jokes aren’t that funny. ‘Gotta joke for me today?’

‘Okay. What ticks on a wall?’ I asked.

‘I dunno. A clock?’ He lifted his shoulders and hands.

‘Ticky tape.’

Basil hit his forehead with his hand. ‘Ha ha ho ho he he that’z a good one.’

Basil is such a funny old dude. He bounced back a joke of his own. ‘Okay then, what else ticks on a wall?’

‘Beats me.’ It was my turn to shrug my shoulders.

‘An an-tick clock, a working one that is. Get it?’

‘You’re a funny man Basil. Don’t give up your day job.’

Basil laughed again. ‘That I can do.’

‘I gave mum the camera this morning,’ I said with a pleased-with-myself grin.

‘You did? And?’ Basil’s bushy eyebrows lifted.

‘She loved it. She cried.’

‘Told you it was special.’ Basil nodded.

‘Thanks Basil. Now I’m after something for Nanna for Mother’s Day,’ I said as I scrummaged through some silverware on Basil’s table.

‘Anything in particular?’ He waved his hand over all the curios on his table.

‘Silver,’ I said. ‘Nanna likes silver.’

‘Er let’za see.’

He disappeared behind the table and returned with a mysterious-looking bag. After burying his hairy hand into it, he pulled out a small black felt box and handed it to me.

‘Open,’ he said with his giant caterpillar-like eyebrows raised.

As I lifted the lid, it revealed a charming little silver salt and pepper set. The pepper container was an old-fashioned shaped with four little legs. The salt container was like a tiny bathtub with a cobalt glass insert, also with four little legs and a tiny spoon. *Cute.*

‘Wow, perfect. How much?’

‘For my favourite customer. Two smiles, three jokes, one hello and a cheeky grin.’

‘Seriously Basil?’

He was always generous, maybe because he knew my dad well. He told me, in his younger days, he used to teach my dad at school. That was before he retired. He also plays bowls with my pop.

‘I tella you what. If you buy me a triple shot espresso from the coffee van and an Afghan cookie, we’ll call it quitza.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure.’ His head did a sudden jerk up, then down.

‘Deal.’ I shook Basil’s hairy gorilla hand.

He was generous. The silver salt and pepper shaker would be worth way more than what I had to pay for his coffee and cookie and a lot more than I could afford.

I came back from the coffee van with his triple espresso. Just the smell of it made me want to do a hundred cartwheels. It was as black as his bushy eyebrows. He had silver hair and a silver moustache flowing over his lips like a waterfall, but black eyebrows!

We did the deal. I handed over the espresso, cookie, and the change I had left over from twenty dollars as a tip. Basil tried to hand it back. ‘This wasn’t part of the deal,’ he said.

‘I know. It’s a tip.’ I walked away with my gift for Nanna before he could give it back.

When I glanced back he was waving his hands at me.

A short stroll from Basil’s stall I opened the box to have another look at the treasure. To my amazement, on the bottom was the imprint *BIRKS STERLING*. I guessed it was worth a lot

more than I first imagined. I hesitated, looked back at Basil, thinking I should give it back to him. Instead, I headed off to find Mum. This gift would blow Nanna away.

Mum was carrying her regular three big planet-friendly hessian bags full of fruit and veggies. I told her I got an ideal gift for Nanna from Basil as we headed back to the car.

‘What did you get?’ She asked.

‘Just a little salt and pepper set.’

I opened the box. Mum peered into the box and took a step back. She had a shocked expression on her face as she looked at me, toward Basil’s stall, back to the box and then back at me.

‘From Basil?’ She asked.

‘From the man himself,’ I replied.

‘Basil?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much did he charge you?’

‘Mu-u-um. You know you’re not meant to ask.’

‘But that rule only applies if the person receiving the gift asks.’

‘Oh,’ I wasn’t sure of these kinds of rules, so I told Mum, ‘The price of a triple espresso, a cookie and a tip.’

Mum shook her head.

‘Do you think Nana will like it?’ I asked.

‘We’ll have to wait and see.’ The look on her face suggested she knew something I didn’t.

We went home for lunch before heading off to Nanna’s for afternoon tea.

Pop was sitting on the porch when we arrived, still dressed in his Sunday best. Nanna and Pop always went to church on Sundays. When I was younger I sometimes went with them. I also loved going during the week when Nanna was on the brass cleaning roster. Helping her clean the antique brass candle holders was fun. I think I might be an antique dealer when I get older. That’s after my football and PE teaching career and becoming the Prime Minister.

Maybe I’ll do antiques for a hobby.

Mum and I hugged Pop.

He made a smoochy sound and said, ‘Been to the markets?’

‘Yeah Pop. How was Church?’ Mum asked.

‘Same, same.’

‘We saw old Basil,’ I added.

Pop gave us a knowing smile.

‘Nanna in the kitchen?’ I asked.

‘Yep.’ He didn’t say much these days. He’s a bit hard of hearing too. Nanna says he has selective hearing. He’s able to hear Nanna say *tea and scones* from one hundred meters away though.

Mum and I followed the tempting smells as we left Pop on the porch to ponder the world.

‘What’s cooking Nanna?’ I called out as I walked towards her to give her a hug, knowing full well it was her pumpky scones.

‘Your favourite.’ She was wearing an apron and had flour all over her hands. She placed one hand on each of my cheeks and gave me a big kiss. Great! Now I had a flour beard.

Nanna was the best pumpkin scone maker in the universe. She won the Show ribbon for pumpkin scones for the last ten years in a row. Except for one year when she was in hospital with pneumonia.

‘Happy Mother’s Day Nanna.’ I thrust my hand forward with the little box sitting on my palm.

‘You shouldn’t have sweetie,’ she said as she fluttered her eyelashes over her glasses.

‘Happy Mother’s Day Mum.’ Mum leant across and pecked Nanna on the cheek.

Nanna placed the box on the kitchen bench and washed her hands.

She picked up the box and was gentle as she lifted the lid.

Nanna shook. ‘Oh, my goodness. A silver salt and pepper set. This is very special.’

Was she about to have a heart attack? I expected a reaction, but not that big.

‘Where did you get this wonderful gift Maddy?’ She asked.

I lifted my chin and fluttered *my* eyelashes. ‘I can’t reveal my sources.’

‘You know it’s valuable, don’t you?’ She lowered her head and peeped over the top of her glasses again.

‘Of course, Nanna, only the best for you.’ I winked at her.

I didn’t realise the significance of what Nanna was saying. I guessed it was Sterling Silver though.

‘No, I mean *really* valuable. This is a collector’s item,’ Nanna said.

‘It’ll go well with your other silver pieces Nanna.’

Her eyes flicked across to Mum, and they tried to communicate something in secret gestures.

Something else was going on, and I wasn’t getting it.

The irresistible aroma of fresh scones wafted from the oven. Nanna knew the precise time to pull them out.

‘Tea and scones,’ she called out.

Within no time, Pop was inside sitting at the table.

We sat down to the best scones in the universe.

‘Hmmm, pumpky scones,’ I said as I whiffed the tasty morsels. They were still hot and the butter melted to create a heavenly aroma.

I took my camera out for a pumpky scones snapshot. I also took a snapshot of Nanna holding the salt and pepper set.

The adults had a cuppa tea from Nanna’s Sterling Silver teapot, and Nana made me a Milo.

Mum gave her gift to Nanna at the table. A day spa voucher for a fancy pamper treatment Nanna would enjoy.

After tea and scones Pop and I played a game of cards while Nanna and Mum talked. They were just out of earshot, but I heard a few words like markets, Basil, collection, antiques, expensive, silver, his wife, shouldn't have.

Pop taught me how to play Cribbage, a card game played using a wooden board with pegs, or in Pop's case, matches. I think he lost the pegs. When he first taught me, it was as if he was speaking in another language when he was adding up his score.

'Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six and the rest won't fix.'

I learnt all the other old-fashioned expressions used in the game like; *Eight and the rest won't mate, four and the rest won't score, his nibs, muggins and skunked*. Pop hated it when I skunked him. It's another way of saying thrashed.

'You bloody tin bum,' he would say. Pop thinks I'm always lucky. Not today.

I kept getting beaten. Not only was I losing, but I was also getting angry. Pop noticed.

'It's not like you,' he said as he stroked his neck.

'What are you talking about Pop?' I played dumb.

'I notice a snippet of anger trying to ooze its way out,' he said as he shuffled the cards. 'Some hurt too.'

He wasn't just talking about me losing the card game. He's a perceptive old codger. I thought he was meant to be losing his marbles.

‘Just deal the cards Pop.’ I ignored him.

‘Keep it inside, and it will go rotten,’ he added. I knew what he meant. I remembered the saying from Karate Kid about grief becoming big anger.

‘It’s okay Pop. I’m onto it.’

Then he said something to make me pay attention. ‘The one that angers you controls you. Give no one that power.’

What he said stuck in my mind like super glue. He won the last game. Skunked me.

On the way home I asked Mum, ‘What was Nanna talking about when she said the silver salt and pepper set was *really* valuable?’

‘She knows you got it from Basil.’

‘Uh?’ I looked at Mum as she was concentrating on driving.

‘Nanna and Basil’s wife used to be best friends,’ she said keeping her eye on the road.

‘And?’

‘You know Basil’s wife died of cancer two years ago.’ Her eyes flicked at me.

‘Yeah.’ I nodded.

‘Ever since then Basil has tried to give Nanna his wife’s silver collection.’

‘Why hasn’t she taken it?’

Mum took a deep breath. There had to be a story. ‘Well, Nanna wanted Basil to keep it himself. He was so grief-stricken after she died that he tried to get rid of all his wife’s possessions. Nanna couldn’t bring herself to take anything from him while he was going through his bereavement.’

‘And the silver salt and pepper set?’ I asked.

‘That was his wife’s prize set.’

‘So, he must have known when I told him I was buying a gift for Nanna.’

‘He’s a crafty man Maddy.’ Mum’s fingers danced on the steering wheel.

‘Should I take it back to him?’

‘No, not at all, Nanna’s decided to keep it.’

‘Ohhhh. No wonder she reacted the way she did when she opened it.’

‘It was a very special gift Maddy.’

‘That’s why she put it next to Basil’s wife’s photo on the shelf?’

Mum put her hand up, and I high fived her.

‘Nailed it,’ she said as she pulled into our driveway.

When we got home, the temptation to get my iPad out was strong. But CLOUD stress less day meant all day, including into the evening. I didn’t want to spoil the day by reading anything mean.

I added the snapshots I'd taken during the day to my wall. The pumpky scones to the *random* section and the Nanna with salt and pepper set to the *antiques* section. Nanna wouldn't be offended. Antiques are old and cool, just like Nanna. The twosie snapshot of Tiana and I dressed in hippy clothes *hmmmm* I considered long and hard. Should it go in the *markets* section, the *school* section, the *selfies* section, or the *friends* section? None. I made a new section, called it the *BESTIE?* section and stuck my first picture.

A lot can happen in a weekend. I lot more can happen in two days of school.

CHAPTER 12

MALICIOUS RUMOUR

“The one that angers you controls you. Give no one that power.” – Maddy’s Pop

On Monday morning at school, the first person I talked to was Mitch. He was with his little sister Megan as they came through the school entrance.

After our usual hello rituals and a cuddle from Megan, we sat down in the *holding pen*, as we call it. It’s the place all the students must wait until the first bell goes. Megan sat with one of her friends.

Mitch shuffled himself closer. ‘Yo Maddy. Where were you yesterday afternoon?’

‘At Nanna’s.’

‘I tried to text you.’ Mitch’s voice had a concerned tone.

‘I had a CLOUD stress less day, sorry.’

‘A what?’

‘An unplugged, social media free day.’

‘Great. One of the few days I use social media, you unplug.’

‘Sorry. Was it important?’

‘I wanted to say it was a mean comment the person posted about you on Instagram.’

‘Yeah, I know. Thanks Mitch, I noticed you stood up for me.’ I was so used to sticking up for Mitch, now it was his turn to stick up for me.

Mitch glared at me like he knew something I didn't. ‘I think you're only talking about the butch loser one,’ he said.

‘What do you mean? Was there another one?’ My tummy was bubbling.

‘Didn't you see it?’ Mitch had an interesting expression on his face like he was bracing himself for the impact after he is about to tell me something terrible.

‘Whaa-aat?’ He had my interest.

‘On the picture of you and Tiana.’

‘What picture?’ I wish he would just say it.

‘Tiana posted a picture of you and her dressed as hippies, hugging each other.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Her comment was simple, *besties*,’ Mitch added. ‘It started malicious rumours.’

‘What rumours?’ My head was in a spin.

‘That you and Tiana are, well, um, er, are gay.’

‘WHAT? Who started that rumour?’ The bubbles in my tummy bumped into each other.

‘Looks like the *kissscreen4me* girl.’ Mitch leant back expecting a fiery response.

I was as furious as a swarm of bees having their hive knocked over. I was mad at Mitch for telling me, at Tiana for posting the picture public and saying she was my bestie without asking me, at the *kisscreen4me* person, at Crystal, at Instagram, the Internet, the world wide web.

Every part of me tensed. The bubbles stewed inside.

As the others dwindled in for the school day, I had the impression everyone was staring at me. The anger had turned to shame. I wanted to become invisible.

If that wasn't enough, Mitch added one more blow, 'Did you hear what happened at the markets?'

'No,' I snapped. 'I was there in the morning.'

'Crystal, Rachel and some other girl got caught stealing stuff.'

'So?'

'Apparently, they stole some antique bracelets from a stall.'

'Not Basil's stall?' I asked.

'Yeah, that's the one.'

Mitch wasn't aware of my connection with Basil.

'Keeliana,' I said between gritted teeth.

'Who?' Mitch moved closer.

‘Keeliana. It’s the other girl.’ *There’s something about her I didn’t like the first moment I laid eyes on her.* ‘She was with Rachel, Crystal and Tiana at the markets,’ I added. *Maybe that’s why Tiana left them.*

‘Apparently, the police took them away to talk with them,’ Mitch said.

‘Ducks on the pond,’ I whispered as Rachel and Crystal rocked up. Just to the right of them, two crows landed on the railing. ‘Crows on the rail,’ I added.

‘What?’ Mitch wondered what I was talking about.

My eyes flicked to show him the girls were arriving.

The bubbles in my tummy had turned to rocks and worked their way to my fists. I wanted to run over and confront them and lay a punch or two. Basil was my friend. How dare they steal from him. If only they knew what he’d been through.

The two stood by themselves and kept giving Mitch and me snobbish looks. They were like the two crows sitting on the railing. *Yeah. There were just like crows.*

By now the number of children waiting in the pen had swollen. The bell sounded, and we headed off to class.

It was an uneventful first part of the morning in the classroom. The shame kept my head down. Mr Thomas was his usual quirky self. Our team won the Planet Zilton mental math competition. Jason captained the team and nailed the last question. I wasn’t useful as a team member. I didn’t want to eye contact anyone.

Mr Thomas gave us our latest project challenge; to research and present a PowerPoint about an ultra-ordinary child in history who had exceptional courage or uniqueness. He said he

chose the word *ultra*-ordinary because he keeps telling us we are all *extra*-ordinary. He had a list of ten different children to choose from. I wasn't in the mood to do a project, and I wasn't feeling *extra*-ordinary.

At recess, as the crows, Crystal and Rachel walked out of the classroom, they bumped past me. 'Tiana's only using you, you know,' they said and took off giggling to each other.

It was a hit and run like someone had stabbed me with a knife.

On my way to the canteen to get a choc milk to go with one of Nanna's pumpky scones, I saw Tiana. She glanced across. I had all kinds of mixed thoughts in my head. What if it was true? What if she was using me, whatever that meant? It annoyed me that she posted the picture public. I faced the other way as I walked off to the toilets. I hid myself and my hurt there for the whole of recess.

'Where have you been?' I heard a voice as we lined up for class. It was Mitch. 'Tiana was looking for you.'

'Whatever,' I muttered.

'Irrespective,' Mitch replied.

'That's such a stupid word,' I muttered as I went into class.

Recess to lunch dragged on like a snail going across a sandpit. The rocks in my stomach became painful. Blood pumped into my head. With each pump, the pressure built until I had a headache.

At lunch, I had nowhere safe to sit. Tiana was standing where Crystal and Rachel were sitting. I knew it was too good to be true. I thought I was finally getting a bestie, but now she

has betrayed me. She gestured with her hand for me to join them. *No, not after what those malicious crows said before.*

I pointed across to Fleur and Li Tan to show Tiana I would sit with them.

Fleur and Li Tan always let me join them. They're so nice. Sometimes it's like I'm using them. Whenever I'm having a tough time fitting in anywhere, I always end up with them or hiding in the toilets. The boys still let me join them too.

'We heard you got voted vice-captain of the footy team,' Li Tan said.

'Congratulations!' Fleur added.

The two were always saying positive things.

When the bell sounded for us to play, Tiana came across.

'Mind if I join you?' She asked all chirpy-like.

'We're just off to the undercover area to play four square, and we have enough people,' I lied.

Fleur and Li Tan looked surprised but said nothing.

Tiana was smart enough to know four-square means four people and we only have three. She got the hint.

It was like I had taken the *user* knife Crystal and Rachel had stabbed me with and stabbed Tiana with it. She looked shocked and hurt as she walked away. I felt bad.

To avoid the others, I hung out with Fleur and Li Tan. I'm not sure they were aware of what was going on.

'You look upset Maddy,' Fleur said. 'You okay?'

'Yeah,' I lied again. The pain in my stomach worsened, and my headache was unbearable.

The two didn't ask anymore.

'Just gotta go to the toilets,' I said as I escaped to be on my own.

While I was there, the words Pop said yesterday came to mind. *The one that angers you controls you. Give no one that power.* I was doing exactly what he said not to.

The afternoon in class dragged on like a sloth running a marathon. I wanted to go home. I had a stomach ache, a headache, and a heartache.

Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, Ms A appeared at the classroom door. She whispered something to Mr Thomas who summoned Crystal and Rachel. The two left with Ms A.

Just before the bell, they returned. I tried not to watch them come in but couldn't help myself. Soon as my eyes caught theirs, they were giving me the evils. I put my head down to avoid further eye contact.

The final bell sounded. I wanted a quick getaway, to run away from all the hate.

Tiana was waiting at the gate. She must have gotten out early. *How can I get past her?*

Maybe I can walk home with Mitch and Megan. I'll wait for them and use them as a shield.

When they arrived, I asked.

‘Sorry Maddy, mum is picking us up,’ Mitch said.

Trust Mitch, as we walked past Tiana, he opened his big mouth. ‘Hey Tiana, groovy photo man.’

I glared at Mitch and shook my head. Too late. Damage is done.

CHAPTER 13

CROSS MY HEART

“You have to dig deep into your heart, dust yourself off and be brave enough to say sorry.”

Alexander (6)

‘We need to talk Maddy,’ Tiana stabbed these words at me as I tried to walk past.

‘What about?’ I stabbed back.

‘Can I walk home with you and talk?’ She asked.

‘If you have to,’ I mumbled. Part of me wanted to run, but I knew she could outrun me. Part of me wanted to crawl up in a ball and disappear. Part of me wanted to punch her. The last part of me surrendered, knowing it was the right thing to do.

At first, the awkward silence was deafening. As we walked away from the school, Tiana broke the ice, ‘It feels like you’re avoiding me. Have I done something wrong?’

It was a courageous thing to ask.

I picked at the strap of my backpack. I had a chance to let the hurt out, but all I could say was, ‘No.’

‘You sure?’ Tiana said as timid as a mouse.

‘Sure,’ I lied.

The unconvinced expression on her face told me she didn’t believe me. ‘Dad said I can come to your place for the sleepover on Saturday if it’s still okay?’ She said.

Now, what was I going to say? I had second thoughts about the sleepover. *Why did those mean crows have to say anything this morning?* I decided to come out with it. I stopped, glared at her and said, ‘Are you using me?’

She halted in her tracks and like a stun gun had hit her. ‘What?’

‘Crystal and Rachel said you were using me.’ I folded my arms and pressed my lips tight.

Tiana planted her hands on her hips. ‘Dead set? Those bitches.’

‘Ouch!’ I said.

Now Tiana fired up. ‘They tried the same on me. They told me you were using me.’

‘I’m sorry, it’s just that..... doesn’t matter.’ *This is awkward.* My eyes lowered.

‘It’s just what?’ Tiana’s hands were still on her hips.

‘Well I’ve never had a best, best friend who’s a girl and I’m not sure who to trust.’

‘Maddy. I’m not using you. Look at me.’

My eyes lifted.

She glared. ‘I AM NOT USING YOU.’ She made sure I heard.

‘Truth?’ I pleaded.

‘Truth.’ She waved her hands over her chest. ‘Cross my heart it ain’t no lie.’

‘Isn’t it *cross my heart and hope to die?*’

‘I know, but I don’t hope to die,’ she said

‘Yeah, what a strange thing to say.’ I wanted to get another thing off my chest. ‘Why did you post the picture of us at the markets?’

‘Because I thought it’d be okay.’ She was as timid as a mouse again.

‘Well it wasn’t okay,’ I shot back.

‘I didn’t know it’d start rumours.’

‘Well, it did.’ It was my turn to put my hands on my hips.

‘But I thought we were becoming best friends,’ she said. Her eyes were reddening, and tears were welling up.

‘What made you think that?’ I don’t know why I was talking with this *madditude*. I so much wanted a best friend, and here I was fighting with someone who could be a bestie.

She grabbed my hands and eyeballed me. ‘To start with, I’ve never had so much fun with someone as I have with you.’

That surprised me. ‘Really?’

‘Even though your jokes are corny, they make me laugh,’ she added, ‘and you treat me with respect. When I’m with you, I’m a better person.’ Her eyes filled with tears.

No girl had ever spoken to me like that before. Now what do I say? I was ashamed to have bad thoughts about her. I was also a better person around her but didn’t know how to say it.

I threw my arms around her. ‘That’s the best-damned speech I’ve ever heard,’ I splurged out.

‘I’m so sorry Tiana.’

It made me think about the Willy Wagtail and what Ryan said. It was like Tiana was a human form of the Willy Wagtail, and I was afraid she would steal my secrets.

I stood back and eyeballed her, ‘It’s just that I’m scared. Scared you won’t like me for who I am. Scared you’ll tell people my secrets. Scared if you become my best friend and then I might lose you.’

She blinked five big blinks. ‘Maddy. I AM your friend. I have fears too, but that’s what friends are for, hanging in there and sharing their secrets and helping each other through tough times.’

She was right, but I had to clear something up. ‘What about the crows, Crystal and Rachel?’ I asked.

‘They’re friends, but not like you. I’m mad at them for what they’ve done. I’ll give those two crows a piece of my mind when I see them.’ She shook her fist.

‘Can I come with you when you do?’ I asked.

‘Those two have been different since they’ve been hanging out with Keeliana.’

‘I heard about the stealing at the markets.’

‘You heard about that?’ Her eyebrows raised.

‘Yeah.’ I started walking again.

‘It was Keeliana’s idea. I told them it wasn’t right,’ Tiana continued, ‘That’s why I came and joined you.’

‘But I saw Basil after that, and he said nothing about someone stealing from him.’

‘They did it when they came back from town after we’d both left.’

‘Oh.’ It made sense now.

‘I guess they were annoyed I wouldn’t join them. When they found out I took off with you, that’s when they started the rumours.’

‘How come you were talking with them at recess?’ I asked.

‘Well, I wasn’t actually talking with them. They were talking at me. It’s when they started being mean to me and told me you were using me. That’s why I called you over. I wanted to sort it out with those crows right there and prove to them you weren’t using me.’

‘And I avoided you. Some friend I turned out to be.’ I used my sorry puppy face.

‘It’s not your fault. I tried to join you at lunchtime, but you wouldn’t let me.’

‘Sorry.’ I felt extra bad now. ‘Who did you play with?’

‘No one.’ She sighed.

‘Where were you then?’

‘I was in the toilets crying.’

Now I felt worse. ‘That was me at recess, in the toilets crying.’

‘All because of those girls,’ she said.

‘Can we promise each other never to let anything like this happen again?’ I asked.

‘Promise?’ She said as she stuck out her pinky finger. I connected to mine.

Out of nowhere, two crows swooped past us. They were being chased by a Willy Wagtail.

We both looked at each other, bewildered.

‘Did you see that?’ I asked.

‘Bizarre,’ Tiana replied. ‘Like ... a tiny bird chasing two big crows. It could be a sign.’

‘No ... just a coincidence,’ I said without repeating I didn’t believe in superstition.

‘Nobody likes crows,’ Tiana said.

‘Yeah, but they like each other.’ I laughed.

The headache had disappeared although I still had some funny bubbles in the tummy.

As we reached my corner, I asked, ‘Hey, do you wanna come over to my place now?’

‘Yeah, but I have to check in at home first and text Dad to say I’m home from school.’

I walked to Tiana’s place with her. She lives with her Dad, her teenage brother who works and her dog Ruby.

Because her Dad works late, she comes home every afternoon by herself.

She invited me in.

‘I won’t be long.’ She let Ruby into the house from the back patio to say hello.

‘Ruby is gorgeous,’ I said as I hugged and wrestled her. She slobbered all over me with her dog glob.

Ruby is the biggest, cuddliest golden retriever I’ve ever seen.

‘It’s like hugging a giant teddy bear,’ I called out to Tiana.

Tiana changed and then texted her Dad.

Home safe, can I go to Maddy’s? 🐾

Her Dad replied,

Sure. Be home by 5. Homework? 💖

I’ll do homework when I get home, promise. 🐾

OK ILY 💖

U2 🐾

‘Let’s go Stormy,’ she said.

‘That was easy,’ I said.

‘My dad trusts me.’

CHAPTER 14

BESTIE?

“A good snapshot keeps a moment from running away.” – Eudora Welty

When we arrived at my house, Mum was on the back patio with a chai latte.

‘Mum, is it okay for Tiana to come over?’

‘What about your homework?’ Mum put her cup on the table.

‘I promise I’ll do it when Tiana leaves at five.’

‘Okay, oh hi Tiana.’ Mum waved.

‘Hi Heather, sorry I called you Mrs Feather yesterday,’ Tiana said.

‘Don’t stress, it happens a lot. How was school today girls?’

‘Same same.’ I was like an echo of Pop.

‘Did you ask your dad about Saturday’s sleep-over Tiana,’ Mum asked.

‘Yeah. He said it was fine.’ She looked across at me.

I smiled and nodded. ‘Can we take Tiana to footy with us in the morning and bring her back to our house after?’

‘Sounds like a good plan,’ Mum agreed.

Tiana and I hit the kitchen for something to eat and drink. Milo and pumpky scones, courtesy of Nanna.

I was in a joke-telling mood. ‘You know how people say, *it’s the best thing since sliced bread*. What do you think was the best thing before they invented sliced bread?’

‘Probably your Nanna’s pumpky scones,’ she replied.

‘Good one Ti Ti.’ I picked up the milk carton. ‘You know how they used to put photos of missing people on milk cartons?’

‘Did they?’ She had a goofy look on her face, bracing for another of my corny jokes.

‘I wonder if you lost your inner self, would you find your own photo on a milk carton?’

It made her laugh just as she was having a mouthful of Milo and some of it came out of her nose.

‘When cows laugh, does milk come out of their nose?’

‘Stop it Maddy. I’m trying to drink.’

We laughed ourselves silly.

I invited Tiana into my bedroom, my studio.

‘Woah.’ She took one look at my wall. ‘Awe - some.’

‘I call it my LIKE wall. Every picture is a special memory.’

‘There must be a thousand.’

‘Nine hundred and eighty-seven to be precise.’

She was meticulous as she studied each section.

‘You have a whole section for Mitch under LIKE LIKE?’ Her eyebrows raised and lowered a few times.

‘Please keep it a secret,’ I begged.

‘Trust me,’ she said as she put her hand over her heart.

I was taking a huge risk. Other than Mitch’s little sister and my mum no one else had ever been in my room.

She came across my newest section. It was titled BESTIE? (with a big question mark) It only had one snapshot. The one of Tiana and I at the markets.

‘That’s us. You ...’

I interrupted her, ‘I know it has a question mark.’

‘So....?’ She did her best quizzical expression.

‘Well, I was going to remove it when I was sure.’

Tiana pulled the label off and poised to tear the question mark off.

‘May I?’ She asked.

‘Yep!’ The first girl in my life I’ve said yes to be a best friend. I did it!

She tore the question mark off and replaced the label on the wall.

‘That settles it. Stormy and Ti Ti BFF,’ she said.

I grabbed my camera. ‘Let’s mark the occasion with a twosie.’

We laid on the bed and put our heads together. Snap. Whirr. Perfect!

We stuck the twosie snapshot on my LIKE wall in the BESTIE section.

‘Wanna check out the latest on Instagram?’ I said.

‘You sure?’ She asked.

‘Gotta face it eventually. Only one thing though, we should go into the living room. Mum doesn’t like me being on social media in my studio.’

‘Studio? You have a studio?’ Her forehead wrinkled.

I swirled around in my room. ‘This is my studio.’

‘That’s so cool Maddy. Do you know what my bedroom is called?’

‘A castle?’ Because she liked unicorns, I guess they come from castles.

‘No, a cloud forest.’

‘A cloud forest?’

‘Yes, the home of unicorns.’

‘That figures.’

‘You’ll have to come over again one day and see for yourself.’

Tiana and I made our way to the living room sofa, sat down, and logged onto Instagram.

There it was, for the world to see.

TB butch 1 + Ti Ti butch 2 = GAY  kisscreen4me

Mum came inside and noticed our bothered expressions as we pondered the hurtful message on my iPad.

‘What’s the latest goss?’ She asked. Little did she know, or *did* she?

She propped over our shoulders. ‘Hmmm, looks a bit serious,’ Mum said.

‘It’s the mystery person again. This time they’ve called Tiana and me gay.’

Tiana added, ‘They had no right to do that. I thought it was okay to post a picture of Maddy and I dressed up at the markets, but it appears someone chose to be mean about it.’

‘What upsets you the most, being called gay or your privacy being compromised?’ Mum was using big words.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. I moved to a more comfortable position on the sofa.

‘Are you offended by being called gay?’ Mum plonked herself down on the other sofa.

‘Der yeah! We’re not lezzos. We’re only kids Mum,’ I said as I put a cushion under my head.

Tiana included her bit, ‘If people are gay it’s their choice, we shouldn’t judge them, but being called gay when you aren’t, means someone is judging us.’

‘That’s pretty wise Tiana,’ Mum said. ‘Have you girls considered reporting this?’

‘Someone already did,’ Tiana said.

I sat up straight. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

Tiana picked up a cushion and hugged it to her chest. ‘Well, I heard Crystal and Rachel were at Ms A’s office today, and the word is they’ve been cyber-bullying.’

‘So that’s why they left the class in the afternoon. Who dobbed them in?’ I asked.

‘I dunno.’ Tiana shrugged.

Tiana, Mum, and I checked at all the other comments. The only ones adding bad stuff were Crystal and Rachel, and the mystery mean person. One comment from Crystal said, ‘Bitch sisters.’ Rachel wrote, ‘Lezzies.’

The worst comment was from the mystery mean person, ‘Die butch.’

The rest of the comments were standing up for Tiana and me. Mum pointed out the number of positive comments. While it helped a little, it still hurt.

We took some screenshots of some of the negative comments for evidence if it’s ever needed.

Mum encouraged me to make a comment, but not to the girls who were being mean.

‘Don’t give them any power,’ she said.

Thanx 2 friends who say nice things 

We waited to see if there were any more comments. Only good stuff, nothing negative.

Go Maddy  Jason was the first to reply.

I thanked Mum and felt a lot better.

We checked out the latest posts. Tiana showed me the photo of us at the markets she took on her phone. I posted a comment.

Like this girl - true friend 

Before Tiana left, I had a joke for her. ‘What do unicorns eat for breakfast?’

‘Lucky Charms,’ She guessed, shrugging her shoulders.

‘No, Uni-corn flakes?’

She chuckled.

Tiana left at five as planned.

CHAPTER 15

ULTRA-ORDINARY CHILDREN

“Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny.” – C.S. Lewis

After Tiana left, I was in the mood to launch into my homework.

I wish I could have chosen my own ultra-ordinary child for the project. I would have selected Tayla Harris or Hillary Swank from the Next Karate Kid. Mr Thomas said we had to choose from his list of ten.

MR THOMAS’ ULTRA-ORDINARY CHILDREN LIST

1. *Malala Yousafzai* – *The youngest person to receive a Noble Peace prize aged sixteen.* Interesting, I’ve seen her on TV once. She got shot by the Taliban.

2. *Arfa Karim Randhawa* – *The youngest child to become a Microsoft Certified Professional aged nine.* Child computer wiz-genius I guess. That name is too hard to say.

3. *Samantha Smith* – *a child actress and peace activist who wrote a letter to the Russian General Secretary during the Cold War.* Ordinary name, this one has potential. I wonder what a cold war is, like did they fight in the snow or winter or something?

4. *Ruby Bridges* – *The first Black American child to attend an all-white school in the USA aged six.* That’s pre-primary age. Sounds amazing. I might pick this one.

5. *Ann Frank* – Famous for writing “*The Diary of a Girl*” between the ages of eleven and fourteen in a German Concentration camp in World War II. Possible, maybe I’ll get ideas for writing in my journal.

6. *Nkosi Johnson* – An African child who contracted AIDS from birth and became famous after his school rejected him because of his HIV-positive status. How depressing. I don’t want to do a sad one.

7. *Cathy Freeman* – The youngest Aboriginal to win a Commonwealth Games Gold Medal aged sixteen. I already know about Cathy Freeman. I need a challenge.

8. *Orion P. Howe*. – One of the youngest recipients of the Medal of Honour Citation in the American Civil War. Not interested in the American Civil War.

9. *Jessica Watson* – The youngest Australian to sail solo around the world aged sixteen. Sounds awesome. I wonder if she got lonely?

10. *Hector Pieterse* – Died aged thirteen while protesting in the Soweto Uprising in South Africa during the Apartheid era. Another sad one. I wonder what Apartheid is?

Knowing little about many except Malala and Cathy Freeman I wanted a challenge, so I chose Samantha Smith. Her name sounded ordinary compared to the others, and I liked the idea of a *peace activist*.

We had until Friday, some work at school and some at home. The idea was to present six PowerPoint slides and talk for twenty seconds on each slide. A total of two minutes.

I spent an hour researching on the Internet.

Samantha Smith was definitely a child actress and a peace activist. What surprised me the most is when I discovered she died at age thirteen, in a plane crash. Sad, sad, sad. I didn't want to do a sad one. This would be a big challenge.

At dinner, I asked mum if she knew who Samantha Smith was.

'I went to school with a Samantha Smith,' she said before putting a forkful of risotto in her mouth.

'I don't think it's the same one I'm researching unless you're over fifty years old.'

Mum placed her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her fist. 'Tell me five things about her.'

'Well, she was American. She was an actress. Aged five, she wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth II. In 1982 when she was ten, she wrote a letter to the Russian leader during the Cold War to plead for peace and not have a nuclear war. She became famous when her letter was published in a Russian newspaper. She wasn't happy because she never got a reply, so she wrote to the Russian ambassador in America. Five months later she received a letter from the Russian leader Yuri Andropov,' I said all this taking only one breath in the middle.

'That's over five things.' Mum folded her arms. I think she was impressed I knew so much.

'What's a Cold War?' I asked, scratching my head.

'A Cold War is when two countries go at each other with words and threats but don't do anything physical.' Mum was pleased with herself.

'Huh! That's like cyber-bullying.'

‘Pretty much, but on a country scale,’ Mum added as she scraped the last of her risotto off the plate.

‘Like America and North Korea threatening to blow each other up.’

‘Yeah. I suppose. So, Samantha was a peace activist?’

I showed Mum a picture of her on my iPad and added, ‘Yeah and that’s why she became so famous. They called her America’s Youngest Ambassador.’ I took a deep breath and added, ‘But she died in a plane crash when she was thirteen.’

‘That’s so sad Maddy. To think, she may have had a part to play in preventing a nuclear war.’

‘I think it’s why Mr Thomas listed her as an *ultra*-ordinary child.’

‘You’re my *ultra*-ordinary child Sweetie.’ Mum reached across and squeezed my cheek.

‘You’re my *ultra*-ordinary mum. Did you know Samantha Smith’s mum was a social worker and her dad was a teacher in literature in a university?’

‘Hmmm, might explain why Samantha was good at writing and wanting to make the world a better place.’

‘What did you dream of doing when you were my age?’ I asked, scraping up the last of the risotto on my plate.

Mum brought her hand up to her chin. ‘Hmmm, I wanted to be a famous actress. Now I just want to be a good mum and a nice person.’

‘Two out of three ain’t bad,’ I said as I winked at Mum.

‘What about you?’ Mum threw the question back at me.

I put my hands behind my head and leant back. ‘I’m not sure. I suppose I wanna be a famous AFL player, a PE teacher, an antique dealer, and the Prime Minister.’

‘That’s ambitious,’ she chuckled.

‘You never know. It’s okay to have a dream.’

‘Sure. I can’t argue.’

‘But, I mostly wanna be happy being me.’ I smiled.

‘That’s cool. In fact, it’s probably the best thing you can aim for.’

I told Mum I still had tummy aches. She said she made an appointment for me at the doctor after school tomorrow and she had planned to pick me up from school.

I didn’t want to go to school. What would the two crows Crystal and Rachel be like? Faking a more severe stomach ache when I wake in the morning might be an idea.

CHAPTER 16

BURY THE HATCHET

“Forgiveness doesn’t change the past but can frame a better picture for the future.”

Tuesday morning, I woke with the funny rumbly tummy, but it wasn’t painful. *Should I go to school or not?* When I peered up at my LIKE wall, the snapshot of Tiana and I stood out. I got a boost of courage to face whatever was waiting for me at school.

Before the first bell sounded, Andrew, our school chaplain, approached me in the holding pen.

‘Hi Maddy. Can I see you for a sec?’ Andrew was good at trying to keep things private, so he gestured for me to move away from the others.

‘Sure.’ I walked with him.

‘I heard about the cyber-bullying and want to know how you feel about having a meeting with Crystal and Rachel to sort it out?’

At first, I hesitated. *How did he find out?*

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, picking at my backpack.

He explained because the incident happened outside school hours, the school could not discipline the girls.

‘The school policy is that the parents are informed,’ he said. ‘And we try to get the students involved to talk it through to restore relationships.’

He also told me he met with the girls yesterday at the recommendation of Ms A.

‘The girls agreed to talk with me and you,’ he said.

I put my fingers up to my mouth, about to bite my nails. ‘Okay, but can I bring Tiana with me?’

‘Is Tiana involved?’ Andrew’s eyebrows lifted.

‘Well yeah. There’s other stuff going on as well between those girls and me that involves Tiana.’ I picked at a bit of fingernail that was sticking out.

‘Okay then. Are you happy to do it first thing when the school bell goes?’

‘Sure.’ I’d been to Andrew’s office a couple of times before. It’s cosy.

‘I’ll come and get you from class.’

I must admit I was nervous about the whole idea, but I trusted Andrew. He was helpful after my dad died and he has helped heaps of kids sort out their fights.

I caught up with Tiana before the school bell rang.

‘Hey Ti Ti.’ I stuck out my pinky finger.

‘Yo Maddy.’ She connected her finger with mine.

I came straight out with it, ‘Andrew wants us to see him.’

‘What for?’ A puzzled expression took over her face.

‘About the cyber-bullying and the fight with Crystal and Rachel.’ I picked at my fingers again.

‘How did he find out?’ Her hands landed on her hips.

‘He said Ms A told him about the online stuff, and I said we had another problem with Crystal and Rachel.’

‘When?’

‘When did I tell him?’

‘No, when do we have to go?’

‘Oh. When the school bell goes. He’ll come and get us.’

‘But I’ll miss maths.’ She tried to look serious, but she was smirking.

‘Oh. Sorry, I told Andrew it’d be okay then.’

‘Fine. I’ll come.’ She rolled her eyes.

Andrew collected all of us from our classrooms. We dawdled to his office without looking at each other. I’d picked all the scrappy bits off my fingernails by now.

I liked going to Andrew’s office, if you could call it that, it was more like a lounge and playroom combined, it smelt like coconut and vanilla. Best of all, his office was like a big hug you get from your mum when you need one.

Tiana and I sat side by side on one couch. Rachel and Crystal sat side by side on the other.

Andrew sat in the middle on a stool.

A voiceless awkwardness filled the air.

Andrew started by asking us, ‘Are you girls okay about having this meeting to talk about what’s been happening?’

‘Whatever,’ Tiana said as she picked up a silver sequined cushion.

‘Irrespective Tiana,’ I added. She giggled.

‘Seriously girls,’ Andrew said, ‘I sense you’re all a bit apprehensive about this.’

‘I’m okay with it,’ I said.

‘Suppose it’s fine,’ Crystal mumbled, not looking up.

‘If it helps,’ Rachel said as she adjusted the scrunchie in her hair.

‘Girls, I want to let you know I won’t take sides. I’m here to help you solve the problem between you all the best we can.’

‘Problems!’ I said as I sat back and crossed my arms. ‘There’s more than one problem.’

‘Would it be okay if you start first Maddy? Can you tell Crystal and Rachel how you feel about what’s been happening?’ Andrew glanced at me as held out his open hand.

The pressure was full-on. *What am I going to say?* I dug deep for a boost of courage and looked Crystal straight in the eye.

‘Well, I’m mad that you have been saying mean things about me on Instagram and I’m furious about what you two said about Tiana and I.’

Tiana jumped in, ‘Yeah, how come you girls have been picking on Maddy?’ she added. ‘Are you trying to break us up?’

The two of them sat in muted awkwardness. What was going on in their minds?

Andrew gestured to Crystal and Rachel. ‘Would you girls like to say anything? Has Maddy or Tiana done anything to upset you?’

Crystal’s face scrunched like she was about to cry. Rachel’s eyes scanned the floor.

‘You okay Crystal?’ Andrew asked.

‘It was a dare,’ Crystal confessed as she lifted her head.

‘What do you mean?’ Andrew asked.

‘I was at Keeliana’s after dancing on Saturday, and she dared me to make a comment on the photo of Maddy taking the mark.’ Her head dropped back down.

The hurt and anger were rotting inside me like Pop said, but I didn’t want her to have the power. ‘Why would you do that?’ I snapped.

‘You don’t understand,’ she said.

‘Understand what?’ I spoke with some *madditude*.

‘Keeliana has power.’

‘What, is she a witch or something?’ The sarcasm flowed from my lips.

‘No, it’s just that she told me she would tell my mum I stole something from the shop.’

Crystal halted like she was trying to take the words back, but they were out there.

‘How do you know Keeliana, Crystal?’ Andrew asked keeping his cool.

‘She goes to my dancing school. We were at the shops after dancing, and she talked me into stealing a ring from the surf shop. Please don’t tell my mum.’ Crystal put her hands together like she was praying.

As cool as a cucumber Andrew said, ‘It’s not my role to do that Crystal, but it might be an idea for you to talk with her yourself.’

‘Are you kidding? My mum will kill me. I’m already in trouble for the Instagram stuff. I’m grounded for a week, and I’ve had my iPad and phone taken from me.’ She picked up a cushion and squeezed the living daylights out of it.

I remembered Tiana told me Crystal’s mum was one scary lady.

‘I thought you stole the ring from Basil.’ I gritted my teeth.

‘That was Keeliana on Sunday at the Markets, not me, and it was a bangle, not a ring.’ She calmed a little.

‘Still. Basil is my friend.’ I sent daggers with my eyes.

‘Keeliana is jealous of you Maddy.’ Just like that, matter-of-factly, she said it.

It was like a stun gun had hit me. ‘What? Jealous? What do you mean?’

‘You know the captain of the Dunes?’ she said.

‘That jerk?’

‘Well, he’s Keeliana’s boyfriend, and she thinks he has a crush on you.’

‘What? He’s a sleaze bag. I don’t even know him.’ I was almost yelling.

‘One of her friends told her he was getting fresh with you after the game.’

‘That’s a joke.’ If only she understood what really happened. ‘All he said to me was that I played pretty good for a girl and it only got me angry, I wanted to punch him,’ I added.

‘Well, it was Keeliana’s idea to call you butch loser.’ Crystal picked at a loose thread on the cushion.

‘So, she’s the mystery Instagram meanie?’ I asked.

‘She has the mystery account *kisscreen4me* so she can be mean to people she doesn’t like.’

‘There should be a law against that,’ Tiana said, slamming her hands down on the couch.

‘She was also the one who started the rumour that you two were gay.’ Crystal added.

‘Both of you didn’t have to join in,’ I said as Rachel lifted her eyes from the floor.

‘She has power,’ Rachel finally said something.

‘Why are you friends with her?’ I asked. ‘Why don’t you stand up to her?’

All this time Andrew sat back, observing the conversation between us. His eyes moved side to side like he was watching a long rally at a tennis match.

‘You sound hurt Maddy,’ he said

‘Hurt? I’m devastated. It wasn’t fair to do that to us. We’re both just becoming really good friends.’

‘Yeah, Crystal and Rachel how come you said we were using each other at school yesterday?’ Tiana leant forward and glared at them.

Crystal’s eyes became teary again. ‘I thought you wouldn’t be my friend anymore.’

‘What? Eh?’ Tiana sat back in surprise.

‘Well, you always wanna hang out with Maddy and not us.’ Crystal wiped her cheek.

Tiana’s hands slapped her thighs. ‘It doesn’t mean I’m not your friend, but if you keep treating Maddy and me meanly then maybe I won’t be.’

Crystal’s lips quivered. ‘I’m ... sorry Tiana and Maddy.’

Tiana surprised me when she stood up and sat next to Crystal and put her arm around her.

As Tiana comforted her, Crystal said through more tears, ‘I’m not a bad person. It’s just that things are bad at home with my mum.’

Andrew joined back in the conversation, ‘Crystal, would you like to talk about that with me on a separate occasion?’

Crystal curled her arms in front of her heart. ‘Maybe, but you can’t tell anyone what I tell you.’

‘Crystal, you know anything you talk with me about stays private unless I have your permission to tell someone, or if I’m worried about your safety or welfare, then I’ll get support for you.’

‘Okay, but I’m worried my mum will find out I talked with you.’

Andrew passed her a tissue. ‘I understand. Let’s talk about that later, okay?’

‘Okay,’ she said as she wiped the tears away.

Andrew’s eyes move across to Rachel, ‘Rachel, you’ve been fairly quiet. Is there anything you want to say?’

Rachel lifted her head and took a deep breath. ‘I didn’t want to be mean to you girls.’ Rachel turned towards Crystal. ‘No offence Crystal but you can be really mean.’

‘What?’ Crystal looked hurt.

‘I hate how you always make me do things I don’t like,’ Rachel was bold enough to add.

Crystal’s face scrunched like she was about to cry again. I started to feel a little bit sorry for Crystal.

Tiana added, ‘Crystal, whatever is happening to you is sucking the niceness out of you. Please don’t let it. I think you’re a better person than this.’

Where did that come from? Tiana surprised me with the things that came out of her mouth.

‘Thanks, Tiana,’ Crystal said.

Tiana said something else I’ll never forget, ‘When someone’s hard to love that’s when they need our love the most.’

‘That’s pretty cool Tiana, where did you learn that?’ Andrew asked.

‘From my dad,’ she replied. ‘He said it when my mum walked out on our family.’

Tiana was full of surprises. So were Crystal and Rachel.

We talked more about some of the issues.

Andrew asked us, ‘Are you all ready to bury the hatchet?’

‘What does that mean?’ Rachel asked.

‘Making things right with each other,’ Andrew said.

‘It means forgiving each other,’ Tiana was good at this kind of stuff.

We all ended up saying sorry.

Crystal surprised me with a hug, so too Rachel.

We’d all been crying, except Tiana and Andrew, although I think his eyes moistened when we said sorry to each other.

‘Girls.’ Andrew cupped his hands together on his lap. ‘I wanna say thanks for your courage this morning. You’ve all shared personal things. It’s essential for you to trust each other to keep those things to yourselves.’

We all agreed. Tiana made us all put our hands on top of each other, including Andrew and we did the hand explosion thing.

Andrew delivered us back to our classes, and we blended into our typical school day.

Mum picked me up from school as planned and we headed to the doctor. My tummy ache had disappeared, so why was I going to the doctor? Oh, that’s right, for my puberty check up and to get another referral to visit Raelene. Puberty rules, not.

CHAPTER 17

P WORDS

“What you give power to has power over you.” – Leon Brown

On the way to the doctor, Mum punched a question at me, ‘What is one thing that happened at school you would like to forget and what is one thing you would like to never forget.’

What a creative way to ask, ‘how was your day?’

‘First, the forget. I want to forget about all the bad stuff between Crystal, Rachel, me, and Tiana. And the one thing I would like to remember, Tiana told me *when someone is hard to love that’s when they need our love the most.*’

‘Hmmm, a wise saying.’ Mum nodded her head keeping her eyes on the road.

‘She said her dad told her that when her mum walked out on the family.’

‘So, her mum and dad don’t live together?’

‘They broke up when she was seven. Remember her mum picked her up from the markets on Sunday with her two little twin half-brothers.’

‘Oh right.’ Mum flicked on the indicator to pull into the doctor’s car park.

‘She usually spends Sunday’s with her mum,’ I said, dreading going to the doctor.

‘So, she lives with her dad the rest of the time?’ Mum concentrated on parking.

‘Yeah, that’s why she needed to get her dad’s permission for the sleepover.’

‘Right. Got it. I think I better meet her dad first before she stays over.’

‘Her big brother also lives with them,’ I said as Mum was getting out of the car.

‘Uh, ha,’ Mum said as she glanced back at me.

I hesitated to get out. ‘And her cuddly dog Ruby.’

Mum tilted her head and gestured for me to get out. I obeyed.

Our visit to the doctor revealed I’m a normal, healthy girl entering adolescence, which the doctor said could cause the tummy aches. She said it’d be good for me to see the psych again, so she arranged a referral.

After visiting the doctor, Mum took me shopping for *products*. Why are all the women’s personal and hygiene items wide open in the brightest lit aisle for everyone to see? It’s like a neon sign pointing out our femininity.

As Mum and I were looking at the array of tampons, pads, panty liners and pimple cream, I spotted three people I knew. It was like all their eyes were on me. How embarrassing.

‘Mum, can we like, get out of here, like real soon. I think I saw Ms A from school and Crystal’s mum.’

‘Sure sweetie. I think we have enough for you.’

The shopping basket was overflowing with all kinds of products. I’m sure I won’t need all those things.

When we got home, Mum showed me how to use the products. Enough said. *I'm glad it's over or is it just beginning?* For a fleeting moment, I wondered how good it would be to be a boy. No, not really.

Before I climbed into bed that night, I took my journal out of my top drawer. It was time to write something. I made up a poem about puberty.

I titled it *P for Puberty*, original, eh?

Parents, products, PMS

Peer Pressure, personality

Panty liners, tampons, pads

Pizzas, parties, popularity

Period pain, personal hygiene

Perspiring in private places

Pesky pimples protrude

From pretty pubescent faces

Puberty!

Wednesday would have to be the normalest day of school in history, except Crystal and Rachel were being nice even though they weren't talking to each other. I would say it's

karma, but karma is like superstition. I suppose it's a case of what goes around, comes around.

What I mean, is the thing Crystal said Keeliana was doing to her is what Rachel said Crystal was doing, having power over her. I don't think Crystal liked hearing that. Everyone has power over someone, and everyone has someone who has power over them. What Pop said came to mind, *the one that angers you controls you, don't give them that power.*

My mum has power over me, not bad power, she makes me do stuff like mums do. By the sounds of Crystal's mum, it appears she has bad power over Crystal and is possibly what makes her the way she is, bossy and mean. I tried to think who I have power over. I guess it's Mitch's little sister Megan. It's not that I bully her or anything like that, it's just that she looks up to me and thinks I'm like a big sister. So, in a way I have power over her, she kinda makes it that way.

It's possible I also have power over Hemi. Well, I try not to let him have power over me, like a dad, so I guess my way of doing that is by having power over him. Now I feel a little bad because I'm sure it's not good power. What kinda name is Hemi anyway? I guess it's a Maori name.

During the day, I wondered about why Crystal hadn't spread rumours about Mitch and me going out with each other. Either she didn't know, which is unlikely because she seems to know everything that's going down, or she didn't bother because of the things Keeliana was tempting her to do, or some other reason. Maybe she has a good side? Maybe she decided not to spread rumours because she wouldn't get any power out of it. Now I think I'm overthinking about thinking about thinking about it. Who cares if anyone spreads rumours about Mitch and me. I can handle it.

At the end of the school day, Mr Thomas reminded us of our homework and doing our presentations on Friday.

When I got home from school, Mum told me she could get me an appointment with the psychologist on Friday during school.

‘But I have to do my ultra-ordinary child presentation on Friday,’ I said.

‘Calm your farm,’ Mum said. ‘It’s at 2.30pm.’

‘That’s okay, the presentations are in the morning.’

‘I’ll have to leave work a little earlier and pick you up from school at 2.00pm,’ Mum said.

Mum works at a winery. She’s lucky because her hours are 8.30am to 2.30pm. After Dad died, the winery owners adjusted the hours for Mum as her boss knew she would do it tough bringing up a kid on her own. That’s where she met Hemi. He started working at the winery just before Christmas. He’s a wiz winemaker. They brought him in from New Zealand. Hemi asked mum out on a date on Valentine’s Day. She said no, but he didn’t give up. They ended up going out only a month later.

I spent another hour on my presentation to get it up to scratch, ready to present on Friday.

The more I thought about Samantha Smith, the more I liked her. I sensed some kind of connection, nothing magical, just a kind of soul friend. I liked her positive determination. If she wanted to do something she had her heart set on, she did it. I mean, who writes to the Russian General Secretary? And gets a reply?

After my homework, I got my iPad out and checked what was happening on Instagram. Not a lot of activity, probably because both Crystal and Rachel were banned. I’m also guessing

everyone else was doing their homework. As I was about to shut it down a message popped up from Tiana on DM.

Hey Stormy 🐱

Hey Ti Ti 🐱

I'm bored 🐱

Just finishing my homework 🐱

That sucks 🐱

No 🐱

What? 🐱

I enjoy doing it 🐱

You okay? 🐱

Might need to see a psych? 🐱

I didn't want to tell Tiana I would actually visit a psych on Friday. Not yet anyway.

Crystal was quiet at school 🐱

I know but she was nice to me 🐱

Me 2 🐾

She and Rachel avoided each other 🐾

They'll get over it I'll give them a day 🐾

I'm excited about the sleepover on Saturday 🐾

I texted this even though I was freaking out a little.

Me 2 can you get your Mum to drop me at the markets on Sunday morning 🐾

Sure early cos mum and I have to go somewhere 🐾

Where? 🐾

Tell you about it on Saturday 🐾

Mystery? 🐾

My cat? 🐾

No mystery about what you'll tell me on Saturday 🐾

Oh 🐾

you'll have to wait 🐾

gotta go 🐾



CHAPTER 18

IN THE BACK AND WHO IS BECKY?

“The best thing about a picture is that it never changes, even when the people in it do.” –

Andy Warhol

Tiana was right. Crystal and Rachel sorted out their differences and were back together.

The two paraded up to the holding pen and stood at the edge, not joining the others.

Mitch rocked up after them with his little sister and sat on his own. He didn't come over and say hello. That's unusual.

Is he avoiding me?

I went straight up to him. ‘Sup Mitch?’

‘Hi Maddy,’ he mumbled without looking at me.

‘So,’ I said.

‘So, what?’

‘So, are you avoiding me again?’ It occurred to me I also had some power over Mitch.

‘Nup,’ he said looking down at the ground.

‘Mitch. It's obvious.’ I stood with my hands on my hips.

He lifted his eyes, they were red. ‘Well, it seems like you're the one who's actually avoiding me,’ he surprised me.

‘What do you mean?’ I took a half step back.

‘Don’t wanna talk here in front of everyone,’ he said looking across at Crystal and Rachel.

‘When then?’ I asked.

‘At lunch,’ he suggested.

I ate lunch with Tiana, Fleur, and Li Tan. When it was time to play, I searched for Mitch to finish our talk. Would you believe it? He was down on the oval playing footy.

Had he forgotten, or he was avoiding something?

I joined in the game at Mitch’s end.

‘We’ve already got enough at this end,’ he said as he walked away.

‘Are you serious?’ My fists clenched. ‘I thought we were going to have our talk.’

‘Later, I’m playing footy now.’

The ball came flying high in our direction. I pushed Mitch in the back and took the mark.

He got up off the ground and yelled, ‘Free kick!’

‘Fair bump!’ I sassed.

‘In the back.’ His fists tightened as he kept his arms by his sides. He was a volcano about to explode.

I hadn’t had this sort of fight with Mitch before, and I’m not even sure why we were fighting.

I planted my foot into the ball, and it shot off at a funny angle.

‘Ha ha,’ Mitch laughed. His sarcasm hurt.

My fists crunched so much the whites of my knuckles were showing. Either I was going to punch him or take my cyclonic energy somewhere else.

Tiana was at the other end, and she spotted me storming off. She followed me and caught up before I reached the toilets.

‘What did he say to you?’ She asked.

‘Nothing. He just laughed,’ I said between gritted teeth.

‘What’s going on between you two?’

‘I don’t know. He just started acting strange and avoiding me.’

‘Why?’ Tiana stopped me going into the toilets.

‘He does that when he thinks something’s wrong.’

‘Have you tried to talk to him about it?’ She sounded like a counsellor.

‘That’s the problem. We were meant to talk at lunchtime, but he played footy instead.’

Tiana marched me to the canteen. She had spare change, so she bought us both a slushy. We hung out there till the bell sounded.

In class, Mr Thomas gave us an opportunity to finish our presentations ready for tomorrow.

Mitch continued to avoid me the rest of the afternoon. I couldn’t concentrate, so I cleaned out my pencil case and put off finishing my presentation for when I get home from school.

I didn't bother to look for Mitch after school. If he was going to behave like an immature brat, it was fine by me.

When I arrived home from school Hemi was there. I wasn't in the mood for him.

I headed straight to my studio without saying hello and collapsed on my bed.

Mum followed me and stood in the doorway. 'What's wrong Maddy?'

'Nothin', I'm just not in the mood to have anyone over.'

'At least you could have said hello to Hemi.'

'Sorry.' I wasn't sincere. 'What's he doing here?'

I invited him over to have dinner with us, and I invited Mitch's mum, Mitch and Megan to join us too.

'Great,' I said through gritted teeth.

'There is something wrong, isn't there?' She asked.

'I haven't finished my presentation, and it's due tomorrow.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'I'll leave you alone for a while, and you can finish it before they come at five.' Mum knows me too well. 'There is something else, isn't there?'

I fought back the tears, 'Mitch and I had a fight at school today.'

Mum made herself at home at the end of my bed. ‘Sorry to hear that Maddy, wanna talk about it?’

‘Not really.’ I plonked my head on my pillow.

‘Having Mitch over will give you a good chance to fix it up.’

‘You don’t get it Mum. He won’t talk to me about it.’ I pounded my fists into my bed.

‘Oh. Do you want me to call them and cancel tea?’

‘No, it’ll be fine,’ I said half-heartedly.

‘Can I get you a Milo?’ Mum was doing her best to help me feel better.

‘No, I’ll come and get one in a minute.’

‘Guess I’ll leave you alone for a while.’

After a few minutes, I ventured into the kitchen. Hemi was sitting at the breakfast bar on his own.

‘Yo Maddy.’

‘Yo Hemi,’ I grunted, ‘sorry I didn’t say hello before.’

‘No probs.’ Hemi was trying to be cheery. ‘Can I make you a Milo?’

I continued with attitude, ‘No. I can do it myself, I’m not a baby.’

‘Whoa, why the madditude?’

He knows I don’t like him saying that. ‘Just leave it. Why do you have to be here anyway?’

He held his hands up like he was surrendering. ‘Just trying to blend in.’

‘You’re not my dad,’ I said with some venom.

Until now Hemi always spoke like he was apologising, without ever raising his voice, like I had the power. He surprised me with what he said next. His voice was like an earthquake rumble, ‘I know I’m not your dad, you’ve reminded me enough times. I could never replace him, but I damn well think the world of you and your mother.’

Just as he said, this Mum walked in and sensed the tension. ‘Everything okay?’

Hemi jumped in first, ‘Couldn’t be better Heather. Nothing to see here.’

Mum eyeballed me then eyeballed Hemi. The look on her face showed she was unconvinced.

‘Just got me Milo,’ I said as I head toward my studio.

I left the adults, knowing they would probably talk about my *madditude*.

Sprawling on my bed, I stared at my LIKE wall. My stomach was tight. It wasn’t painful but a concoction of feelings brewed. I was annoyed at Mitch and what Hemi said made me feel bad about the way I talked to him. I don’t like my own *madditude* at times.

I dragged myself over to the computer desk. As I tried to put the last touch to my presentation, I wondered more about Samantha Smith and Becky. *Who is Becky, the friend of Tom Sawyer the Russian leader said she was like?* I did more research.

There were some YouTube clips from the Tom Sawyer movie. I watched them all. Becky Thatcher was Tom Sawyer’s love interest, fascinating. She was a spirited, blonde-haired girl about my age. A lot like me but I’m less of a girly-girl than she appeared. There was one

scene where they were talking about getting engaged. *Seriously?* Becky kisses Tom on the cheek.

After my research on both Becky and Samantha, I found a soul friend connection between the three of us. Samantha wasn't blonde, but she also wasn't a girly-girl.

At five o'clock the doorbell rang. I could hear voices. It must be Mitch, Megan, and their mum. I stayed in my room. I didn't want to face Mitch right now.

CHAPTER 19

IMPERTINENCE

“Which of my snapshots is my favourite? The next one I take.”

Megan’s voice was the loudest, ‘Where’s Maddy?’

‘She’s in her room,’ I heard Mum announce. ‘Maddy, they’re here.’

‘I’ll be out soon,’ I called back.

Ten minutes later I was still in my room. I heard a sound at my door. A little knock and a small voice, ‘Maddy.’ It was Megan.

‘You can’t come in.’ I’m not sure why I said it when I’m usually nice to Megan.

‘But Mystery wants to come in.’ Megan was a smart and persistent kid.

‘Okay then, come in.’

The door opened. Mystery scooted through the door and pounced on my bed

‘Why are you in here?’ Megan asked, still standing in the doorway.

‘Der, it’s my room,’ I said.

‘I know, but why haven’t you come out yet? Mitch is here.’

I rolled my eyes, and she picked up on it straight away. Why are little kids so smart?

‘Ooohh, you and Mitch are fighting,’ she said, shaking like a noddly doll on a car dashboard.

‘What did he say to you?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. I just figured it out. He told Mum he didn’t want to come over, which I thought was strange.’

She gazed up at my LIKE wall and noticed I had changed the sign above Mitch’s pictures.

‘How come Mitch’s sign says *hhmmmm*?’

‘It’s grown up stuff Megan.’

By now Megan was lying on my bed cuddling Mystery. If I had a little sister, she would be just like Megan, except without the brother.

‘Which is your favourite photo?’ Megan asked.

‘My favourite snapshot? Hmmm ... is the next one I take.’ I held my hands up to my eyes pretending I was holding a camera.

‘What will that be?’ She copied my camera action.

‘That’s what makes it my favourite. I don’t know yet.’

It was time to venture out of my room. I grabbed my footy on the way and Megan followed.

Mum was in the kitchen talking with Mitch and Megan’s mum as they were preparing dinner.

‘Mitch is out on the patio,’ Mum said.

‘Maddy and Mitch are fighting,’ Megan announced. Maybe a little sister was a bad idea after all.

I glared at Megan. Mum knew anyway. I headed toward the door of the patio with Megan in tow.

Mum called her back, ‘Would you like a chocolate chip cookie Megan?’ Mum was on the ball.

Megan couldn’t resist. She turned on the spot and headed back to the kitchen.

Mitch was lying in the hammock playing on his iPad.

I hand-balled the footy to Mitch. ‘Think quick,’ I said.

He juggled his iPad and nearly fell off the hammock as he caught the footy.

‘Nice Mark,’ I commented.

‘Nice handball,’ he replied.

I joined him up on the hammock. He was looking uncomfortable, like a puppy dog in trouble.

‘Sup?’ I asked.

‘Sup?’ He replied.

‘Are we still friends or what?’

‘Yer.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Yeah right, nothing? Nothing, avoiding me, nothing wouldn’t talk to me at lunchtime as planned. Nothin’ nothin’ nothin’.’

He came out with something, ‘How come you didn’t walk home with me from the park the other day?’

‘What? When?’ I was confused like a skunk smelling a fart.

‘Saturday?’ He was abrupt.

‘Oh, the park.’ It clicked. ‘Because Tiana asked me to go with her.’

‘Are you and Tiana best friends?’ He asked.

I understand the problem. He’s jealous, but he shouldn’t be.

I didn’t beat around the bush, ‘Are you jealous of Tiana and me?’

‘No!’ He snapped.

‘What then?’

‘Well, you’re spending a lot of time with her.’

‘And not you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s jealousy.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Irrespective.’

‘Ha ha, funny.’

‘Mitch, Tiana is a girl, and yes she’s now officially my bestie.’

‘Oh, it’s like that now?’ He folded his arms in a huff.

‘You didn’t get sucked into those rumours about Tiana and me did you?’

‘Of course not. It’s just that I don’t get to hang around with you as much and I I...’

Mitch’s eyes grew tears, ‘... I miss hanging out with you.’

‘Mitch you’re gonna have to learn how to share. I don’t complain when you hang out with all your boy mates, so you shouldn’t complain when I hang out with one friend who happens to be a girl. You’re still my bestie boy.’

‘Bestie boy?’ He raised his eyebrows, ‘Is there such a thing?’

The image of Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher sitting together came to mind.

‘Is now,’ I said as I put my hand on Mitch’s. He tried to shuffle away from me, which is tricky when two people are on a hammock. The more he tried to wriggle the closer we got.

Snatching the footy off his lap, I jumped out of the hammock and left him swinging.

I ran inside and straight to my studio, grabbed a marking pen, and made two new signs for my LIKE wall. *Bestie boy* and *bestie girl*. One with Mitch’s snapshots and one with the snapshots of Tiana and me.

When I raced back outside, to my absolute surprise, I found Mitch sitting on the lawn. There was a Magpie close to him. I ran back inside, grabbed my camera, and headed back outside.

‘What are you doing Mitch?’ I whispered as I tippy-toed closer.

‘Shhh.’ He gestured for me to sit next to him.

He had a beetle in his hand and was holding it out for the Magpie.

‘Maximus,’ he whispered.

‘Maximus?’

‘Remember the Magpie I told you about? This is him. He must have seen me and landed on the lawn.’ Mitch was more excited than when he kicked the goal last week.

The Magpie, Maximus, grabbed the beetle out of Mitch’s hand with his steely beak and gulped it down. I took a snapshot of the special occasion. *Yep, a favourite.* As the photo developed a flock of Magpies appeared out of nowhere and sat on the fence.

‘That’s his charm,’ Mitch said.

‘Charm?’ I was thinking about the charms my dad gave me.

‘Charm is the collective noun for a group of Magpies,’ he added.

‘Right.’ I’d never heard of that before. *I know a group of crows is called a murder. I wonder what they call a group of Willy Wagtails?*

Maximus flew off with the other Magpies. The look in Mitch’s eyes showed that something special just happened, and I was there to see it, in fact to get a snapshot.

‘I’m gonna stick this picture on my LIKE wall in my studio. Wanna join me?’

I lead Mitch back inside and to my studio.

He stopped at the door, ‘I can’t come in.’

‘Why?’ I said as I grabbed his hand and tried to tug him in.

‘It’s taboo. I thought you said I wasn’t ever allowed to come in here.’ Mitch stood firm.

‘Well, rules are made to be broken.’

Mitch relinquished.

‘Woooooaaahh!’ He gawped in amazement at my LIKE wall. ‘There must be a hundreds of photos.’

‘Snapshots, and there are nearly a thousand.’

I made sure he was watching as I stuck the picture of him and Maximus in the *Bestie Boy* section.

‘Bestie boy?’ Mitch’s eyebrows danced in bewilderment.

The scene where Becky Thatcher kissed Tom Sawyer on the cheek flashed into my mind. I don’t know what I was thinking, but I leant across and planted a quick kiss on Mitch’s cheek.

He pushed me away. ‘No need to get all romantic on me,’ he said.

He was blushing like a ripe tomato. So was I.

Out the corner of my eye, I spotted Megan standing in the doorway.

‘Oo-oo-oo!’ *Oh no, why did she come just at that moment?*

‘Not a word or you’re dead meat,’ Mitch and I said in stereo. Knuckle-pinkie!

‘Can I play a game on your iPad?’ She asked Mitch. She’s one smart cookie. He’d daren’t say no.

‘Dinner’s ready everyone,’ Mum called from the kitchen.

We all sat down to burritos and chicken wings.

Mitch’s Mum brought a lemon meringue pie for dessert. *Mmm, yummy.*

During dinner, we discussed collective nouns. According to Mitch, a group of Herons is called a siege. Hemi told us a group of Kiwis is called a tribe.

‘What’s a group of Willy Wagtails called?’ I asked Mitch knowing he and his dad talked a lot about birds.

‘Don’t know that one. I’ll look it up.’ Mitch pulled out his iPad.

‘A group of Willy Wagtails is called an impertinence,’ Mitch said.

‘What does impertinence mean?’ Megan asked.

I’m glad she asked because I didn’t know. Mitch’s Mum explained that impertinence means rude or cheeky. It’s an appropriate word for Willy Wagtails, especially the cheeky bit.

‘Hey,’ I said with an impertinent grin on my face, ‘if you call a group of crows a murder, what do you call two crows together?’ I had an image of Crystal and Rachel in my head.

All eyes were on me. ‘What?’ They all said in unison.

‘An attempted murder!’

‘That’s a good-un,’ chuckled Hemi.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Megan.

Hemi tried to explain it, but I think he only made it worse.

The last time we were all together; it was at the Ship Hotel. We were missing Mitch’s dad this on this occasion. I remember Mitch being on some kind of ban on electronic devices. Not this time. After we had helped with the dishes, the three of us kids sat down and played some serious computer games till it was time for them to go home.

That night, I lay in bed with the light off. I had my torch with the powerful beam and gazed up at all the sections of my LIKE wall one at a time. I counted nine hundred and eighty-nine pictures. Seven more till I reach one thousand. One thousand treasured memories. I shone the torch on the picture of Mitch and Maximus the magpie. *That’s my new favourite.* I stared at the space under Djidi Djidi and wondered if I would get take a snapshot sometime.

Impertinent little creatures.

I also wondered about whether I would ever take a shot of Hemi and where I would put it. I was thinking about what Hemi said when I was rude to him. *Why didn’t I let myself like him?*

CHAPTER 20

SIXTY MINUTES

“We realise the importance of our voices only when we are silenced.” - Malala Yousafzai

Mr Thomas dressed in a suit and a red bowtie. It's the most excited he has been since maths week. He decorated the classroom to look like a TV studio. Somehow he got hold of an old-fashioned TV Camera which he placed at the back of the room.

‘Welcome to the studios of Channel 30, Bayside’s very own television station,’ Mr Thomas announced, pretending to be an anchorman.

It was a little old-fashioned, but we went with it. I mean, he did put a lot of effort into it, and he doesn't give us a lot of homework. He told us if he expects us to do homework the least he can do is to make it exciting. I'm not sure if other teachers are able to get the same results, but Mr Thomas gets almost 100% completion of homework from his students. Go Mr Thomas. Go us.

He had a big clock on the smart board and connected the speakers.

In a deep formal TV voice, he announced, ‘I'm Lindsay Thomas ... and this issss ... Sixty Minutes.’

He pressed the remote and loud ticking sounds came out of the speakers.

There are thirty of us in the class, and we each have two minutes to present our report. I guess it's where he got the Sixty Minutes idea from.

Mr Thomas continued in his best anchorman voice, ‘Our first reporter today is Fleur Hardingham with her story on Ruby Bridges.’

Fleur appeared as nervous as mouse in a cattery being the first up. She cleared her throat and spoke in her quiet voice.

‘There was a lot of racism in the United States in the sixties. A little girl, aged six, Ruby Bridges was the first African-American child to go to an all-white public school in Louisiana.

Ruby and her mother were escorted by US Marshalls into the school to keep them safe. Ruby marched along like a little soldier through the jeering crowd. She showed a lot of courage.

All the white parents withdrew their children from her class and for a time she was the only student with her teacher, Mrs Henry whom she liked very much.

Ruby Bridges was an ultra-ordinary child during the civil rights movement in America.’

‘Thank you, Fleur. Great report, excellent research,’ said the anchorman. ‘Our next reporter is Li Tan with her story on Cathy Freeman.’

‘Cathy Freeman started athletics when she was young. She won lots of titles. In 1988 she was awarded a scholarship to an exclusive girl’s school in Toowoomba.

In 1990 she was chosen as a member of the 4 x 100-metre relay team for the Commonwealth Games in New Zealand. The team won gold which made her the youngest Aboriginal to win a Commonwealth Games Gold Medal at the age of only sixteen.

Cathy competed all over the world in many championships as well as the Olympics.

Cathy's highlight came when she was the first Aboriginal woman to receive an individual Gold medal when she ran in the 400-metre race dressed in a full body suit at the Sydney Olympics. After the race, she took a victory lap and broke tradition by running with both the Australian and Aboriginal flags.

Cathy Freeman is definitely ultra-ordinary.'

During her talk, I wondered about how fast Tiana could run and imagined her in the Olympics.

Mitch was next in line to present. Just as he was about to start his report, there was a power failure.

The ever-ready anchor-man stepped in. 'Sorry folks, it appears we have encountered technical difficulties in the studio. We'll be right back soon as we sort it out.'

The laptop computer didn't shut down, but the data projector gave up its illuminating.

Mr Thomas left the room to sort out the power issue. Not long after, there was a blood-curdling scream. We all turn toward the door to see what was happening. Major freak out as the *Grim Reaper* or someone dressed in costume was standing in the doorway, holding his sickle. We didn't know whether to scream, run, or laugh.

I guessed it was Mr Thomas.

Mitch announced from the front, '*Meet the GRIM REAPER. They used him in a controversial TV campaign to warn people about AIDS.*'

It was a set-up. Mr Thomas, I mean, the Grim guy turned the power back on. The first image to fade up was the GRIM REAPER. Mitch was getting a reputation for presentations with an impact. This one didn't disappoint.

'We don't hear as much about it nowadays but back in the eighties and nineties AIDS was a pandemic, a worldwide disease. Nkosi Johnson was an African child who contracted AIDS from birth. He became famous after they expelled him from his school because he was HIV-positive. South Africa's constitution forbids discrimination on the grounds of medical status and the school had to reverse their decision.'

'Sadly, Nkoshi died at aged twelve. Before he died, he got to speak at the Thirteenth International AIDS Conference. This is a part of his speech:

"Care for us and accept us – we are all human beings. We are normal. We have hands. We have feet. We can walk, we can talk, we have needs just like everyone else – don't be afraid of us – we are all the same."

Nkosi was an ultra-ordinary child.'

The anchorman said, 'Well done Mitch. Again, you excelled with your presentation.'

'Thanks Mr Thomas, you played the Grim Reaper to perfection,' Mitch replied.

Jason was next. How could he follow that up? It was a total surprise when he talked about a famous girl. He was little unco as he presented as he still had the cast on his arm, but he managed.

‘Jessica Watson lived five of her younger years on the family’s 16-metre boat. Maybe that’s where she grew her love of the ocean and sailing. When she was eleven, her mother read Jesse Martin’s book Lionheart: A Journey of the Human Spirit as a bedtime story.

Jesse was the youngest person to circumnavigate the globe solo, non-stop, unassisted, in 1991 when he was seventeen. Jessica was impressed with this, and at the age of twelve, she had the ambition to sail around the world. That’s around our age. I wonder if you have an ambition?’

My ambition to play AFL and be the Prime Minister was appearing more realistic.

‘Jessica said she wanted to challenge herself and achieve something to be proud of. She said she hated being judged by her appearance and other people’s expectations of what a ‘little girl’ was capable of. It reminded me of Maddy when she stood up to the captain of the Dunes. He was surprised when she led our footy team to win.’

A warm redness raised in my face like a thermometer when everyone gawked at me. *What a nice compliment.* Jason continued with his report.

‘The first time Jessica set out her mast broke, but this didn’t put her off. Jessica finally sailed the 23,000 nautical miles around the world solo and became the youngest Australian to do so the age of sixteen. Super-doooper-ultra-ordinary child in my eyes.’

Jason gave me a fist pump on the way back to his desk.

Ryan chose Hector Pieterse.

‘Apartheid is an unfair political system based on one race being superior to others. Hector was one of the many students who gathered for a peaceful protest at the Soweto Uprising in

South Africa, but the crowd soon became angry when the police arrived, and they threw stones. The police fired tear gas, and the children ran. Someone started shooting and sadly, Hector was the first child to die that fateful day at the age of thirteen.'

When Ryan put up an image of a student carrying a limp boy and a young girl running beside everyone take a sharp breath in.

'Hector became a symbol of the Apartheid uprising in South Africa when a news photograph of him being carried by another student while his sister ran next to him was published around the world.'

Today, National Youth Day is celebrated on the sixteenth of June, the day Hector died, when South Africans honour young people. Hector is one of them; a true ultra-ordinary child.'

'Well done Ryan. Next is Rachel Moroni presenting her report on Malala Yousafzai.' Mr Thomas was in his element as the anchorman.

After the meeting with Andrew, I had a different opinion about Rachel after she stood up for herself. She approached the front of the class as confident as eagle soaring in the sky. Her first picture was a twin image. One of Malala before and one after the Taliban had shot her.

'This is Malala Yousafzai. It took me ages to learn how to say her name. She lived in Pakistan. The Taliban banned girls from attending school and Malala who was brought up in a school and dreamt of being a teacher thought this was unfair. When she was eleven, our age, she wrote a blog under a pseudonym (fake name) for the BBC telling about her life and the Taliban occupation of her village. This was an incredibly brave thing for her to do. If the Taliban found out, they could kill her and her family.'

Not long after, the New York Times made a documentary about her life. She was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize by South African peace activist Desmond Tutu.

A gunman attacked her school bus and fired three shots at Malala. It severely injured her, and it was a miracle she survived.'

Rachel's next image was of Malala in the hospital with tubes and medical equipment hanging all around her.

'They treated her at a hospital in the UK where she lives today.

This only made Malala more determined, and she became an internationally known advocate for the rights of all children to an education. She said, "If one man can destroy everything, why can't one girl change it?"

When Rachael said this, I gave a fist pump and said, 'Yeess!' Everyone stared at me, and I just gave an impertinent grin.

Rachel smiled at me continued, *'In 2014 Malala become the youngest person ever to receive a Noble Peace prize at sixteen. Now, that's an amazing ultra-ordinary child.'*

'Thanks Rachel.' Mr Thomas couldn't help himself add a little comment, 'To think, some children in Australia fight to get away from an education.'

After ten children had given their reports, Mr Thomas gave us all a crunch and sip break, except when our class had crunch and sip it sounded more like slurp and chew.

Following the break, there were ten more reports followed by recess. I was in the last group of ten after recess.

Crystal presented on Ann Frank – Famous for writing *The Diary of a Girl* between the ages of eleven and fourteen in a German Concentration camp in World War II. It was upsetting what Crystal told us happened to her.

Crystal read some of the things Anne Frank wrote in her diary

Two of them sounded awesome.

‘How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.’

And she finished with this. *‘Who would ever think that so much would go on in the soul of a young girl? Anne Frank was an ultra-ordinary child, and so are we.’*

That’s the best thing I’ve ever heard to come out of Crystal’s mouth. I wonder if she keeps a diary herself.

Amina was into computers big-time, so she talked about Arfa Karim Randhawa.

‘Arfa was born in Pakistan. She was the youngest child to become a Microsoft Certified Professional at nine years of age. That’s right, only nine.’

Amina made her pictures on PowerPoint do all kinds of special effects, things I didn’t even know existed.

‘Bill Gates invited her to the Microsoft headquarters in the US. Arfa won many awards in the science and computer world.’

At sixteen something terrible happened. Arfa had a heart attack and an epileptic seizure.

Even though Bill Gates and many doctors tried to help her, sadly, she died in January 2012.

Arfa's philosophy on life was, "If you want to do something big in your life, you must remember that shyness is only in the mind," she said. "If you think shy, you act shy. If you think confident, you act confident. Therefore, never let shyness conquer your mind."

I like that quote. It reminds me of what Tayla Harris said, 'You can't be what you can't see.'

'They named the Arfa Software Technology Park in Lahore after her. To think she was only nine when she first became famous is ultra-ordinary.'

Jack who's into war stuff was next. He brought in some statues and figurines of soldiers from his dad's collection and had a full-size Confederate Flag.

'Orion P. Howe was one of the youngest recipients of the Medal of Honour Citation in the American Civil War. Orion was a drummer boy. At fourteen years of age, he was severely wounded. Under heavy fire from the enemy, he stayed on the field of battle until he had reported to Gen. W. T. Sherman that the troops under the command of Colonel Malmborg needed a supply of cartridges.'

The anchorman said, 'Thanks for your report Jack and well done on the extra props. Our final report comes from our very own Maddison Fairweather. Take it away Maddy.'

Finally! Apart from what I told Mum about Samantha Smith I told the class, I mean audience,

'Samantha was quite an ordinary child, just like one of us, who became ultra-ordinary when she wrote a letter to the Russian General Secretary Yuri Andropov.'

This is part of the letter Samantha sent to Yuri Andropov:

"Dear Mr Andropov,

My name is Samantha Smith. I am ten years old, Congratulations on your new job. I have been worrying about Russia and the United States getting into a nuclear war. Are you going to vote to have a war or not? If you aren't, please tell me how you're going to help not to have a war. This question you don't have to answer, but I would like to know why you want to conquer the world or at least our country."

They published her letter in the Soviet newspaper Pravda, and after writing to the Russian ambassador in the US, she also received a reply from Yuri. Here's a part of his reply:

"It seems to me – I can tell by your letter – that you are a courageous and honest girl, resembling Becky, the friend of Tom Sawyer in the famous book of your compatriot Mark Twain. This book is well known and loved in our country by all girls and boys."

Yuri's letter also included that he too didn't want a war, and he didn't like nuclear weapons.

Who knows, Samantha's letter could have prevented world war three. It's what makes her a truly ultra-ordinary child. Most kids can't even stop fighting with their friends.'

Mr Thomas stood and clapped. 'What a terrific way to finish. Thank you Maddy. That's given me an idea for a lesson or maybe homework. Maybe we could all write a letter to Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader or Donald Trump.

Lindsay Thomas here, back in the studio. You have been watching 60 Minutes, see you next week, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick....'

Sixty minutes ended up taking all morning. The lunch bell sounded just after Mr Thomas got us all to return the room to normal.

At lunchtime, we played footy and talked about tomorrow's game against Margs. It was an away game. After last week's win, we were excited to be playing again.

CHAPTER 21

RIDING BAREBACK ON A DOLPHIN

“Life is like a camera. Just focus on what’s important and capture the good times, develop from the negatives and even if things don’t work out, just take another shot.” – Unknown

Mum picked me up from school at two as planned. Everyone stared at me as I left. I imagined I was a Willy Wagtail and gave an impertinent grin as I flitted from the class. No one knew where I was going. I wanted to keep it that way.

Mum sat outside while I was in with Raelene.

Raelene had a radical hair change. She no longer looked like Mona Lisa but now more like Lisa Simpson. She also changed her office around since I was last here. For a while, we sat on bar stools at a high bench. She made me a Milo, and we caught up on a pile of things before we moved to the lounge chairs.

‘Puberty!’ She put the word out there. ‘There is no cure.’

‘It’s not a disease,’ I replied as I made myself comfortable.

‘No, but you gotta let it run its course.’ She played with her large loopy ear-ring.

‘How long does it take?’ I asked.

‘How long is a piece of string?’

‘That long eh?’ I sighed.

‘Puberty is like riding bareback on a dolphin,’ she said.

The image came into my head. ‘That sounds kinda fun.’

‘Sounds cool at first but now and then you go under.’ She moved her hand downwards like a dolphin diving.

‘Oh.’ I sat up straight.

So, how’s your ride so far?’

I pointed at the side of my head as I rattled off a list. ‘Funny tummy, occasional headache, a basket of emotions and one zit.’

‘What’s the hardest thing for you?’ She asked.

‘The zit,’ I was joking. ‘No seriously, not being able to control my moods. And, one more thing ...’ My eyes got warm and moist as I was saying this, ‘... missing my ... dad ... big-time.’

‘I was going to ask you about that. Tell me more about missing your dad? Are you comfortable to talk about it?’ She picked up her cup and finished the last of her Milo.

I grabbed a cushion and hugged it to my chest. It was one of those cushions with millions of silver sequins. They kinda change colour when you wipe them all one way. You can also write words on them. Tears welled in my eyes. ‘Tomorrow is the fourth anniversary of Dad dying.’ I used my fingers to write DAD on the cushion.

‘That must be hard for you.’ She nodded in understanding.

One thing Raelene was good at was listening. She had a way of asking questions that made me feel comfortable enough to talk.

After talking about my dad and how we were going to his gravesite on Sunday, I talked about Hemi and Mum, and me not being ready for someone to take Dad's place. I talked about Mitch, boyfriends, Tiana, the mean Instagram posts, sleepovers, football, old Basil, my nan and pop, school and I even mentioned I was considering getting Pinky washed.

After talking heaps, I said thanks for helping and for all the advice.

'I didn't give any advice, did I?' She asked.

'Well, not really, you just asked the right questions.'

'And those questions, who answered them?'

'Me.' It was like a lightbulb lit up in my brain.

'Maddy, you are your best healer,' she said. 'It's your ideas, your thoughts and your strengths that'll get you through this. It's normal for you to be missing your dad around this time. Each of your life milestones will have their own challenges and puberty is one where dads can play an important part. So, not having your dad around may make it a bit tricky. It's good to have another male role model though.'

'Puberty sucks,' I said knowing I ignored the comment about a male role model.

'Only some parts,' she replied.

I told her about my mum and my trip to the shops to get products and how Mum made up a kit for me.

'That's so cool,' she said.

'Embarrassing.' I hid my face behind the cushion.

‘It’s okay to be embarrassed, but don’t let it take over.’

‘That’s advice,’ I said as I dropped the cushion to my lap.

‘No, just letting you know your feelings are a normal part of you and you’ve got to handle them.’

‘Pop said *keep it inside, and it will go rotten.*’

Raelene nodded, ‘Hmm, smart man. Another way of saying we should let out our feelings, in a safe way. We should be the boss of our feelings, not them being the boss of us.’

‘Shouldn’t be hard for me, I can be pretty bossy at times.’

I was hoping she wouldn’t ask, but she went there, ‘You said you like Hemi, but you haven’t told him that.’

‘No. I don’t want to betray Dad.’ I brought the pillow up to my face, and my eyes peered over the top.

‘Do you think your dad would want you to be happy?’

‘Of course.’

She put her hand on her chin and her finger on her lip. ‘Do you think your dad would be jealous?’

I dropped the pillow. ‘How can he? He’s not here.’

She looked at me with her understanding eyes waiting for me to say more.

‘I’m worried Dad will think I don’t love him anymore.’

She put her hands in front of her chest then did a love heart shape with her fingers. ‘How many people can you love at a time?’

I made a big circle with my arms. ‘As many as you want.’

‘And would you be betraying any of them by loving someone else?’

‘Hmmm.’ I put my chin on my hand. ‘Only if you forget about them.’

It occurred to me that’s what Mitch was saying. Because I was spending more time with Tiana, maybe he believed I had forgotten about him, which led to him feel jealous.

‘Will you ever forget about your dad?’ Raelene asked.

‘Of course not.’ I picked up the cushion again and hugged it.

‘What is your heart saying?’ *How does she come up with these questions?*

I wiped my hand over the sequins on the cushion until it was flat, then I drew a love heart. ‘I’m not sure. I think it wants to be free as a bird, like a Willy Wagtail.’ I moved my hands like a bird flying.

‘A Willy Wagtail?’ She had a surprised look on her face.

‘Yep, I’m trying to get a snapshot of one for my LIKE wall.’ I explained my wall to Raelene and how I was close to taking one thousand pictures.

Her eyebrows looked like they were going to fly off her forehead. ‘It reminds me of a saying,’ she said as she crossed her hands and linked her thumbs making her hands look like a butterfly flapping. *‘Happiness is like a butterfly, the more you chase it, the more it eludes you, until one day it quietly comes and sits on your shoulder.’*

‘Yeah, just like Willy Wagtails, except they just keep fluttering away.’

‘Why do Willy Wagtails intrigue you so much?’

‘Well, they’re free. They don’t have to worry about stuff, except where to get the next feed. They can fly. They’re cheeky in a fun way, and they know how to stand up for themselves.’ I remembered when Tiana and I saw the Willy Wagtail chasing the crows.

‘How about using the Willy Wagtail as a metaphor?’ She said.

‘What do you mean?’ I scratched my head.

‘You know what a metaphor is?’

‘Yeah, a metaphor is when you say something *is* something and a simile is when you say something *is like* something. Something like that.’

‘Sometimes it helps to focus on a particular thing, not that you copy it, but you draw strength when it reminds you of what your heart is telling you.’

It made me think of Mitch and his Magpie friend, Maximus, and my footy charm.

‘Yeah. That’s why I have the footy charm my dad gave me,’ I explained to Raelene about my charm and how I use it to gain confidence.

‘Sounds like you’re already doing the metaphor thing.’

I came away from Raelene’s more determined to get a photo of the Willy Wagtail, but I would be patient and wait for the right time. Like waiting for a butterfly to come and quietly sit on my shoulder.

When we arrived home from visiting Raelene, I celebrated not having to do any homework by taking the footy outside and playing kick to kick with myself. It only lasted a little while as I got a tummy ache, so I crashed on the hammock.

I must have drifted off to sleep for a while. Chirping and chittering noises woke me.

‘Jitty jitty, jitty jitty.’ It was a Willy Wagtail right there on our back lawn. It was flitting from place to place. I watched in awe for a while.

I snuck inside to get my camera, hoping I could get a snapshot. When I came back out, the Willy Wagtail was on the hammock. I snuck across with my camera at the ready. I got as close as I could. *Click*. I took a snap. The camera click must have scared the Willy Wagtail because it fluttered away back to the lawn.

When the photo came out, I held it, excited, waiting to see the snap I’d taken.

Oh, fudge. All I got in the snap was the hammock, and it looked like the last part of its tail feathers, and it was blurred. Foiled again. The Djidi Djidi flew off.

‘There’ll be another time, you impertinent creature,’ I called out.

CHAPTER 22

KINA AND HYPNOTISM

“I find humour in many situations and things and tend to make photographs that point out these things. We photograph according to our character.” – Huy Nguyen

A bundle of shopping bags full of interesting goodies covered the kitchen bench. Hemi arrived for his usual Friday night sleepover. It was his turn to produce a meal. He is a most excellent cook.

While Hemi was slaving away in the kitchen, pretending he was a star in Master Chef, Mum was sitting at the breakfast bar with a glass of red wine. Something Hemi had brought in a clear-skin bottle.

As he was cooking, he threw some more jokes at me.

‘Hey Maddy, how do you catch a unique rabbit?’

I didn’t know this one. ‘I dunno, surprise me.’

‘Unique up on it!’

‘Ha.’ It deserved one ha, not a ha ha and definitely not a ha ha ha.

‘Okay then.’ He wasn’t giving up. ‘How do you catch a tame rabbit?’

‘Beats me.’ Another one I didn’t know.

‘Tame way.’ He had a big cheeky grin on his face.

‘Ha ha.’

He must have been doing some research to find some decent jokes.

‘One more,’ he insisted. ‘How do you catch a polar bear?’

‘I give up.’ *This better be good.*

His cheeky grin looked funny. ‘First, you cut a round hole in the ice. Place peas around the hole. When the polar bear comes for a pea, you kick him in the ice hole.’

‘Ha ha ha ha, that’s hilarious.’ It was one of the best jokes I’ve heard for a long time.

It horrified Mum. ‘Hemi, you shouldn’t be telling her jokes like that.’

‘Mum, you must admit it was pretty funny.’ I liked his cheekiness, his impertinence.

‘Funny, but not appropriate for eleven-year-olds,’ she grumped.

Hemi rolled his eyes and went back to his cooking.

Without a joke to match his, I let him win this one.

Hemi made some traditional Maori dishes. He called it his indoor Hāngi. At first, he wanted to dig a hole in the garden and light a fire, but Mum wouldn’t let him.

Most of what he cooked was fine, but he made me taste something which would be the most disgusting thing I’ve ever tasted in my life. It was squishy and brown, about the size of a segment of an orange, covered in gooey brown sauce.

‘This is how you do it,’ he said as he put a whole piece in his mouth.

I was adventurous enough, so I tried it. It was so disgusting, hard to describe the flavour. No, it didn't have an official recognisable taste. It was just grossness in a blob. It was kinda salty, gooey, slimy, and worse than stale fish bait.

Hemi grabbed my camera off the table and took a snapshot of my scrunched-up face while I was eating it, more like just as I was about to spit it out. I couldn't say anything as my mouth was full of a brown lump of grossness.

'Pweeeughtt.' I spat it onto my plate. 'What *is* that muck?'

'Kina.' Hemi was in stitches.

'What the f.....ood is Kina?' I growled at him.

'Sea urchin.' He grinned.

'It tastes like sh....'

'Manners Maddy!' Mum interrupted before I could get the rest of the word out.

I ignored Mum and my fists clenched. Once I cleared my mouth with a few more spits, I yelled at Hemi, 'That's my camera. Don't you ever touch it again.' He not only made me eat something gross, but he also used my camera. No one touches my camera.

'Sorry Maddy.' It didn't appear as if he meant it. 'Just having a bit of fun.'

'Maddy doesn't like people touching her camera,' Mum added.

'Check out the photo.' Hemi had hold of the image as it developed.

'Give me that,' I insisted.

He held it in the air and was teasing me.

‘Hemi, don’t push her too far,’ Mum said.

In a quick move, I pounced out of my chair. ‘Geronimo!’ I called out and leapt high enough to snatch the photo out of his hand.

I stormed off to my room, plonked myself on my bed and looked at the snap. Even though my annoyed button was pressed, I also grasped the funny side. The photo was hilarious. I stuck it on my LIKE wall in the selfies section even though I didn’t take it.

Right! I planned my payback. I need two plates, a candle, and some matches. I snuck out to the kitchen and grabbed the things I needed and snuck back to my room. When I lit the candle, I waved the back of one plate over the flame, so the soot blackened it. All set.

I joined the adults as if nothing happened.

For sweets, we had Hokey Pokey ice cream. My favourite, honeycomb flavour. Hemi redeemed himself a little.

When I helped clean up and do the dishes Mum was suspicious. She knew me well enough to know I was up to something.

We sat back around the dining room table.

‘I bet I can hypnotise you,’ I said to Hemi.

‘Hypnotise me eh?’ He replied.

Mum gave me the *what are you up to?* look.

‘Wait here,’ I said as I headed to my room to get my items. When I came back I dimmed the lights and placed the candle in the middle of the table and lit it.

I put one plate on the table (the one with the sooty back) in front of Hemi.

‘Don’t touch it yet,’ I insisted.

‘Okay.’ He lifted his hands.

I placed the other plate in front of me.

‘Right. All ready. Have you been hypnotised before?’ I asked.

‘Nope, I don’t think so.’ Little did he realise he was about to be my victim.

‘Listen carefully to my voice and stare at the candle.’

‘Righto.’ He was obedient.

Using my best calming voice, I said, ‘I’m going to put you into a trance. Keep looking at the candle and copy what I do with my hands.’

I made gentle hand gestures then I picked up my plate. Hemi picked up the plate in front of him. I swirled the plate around making sure I was wiping my hands all over the back of the plate, all the time continuing to mesmerise him with my voice. Hemi copied beautifully.

My plan was working. I put the plate down on the table, lifted my hands and opened them face forward so the light of the candle hit them. Hemi copied. I could see the soot on his hands his hands. Perfect, they were as black as a crow. He couldn’t see it himself. I then drew shapes on my face, my nose, then my cheeks, I rubbed my hands all over my face. I placed my hands face down on the table. Hemi copied dutifully.

‘Hemi, when Mum turns on the light, you’ll be a new person,’ I said.

Mum obliged with the lights.

‘But I don’t feel any different,’ Hemi said.

‘But you look different.’ I grabbed my camera and took a snapshot just as he poked his tongue out at me like the Kiwi rugby players do.

He had black marks and lines all over his face, like a smudged Maori warrior.

Mum didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. The laughing won.

‘What’s so funny?’ Hemi said.

‘Your face. It’s, it’s different alright.’ Mum almost choked on her laughter.

‘Get me a mirror,’ Hemi demanded.

‘Don’t need a mirror,’ I said. By now the snapshot had developed. I showed it to Hemi.

‘WHAT! You impertinent little beast.’ Hemi was mad, but a funny mad. ‘Give me that.’

‘No,’ I said waving it in the air.

‘Are you gonna let her get away with that Heather?’

‘Well, what goes around comes around,’ Mum said.

Go Mum.

Hemi does have a good sense of humour. ‘Well, you certainly got your payback young lady.’

I took my first snapshot of Hemi, even though it was a funny one. It'll go well on my LIKE wall even though I'm not sure which section. Hemi disappeared to wash his face. When he returned we all collapsed on the couch to watch a DVD, the one Mum and I didn't get to watch last week.

'Is this a *chuck fluck*?' Hemi asked.

'Chuck fluck? What's a chuck fluck.' I was cheeky.

'Cheek fleek. Is that better?'

It didn't matter as he ended up falling to sleep.

That night I had another dream. This time it was different. It started off as a nightmare.

CHAPTER 23

THE NEW DREAM AND CATERPILLARS

“I think good dreaming is what leads to good photographs.” – Wayne Miller

Pinky was driving a football-shaped car on a green road. I was in the back seat telling him pig jokes when a giant football boot swung across the road and kicked us.

The football car flew through the air and tumbled over and over.

Pinky was squealing.

I was screaming.

The football car came to a sudden jolt.

Pinky was still. He was hurt.

There was blood on him.

There was blood everywhere, so much I was drowning in a sea of red.

I passed out.

Next, when I came to, Pinky was laying on a hospital trolley. I was holding his hand (trotter).

He said, ‘Everything is going to be okay.’

Nurses and orderlies took him away. Instead of taking him to the theatre they took him to a laundry.

Pinky was in a washing machine going around and around.

I was screaming, ‘Pinky! Pinky!’

A hand took hold of mine. It was Dad. He appeared ghostlike.

His voice was gentle, ‘Everything is going to be okay. Pinky will be fine. You’ll be fine.’

As soon as I heard this Dad vanished.

I could hear myself calling, ‘Dad, Dad.’

Next, I noticed Pinky laying on a hospital bed.

He was clean, new, no blood stains.

I walked over to kiss him.

He smiled and said, ‘I told you everything was going to be okay.’

A peacefulness came over me.

When I woke in the morning, the first thing I realised was Pinky lying on the pillow right in front of my eyes.

I was ready. It was time to get Pinky cleaned.

‘Pinky, I want you to be brave,’ I said.

Then I sensed something was uncomfortable. I lifted my bed sheets and spotted blood.

I freaked. *What the...?* Then I realised what had happened. My first period.

‘MUM, MUM!’ I bellowed.

Mum rushed into the room. ‘What’s wrong sweetie?’

‘I don’t want to be a girl anymore.’ I clenched clumps of my hair and held it up in the air.

‘Say what?’ Mum was a stunned mullet.

‘I’m bleeding.’ I pointed to my bed.

‘Bleeding?’

‘Yes, bloody blood. There’s blood on my sheets.’ I wanted to shrivel up and disappear.

‘No big deal sweetie.’ Mum kept her cool.

I was overwhelmed with embarrassment like I had wet my pants in front of the whole class.

‘Muuuum, this is serious,’ I said through clenched teeth.

‘You’ve officially taken the next step into womanhood,’ she said in a calm voice as she kissed me on the forehead.

‘Oh crap, footy!’ All I could think about is the away game at footy which means wearing white shorts. ‘I can’t play today Mum.’

‘You’ll be fine.’ Mum tried to tidy my hair.

‘What about the white shorts?’

‘Products and skins,’ she replied. ‘Many women in history have accomplished much more than playing a game of footy while having their time of the month, trust me.’

‘Women!’ I emphasised. ‘I’m still a kid, and I heard it was going to rain today. You told me that only tampons are suitable for wet sports and I won’t be old enough for them yet.’

‘I know, but pads and skins should do the job.’

Not convinced, I wanted my studio to swallow me up.

Mum told me to pack my emergency kit along with all my footy stuff. She helped me by removing my sheets.

I showered and with Mum’s guidance, fitted my first pad and put my skins over the top.

After getting dressed, I ventured into the kitchen.

Oh, fudge. I forgot Hemi was here. I mumbled a hello with no eye contact. Did he know? I was a thousand times more self-conscious than usual.

Mum made an exception and allowed me to eat my brekkie in my bedroom.

After brekkie, I followed my usual routine to get ready, so I thought at the time. Later I found out I had forgotten something in the morning’s muddle and rush. We had to leave earlier than usual as we were heading to Margs and we had to pick up Tiana.

Mum met Tiana’s Dad for the first time. After an exchange of parent pleasantries, all was set for the sleepover. Tiana climbed in the back with me.

At first, I didn’t want to talk. *Has it happened to her yet?* Now was not the time to talk about it, so I tried to act as normal as possible. We ended up talking about the game and about the planned sleepover.

It was a thirty-five-minute drive to Margs. About halfway there it rained. Bummer. My worst nightmare. Playing in the rain sucks, especially with white shorts and my period. Maybe I'll fall over in the mud and make my shorts brown.

We arrived at the ground. The car park was half flooded. The change rooms were from the dark ages. *NO SEPARATE SHOWERS FOR THE GIRLS. What about my period?*

Coach Fraser had already worked out something. He got a partition from the club rooms and separated the shower cubicles, with a makeshift section for the girls.

Still, I needed Tiana's help. I had to tell her.

I took her away from the others. 'Ti Ti, can you keep a secret?'

'Der, yeah.'

'Cross your heart.'

She crossed her chest. 'It ain't no lie.'

'I, um, am, er, had, having my period.' My hands didn't know where to go until I pointed down there.

'I knew something was up when I got in the car,' she whispered.

'Can you help keep guard in the change cubicle and showers at the end of the game?'

'Like, no problems. I'll make sure the other girls go first, and I'll keep the boys out.'

'Thanks Ti Ti, you're a true friend.' I wanted to hug her, but I didn't.

Phew, that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Now to psych myself for the game.

As I was getting my boots on, I had an awful feeling. Oh, no! I think I'd forgotten to put my football charm in my shorts. Sure enough, I put my fingers in the secret pocket. It wasn't there.

'Crap! Crap! Crappity crap!' My fists were about to explode.

'What's wrong?' Tiana asked as she put her hand on my arm.

'My charm. My friggin' footy charm. I left it at home.'

'Don't worry Maddy. It's just a charm,' Tiana said.

I clenched my teeth. 'You don't get it. It's a special charm. My dad gave it to me.'

'Where is it?'

'I must have left it at home on my bedside table on the bracelet.'

'Can your mum get it for you?'

'It's too far.' *This day is turning out to be a disaster.*

I got my phone out anyway and texted Mum.

I forgot my footy charm. 🏠

Doofus. You'll just have to play without it. 🏈 🤔

😞 😫 🏈 (emojis)

What was I going to do? It was hard to focus.

Coach Fraser took us through the usual pre-game warm up and chat.

As we ran through the rain onto the oval, I double checked. No charm. What a crappy day.

I couldn't even win the toss. The Margs captain pointed to the town end.

The siren sounded, worse than the one at our home ground. It was like an old air-raid siren from a war movie.

The first half was a shocker. I fumbled, slipped over, and couldn't mark a ball. Not having my charm, thinking about my time of the month and the wet weather all took their toll on me.

The rest of the team also struggled.

At halftime, we were five goals down. There's no way we would get back from here, especially in the wet weather.

The atmosphere in the change room was glum. I was supposed to be the captain, but I was playing bad.

Coach Fraser came across and had a private chat with me. 'You okay Maddy? You're not your usual self.'

'I've got some stuff going on. I'll be okay.' The dream I had last night when both Pinky and Dad said things will be okay flashed into my brain. *What happened? I mean, things are not okay. How can I turn this around?*

Coach Fraser interrupted my thoughts. 'You know those caterpillars that follow each other in a long line?'

'Yeah,' I said, wondering where he was going with this.

‘You know what happens when you take away the leader?’

I got a mental image. ‘The others go all over the place.’

‘Well, Maddy. The others look to you for leadership. That’s what it means to be a captain.

So, get out there and lead.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Okay Coach Fraser,’ I said, ‘I’ll do my best.’

Coach Fraser spoke to us all in the huddle, ‘We’re playing wet weather football. Keep the ball moving forward any way you can. Kick it long, get in there and fight hard in the packs, just keep it moving forward.’

Coach Fraser mentioned all the players one at a time and asked us to lift.

As we were about to burst out of the doors of the change rooms for the second half, Mum appeared at the doorway.

She reached out her hand and said, ‘This might help.’ She handed me the footy charm.

‘What, how?’ I was baffled.

‘Just get out there and create a storm,’ she said.

A sudden boost to my confidence came as I put the charm in the hidden pocket and ran onto the oval. The rain stopped, but the oval was one big mud patch.

We owned the third quarter and got back to within three goals.

Like last week’s game, we had to come from behind.

During the last quarter, the rain pelted down again. Sometimes it was so strong, most of the players were a blur. Three goals ended up being too much for us to catch up. We put in a mighty effort, going down by seven lousy points.

We were a pack of drowned rats as we trudged into the change rooms. Our new footy jumpers were no longer blue. We looked like a bowlful of Kina. I got my wish. My shorts were brown from the mud. In fact, we were like zombies from the brown swamp covered in mud and lawn clippings, kinda like lamingtons dipped in hot chocolate. I took a snapshot of Tiana, Mitch, Ryan and Myself. At least it will look funny on my LIKE wall.

Coach Fraser was upbeat in the change rooms though. He said he was proud of the effort we all put in and that we didn't give up. He told me, 'Thanks be for being a good lead caterpillar.'

I showered last as planned. Tiana stood guard like a bouncer. She also found a particular rubbish bin for me to put my used products.

After showering, I accomplished the task of applying a pad on my own and got into some dry, clean clothes. Tiana and I said goodbye to Mitch, Jason and Ryan and the rest of the team and headed to the car. As we approached, I noticed the windows were all fogged up.

Mum and Hemi were inside, out of the rain. A classic scene from any winter Aussie country town footy game.

We chucked our soggy footy stuff in the boot and climbed in the back seat.

Hemi was in the driver's seat. He turned the key. Wrrrrrr, wrrrr, wrr. A flat battery.

‘That’s what happens when you have the wipers and demister going for a whole half of footy.’ Mum glared at Hemi with that *I told you so* look.

He tried again. Wrrrrr, wrrr, vroom.

‘We have ignition.’ Hemi looked like he had just won a bet.

As we pulled out of the car-flood, Mum said, ‘Great comeback.’

‘Not enough Heather,’ Tiana said.

‘If only it didn’t rain in the last quarter, I reckon we would have beaten them,’ I added.

‘We didn’t see much with the rain and all that in the last quarter,’ Hemi said.

‘Neither did we,’ Tiana laughed.

‘Mum, thanks for getting my footy charm for me. Did you drive all the way back to get it?’

‘Not me.’ She peered over her shoulder at me.

‘Eh?’ My eyes flicked to Mum then at Hemi or the back of his big boof-head.

‘It was Hemi,’ Mum replied. ‘When you texted me, Hemi didn’t hesitate when I told him. I stayed in the club rooms while he drove back home.’

I leant forward and put my hand on Hemi’s shoulder. ‘Thanks Hemi, you’re a legend.’

‘’twas nothin’.’ He shrugged.

‘That’s one of the nicest things anyone has done for me.’ I was genuine.

‘I knew how important the footy charm was to you,’ he said.

‘That’s so cool Maddy.’ Tiana gave me a look that made me feel important, accepted. She is going to be an awesome best friend.

CHAPTER 24

RUSTY BUCKET AND CRIMSON FACES

“Photograph what you love and love what you photograph.”

Hemi turned the car onto a side road. ‘Where are we going?’

‘I thought it’d be fun to call into the winery for lunch since we were down this way,’ Mum said.

‘Awesome. Ti Ti you’re gonna love the winery. The staff are the coolest people.’ My spirits lifted even more.

‘Sounds excellent.’ Tiana put her thumbs up.

The sun came out as we turned into the driveway. The sign read, RUSTY BUCKET WINERY AND RESTAURANT.

All the staff knew Mum and Hemi except the new waitress Alison.

As we were about to sit at the table, Hemi pulled my chair out for me like a gentleman.

Alison said, ‘Is this your daughter?’

Both Hemi and I answered, ‘No!’

I put my fist up for a knuckle-pinkie. Hemi just fist pumped. We both looked at each other and laughed.

‘Sorry.’ Alison’s face turned a bright shade of crimson. ‘It’s just that, well, the way you, he um, sorry.’

Hemi then said something to turn the awkward situation around, ‘No, Maddy’s dad is one of the finest people I never had the opportunity to meet. If I *was* her father, I couldn’t be any prouder. Maddy’s the most amazing child I *have* met.’

How could I respond to that? My cheeks got warm and a little crimson. I had an *ultra-ordinary* and toasty feeling. Even though today is the fourth anniversary of dad’s death, the normal sadness wasn’t there. I remembered the image from my dream where my dad said *everything’s going to be okay*. It was becoming okay.

Mum looked at me to waiting for a response.

‘He does sound like George Clooney Mum, I can understand why you like Hemi.’

Mum just smiled. Hemi had a bewildered expression.

All this time Tiana was quiet. She was busy looking at her menu. She must have heard the conversation but didn’t bat an eyelid.

‘Can I have salt and pepper squid rings?’ Tiana asked.

‘What’s the magic word that comes between *can I* and *have?*’ Hemi voice was mischievous.

‘Um, *now*. Can I *now* have salt and pepper squid rings?’ Tiana’s reply was as impertinent as a Willy Wagtail, knowing Hemi was only joking.

Hemi put his hand on his hip like he was expecting a different answer.

Tiana was good at sparring with him. ‘Oops sorry, may I *pleeeeee* have squid rings, if that’s okay? They’re my favourite.’

‘Sure Tiana,’ Mum said.

Tiana had picked a winner as we all went for salt and pepper squid rings, chips, and salad.

Mum didn't want chips. Hemi fussed over not wanting cucumber. I laughed.

'It's nowhere near as bad as Kina,' I said. 'Don't be such a wuss.'

'Hey, you already had your payback.' Hemi said.

'Just getting one up on you,' I replied.

Alison took all our orders. 'So that's four salt and pepper squid rings with chips and salad, one without chips and one without cucumber for the wuss.' I liked her impertinence.

'They're ganging up on me Heather,' Hemi said as his bottom lip dropped.

'You better get used to it,' Mum replied.

After the scrumptious lunch, Hemi took Tiana and me on a tour of the winery while Mum stayed to talk with some of the staff.

We rode on a tractor, picked grapes (late harvest), and we even did some barefoot wine pressing.

I let Tiana use my camera to take a picture of Hemi and me on the tractor. It was the first official *nice* photo I had of Hemi and the first of us both together.

I also let Hemi use my camera to take a picture of Tiana and me in the wine press. At first, he was hesitant because of the last time he used my camera.

We were covered in grape stains. Tiana somehow managed to get crimson patches on her face.

‘This is the best day every Maddy,’ she said.

‘Except for the footy this morning, but even so it was fun getting so muddy.’

‘You did look kinda funny covered in mud,’ Hemi laughed.

‘Muddy Maddy,’ Tiana added.

‘Can’t wait for tonight,’ I said.

‘Youz two are having a sleepover, right?’ Hemi said.

‘You bet,’ Tiana and I replied, ‘no guys allowed.’

‘Not fair,’ Hemi pretended to sound disappointed.

What started out as a crappy morning at home and at footy turned into an excellent afternoon.

I was a little apprehensive, but I was looking forward to the sleepover.

Tiana scrubbed the crimson stains off her face when we arrived home in the afternoon. Mum let us both go to the park for a while.

Mitch was there on his own, riding his bike. When he spotted us, he rode over and joined us at the playground.

I don’t think just the three of us had been together at the park before as a group with no one else.

We talked about losing the game, and grovelling in the mud, but only for a little while. We threw honkey nuts at a can. Typically, Mitch turned it into a competition. One boy against

two girls. Tiana is a good throw. She hit the can three times in a row. Mitch had to eat humble pie.

I was worried Tiana and Mitch wouldn't get on with each other. But to my surprise, they got on like hot chocolate and marshmallow. I was getting a little jealous. Then I remembered what Raelene said about all feelings being okay, just don't let them get the better of us.

We moved to the picnic table and continued talking when I could hear that telltale sound.
'Jitty, jitty.'

It was a Willy Wagtail. He was back. I'm glad I bought my camera with me.

'Keep still everyone,' I said. 'I'm gonna take a snapshot.'

'Wish you luck,' Mitch said.

'They never sit still long enough,' added Tiana.

'I won't give up,' I said as I got my camera ready.

We all froze while the Willy Wagtail fluttered and bopped around the picnic table. At one point, it hopped onto the other end of the table.

'Right,' I whispered. 'Now I've got you.' I pressed the shutter. 'Yes, yes. I think I got him.'

The Willy Wagtail jittered as it fluttered away.

We all huddled over the picture as it developed.

'What? Noooo!' All I could see was the same bit of blurred tail as the last time I tried to take a snapshot of a Willy Wagtail on our hammock.

‘Elusive little blighter,’ Mitch said.

‘I’ve never seen an actual photo of a Willy Wagtail anywhere,’ Tiana said. ‘Maybe they’re like too hard to take a photo of.’

‘Maybe it’s because they’re some kind of bird spirit like Ryan was saying,’ Mitch added.

‘I don’t believe in that stuff,’ I said as I put my camera back in the bag. ‘I’m not superstitious.’

‘How come you carry that charm when you play footy? Doesn’t it bring you good luck?’ Tiana asked.

‘Not luck, confidence. My Dad gave it to me. When I touch it, I think of my dad, and it helps my confidence.’

‘That’s like, pretty cool, but why was it such a big deal today?’ She said as she gazed into my eyes.

It was time to tell her, ‘Today is the fourth anniversary of my dad’s death and not having the charm this morning at the game upset me.’

‘I’m so sorry Maddy, I didn’t know.’ Tiana put her hand on my forearm.

‘It’s okay.’ I patted her hand.

‘But I’m coming over for a sleepover on this big day for you.’

‘Truly, it’s okay. I’m so pumped about you coming over,’ I said.

‘Hey, you two have a great time tonight,’ Mitch’s voice was full of sarcasm.

‘Sorry Mitch. I didn’t mean to leave you out.’ I patted the back of his hand too.

He pulled his hand away. ‘It’s alright I don’t do sleepovers with girls.’

‘You’re not invited anyway *and* what’s wrong with girls?’ Tiana bit back.

‘Nothing. I just don’t like the idea of doing a sleepover with girls. Having a little sister is hard enough.’

‘But your little sister is a sweetie,’ I said.

‘You don’t have to live with her.’ Mitch did an eye roll.

‘Good point, but you do love her, I can tell.’ I frowned at him.

‘Of course I love her. Doesn’t mean I have to like what she does.’ He shimmied his body like Megan does.

‘That’s valid,’ Tiana said.

I glanced at my watch. ‘Hey! We should be getting home it’s nearly five.’

CHAPTER 25

STAY-AWAKE OVER

“Life is you taking pictures - some are bad, some are good. Make sure you take shots of the ones that have a good effect on you.” – Maria Pineda-Meneses (11)

Mitch rode his bike alongside Tiana and me as we headed off. At the end of my road, we farewelled Mitch.

Tiana and I entered my studio when we got home. We stuck the pictures we had taken to the LIKE wall. I added the blurred snap of the Willy Wagtail to the *Djidi Djidi* section, the picture of Tiana and I in the wine press to the *bestie girl* section, and the picture of Hemi and I on the tractor under the *big question mark* next to the photo of Hemi with the blurred black tattooed face.

‘Why are you putting it under the question mark section?’ Tiana asked.

‘It’s my temporary holding area till I decide where I will put the snapshot.’

‘Haven’t you got a Hemi section?’

‘No!’

‘Just asking.’ Tiana put her hands up in surrender.

‘You know what?’ I said as I grabbed a making pen and a piece of card. ‘It’s time.’

I wrote *HEMI* on the card and stuck it on the wall.

I moved the snaps of Hemi from the question mark section to the new Hemi section.

Just as I did this Mum called out, ‘Hemi’s going.’

We shot out of my room to thank him for the winery tour and grape stomping and caught him in the doorway.

‘Thanks Hemi for getting my footy charm for me this morning and for what we did at the winery today,’ I said.

‘Yeah Hemi it was like totally special,’ Tiana added.

I did something I’d never done before. I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a hug. Tiana did too. It was like hugging a rhino.

‘Hey girls I’m gonna start needing a bodyguard,’ Hemi chuckled. Like he needed one, not.

We didn’t hang on for long.

‘Sweet as girls. It was my pleasure.’ He gave us both a fist pump.

Mum smiled and said, ‘Yeah thanks Hemi, it was a great day.’

The two of them smooched.

‘Get a room,’ Tiana said. I like her cheek.

Hemi purred off in his canary car.

‘Right you two.’ Mum was looking mischievous. ‘Girls only house. Let’s do this thing.’

We headed into the lounge room and plonked ourselves on the sofas.

‘First. Let’s order pizzas,’ Mum said.

‘Slow down Mrs Feather, I mean Heather. I’m like allergic to pizza.’ Tiana had a cheeky look in her eyes.

Mum halted her progress. ‘Seriously?’

‘Mum she’s kidding,’ I said.

‘So, you’re okay with pizza Ti Ti?’

‘Sure. I was just joking.’

‘Two jokers in the house. It’s gonna be a fun night. What toppings?’ Mum asked.

‘Meat. Any kinds of meat,’ Tiana said.

‘But no bacon or ham,’ I added. ‘It’s not right to eat pigs.’

‘Okay,’ said Mum.

‘Can I have the one with tomato, bocconcini, and basil?’ I asked.

‘What about we get a honey soy chicken for Tiana, a Margherita for you, and a vegetarian for me?’ Mum tapped her phone as she wrote our orders down.

‘Awesome Mum.’

‘Like super special,’ said Tiana.

Mum phoned the pizza shop and planned delivery for six-thirty.

‘Next on the list,’ Mum said. ‘I bought you something.’

She pulled out a large brown paper bag with handles. On the side were words, in Mum's writing, *sleepover kit*.

'What's this Mum?' I asked.

'I put together some things you two might like, to spice up your sleepover.'

Tiana and I looked at each other with puzzled expressions. I worried about what Mum was about to pull out of the bag.

'Well, do you wanna see what I got?' She rubbed her hands together.

'Okay.' We were both as nervous as cats at a dog show.

The first thing she pulled out was a bag of marshmallows.

'Winner!' I fist pumped

Next were some sour straps.

'Double winner,' Tiana said.

A Girlpower magazine, the latest.

'That could be handy.'

A bottle of Diet Pepsi.

'Delish.'

A nail art kit with glitter and stars and polish and all kinds of stuff.

'Awesome.'

A Netflix voucher.

‘Yeah, movie!’ We both said.

A bottle of red wine!

‘Muuuum we’re not allowed to drink.’

‘Not for you two. This is for me while you two are enjoying yourselves.’

‘The whole bottle?’ I gasped.

‘Some of it. I do drink responsibly you know.’ She fluttered her eyelashes.

We helped Mum drag the mattresses and doonas into the lounge, along with a mountain of pillows and cushions.

Mum left us alone in the lounge room with our *sleepover kit*.

It was official. The sleepover had commenced.

‘Why do we call it a sleepover?’ I said to Tiana.

‘Because that’s what it is. Like when someone *sleeps over* someone else’s house,’ Tiana said.

‘But there isn’t much sleep that happens. It should be called a *stay-awake* over.’

‘That’s funny.’

‘You know what’s really funny?’ I said. ‘Mum told me not to repeat this joke of Hemi’s.’

‘Well, I’m in suspense.’

‘How do you catch a polar bear?’

‘I dunno, you make a cage or something.’

‘No. First, you cut a round hole in the ice.’

‘In the ice? What with?’

‘Yes. With a saw I suppose. Then you put peas around the hole.’

‘Peas?’

‘Yes, peas. Stop interrupting. When the polar bear comes for a pea, you kick him in the ice hole.’

Tiana laughed and then threw pillows at me.

‘Pillow fight!’ I declared.

It only lasted until Mum heard the ruckus.

‘Sorry girls, but there are breakables in the lounge.’ Mum was a spoilt sport.

The pizza arrived. Mum took her vegetarian pizza into the dining room and sat down with her glass of wine. Tiana and I dug into the other pizzas. There was way too much. We had to leave enough space for the marshmallows and sour straps.

We downloaded a movie and watched it, sort of, between telling jokes, eating mallows and sour straps and looking at stuff in the Girlpower magazine. The magazine had a quiz about how well you know your bestie. We both scored average. Well, we’d only been besties for a brief time.

We decorated each other's nails. Tiana ended up with ten different coloured fingernails with glitter and shapes. When she held her hands up, it looked like a rainbow. Snapshot. On her toes, she wrote the words BEST FRIEND. One letter on each toe. On my fingernails, I did all kinds of creative glittery, starry, love hearty art. On my toes, I wrote the words TIANA MADDY, one letter on each toe. I took a snapshot of our feet together. I took a snapshot of my fingers, and I took a twosie.

We didn't want to play truth or dare but challenged each other with D and M questions like:

'Have you ever kissed a boy?' Tiana asked.

'Yes, but only on the cheek.'

'Who?'

'Who do you think?'

'Mitch?'

'Correcto.' My face grew warm.

'My turn,' I said. 'Have you ever stolen anything?'

Tiana scratched her head. 'No ... um ... like ... yes.'

'What?'

'I took some money from my Dad's wallet.'

'How much?'

'Ten dollars. I really wanted this bangle, and I had run out of pocket money.'

‘Did your dad find out?’

‘Yeah.’ She gave an eye roll.

‘How.’

‘I told him.’

‘What?’

‘I felt terrible, so I told him. I said to him the day after that he only needed to give me half of my pocket money next week. When he asked why. I said because I already took ten dollars of it.’

‘So, what did he do?’

‘Didn’t give me any pocket money. Well, he gave me the twenty dollars, but I had to pay back the ten I took and ten interest, so he said. It was more like a fine.’

Okay, another question, ‘What is something no one knows about you except your family?’

‘Umm, I’m obsessed with My Little Pony.’ Tiana sunk her head into her shoulders like she didn’t have a neck.

‘No way,’ I giggled.

‘Yes way, don’t tease me.’

‘No, I wasn’t teasing. I still sleep with Pinky my pig teddy.’

‘I still sleep with Rufus.’

‘Who’s Rufus?’ I asked.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a My Little Pony unicorn. It looked like it had been over-loved.

‘I’ve had it since I was two years old,’ she said as she snuggled him to her face.

I reached into the pillow where I had hidden Pinky and pulled him out.

‘He’s so cute. What’s that stain on him?’ Tiana asked.

In all the excitement, I had forgotten about the blood stain. No one other than my mum knew about the blood on Pinky. Not even Megan.

‘It’s a long story.’ I sighed.

‘I like stories,’ She said shaking her hands in excitement.

‘Do you promise you’ll tell no one what I’m about to say to you?’ My eyes squinted at her.

‘Now we are officially besties, a bestie pledges to keep all secrets.’ She stuck out her pinky finger, and we connected.

Tiana shuffled herself forward and sat cross-legged on some cushions in front of me.

‘Okay then.’ I took a deep breath. ‘I had Pinky in the car accident.’

‘The one where your d...’

‘The one where my dad died.’

‘We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to Maddy.’ She reached forward and put her hand on my forearm.

‘It’s okay, in fact, it’s good to talk about it to someone you trust.’

‘You can trust me.’

‘Pinky is my connection with what happened that night.’

‘What did happen?’ Tiana asked.

I took a deep breath. ‘When I was seven years old, I was having a sleepover at my grandma’s house, my dad’s mum, but I was missing Mum. I got so homesick Grandma had to call Mum to come and get me. My dad offered to pick me up. It was late at night. It was a forty-minute drive home, and I fell asleep in the back seat with Pinky. All I remember hearing was my dad yell out, *Bloody hell!*’

When I looked up at Tiana, she was staring at me like a kangaroo in a car’s headlights.

I continued, ‘Next thing I remember hearing was the squeal of the brakes. The car then swerved and rolled, over and over and over. Later Mum was told the car rolled five times. It was the worst feeling. Stuff was flying everywhere. Luckily, I was wearing my seatbelt. I heard crashing and banging and pieces of glass flying all over the place. The car came to rest on its roof, and I was hanging upside down. The petrol fumes were strong. There was an awful pain on the side of my head, and I must have passed out.’

Teardrops were swelling in Tiana’s, about to flow. She wanted to know more. ‘What happened after that?’ She took hold of my hands.

I took another big breath, trying not to cry. ‘The next thing I remember was coming to, at the hospital. The first thing I noticed was Pinky. Apparently, one paramedic had found him at the accident and put him on the stretcher with me when they put me in the ambulance. One nurse had put a bandage on him to cover up the blood.’

‘Y...your Dad?’ Tiana asked like she wasn’t sure if she should go there. ‘Is it okay to ask about that?’

‘My Dad was in a coma for two days. Mum and I were holding his hand when the doctor turned the life-support machine off.’ The tears flowed, and I sniffled. ‘They couldn’t do anything for him.’

Tiana reached across and gave me a hug. ‘We can stop talking about it if you want.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said as I enjoyed the safety of her huggy arms. ‘I used to believe it was my fault.’

‘What do you I mean, your fault?’

‘Well it wasn’t my fault there was a cow on the road in the middle of the night. I blamed myself because I got homesick at Grandma’s and Dad had to come and collect me. I had to get some counselling from a psychologist for my anxiety. Ever since the accident, I haven’t been able to go to any sleepovers. I haven’t even been able to have anyone over for a sleepover.’

‘So, I’m the first?’ She squeezed me tighter.

‘Yes. You are it.’ I squeezed her back.

‘Are you going to be okay?’ She asked.

‘The only thing is, I might have a nightmare, and I don’t want to frighten you.’

‘Confession time. I’m scared of the dark, and I need a night light.’

‘Me too. I have a deal with Mum. It was her idea for us to sleep in the lounge on mattresses. She’s put an extra one in here and will come and join us when it’s time to go to sleep. I hope it’s okay with you?’

‘Maddy, your mum is like cool. I’m more than happy to let her sleep with us when we are ready to hit the sack?’

‘You sure?’

‘Like yeah.’

We talked more and tried to ram extra marshmallows inside our bulging tummies. Tiana told me more about her mum and dad breaking up. She also revealed she has a crush on Jason.

‘If you tell anyone I’ll disown you,’ she said.

‘Your secret is safe with me.’

We spent a small amount of time on the internet. Not Instagram though, we made it an Instagram free night. We checked out a few YouTubes.

Tiana told me her name means, princess or fairy queen, we looked it up. She was right.

‘Tiana is actually short for Tatiana, Mum and Dad named me Tiana though.’

I told her my name meaning wasn’t very exciting. It just meant child of Matthew, a name that can be used for a boy or girl. It means *gift of God*.

We looked up what *Hemi* meant. What we found out was Hemi is the Maori version of James. I looked up the meaning of James. It meant *supplanter, one who takes the place of or follows on from*. A fitting name, maybe. He will never replace my dad, but he may be a good male role model like Raelene suggested.

We both had lots of secrets to keep. It's good to share secrets with someone, but it's also risky. I mean, trusting someone with private information is a big thing. It's like a precious gift of yourself, and you want the other person to handle it with gentleness.

When it was time to do the sleep part of the sleepover, we tippy-toed to get Mum. She was sprawled out on the sofa in the living room, asleep, with Mystery curled up on her. The book she'd been reading had fallen to the floor. She woke up when we stood there wondering what to do with her. We invited Mum and Mystery to join us in the lounge.

'What time is it?' Mum yawned.

'Midnight,' I replied.

'Why aren't you two asleep yet?'

'Mum, it's a sleepover!'

'A stay-awake over,' Tiana laughed.

The four of us (including Mystery) settled back in the lounge room.

I took a snapshot of the special occasion. Mum, Tiana, Me, Pinky, Rufus and Mystery.

'Mum, I wanna get Pinky cleaned,' I whispered as we all laid our heads on our pillows.

'What brought that on?' She asked.

I told her about my different dream last night. ‘Seems like a good time. A weekend of changes,’ I said.

‘I’ll take him to the dry cleaners on Monday,’ Mum yawned.

‘Can’t we do it at home? In the washing machine?’

‘Whatever you want sweetie.’ Mum was half asleep by now.

‘Hey Ti Ti. How do you know if there is an elephant in your bed?’ I asked.

‘Dunno,’ she yawned.

‘Look for the E on his pyjamas.’

‘Funny, now go to sleep,’ she said.

‘How do you know if there is an elephant under your bed?’

‘Go to sleep!’

‘You’re sleeping with your nose touching the ceiling.’

I think it was about one o’clock in the morning before sleep won out. Mystery cuddled in amongst us.

CHAPTER 26

WISH TO HOPE

“When I photograph, what I’m really doing is seeking answers to things.” – Wynn Bullock

I woke to the scrumptious aroma of pancakes wafting into the lounge. Tiana was in the kitchen with Mum cooking up a batch of delicious pancakes for breakfast. Mum had her blended lawn clippings. Tiana tried some and agreed with me about its grossness.

‘I had another dream last night,’ I said. My mum’s eyebrows expressed concern. ‘I was eating a giant marshmallow.’ Mum changed her expression once she realised I was kidding. I continued, ‘When I woke up in the morning I couldn’t find my pillow.’

Mum and Tiana both chuckled.

Tiana came back with one of her own, ‘Well I had a dream last night too. I was eating a giant jelly baby.’ We braced ourselves. ‘When I woke up in the morning, I couldn’t find myself.’ She cackled at her own joke.

Mum and I both laughed as we shook our heads.

‘That’s funny Ti Ti,’ I said. ‘You’re pretty good at this joke thing.’

We had to get Tiana to the markets by ten to meet her mum.

Mum said after we drop Tiana off, we would buy flowers, head to the cemetery, then back to the markets. It sounded like a plan.

We met Tiana’s mum and two siblings at the watermelon stand as planned.

‘That was like the best sleepover ever,’ Tiana told me.

I had nothing to compare it with so I agreed.

‘I had an awesome time Ti Ti. Thanks for coming over.’ We hugged each other.

‘What we say at sleepover stays at sleepover,’ she said, ‘your secrets are safe with me.’

We connected our pinky fingers.

‘Yours too,’ I replied.

‘Bye Stormy, look after Pinky and Mystery.’

‘Bye Ti Ti, look after Rufus and Ruby.’

Tiana and her part-time family walked off as Mum, and I turned toward the flower stand.

We bought the biggest, bestest bunch of flowers we could find.

The cemetery was about ten minutes out of town.

When we arrived, we walked through all the sections to Dad’s gravesite.

Mum and I tidied things up. She brought a bottle of water to fill the vase for the flowers.

We sat together in each other’s arms as we told Dad how much we miss him and what’s been happening in our lives. Mum told him about Hemi.

‘I know you’d like him. He’s a kind man who treats us both with the utmost respect and he can handle Maddy’s sense of humour.’ Mum talked for a while, then it was my turn.

‘I got voted vice-captain for the Bayside Blues under twelves’ team. The first girl ever. And I got to be captain because Jason was injured. You’d be so proud of me. We won our first game. I kicked a goal on the siren. But, lost our second, only by seven points, in the wet.’

‘They finished the new club rooms,’ Mum said.

‘Yeah. They’ve called it Stormy’s shed,’ I added.

‘Unofficially,’ Mum said as she adjusted the flowers.

‘The change rooms have a separate shower section for the girls,’ I made a point of saying that.

‘You’d be proud.’ Mum had a tear in her eye.

‘I have a best friend, a girl, Ti Ti. She’s a lot of fun, and I trust her. Also, I’m riding on a dolphin into womanhood. Oh, and one more thing, I kissed Mitch the other day.’

Mum gawked at me like I had just hit her across the face with a wet fish.

‘Only on the cheek,’ I said.

Mum shook her head and added, ‘Maddy had her first sleepover since the accident. I’m so proud of her.’

‘Mum. I’ve written something I would like to read out.’

‘What is it, sweetie?’

I pulled my journal out of my camera bag.

‘Remember the other day when you said hope is more powerful than a wish?’

‘Yes.’ She nodded.

‘And you said I should think about my hopes and write them in my journal.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well. This is what I wrote.’

WISH TO HOPE

I wished you would come back, but I knew it wouldn't happen.

I wished the accident didn't happen, but it did.

I wished the cow wasn't on the road that night, but it was.

I wished I hadn't gotten homesick at Grandma's, but I did.

I wished I could change the past, but I couldn't.

A wish is just a wish; it has little power.

Wishing for something to happen isn't standing up to be strong.

I decided to change my wishes into hopes.

I hope Mum and I can both be happy.

I hope we will never forget you.

I hope Mum doesn't have to be lonely anymore.

I hope I can be brave and strong.

I hope I can have a best friend I trust.

I hope I can forgive myself.

Hope believes there is a better tomorrow.

Hope is brave enough to help make a better tomorrow.

Hope is more powerful than a wish.

I added, ‘Oh, by the way, I have one more hope. I hope the Bayside Blues win the grand final this year.’

As I finished reading, I looked up, Mum had tears streaming down her cheeks.

‘That’s the most beautiful thing I have ever heard,’ she said and wrapped her arms around me. We stayed like that for a while until a Willy Wagtail interrupted us by fluttering around and chittering.

‘Mum. Look.’ I was shaking with excitement.

‘Get your camera,’ she whispered.

‘Not yet. Let’s be patient and watch it for a while.’ I remembered what Raelene said about the butterfly.

It bopped and bounced all around us as if trying to tell us something. Eventually, it landed on the tombstone at the end of Dad’s grave.

‘Now I’ll get the camera,’ I whispered to Mum.

As I carefully pulled my Instamatic camera out of my bag, the Willy Wagtail stayed put. I snuck up closer. Its little head moved from side to side, and it appeared as if it was trying to say something.

On the whisper of the wind I heard these words, ‘I’ve taken your secrets. They’re safe with me.’

I slowly brought the camera up to my eyes and took a deep breath. Snap. The Willy Wagtail didn’t move.

When I sat back down to wait for the picture to develop the Willy Wagtail flitted around again. It looked like it was fluttering behind us to get a look itself.

‘That’s a great shot Maddy,’ Mum said as the photo developed in front of our eyes.

The picture was perfect. A warm tingly sensation came over me like I was being hugged by a glitter cloud.

‘My one thousandth,’ as I said this the Willy Wagtail chirped, chattered, and flew off. A heaviness lifted from my heart as it winged away. It was as if someone or something had taken all my anxieties.

My secrets were hidden in my anxieties, but now I was free.

END

“Hope is more powerful than a wish.” – Harry McCourt (8)

“A wish is trying to add something to a picture – hope is finding something special in the picture.” - Steve Heron

Glossary

ABORIGINAL – general term for the first nation or indigenous peoples of Australia

AFL – Australian Rules Football a form of football invented and played in Australia – many say it is our national sport

AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome – HIV a virus that attacks the immune system – became a pandemic in the eighties

ANTIQUUE – something old and treasured – usually something your grandies had

APARTHEID – a form of separation based on race – usually meant different rules for black and white people

AUSKICK – A version of AFL designed for junior sports

BEREAVEMENT – the time a person goes through grief after the loss or death of someone they love

BESTIE – Best Friend or BFF

BOX BROWNIE CAMERA – a very popular family camera made by Kodak - from the nineteen-twenties to the nineteen-sixties

CLOUD – Celebrate Life Offline Unplugged Day – invented by Maddy's mum – a day a week free of social media – who knows it may catch on

CHAPLAIN – many public or state schools have a Chaplain or Student Welfare Worker that helps students, staff and parents with social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing

CHARM – a collective noun for a group of Magpies or a small jewellery ornament worn on a bracelet or necklace

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT – during the sixties a strong movement for equal rights in America raised up mostly associated with equal rights for Afro-Americans

CLIQUE – a small social group who stick to each other exclusively

KOOLBARDIE – Noongar word for Magpie

CRIBBAGE – a card game played mostly by miners to pass the time underground on their lunch breaks – uses a regular set of cards and a wooden board with two rows (sometimes three) of 121 holes – pegs are moved along to score

CURIOS – another name for old stuff or antiques

CYBERBULLYING – a form of abuse used on social media – it is said that people who cyberbully cowardly hide behind the keyboard

DELI – a dying breed of corner shops or stores selling all kinds of goodies

DJIDI DJIDI – Noongar (Aboriginal) word for Willy Wagtail

DREAMTIME – Legend and stories used by aboriginal people for generations to explain how the world came into being and how things are

DUNE BUGGIE – a small four-wheel drive designed for driving in sand dunes

ESPRESSO – Coffee made by an espresso machine that forces hot water through ground coffee forming a Crema

FIFO – Fly In Fly Out – many mining companies employ workers and fly them directly to mine sites

FOOTY – slang for AFL

FOUR-SQUARE – a game played by many Aussie kids at their schools in the playground – usually four or more players – sometimes called King Ball or Tap

GAY – a term used to describe a person who is attracted to the same gender as a partner

GEORGE CLOONEY – Actor who played a lead role in Tomorrowland

GERONIMO – an expression used when leaping or jumping

HIPPIES – alternate life-stylers from the sixties – during the Flower Power era or Love revolution – often dressed in colourful and psychedelic colours – it is said that many were high on drugs

IMPERTINENCE – The collective noun for a group of Willy Wagtails – also means rude or cheeky

INSTAMATIC – a style of camera where the photo develops as it comes out of a camera

IRRESPECTIVE – Whatever – or no significance

JARMIES – PJ's or Pyjamas

JULIE – main character (with anger and grief issues) in Karate Kid IV – played by Hilary Swank

KALE – green vegetable stuff full of vitamin C – also a boy at Maddy's school

KIWI – a resident of New Zealand named after a cute small flightless bird native to NZ

KNUCKLE PINKIE – A gesture invented by Maddy and Mitch – a knuckle punch followed by a pinkie finger lock

LIKE LIKE – when a boy likes a girl, or a girl likes a boy more than just a friend – a crush

MADDITUDE – Maddy's bad attitude – she didn't like this expression

MALLOWS - marshmallows

MAXIMUS – Mitch's Koolbardie friend – also the title of the first book in the Bayside Blues Series

MUMMARIES – mythological, spiritual beings in Noongar culture – dark spirits

MYSTERY – Maddy's cat

MCG – Melbourne Cricket Ground – the home of AFL and Cricket in Australia

MIAGI – the aged Chinese master in Karate Kid IV who taught Julie karate

MILO – a chocolaty, malty milk drink consumed by many Aussie kids

MONARO GEN 3 CV8Z – made by Holden Australia – only 1000 of these were made - the last Holden made in Australia was in October 2017.

NEW ZEALAND – Neighbouring country to Australia – Aussies and Kiwis have a long-running rivalry in sports especially Rugby, Netball and Cricket

PEPPY TREE – Peppermint Tree – a common tree in the South West of Western Australia – possums love to hang out in Peppy trees.

PINKY – Maddy's pink pig teddy

PLANET ZILTON – a fictional planet invented by Mr Thomas (Maddy's teacher) used in his maths lessons

PREMIERSHIP QUARTER – The third of four quarters in an AFL game – named the premiership quarter. Legend has it the team that does the best in this quarter usually goes on to win the game.

PUBERTY – Adolescence – the section of time where boys and girls begin the change from childhood to adulthood.

PUMPKY SCONES – Scones made using pumpkin instead of sugar – many grannies have made these over the years – most country towns still have scone making competitions at their agricultural shows

RUCK – a designated AFL player who goes up for the tap down when the ball is thrown up at the beginning of each quarter and any stoppages in the game

RUGBY – an alternative form of football – in Australian there are two main versions, Rugby League and Rugby Union.

SELFIE – taking a picture of oneself – popularised since the introduction of social media

SEPARATION ANXIETY – a form of fear or phobia of being separated, usually by a child from their parents

SLEDGE – a verbal barrage of words used to put an opposing player off their game

SLUSHY – a frozen fruit flavoured drink with made with finely crushed ice - frappe

SPAG BOG – Spaghetti Bolognaise – Meat (usually mince) with a tomato sauce and spaghetti
– sprinkled with smelly cheese (parmesan)

STERLING SILVER – a form of silver used to make cutlery and other dining items – usually
valuable

TAYLA HARRIS – one of the original famous Women’s AFL players – has played at various
clubs – well known for her kicking style when she performs a vertical splits while kicking

THE NEXT KARATE KID – the fourth of the Karate Kid series of movies

TOMBOY – an old fashion saying for a girl who likes doing boy stuff