

Prologue

Sunday, 5th January 1986

The sun had just disappeared behind the neighbour's mango tree, making it harder for Jonathan to see the faces of the playing cards and more treacherous when placing them on the current tower layer. He has been building a card pyramid on the front veranda for the past half an hour and is only two layers away from breaking his record. His previous record of 5 layers could have been higher; however, he ran out of cards on the penultimate layer. He now knows that it takes 40 cards to build 5 layers, but 57 to build 6, since the base is one triangle wider.

At that time, he was in the zone and could feel the adrenaline as he began the 5th layer; sure, his record was in reach. He was so focused that he hadn't taken his eyes off the tower for at least ten minutes. Unfortunately, when he reached for the next card, all he felt was the cool wood of the old kitchen table his father had put on the

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veranda so he could do his homework away from the television and the distractions in his room. At first, he hoped his father would have another pack of playing cards inside; however, after a frustrating search of the house and fifteen minutes of begging for him to go and buy him another packet—his father didn't seem to appreciate the enormity of the occasion—a noisy minor bird flew onto the veranda and knocked his tower over. He heard the familiar high-pitched whistle and made it out the front door in time to shoo it away, but the nasty bird just looked at him, then flew straight through the middle of the pyramid as though it knew exactly what it was doing. Jonathan ran down the front steps and picked up a rock and pegged it at it, but of course, he missed by miles.

He didn't speak to his father for a week after that....

Eventually, another pack appeared on his dressing table. But it took a few weeks for his pride to allow him to attempt the record once more.

His father's voice calling him in for dinner brought him back to the here and now, and the tower in front of him. He didn't respond for fear his voice would cause a vibration in the air, knocking the tower over once more.

A few moments later, footsteps stopped behind him.

"Jonathan."

He held up his palm like a traffic cop but didn't speak.

This time, Nicolas spoke softly. "I will put your dinner in the oven."

Jonathan could hear his mother in the kitchen, rattling pans, and he felt a little guilty for not joining them since it was a rare occasion that she was well enough to come out of her room. However, there was no chance he would

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miss this opportunity to break his long-standing record. It is not often you get a calm, windless evening like tonight, especially recently, with all the torrential rain they have had over the past week.

Jonathan took a slow, deep breath as he placed the last card on the 5th layer, finishing the final platform layer for the highest pyramid card tower he had ever built.

Now for the final triangle.

Don't mess this up, Jonathan, he thought.

He slowly reached for the last two cards required for the apex, then held them above the tower in a triangular shape with two hands.

Nice and slow...

After gently placing the final triangle on top, he took two steps back from the table, then began counting to five. He read in the Guinness Book of Records that a card tower must remain standing for at least five seconds to be counted as complete. Although six layers is nowhere near the world record, he fist-pumped the air when he finished the count.

His mother walked out the front door.

He looked at her with both hands raised in celebration. "I did it!"

She kissed him on the forehead. "I'm going for a walk."

He looked down at her white tennis shoes. "Okay."

"Be good for your father."

"I will," he replied, but he was a little annoyed that she wasn't more excited by his amazing feat.

Mary stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned. "I love you, Jonathan."

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He just turned and smiled, then looked back at his tower.

Maybe tomorrow I can aim for 7 layers.

After shovelling the last mouthful of mashed potato into his mouth, he picked up his plate and took it to the sink.

His father appeared at the doorway to the lounge room. "Rinse it properly!"

"Yes, Dad."

"Have you seen your mother?"

"Not since she went for a walk."

Nicolas looked from his watch to the darkness outside. "Maybe she is chatting with the neighbours."

"I'm going to my room to read," Jonathan said.

"Okay. Lights out by nine."

"I know."

Once in his room, he picked up his copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book his mother gave him for his last birthday—her favourite book; it has a photo of Gregory Peck and Mary Badham on the back—then opened it at the bookmarked page and fell backwards onto his bed. And it wasn't long before the world around him was replaced by the black-and-white version of Maycomb County he remembers from the movie he watched with his mother just before Christmas.

Half an hour or so later, a police siren echoed in through the window, dragging him back to his room.

Jonathan knows all the different sirens; most kids learn them on the playground. Usually, someone will announce the type just before everyone runs to the fence to wave as

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the police car, ambulance, or fire engine flies by. However, they usually only get a wave from the fireman in the passenger seat. The others all seem too serious.

He couldn't be sure how long he had been reading when the siren interrupted the story, but he had read at least twenty pages. Time seemed to have no meaning when his mind disappeared into Maycomb County with the antics of Jem, Dill and Scout. This is the third time he has read the book, and each time he feels he enjoys it more than the last, especially now that he has images of the characters from the movie.

The siren grew closer.

He put the bookmark on the current page, placed the book on his bed and rose to his knees, then leant against the wall and opened the glass louvres.

The blue light of the police siren reflected off the leaves of the large wild fig tree at the end of their block before the patrol car turned into their street. Normally, when the police drive down their street, it's to either arrest Mr Davis for being drunk and fighting with Mr Benson, his neighbour, or to talk with Tim Simpson, a teenager who lives with his grandmother at the end of their street, about the latest robbery in the posh area of South Junction. Considering it was a Sunday and the school holidays, he assumed they were coming to talk with Tim. He seemed to be the go-to crook when there was a theft on the north side of town.

The police car slowed as it approached their driveway.

Jonathan expected the lights to fade as it passed by, but the engine stopped just out of view, and the lights continued to reflect off the wall of his neighbour's house.

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Maybe something happened to old Mrs Donaldson across the road?

His father appeared in his doorway. "Jonathan, can you come out the front, please?"

There was something odd in the way his father spoke. And he noticed he didn't look him in the eye.

"Is it Mrs Donaldson?"

"Just follow me."

The moment he walked out onto the veranda and saw Mrs Donaldson watching from her front door, he knew something terrible had happened. "Where's Mum?"

"The police are looking for her."

"Why?"

"She never came back from her walk."

"Maybe she stopped for a cup of tea at someone's house."

"Do you remember what she had on her feet when she left?"

"Yeah, her white tennis shoes. Why?" He looked at a plastic bag in one of the officer's hands. "Why has he got one of Mum's shoes?"

"I found it down by the river where your mother walks." Nicolas rested his hand on Jonathan's shoulder and spoke softly. "Just near where the riverbank had collapsed into the water. They are doing all they can to find her."

Jonathan could feel the panic surge inside his chest. "What do you mean?"

A tear rolled down his father's cheek. "It looks as though she got washed into the river with the landslide."

Jonathan's words got caught in his throat as he looked towards the river.

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Sensing his son was just about to make a run for it, Nicolas stepped closer and pulled him into an embrace. "All we can do is pray."

He struggled to break free. "Fricken let me go. I can find her. I'm a strong swimmer."

Nicolas held him tight. "I'm sorry, Son."

"Your fricken prayers won't work," he screamed. "You don't even go to church."

He kicked his father in the shin and made a run for the stairs, but one of the policemen grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

He swung his free arm wildly. "Let me go!"

Nicolas led the tall, thickset, balding officer, who was holding Jonathan tightly by the right bicep, into the house, where he tossed him onto his father's single-seater lounge chair. "If you move from this spot, I will have to take you to the station. Do you understand?"

Jonathan just glared at him with his chest heaving and spit and snot running down his face.

Nicolas crouched down in front of him. "I know it's hard. I want to be out there looking as well, but it's dark and dangerous. We will only make their jobs harder. They will find her."

He gave his father the same disdainful look, then just rolled onto his side, facing the back of the chair, and covered his face and sobbed.

"They will find her," Nicolas repeated.

They never did....

Chapter 1

Tuesday, 27th January 1987

Lightning lit up the western sky, giving shape to the houses on both sides of the street. In the distance, Jonathan could see the bell tower of the Catholic church and the Australian flag flapping wildly above the admin building of the Catholic primary school he would soon be attending for the first time. After a difficult previous year at his local public school, Jonathan's father—and his former *miserable* principal—decided it would be best for him to start afresh at a new school.

Thunder rattled the glass louvres as he peered through them. Something about the street outside his front yard didn't feel right, but he just couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe his nerves about starting 6th grade at a new school are the cause of his discontent, but the little voice in the back of his mind is whispering something different, something more sinister.

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Movement in the shadows of a wild fig tree towards the end of the street drew his attention. Someone was standing there, watching him watch the street. He couldn't see who it was, but the sudden waft of a familiar perfume sent his heart a-racing.

He stood tall on his bed and opened the louvers until the metal lever began to bend, then took a big, deep breath. The fragrance he remembered from happier days, days before his life took a terrible turn, filled his lungs and brought a mist to his eyes that hid the very source of his sadness.

Suddenly, he found himself standing on the road in front of his two-bedroom fibro house, staring towards the large wild fig tree at the end of his block, with his mother's voice echoing at the back of his mind. He couldn't make out what she was saying, but it felt as though she was telling him not to give up, not to believe what he had been told: she is not dead, but unable to come home for reasons yet to be known.

Her voice slowly becomes clearer.

Jonathan....

Jonathan....

Jonathan....

"Jonathan, wake up! You'll be late for your first day at your new school."

Jonathan kept his eyes closed until the smell of his mother's favourite perfume faded into the smell of burnt toast. He's had the same dream just about every night since the excitement from the fireworks on New Year's Eve had faded in the gloom of the approaching school year. It has been a little over a year since his mother disappeared, and although he was told by his father and

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Father Riley that she had passed, he wasn't so sure. Apparently, they haven't found her body. And even though his father told him there was evidence that the riverbank had collapsed beneath her during her after-dinner walk and that she had been swept away by the swollen river, it just didn't feel right. Maybe she had to leave. Maybe she's in hiding for reasons unknown. He once read a book about a man who had faked his own death, so he didn't have to go to jail for robbing a bank. Not that he thinks his mother would have robbed a bank, but there could be thousands of reasons for someone to disappear and make everyone think they're dead. He has made a list of possible reasons that has filled two pages of his old school diary. And they are just those he could think of off the top of his head.

"Can't I just go back to my old school?" he said as he sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I know I had some issues last year, but that is behind me now. I promise I will behave. Besides, I still got the best marks in my class!"

"I think that says more about your classmates. Besides, it's not about your marks, Jonathan. It's about your attitude. You can't be rude to your teachers, and you can't use that terrible language you picked up from *those* boys and expect to be forgiven. You were given many chances by the principal, but you just can't seem to control your temper. The nuns at your new school will help you manage your emotions."

Jonathan swore under his breath. "I heard they make you drop your pants before they spank you with a wooden paddle."

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“Stop being silly and come out and have some breakfast. I made Vegemite toast.”

“I know. I can smell the charcoal.”

Nicolas Rossi rolled his eyes. “Just hurry up and put on your new uniform and come out.” He stopped and turned at the door. “But make sure you don’t spill food or milk on it. They will send you straight home if you are not neat and tidy.”

“Whatever, *Nicolas*.”

His father ignored the challenge.

Although he no longer receives a verbal reaction, Jonathan can see the disappointment in his father’s eyes, and he feels guilt and shame once he calms down. However, he seems unable to stop himself from doing it again.

“Oh, and I left your new school comb on the bench with your lunch. You must comb your hair before each class.”

“That’s the stupidest rule I have ever heard.”

Nicolas Rossi’s eyes narrowed. “Just come out and eat. You don’t want to be hungry on your first day. Your brain needs fuel. The kids at St Batholomew’s will be a lot smarter than your old school.”

Jonathan covered his mouth with his hand. “And probably stuck-up.”

“Pardon?”

“I said, I’m getting up.”

“And keep an eye out for your cousin; she goes there, remember. Maybe she can show you around.”

“Who?”

“Aunt Caroline’s daughter.”

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“What’s her name?” Jonathan knew her name was Kathleen, but he knew his father would have forgotten; they don’t have much to do with his mother’s side of the family.

“That’s a good question. Maybe you should look through your mother’s photos.”

Jonathan has vague memories of visiting his aunt when he was little, but he hasn’t seen his cousin since he was about five and doubts he would recognise her. His father said that the Rossi and Bennett families travel in different social circles. He surmised that the Rossi family doesn’t have a social circle at all, not even when his mother was here. Mary was all but disinherited when she married an Italian man. And her parents refused to go to the wedding. Jonathan learned all this just by listening to adults talk as though he were invisible. For a reason he has yet to understand, adults think young children are stupid. Everything he learned about his mother’s disappearance came from the many adult conversations that happened around him, as though his ears were *just for decoration*, as his fifth-grade teacher used to say when he was gazing out the window instead of listening. In fact, he didn’t hear about her memorial service until a few weeks after the fact. And when he confronted his father about it, he was told that Father Riley reckoned it would be too sad for a young child.

What would a man who wears a dress pulled together with a curtain cord and is not even allowed to marry know what’s right for a child?

His father smiled his usual morning fake smile, then headed towards the front door and the white Ford station wagon parked in their bumpy gravel driveway. “I will be

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home late tonight. Last day of stocktake, so you'll have to cook your own dinner. I put sausages in the fridge. Just cook some mashed potatoes to go with it."

"Great!"

Nicolas Rossi—Nicoli on his birth certificate, but that's a story for another time—a widower and single father of one, Jonathan Rossi, is the manager of the local Woolworths Supermarket. He has been the manager for the past five years and took only two weeks' leave when his wife, Mary, disappeared. He really wasn't in the right state to return to work, but he didn't have the time to mourn: the mortgage and bills still had to be paid, and food put on the table. Not that Jonathan has let on, but in the first few months after she vanished, he heard his father crying late at night when he thought Jonathan was asleep. Although losing his mother was devastating, and he has been terribly sad since his mother kissed him good night for the last time on the way out the door for her after-dinner walk, the fear he felt upon hearing the pain in his father's cries and moans changed how he saw his father and the world itself....

Jonathan waited until he heard his father's engine fade down the street, then rolled out of bed and headed to the toilet. He's glad his father won't be home until late. Since he spent the entire school holidays in *boring* vacation care, he has been waiting for the opportunity to search his father's room and office for anything that might help him find out where his mother may have gone.

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By the time Jonathan left his front door with a heavy, full school bag—containing every textbook and related exercise book that he would need for every class—heading towards the bus stop where the school bus to St Batholomew's picks up the other Catholic kids that live on the south side of town, his thoughts had drifted away from his missing mother to the day ahead. Over the past few weeks, his mind had conjured up all sorts of horrible, mean kids waiting for him at the bus stop and the *snobby* school itself. There has always been a heated rivalry between St Batholomew's and South Junction Public School. The rivalry is so intense that his old classmates didn't even know he was born a Catholic. If they did, he would have been the target of their daily thumping instead of that unfortunate boy whose leg got broken by the back leg of a cow when he was retrieving a cricket ball from the neighbouring farm. The kid wasn't even playing cricket. He was just sitting under a tree eating his lunch, minding his own business, when the school's biggest bully forced him to climb the fence and retrieve the ball. The poor kid now has a bung leg that is more crooked than Jonathan's next-door neighbour's rundown old front paling fence. And that fence doesn't even stop the local dogs from shitting in his yard. Jonathan is probably the only one at his old school who remembers the poor, unfortunate boy's actual name. The bullies called him Pinocchio, but everyone else just called him *the boy who got kicked by a cow*.

Jonathan looked down at his new blue school shirt, then at the surrounding neighbourhood. Fortunately, St Batholomew's school day begins almost an hour before classes at his old school. When he first heard that he had

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to be at school by 7:45, he thought it was ludicrous, outrageous, preposterous, and downright mean. However, the moment he saw his new uniform, he was glad that he would be on the bus long before any of the South Junction students were out walking to school. And considering St Batholomew's finishes half an hour before South Junction, he can be home before anyone sees him. The longer it takes for them to find out that he defected to the enemy, the better it will be for him. Once that dog is off the chain, he will have to spend his afternoons and weekends hiding inside his bedroom.

The rivalry in South Junction—he doesn't understand why it's called South Junction since there isn't a North, West, or even an East Junction—isn't just between the schools; it extends to the greater population. Since there are only two primary schools and the town is made up of about 60% Catholics, who tend to live on the north side of South Junction, the townspeople's attitudes are ingrained from a young age by their older siblings and parents. The town itself has an invisible border with the shopping area in the centre of town, designated as the demilitarised zone, and is the only area where they get along, albeit sometimes uncomfortably. There is a spattering from both sides who live outside their own areas, but they are either too stupid, too poor to care, or believe that the town would be a better place if we all just lived together in harmony, singing Kumbaya. Jonathan's opinion on the matter is fluid. At this moment, as he heads to the prison bus, he is on the side of segregation.

The moment he turned the corner, heading towards the bus stop, his heart dropped into his stomach. Standing in a close group, looking very intimidating, a half

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dozen or so well-groomed students gathered to the right of the path. The moment one of them noticed him, they all turned their attention towards him, and not in a flag-waving, cheering, here-comes-the-Queen sort of attention. More like, here comes the last human left standing in a vampire-takes-over-the-world sort of movie.

Jonathon swallowed hard, then felt for the comb in his back pocket, wishing it were a flick-knife.

The closer he got, the more intense their stares became, as did their whispers and giggles.

He stopped a few metres from the group, set his heavy bag down on the path, then took out his copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and did his best to ignore their interrogation.

After reading a paragraph—he didn't remember a single word—he felt someone approaching.

When a pair of well-polished shoes appeared beneath his book, Jonathan looked up.

"Are you the boy whose mother drowned in the river?"

Jonathan looked at the short, blonde, skinny kid, then glanced towards the others, all watching on in expectation. "Do you want a punch in the face?"

The kid started shaking. "No."

"Then I suggest you go back and tell your friends that if anyone asks that again, I will come to their house in the middle of the night and smother them with their posh pillows."

"Okay," he said with a quiver.

"Well, why are you still here?"

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The kid turned and ran back to the group, who suddenly swallowed him up like the hooker in the front row of a scrum. The boy stayed hidden during the brief group discussion, where the occasional accusatory glare and threatening posturing further distracted him from the drama playing out in Maycomb County.

Jonathan suddenly felt guilty. It was obvious that he was just the unlucky designated representative and shouldn't have borne the brunt of his fury.

A sudden image of his father's raised eyebrows agreed with his summation.

The nuns at your new school will help you manage your emotions!

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tall, pretty, and physically maturing girl appear from the side of the scrum and head briskly towards him.

She held out her hand. "I'm Kathy. Sorry about that. I told them not to do it."

Jonathan looked at the hand and then back at the big brown eyes of the prettiest girl he's seen on this side of town. "Jonathan."

"Have you changed to our school?"

He thought it was obvious since he was wearing their bright St Batholomew's *bully-attracting* uniform, but he just nodded.

"Welcome." She raised her well-groomed eyebrows. "But if you want to survive your first day, I suggest you don't threaten any more of us. The last kid to come from South Junction Public didn't last the week before he and his whole family left town." This time she winked. "That was after he got out of hospital...."

She smiled, then turned just as the bus pulled to a stop.

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Jonathan wondered how she knew he used to go to South Junction Public....

On the bus ride to school, he sat on his own, doing his best to concentrate on his book and not the group whispering behind him. However, Kathy's big brown eyes, long dark hair, and beautiful smile kept replacing the words on the page.

When the bus stopped, he waited until the bus was all but empty before getting up and following the last of the students towards the exit, hoping no one would notice him at the back of the dozen or so students as they entered the schoolyard. However, when he stepped onto the path, Kathy was waiting for him just inside the front gate.

"I assume you are in grade six," she said. "You look too cranky to be in grade five."

He didn't understand what she meant, but he just nodded. "I have to go to the office first."

"I will take you there. No one will bother you that way." Kathy nodded to the playground to her right. "There is only one thing they hate more than those of us who live south of town, and that is those who come here from South Junction Public."

"That's just great!"

Jonathan did his best to keep his eyes on the front stairs and not on the schoolyard around him as he followed Kathy towards the entrance, which looked more like a church archway than a primary school front door. However, it didn't take long before the screams and laughter of the playground faded away until the distant traffic and the local wildlife became the soundtrack to his walk of shame. The only things missing were the

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welcoming committee's chants of blasphemy and heathen, and the pelting of rotten fruit.

Kathy stopped at the bottom of the stairs, then turned. "Don't worry, they will get bored with you soon. This is only my second year here, and they don't pay me no mind anymore."

He wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing, but what he wanted to say was: that's because you're a beautiful angel....

Kathy left him sitting on a chair in front of the office counter, waiting for someone to come and take him to his homeroom. There are four grade six classes, so he has a one-in-four chance of being in the same homeroom as Kathy, but he wasn't sure if that would be a good thing. What if he is forced to introduce himself to the class? What he says could set the tone for the rest of the year.

The office lady walked out from behind the counter and handed him a school diary and his class timetable. "I suggest you comb that hair of yours before entering the classroom. And maybe suggest to your father that a proper haircut would be a better solution."

He noticed she didn't say, 'mother'.

"I got one yesterday."

"Not by our recommended barber." She put out her hand. "Comb."

Jonathan reluctantly retrieved his comb from his back pocket, then stood there while she vigorously straightened his part and removed several knots, just as several late arrivals giggled as they walked briskly by, heading towards classrooms at the end of the hall. Not the start at his new school he'd hoped for.

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The office lady stopped just before the last doorway on the left. "This is your homeroom. Normally, you need to be seated before 8 am. Just wait here until you are told to come in." A few moments later, she walked back out the door, heading back towards the office without looking at him.

He resisted the urge to stick his head in the door and take a peek.

Footsteps preceded a short, stern-looking, well-fed nun who appeared in the doorway. "I am Sister June. Come in and stand at the front and introduce yourself and tell the class something interesting about you."

Crap, he thought.

Before going to sleep the previous night, he made a list of possible things to say if called upon. Initially, at the top of his *likes-list* were punching bullies on the nose and kicking teachers in the shins, but knew it wouldn't be the best idea, so he decided he needed to say something that would be interpreted as a warning to the class: a message to those who took pleasure by picking on the new kid, that he wouldn't take shit from anyone, but also wouldn't get him into trouble with his teachers on his first day. Although he is mad at his father for sending him to the school of the sworn enemy, he didn't want to add more pressure on the shoulders of a man obviously struggling with his wife's disappearance.

His mother's soft, understanding smile tightened the muscles in his chest....

Once facing the class, he looked up. "I am Jonathan Rossi. I am new here." He looked to Sister June, who gestured for him to continue. "My favourite subjects are maths, science, and English. And I like reading,

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fishing..." He paused for dramatic effect. "And boxing!" The last word he emphasised as he scanned the eyes of the boys in the room. The skinny kid from the bus stop swallowed hard. Jonathan was surprised that the small boy was in grade 6. He looked to be no more than ten years old.

"Take a seat over there," Sister June said, pointing to an empty seat in the second row near the window, just across the aisle from *said* skinny kid. "And raise your hand and say *present* when your name is called."

He glanced around the room as he headed for his desk, wondering if his speech had the desired effect. However, he couldn't tell if the soft whispers, accusatory glances, and silent innuendos were to do with his words or the fact that they all knew about his mother.

Unfortunately, his mother's disappearance in January the previous year was all over the local news for months. Not a lot happens in South Junction, except for domestic fights, drunkenness, and the occasional break-in. He read in the paper that his mother's disappearance was the first in over twenty years, and the last time someone was murdered in South Junction was in the early fifties, when a man killed his own brother for stealing his wife. During the early weeks of his mother's disappearance, Jonathan overheard his neighbour talking loudly in his backyard, saying that this town has been starved of any interesting news and that the Rossi tragedy is all anyone could talk about. His moronic neighbour said it in a way that made it sound as though it was their fault he had to hear about it every day. At the time, Jonathan was in his treehouse in their backyard, the place he went to think and be alone, and sometimes play with his homemade slingshot. That

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day, he had to use all his willpower to stop himself from picking a berry from a branch and shooting the wanker between the eyes.

“Pipe down!” Sister June said.

Immediately, the class went silent.

Jonathan sat down and nodded to the skinny kid.

The kid returned a weak smile.

Sister June began taking the role....

After the last kid raised his hand and said *present*, Sister June read a few announcements, then sat down as everyone in the class opened their desks and took out what they needed for their next two classes. Jonathan looked at his schedule, then retrieved the pile of textbooks and newly covered exercise books from his bag and stacked them inside his desk, leaving the books for English and religious studies on his lap. He thought it was strange to have different classrooms for different subjects. At South Junction Primary, all classes were taught by the same teacher in the same room. Apparently, it is the same at St Batholomew’s up until Grade 5. However, since St Batholomew’s is run by the same organisation that runs St Patrick’s Catholic College, they organise the Grade 6 classes in much the same way as the neighbouring high school, so the transition the following year is easier. Jonathan knows that if they did that at South Junction, half the kids wouldn’t go to class; they would just take off after roll call....

An electronic bell rang out around the school, startling him.

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Another difference: at his old school, someone had to pull on a rope to ring the bell.

“Jonathan!”

He looked to his right, where David—David Dickson, according to Sister June’s role—looked at him sheepishly, holding out a folded piece of paper.

Jonathan took the note, read it, then glared at David before picking up his books and heading for the door. He didn’t know what to make of it. It was from Kathy, and although he hoped to run into her again, he didn’t know her, or any of the students who caught his bus, for that matter, so he wasn’t yet prepared to take what she said at face value. Hanging out with those students who are just rung above him on the ladder of the school’s social order may be a big mistake. He needs to understand the lay of the land first. After all, he would have been at the top of the pecking order this year if he hadn’t been forced to change schools. Last year, he was accepted into the cool group after jumping out the window during Home Economics. It was a dare Ernie Hanson, the meanest kid in grade 5 last year—and probably grade 6 as well—put to him, and although he got 2 cuts of the cane, he felt it was worth it. Well, that was until he saw the disappointment and sadness in his father’s eyes....

The moment he stepped out the door, he walked into Kathy.

Kathy looked at him sheepishly. “What’s your first class?”

“English.”

“Mine too.” She started walking down the hall next to him. “Do you know where it is?”

“No.”

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“I will take you there.”

He looked into her suspicious eyes. “What’s your second class?”

“Religious studies.”

“Can I see your schedule?”

She let out a big sigh. “Yes, we have the same schedule. And yes, I was visited by Brother Carmichael, our principal, yesterday, and told to make sure you got to the right classes on time. He also said that it is my responsibility to make sure you understand the school rules and how to carry yourself in the St Batholomew’s way.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Kathy glanced back over her shoulder and spoke softly. “For a starter, it means not using the word *hell* in that way. This is a Catholic school after all, and they take their religion very seriously.”

“For Christ’s sake,” he said under his breath.

“Look, I know you had a difficult time last year, but it would be best if you just kept your head down and tried not to make any waves.” She glanced at one of the teachers standing outside of a classroom, making sure everyone moved quickly to their first class, and whispered. “You have a lot to learn about surviving in this school, so my advice: keep that surly attitude of yours in check. It’s my life on the line as well.”

Jonathan smiled. “Surly: that’s a big word for a sixth grader. You must be very smart.”

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be here....”

Jonathan wondered what she meant, but didn’t want to keep the conversation going.

Chapter 2

The first two classes went by without any real drama except for more whispers and glares. Jonathan enjoyed English more than he did at his old school, but religious studies seemed like a big waste of time. Since his mother vanished, he no longer sees the world through the same simplistic religious lens as before. Although he celebrated his Holy Communion and Confirmation with his mother by his side, he hasn't attended Mass since that awful day. His father gave him the choice: attend Mass with Aunt Caroline, his mother's sister, or stay home with him.

Nicolas' parents were Italian but didn't attend Mass and didn't pass on any of their old beliefs to their son. Something to do with how the Italians were treated in Australia after the Second World War, which forced them to keep to themselves—hence the more Aussie version of his name. He doesn't remember his father's parents; they both died a few months apart when Jonathan was about three. Apparently, after Jonathan's parent's first married, his father attended Mass with his new wife, but after a few heated discussions, they decided it was more

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blasphemous for him to attend when he didn't believe in, or was indoctrinated into, the Catholic way of life. He knows there is more to it. He has seen how most of the congregation look down their noses at those from the south. Jonathan used to go every Saturday evening with his mother. Apparently, there is an unwritten rule in South Junction that Sunday morning services are not for the riff-raff from the south, even if you pray to the same God. Jonathan suspects there is more to his father's decision, since Aunt Caroline kept turning up every Sunday morning for the first few months after her sister disappeared, trying to convince his father that his son's immortal soul was at stake. He thinks that his father knew he wouldn't choose to go; that's why he gave him the choice. He is not sure his father wants him to be influenced by the Bennetts' attitudes. However, he was glad he had been given the option, since he didn't know Aunt Caroline or her family from a box of stray cats. When he asked his father why they didn't visit his mother's sister's family, his father just sighed and said her family is complicated.

Maybe, he thought, that so-called complication is the reason why Mum disappeared.

After returning his books to his homeroom, he retrieved his lunch from his bag and headed towards the playground with butterflies eating away at his appetite. Luckily, Vegemite sandwiches sit easy in a nervous gut.

He stopped at the edge of the large playground and studied the organised chaos in front of him. Just like his old school, each grade had their own unmarked areas, and within those areas, different social groups gathered, especially in the senior grades: four, five and six. In the

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junior grades, the lines were not yet so defined. He suddenly realised that everyone knew their place in the social quagmire, everyone, that is, except for *Jonathan Rossi*. He glanced towards the front gate and the road home and wondered what would happen if he just left.

"I reckon you might make the gate, but see Mr Boyle over near the grade three playground; he once made the Stawell Gift final and used to be a New South Wales state sprinter. The last kid who tried to make a run for it was tackled before he got to the corner."

Jonathan looked at the boy and recognised him from the bus this morning. The thick coke-bottle glasses and knobby knees gave the impression he was a typical *Poindexter*, but the olive skin and sandy-blond hair showed he had potential: with a few minor alterations, he could be almost cool. Girls love the surfer type.

"Did Kathy send you?"

"Maybe."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"I wish. She said boys our age are too immature."

He rolled his eyes. "I reckon she must be stuck-up? Pretty girls usually are."

"She likes to act tough, but we must if we're to survive here. If you show weakness, they will come for you." He held out his hand. "I'm Harrison, but my friends call me Harry."

Jonathan wondered who *they* were....

"Jonathan," he said without shaking his hand. "And my friends, *and enemies*, call me Jonathan."

Harry shrugged. "You have two options, Jonathan." He pointed to an area where several kids sat eating alone. "Sit with the kids without any friends. That area is for all

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the losers, from any grade. They usually end up in the library not long after eating, before they get picked on.” He turned towards the other corner of the yard. “Or you can sit with us. There is safety in numbers.”

Jonathan pointed to the group of tall, athletic-looking boys who were obviously part of the cool gang of St Batholomew’s by the way they strutted in front of a group of girls, all of whom had similar long hair and matching headbands. The boys were tossing around a cricket ball while the girls watched on like American cheerleaders. “What can you tell me about that lot?”

“Come and sit with us, and we will tell you what-is-what. It will save you a lot of pain ... and possibly some broken bones. Besides, Kathy would kill me if I told you anything without her.”

Jonathan sighed. “Lead the way.”

As they headed toward the back corner of the schoolyard, where the same kids from the bus stop sat in the shade of a large gum tree, he noticed another difference from his old school: not a Koorie kid in sight. At South Junction Primary, there are many Koorie students, and before he was taken out, he had many Koorie friends in his friend group. They were the coolest kids there. He suddenly felt as though he had somehow landed in a different country.

Kathy stood up and brushed the dirt and leaves from her skirt. “Jonathan, let me make the introductions.” She pointed to David. “Obviously, you already know David and Harry. Next to Harry is Ronald Bickmore. Everyone calls him Ronny. Then we have Claire Donaghue, who missed the bus this morning. She is in my homeroom.

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And finally, Gerald Brownlee: he is in the room next to yours with Ronny. He hasn't got a mother either."

Gerald raised his hand. "Left when I was two."

Jonathan looked around the group—pausing on Ronny's bright red hair—and wondered how this bunch of misfits were any different to the group of losers Harry had just pointed out. "Harry said you would fill me in on what-is-what in this stupid school."

Kathy smiled. "It will be my pleasure."

For the rest of recess, Jonathan listened to every word as though his life depended on it. He learned that the so-called popular group was made up mostly of cricketers and netball players, and that their parents were amongst the wealthiest in town. Not only do you need to be good at sports, but you must also come from a well-to-do family to be accepted into that group. And of course, the school captain and other prefects all come from that group. He also found out that this school has band nerds and geeks—David is in both groups. At his old school, you were either cool or not, with nothing in between. Apparently, these social groups mirror those in the Catholic high school over the back fence. At that moment, Jonathan realised he didn't even know which high school he would be attending next year. He always thought he would go to the public high school in Tallowsville, about forty-five minutes west of South Junction, like everyone who has ever graduated from South Junction Public. Many buses pick up students from South Junction and the surrounding districts every morning and transport them to Tallowsville. Now he is not so sure where he's going next year.

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When Father Riley and his father told him he would be going to St Batholomew's this year, he was confused. Considering his father doesn't practice Catholicism, and he himself hasn't been to church for just over a year, he assumed it was just because of his behaviour. He thought that the following year, he would go back to being an atheist. A year of a good old Catholic education would set him right, and he could get back to being just like Nicolas. But in hindsight, he now thinks his father has decided his son is a Catholic after all. Maybe Aunt Caroline finally got her way.

Jonathan made a mental note to find out for sure whether he is a full-time Catholic or just an atheist on some sort of weird sabbatical. Something he thinks should be his decision, not a result based on the best argument from family elders.

He looked around the schoolyard to see if he could see anyone who could be his cousin. Maybe Kathleen will know something about why his mother disappeared! Unfortunately, the last time he saw her, she was wearing pigtails and carrying a Barbie doll. He is pretty sure he is older than her, but from what he remembers, not by much, so she could be any of the girls in grade 5 or 6.

The bell rang out around the playground.

"So, Jonathan, will you come back here at lunchtime?"

"I've got no better place to be."

Kathy smiled. "We are now a group of seven."

Everyone smiled and high-fived each other.

Jonathan didn't think the extra person would make much of a difference if the popular group decided to attack.

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He walked into science feeling a little better about the year ahead. However, his optimism lasted all but a few seconds before a tall blonde boy—he now knew to be the newly elected king of the school—walked into the room.

“Hey, there’s the rat from South Junction Public. I think we need to get the exterminator back in.”

The class erupted in laughter.

Jonathan looked from the eyes of Grant Williamson—who was throwing a hard red cricket ball up and down as though he was about to run towards the crease—to the boy standing next to him wearing a pair of wicket-keeper gloves.

Tony Scanlan raised his gloved hands. “Yeah. We need to be careful before we catch the *stupid* disease.”

This was the moment Jonathan had dreaded. Based on the conversation during recess, he knew these two would come for him at some point, but he hoped they would at least give him the first week. Kathy and his new friend group warned him to be ready; that he needed to prepare himself. They said the best course of action was just to ignore them and let their jibes slide off his back like a duck. However, Jonathan doesn’t like the water, especially since his mother drowned in the river—apparently—and over the past year, he has become less tolerant of bullies. “If stupid were a disease, you would have died from it not long after you were born.” Jonathan looked to the newly elected student captain. “I assume you’re the famous Grant Williamson, school captain and captain of the 1st cricket team?”

Grant threw the cricket ball to his buddy, then stepped forward so his chin almost rested against Jonathan’s nose, and looked to Kathy and Harry, who were standing to

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one side. "I see you have been well informed by your new Southie mates."

Kathy just glared at him. When she first arrived at the school, she had been invited to sit with the popular kids in Grade 5. However, by the end of the first week, they found out she lived south of town, and the invitation was quickly revoked. At this school, just being pretty doesn't give you a free pass.

"Yeah," Jonathan said matter-of-factly, then pointed his thumb at his mate. "If that bloke is on your team, I suggest you start scouting for a replacement; it won't be long before natural selection takes him out."

Tony Scanlan, vice-captain of both the school and the senior cricket team, snarled. "Funny. I suggest you spend your lunch in the library. Otherwise, you'll be eating a knuckle sandwich."

"Don't let him get under your skin, Tony," Grant said. "He's just trying to bait you."

"Yeah, Tony," Jonathan said. "Do what your *master* says."

The silence in the classroom had become thick with anticipation of a flogging.

Suddenly, everyone turned away when a tall, square-headed man with thinning black hair, wearing a plaid shirt and tie, covering his pregnant-like belly, walked into the room and pointed at Jonathan. "John Rossi, the Principal, would like to see you."

"My name's Jonathan!"

The class took a sudden breath....

"And my name is Mr Peterson. And if you talk to me like that again, you will find out what six of the best feels like. Now get to the office."

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Jonathan swallowed hard. South Junction Public had just banned the cane under the government's mandate, but he surmised that private Catholic schools could make their own rules.

Grant dropped his shoulder into Jonathan, knocking him off balance as he passed by. "Welcome to St Batholomew's, Orphan Jonny!"

Mr Peterson ignored the physical exchange, reinforcing the special treatment that certain individuals get at this school. "Settle down, class; we have a lot to cover today."

As he walked towards the office, Jonathan chastised himself for letting Mr Peterson get under his skin. Although he hates being called John or Johnny, up to that point, he thought he had dealt with Grant Williamson and his flunky quite well. One simple loss of control, and Grant had the last word, no doubt feeling as if he had come out on top in their first confrontation.

By the time Jonathan returned to the science lab, the class was already half over.

He handed a note to Mr Petersen, who read it quickly, then pointed to the seat next to Harry.

"What was that about?" Harry said, handing Jonathan a worksheet detailing the official scientific method.

He glanced at David in the row behind them. "I will tell you all at lunch."

Kathy's look portrayed the same question.

Jonathan looked across the room to the other side, where Grant Williamson sat next to one of the netball

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girls. From where he was sitting, he could only see the back of her long blonde hair, but the moment she turned and smiled at something Grant had said, he realised the girl might be Kathleen Bennett, his cousin.

He leant over and spoke softly. "Harry, what's the name of the girl sitting next to Grant?"

"She's out of your league."

"I don't want to go with her. I want to know her name"

"Kathleen Bennett, and she is Grant's girlfriend."

At that moment, Kathleen looked his way with what looked like fear in her eyes.

"That's unfortunate," Jonathan said, then looked down at the worksheet. "What do I do with this?"

"Just read it, then answer the questions on the back."

Although science wasn't a separate subject last year, Jonathan already understood the scientific method and the principles that underpin it; he has a book all about it at home and is fascinated by how scientists work stuff out.

He turned over the page and answered all the questions quickly, then sat back and stared at the back of Kathleen's head. He couldn't care less who his cousin dated, and whether she was keeping the fact that she has a Southie cousin from her posh mates. He is more concerned with what she may know about his mother's disappearance. However, he may be able to use the fact that they are cousins to his advantage, especially if she wants to keep it a secret. A little family blackmail won't hurt anyone....

"Why are you staring at Kathleen?" Kathy said. "She is the biggest bitch at this school."

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He looked to Kathy, who had swapped seats with Harry. "Why, because she has the same name as you?"

"No, smartarse. My full name is Katherine, not Kathleen."

"I'm just messing with ya. I was just thinking up ways to piss off Grant. That guy is so full of himself. He wouldn't last a day at South Junction. The Koories would sort him out quick smart."

"There was an Aboriginal student here last year," Kathy said. "But she was being sponsored by one of the local rich, *pious* families. Apparently, the P&C and the church established a scholarship to provide a better education for those less fortunate. However, I don't think she liked being paraded around as an example of how *altruistic* our school is."

Jonathan has always considered himself *well-read*, especially for someone so young. At least that's what his mother used to say. However, he had no clue what *altruistic* meant. He made a mental note to look it up later.

He nodded, hoping his agreement hid his confusion.

"And guess which bitch's mother is president of the P&C?"

Aunt Caroline, he thought.

"Kathleen Bennett's mother?" he questioned.

Kathleen nodded. "What a bitch!"

Jonathan sensed there was something to Kathy's vicious dislike of his cousin, but quickly changed the subject after the conversation he had with Brother Carmichael came to mind.

Looks like this year's scholarship recipient is a poor boy who lost his mother.

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A sudden vision of Aunt Caroline standing up in front of the school, telling everyone how she had saved the soul of a poor, motherless relative, sent a shiver up his spine.

"Someone just walked across your grave."

He turned to Kathy. "Huh?"

"You shivered for no reason. It means someone just walked across the ground where you will be buried."

"Really?"

"Probably not, but you never know."

"How come I don't see any of you in the street after school? It's a little strange that we live in the same area, but we have never crossed paths."

"Our parents won't allow us to roam the streets on the south side of town. Apparently, it is too dangerous. Besides, we all meet at Harry's before South Junction finishes for the day. He has a cool basement where we meet each afternoon for study-group."

"You study every afternoon?"

"Well, we get our homework done there, and if there is a test, we may study a bit, but mostly we just hang out and have fun. You should come. Harry's mum is really nice."

Mr Peterson cleared his throat, put his index finger across his mouth, then pointed down at his table.

Jonathan dropped his head and whispered. "I would have to clear it with Dad first, maybe tomorrow afternoon." He's sure his father won't mind, especially since he won't be home until late, but tonight he already has plans.

"Can't you ring him at work?" Kathy said just as softly.

"I guess."

The bell rang for the end of class.

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“I have to go to the loo,” Jonathan said. “I’ll see you in maths.”

“Don’t be late. Sister Agnus is worse than Sister June.”

He waited until Kathy, Harry, and David had left, then followed Kathleen out the door.

And after Grant left her, heading in the opposite direction, he took the opportunity to fall in behind her.

He got as close as he could, then leant in near her right ear. “We need to talk.”

Kathleen glanced over her shoulder, then at the hallway around them. “Not here.”

“Fine, but don’t make me wait.”

Maths went by without a hitch. Out of all the subjects, Jonathan finds that maths makes the most sense. He finds comfort when the answer is either right or wrong, black or white, yes or no. Unlike the past year, during which the more he has learnt, the less he understood. The possible answers to the ever-increasing list of questions about his mother and the world in general seem to be exponential, and not in a way he could graph or draw any reasonable conclusions from.

The moment the bell rang, he headed for the door, hoping to see Kathleen step out of one of the other 6th-grade classrooms. Unfortunately, it appears his cousin isn’t as good at maths as he is; however, it appears that all of the *Southies* are, and that’s why he could feel them standing behind him.

“What’s the hurry?” Kathy said.

“I’m not in a hurry.”

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"It's okay to be scared of Grant and his mates. Everyone in the school is."

They all nodded their agreement.

"I'm not scared of that wanker."

"If you say so."

Kathleen looked his way from the end of the hallway, just above the stairs to the playground. However, she turned away when Grant and two of her friends appeared.

"I assume we are going to the same spot?"

"Yes, but don't you have to drop off your books and get your lunch from your bag?"

He looked back towards his homeroom, then set his books on top of the pile David was holding. "I ate it at first-break."

David looked at the books, then back at Jonathan. "Don't you pack enough food for both?"

"Nope. I'll just gutz down some bread when I get home."

"Okay, we will see you at our tree," Kathy said. "Don't get into any fights until we get there."

He didn't respond. He just headed down the hall, his eyes fixed on his cousin, who immediately went down the steps, dragging her friends with her.

"Are you Jonathan Rossi?"

Jonathan stopped and looked down at a kid who looked no more than seven years old. "Yeah."

He held out his hand. "Here."

"What's this?"

"Don't ask me. I wasn't allowed to open it."

"Who gave it to you?"

"The head girl."

"Kathleen Bennett?"

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The kid nodded, then turned and ran towards the stairs.

He looked at the folded note with sticky tape keeping it closed and unread.

“What’s that?” Kathy said, reappearing next to him like a Japanese ninja from his favourite martial arts movie. The only thing missing was the puff of smoke.

Jonathan slipped it into his pocket. “Nothin’; just something I have to take home.”

“Is that why you had to go to the principal’s office?”

He continued towards the stairs. “I don’t wanna repeat myself, so I’ll tell you all at the tree.”

By the time they arrived, the others had caught up.

“Did you see Grant and his mates gawking at us?” Harry said. “I hope they don’t come over to finish what they started in science.”

“Nah,” Kathy said. “They won’t do it in the playground. They will come for us outside of the schoolyard, so we need to be careful. No walking to the bus stop on your own.”

“Why would they come for you? It’s me they want.”

“They’re always looking for an excuse to enforce their dominance over the smart kids from the south. You’re just the latest excuse.”

Smart kids? What does she mean?

“So, Jonathan, Harry told me you got called to the office,” Claire said. “You didn’t get the cane, did you?”

Jonathan looked from her short, black, bobbed hair to the braces decorating her nice smile. She reminded him of Velma from Scooby-Doo. “No. Brother Carmichael just wanted to introduce himself since he wasn’t in the office this morning. Plus, I think he wanted to warn me

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about what a great opportunity I've been given coming to this *wonderful* school."

"Yeah, he gives that speech to all the scholarship kids."

Well, that answered one of his questions. "How many scholarship kids are there?"

Let's see," David said with a smile, while he purposely pointed at each of them as he counted. "With you, that makes seven in grade 6."

"What? Are you all here on scholarships?"

They all nodded.

"Our scholarships last until we graduate high school," Kathy added. "I reckon they only do it so their overall school marks are better and they can brag about it."

"Yeah," Harry added, "But I wouldn't say that to Brother Carmichael. He would kick you out just to show you that it's not the case."

"There was another kid with us at the beginning of last year," Gerald said. "But he didn't maintain his grades. They booted him after mid-year exams."

"But they gave some lame excuse about his parents lying on the application," Ronny added.

"Was he from South Junction?"

"No," Harry said. "He was from a public school in Tallowsville."

"Except for you," Kathy said. "We're all from another place. Our families moved here so we would be close to the school."

"I'm from Orange," David said. "My parents wanted to get me out of my old school. I wasn't treated very well there."

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Harry raised his eyebrows. "Didn't you think it was odd that we all live in the poorest part of town? Our parents couldn't afford anything better."

"Where just a bunch of smart paupers," Claire added. "And that's why the so-called cool kids don't like us. Their money can't buy them brains."

Ronny raised his hand to Claire, who obliged with a high five.

Before his mother disappeared, Jonathan never considered whether they were poor. They always had food on the table, and he never heard any arguments between his parents about money.

What Kathy had said about the Koorie girl echoed in the back of his mind. "Was that Koorie girl on the same scholarship as us?"

"No, she was on a special scholarship."

"Yeah," Ronny said. "They splashed her image all over the papers to show what a great, selfless school we have...."

That answered Jonathan's question about what altruistic meant.

"The poor girl looked terrified in the pictures," Kathy said softly. "My mum reckons it was a horrible thing to do to her. She said they were just using her to raise the profile of the school to compete with metropolitan schools so they can attract better students."

"Where is she now?"

"No idea. She's not at St Patrick's, that's for sure..."

David opened his lunch box, then held out a ham sandwich for Jonathan. "Mum always makes me too much. I think she is hoping I will have a growth spurt."

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"I'm not a scab! I can bring my own lunch. We're not that poor."

Kathy rolled her eyes. "He didn't say you were. And we're not poor unless you're comparing us to the rich snobs that control this school. Besides, he normally gives the extra sandwich to Gerald, but obviously, he doesn't need it."

The others laughed, including Gerald.

"It's what friends do," Kathy added when she saw his hesitancy.

His shoulders dropped. "Thanks, David."

"No probs."

Gerald stood, then shook his belly up and down, the ringlets in his curly hair bouncing in time. "Don't worry, I've already started to shoot up. All my brothers used to be fat like me before puberty, but now they are all beanpoles."

This time, everyone laughed, but mostly out of embarrassment.

The conversation soon became light and humorous as they ate. Jonathan's attention kept drifting to the note in his pocket. There is no way he'll be able to wait until after school to read it. There is still an hour and a half of classes.

Kathy moved a little closer to Jonathan. "So, Jonathan, how do you think your first day is going?"

"It's had its ups and downs, but on the grand scale of things, I think more up than down."

"That's a positive."

"I guess it could have been worse."

"So will you ring your dad so you can come to our study group?"

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"I'm not supposed to call him at work unless it is an emergency. I will ask him about it when he gets home. I reckon it'll be good for tomorrow."

"Okay," she replied, but Jonathan could tell she was disappointed.

He looked at Harry, who suddenly looked away. He could tell Harry was a little jealous of the attention Kathy was giving him.

After a few moments, Jonathan moved over next to Harry. "So, young Harrison, what do you do for fun outside of your schoolwork? Cow tipping? Snow-droppin', perhaps?"

"What's that?" Harry replied.

"Which one?"

Both, they all said in unison.

"You guys need to get out more!" He adjusted his sitting position as they all moved closer, forming a circle. "You know how cows sleep standing up?"

They nodded, but Jonathan could tell they weren't so sure.

"Cow tipping is a game played usually after the sun has gone down." He held up his hands, palms forward. "You sneak up on the sleeping cows and just push them over. Whoever tips over the most cows wins."

"That sounds made up," Kathy said. "They're not stiff or made of plaster."

Jonathan shrugged.

Gerald raised his eyebrows. "Have you done it?"

The answer was no, but he had heard it many times at his old school. That said, he had the same reaction as Kathy. However, it's best not to let the truth get in the

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way of a funny story. "I cannot confirm or deny that statement."

"What about snow-dropping?" David said hesitantly but pronounced in his refined way. "It's too hot here to get any snow."

"Snow-droppin' has nothin' to do with the weather."

"What then?" Kathy said suspiciously.

He looked around the playground. "Do you sometimes hear about stuff being nicked from the posh kids here?"

"Yeah," Claire said. "They are always banging on about it. They have neighbourhood watch meetings to discuss it all the time."

"Well, most of it probably disappears because of snow-droppin'. How do you think kids from the south of town get new clothes? Their parents can't afford to buy any, especially the fancy brands." He leaned forward and spoke softly. "Snow-droppin' is what we call it when we go out at night and steal clothes from clotheslines. Kids from the south of town sneak into the posh neighbourhoods in groups and raid the clotheslines in the middle of the night."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. I have done it, but only once. I almost shit myself. And later I took them back because I felt guilty."

"Besides all the dangerous stuff, what else do you do for fun?" Harry said.

"Fishing. Do you like fishing?"

"Haven't really done it before."

"What? That can't be true. You really do live in a different Australia from the rest of us. I will have to take you."

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Harry smiled. "For sure!"

The bell rang for the end of lunch.

"Maybe we can go this weekend." Jonathan paused, then smiled. "But if we see any *real* Southies, we tell them you're a cousin visiting from out of town."

"I am okay with that."

On their way back to their homerooms to gather the books for the last two classes, Jonathan stopped outside the toilet block. "I need to take a piss."

Kathy rolled her eyes. "I don't like that word. Can't you just say you need to go to the toilet?"

Jonathan smiled. "I think you're becoming too posh. Hanging out with me should set you straight."

She rolled her eyes, then continued to the stairs with the others.

Once inside one of the toilets, he sat down on the closed lid and slowly removed the tape from the note.

*Meet me behind Gino's fruit
market in town at 4. And come
alone!*

Jonathan read the note once more, then flushed it down the toilet