



Somerset College

2017



write a book
in a day



**THE KIDS'
CANCER
PROJECT**

Terry the Tasmanian Tiger

By TheSS



Terry the Tasmanian Tiger

Written and Illustrated By:

Jina Hong

Kelly Park

Nicholas Sandeman

Monique Nguyen

Trudi Morris

Uni Kyeong

Ruby Sherrington

Kyah Anderson

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Message to the reader...

Over the last seven hours, we have become quite attached to our protagonist, Terry, and his amazing friends. We hope that you also fall in love with their journey and enjoy reading the book as much as we enjoyed writing it!



Chapter 1

We live in a beautiful place where flora and fauna thrive. The vast expanse of the Australian outback is home to an array of animals who scurry about their day. The golden wattle and eucalyptus sway in the soft, warm breeze and provide shade from the sweltering heat. Most days the animals lay out in these cool areas and nap and dance and eat to their hearts content.

Then there are the birds, the birds who soar high above us and, who swoop low to the ground. The kookaburras, the cockatoos and the parrots with their stunning, colourful feathers parade around and take in the picturesque scenery. Not all of the birds fly around and fill the expansive, blue sky with their colour. The flightless emu bird prances around on its long legs, like it was strutting down a runway.

In the midst of this exquisite place, is Evandale primary school, a quaint little school that is one of a kind. It is filled with few students of a wide range of nationalities who love to learn about their bush surroundings and the animals who occupy it. Even though they love all of the animals who come to visit them, however, they do have a favourite, who lives a little further away. Terry the Tasmanian tiger spends his time travelling around the Australian outback and Tasmanian national parks. He sings and dances everywhere he goes through the night and into the small hours of the morning, and spends the day exploring new places and meeting new friends. No matter how far Terry ventures, he always comes back to visit Evandale once a year on a very special day. His birthday.

This year the children at Evandale started planning the bush extravaganza weeks in advance, they had crafted and hung banners from the native plants and flowers, they had made a huge, delicious cake and best of all, they had collected enough firewood to have a magnificent

bonfire to which they could dance to the light of all night. A group of students had also written a song to surprise Terry with at his party, a song they had taught all of the other children so that they could sing it to him together before they brought out his birthday cake. It went like this:

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

What did you eat Terry, what did you do?

Did you eat bush tucker and dance with kangaroo's?

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

What did you see Terry, where did you sleep?

Did you see amazing sights and stargaze where animals creep.

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

To celebrate his birthday under moonlight.

To dance and sing around the fire burning so bright.

Many people think that Tasmanian tigers are extinct, so the children must keep the news of Terry's arrival quiet. He is one of the last of his kind, which makes him even more special. He has a thin, but fuzzy coat and two eyes of a deep and beautiful emerald green colour. His body is very thin and lean, which makes him a fantastic runner! That's why the children call the black stripes he has on his lower back his racing stripes. There are many stories about how they have special powers that make him run faster that circulate around Evandale, just one of many stories told around the campfire about Terry.



Chapter 2

It was two days before Terry's birthday and the entire student body was buzzing with excitement. Terry always only wanted one thing for his birthday: yosterberries, they only thrive in the summer and Evandale is renowned for having the tastiest around. Everyone wanted to be involved, gathering the berries for Terry, so Miss Lotus organised an excursion to a nearby orchard to pick the berries.

On the day of the highly anticipated trip, all of the children were extremely eager to make Terry's birthday wish come true, and so excited in fact that they didn't notice one of the students had wandered off. Drew, a smaller, but brave seeker of adventure had gotten distracted and walked away from the group. After his short explore, he was upset that he was missing out on the fun and tried to catch up with the group, but on the way back to the orchard something caught his eye. A fragile, old fox with molting, grey hair following a mysterious man and an older lady. They were walking into a strange building that had duck egg blue paint peeling from its boxy concrete walls. It was small enough to be a single bedroom. Drew, filled with curiosity to why such a foreign-looking room would be there, snuck around the back and crouched himself near a window to try and listen to their hushed conversation. The woman inside had long, frizzy, dyed red hair and was wearing a flowing, deep purple dress. Her thin face and lips were turned down into a scowl, glaring into the timid eyes of the awkward, alarmingly short man standing next to her. He was barely the height of the window and Drew had to peer downwards into the room to see the top of his blonde, straight hair. He was dressed in a black tuxedo and long black boots that went up to his knees.

“Earl, I heard the children talking, and they have been planning the party for weeks now. Making banners, blowing up balloons. It will happen two days from now.” Whispered the woman.

“But Doris, how will we get in unnoticed if the whole primary will be there? And their teacher?” The short man, Earl, looked increasingly nervous and it was clear in his voice.

“We don’t have to get in unnoticed, we will hide in plain sight, everyone knows about the anticipated arrival of Terry. We will pose as excited community members and they are sure to let us join their celebrations. Then when no one is looking, we strike. Terry will be ours. I love this plan!” Doris menacingly chuckled.

Startled by this information, Drew hurried back to the group to tell them immediately of the strange conversation he had overheard. Why would anyone want to do anything to spoil the upcoming celebration? He thought the whole town was ecstatic about Terry’s visit. Sprinting past fields of tayberries and gooseberries, Drew ran and ran until he reached the orchard.

“Miss Lotus, Miss Lotus!” he yelled, approaching the group. “There’s something you need to see”

“What is it Drew, where have you been?” Miss Lotus replied in a concerned tone.

“Hurry, they might get away!” Drew pleaded, now attracting the attention of some other students.

“*Who* will get away, Drew, what is wrong?”

“The man and the fox and the old woman. They’re going to take Terry!”

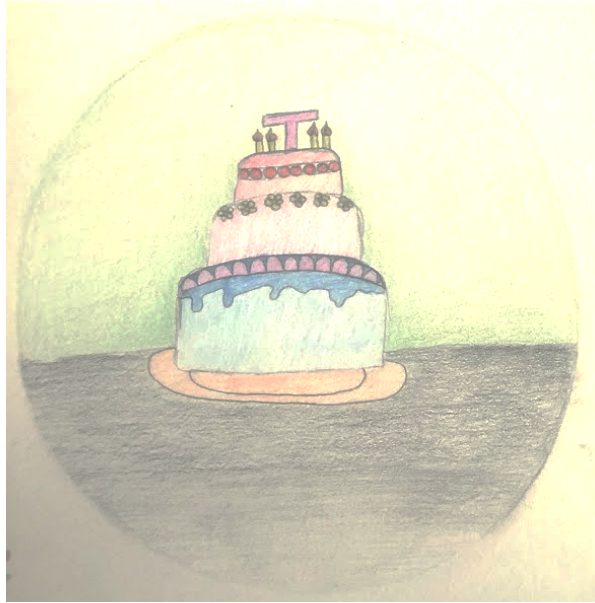
A group of nearby children who were picking berries burst into fits of laughter. One child cried out “Everyone in Evandale is too kind, who would ever hurt Terry? That’s just silly!”

“Drew, that’s enough” snapped Miss Lotus. “There’s no need to tell lies and worry the other children, what have we talked about Drew, no more of your shenanigans please.”

All of the children filed back onto the bus after ten more minutes of frantic berry picking, trying to pick out only the best and ripest fruit for Terry’s big gift. Drew remained at the back of the line, trying to decide what to do about what he had just heard, as he turned around he saw one other classmate was yet to file onto the bus. A young girl with long brown pigtails stood, staring at Drew, it was Riley.

“I believe you.” she whispered.

“Well, it looks like you’re the only one.” Drew replied, lifting his head from the ground to look up at her.



Chapter 3

Today was the day. All of the decorations, banners and balloons were hung up and the finishing touches on the cake were made. The presents were laid out on the table in all shapes and sizes; from a bowl of treats to a squishy new pillow, it was obvious Terry was going to be spoiled. It couldn't be more perfect. The children waited anxiously for the car to bring Terry.

“Children, I know this is an exciting day for you all, but it is time for you to hide, be as silent as you can so we don't ruin the surprise. The driver has just let me know that Terry is close.” said Miss Lotus.

The children all got into their hiding spots and waited for the special moment. They could hear the car tyres crunching in the gravel down the dirt track road outside. The entire room was buzzing with excitement, even in the silence. The car screeched to a halt outside and the engine ceased to rumble, followed by the sound of a car door opening and shutting. Sounds of footsteps approached the room, getting louder and louder by the second. The door creaked open... Riley whispered “3,2,1...”

“Surprise!” Everyone jumped up and shouted!

Terry stood in the doorway startled, his tail wagging vigorously. The children all gathered around Terry. This was the moment they had rehearsed for.

The day went by quickly with pin the tail on the tiger, pass the parcel and Simon says. When the sun was about to set Terry and the children went down to the dam for an afternoon swim whilst Miss Lotus set up the school for the night time activities.

The group returned with Terry following behind. When arriving back to the school Drew noticed that Miss Lotus was joined by two figures that he had seen before; a short man carrying a small fox and a scary old woman. It suddenly occurred to him that these were the two who were plotting to steal Terry. Drew pulled Riley aside, pointing to the two and whispered, “those are the people that are going to steal Terry.”

“Are you sure? They look nice to me.” Riley replied, smiling.

“I’m certain of it.” Drew said, getting increasingly frustrated. “It’s Earl and Doris for sure. Just trust me, alright?”

“Okay,” Riley said nodding “What do you need me to do?”

“I just need you to keep an eye on Terry and keep him away from those two.”

“Okay, I’ll try my best but I’ve already promised to help Miss Lotus with the cake as well.”

As the night went on, the moon rose over the distant hills and the fire was blazing, Riley and Drew were subtly spying on Earl and Doris, judging their every move. Terry and the children danced around the bonfire under the light of the moon and stars, singing the song they had prepared:

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

What did you eat Terry, what did you do?

Did you eat bush tucker and dance with kangaroo’s?

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

What did you see Terry, where did you sleep?

Did you see amazing sights and stargaze where animals creep.

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

To celebrate his birthday under moonlight.

To dance and sing around the fire burning so bright.

Terry loved their song and joined in, dancing and dancing for hours.

The now rather tired group went silent as Miss Lotus entered with the scrumptious cake they had made for Terry, three stories high with a giant ‘T’ on the top, candles lit up the frosting to show the cakes vibrant colours. Everyone started to sing in harmony.

“Happy birthday to y-” the children stopped suddenly as they looked towards where Terry was sitting. But he wasn’t sitting there, he wasn’t sitting anywhere, he was gone. Out of the corner of his eye, Drew saw Earl and Doris with a cage covered by a blanket. Earl opened the trunk of a car and placed the cage in, when a bark came out of the cage that could only be Terry. Drew grabbed Riley’s hand and raced towards the car. Suddenly, Riley’s hand slipped out of Drew’s and she fell to the ground.

“Riley!” Drew cried, falling to his knees next to her.

“I’m alright,” Riley said dusting herself off to find only a scab on her knee. “Look, the car!” Drew cast his eyes to the road where the car was disappearing in the distance leaving them defeated in a cloud of dust.



Chapter 4

Riley looked to Drew with her eyes wide in terror. Her lips quivered as she shook in disbelief and Drew panted heavily in the middle of the dirt road, his gaze cast downward as the dust, kicked up by Doris' car, started to settle. He had tried to run after Terry's kidnappers, but it was in vain. Terry was gone.

"What are we going to do, Drew?" Riley squeaked, trying hard not to let the cracks in her voice betray her fading composure.

Whipping his head back to Riley with renewed energy he shouted, "We have to save him! We need to tell someone".

Eyes ablaze with determination, Drew tugged at his phone wedged in his jean pocket. He quickly punched in the Animal Services number and held his phone eagerly and impatiently to his ear. However, as the phone rung out, Drew realised that it would not pick up. He looked at his screen accusingly, with betrayal written in hard lines across his face.

No service.

Riley, who had shuffled from her spot on the side of the road, now stood worryingly over Drew's shoulder.

"How are we supposed to reach help now? There's no way to get mobile service out in the bush!" screeched Riley, now even more anxious than she had been before.

“We just need to get somewhere high enough for my phone to work. Everything will be ok, Riley. We will get Terry back.” Drew assured her, while also hoping for himself that it was true.

The two hurried back to the school, along the road of gravel and dust. Their race back was hot and tiring as the tips of rocks and stones tried to pry through their shoe soles with every step and the burning Australian sun sizzled the sunblock on their necks. They crashed into the school and ran up the stairs, despite their legs stinging from exhaustion and as they reached the highest window they could find they came to an abrupt stop.

Drew held up his phone, squinting as the reflection of sunlight struck his eyes. The bars on his phone remained empty. They weren't high enough. However, any higher would be up on the roof, and the only way to the roof was to climb through the window.

Drew and Riley looked each other in silent agreement. It was now or never. If they didn't get help soon, they may never see Terry again.

Sticking his legs out of the window, Drew took in a sharp breath, concentrating on keeping his eyes from the ground below. His knuckles were white as he gripped tight to the top edge of the window frame as he stretched his other hand up to the edge of the roof. In one daring leap, he pushed off from the window and dangled dangerously before clambering onto the fry-pan of a roof.

Riley poked her head out of the window, watching as Drew held his phone high in hope for just one signal to push his call through. Each second passed like a lifetime. Every moment the phone rang out was a moment Terry was stuck in the clutches of his kidnappers. With his phone still unresponsive to any possible service, Drew's face scrunched up as if he ate a lemon and he angrily began to strike his phone against his palm in frustration. And then in a split second of absolute horror, his phone slipped out of his hands.

Drew's phone crashed to the ground below and shattered upon impact.

“NO!” he yelled. Drew looked down to where the remains of his phone and his hope of finding Terry lay. What else could he do now? He knew he needed Miss Lotus' help, but then again, she couldn't do anything all by herself.

He needed the rest of the children to help him as well.

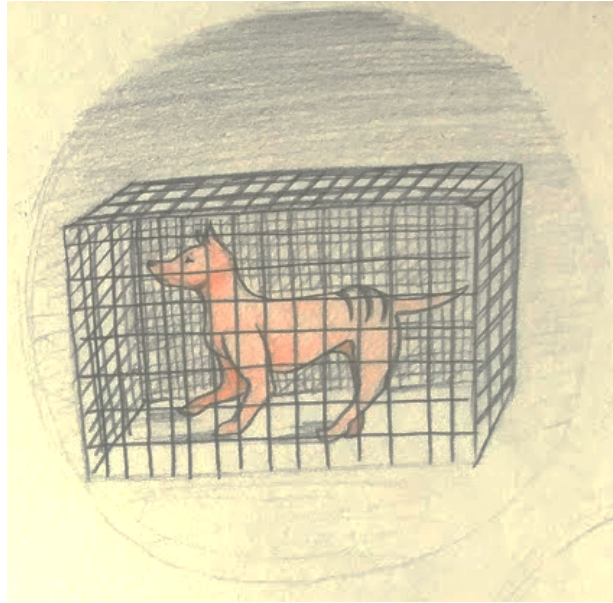
As he scanned the area below him, he spotted the gathering of kids waiting excitedly for Terry. With the utmost care in his step and some help for Riley, he slowly made his way off the roof.

As he approached the bustling crowd, the children began to appear from where they had tried to hide themselves. As if expecting good news, they bounced happily over to Drew and Riley, unaware of the horrible tragedy that the pair had come to tell.

“Everybody, I have something to tell you,” Drew began, “Terry has been kidnapped and I need your help to find him”.

A cacophony of yelling and confused chatter erupted from the children, followed by a terrified hush as they leaned in to hear of Drew’s plan.

“If we go now, we may be able to catch Terry’s captors,” started Drew, “I know where their hideout is”.



Chapter 5

“We have to hurry” Drew said. “We don’t know how what they’re planning to do with Terry.”

“Where did you say the office was again?” Miss Lotus asked. Once Drew had told the rest of the group that Terry had been taken Miss Lotus decided that Drew, Riley and herself would go to Earls office and convince them to give Terry back immediately.

“It’s just around this corner” Drew said as he ran past the familiar berry bushes and trees, whirling around the bend to the place where he first heard of Earl’s and Doris’s plan. As he reached the building he spied in through the window only to see a bushy head. Doris. Before Drew could knock on the front door he heard something that made him stop in his path.

“I sold the scruffy dog just like you asked now where is the money.” Earl growled.

“Fluffy dog?... Terry?!” Drew was devastated, they had sold Terry, they were too late.

Miss Lotus burst through the door angrily. “What have you done with Terry!” She screamed, irritated and furious. Doris and Earl spun around, alarmed by the sudden intrusion. “What are you talking about?” Doris demanded.

“We know you stole Terry, what did you do with him!”

Doris rolled her eyes “So what, he was just a silly animal”

“He was our friend you monster!” Riley cried “Tell us who you’ve sold him to... or else!”

Earl strode towards Riley until he was face to face with her, he didn’t have to bend down to be at her height. “Or else what?” he said intimidatingly.

“The whole Scooby gang will hunt us down? I don’t think so little girl. You see, once I was happy and innocent like you and then I grew up, you should do the same.”

Riley was left standing there, dispirited and gutted. Earl walked away from her and back to Doris.

“Your heart was broken wasn’t it?” Drew asked, stepping out of the shadow of Miss Lotus.

“What are you talking about boy?” Earl said turning around slowly to look at him.

“You had a friend like Terry didn’t you? A friend that loved you? And they left you, didn’t they?” Drew gulped.

“That’s why you want to take Terry away from us. You want everyone to feel the pain you felt. Don’t you?”

Earl marched over to Drew until he was so close that Drew could feel his breath on his nose. “His name was Archie, he was my best friend, the best dog a boy could have. But he escaped on the night of my eighth birthday. You don’t understand, he was kind to me, he was the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“If you got to know Terry, he would be one of the best friends you will ever have” Said Riley

“You mean... we could share him?” Earl pleaded

“The whole town loves and cares for Terry, what’s one more?” Said Miss Lotus smiling.

“But first you need to tell us where he is.” said Riley

“Oh yes, for sure, he is... “

“No!” Doris interrupted “how dare you betray my plans! We were going to be rich Earl, you and me. US!”

“Ha, there was no us” Earl chuckled, “there was only you and the money.” With that Earl pushed Doris out the door and grabbed the handle to shut it, and before he did, he looked at Doris and mockingly saluted her.

“It was a pleasure doing business with you, Doris.” The door slammed shut and Earl turned to face the startled group. “So, the address, hey? Listen, the guy I sold him to isn’t the kindest of folks, he has a way with words and hates it when he doesn’t get his way. I do wish you luck.” Earl handed Drew a piece of paper with the address.

“Thanks, Earl” Drew dug into his pocket and grabbed at a familiar object.

“Ah, and this is for you.”

Drew handed Earl an invitation and Earl read it out loud “You’re invited to Terry’s birthday party. Thank you, I’ll see you there.”



Chapter 6

Terry had spent his entire life in the fresh open air that was outback Australia. As such, he was not used to the stagnant air inside the truck and it was suffocating him. His sense of sight had been lost, as he lay in complete darkness, all light blocked out by the metallic walls of the truck. The truck driver relentlessly put his foot down on the accelerator, and the brakes were a foreign concept. With each speed bump that they passed, Terry felt his bones rattle and he was helpless to do anything but whimper with each lurch. Eventually, the truck came to a sudden halt and he could hear a hand roughly fumble with the lock that had secured the back of the truck. He heard the man and woman talk as the back door opened with a clunk. They had a scary-looking cage wide open as they gestured for Terry to enter it. Fear sharpening his senses, Terry saw no other option but to obey the humans. Dragging one paw behind the other, he reluctantly curled up inside the cage. The metallic bars of the cage pressed tightly against his skin, compressing him far too tight to breathe normally.

A shrill beeping noise woke Terry from his unconscious state. “Hi Tim. Yes, he is all ready for you to take. He is just sleeping now, but completely healthy. I’ll meet you at the gate in five minutes and show you inside,” the woman spoke on the phone. The two humans that had kidnapped Terry walked off along the pathway, leaving him alone in the cage.

Now was his time. He gave a desperate push, slamming his shoulder on the door, but to no avail. He winced from the pain that spread through his body but then shook it off before slamming himself against the metal bars another time. This time, he felt the cage give a little under his weight. He threw himself at the door one last time, and he crashed out of the cage.

Looking around frantically, he ran. He ran and he dodged the rocks and he zigzagged through the trees. He ran as fast as his legs would take him because he knew this was the only chance he was going to get.



Chapter 7

As the group of children laid eyes on the rustic, brick cottage they lingered for a moment. They were finally going to get Terry back. Drew walked up to the red, wooden door and knocked twice. A strange, suspicious man appeared. He had thick, curly hair and an old, sunken in face.

“Who are you people?” He growled.

Miss Lotus stepped in. “We are from the local primary school and we are here to get our Tasmanian tiger back.”

Once Miss Lotus said this something in his face changed, it almost hardened. “Tasmanian Tiger? I have no such thing!” He said angrily.

“We know you have him, Earl and Doris told us they sold him to you.” Miss Lotus narrowed her eyes.

“They sold me a striped dog, not a tiger!”

“Please let us see him, he’s our friend and he belongs in the wild.” Drew piped up.

“No! I was sold a friendly pet that I paid good money for and I’m not giving him back so you can all get off my property and go back to where you lot came from!” The man sounded threatening and they had almost decided to give up when Riley stepped forward with her head high and determined.

“Mr. . . . sir, the pet that you bought he, he’s our friend and it’s his birthday today and we were planning a big party for him, but then he was stolen from us, by Earl and Doris. Terry belongs in the wild, it’s where he lives and it’s where he’s happy so please let us see him, let us bring him back to his rightful home.” Riley’s eyes were getting teary now, this was their last chance to get Terry back.

The man’s eyes darted back and forth, deciding what to do. Finally, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Fine you can all see him. . . . And I will let you and your friends take

him back with you.” As he started walking through his cottage he stopped and turned “My name is Tim by the way, Tim Sandley.”

Everyone’s faces lit up beaming with happiness. They all followed him through the living room, through the kitchen, past the bathroom, past the bedroom. This was it, Terry was finally going to be returned to them and be happy. They followed Mr Sandley to a small concrete room with a single window. In the centre of the room there was a medium sized wire cage. Riley gasped. Mr Sandley stopped. Drew pushed past the group and realised the horror before them. The cage was empty.

“What have you done with Terry?” Drew choked, trying to fight back tears.

“I don’t know I swear he was right here, I swear I checked on him an hour ago and he was fine, I’m sure I locked the cage...” He trailed off.

“Well if he’s not here now then where is he?” Riley asked, eyes wide.

Then there was only silence.



Chapter 8

“Where’s Terry? Where have you put him?” demanded Drew.

“What happened to him?” Riley yelled. Mr Sandley looked confused.

“He was just here a minute ago. Where could he have gone?” Mr Sandley and the children searched all through the house - in every room, under every cushion and behind every curtain.

“Where could he be?” Riley sniffled. Drew suddenly pointed at an open window.

“He probably escaped out that way!”

They all ran around the back of the house. Luckily the children found Terry’s footsteps on the dirt which they could follow. They tracked the faint trail all the way to the edge of a forest.

“The footsteps stop here.” sighed Riley.

“What do we do now?”

“We can’t give up now. We need to split up and look for him!” The children strode on bravely through the forest, searching high and low for their beloved Tasmanian tiger. Minutes turned to hours, and the children began to tire.

“It’s getting dark.”

“I want to go home.” The children collapsed onto the floor, feeling no more hope for their impossible search.

“Terry is back, from the bush track. Clap, clap, clap...” Drew started singing softly.

“What did you eat Terry, what did you do?” sung Riley. The two looked hopefully at one another.

“Did you eat bush tucker and dance with kangaroo’s?”

By the end of the song, all of the children were singing and laughing - their spirits back up again. "I hope Terry is alright." Riley groaned, scratching his head. Just as Riley finished his last word, Drew felt something fuzzy brush up against his leg. He looked down.

"Terry!" he exclaimed.

"Terry!" the children rejoiced.

Terry had heard and recognised the children's chanting, and followed the sounds to find them. The children all huddled around their orange, furry friend. Mr Sandley looked at them with a confused face.

"How did he find his way...?"

Drew smiled at him and instead of answering Mr Sandley's question, he offered another question himself.

"Mr Sandley, don't you think that Terry deserves to be able to live in the wild?"

Mr Sandley's brows furrowed in thought for a while, and his face suddenly brightened.

"I've made up my mind." He turned to Terry, knelt down and stroked his head. Everyone held their breath in suspense.

"Terry, I'm setting you free!" All the children cheered with joy and jumped up and down in excitement.

"Do you know what this calls for?" Miss Lotus exclaimed.

"Let's finish Terry's birthday celebrations!"

The children cheered and lit the fire again and brought back out the decorations, relieved that Terry had returned. The children danced and sang into the night.

Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

What did you eat Terry, what did you do?

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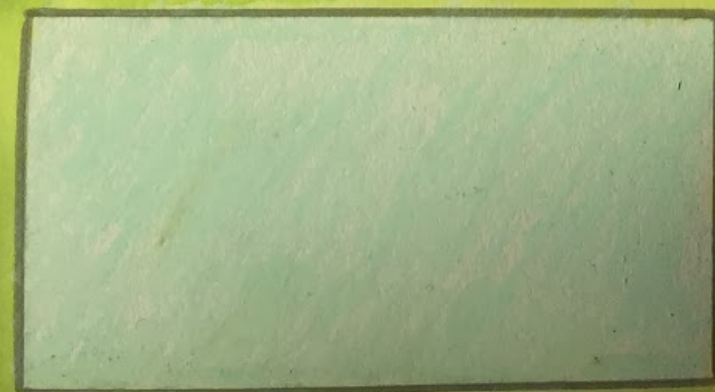
Terry is back, from the bush track.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

To celebrate his birthday under moonlight.

To dance and sing around the fire burning so bright.

Evandale Primary waits each year for Terry the Tasmanian Tiger to return from his travels to celebrate his birthday with them in an evening of dancing, singing and celebrations. But word of Terry's arrival spreads to the wrong people who try to use the special day to their own personal gain...



EVANDALE PRI



Book Summary

Group/Team Details

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Division: Upper School
Team Name: THE SS
Team Members:

JINA HONG	NICHOLAS SANDEMAN
TRUDI MORRIS	UNI KYEONG
KELLY PARK	RUBY SHERRINGTON
MONIQUE NGUYEN	KYAH ANDERSON

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***GREAT AUNT GRETCHEN OF
MORTJ MORE***

By Beep Beep Hypocritical Lettuce

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Chapter 1 - Gretchen is a winner

Aunt Gretchen Sugarham Dungaree Graham hated losing. Her ego, almost as fat as her thighs, could not fathom the possibility of losing. Great Aunt Gretchen was Mortimores' wise cracking, foul mouthed, attention seeking, boastful, wrinkled prune, who always knew everything about everyone, and today was no exception. The preparation for the annual Lake Eyre Triathlon was in full swing, as was Great Aunt Gretchen's plan for her fifteen-year-old niece, Pinky, to claim victory.

"Pinky Darling," Great Aunt Gretchen beckoned, cloaked in her signature emu feather boa.

"Come here my precious little pumpkin."

Pinky lifted one of her freshly manicured fingers from the overly tedious task of tying her very own shoe laces, pushed a lock of platinum blonde hair out of her emerald green eyes, and stood herself up and pranced over to her favourite Great Aunt, Gretchen. As Pinky was being doted over by her distant relative, Great Aunt Gretchen's biological child Michael, similar in age to Pinky, was being blatantly ignored, which by now, he had grown used to.



Michael had ears to match a small elephant, and a complexion pale enough to win a game of hide and seek in the south pole. His brown curly hair and scrawny figure made him easily mistakable for a half shaved ferret.



Michael had very few possessions he valued, regardless of the academic achievement awards and sports carnival ribbons he'd earned over the years, the only item he owned that held any significance with him was the one gift his mother had ever given him; a doll. The doll had many features, most of which were nothing to be proud of, and were comparable to a second hand pillow. Michael had decided to bring the doll with him to the triathlon. He decided that if he was already lacking this much motivation to do well, a little bit of luck couldn't hurt anyone, especially someone as mundane as Michael Graham.



Chapter 2 - The Doll Man

There was no way that Aunt Gretchen would allow anyone but Pinky to win this race. She approached the judge of the Triathlon, Judge Judie. It was clear that he was intimidated by the grubby, large mass in his view. However, he was distracted by something else.

Judge Judie's small, beady, rat eyes zeroed in on the limp piece of cloth in the bag. Gretchen's gossip radar beeped loudly as it noticed the Judge's gaze. Nimble steps were taken around the small man as a horrid, wrinkled frack obscured his view.

"So tell me, Judge Judie, who do you think is likely to win this years race?", questioned Gretchen.

Judge Judie was a short, brittle man, shy and secretive, who was known as Mortimores' **awkward** and quirky, forever lonesome bachelor. With rusty brown hair, a mousy voice and little self esteem combined with his keep-to-himself lifestyle, few considered him worthy for their time. Rumours were often heard with his name, but no one knew his true, deep intentions.

"Well, it is yet to be seen," stammered the terrified Judge. His eyes dared not to glance at the ferocious snake above him, and they instead trailed the doll in the bag. That fact was not missed by Gretchen, who could tell his actions were out of the norm. *Something is going on, she thought.*



“So tell me, dear Judie, you are surely burdened by all this responsibility I assume,” she pauses, contemplating her words. “Is there anything a small old lady like me could do for you?”

“Well, um, you see... That doll wouldn't happen to be for sale, would it?” he squeaked. His palms were sweating, knowing he could well have messed everything up.

“Why do you ask, Judie? This doll is nothing special, quite ordinary in fact,” she exclaimed, seeking for explanations.

“You see, Gretchen, my little girl absolutely adores dolls, loves them to death, and that one is not yet part of my - her, collection,” he corrected himself.

Suspicion enters her sly, flabby face. Two mistakes clear in the simple sentence. Great Aunt Gretchen knew he had no children, everyone did. He was the lonely bachelor of the town. The slip up, however, was more evidence that there was dishonesty in his answer. Playing along with a lie was going to make him more nervous, and so, Gretchen did exactly that. “Oh, what dolls does she already have?”

“She has, uh,” he paused, clearly structuring his sentence. “... she has the limited edition malibu Barbie, the Ever After High Raven doll and, of course the premium Lalaloopsy,” he answered, speeding up his words as the sentence continued.

“Oh my,” Gretchen pretended to be surprised, “that is quite the collection. They all must be kept in a very safe spot, I would imagine.”

“Well, actually,” he hesitated. The fidgeting of his fingers increased and the tapping of his feet got faster. “They are kept... in ... In the secret shrine. A secret shrine in the corner of my room,” he blurted out. He did not have time to process his words, and you could see the life drip out of him. His face turned beetroot purple in embarrassment as he tried to form a somewhat coherent explanation.



“Oh my, that is awfully embarrassing,” she said in a pity-like tone, not helping the colour of Judie’s face. “I assume you would like me to keep that fact a secret, lest your reputation be ruined. Not to mention the fact that you told me about a fake daughter, making up a fake person for a fake story to hide the sadness that is your hobby. Imagine,” she wrapped her grimy arm around his shoulder, with an evil smirk, looking into his lifeless eyes, “imagine being known as the doll loving, lonely male judge. It is truly a surprising obsession, Judie. I doubt many people would react in a better way than me,” she said as she enjoyed seeing Judie’s personality being sucked out.

He was left a tomato-faced, stammering dolt. Outrage soon took over his features. “Are you blackmailing me?”, as he attempted to sound confident. That did not last long however. “Just don’t tell anyone, please. It could be the downfall of my career, my reputation, my everything. You mustn’t tell anyone, I beg of you,” he pleaded to Gretchen.

“Well, I suppose I could do you that favor,” she drawled, seeming accepting. “But, there would need to be a price,” she spoke. Her inner evil stepmother arose to the surface. “If you would like, I could even add in this doll to the deal.”

“What do you want me to do, Gretchen?” He wishes he could control himself, but the doll, the doll Gretchen kept close by her side, was the only thing Judie wanted. Gretchen could picture him in a pink wig and a tutu, squealing and surrounded by dolls, and would not be surprised in the slightest.

“You are to sabotage the race, using any means necessary, to ensure that my sweet, little great niece, Pinky, the sweet sugarbaby, wins the race and crown,” she opted, clasping her hands together, her innocent, old lady facade in place.

“And the doll?” The Judge inquired. His want for the doll increased by every passing second.

“Will be yours”, she states, tossing the disregarded pile of cloth (at least in her opinion) into his repulsive limbs.

“I will handle it then,” Judie agrees, distracted by the new specimen to his collection. Little did he know the debacle he would soon get into.



Chapter 3 - Incentive and Destruction

Great Aunt Gretchen was ready for that crown. The gold, shiny hat she had dreamt of wearing for the months leading up to the triathlon, and this was her chance to finally have it.



Her confrontation with Judge Judie practically guaranteed Pinky's victory. Gretchen's motivation routine went into full swing as she approached Pinky. "It's easy, Pinky!" she exclaimed, never allowing herself to be questioned. "All you have to do is run, cycle and swim. You've been doing all of those your whole life, so what makes this so hard? You'll win by 200 metres, 2000!" Gretchen's blond spiralled hair swayed in all directions as Pinky tried to be inspired by her words. But still, Pinky was apprehensive. She didn't want to let Great Aunt Gretchen down. Who knows what would happen then?

"W-what if I lose?" Pinky asked, stuttering as she knew the response would be fierce.

"If you lose," Gretchen chided with a cold, passive anger, "I will make sure you never, ever forget

It." Pinky's heart leaped at the threat. The crunching fire in her stomach was too strong for her to say any more.

"Okay, okay, I'll win. I'll win Aunt Gretchen."



Pinky soon began to warm up for the triathlon, following zigzagged pathways at jogging pace. Gretchen left her be, but soon ran into Michael. Her wrinkled eyes narrowed as she approached him.

“Hey, mum! How... how are you?” He tried to stay strong with her but it was hard for him. “I was going to bring your doll, as a pendant to run with, but I couldn’t find it. Have you seen it?” The missing doll made him worry greatly, but he couldn’t show his emotions. Not in front of Gretchen.

“Don’t pretend you liked it, Michael. It’s not yours anymore. I gave it away to someone who actually deserved it,” Gretchen replied, looking off at Pinky training in the distance.

“What?? Why?? I loved that doll!” Michael began to get teary.

“You never loved it, just like I never loved you,” Gretchen stated, before walking off slowly, as if nothing ever happened. Michael stood there, watching her walk off, for what felt like an eternity. After regaining awareness, he ran to the bathroom. The paper towels soon filled the garbage bin, soaked with saltwater. Staring into the mirror, Michael had finally found his missing motivation. *I’m going to win the triathlon.*



Chapter 4 - The Failed Attempt

Judge Judie began racking his brain for a plan to sabotage the triathlon. The stakes were far too high to fail. He would lose everything; his career, his co-workers' respect, his dignity, and so much more. Beads of sweat started to run down his face, not assisting his permanently nervous facade. What on earth could he do to help that spoilt little brat win? She wasn't particularly good at anything despite how hyped up her very existence was. Running, swimming, cycling. All of them are relatively simple tasks with such a large range of worst case scenarios, but for someone who overthought everything as much as Judge Judie, the task seemed like re-inventing the wheel. As the starting gun rang in his overly sensitive ears, he had an idea. Not a great idea but any means, but on a scale of sliced bread to Titanic, it scored about the invention of a USB.

Judge Judie set to work. He recited his scheme a countless amounts of times in his head. He pictured the pleased look on Great Aunt Gretchen's face, the look when she sees Pinky run over the finish line and breaking the ribbon. He was ready to share the plan he had concocted with Great Aunt Gretchen, however he soon realised the true meaning of the phrase 'It sounded better in my head'.

"You see, Gretchen, I have a cunning plan," he told her, trying to sound like he had some amount of self respect left.

"Excellent. What might it be, dolly lover?"

"Well, I am going to sabotage the cycling. I plan to replace some of the bike parts with highly magnetized metal, so that the bikes are thrown off course when they cross over the water mains, which I have contaminated with magnets," sounding like a madman when telling her.

Great Aunt Gretchen's face began to curl into a smile. Judge Judie's eyes lit up. Her reaction was everything he had imagined it to be and more. Until, suddenly, it wasn't. Great Aunt Gretchen began to laugh at the idea.

"You Gimblebaster!" Great Aunt Gretchen cackled. "That would only work if the judges were a bunch of bumbling Idiots-" she paused, soon realising who the judges were and who she was talking to.

"You know what?" Gretchen concluded, "Sounds like a pretty good plan."



Judge Judie set to work on the bicycles. He worked and worked, until he came to a pink, glittery bike, with streamers coming off the handlebars, which he wrongly presumed was pinky's. It turned out to be Michael's. His mother had offloaded Pinky's old bike onto her son when she had outgrown the cupcake shaped bell. As the contestants began the cycling stage of the triathlon, Judge Judie sat down, expecting a good show and prosperous future of his career, free of public ridicule. When Pinky approached the water mains, oblivious to his mistake, Judge Judie began to cheer. He stood up, absolutely ecstatic, screaming as she passed the wreckages of the other athletes' bikes. His timing couldn't have been worse. As he reached the height of his applause, Pinky reached the water main, and skidded to the side of the course. Then, out of the blue, in last place, came Michael, streamers and all. He seamlessly rode over the mains and made it to the running track, suddenly in first place. Judge Judie's heart stopped. He knew exactly what he was in for.



Chapter 5 - The Unhappy Mong

He had clearly messed up. Rubbing his head, filled with embarrassment, he prepared himself for what was to come. Great Aunt Gretchen approached. She bombarded Judie with a series of questions, she could not believe what had happened. Her anger subsided into a dull silence. Judie braced himself for the storm.

All of a sudden, Great Aunt Gretchen exploded in anger,

“Why why why why why?!?! How could you mess up something so.. so simple! You are a lazy, annoying, lazy, stupid person! I expected more, so much more! I thought you were smarter than this! If you don’t do what you promised, this is the end of our agreement!”

“No, please no, I’ll try harder, I’ll do better, I promise!” Judge Judie cried. Gretchen smiled an evil grin, a smirk.

“Well then, you're going to have to do better, yes? Unless you want to be known as doll man...”

“No, no. You would never!” Judie squealed with humiliation.

“Really? Will I not? Why don’t we wait and see.”

Gretchin’s creep sent chills down the Judge’s spine, making him pace around in a scurry. Judie’s mind went ticking. He didn’t want his biggest secret out into the open world, it would be his worst nightmare come true. He made that abundantly clear. He couldn't let it happen.



Chapter 6 - Water on the Floor

Judie had an idea. In the humid summer climate, during the longest drought in Mortimore, a huge flood would overflow Lake Eyre. It was flawless, it was perfect, it would work swimmingly. But how? He couldn't rely on the rain, there was no source of water nearby, heck, the closest thing to him was the water tower -his thoughts were interrupted by the ignition of a car.

"That's it!" he exclaimed to himself. He had finally come up with a great plan that would sabotage the race for Great Aunt Gretchen. His secrets would be safe. He knew it was strange for an old man to have an obsession for dolls, but what could he do? He found dolls fascinating and beautiful, a gift from the gods, a blessing. It may have been the lack of a female presence in his life, but it was far too late now. He had to keep it a secret, for his sake. The genius idea of his was to bring down the old water tower, unused but still full to the brim. All he had to do was tie one end of a rope to his car, the other end to the water tower pipe and drive.

Simple, he thought.

While everyone was occupied with the race, Judie drove his car up to the old water tower. It was terribly kept. No maintenance went towards them. The water was a dark, dirty brown, and was spewing out of holes where the rust had given up against the pressure of the water within the tank.

He tied a rope to the leg of the tower and another to the back of his car. Unfortunately, the rope he had gotten was far too short leaving only a mere meter between both structures of metal. Judie knew he could not fail again. He must not. With that thought, Judie had begun driving. What he had not noticed, however, was that his car was on reverse, as he had forgotten to change gears after parking. "Oh no", he exclaimed quietly. The triathlon judge had realized his mistake, but not before it was too late.



His car reversed right into the tank and, after years of straining on the joints, it burst right into the race track. It flooded. The whole running track flooded, with the majority of the participants still racing after the failed first attempt of sabotage. Everyone had turned and watched with growing horror as the waves of water crashed into the track and nearby building, filling the long parched lands. No one knew where this flood came from, but all they knew one thing: they had to run. Fast. By the time the water reached them it was not too high, as it had already dispersed and lost energy on its journey. Debris was the problem. Those few who were ahead in the race were spared of these troubles, but branches, sticks and stones were viciously attacking the innocent bystanders. Of course, not all were innocent. One of these sticks met with a bright emerald eye, and was greeted with a scream of epic proportions.



Chapter 7 - Pink Eye Confessions

Pinky had pink eye. Those precious emerald green eyes that everyone had adored were sore and squinting as pus oozed out of them. Her tiny thin frame lay resting on the emergency bed, as the nurse filed through the medical bag for eyedrops.

“Owwwww! Hurry up! My eyes are stinging, and everything is fuzzy, and...!” She whined.

Her face scrunched up, and her hands waved back and forth dramatically as she fanned herself down.

“Don’t touch your eyes, otherwise you’ll infect them, darling!” remarked the nurse.

“I’m not!” She snapped back. But to Pinky’s dismay, her loud whiny voice was recognised by Great Aunt Gretchen, who soon after waddled into the emergency room screeching her name.

“PINKY!” Her head was boiling, her squinted eyes filled with rage.

Her wrinkles were accentuated by a giant frown. Great Aunt Gretchen Sugarham Dungaree Graham was about to explode. Her plump, fat chest expanded, popping a button on her shirt, and her saggy neck tilted violently as her raspy, tired voice began to screech.

“PINKY! YOU IMBECILE!” Great Aunt Gretchen stuttered for words. Her wrath overcame her, and she hesitated for a sentence.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, YOU SPOILT, NO-GOOD WIMP? Why haven’t you finished the race?! How.. how.... how... You lazy, sensitive loser! Why did I ever believe in you? All you are is a pretty dull primp. I did everything for you! I sacrificed everything!”

“But..,” Pinky tried to interject. It wasn’t her fault the lake had flooded from nowhere. It wasn’t her fault a stick stabbed her pupils. it wasn’t her fault she had pink eye and couldn’t see a thing.



“I don’t want to hear it, Pinky! I’ve hired the best trainers, bought you the best gear, I even cheated! I caused the flood, to get you ahead of everyone, to get you to win the competition. To get you to claim the crown! And look what you’ve done, you failure. Never should I have given you a chance! Look at you, you disgusting girl! Get out of my sight!”

Great Aunt Gretchen was fuming. Absolutely furious. Judie was by her side trembling. However, being distracted by her rant and her voice, sore from screaming, she did not realise the sudden crowd which had flocked to the nurse’s tent. Jaws dropped in disbelief and Gretchen soon began to realise what she had done, what she had said. She stuttered, humiliated and completely embarrassed. Her chubby cheeks inflated and she was simply gob-smacked.

The Nurse began to interrogate - “What did you say, Gretchen? Repeat yourself please, I believe some of us missed out on your... horrifying confession.”

She stammered for an answer, unable to believe her eyes. Everyone had heard, they all knew. This was the end of her career, her reputation. But, she had one chance left to clear up the situation.

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t flood Lake Eyre! Look at dear Pinky, I would never do that to my niece! What happened was clearly an accident.” Her excuse might have been enough to convince the crowd, but Pinky, fed up and tired, had given up on protecting her Great Aunt. It was time for her exposure.

“She did it! She’s lying to you all! She just confessed to me, you can’t trust her. It was her that convinced Judge Judie to flood the Lake and burst the water tank..” she shouted.

Gretchen cut her off, “Wait, how did you know?! I never told you that!”

“Aha! So it was true. I knew it! Look at what you have done! You’ve exposed yourself, Auntie. You cheated to let me win. I’m no longer behind all your plots and schemes!”

The audience of the rebuttal began booing Great Aunt Gretchen, screaming insults as she sulked outside of the tent along with embarrassed Judge Judie.

“I’m just glad no one has found out about my doll collection,” he exclaimed loudly. Sadly, however, to his dismay, everyone had heard his exclamation. Laughter erupted amongst the Mortimore triathlon watchers. It soon settled though, as a sweaty figure appeared running down the track.



Michael was gleaming, a smile stretched up to his ears appeared upon his face as he noticed the faces of disbelief watch him claim first prize. With no one behind him, he began to frown. Confused as well as surprised, he noticed the faces of fellow runners trackside gaze upon the unexpected victory. His arms stretched wide hugging the medal at the end.

But he was still frowning. *Why had everyone dropped out? Still, the audience was cheering. Michael- Great Aunt Gretchen's often forgotten and dismissed son, had come first. Gretchen couldn't believe the unfolded events.*

“What?!” she yelled. “This can't be true!” But there Michael was, sweaty and overjoyed finishing first despite everything.



Chapter 8 - The Confession and The Crown

The sensation that Michael felt, was unable to be described by any. He couldn't believe his eyes. The glinting gold crown passed into his field of vision, rising up slowly, two hands on either side of it. It went up above his eyebrows and he could no longer see it. Soon after, he felt something weighted come to rest on the top of his head. Then the emotions hit him.

A rush of something inexplicable hit him like a freight train. He had never felt anything like it. It's warmth, force and power. He felt unstoppable. Michael had always been a failure in his mother's eyes. Always top of his class, best on the sports team, the teacher's pet. But what would his mother say?

Michael felt glorious. He raised the crown off his head, raising it high into the sky, the crowd swarmed around him, splitting in the middle, they had him circled, and then they closed in. he felt his two legs raised off the ground, then a hand on his back, then finally the crowd pushed him up off the ground. Soon, Michael was moving down the sea of faces, propelled by more and more hands. He closed his eyes, enjoying the moment. *'That will show them', he thought. The crowd set him down, next to the podium, he had done a full circle. Nothing could describe how he felt.*

Suddenly, a sheepish, glaring eye made Michael shiver. Judge Judie emerged from the crowd. Michael stepped out of the eyes of the crowd, and faced the man who was in possession of his single most valued possession. The doll his mother had gifted him with.

“Con-Congratulations, Michael” Judge Judie stuttered hoarsely. Clearly he'd been crying. “I-I have your.....er.....doll.”

“My mother gave YOU the doll?” Michael questioned, astonished that a sweat-marked, middle aged man would want anything to do with a doll such as his. He held the doll in his spindly fingers, and shoved it back into Judge Judie's arms.

“On second thoughts,” Michael said, feeling confident for the very first time, “I won't be needing this.”



The End



It's that time of year again. The Annual Mortimore Triathlon is about to start in Lake Eyre, but tensions are high. Pinky and Michael are second cousins, battling out for victory. However, Great Aunt Gretchen Sugarham Dungaree Graham has chosen her side and will do anything to get things her way, legal and moral or not.



Book Summary

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Team Members:

GEORGINA POWELL	CALVIN WALTHER
LILAH THURBON	ANDRE VASQUEZ
ANTHONY MCKENNA	MATTHEW WHITE
KEVIN SONG	SLYLAR KLEASE
GRACE LOUIE	GULIA PROVENZANO

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folliot, phoenix chapman, naomi gray, grace louie,
serena walsh, jack daly and eva wallace

bangarra



prologue

It was a balmy midsummer evening, like the one before and the one before that, and the ones to come after. A fire crackled, as it did every night. And the people laughed, and talked, and sang, as they did every night. Not every shadowy figure sitting around that midsummer fire was united by blood, but they were family all the same. One figure sat in the middle of the fray, head a little higher, back a little straighter, despite the streaks of silver in her hair and the deepening creases around her eyes. She had seen many things, and her voice as she sang rang out across the plains and wove through the trees that seemed to whisper in reply to her. Her coming came to an abrupt stop. The children widened their eyes in anticipation, as they knew that when she stopped singing, a story would come soon after. She looked at them for a long time, touched her chest and her eyes glazed over as she fell completely, every part of her being focused on remembering. She smiled slightly, a crooked, warm smile, and took a deep breath before she began speaking, her voice low.



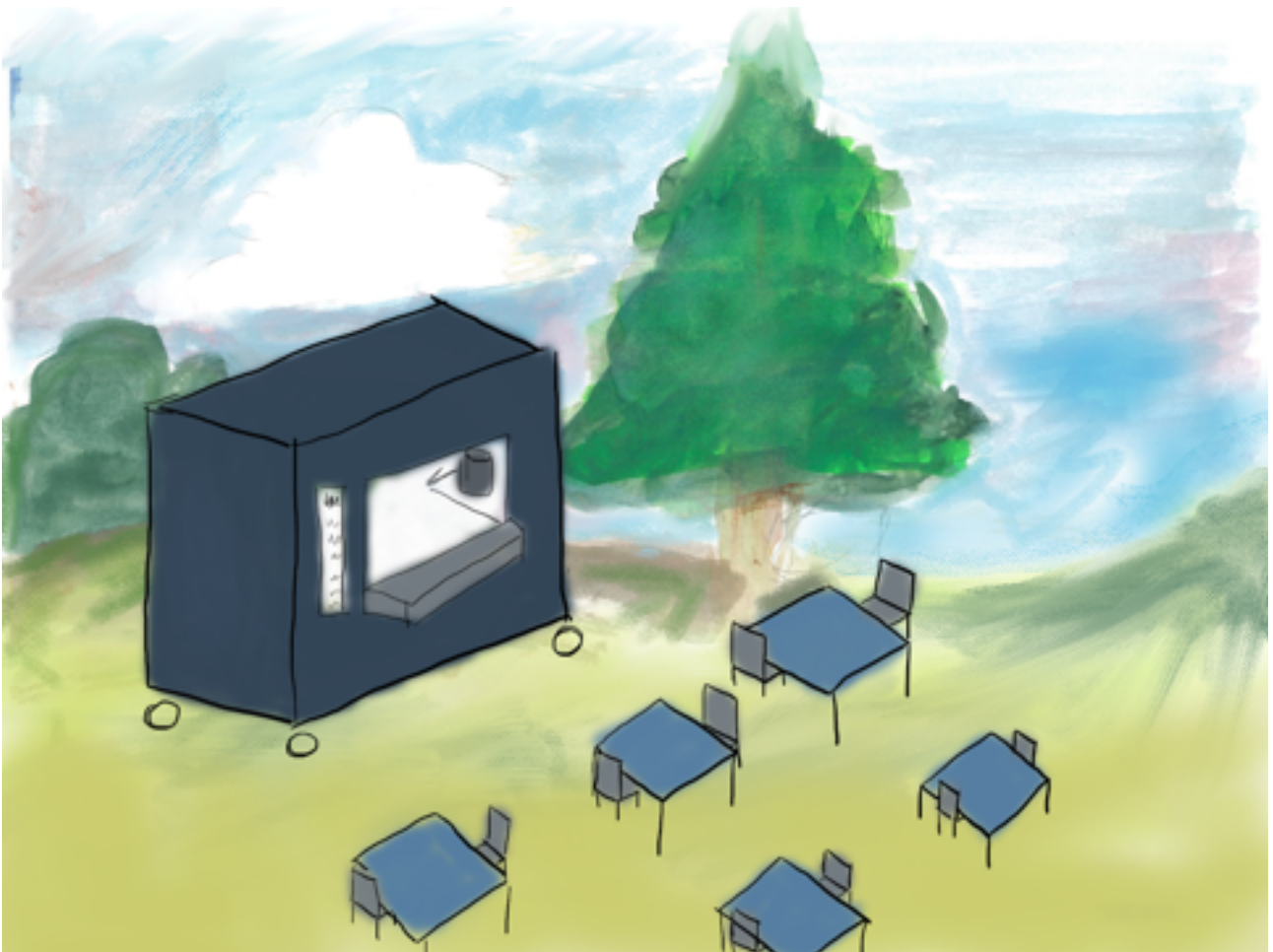
"This is the story of an adventure many years ago."

They leaned closer, eyes wide.

"This is the story of how we took back the land we stand on, and the water that runs through it. This is the story of how we gave the land back its heartbeat."

chapter one

A soft clicking sound. A burst of flame. The clang of pots and pans as the caravan suddenly filled with the warmth from the gas stove. He adjusted his chef hat and stirred the soup once more, taking in the sweet aroma of the various spices in his new creation. Jason prepared two bowls and carefully poured equal amounts of soup into each. He delicately placed some coriander on top of each creation, and pushed them out ready for the waiter to take out. "Looks great chef, and smells even better!" The waiter carried out the dishes to Table 2 - the only occupied table - where a tall girl sat, wearing a basketball uniform. She had dark, slightly blemished mocha skin, decorated with freckles. Her eyes were a dark emerald colour, and her eyebrows were thick and bushy. She had long and curly, black-brown hair which was tied up into a messy ponytail, with pieces of hair falling out everywhere. She was wearing a basketball uniform that hung loose on her, with grass stains on the knees. She closed her eyes and appreciated the hearty smell of her dinner. "Thank you," she spoke with a calm, soft voice, "this looks great."
"No worries", said the waiter. "Do you need anything else?"
"May I please have some table water?" she asked.
"Yeah, sure. I'll be right back."



As the waiter turned to walk out, his eyes dropped and he saw one sneakered foot beside a bionic leg, which was lightly kicking a basketball side to side beneath the table. He sucked in his breath slowly, before walking back to the kitchen. "So brave", he muttered to himself.

The girl heard him, saw the look up and down, the intake of breath, but took no offence. She was used to this by now.

In the kitchen, Jason sighed, exhausted from a long day of work. He went to wash his hands, which were covered with the day's grime. He turned on the silver tap, but nothing came out. Surprised, he turned the tap off and on again. Still, nothing. Jason's hands were filthy! He had used water only a few minutes ago, where could it have gone?

His waiter, Jeffrey, returned and went to fill up a large glass bottle. He turned on the tap and was surprised to see nothing.

"Where's the water gone?" asked the confused waiter.

"I don't know, this tap's not working either."

"Well what are we going to do? The table needs water to drink."

"Simple. Apologise, and say the water's run out."

"But they need -"

"Jeffrey, it's okay. I'm sure they'll understand."

"Okay, boss. I'll tell 'em."

"Look, I'll come with you." said Jason, placing down his hat.

Jeffrey walked out to the table nervously, closely following by Jason. It was his first day at his new job, and he didn't want to let anyone down.

When he reached the table, he stuttered, nervous about how the customers might react.

"I'm sorry, but unfortunately we have run out of water. The taps aren't working," Jason said. "Would you like a smoothie, or maybe a coffee instead?"

The girl looked as if she was thinking hard.

"No thank you, it's fine."

"It's a real mystery, no idea what's going on with it," Jason interjected, worried he'd have an unhappy customer on his hands.

The girl snapped out of her reverie.

"There's an old dreamtime legend about water, have you heard of it before?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't really believe in that sort of stuff," mumbled Jason.

"Just listen in, it's quite a cool story," the girl said.

"Go on then," he said reluctantly, sitting down on a spare chair at the table.

Jeffrey stared at him curiously, but Jason nodded at him to stay.

chapter two

"There's this story," the girl said, "That my grandmother used to tell me when I was little. About water - how the land got so much of it. Long ago, right here in the land of Kakadu, there was this lizard, a blue-tongue lizard, Bangarra, who was the only one who knew about the springs. He was greedy, he hid it from everyone."

Jason still didn't see her point. He was becoming impatient.

"What does this have to do with our drought?"

"Just listen, I think we can help. It was only the small animals - the rats, Gula, who were quiet enough to sneak behind Bangarra to discover the water. The other animals teased Gula, said he was too small, said he couldn't do it. But he saved them. He gave them their water. In my people's stories, it's the smallest creatures who achieve the most. We could be like Gula."

Jason listened intently. He started to understand where she was coming from.

"I see your point, but where do we even begin? Look where we are, in the middle of nowhere. How could we possibly -"

"We begin right here. Right now. Do you know where the Emerald Lagoon is? It's not far from here. If the water is gone, we can follow the drained stream. I know there's something wrong, I can just tell. We have to be the ones to find out what it is!"

She stands up, excited and driven.

"How do you know?" Inquired a curious Jason.

"It's the birds. They fly towards water. But now, they're all moving in different directions. They aren't flocking like they're meant to. And you've seen the water in the taps. If we run out of water, who knows what will happen."

"Woah, how do you know that?"

She shrugged. "Just something I learnt from my mother. She learn it from hers."

Jason smiled at her, the girl with the wild hair and the burning convictions, and for a moment he felt as if he had caught some of her hope.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" He asked. "My name's Jason, by the way."

"I'm Apanie," she smiled.

Jason turned to Jeffrey. "Hey, we'll be back soon enough. We're gonna rescue the water!"

"Wait, but it's only midday! We aren't closing until 4pm this afternoon!"

Jason responded, "Well, I'm giving you an early mark. Can you close up the food truck, please?"

"Okay Jason, sure thing! Good luck." Jeffrey said, and started to tidy the outdoor tables.

Apanie grinned, and pushed back her chair with a clatter.

"I knew you'd get it. I knew you'd understand. Let's get out of here."

chapter three

They reached Apanie's truck, parked just outside Jason's food van.

"It's a bit of a tin can, but it's got wheels. It'll take us as far as the lagoon," spoke Apanie.

"I'm game if you are."

Apanie beamed at him, squinting in the midday sun. Without hesitation, she strode towards the truck, swung open the door and settled herself in the driver's seat. Jason hopped in the passenger's seat.

For the first few kilometres, they drove in comfortable silence. The girl with the fire in her belly, gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white, a look of determination on her face.

Driving along the dusty road, Apanie suddenly yelled.

"Look, look, emu!"

She slammed on the brakes. He could barely make out the blurry figure. They got out of the beat up red Holden, and slowly walked over to where an emu was looking desolately at what looked like a dried up water hole. As they got closer, Apanie started muttering. "But, it doesn't look like an emu, it is bigger, has two toes and big eyes. "

That made Jason exclaim, "that's not an emu, that's an ostrich!"

"That would make sense, " agreed Apanie, "but how did it get here, in Australia?"

Jason shrugged his shoulders.

"he looks thirsty though, lets take him with us."

"Sure." Apanie ran over to a patch of grass, uprooted it, and used it to lure the ostrich in to the Holden's tray. They padded the tray with fuzzy pillows so that the Ostrich was comfy, and then they continued on their way along the dusty road. They travelled in silence until finally Apanie said, "I think he needs a name."

Jason pondered this.

"Ed," he said confidently.

"Why?" Apanie enquired.

"He just looks like an Ed."

They looked at one another in agreement, and Ed himself gave a squawk of satisfaction.

Silence, once again, settled upon the truck.

The boy, the girl and the bird, a motley crew of companions making their way across the desert.

A couple of hours later, they stopped to turn in for the night. Lying in the tray of the truck, faces to the sky, their eyelids grew heavy as they felt the cool night

air brush their cheeks. Apanie turned to Jason, one arm pointing to the starry sky.

“See that shape over there, that cluster of stars?”

Jason squinted, and sure enough he could see a patch of stars scattered across black night. Apanie glanced at the ostrich sleeping soundly beside her, and then back at the stars.

“That’s the emu in the sky. It’s another story my grandmother would tell me. He’s running, see? His neck is stretched out, there,” she pointed a finger to a thinner cluster of stars.

“And there’s his body, and his legs. He’s like our ostrich. Our emu in the sky.” Jason was enthralled, in awe of this girl with so much ancient knowledge. He stared at the emu in the sky for a long time, before finally replying.

“What’s the emu’s name?”

But Apanie had fallen fast asleep curled in the corner of the tray, chest rising and falling steadily.

Jason glanced at the clock on the dash. It read 20:30. He lay back down and stared up at the stars that winked back at him, as if communicating in a language he could only dream of knowing. Soon, he too had drifted fast asleep.

chapter four

The three friends drove across the never-ending desert, occasionally seeing a tree, bush or other signs of life. Suddenly, in the far distance, they spotted a large mound, almost a mountain. Trucks and other machinery, as well as some makeshift homes, loomed in the distance. In hope of discovering water, they headed in that direction at a fast pace. Jason pressed hard on the accelerator and they sped across the desert, dust billowing in clouds behind them.

'I see it! I see it!' Jason shouted as they got closer and closer to their destination. They made it and realised something was oddly wrong with the place. There were dark pits everywhere and large heavy machinery scattered across the land. A loud bang shook the ground, and another huge hole formed, smoke and dust engulfing the place. It was almost eerie, and everything seemed to be shrouded in dirt and cold metal.

"Are these mines?," Apanie asked, confused to why these large holes were taking over the place. Her usually curly brown hair had turned black from the smoke and dust.

"Yep, this is what is ruining and poisoning our drinking water," Jason replied, knowing that these horrible pits were the causes for the lack of water.



They walked around these large mines, as they peered and looked 100 metres down to the bottom of these holes. Suddenly, they heard footsteps approaching them, startled they, jumped up and looked back, seeing a man who looked to be in his late fifties with a perfectly shaped emerald stone hanging from a silver chain around his neck. His dry scaly skin gathered in wrinkles around his small brown eyes, piercing into the chef's own.

"Is that you, Jason?," The he asked.

Apanie and Ed jerked their heads at Jason in a mixture of shock and confusion. The mood changed and an awkward tension filled the atmosphere.

"Dad?," Jason replied confused, wondering whether or not this was his dad. He looked older then when they had last met. His once smooth skin had turned rough and scaly and wrinkles showed everywhere.

"While you were away and trying to reach your lame cooking career, I was able to become one of the top CEO's in the mining industry." he gave a smug grin.

Apanie and Ed looked at each other in confusion.

"Jason, you said the mining industry was bad, and now your dad is the CEO of this very mining company that is ruining our water," Apanie exclaimed, rage filling up inside her. She was mad. One of her closest friends that she had, had betrayed and lied to her. She realized this whole journey was a lie, there probably wasn't a lagoon somewhere in this dry desert.

"Why would you do this to us, Jason, why would you lie to us? You insisted for us to follow you on this journey to absolutely nothing, instead leading us to your evil father's company, polluting the water that everyone needs." Apanie shouted.

Ed started squawking loudly.

"Come on Ed, you're right, we don't need this loser guiding us on this trip."

Apanie declared.

And so they left, leaving Jason alone with his cruel father.

chapter five

After walking back to get his car, Jason drove on, looking for his friends. Jason gripped the steering wheel of his Holden, looking out the window. His life. All one big bowl of cooked up frustration. Where was this lagoon? Where was what he had been striving for since the start of his journey? All, all he needed – was soup. Warm, tasty soup, being slurped up by delighted customers. He started to feel sleepy. Oh, so sleepy. He started to feel his grip loosen, as the car began jolting as if a wheel had gone loose. Swearing loudly, he slammed the brakes and realised that he driven straight through a pile of loose gravel. Flinging open the door, he looked around at his surroundings and it seemed to him as if he had travelled to some post-apocalyptic universe. The land was barren and dry, flat for kilometres apart from the enormous piles of red dirt and rubble, and the huge machinery, cold and menacing. He saw this all in a glimpse of a second. He jumped out of the car.

He fell, and tried desperately to stab the wall with the cooking knife in his apron while going down, failing miserably. He looked down with only a few meters left until landing, and he desperately stuck his hands out. Time seemed to stop. And then before Jason knew it, he was on the ground with a stinging and aching wrist that did not seem to move. He screamed – but stopped himself. No one would hear him. The excruciating pain seemed like a nuclear explosion had erupted in that one spot.

He lifted himself up with his other hand and straightened his legs, feeling his right wrist scream at him, scream in pain.

He looked down at the cliffside and saw the wall, all the while feeling 100 needles in his hand, constantly crushing, constantly pinching.

He started to walk down the zigzagged path, complicated, like a maze, looping, twisting and turning.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw movement. He swiftly moved his head to the side to see a person shifting in his seating position.

Jason yelled, "Help!"

The guard looked at the source of the noise, his brow furrowed. Surprise dawned on his face as he realized who was calling out.

He felt his wrist hurt, more than ever before.

And then, suddenly, everything went black.

chapter six

He woke up, everything blurry. He had fainted from his excruciating pain, and still felt horrible. Like someone was compressing his hand, slowly squashing it. Sitting, pondering. What was he going to do? Jason couldn't take it, he hated the feeling of isolation. So he felt that he had to do something. Suddenly, he remembered about the set of cutlery in his back pocket. But how could he use it to escape?

Still sitting, still pondering. He opened up the cutlery set and realised that he only had a spoon left after his fall because his knives had got stuck in the dirt near the top of the hole. That did not leave him with many options of escape. After a few minutes of thinking, Jason decided to dig out of the dirt walls with his spoon. Now to actually dig out. The biggest problem was that Jason was right handed and he had broken his right wrist when he had fallen earlier. This would make it impossible for him to use his right hand which would make his escape harder and slower because he would have to use his left hand to dig to freedom. But the pain was unbearable! Maybe he could wait a bit longer before he started digging so that his wrist hurt less. But then he heard footsteps.

Footsteps that were coming towards him from the top of the hole. Jason hoped that it was Apanie and Ed coming back for him to help him out even though they still believed that he had betrayed them. Suddenly, the mine worker that was guarding him before appeared at the top of the hole. He must have figured out who I am, and realised that I am his boss's son! Jason thought. More mine workers' heads appeared into view and they slowly lowered a rope ladder down to Jason.

Realising that Jason was unable to climb the ladder, one of the men climbed down to help him up the ladder and out of the hole. Once Jason was up out of the mineshaft, the mine workers forced him into their bright-blue truck and they started driving towards his father's office, on the other side of the large complex. Sitting in the back of the truck, Jason realised that the only way to save the water source and heal his broken friendships with Ed and Apanie was to stand up to his father and shut down his mining company.

It sounded easier than it was going to be.

chapter seven

Jason stood frozen. The man who he feared all his life was standing over him, the way he always had been. And he was defenseless, like he always had been. This was how it all started, and this is how it all was to end. There was no way to win this. He looked at his shoes, head bowed in shame. He had lost. Again.

He turned to walk away when he felt Apanie grab his shoulder and whisper in his ear.

"Don't you see? He is Bangarra. You are Gula. We are the smallest creatures, but we must win. We can defeat him. Use your voice, Jason. It's been waiting for you all along."

Despite the terror in his belly, Jason couldn't help but feel a rush of joy that his friends had decided to give him a second chance and come to his aid. He felt a jolt of strength and purpose. Jason finally knew how he would do it. He grabbed the steak knife from his apron and ran to the other side of the office where there was a large water pipe going through the wall. Gripping his knife in his non-injured hand, he thrust the knife into the main pipe running through the side of the building - bursting a large gaping hole into it. The water inside the pipe gushed out, and was so powerful that it broke an opening in the office wall. The water continued to flow out so much that eventually it would weaken the soil and rocks above the mineshafts and cause a rockslide which would block up the mines, shutting them down and letting the rest of the water flow out in a magnificent flash flood that replenished the parched earth.

But there were more pressing matters to address.

Jason looked at his father, and the frown increased on his face.

He ran to the hole, hearing shouts behind him, and dived through it, only seeing blue and brown. He dodged the shrapnel around him and eventually saw light. Dodge, duck, turn. Dodge, duck, turn. His vision started to go fuzzy from the lack of breath - but eventually burst through the surface, looking behind him and seeing the ruins start to settle and block the path he had come through. The only thing he could see now was sunshine.

Next to him, he looked and saw his father.

He had come too.

"It's ok, son. I have realized what I have done and I promise to stop harming the world with my mining and I will help you become a famous chef. But from the looks of things, you probably won't need it."

His dad put his arm around Jason.

"It's ok."

There they were: father and son, girl and ostrich, and the rusty red pickup truck. All gathered at the base of a newly flowing, clear lagoon. The once barren plains had been replenished, and wildlife drank happily, as vines and leaves twisted their way around the rocks and gullies. Jason's father looked down at his son, more of a man now, and felt pride in him for the very first time.

"Son."

Jason looked up to see his father tear off the emerald pendant that sat around his neck and throw it purposefully into the lagoon.

“This doesn’t belong to us. The earth is not something for us to claim. We belong to it, and let it guide us. I forgot how for too long. Thank you for helping me to understand.”

Apanie smiled. Ed gave a squawk.

The land’s heart was beating again, blood was coursing through its veins.

Things were as they should be.

epilogue

The stars above were not the only sacred things glistening that night. As beloved Aunt Apanie recalled her tale, happy tears did roll down the children's cheeks. Gemstones, like emeralds but blue like water, she thought, her smile warm like the fire in the branches and in her bones. Perhaps one day they would follow in her footsteps, along the dusty desert dunes and slumbering mammoth mountains, to reach their own oasis. She felt the dirt beneath her, and could feel the ancient heart, beating still. And she was happy.



Kakadu national park,
Australia.

latitude 13.09° , longitude 132.3°

the taps are empty, the streams run dry. a girl with fire in her belly and luck on her side is on a mission to find out why. an unlikely friendship, mischievous emu and an old red Holden lead them to the answer, but they may be in too deep. Are they able to defeat Bangarra and give the land back its heartbeat?



Book Summary

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Team Members:

VIVI BAKER	JACK DALY
HAMISH FOLLIOTT	SARAH NORTON
LILY THOMPSON	MI-JUNG KIM
NAOMI GRAY	SERENA WALSH
JORMIMA MA	PHOENIX CHAPMAN

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Adventures of William the Space Cadet

By the Anti Social Club

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CHAPTER I



William sat, slowly sinking to a slumped position of defeat, at his desk which had cartoon drawings of rockets that looked childish and nothing like the humongous and intimidating ships that were docked just four corridors to the left and two doors to the right of his spacious, six-person dormitory. The National Australian Space Station was home to twelve-year old Will and his twenty-four classmates learning to become astronauts in an out-of-this world boarding school. Literally. The stress of the upcoming Astronaut Examinations were crushing in on poor Will's thoughts like the intensely pressured field around a black hole. The vibrant backlight of *Nova's* screen - his artificially intelligent laptop computer and only friend - was contrasting to Will's gloomy

mood. *Nova* who was trying her hardest to encourage Will and his, frankly, dismal attempts to study. With a fifth wrong answer in a row on a practice exam he was completing, he slammed *Nova's* screen down in frustration and sighed.

"I can't do it, *Nova*! I will never be an astronaut, I won't be able to pass this stupid exam, and my parents will be disappointed in me for the rest of my life!" Will cried out in exasperation.

"Don't lose hope, Will. You just need to keep working hard, your parents know you can do it," came the pre-programmed robotic voice of *Nova*, "now, open my screen up again."

Will did as he was told and the screen showed pictures of his family back home on Earth rather than the infuriating practice exam that was taking hours to complete. His mother dressed in her usual - casual jeans and simple blouse - and his father holding his baby sister who was laughing at the camera. They all looked so untroubled and eager in their home amongst the eucalyptus trees and casual kangaroos grazing in the background of their home in the Australian outback. Quite the opposite to Will's awkward trainings and exam failures. Will didn't want to disappoint them by being sent home from failing the astronaut training but so far it wasn't looking good.

In total, there were twenty-five cadets with strictly twenty being accepted into more exclusive astronaut training. Will had known from the beginning that five people were going to be sent back to Earth for failure to pass the Astronaut Examinations and it seemed that he was likely to be one of those unlucky five. Will had been trying, working laboriously since he got to the NASS, not wanting to disappoint his family or himself but he was currently ranked last out of all his peers. Will exhaled slowly, adjusted *Nova's* screen and tried to regain focus, he had to stay positive and keep a clear head.

"*Nova*, pull up the practice exam from before," Will requested with a forced determination, "and remind me to stay on task, I *have* to be in the top twenty."

"Sure but a 'please' might be nice. Just breathe deeply and concentrate, your parents know you can do this," answered *Nova*.

Just as Will started refocusing on what was in *Nova's* screen, the sound of voices close-by increased until very quickly they were clearly audible. He turned his head to the automatic dormitory door just in time to see it slide upwards swiftly and a few of his fellow cadets burst through, among them,

Bobby Lawson. Bobby was insistent on making Will's life at the NASS less than enjoyable.

“What’s up Billy-boy? Still trying to maintain your spot as an astronaut? You should start packing and just leave, no-one wants you here anyway,” said Bobby, his voice full of malice and taunting towards Will. Murmurs of agreement and laughter rippled through the group. Bobby then picked up *Nova* against the protests of Will while another of Bobby’s friends roughly shoved Will towards the door.

“Go away, William. We don’t want a loser hanging around,” sneered Bobby.

Will answered half-infuriated half-intimidated, “But... it’s my dorm too! Where am I supposed to go?”

“Come back after dinner and we *might* let you have somewhere to sleep.” Bobby shoved *Nova* into Will’s arms and was forced out of the door, shoulders slumped in defeat. The door slid shut and isolated Will from the laughter and jollification of the dormitory. Will was used to being tormented and thrown out of his dormitory but at least he could always get back in at night to sleep. With *Nova* in his hand, he turned to the direction of the NASS library so that he could study in silence.

CHAPTER II

There was a freshness to the day that wasn't there a week ago. Today was the day that Will was going to do it, he was going to pass his practical training course. Immersed with feelings of determination and mild nausea, Will zipped up his space suit and stepped out onto the fields. However, with every step that he had taken, the task ahead appeared more and more daunting. His fellow peers were already there, warming up and incredibly confident.

'Let's face it,' Will thought, 'they're probably more prepared than me anyway.'

As Will passed his competition, he tried to mask his unease as he heard the snickers and laughs lingering behind him. He dropped his gear down and flattened his space suit, heart pounding with adrenaline for the tasks he had yet to conduct.

"Hey loser, ready to fail?" the cackling laughter from Bobby Lawson, disrupted his thoughts. Bobby Lawson, was the most egotistical, high-achiever that Will had ever met. Clearly Bobby had no idea that Will may actually win this. He may be able to fulfil his goals of being astronaut, he will prove them all, he was going to prove Bobby and his posse wrong.

"Alright everyone, assemble into a line, everyone will be required to conduct these tasks individually," Captain Mark's voice boomed. All attempts of appearing composed had diminished, Will's body rushed with a strong sense of fear, it was actually going to happen. Mustering up whatever courage and hope he had left, Will made his way towards the line. It was no surprise to Will to see Bobby proudly position himself at the front of the line, gloating about how well prepared he was and how he was going to be the best.

Trying his hardest to block out his surroundings, Will took a deep breath in and closed his eyes, clearing his thoughts and eradicating whatever fear remained. First task, the agility test. Usually this task would not be so bad, but Bobby and his friends always topped this one.

"Bobby you're up first" Captain Mark announced, indicating to the obstacles ahead.

"Yeah Bobby" his posse cheered loudly whilst he smirked cockily, hardly affected by the challenges to come.

Bobby darted around the track, almost inhumanly fast. Will knew that Bobby was only that fast because of his special moon-boot inserts. Moon-boot inserts,

like any item that could enhance the performance of the athletes, was strictly forbidden and the possession of any forbidden item would result in expulsion. It was impossible for Captain Mark not to know about Bobby's moon-boot inserts but yet Bobby was still part of the program.

Just as expected, Bobby flawlessly completed the test, posing heroically and smirking slyly at Will as he went to celebrate with his friends. By this stage Will felt hopeless, as if the weight of the entire universe was on his shoulders. He watched nervously as all the contestants in front of him mastered the test, each passing by with beaming smiles. There were only twenty positions available for those eligible to pass onto the next stage of the course, and it seemed that by only a matter of moments, fifteen of those positions were occupied.

"William you're up," the sound of Captain Mark's voice made Will freeze. This was not what he expected, he was supposed to be more prepared than this. All the motivation he brought to the field had abandoned him, there he was staring at the obstacles ahead, dreading his existence. Of course, Bobby was only going to add to Will's discomfort by taunting and discouraging him, making him retreat further into his shell.

However, by shaking his thoughts and taking a deep breath in, Will's eyes narrowed as he stared at his fate. It was now or never. Ready himself for the task, Will swallowed his fear and watched the obstacles cackle at him, almost as if they were guaranteeing his failure.

Within a few seconds, Will had taken off, fighting against the forces of gravity and sprinting on the field, bracing himself for the first obstacle. The purpose of the obstacle was to jump over it, however, fate had another plan for Will. He leaped, but instead of jumping over it, he collided into it. The failed leap only summarized how the rest of the agility test went. He failed. Totally. Utterly humiliated, Will trudged his way towards the rest of his peers who at that point were hunched over laughing. This was not what he planned.

"William!" Captain Mark shouted as he signaled Will over. Will was terrified, it had been bad enough watching Bobby and his friends wheeze with laughter but now Captain Mark was not pleased either. Craning his head to see his captain's face etched with disappointment, Will expected for the worst. "You my boy need to pick up your game, otherwise, there will be one less astronaut in this academy," Captain Mark warned, shaking his head completely unimpressed. That was the final straw, Will could not bear it anymore. He was humiliated and frustrated beyond words, and so without a single word, he ran. Away from everyone. But most importantly, away from his dreams.

He ran and ran and ran until the voices became echoes in his ear. He ran and ran until the space station became a distant speck on the horizon. He ran and never looked back. Raising dust behind him, he sped past the training fields and the spaceship parking lot. He didn't know where he was going or what he was doing. All he knew was that he was done. He was done with this stupid training at this stupid space station in the middle of nowhere. He was done with the cheating cadets and the gruelling training and his uncaring teacher.

He was at the bottom of his class and he was going to be inevitably booted off back to Earth, he may as well run away now. His legs began to seize up. A fine layer of dust coated his helmet and his vision began to blur. Each breath became more laboured. His lungs began to sting. His pace began to slow. Each movement was taking more and more effort. He began to gulp down air. Each second seemed to stretch out. He tripped over a jagged piece of rock. He staggered. He fell.

CHAPTER III



William awoke to tiny paws on his chest. He opened his eyes groggily, and felt a tiny green cat licking at his cheeks.

“That’s Emerald!” said a cheery voice from the corner. As William’s eyes trailed to find the source of the voice, he saw a woman hidden behind a cloud of light brown curls preparing a pot of strange blue tea. He reached his hand out to pet the cat, stroking its soft fur.

“Who are you?” he replied.

“My name is Lyra Venus Cassiopeia Andromeda Zephyr the Fourth.” She paused, “but you can call me Lyra.”

They conversed and drank tea until Lyra had finished explaining what had happened. Apparently, Lyra had found him some time after he collapsed from

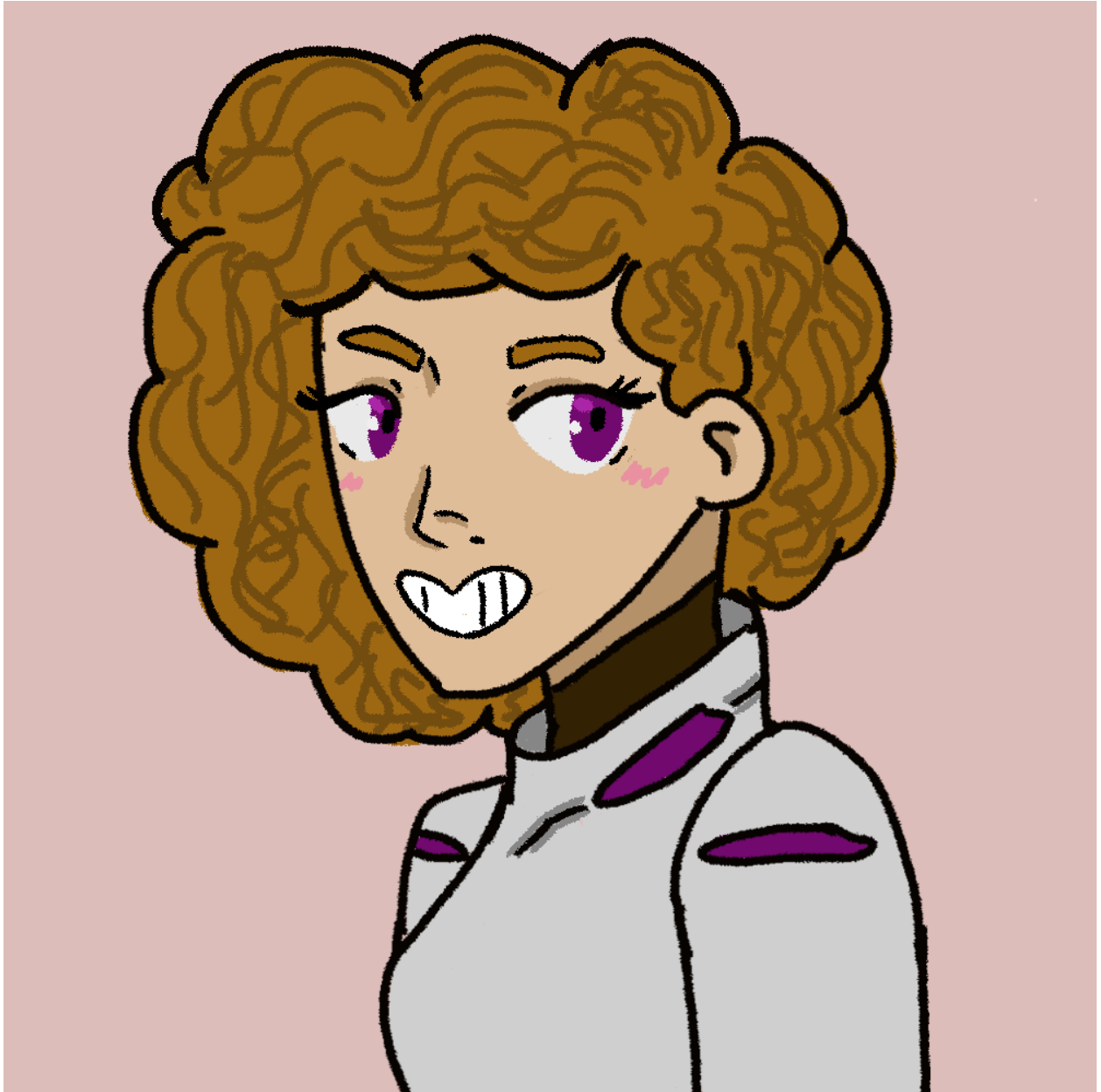
oxygen deprivation in his space suit. She had carried him to her home: an antique store that reminded him of his outback home.

She had explained to him that she used to be the most famous Astronaut the world had ever seen, but a freak accident had seen her crew destroyed. Too ashamed to return to Earth, she decided to begin a new life, as a whole new woman, in her Australiana antique shop.

In return, William told Lyra all about the space station and his astronaut training. He confided in her about the other cadets and how they didn't take him seriously.

“Could you help me?” William asked. “All I've ever wanted is to graduate and become an astronaut!” She protested, but William's desperation was more than enough to tug at her heartstrings. She finally agreed to be his mentor, and hoped that if she helped this boy to reach his dream, maybe her guilt over her past would subside.

CHAPTER IV



Over the next two days, Lyra sought to training Will in the rooms above her antique store. He had three exams to pass: flying, combat, and theoretical. He needed to get to work. After digging through piles of junk, Lyra found an old laser gun, used for fighting alien parasites on deserted moons.

“You can use this to improve your shooting skills” she said with a grin. Will knew he had to master using this gun, especially since one of his examinations was combat.

Will and Lyra started off with target practise. Lyra would throw old crockery up in the air and Will would shoot them with his laser gun. There were many occasions where he nearly singed his mentor's curly hair. Most of the time he just hit the walls, leaving burn marks on almost every surface. Will apologised but Lyra didn't care.

Will then told Lyra that his strengths was bookwork and smarts, but she still made him read a dozen astronomy textbooks. He felt comfortable with what he knew for the theoretical examination. The last thing that scared him was the flying exam. That was his worst area of expertise.

After finally finishing another successful training session, William and Lyra flopped back onto the floor, exhausted.

"I can't believe I'm really gonna be an astronaut!" William exclaimed. Lyra smiled fondly towards her charge, sharing in the exciting moment.

"Don't get too cocky, little mate," Lyra urged him, "We still have to get back to the Station." William paused, his excitement quelled by the sudden realisation. His face fell, dulled at the prospect of all his hard work going to waste.

"How are we possibly going to get back to the Station in time for me to take the test?!" William was distraught.

Discouraged by her pupil's distress, a thought popped into Lyra's head. Immediately, Lyra sprinted from the training area back into the antique store, frantically searching behind bureaus, cupboards, and stuffed native animals. Hurrying behind her, William began to fire off questions, his own emotions entering a state of panic.

"Lyra! What are you looking for?! How could you be working at the store at a time like this?" William all but yelled, exasperated. Suddenly, Lyra lets out a cry of victory, calling William over to where she stood beside an unassuming chest of drawers.

"Come on, help me move this over!" Lyra called. Together, the two pushed with all their might, and the chest scraped along the floors. Finally shoved out of the way, William and Lyra uncovered the hidden door, once-obsured by the chest.

William's intrigue peaked, and he inquisitively turned to Lyra. Before he could even open his questioning mouth, the door slid open with a mechanised hiss, revealing a dimly lit elevating platform. Lyra strode onto the platform, with

William trailing closely behind. The doors slid closed, and the platform began its descent. William's heart pounded in his chest, and Lyra slyly looked over towards the boy she had come to tutor. With a jolt, the platform stopped, and the doors slid open to reveal a dark, dank space. As the two stepped into the room, fluorescent lights flickered on – unveiling a large mass in the centre of the room.

Without hesitation, Lyra hurried in and wrenched the opaque canvas cover off the mass. William's gasp shattered the silence of the room, and he felt his heart soar as the battered spaceship came into view. "Wha- What? What even?" William stuttered, speechless. Lyra turned to him, feeling a rush of fondness as the courage returned to William's face.

Still awestruck, William whispered "Do you think it will get us there?"

Lyra assessed the old, worn ship, and replied unfazed, "Only one way to find out."

CHAPTER V



With a turn of the key, the engine turned over and then stopped with a thud. Steam rose from the hood like a kettle.

“There could be one small problem with the space shuttle.” said Lyra

“What kind of problem?” Will asked her tentatively over the intercom.

“It hasn’t been started since 2025.”

Lyra explained that it was one of their first cruisers to fly from Melbourne and it crashed here. “Technical flaws,” she said. “Something to do with the heating or cooling system. It’s pretty sketchy. I’ve tried so many times but nothing ever seemed to work ”

In terms worthy of any graduate engineering class, the ‘serious technical faults’ were outlined in detail on Lyra’s sketchpad, specifying what could happen during re-entry to the system that provided cooling to the cabin and sensitive electronics.

The source of the problem seemed to be the electromagnetic actuators used during space flight on the iron rods used in the cooling system. At the top of the page was a detailed drawing of a tube of some type, showing its iron-rod center and a chamber that held a liquid substance.

“Who drew this?” Will asked.

“Not me,” Lyra said.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know it was from a crew member , somehow I think it’s supposed to help, but I don’t know.”

“What does this all mean, Lyra?” Will didn’t have the faintest idea; neither, apparently, did she.

The key was the ventilation system, according to the message. If it wasn’t at the proper temperature during the start of the engine, the result could be a toxic release that would fill the lungs of the crew and quickly render them unconscious. No doubt that that was the potential downfall of its last crew.

That's when it struck Will, a lightbulb moment. His training at the space academy, astroengineering lessons. It was the supercooled reactor engines that powered the magnets required to start the motor which would need a bubbly cooling fluid with a low freezing point.

“Soda!” Will exclaimed.

“What about it?” Lyra asked, confused.

“That’ll kick start the engines!”

Lyra thought for a minute, and stared at Will. She nodded curtly. “You’re right. But we’ll have to be quick.”

Will and Lyra got to work on the ship. Lyra brought down antique bottles of soda and Will used his newfound knowledge to use that to power the engine.

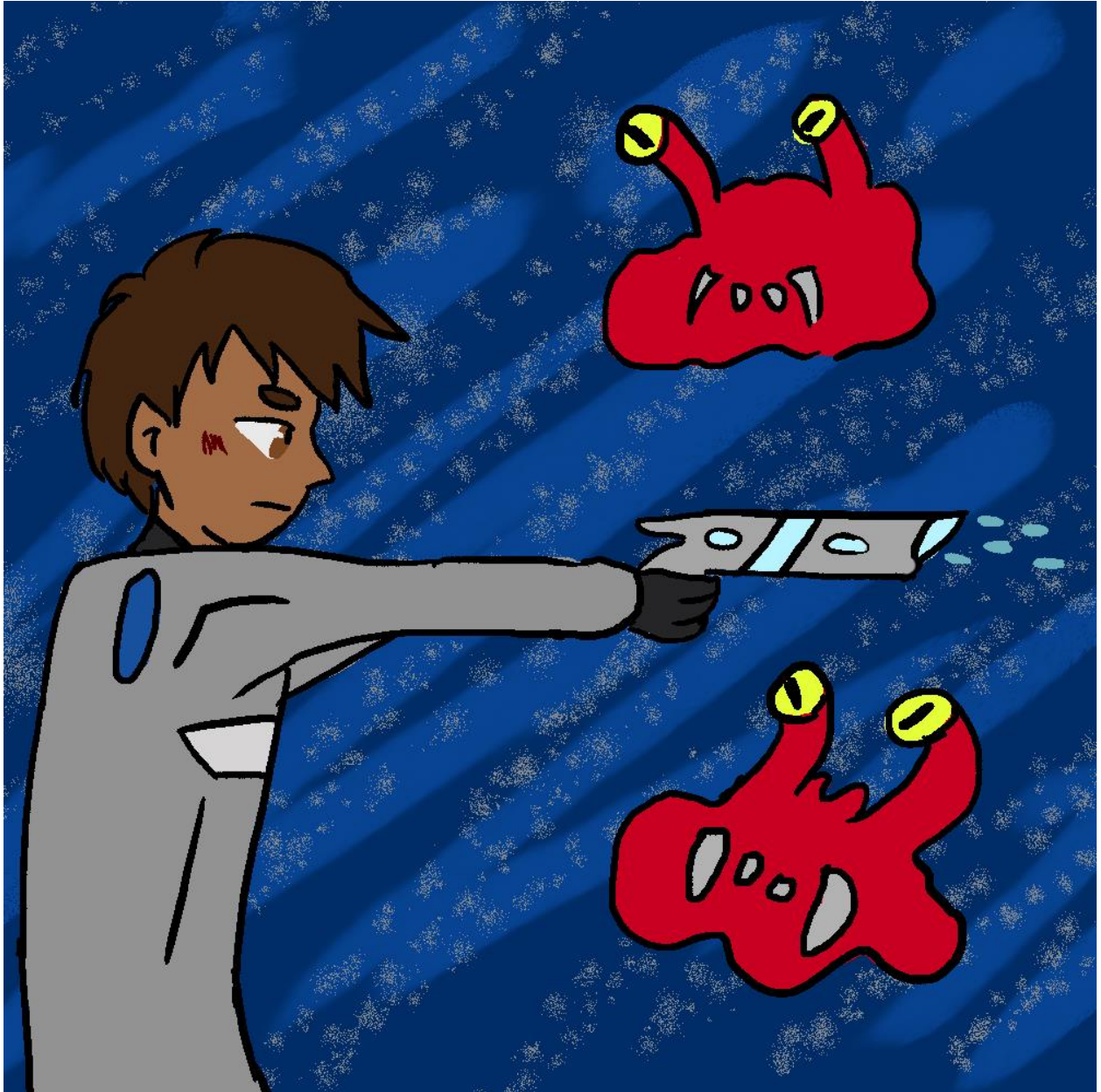
After successfully fixing Lyra’s ship, Will sat at the driver’s seat. The flight controls before him were covered in dust, but he recognised everything. He knew what to do. This was the last bit of practise before his exam. He looked to Emerald, who had snuck on board and was lying on a fuzzy pillow on the floor of the ship. He started the engine and the ship roared. The ceiling of the

basement slid open to reveal the dark sky. They flew out of the basement and soared above Lyra's antique store, and into space.

"Okay Will, let's get you back to the NASS" Lyra said proudly.

Will adjusted the thrusters and they boosted past the galaxy. They would reach the station in no time.

CHAPTER VI



William was lined up in the ring, ready to show his worth, ready to establish his true ability.

It was his opportunity to finally shine and put his strenuous training to work, to hopefully graduate in the National Australian Space Station and become what he always wanted to be: an astronaut. He had to outlast an intense, physical assault from an avatar emulated from the species of alien that attempted an assault on earth many years ago. The bell rang out, and Will clicked the visor of his spacesuit shut. He was ready. William knew if he could reach the edge of ring and manage to dodge the majority of his opponents blows, he could last it out and pass the test. The final bell rang, the fight began.

The alien lunged toward him, but he saw it coming, swiftly weaving underneath him, and then he landed a blow of his own. Being small has its advantages. His opponent ferociously swung back around, charged again, this time striking Will in the head. The blow propelled him to the ground and he remained down for several seconds. He pushed through the pain, knowing he only had to outlast 30 more seconds of the assault. Will managed to withstand the remaining attacks through dodging and weaving, and the bell rang out. He'd done it, he'd completed the physical assessment. It was only months ago he was getting beaten to a pulp by his peers, and was failing to complete the basic preparatory trials. But only because of Lyra's help he comfortably cleared the physical assessment

Though he had cleared the physical test, there was still the target shooting simulation to go. Will recalled that Lyra said that this simulation would be like a game she used to play as a kid, Space Invaders he thought it was called. He entered the dome on the east wing of the space station. The door shot open and a single word was uttered over the PA system:

“Begin.”

A blue blaster laid in the centre of the glass room. The bright stars shone into the room serving as a magnificent backdrop. William could just see Earth, a tiny speck in the distance. It would serve as a reminder of what he was doing this for, his family. He lifted the blaster, gripping the trigger, ready to begin. A red alien like figure then flicked across the room but William's reactions were too quick, his blue laser striking it to the ground. He repeated this process with ease, striking down each and every alien, until only one wave remained, the finale. A series of red aliens shot toward him in every direction, but Will shot down each and every one in a flurry of fire. The room descended into darkness, the bright stars glistening in the black expanse, with the distinct sound of William's laser echoing throughout the room. It was clear that his laser skills were of astronaut worthy status.

After his triumph in the ring and the target simulation room, all that was left was for William to complete was the theoretical test and the spaceship simulation to finally graduate as an astronaut. Throughout his preparation for the series of tests, the theorem component was his strong suit, and he was confident he would walk out of the examination room one step closer to becoming an astronaut. A single word echoed out from the PA system:

“Begin.”

William briefly paused before commencing, and held the paper before him, and came to the realisation that it held his destiny to become an astronaut. He opened the test and his heart dropped. There was a total of 10 scenarios to complete in only half an hour. Through his studies Will had only managed to solve such a set of questions in at least an hour. He would have to halve the time it took him in practice and ensure perfection. There would be no second chances. His hopes of becoming an astronaut could be quashed. He nervously began. One question down, five minutes gone. He needed to pick up the pace. He reached the next question, in which he had to determine the rate at which a spaceship travelling at two thousand kilometers per hour would reach earth, and completed it in just few moments.

He continued, completing seven of the eight remaining questions in record time with only four minutes remaining for the final question. This single question would be the determinant of whether he would pass his writing exam. It was worth a total of 10 marks. It required him to determine a solution to the required amount of thrust from the spaceship to get out of the gravitational pull of a black hole. He had to determine the escape velocity of the black hole and Will remembered that this was determined by the distance and mass of the black hole. He managed to calculate the gravitational pull with only 50 seconds remaining. He then managed to calculate that the exit velocity and then violently scribbled the required thrust as the bell rung out to signal the end of the test. He dropped his pen and took a deep breath, he had just completed the problems in record time, two months ago such an undertaking would have been unimaginable for him, only achievable due to Lyra's demanding training. He'd done it, he glanced out the window, earth a shining speck in the distance, he knew his family would be proud of his achievements. His elation was suddenly cut down by the realisation that he now had to complete the nerve racking spaceship simulation test. He had no idea what he would encounter, but all he knew was that it held all of his aspirations to become an astronaut.

CHAPTER VII



The flying simulation test. His last exam. Will entered the room, looking over at his sneering peers like every other day of that eventful term. Their arrogant voices merged into one blur of sound, charging Will's determination to pass. Once he was inside the ship, Will perched on the edge of his seat, his arms trembled as he put on his belt, the wires and finally his goggles that now felt as if they had been injected by the weight of his future. The darkness brought by them, which typically assisted in his pre-flying simulation freak out, now carried a sense of peacefulness.

He felt different from previous simulations. On this day, after all his training at the National Australian Space Station, being bullied by his cadets, his ignorant teachers and his weekend of training with Lyra all strengthened him for this exam. Will felt prepared for anything. The determination and hope exuded from every movement he made; his eyes focused on the brightness of his simulated screen. The PA system bellowed:

“Begin.”

The simulation had commenced, he knew that all he needed to do was successfully complete the mission. The words of Lyra playing over in his head, “Your mission will be to safely return your ship home, there will be a series of events that have to be overcome. You must stay focused and determined in your duty to return home. You will firstly be tested on your piloting skills. This will be examined by your ability to dodge oncoming meteors. The next test will challenge your multitasking skills, this will include a distraction of some sort whilst you are flying, such as an attack. This will also challenge your team working skills. The last test will be a simulation that will challenge a weakness in your cohort, so this will require great persistence to overcome. Will you are strong and determined, you can do anything you put your mind to...”

It all happened as Lyra had said. Will zigzagged through the meteors and fought the attacking aliens. The station came into sight, he was so overjoyed by the sight of the station that he hadn't realised the lights of the ship had turned off and he was starting to lose control of the ship. He looked around, realising that the two examiners were puzzled by the situation. He knew exactly what to do. He could save the mission, he grabbed a soda, knowing it could be used as a cooling fluid in the engine. The lights started and the engine turned on.

The examiners stared in amazement, realising what he had just done.

“Will, you did it, you saved the mission”

He plonked down in his seat and flew back to the station with an enormous grin on his face.

CHAPTER VIII

~ A week later ~

Will could not stand waiting anymore. One week had felt like a year. Each day he'd ask *Nova* whether his results had arrived, sometimes more than once. *Nova* being the ever patient piece of laptop intelligence she is, resorted to the same response each time, "no, it has not arrived, but as soon as it does I will let you know." This drove Will crazy.

"You can't keep telling me the same thing!" Will said.

"There's nothing more to say," *Nova* responded.

Will decided he would go see Lyra to get his mind off of his results. He put on his space suit and was about to go out the door when he suddenly heard *Nova* on her highest volume setting from the other room, "Will, Will, WILL!" Will sprinted to where *Nova* was.

"*Nova!* Is it really here?"

"Yes, Will," she paused, savouring the dramatic effect.

"And...?" Will asked.

"You passed!"

Will was so overjoyed he kissed the top edge of *Nova* and ran out the door. *Nova's* screen turned to a pink beating heart.

'Adventures of William the Space Cadet,' tells the story of twelve year old William Baker: the best, worst astronaut to ever pass through the corridors of the National Australian Space Station. Missing his family back home in Outback Australia on planet Earth, William sets out on an adventure to conquer his fears and become the astronaut he always dreamed of being.

This book is recommended for children aged 10-14 years.

**Illustrations by Christie Spegel
Written by Ashraf Docrat, Taylor Crooks, Xenavee Goldsmith,
Christie Spegel, Riley Cameron, Sam Platt-Muniz,
Alinae Abbas, Yasmin Holmes, Rosalie Goulding**



Book Summary

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Team Name: The Anti Social Club
Team Members:

ALINAE ABBAS	CHRISTIE SPEGEL
RILEY CAMERON	YASMIN HOLMES
SAM PLATT-MUNIZ	XENAVEE GOLDSMITH
ROSALIE GOULDING	ASHRAF DOCRAT
TAYLOR CROOKS	

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Author → Write On

Illustrator → MG

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CHAPTER ONE

Emerald

The air felt thick and dry in my throat as the summer sun beat down over me. Beads of sweat trickled down the nape of my neck and I could feel my dark, plaid shirt clinging to my back. The sun is 149.6 million kilometres away yet it's unavoidable, searing heat continued to burden my morning. My thoughts ticked over like the continuous click of the pedals. I have travelled this road every day since I can remember and as always, the unchanged town in the distance shifts position, reminding me of the parallax angles I used to locate stars. As I rode through town, I observed the slow-moving life of the country town. I thought about the night ahead of me. The local's sedated lives may change forever. Tonight was the night.

My messy black mop of hair flopped in front of my eyes, catching behind my glasses as the bike halted. I slid off the seat and headed toward the cafe doors. As I entered, the familiar jingle of the door bell sung and a strong wave of coffee washed over me. Glancing at the till, I caught the familiar green eyes of **Emerald**. Her honey blonde locks fell carelessly over her shoulders and shorter strands curled a frame around the contours of her rosy cheeks. Her caramel skin glowed in the late morning light as I moved behind the counter.

"Morning, Nolan" Her soft Australian accent resonated, "How are you?"

"Late," I huffed, wiping the sweat off my forehead and wrapping my apron around my waist hastily.

"So, are you still going star gazing tonight?" Emerald joked, making a new pot of coffee.

"It's more than that, Em. You know how important this is to me. I've been waiting two years for this, I'm going to change the way we look at science." Em laughed apprehensively. "You don't believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe, Nolan."

"Em... I've been calculating and sketching, analysing for years. Something will happen tonight, all the signs are there. I... I just can't be wrong."

"Okay, okay Nolan. Still, I'm not too sure about this. It could be dangerous."

"I've been there a million times before, and besides, whatever happens, it will be 93 million kilometres away, I've calculated."

"Always so precise, aren't you. What are you expecting to find anyways? Planetary alignment?"

This time I laughed. The next planetary alignment isn't until 2854. Everyone knows that. I smiled awkwardly at her.

After a long six hour shift, I untied my apron and began to close the cafe. The bell sang its final goodbye as I left the café to retrieve my bike that was patiently waiting for my arrival. The morning heat melted away to a cool afternoon, the sun slowly setting with thick white clouds lazily painted across the sky. My bike whined in agony as I began to slowly pedal my way back home.

The sun warmly hugged my body as a cool breeze kissed my skin and whipped my wavy hair out of my eyes, causing my skin to prickle with goose-bumps. This was my favourite time of day, the sun weakening as it slowly waved goodbye, allowing the stars to finally come out a bid a hello. My love for space never ceased, the way the stars danced at night and the moon glowed against the dark blanket of sky made me feel so small in this big world, and I loved it.

My pace began to quicken as tonight's plans brewed an excitement within me. Everyday I've studied and analysed the beautiful constellations of the universe, and tonight I will finally come face to face with the star I have been dreaming to see. An emerald, a star so beautiful that craves love and admiration, but when the sun and moon allow its wish, it is the most beautiful night to be alive.

My thoughts vanished to reality as house appeared, tiny against the deepening horizon. I pedalled faster and my anticipation only seemed to grow. The white, ageing weather boards and rusty tin roof that I call home became clearer as I finally reached my home. The rusted gate creaked open as I wheeled my bike to a halt.

Darkness engulfed me before a single ray of dying sunlight pierced through the curtains in the front room. The only noise to be heard was my heavy footsteps against the wooden floor boards. The stench of strong coffee clung to my clothes and engulfed the air of my living room, a smell that feels so much like home.

I glanced at the clock that ticked for my attention, only half an hour to go to make up for 2 years of waiting. My heart pounded against my chest, desperate for the unknown as my mind began to race with 'what if's.' Tonight, the only thing that mattered was my telescope, the universe and Emerald.

CHAPTER 2

Starry, Starry Night

Jacket, telescope, star chart, maps, camera. I grabbed everything I needed and threw it into my beaten up backpack. It was stained and splitting at the seams from the endless hours spent waiting for stars. I swung it over my shoulder and the comforting weight settled on my shoulders as I stepped out the front door. The sun settled low onto the horizon, sending its final fingers of light onto my veranda. My bike waited dutifully for me, just as excited as I was for tonight's escapades. I settled into a steady peddling rhythm and I could feel my shirt sleeves flapping in the wind. Left, right, straight for 2 kilometres. A familiar route. The hill in front of me grew in size as I rode closer. The dark shadows marched across the town at my back and the sun slipped down the sky, dipping below the horizon. I didn't want to ride for too long in the dark so I quickened my peddling rhythm, making my backpack bounce faster upon my back. As the sun took its last look at the town, I reached the peak of the hill and slowed my bike to a stop.

The top of the hill was grassy and dry, with the occasional rock scattered here and there. I climbed carefully across them and settled on the biggest rock – the rock that lifted me closest to the night sky mapped out above me. I unzipped my backpack and pulled out my telescope: a small brass affair, patterned with my fingerprints and smudges of brown dust. The heat of the day was long forgotten by the earth. I shivered and pulled out the black jacket that I had stuffed into my bag before I left. The sky was pitch-black above me, dotted with swirling pinpricks of light that **zig-zagged** across the sky. The Milky Way sprawled lazily above my head, a familiar friend. It was almost time – I'd waited for nearly two years to see this star. Thousands of calculations and nights spent standing on this very rock, watching the stars blow across the sky, led me to a prediction. That tonight would be the night – all the signs pointed to something happening, something that had never happened before. I looked down at my brass telescope, my key to opening the secrets of the universe. My face blinked back at me in the reflection, clear green eyes alight with the glow of ambition. I took a breath and lifted the telescope to my eye. The world disappeared from my vision and all I could see was sky. When I lift a telescope to my eye, I can ignore every one of my **awkward** qualities and forget every painful conversation. For a while, I'm not a part of this world. For a while, I'm a part of the sky. The constellations stretched out before me in an endless sea of stars and dust. Cosmic purples and blues and deep, deep blacks swirled like couples locked in a dance, dresses embellished with starlight. I waited. And I waited. For the heavens to move and the sky to break. My heart sank into my dusty shoes. All my calculations were for nothing – years of sitting under the stars waiting. I was about to lower the telescope from my eye when I glimpsed it. My breath caught and I opened my eye wider to let in all the light I could. A new light was growing brighter, overpowering every star around it as it grew. All the spurring dust objects, surrounding the atmosphere, had built up and formed this new light shining brightly against the sky. It emitted soft emerald swirls from its edges, tendrils of silvery light stretching across the sky. It seemed to pulse and breathe, like a living ball of energy suspended in the inky night. This was it. It looked like no star I had ever seen – there was something alien about it, almost otherworldly. I pulled out my camera, my movements slow and deliberate, afraid to disturb the universe. I opened the aperture and extended the exposure time. I wanted to capture it perfectly. Click. I tucked the camera back into my bag and glanced back up at the sky. The alien light was fading, shrinking back into itself.



In a second, the sky had returned to its former state, without even a hint that such a phenomenon had occurred. The moonlight shone softly on the rocks at my feet and I grabbed my dusty backpack from the ground. I slung it over my shoulder as I lifted my bike off the ground and swung myself onto the faded vinyl seat. My heart was thumping in my chest – I needed to get back and develop this photo. I stepped onto my bike and peddled hard into dim night, towards the sleeping town of Miles.

CHAPTER 3

The Clean Up

The moon was hanging in the dark sky as if from a thread as my bike rolled down the main road. The lights in the Caltex on the corner spilled softly onto street. I could almost hear the town asleep; the collective sighs and muffled sounds of people turning over. My bike rolled silently past the old buildings that lined the street and continued on until the houses had been reduced to two or three per five hundred meters; slowing to a stop outside my house as if it knew it was home. I jumped off and shackled my bike to the metal gate. The thought of the photo waiting to be developed propelled me forward with energy that I didn't realize I had left. I leapt up the steps, holding my backpack tightly in my hand.

My hands trembled as I reached out and grasped the door handle, adrenaline coursing through me as my mind whirled with my discovery. I tucked the picture inside my pocket, unable to mask the huge smile that spread across my face, trudging into the dark house, my boots caked with dried dirt, exhaustion settled into my bones, but the excitement of finding a star- the massive accretion was a blessing- a blessing, because it was a reminder of her- Emerald- who was standing in his living room, he tripped over the rug in surprise at the blonde beauty standing in his living room, her face tear stained as she bit back a sob.

"Hey, are you ok? Em?" He asked as he crept towards her, his earlier suspicion banished as he observed her shaking form.

"Nolan...," she began, her lips quivering, I quickened my pace towards her, eager to banish the sadness as fast as possible. "I'm so sorry."

My brows furrowed as I gently grasped her shoulders, she was sorry, about what? I looked around, noticing that my place seemed dishevelled, as if someone had scrambled to put it back together, had she looked around? I turned to ask her, hands slipping off her slender shoulders. Before I could face her, I staggered back, my axis tipping as I stumbled away. My vision darkened, as my muscles weighed me down, I sagged against a wall I had smashed into. Lifting my heavy, pounding head I saw through my lashes- Emerald standing above me, an expression of regret, and her hands glowing a luminescent blue as she hushed me. It was like my body was being forced into sleep, I struggled weakly, fighting to keep my eyes open as my body slipped further and further into a dream.

I was surrounded, surrounded by stars and galaxies and the wonders I had so meticulously studied. Everything was spinning, faster and faster, a kaleidoscope of galaxies and colours and blurred lights whizzing past me, my head pounding faster and faster, heartbeat picking up. Chaotic white streaks blew past my eyes and explosions of red stars crossed my vision. I tried to move, to get out, to stop the whirling, but the harder I moved, the faster they went. Around and around, endless, just like the galaxy I sought to study. I felt a tug deep inside of me, and the aftermath left a searing pain in my mind. I pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to relieve some of the pressure that was building up with each whirl of the cosmos around me. I felt the tug again, as if my head was being pulled from my body. I shrunk into myself, trying to get away from the pain, but I was rooted to the same spot. I squeezed my eyes shut, desperate to get out and when the tug came again, I followed it, trying to track it through the wisps of presence it left in my mind. I kept going, kept trying to find my way out

of the hellish place I was in. My body strained as I tried to follow it, tried to break out of this somehow. With my last ounce of power, I stretched again and arched, reaching, reaching, clawing and struggling and-



I broke through, stepped out of the blur, my eyes fluttered open. Revealed to me, through a film of sleep and deliriousness Emeralds hunched form, my ears heavy and blocked, as if I was underwater strained to hear her muffled words.

“I’m sorry... you shouldn’t have seen” my head pounded again, another wave of sleep washing over me, as I fought to hear the last clips of her voice.

“you won’t remember... I will.... I’m sorry.”

“Sleep.” The last word was whispered as my failing ears gave up. I slumped down into the corner, my weary eyes giving in. Just before I slipped back into the whirling galaxy, I felt a cool hand brushing my forehead. My senses tingled as I whirled back into the spinning world.

CHAPTER 4

Who Are You

The blaring of an alarm woke me and I stretched out across my pillow. My heavy arm slammed down on the clock to silence it, returning my home to its quite peacefulness. I lifted the covers, my body protesting as I groaned. My head pounded, my memory of the night before was **fuzzy**.

I sat up in bed, feeling like a ton of bricks had collapsed onto my head. The faint smell of coffee crept into my senses and I wondered whether I had fallen asleep in yesterday's clothes. A haze of confusion filled my mind as if a part of my memory had been stolen. As I recalled the events of yesterday, I always stopped short at one point. It was like my memory was a broken disc that continually skipped at the same place. No matter how hard I tried to remember that missing puzzle piece, it was useless. It was gone and there was nothing I could do. But I could not let it go. It felt important, as if I had forgotten that I had found something special, something that meant the world to me. I remembered only going to work yesterday morning and returning that evening. My head pulsed painfully with the effort of thinking.

As I gazed around the room, my head whirred with a strange sensation and my eyes mindlessly wandered, unfocused and distant. An unusual earthy scent masked the room, an unfamiliar one.

Dragging my feet across the soft carpet of my house, I entered my bathroom and stared at my reflection. The man who looked back at me was a dishevelled mess. My clothes looked unclean, red dirt splattered onto my black jeans and jacket and my jet-black hair sticking up in all the wrong angles. I knew I was messy, but I was not *that* messy. Quickly, I stepped into the shower and under the steaming stream of hot water, I closed my eyes. I traced back the events of yesterday in more detail this time. Again and again, there was a roadblock in my memory every time that I tried to remember that one thing. Something so significant that would be unforgettable, seemed to be long forgotten. I Woke up. Went to work. Came home. Then what? I must be losing my mind.

I hopped out of the shower and examined my clothes again. *Seriously*, I thought to myself, *how did my clothes become so dirty? What happened?* I dusted off the dirt from my jacket, and leant down to pick up my beaten up backpack from the floor of my bedroom and return it to its hook. As I picked it up, I saw the edge of what looked like a piece of paper sticking out of the front pocket. I reached inside and pulled the object out. It was a faded photo, torn at the edges, of what appeared to be a picture of a boy and a girl with his arms around the girl's shoulders. Looking closer, I saw that it was me, but I wondered who the girl was. She had blonde hair that looked like the colour of honey. High

cheekbones stood out against her face and the warmth in her smile was so genuine, I could almost feel it through the paper. Her dark, emerald eyes stared into his own in the photo, a look that suggested familiarity – maybe even something more. There was something familiar about her, but I could not put my finger on it. My heart beat faster as I looked at her – maybe it recognised her even if my eyes didn't. Turning the photo over, I saw a note scrawled in pen: *'I'm sorry'*. I had a feeling that the girl had written it, but I had no idea who she was. All I knew was that the two of us were wearing the same café uniform. I needed to find out.

Rushing out the door, I put the photo safely into my pocket. Glancing at my watch, I saw that I had ten minutes before the morning shifts began so I sprinted as fast as I could to the café. I burst through the doors like a madman and noticed that the customers all went silent as they stared at my maniac entrance. I didn't care, all I cared about was finding some answers to my questions. I hurried to the counter, showing the photo to my colleagues and asking if they knew the girl, but nobody had a clue. They stared blankly at me and shrugged. I pleaded for them to remember something, or anything, about her but none of them knew.

'Impossible!' I yelled, frustrated. 'She works here, doesn't she? How does nobody remember?'

I realised that I too could not remember her, yet she was once my co-worker. I was losing my mind. The photo was proof that she exists, that I knew her, but my mind was telling me something completely different. The confusion and frustration coursed through my veins with every passing second. I was beginning to feel sick to my stomach and my head was pounding. My hands were bunched into angry fists at my sides as I shoved open the café doors. Why couldn't I remember?

CHAPTER 5

An Emerald Realisation

My head spun in a tumultuous whirlwind of confusion and emotion. Eyes fixated upon me as I stumbled out into the street. The dry air hit me instantly and knocked me back.

After a while, the throbbing in my head subsided and my thoughts had cleared. I looked at the photo again. Something about the woman's piercing, emerald green eyes and honey blonde hair provoked a faint memory. Scrawled on the back of the photo in smudged black ink are the words, 'I'm sorry'. What happened to me? The faded memory keeps playing in my mind over and over again. With each passing second, my mind fumbles over the possibilities of who the woman could be.

Placing my clammy hand inside the depths of my pockets, my fingers brushed upon a scrunched piece of paper. Wrapping my fingers around the paper, I slowly withdrew it from my pocket and began to unravel the unfamiliar object. Depicted, was a deep green hue, the most amazing print of colour I had seen. The emerald sweltered from the inside and sent bursts of light in textured streams around the exterior. It flamed and glistened in colourful oscillations, as though this elegant ball of light was alive. I gazed down at the photo of the mysterious woman, examining her soft features; the way her dimples deepened on her rosy cheeks when she smiled, and still, those captivating eyes staring back at me. I glanced back at the green grandeur of the star. A memory flooded my thoughts and I felt the smile on my face broaden. The recollection of a night, so beautiful, it amazed me. A night filled with astrological wonder and discovery and a woman who I think I love.

Emerald.

CHAPTER 6

The Shooting Star

I looked at the photo. The green light shone so brightly, begging me to return and discover its mysteries. I threw on my windcheater, mounted my bike and sped away into the night. The cold air whipped my face, whistling past my ears. Trees blurred past me and before long I had made it up the windy dirt road to one of the only hills in my small town of Miles.

I leant my bike up against a small eucalyptus tree at the base of the hill and began hiking to the summit. From up here, I could see the entire night sky. The constellations sprinkled along the great dark expanse that envelopes our world. Surely I could find it once more? I took out the blanket, telescope and notebook that seemed to live permanently in my backpack and began setting up.

I waited. I waited for hours.

That was when I felt her presence, the girl who I had so much love for, yet had no idea who she was.

My focus shifted from the telescope eye. The long grass that grew rustled quietly as it waved back and forth in the wind.

There she was, the elusive girl I had been searching for ever since that fateful night that I discovered the star and then the picture of us. Her blond hair was just visible behind the gnarled and winding oak tree. Then her green eyes caught mine and the confusion of the last few months swirled up and swayed around me. I dropped the telescope, but hardly heard the sound of metal against rock when it bounced down to rest in a tussock.

“Hey,” I shouted.

But fear drifted into her eyes and she backed away.

“Who are you, I feel like I know you but I can’t remember your name? Why is that?”

And suddenly I stopped advancing towards her, I was in the exact spot I had been standing when I discovered the star. The sparkling light of it caught my eyes just the same and suddenly I remembered the night she had visited me and realised she must have taken something. The star or just the memory of it at least. That was what had been missing. All my memories of her had been erased and only my feelings had remained. That was also why the picture of the star had made me feel excited for no apparent reason.

That was what I had wanted to name it; Emerald Nortorialis. It was after her. The Emerald who made me spill about constellations and meteor showers because I didn't know what else to say. The Emerald who made my palms sweaty and caused me to stumble over my words. The Emerald I had loved for so long yet had never been able to tell her so. Naming my greatest discovery after her, was meant to the moment she would know how much she meant to me.

Yet she was furiously packing the bag she had with her and muttering about how she had go.

"Emerald," I yelled. At this she looked up and a small tear ran down her flushed cheek. "I remember who you are, what is happening?" I finished.

"I'm sorry Nolan but there's too much to explain and I have to go."

"No," I said, "Not before you tell me what you did to me, and *why*! You're a thief, you know that? You caused me to lose the greatest discovery of my life, you have no idea how much I've lost! I think you at least, owe me an explanation." The anger pulsed through me but when I heard her heavy sigh and saw pain cross through her eyes, I softened, "Please. Why did you take my memory of the star, and of you?"

"Because you saw too much Nolan, you saw what the government has been trying to cover up for years."

"The government is covering up a star... yeah right," I persisted in disbelief. She laughed at this.

"It isn't a star Nolan." Now it was my turn to laugh.

"It's proof of life elsewhere," she continued, "What you saw was anextraterrestrial." My mind reeled at the significance of what she was saying. "What some might call, an alien," she finished. "I work for the government and its part of my job to cover up any evidence, it's what I do. The waitressing was just a side job to keep an eye on your findings. I was meant to get close to you, but I didn't mean to get attached. When the government finds out about the mistakes I have made, they will be after me. You should lay low as well but I doubt they will suspect you as you supposedly don't remember anything. Well on records anyway."

Newspaper clippings about The UFO and paranormal Society of Australia claiming that the government knew more about foreign life forms than they said, suddenly popped into my head and the pieces seemed to fall together. I shook my head.

"I can't be seen with you Nolan, they expect me to eliminate any evidence, and you, well you are now evidence. I'm sorry but I have to go." I saw her the immensity of what she was saying and realised that I didn't have much time. I pulled out the photograph of the breathtaking star and gave it to her. She was about to rip it up but stopped when I began to speak.

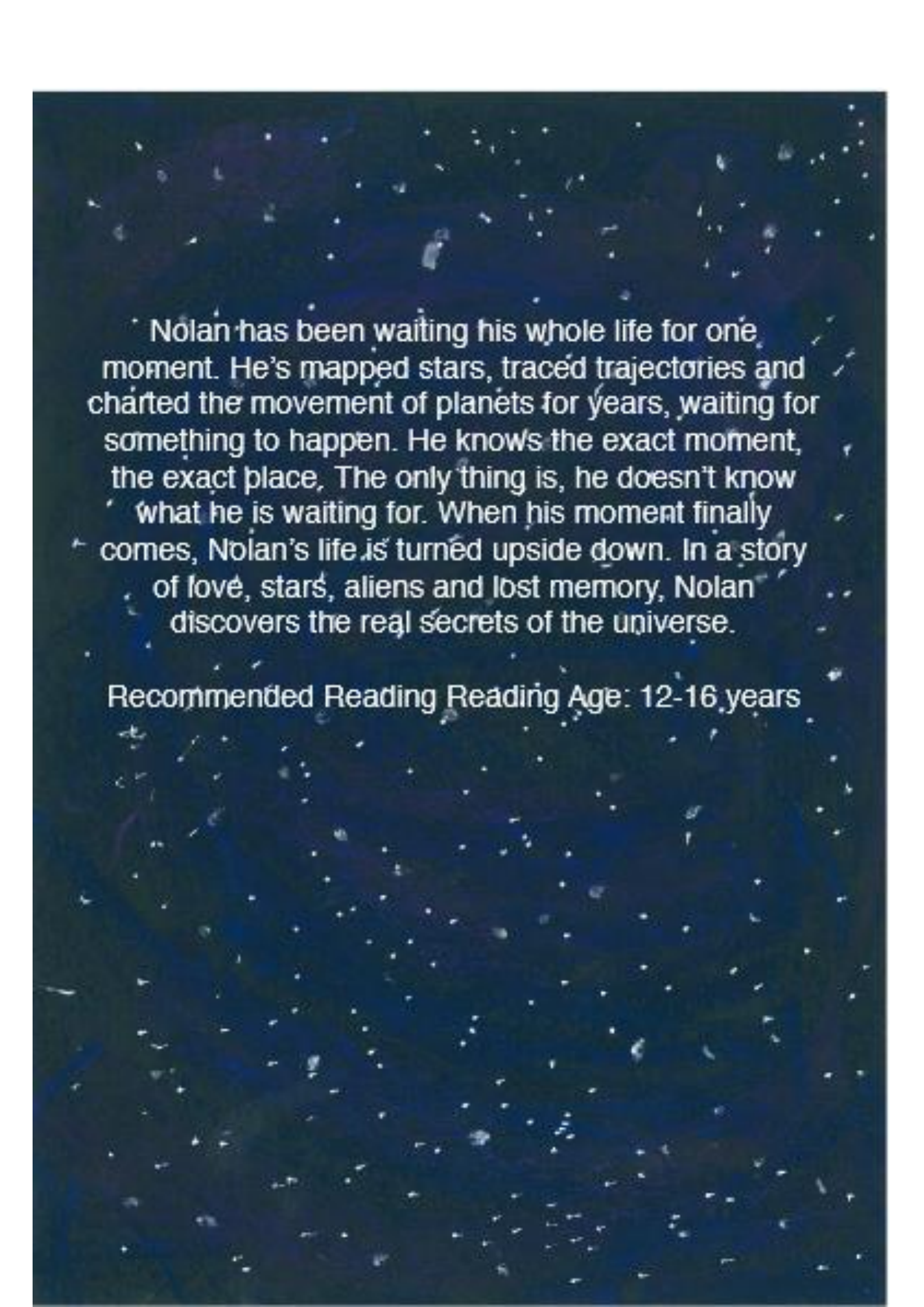
“Emerald, I named the star Emerald Notorialis, after you. I know I can ramble on about stuff, but what I’ve been trying to say all along is that I love you. I know it’s not possible for us to be together but I just didn’t want you to go without you knowing how much I care about you.”

She began to smile. She turned the photograph over and I thought that nothing I had said, had many any difference to what she had to do. But she took a pen out and scribbled something on the back and handed it back to me. I looked into those beautiful emerald green eyes as she leaned forward slowly. She kissed me gently on the cheek and suddenly my heart felt full. A warm, sweet feeling swept through me and I felt over the moon.

Then she disappeared. And the happiness leeches out of me faster than the cold air spiralling out of my mouth into the night. I felt like I had lost everything until I turned the photograph over and saw the message.

Find me again when all this is over...

At this moment, a shooting star shot across the Milky Way and I knew exactly what to wish for.



Nolan has been waiting his whole life for one moment. He's mapped stars, traced trajectories and charted the movement of planets for years, waiting for something to happen. He knows the exact moment, the exact place. The only thing is, he doesn't know what he is waiting for. When his moment finally comes, Nolan's life is turned upside down. In a story of love, stars, aliens and lost memory, Nolan discovers the real secrets of the universe.

Recommended Reading Reading Age: 12-16 years



Book Summary

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Team Name: WRITE ON

Team Members:

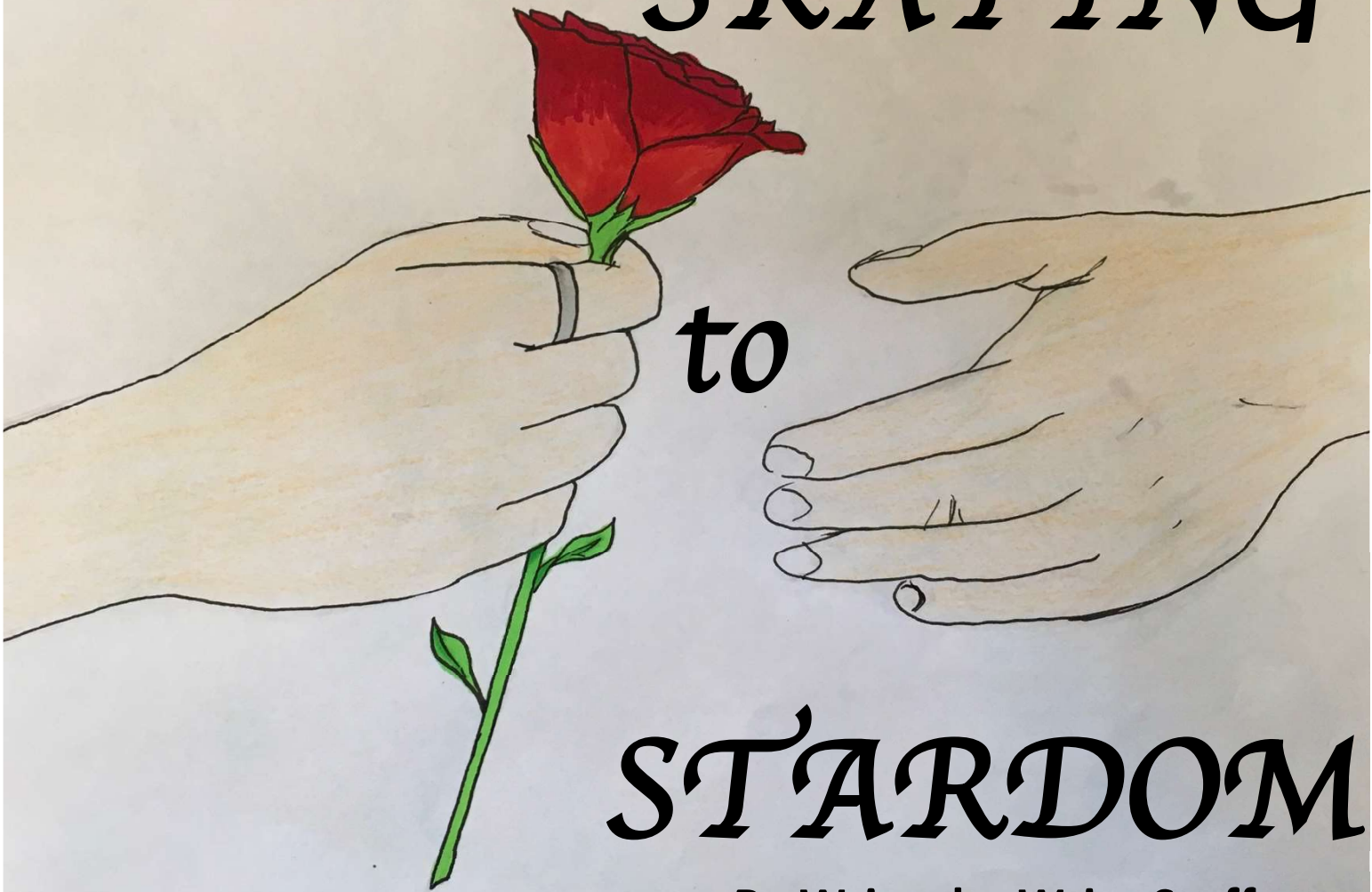
ROSIE BENLEYS	JESS JACKSON
LILLIAN JAI	SALMA KENNEDY
BRIANNA BISHOFF	KURT GRGIC
TINA RODGERS	ROSIE CUI
MANASI GUDURI	KYAH ANDERSON

Book Details

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SKATING



to

STARDOM

By Write the Write Stuff

CHAPTER 1 – THE AUDITION

It was the day of the figure skating auditions and Lana's heart was racing. Stepping slowly into her homemade leotard, she felt the smooth velvet slip over her waist. Lacing up her ice-skates, Lana took a deep breath, preparing for her big moment. Last month, after getting her audition acceptance letter in the mail, she had immediately begun packing her bags, excited to depart Sydney and cruise around Australia doing what she loved most in the world – ice-dancing. Now aboard the world famous cruise liner, 'Ocean Odyssey', she would finally get the chance to realise her life long dream.



Slowly, she stepped onto the rink and began to glide, the frosty air grazing her glowing cheeks. Lights twinkled on her skin, blinding and bright as they reflected off the cold ice. Closing her eyes for a moment, she stopped to soak it all in – the soft classical music and wafting smell of hot chocolate and toasty marshmallows. This was her moment.

Suddenly, Lana's eyes flashed open at the sound of high pitched giggling. A group of girls wearing red ribbons floated across the ice towards her, twirling and racing one another around the bend. Their movements gentle and smooth, Lana was reminded of swans gliding on the water. As they zigzagged towards her, Lana began to feel awkward and started tying back her red fuzzy hair. She gave a small wave as the girls approached, fumbling anxiously with the edge of her leotard.

The group of five girls skidded to a stop, deliberately spraying freezing, wet ice over her pale, exposed legs. Flinching, she lost her balance, arms flailing she began falling, grasping wildly at the open air. She hit the ice with a loud thump, her outfit soaking up freezing water like a sponge as her wild red hair tumbled over her shoulders.



Biting her lip, she slowly looked up at the posse of girls towering above her and extending her hand for help.

Anastasia, the ring leader, smirked, eyebrows raised. The rest of the girls suddenly began to point and laugh, a scathing, cold-hearted laugh that caused Lana to tear up. The girls' emerald leotards encrusted with sparkling swirls of glitter made her hand sewn blue leotard look tired and drab. Sneering, they turned their backs and skated off, arms linked.

Minutes later, Instructor Mary-Anne skated over to help her up and told her to try again, but her dream felt like it was already over. She had completely messed up her audition and was too embarrassed to face the skating bullies again. An hour later, the results for the skating summer job were announced. Unsurprisingly, Lana hadn't made the team. Dragging her feet, she exited the rink with a heavy sigh, ready for a night of crying into her pillow.

CHAPTER 2 – LOLLIPOP LADY

After two weeks at sea, Lana began to regret her decision to embark on what was to be the opportunity of a lifetime. Staring into the horizon, she rocked back and forth on her almost three-legged plastic chair. The consolation job of a lollipop lady was not a glamorous one – spending day after day stuck in a chair manning the line for the waterslides was not how she had envisioned spending her time on board. The jumble of thoughts spiralling around her head was drowned out by the constant whooshing of the waterslide. Waiting, waiting, for the sun to come out, for something to break the monotony of her dreary day. The only friend she had managed to make the entire trip was Duke the Drone. The fast talking, wise cracking flying robot was her constant companion and always managed to cheer her up when she was down.

Eventually, her shift ended and she trudged down the stairs to her cabin, toes squelching in her gumboots as she walked. She collapsed onto her double bed, exhaling another day's worth of taunts from the skaters at the pool bar.

“How's the weather up there, LLAMA?”, they scoffed while adjusting their position to show off their bronzed legs from days spent poolside. Lana could never seem to find the will to reply, so just sunk deeper and deeper down into her hideous yellow raincoat.

She scoffed at the memory, frustrated by her constant lack of comebacks. ‘Hindsight's a wonderful thing’, her mother had always said. Now kilometres, towns and cities away. Lana longed for one brief moment with her mother, to disappear into her warm hug and breathe in her daisy scent.

Duke the Drone interrupted her moment of nostalgia, waking up from the corner of the room with a beep that jolted Lana out of her trance.

“La-la-lana, what wrong?”, he cooed, buzzing up to her and sending her long ginger hair dancing around her face as she sat up to face him.

“Not now, Duke, I'm not in the mood,” she grumbled, fluffing down the frizz that took over her face.

“Come on Lan, chin up. I'm sure their teasing doesn't mean anything,” he whirred playfully, in a vain attempt to cheer her up. “Don't pay attention to them, just ignore it –”

“Duke, this isn't helping!” Her frustration bubbled over before she could do anything to stop it, immediately regretting snapping at her only friend. Sighing, she sunk into her pillow, as if the only solution to her problem could be found in the mould-smelling pillow stuffing. Running her fingers through her ginger nest

of hair, she wished she had been born a blonde or at least with hair that wasn't such a vibrant shade of "carrot" orange, her childhood nickname.

Sometimes Lana swore Duke's powers extended into some sort of psychic realm, as he began to zoom circles around her head, as he usually did to cheer her up.

"Lana," he flew around like some sort of giant mechanical bee until she looked at him, giving up on her self-pity. She couldn't help but grin at her unexpected friend's way of cheering her up. "Surely there's something that we can do to make these next few weeks more bearable."

"I wish," Lana sighed, "but unless I can transform unto the ultimate ice dancing extraordinaire overnight, none of my problems will go away".

"Aha!" Duke's excited outburst startled her.

"What?! Gosh, you almost sent me overboard, Duke!"

"I have an idea", he begun, "what if we did just that? What if we trained you so that you could prove all those girls wrong with your skills?"

Lana didn't want to crush his optimism, but she knew there was no way she could become talented at anything sport-related after fifteen years of lankiness. She began to dismiss the idea, but Duke refused to give up on his idea.

"You're forgetting my main talent, Lani! If you want to get better, I can sneak into their rehearsals and record their routine for you. Each night, we can go over the choreography and you can learn it!"

Lana turned the idea over in her mind, still not convinced, "but how can I practice properly in this tiny room? I'm clumsy enough without all this furniture in the way".

"I know for a fact that they don't lock the rink doors... it wouldn't be hard to sneak in every now and then for a practice. Lana, this is your chance to prove yourself wrong! I know what you can achieve if you put your mind to it. You can be very tenacious when you want to be."

Lana's head swirled with the possibility – could this work? Biting her lip, her palms become clammy with the excitement of gliding around on the ice again. Looking up at Duke still hovering above, she made up her mind.

"Why not?" She grinned cheekily. "Commence Plan Overnight-Skating-Superstar".

CHAPTER 3 – THE SECRET REHEARSAL

Duke buzzed above her as she entered the ice skating rink, his motors whirring as he spun. The empty benches around the rink were a deep mahogany brown, a stark contrast against the shining ice. As she began lacing up her skates, Duke came down to rest beside her. She exhaled slowly, longing to be on the ice, longing to get better so that she could be a part of the team, a star shining bright under the lights.

Duke replayed the scene he had captured of the girls practising. Their movements were so definite and precise, Lana watched in awe as they twirled and danced on the ice effortlessly. She mimicked their movements as she glided onto the ice, picking up speed. Twirling and twirling – then falling. Frustrated, she picked herself up, dusted herself off and tried again.

Lana kept at it until she was able to perfect the turn, then began practising some more complex moves from the routine. By the time she had finished, she was beyond proud of the enormous progress she had made, moving and swaying effortlessly to the beat of the music.

As the lights outside began to dim and the sun set on the horizon, Lana hung up her skates for the night.

CHAPTER 4 – THE DREAM TURNED NIGHTMARE

That night, Lana dreamed she was skating elegantly in circles, nothing on her mind except the melodic music. The lullaby was gentle and rhythmic and her body swayed as she became absorbed in every move. Lana felt like she was flying as she spun and twisted, ice spraying around her in a cloud of soft white. The cool air flushed her cheeks, turning them a faint shade of rose as she skated round in wide circles.

Duke followed her from above, encouraging her every step of the way. Finally, she could perform every step in the routine without faltering. Now, she was beautiful. Now she was just like all the other girls and the audience loved her. She could hear them chanting her name. She moved quicker now, trying new moves and tricks outside of the routine, dancing from her imagination.

But then suddenly she was falling, with no one to catch her.

Darkness.

The vibrant, cheering audience faded away and the rainbow of colours that had surrounded suddenly disappeared. Squinting through the gloom, she heard cackling. High pitched giggling she knew all too well. The skating bullies had returned – and her dream turned to a nightmare. The girls looked down on her and she no longer felt beautiful. They shouted at her, pointing out her flaws and inconsistencies. Lana felt empty. Then, almost as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone and she grew in confidence again. Duke the Drone began to drift away, further and further – but she didn't break down because she realised that she was good enough on her own, that she was strong. She *would* be able to learn this routine.

Even if nobody ever saw her, she now knew she was good enough.

CHAPTER 5 – THE POSTER

As a blanket of darkness enveloped the boat's deck, Lana nimbly made her way towards the ice rink. Grinning as the door creaked open with ease, she breathed in the cool, crisp air she had grown to love so dearly. The rink lit up as the automatic lights flickered on, illuminating the expansive frozen body of water in all its glory. Lana glided towards the centre of the rink, her portable stereo gripped in one gloved hand. Pushing any lingering doubts aside, she inhaled, remembering that every training session symbolised a step forward, a step closer to her end goal of becoming a pro ice-dancer.

With the click of a button, the soft melody from her stereo filled the rink, causing her to transition smoothly into the steps that felt like second nature to her. Closing her eyes briefly, she pictured cameras flashing in a sporadic flurry of unordered chaos and the cacophony of unified cheers echoing around the rink.

This was her dream.

The creak of a door opening echoed around the rink, barely concealed by the blaring music. Unbeknownst to Lana, she was no longer alone. A woman in a form-fitting tracksuit and greying hair pulled back in a tight bun sat quietly on the bleachers. Alerted to an intruder in her rink, the skating instructor scowled in the direction of the spotlight, aggravated by the obvious disregard for the rules. Her scowl softened though, as she observed the young girl's undeniable grace and skill. Talent like that was what had led Mary-Anne to a role in choreographing ice-dancing after her own skating career had ended. Now wondering if she should have given Lana a second chance, the instructor shook her head in disappointment. Turning her back on the rink, the instructor collected her belongings and left Lana to practice in solitude once more.

Skating towards the bleachers, Lana sighed with relief. The end of a skating session always left her feeling worn out, yet eager to continue improving her technique. As she removed her gloves, a pop of colour caught her eye. The poster read: 'CLOSING NIGHT: *Ocean Odyssey* presents *Swan Lake on Ice*.' Initial discouragement was replaced by determination – the tiniest prospect of ice-dancing in front of such a large audience, sparked a light in her that refused to be put out. Stuffing her belongings into a bag, she grabbed a copy of the poster from the pile. Hurrying out the door, her mind was filled with illusions of grandeur – a performance that would take an audience's breath away and move her one step closer to achieving her dreams.

CHAPTER 6 – THE BULLIES RETURN

Lana stood shivering, covered head to toe in her banana yellow raincoat. This was *not* how she had expected her summer on the cruise ship would turn out. Instead of skating free as bird across smooth, cool ice and feeling the soft breeze stream through her long locks – she was here. In the cold, overwhelming wet, surrounded by a throng of screaming little kids and complaining parents. The job of a lollypop lady was the opposite of that of a glamorous ice-dancer. Lana had never felt so homesick.

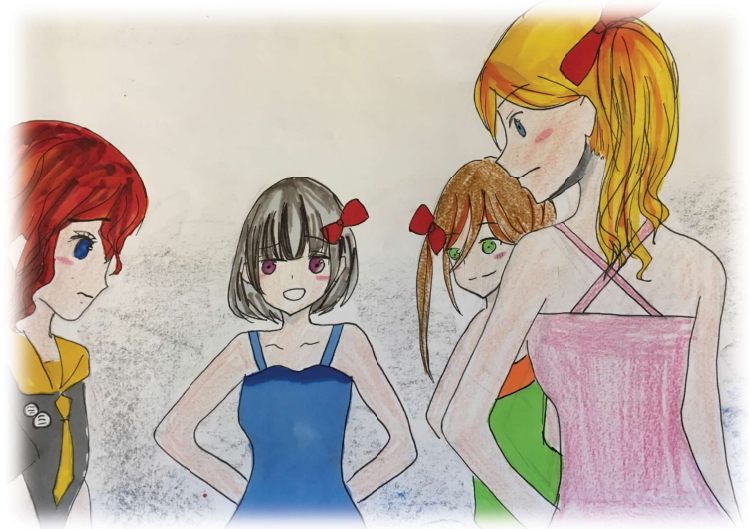
Her stomach dropped as she heard the characteristic giggles of the ice-dancing bullies. Lana hung her head and tried to avoid being seen, but her bright and baggy raincoat made this near impossible.

“Hey, Lana the Llama!” the group of girls cackled, twirling their long, blonde hair. Lana looked them up and down – all wearing matching swimmers and sunglasses while showing off a golden tan, they looked like something out of a modelling shoot.

Lana cleared her throat and relayed her usual spiel. “Hi and welcome to ‘The Super Duper Slippery Slide’, please only one rider at a ti–”

“Save it, Lana!” Pushing past her, the girls began climbing the stairs to the top of the slide.

Lana sighed, there was no way she could stand up to these bullies. Pulling the crinkled ice-dancing poster from her pocket, she gave a bittersweet smile. She would give just about anything to be a part of the show, to get back on the ice – back where she belonged.



Splash! Lana shrieked as she was splashed with icy cold water. Wiping her stinging eyes, she spotted the group of girls, once again giggling and pointing as they continued to splash and splash and splash...

“What have you got that poster for Lana? Its not like you’re ever going to become one of us,” called Anastasia, the group’s leader. With a flick of their hair they were off, and Lana was once more left alone and hurting.

CHAPTER 7 – BE YOUR BEST

Sobbing, Lana buried her head in her hands and ran off to the change rooms. Lana she wouldn't let their bullying get to her – but this time they had succeeded. She felt exhausted. Why couldn't they just accept her and let her be a part of the team? She had trained so hard and worked so tirelessly on the routine to try to reach their standards. Her feet had ached and her knees had wobbled, but she had kept going. Now, she just had to convince them that she was good enough. Although she was hurting, she knew she could move past this and become stronger.

She heard a whirring sound and was relieved to see Duke by her side. He was quick to reassure her she had talent and the passion to achieve her dreams. What would she have done without Duke and his constant support? He had taught her how important it was for people to believe in one another and encourage each other to be the best that they can be.

CHAPTER 8 – LANA’S LUCKY BREAK

Lana awoke from her slumber as loud frantic noises from the upper deck echoed down into her tiny cabin. Alone in her room, Lana suddenly had the feeling a major emergency was taking place. Her stomach did somersaults, as she wondered what could have happened, beginning to wish she hadn’t watched Titanic so many times. She quickly pulled on her robe and rushed out of her cabin, awkwardly stumbling up the stairs half-asleep.

As she followed the noise, beads of tears trickled down her forehead – alarm bells ringing in her mind. Up she ran to the ice skating rink where she heard murmurs of "disaster" and "the show is over". A shiver ran down her spine, as she stepped onto the ice in nothing but her slippers. Skidding on the smooth surface, Lana was barely able to stand up right without losing balance, let alone see over the crowd forming in the centre of the ice.

Pushing her way through the medics and throng of hysterical girls, she gasped as she spotted Anastasia sprawled on her back, whimpering and crying in pain. Her posse were fussing and cooing words of sympathy, but from a safe distance, clearly grossed out by Anastasia’s bloodied knee. Lana slowly made her way over, crouching beside Anastasia and rubbing her arm reassuringly.

“Ugh”, Anastasia groaned, unappreciatively.

The medics gravely broke the news to the concerned crowd – Anastasia’s leg was broken and there was no way she’d be able to perform in the final show. Horrified mutters echoed around the auditorium, as curious tourists craned their necks to see what all the fuss was about.

Suddenly, a single voice cut through the commotion.

“Lana!” Mary-Anne skated towards her. “Lana, we need you!”

“What?!” Anastasia squealed indignantly. “There is no way that loser could take my spot!”

The other girls nodded in agreement, mimicking Anastasia’s anger like sheep.

“Hey!” Mary-Anne appeared a few metres away. “Lana is the best girl for the job, I know she already knows the routine.”

Mary-Anne placed a reassuring hand on Lana’s shoulder. “You can do this. I’ve seen you and I know you want this more than anyone.”

Shaking her head, Lana looked up to the instructor. “But there’s so many people who want this spot, what if I miss a step? What if –”

“But what if you don’t?” Mary-Anne interrupted. “What if you succeed? This is your chance to prove everyone wrong”.

Lana was in shock, still struggling to comprehend the whirlwind turn of events, amazed by the teacher in front of her that was telling her she could succeed. It was liberating.

“But, she hasn’t even practiced!” squealed one of the potential understudies, desperately trying to grab at her last chance at fame.

“Oh yes, she has.” Mary-Anne beamed her eyes still fixed on Lana.

The disappointed girls turned on their heel and walked off in a huff, like bullies in a bad teen drama movie. Lana watched with guilty satisfaction as they pushed their way through the throng of tourists hanging around the exit.

Stepping back, Mary-Anne grabbed Lana’s freckled hand and pushed something cold and metallic into her palm. A key.

“Anastasia’s dressing room is just down the hall and to the left. Her costume will fit perfectly, it’s hanging up and ready to go. You’re on in five.”

With a wink and a squeeze of her hand, Mary-Anne turned and skated elegantly away.

Lana turned triumphantly and made her way to the dressing room.

“Show time.”

CHAPTER 9 – PERFORMANCE NIGHT

Lana felt a flurry of emotions as she changed in the dressing room – one minute she was feeling a mixture of fear and excitement and the next, a sense of peace washed over her – she was ready. As the muffled chatter of excited audience members could be heard from behind the door, she composed herself, taking a long, deep breath. She felt butterflies in her stomach as anticipation overwhelmed her, tingling her spine – exhilarating.

This had been her childhood dream and now she was finally living it. Suddenly, the audience’s voices seemed to subside, as the dance troupe was introduced.

She suddenly began to feel doubt creep over her and began to question why she had agreed to partake in such a nerve-wrecking experience.

She had always imagined having the confidence all professional dancers possessed, but she was finding it hard to ignore Anastasia’s comments that she wasn’t good enough, she was too awkward, too clumsy. The negative remarks seemed to repeat themselves over and over in her mind, she could still hear her cruel laughter echoing in her head. But she knew she had to move on from this and not let it bring her down. Inhaling slowly, she calmed her nerves and banished any negative thoughts.

“Are you alright?” Tiffany asked, sitting beside her. She was one of the other dancers Lana recognised as a member of Anastasia’s posse that she had grown to fear. However, a look of genuine concern was evident on Tiffany’s face and Lana realised without their leader, these girls weren’t so bad after all.

Lana stared down at her hands which began to fumble, her fingers trembling in fear. “It’s okay, Lana we all feel the same. Just do your best and I know you’ll do amazing.”

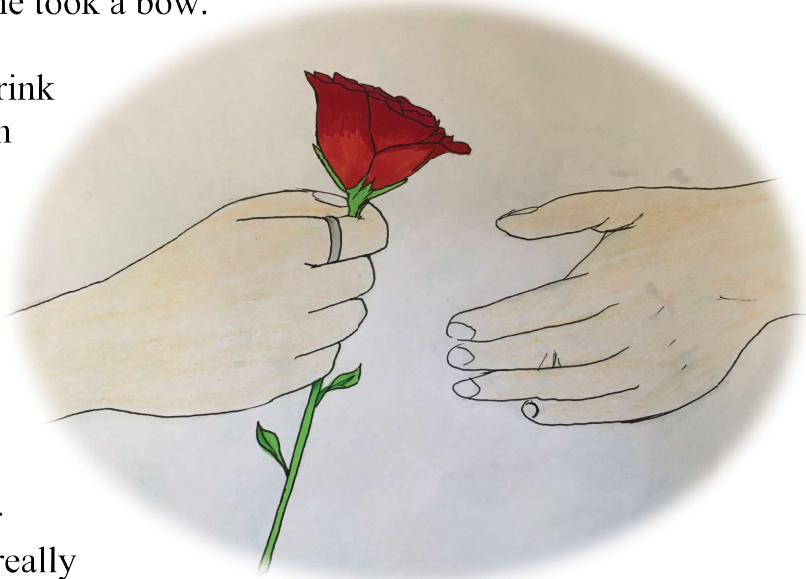
With a reassuring nod of her head, Tiffany and the remaining girls filed out of the rink, preparing for the opening number. It was in that moment, Lana realised she wasn’t alone and the fears she had been letting plague her mind were shared with her fellow skaters. She could do this – the audience would watch in awe as she and the rest of her new team would skate together as one body.

Taking a deep breath, Lana entered the rink, resisting the urge to flinch as the shaven ice nipped at her exposed ankles. There was nothing in the world that could take away from this moment of unparalleled bliss as she was finally skating the path to destiny she had carved for herself.

Lana was bathed in the glow of a bright, white spotlight as the music began to play. It's comforting melody warmed her heart and soothed her nerves. Effortlessly, Lana began to glide across the ice, no longer conscious of the expectant eyes of the audience members. Pirouetting gracefully, the audience members gushed in delight at her brilliant performance. She knew this was a moment in her life that she would always remember.

Roses fell like raindrops from the sky, as her performance came to an end. Tears began welling up in her eyes, the sudden eruption of cheers filling her with a sense of pride and accomplishment like none either. This was her moment and her heart erupted with happiness as she took a bow.

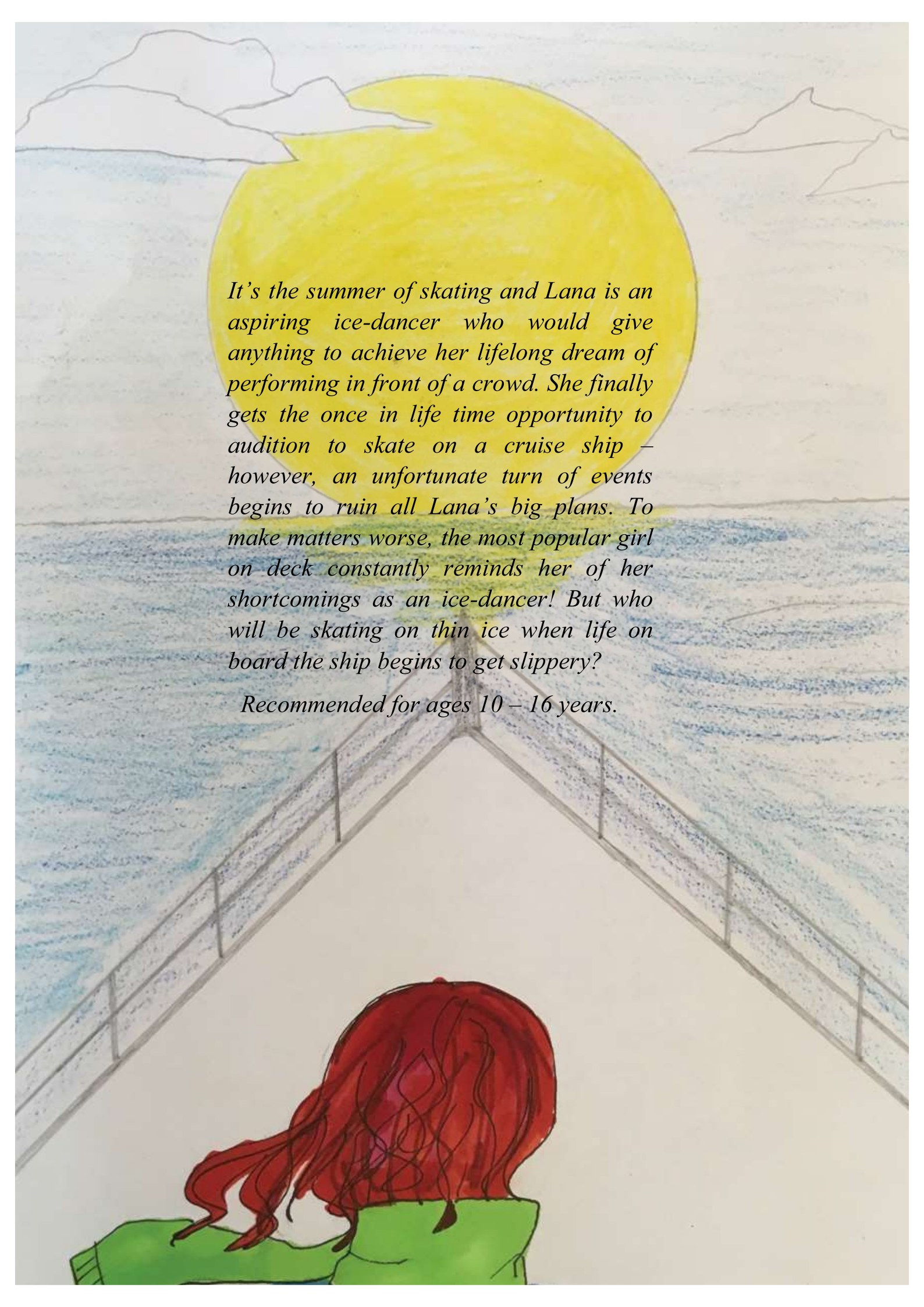
Anastasia met her by the side of the rink in a wheelchair, her head bowed in shame, eyes lowered. With an outstretched hand she presented Lana with a crimson rose, its petals glowing in the spotlight. "You know, I never thought I'd ever say this, but I underestimated you. That was pretty amazing."



Lana knew this wasn't a proper apology, but she realised she didn't really need one to feel good about herself anymore. She was amazed that she had been able to get through the routine without faltering and even more amazed that Anastasia had the decency to admit she was wrong. Lana knew now that the girls' bullying had only made her stronger as a person and despite their cruel comments, she was able to sincerely believe in her abilities as a skater. The lollipop lady job had been a humbling experience for her, however here on the ice was where she belonged. The girl's negativity no longer seemed to bother her, if anything they had only encouraged her to try harder – just to prove them wrong. She had now moved on from the feud that had taken up so much of her time on board Ocean Odyssey and had instead found the strength within to move on and achieve her full potential.

Nodding her head in gratitude, Lana took the rose from her graciously. "Thanks Anastasia, I hope you can skate with us next year."

Walking into the roaring crowd with her instructor and new group of friends by her side, Lana was finally able to bask in the glory of her performance and anticipate an exciting future where she would become the skater of dreams.



It's the summer of skating and Lana is an aspiring ice-dancer who would give anything to achieve her lifelong dream of performing in front of a crowd. She finally gets the once in life time opportunity to audition to skate on a cruise ship – however, an unfortunate turn of events begins to ruin all Lana's big plans. To make matters worse, the most popular girl on deck constantly reminds her of her shortcomings as an ice-dancer! But who will be skating on thin ice when life on board the ship begins to get slippery?

Recommended for ages 10 – 16 years.

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Team Name: WRITE THE WRITE
STUFF

Team Members:

MAYURI YAMAGUCHI	RISA UTAMA
TALIA VARCOE	CELESTE WALSH
SINEAD NEARY	OLIVER LEEDER
ZAC HARDMAN	

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The Divinity of Dreaming

Authors: Scriptoribus

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CHAPTER 1: A Head Full of Dreams

Charlie kicked at the slippery pebbles as she stormed away from the slammed door. Pushing back tears of frustration, she was adamant not to cry. The browning grass felt rough beneath her feet, as she ran through the garden to the grand gum tree at the back. As she reached the rotting rung of the ladder, she hesitated. Having not visited her tree house for years, she was struck with a sudden uncertainty over her decision. Placing a shaky hand on the ropes, and set foot on the first rung. Climbing up, she felt as though it was natural, the product of years of childhood routine. Instantly, old memories came rushing back. Hours spent exploring imaginary worlds, and years of thrilling adventures floated through her mind. Charlie twirled the bell hanging on the door, and waited with baited breath. Every time she had rung the bell in the past he had come, but it had been years. *He might not remember*, she thought desolately. *He might not care*. With each ring, the tears threatening to spill grew harder to hold back. Finally, the familiar head of shaggy dark locks appeared, and there he was. Riley was smiling right in front of her, and Charlie exhaled in relief.

Riley looked expectantly at Charlie. She reflected the look back.

“You rang the bell.” Riley said. “You haven’t done that for a while.”

Charlie hung her head. “I didn’t know if you’d come.” Tears fought their way to the front of her eyes again. She lifted her gaze to meet his. He led her into the treehouse, which was filled with dust and cobwebs. Charlie and Riley gazed around the small room that had once been their only refuge. It felt strange to be back here, almost as if it were a different lifetime. They sat on the two cardboard boxes, that had at times been beanbags, thrones, or airplane seats - constantly changing to suit their games.

“What’s going on, Charlie?” Riley asked.

Charlie sighed. Looking at Riley, she knew she couldn’t keep her problems quiet. Riley smiled, encouraging her to take her time.

“It’s Mum.” Charlie replied. “I got an envelope today from the university. I think it has my acceptance letter in it.”

“That’s amazing Charlie!” Riley exclaimed. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s the marathon scholarship.”

Riley’s smile faded, as he realised what she meant.

“Your mum won’t let you go, will she?” he sighed. It was more of a statement than a question. Charlie thought back to the argument she had just had with her mum. Her mother had told her that people like them did not become athletes. All of her life, Charlie had been taught to be the perfect daughter. Her mother had forced her to win spelling bees, get top marks and learn all sorts of instruments, to further her chances of getting a doctor’s degree. No consideration had ever been given to Charlie’s passion for marathon running, which her mother had passed off as a

hobby. It was because of this that Charlie had applied for the marathon scholarship behind her mother's back. She had never thought that her mother would refuse to let her open the letter.

“Doesn't she understand that this is what I want? I don't want to be a doctor! I want to be a marathon runner! How am I meant to achieve anything if my own mother doesn't believe I can do it?” Charlie exploded.

A flash of anger passed through her as she frantically paced up and down the dusty floorboards. She had grown up being told that people would dismiss her because of her skin colour. She had grown up with hisses in her ears about the wrongness of her nationality, as if being Asian was a crime. She had come to understand that the world was not good, not fair. But she was unable to get used to the prejudice against her, and the derogatory slurs thrown her way.

It was all too much. The floodgates had opened. Charlie collapsed onto the wooden floor, her body heaving with sobs. Burying her face in her hands, she felt a comforting touch on her shaking shoulder. She silently thanked the skies for giving her someone like Riley in her life. Of all people, he would know what it was like to have his future handed to him by people who cared nothing of what he wanted. Riley understood her, even after all these years.

“How did you convince your mum to let you do music?” She sniffed.

“I didn't,” he admitted.

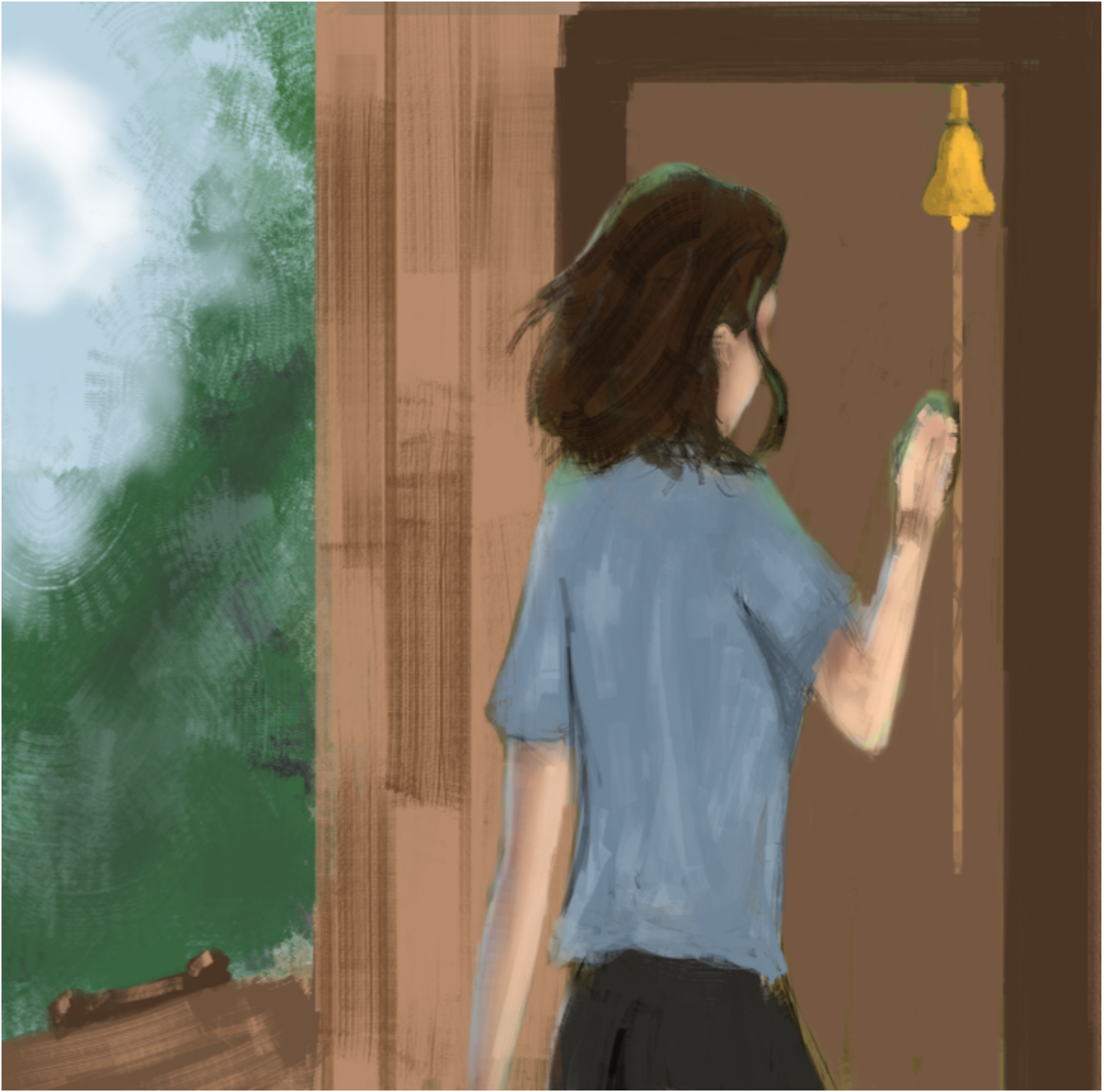
Charlie's head snapped up. “But... but I hear your guitar at night. I hear you practicing.”

“That doesn't mean Mum's happy about it,” he shrugged. “She still wants me to pick up the family trade.” He shook his head and chuckled at the absurdity. “I mean, can you imagine me, a mechanic?” Looking at his shaggy long hair and *Nirvana* t-shirt, Charlie laughed along with him. “Nah,” he continued, “she doesn't want a rock star for a son.”

He laughed, but Charlie saw the struggle he faced. Music was his dream. He'd wanted to be a rock star for as long as Charlie had wanted to be a marathon runner. They'd both worked so hard to achieve their dreams, but their parents proved to be unavoidable obstacles in their paths.

Suddenly the patter of rain on the roof ceased and the sun broke through the clouds, emitting a single ray, and reflecting on a strange object half hidden by a tattered cardboard box. Riley stepped closer to investigate, only to turn around with a mischievous smile.

“You'll never believe what I just found!”



CHAPTER 2: Pure Imagination

There, in his hands, Riley held an old stuffed koala toy with soft, **fuzzy** fur, plastic black claws and a shiny nose. One of the **emerald** button eyes was almost falling off, held by just a few threads. Charlie was speechless.

“I can’t believe it! I thought we lost Kami years ago. How is this possible?”

“I don’t know, it just appeared!”

Kami the Koala had mysteriously come with the treehouse when Charlie’s family moved in over ten years ago. A recurring starring role in their games, Kami had always been up to play the part of a pirate, a monster, or the chest of gold. Looking at the state of it, it seemed as though for the last few years, Kami had been playing the part of the abandoned stuffed toy.

Riley looked at Charlie. “Do you remember the last game we played here?”

Charlie looked away. “No.”

She felt a small brush of fur against her cheek. Riley stood behind her, holding Kami.

“Come on, I know you do - it was your favourite!” Riley pushed.

Staring out the broken window, Charlie willed herself not to smile. Riley had this miraculous talent for making her laugh, and she had serious things to think about now.

Riley grabbed Charlie’s hand, and dragged her down the ladder to the grass. They stared up at their home in a tree.

Charlie’s nose itched for the smell of salty sea air.

The treehouse was a treehouse no longer. In its place stood a grand sailboat, complete with silken sails and a deck spanning the length of the tree.

“Wow.” Charlie exhaled.

“I knew you’d remember.” Riley smiled. “Come on...we’ve got work to do before we set sail.”

Racing up the ladder, the cardboard boxes became deck chairs. A magnificent ship’s wheel had sprung up in the middle of the chairs, and a striking sail towered above them. Ropes were thrown over the sides, and secured for the journey.

Charlie stood up on top of the ship’s hull, and inhaled the salty air. Sparkling crystal water spanned for miles. Her splendour was interrupted.

“Alright Captain, no time for resting!” Riley called from the top of the sail. He had always been the best at shimmying up the sail pole, and securing the buckles.

Charlie jumped across the boat, and gazed over the water.

“All okay on the port side!” she yelled back to Riley.

Adjusting her Captain’s hat, she stood tall behind the wheel.

“Alright First Mate, let’s set sail!”

Riley smiled at her. It was good to finally have his best friend back. It was just them and the ship, like it used to be years ago.

Charlie had no conscious thought of where they were headed, but she wasn’t scared. Her arms spun the wheel and steered the boat, sailing further into the vast ocean of water.

As they sailed, the ship rose and fell with the tide, creaking and groaning after years of salt water abusing the hull and sides. Riley and Charlie adored the ancient ship. It was beautiful, with huge white sails, a rich brown wooden hull and a tall, strong mast. They had no crew, but it didn’t matter. They had always been enough for each other.

“So, where to?” Riley asked.

“To a land where we can fulfill our aspirations! The place where we can be who we want to be!” Charlie cried with joy.



“Took you long enough!” Their heads snapped towards the gruff voice.

“Kami!” They cried, joy filling their features as they bounded over to the koala.

Stretching his limbs and yawning, he grinned as the two engulfed him in a hug.

“It’s been years, you two! I’ve been so bored! How can I be a sailor without my captains?”

Charlie and Riley laughed, noticing how much smaller he seemed in their arms. He used to feel so big when they were little kids. Charlie hugged Kami even harder. His soft chest felt like a **pillow** against her head. She’d missed this.

CHAPTER 3: Crossing the Water

Charlie stared up at the sky. The clouds seemed so free. Free to go wherever they wanted, free to be whatever shape they chose. Now she was one of them. She closed her eyes, satisfied with the sun warming her skin.

“Uh, Charlie?” Riley’s shaky voice broke her bubble of serenity.

She sat up. “Yeah?”

Riley’s face was frozen in an expression of worry, as he pointed across the side of the boat. Charlie followed his gaze to the horizon. Advancing at an alarming rate, there was a fleet of ships bearing none other than the feared flag. The skull and crossbones waved in the wind at the top of every boat in the fleet. Behind the boats, a darkened horizon with rumbling storm clouds approached menacingly.

“Here comes trouble, sailors.” Kami mumbled from behind them.

Riley turned to Kami, stressed. “What do we do?”

Charlie stepped forward, eyes narrowing in determination. “There’s only one thing we can do. We have to fight. This is our ship, and there’s no way we’re going to let them take it from us.”

“You’re right,” Kami agreed, pride shining on his face, joining her at the front of the boat.

“We’ve beat them before, and we can do it again,” Riley said, now standing alongside his crew. The sound of the bell rung loud and clear, its four clear counts signaling danger.

“Battle stations everyone!” yelled Charlie.

They leapt into action. Securing the sail, Charlie fastened the ropes, and swung the boat around to face the pirates.

“Riley, get the swords!” She shouted.

Riley appeared beside her, two silver swords in his hands. The sharp edges glinted in the sunlight. They exchanged a knowing glance as Charlie grasped her sword, and stood at the point of the ship - ready for anything.

The pirate ships were close enough to touch. Foul-breathed men, with jagged beards leered at them from across the water. Charlie took a deep breath, put her hand on her sword, and leaped onto the foreign boat. Confidently, she sprinted into the path of the first pirate. He had orange

hair, and a tattoo on his forehead of the skull and crossbones. But as the other pirates flooded towards her, her confidence waned. Charlie began to panic, she didn't know if she could do this alone. Suddenly, the familiar shaggy mop of black hair appeared beside her. Riley smiled reassuringly at her, as they fought off the sea criminals together. Out of the corner of her eye, Charlie saw a ball of fluff leap onto the ship, claws out. She felt immense relief at having the koala on their side.

Riley yelled her name, but she didn't hear him. She had problems of her own. The pirate captain - a giant with moldy skin and rotting yellow teeth was approaching behind her. Suddenly Riley's words became clear to her.

“CHARLIE, RUN!” Riley's scream interrupted her fear.

And like a swift intake of breath, the rain came.

Charlie's world moved in slow motion. Her running instinct kicked in, but a vision of her mother's face scrunched up in disappointment appeared before her. A choice had to be made, and made quickly. Shaking her head, she focused on the approaching threat. She made a decision...the decision to run. Charlie's legs moved fluidly, with the need for speed. She dashed along the hull of the boat and **zigzagged** through the fighting pirates. She could see Kami at the helm of their own ship, trying madly to direct the cannon's towards the enemy. The pirates tried chasing her, but they were not match for Charlie's years of running training. Suddenly, an idea sprung into her head. Unsure of herself, she looked to Riley for guidance. Almost as though he had heard everything in her head, he looked back and smiled. That smile was all the reassurance she needed, and she took off, feeling the rain drizzling down her face. Grabbing the pile of rope in the corner of the pirate's boat, she told herself...

This is it.

Running circles around the pirates chasing her, she gradually let the rope out. Charlie pushed her legs to the maximum, as she sprinted faster and faster around them. Eventually, the pirates chasing her were tied up in a heap on the deck of the ship.

Charlie smirked at the pirates, pleased with her work. Turning back to the fight, she squinted through the sheets of rain, to see Riley and Kami struggling - outnumbered by the enemy. Rushing over to help, Charlie began to feel that they had no hope. The pirates were trained to fight - and they were not.

“I don't know how we'll ever win!” Charlie shouted over the wind.

“We will. You just have to believe in us. I promise we will.” Riley yelled back.

Charlie nodded. *This had better work.*



CHAPTER 4: An Unexpected Resolution

As the battle went on, the pirates were overpowering. Charlie was getting beaten down by a nasty, green one who looked like he hadn't brushed his teeth for ever. Riley tried to help Charlie back onto her feet when another pirate with a scar-covered face knocked him onto the ground. Kami was thrown on top of them, and the three huddled together in fear.

Suddenly, someone on the enemy ship called out. The pirates towered above the crew of three, daggers raised to kill. The calling from the ship got louder. Looking at each other with surprise, the pirates shrugged, before sheathing their weapons. One by one, they leaped back onto their own ship, none of them flinching at the crashing waves below.

"What... what happened?" whispered Riley.

"I think they're retreating," Charlie replied. A wave of relief flooded through them, but it was all too soon. Their troubles weren't over yet.

BOOM!

The entire ship rocked from the impact, throwing all three into an **awkward** pile onto the deck. The pirates had fired a cannon.

"Oh, no," murmured Kami.

Charlie bolted to the wheel. All her athletic training allowed her to reach it so fast she was able to stop the wheel before the whole ship tipped over. As she struggled to gain control, Kami spoke again.

"Uh, guys? I think we have another problem."

Before the kids could ask what, a crack of thunder pounded at their ears as the sky darkened. All three froze as they became face to face with the storm ahead. Menacing clouds crawled towards them, as the rain began again, heavier than ever.. Peering through the sheets of rain, Riley began to see shadows in the distance. As the waves pushed the boat forward, the shadows became clearer. A row of dark, foreboding cliffs were staring down at them. The crew began to realise why the pirates had retreated so quickly. A thick fog seeped over and around them, making it impossible to distinguish between sky and sea. Charlie looked in despair into the fog, trying to make out where the cliffs were.

"It's hopeless!" She cried. "We have no chance."

"We need to get to land before the ship sinks." Riley said.

"How?" Kami exclaimed. "We can't see two feet in front of us, let alone land!"

Charlie and Kami both looked to Riley, hoping that he had a solution. Before he could say anything, a massive rock rose up in front of them.

Charlie grabbed the wheel again, trying to turn the ship around. The wind got stronger. She leapt around the boat, cutting ropes free, in an effort to let the sail swing around, but it was no good. She sank onto the deck, as she realised all their efforts were useless. Their ship was doomed.

“JUMP!” Riley screamed.

Kami climbed onto Riley’s back as the two kids leapt off the side of the ship. They landed in the freezing cold sea, salt water filling their mouths. Charlie started to panic, she couldn’t see, she couldn’t breathe. The ocean current tugged her body in two different directions, and she felt as though her body was being ripped apart. Suddenly, she was grabbed by a pair of strong arms, that she clung to as they dragged her to the surface. Charlie spluttered, trying to drag in a breath. Riley had her arm in his grasp, and together they swam towards the cliffs, hoping to find a shoreline. Kami clung onto Riley, shivering against the cold. They struggled against the tide, and finally made it to a small beach at the bottom of the cliffs. Dragging themselves onto the sand, they sat there for a moment, catching their breath. Charlie suddenly began to laugh.

“We got away! We defeated the pirates!” she giggled.

Riley and Kami stared at her as if she was crazy, and then began laughing too.

“Technically, they retreated.... And then they shot a cannon at our ship”, Riley pointed out.

“We still won!” Kami exclaimed.

Before long, the three were rolling about on the sandy ground, shaking with laughter. Charlie pushed her hand through the sand, discovering something hard beneath the surface. Digging through the sand, she found a wooden covering under the beach.

“Hey Riley, look at this!” She turned around. But Riley was busy dragging bits of wood from their damaged ship up from the water’s edge.

“We could build a shelter!” Riley said, as he began sticking pieces of wood into the sand to create a room. Charlie watched, as the familiar cardboard boxes appeared within the room Riley had created. Suddenly, she remembered Kami.

“Kami?” Charlie shouted through the dust that was covering the room like a blanket. “Where are you?”

Squinting, she spotted Kami sitting in a solitary ray of sunlight that made its way through the broken window. She picked Kami up, and hugged her friend close, as she had on the boat. But

something was different this time. Kami didn't hug back. Charlie understood that her adventure with Kami had come to an end - for now. Charlie bent her forehead to the koala's. *Thank you.*

She heard footsteps behind her.

"Hey Charlie," Riley said softly. "Your mum is calling you."

She dropped the stuffed toy, and stared back at him, not wanting to go back to reality. The memory of her mother's argument rang in her head.

"Do I have to go back?" she asked quietly. "Can I stay here with you?"

Riley grinned sadly. "You've got to talk to your mum, Charlie. And anyway, she'll freak out if you live the rest of your life on a deserted island."

"I think she'd freak out if I lived in a treehouse for the rest of my life too." Charlie sighed.

Riley laughed quietly. "Promise we'll do this again soon?"

Charlie nodded. "Promise," she whispered.



CHAPTER 5: Life, the Truth and Being Free

As Charlie went to leave the treehouse, Riley put a hand on her shoulders. She turned around and saw him holding Kami.

“This is yours, Charlie.”

Riley pressed the koala into her hands, like a key fitting into a lock. A bit like a promise.

A bit like home.

Charlie looked at him and felt a sense of understanding.

“Thank you, Riley.”

He smiled and she turned away from him, disappointed that this adventure was over. But she knew it wouldn't be the last. She would see Riley again.

The steps of the house were still damp from the rain, and she pushed the door open the same way she came. With the koala dangling from her left hand, she picked up the letter and walked into the kitchen, where her mother was.

“Mum.” Her mother stood at the window, and did not turn at her voice.

Charlie sighed. “Mum, I know you're mad, and I'm sorry I ran out. I know you only want what's best for me, that you only want me to live with the best chance for a future; but I can't live like that. I can't live for somebody else – I can only live for myself. Being a marathon runner is what I want, Mum. I hope you can understand.”

Charlie watched her mother take in her words with a deep breath. Her mother turned away from the window, with her back against the wall, and came to face her daughter.

She touched her face. “Wǒ de nǚ'ér.” *My daughter.*

Charlie felt her shoulders fall, her heart slow, her breath rush. This was it. She had wanted to be accepted, but none of that meant anything if she was not accepted by her own mother. This was it.

She watched her mother's face, her feline-tipped eyes, her olive skin, her inky hair. She saw herself reflected in her face, in her eyes.

“My daughter,” she said again, her accent rounding the vowels. “I am so proud of you. I am sorry for pushing you. I shouldn't have done it. I was scared that you would not be accepted and your dream crushed, scared that your future would be a dead end. A mother should support her children, regardless of what they want to do. The most important thing is that you live life to the fullest; that you are happy with yourself, and that you have accepted yourself.”

Tears melted and dried on her face. She can't believe she thought that her mother did not care for her, that her reasons to deny her were purely selfish. Her mother loved her and only wanted what was best for her. She was a fool to forget that.

As they were hugging, Charlie remember the letter in her hand. Taking a deep breath, and looking up at her mother with a smile, she undid the envelope and pulled out the piece of paper.

Dear Ms. Liu, we are delighted to inform you that you are the recipient of our prestigious marathon scholarship...

With a relieved sigh, Charlie put down the letter down. Finally, her dream would become a reality. She only hoped that Riley's dream of being a rock star would also come true. Smiling, Charlie felt Riley in the room with them, and somehow, she knew he was smiling too.

I promise to be a better friend.

Charlie looked up towards the clouds. Finally, she too was as free as they were. Content, she leaned back into her mother's arms.

I promise to be a better daughter.

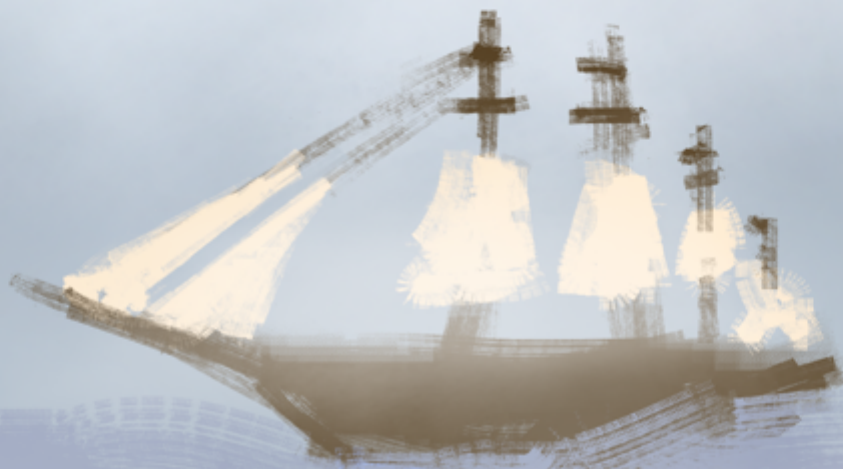
Glancing at her acceptance letter again, she felt a warm sensation tingling through her body.

I promise to believe in myself.

Neither of them noticed the small smile on Kami's face and the bell ringing in the distance.



When an aspiring marathon runner is discouraged from following her dreams, she seeks refuge in an old place with a old friend. Together they rediscover their childhood, and undertake a brand new adventure.



Book Summary

Group/Team Details

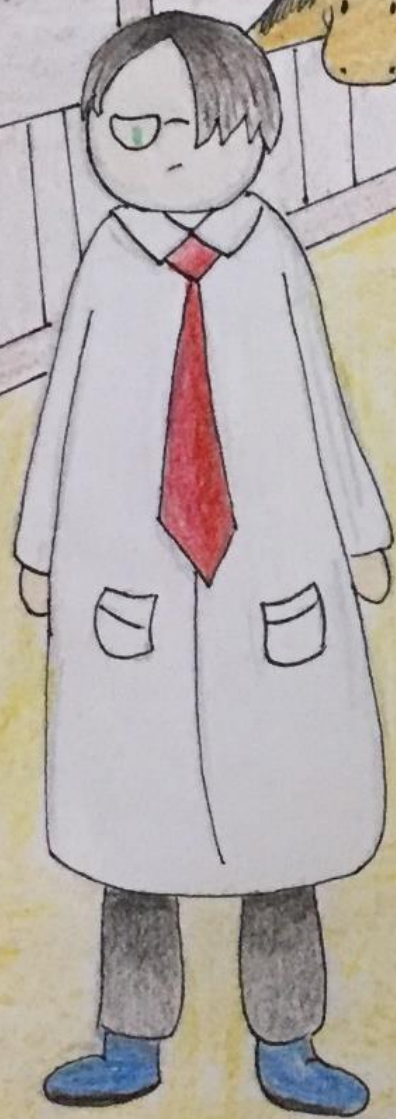
Writing Date: 10th August 2017
Division: Middle School
Team Name: SCRIPTORIBUS
Team Members:

WINNIE CHEN	JAMES ENWRIGHT
THOMAS GRAY	MITCHELL HAMILTON
MONTANA MACFARLANE	MADDIE STRICKLAND
ELLA BROWNING WOOD	GRACE CURLEY
LILLY THOMPSON	CHLOE GARRIER

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THE SWAP



By Team Dad Joke

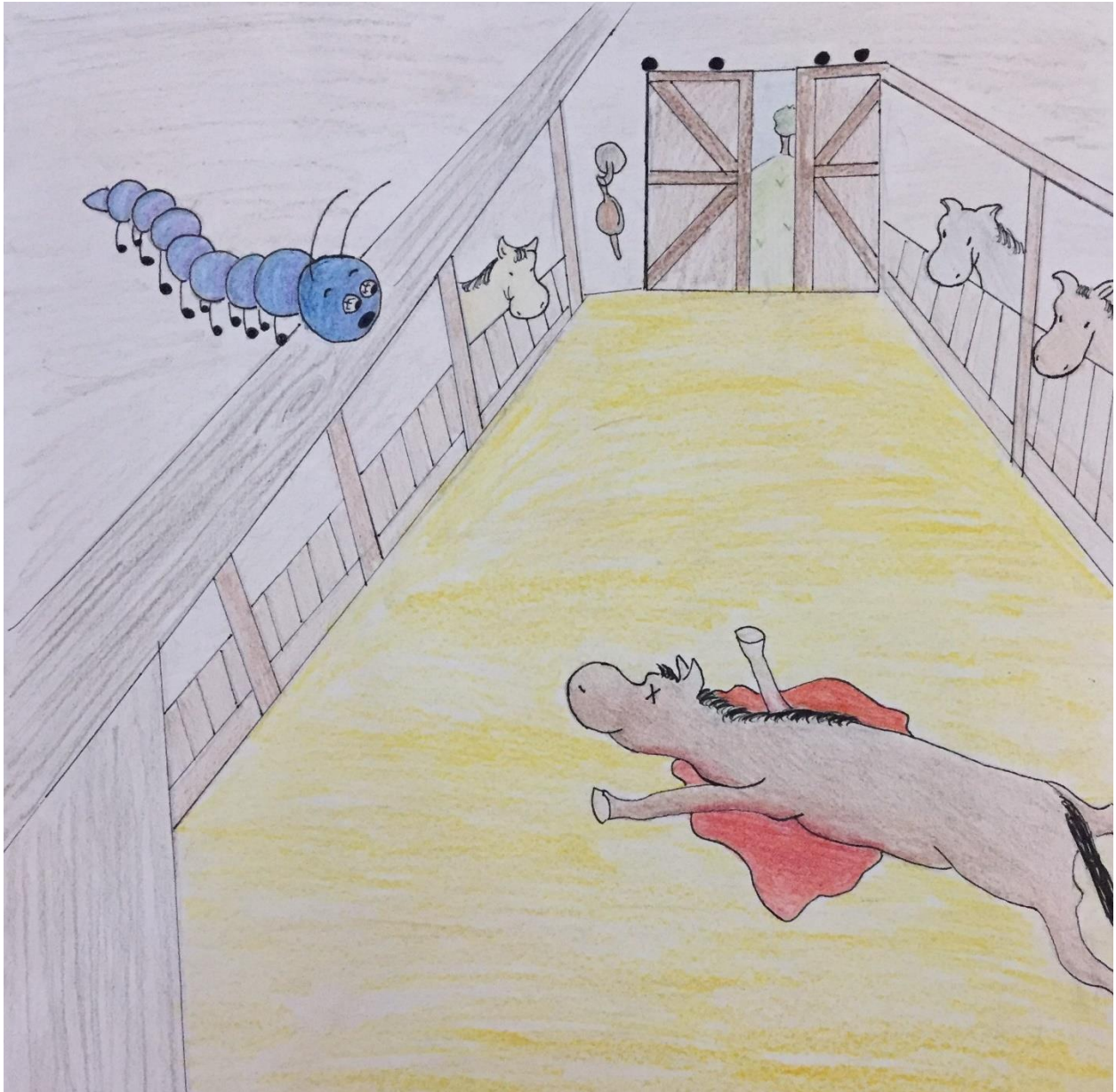
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Chapter 1

My nimble, flexible body wraps around the rusty beam as I peer down at the horrific sight of my best friend's dead body. His last words echo in my brain.

Neigh.

I miss him so much, even though I can't speak horse. Some of our most memorable moments replay in my head:

Hey Jackie! How's the oats?

"Neigh."

"Nice, isn't it?"

"Neigh."

"What do you think of my new hidey-hole?"

"Neigh."

"Thanks."

"Neigh."

"I think you're great too."

Suddenly, my fuzzy legs perk up in anticipation as I hear the bolt of the stable unlock. I carefully brace myself in case of being discovered. You can *never* trust those humans.

Abruptly, the door bangs open and light floods in, lighting up the many enclosures designed to hold my old friend, that poor beast of burden, may he find peace.

The humans barge in, a heated argument taking place. I watch from a safe place, a hidden alcove inside a split wooden pylon. I can see everything without being spotted. As a millipede, being spotted means a painful death. Those humans are so sadistic. Being ripped apart or squished is not fun.

"This is a waste of my precious time, I need to get this job finished which cannot happen with you in my way!" grumbled the tall, scary looking one. He smelt of horse dung. The bad kind. The stuff that had been left out for a week and won smelliest dung competition. I wonder where he got his perfume from? He smelt worse than this stable.

Suddenly, my common sense took over. This could be a human from the contamination room. He may be here to kill me, like he did so for my family. But then, if that hadn't happened I would have never met Jackie, my dear, deceased friend.

Jackie was a beautiful steed, chocolate brown with a white star at the center of his forehead. One morning, alive and kicking, the next, on his back legs in the air, blood all over the floor. Dead.

The voices raised dramatically, dragging me away from the daydream.

"Well, I was booked in first!" retorted the bedraggled one. He stood defiant, arms crossed and face stone-like. Wait, booked in?

"This is a crime scene and I suggest you leave!" Crime scene, I wondered. Instantaneously, it hit me. The scary guy was here to uncover the mysterious homicide of Jackie, my horse best friend. So they weren't here to kill us!

"You're out of line, mate!" yelled the bedraggled, messy guy, "You don't need to be so aggressive, I'm only here to do my job."

I carefully observed the argument, wondering about my next move. After 10 minutes of immense irritation, I finally came to the conclusion of causing an intervention. Slowly, I zigzagged down from the ceiling, scuttling towards the two men. I cleared my throat. However, no one seemed to notice me. Once again, I cleared my throat. They couldn't hear me. Exasperated, I yelled "HELLO!"



"What was that!?" The startled forensic scientist yelled as he jumped into the cartoonists' strong, muscled arms his emerald eyes looking up at him, admiringly.

"It wasn't me," said the other human, equally confused. He put the blushing scientist down.

"It was me," I calmly stated. They both looked alarmed, scanning the dirty, old stable.

"Maybe it was the murderer?!" screeched the forensic scientist, wildly searching for the voice.

"Hello, down here!" I yelled.

The humans still look confused. I rolled my eyes, they really needed to use their intellect that they are so supposedly known for.

"The millipede, I'm the millipede!" I shouted annoyed.

Humans, I thought sarcastically. "Yeah, I'm a millipede that talks, mate, get over it. Me and my horse pals are sick of your squabbling! So quit it and find out who killed my buddy, Jackie."

The humans looked at me, flabbergasted. The lack of intellect that they acquire is astonishingly low.

"Ok, let's go through the formalities, my name is Theodore. Yes, I am a millipede, yes, I am three times more sophisticated than you. What about you two?" He stated regally.

"I'm Zach, I'm the forensic scientist in charge of investigating the horses' murder," stuttered the nerdy guy in the white coat.

"I'm Leo, the cartoonist, I was supposed to draw the horse." the other red-headed human mumbled.

"That's nice, but I really don't care. Well now that the formalities are over, let's begin resolving your differences." I said, channeling my inner therapist.

"This man is contaminating my crime scene, and purposefully aggravating me. I can't work under these circumstances. I shouldn't be either." Zach complained. "I shouldn't be doing this work, I am worthy of intruding and complicated cases, not a simple stabbing. On a horse."

"At least you can make a living out of this, I'm stuck with a low-income job and no clients because no one wants professional drawings anymore. Cameras have made my job difficult." Leo rebutted.

"Ok, stop. You think that this job is easy?" Zach accused.

"Can't be a miserable as mine." Grumbled Leo.

"Try me, it's horrible." Zach replied.

"Well, then, why don't you swap places for a day..." Theodore interrupted. His smirk wide, as his plan was finally coming to fruition. "If anything either of you have said is true, then it should be easy. A day off if you will."

"It's not like it's going to be hard," Zach said.

Zach and Leo turned to each other, and made a silent agreement. It was settled. They would swap positions for today.

Chapter 2



Leo and Zach discussed what exactly they were supposed to be doing, as neither of them had any idea of how to complete the opposites job. The conversation was stunted and **awkward** but they managed. When they had basic knowledge of what to do, they split off to find the equipment and set off to work.

With a new found respect for Zach and his work, Leo had gained a sense of trepidation of the job ahead. The immense pressure of finding a killer, and not messing up was beginning to weigh on his mind but it couldn't possibly be worse than his own job. Not going to happen. High School science was such a long time ago, he could barely remember the necessities. Luckily, Leo had watched many crime shows including Bones, NCIS and many more. He was a cop show fanatic. Although he knew they were only partially truthful, it was a starting point. One that he was sorely lacking before-hand. Hopefully more was truth than lies, however unlikely it seemed.

As he walked into the stable, the smell of the dead horse overwhelmed him. It sent him stumbling backwards, only just avoiding the need to throw up. He regained control of his body and tried to go in a second time, this time with his hand covering his mouth and nose, he made it inside to take a closer look of the late horse.

The sight he was faced with was a lot to take in. Almost too much. Reminding himself that he had a job to complete, he continued on to examine the body. When he walked around to what he believed was the source of it of all the blood pooling around the body, he found a stab wound.

"So, there has to be a knife, or something, right?" He said to himself. Talking to oneself is the first sign of madness. But then again, who doesn't talk to oneself?

Looking around, Leo decided that his next point of call would have to be to try and find where the knife was, if it was, in fact, still here. Which it might not be. The killer may have taken it with him.

"Where could it be?" There was almost nowhere that something like that could be hidden here. It was a simple stable. Pretty, but simple. It had long lines of stalls, tack, Zach's stuff and extra paraphernalia that was hung across the walls. The only place that could potentially hide something inside would be the hay. But the knife would probably be covered in blood. As would the killer. Not that that matters right now.

"Not inside the stable then." Leo decided that the next logical step would be to find where the murderer could have escaped from. It should be the closest exit. That would make sense. But where did they go? Have they even left? Are they still here? The idea that the murderer could still be here has clawed its way inside Leo's head creating fear until he dismissed it and continued with his assigned job.

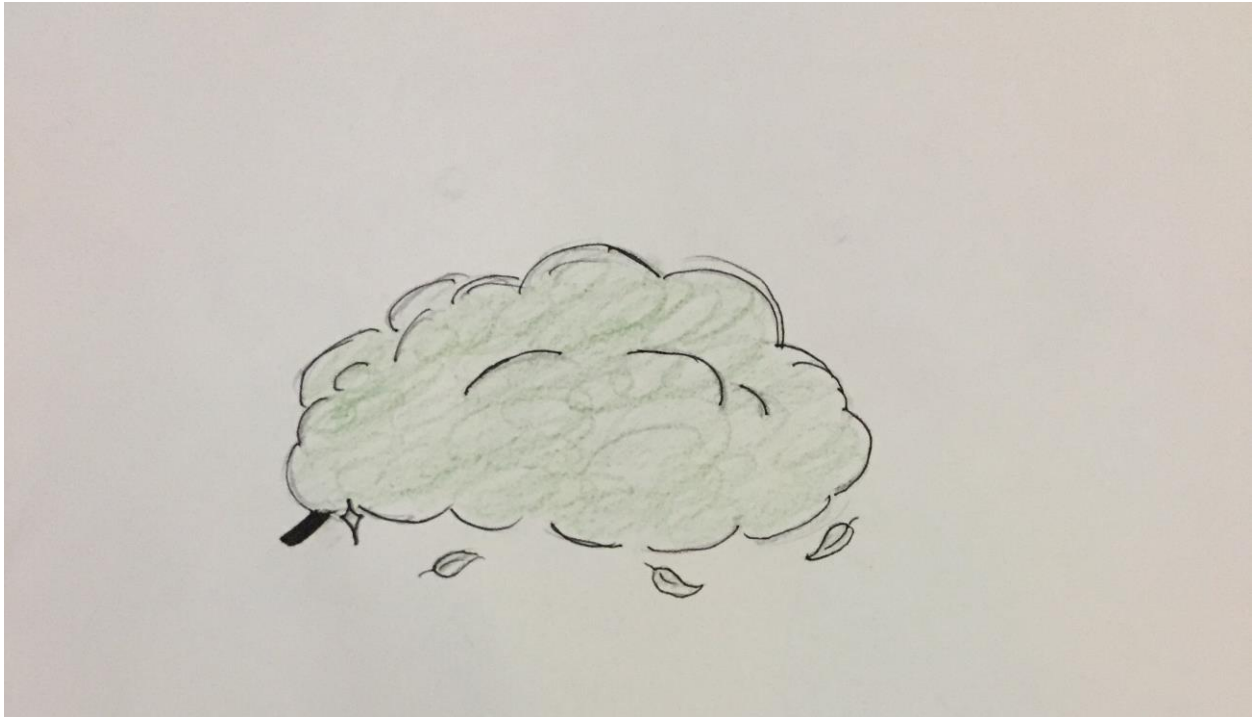
"This job is possibly harder than I originally thought," Leo conceded, "Give credit where it's due, I suppose."

At this, Leo spotted the back door, which had a few odd looking marks. As he quickly moved towards the door he realized what the marks consisted of. The same foul smelling blood that had covered the floor of the stall. The horses' blood.

"The murderer must have escaped through the door, so, if I'm lucky, the knife may be somewhere out here" Leo muttered quietly. He believed that his reasoning was sound, and with that, he opened the door.

As he walked outside, he was in awe of the breath-taking landscape in-front of him. The lush green seemed to never end, hills abounding covered with rolling clouds. All Leo could think about was how much he wished that he could spend hours sketching, painting and drawing the beauty he was standing in. This would be his ideal commission. A few hours out here would be amazing. Not that his job was anything to look forward to. Shaking his head, he escaped the thought and got back to work.

As he focused, he looked down and saw a trail of footprints. He was well aware of how lucky he had gotten in finding this. The recent heavy rain had left mud in its wake, leaving well-defined boot prints leading to small hedge nearby. This job was far less enjoyable than it seems on TV.



"This could just be the owners. I could be wrong. This might just be me wasting time, following through on an empty lead." Leo began to get nervous. It felt far more serious than before. But the hesitation only lasted a short time, and his curiosity took over. He carefully avoided the footprints while making his way over.

Soon enough he was standing behind the hedge he had previously seen. The hedge has clearly been tampered with as leaves are everywhere. As he parts the bush, he can see the knife clearly

sticking out from the middle. As he goes to grab it he remembers the one thing that every cop show agrees with. Never touch the evidence with your bare hands. Slowly, Leo retracted his hand. The kit that Zach had given him earlier must have something in it.

As he made his way back, he thought about how his day had gone. He was clearly wrong about what he perceived Zach's job to be. Just because he was having a miserable day and his business isn't great doesn't mean that any other job is going to be better. In fact, he missed his drawings. Today was stressful. And horrible. All he wanted to was apologize and go home. Well, time to finish everything else off.

Leo grabbed Zach's bag. He looked inside to find what looked appropriate as far as his TV knowledge could take him. In the end he grabbed the knife with a cloth on the sharp end and put it into a clear, sealable plastic bag. He could only hope that this was right. That he didn't mess up in a major way and contaminate the evidence. He just wanted to get rid of the stench of blood. His hands were disgusting. Leo wondered back towards the stable in an attempt to find Zach again.

Chapter 3

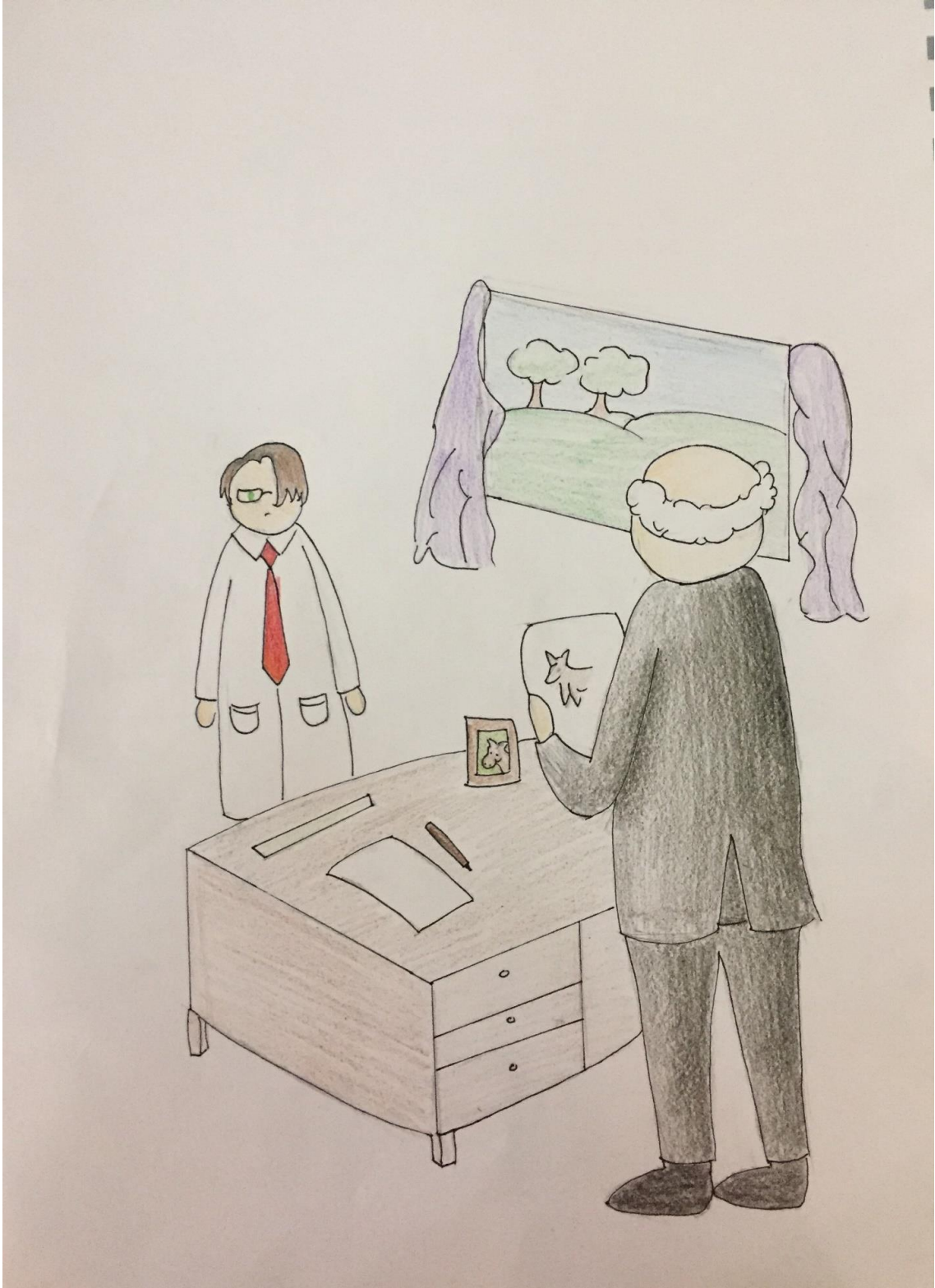
Zach had to go find Leo's drawing gear, as apparently he had 'left most of it behind'. This meant trekking all the way to Leo's car and back. By the time that he had gotten to the stables, his kit had been moved but Leo was no where to be found.

Once he walked into the stall, Zach was engrossed with his subject matter. The once magnificent steed lay on his side, blood poured out of the colossal wound on his side. Zach vigilantly took a couple of steps forward, notebook in hand. He crouched in front of the body, noticing the wounds shape and size. He noticed it's sharp edges and depth, concluding that the death of the striking steed was indeed from a stab wound.

"No." he thought to himself. "I mustn't do my old job." Snapping out of the familiar mindset, he quickly backed away from the bloody body to draw the body, his new, better job for today.

He tried to recollect thoughts from his old art classes and what Leo had told him. However, all he could remember was sitting and looking out the window. He was never very good at art. Taking a deep breath, Zach's hand trembled over the blank page. 'I can do this he thought' and he starting sketching his first cartoon.

His pencil flew across the page, outlining the deceased horse's figure. Grasping every detail was essential in the success of his artwork. At last, after two hours of hard work, the immense pressure of creating a good piece of artwork for the rich owners of the incredible steed was finally of his mind. He stepped back and looked at his masterpiece and felt a thrill of pride.



Zach made his way towards the unbelievably large house. The incredibly lush and well-kept grass was like walking on a pillow. The mansion's regal entrance stood, towering before

him. Swallowing down nerves, he entered through the hall, agitatedly picking at the edge of the cartoon's page and hesitantly walking towards the main office, staring in wonder at the amazing antique artwork displayed in the striking walk way. Zach cautiously knocked on the majestic door.

"Come in," demanded a deep voice, full of authority.

Zach anxiously opened the door, stepping into the colossal room of which they called an office. The intimidating trophies, medals and certificates hung from all walls. A distinguished looking man sat behind the massive desk, reading the daily paper.

"Yes," he said, not looking up.

"Um, hello sir," stuttered Zach. "I'm here to present the drawing of your deceased horse, Jackie."

He gingerly stepped forward, anxious to not disrupt or do the incorrect thing in front of the noble man. Producing his picture now, Zach gained a sliver of confidence as he gazed adoringly at his sketch.

The man peered up. "No, do it again," he simply stated as he went back to reading the paper.

"But sir..." Zach objected, "It took me two hours to do this glorious picture!"

The man merely stared at him. "It did not grasp my attention straight away. Hence, it is not worthy to be hung up with all the other artwork. In fact, it looks like it was created by a five-year-old! The caliber of work here is much higher than what you have produced and we do not accept artwork made by amateur artists. Therefore, Mr Balthazar, I suggest you complete this drawing again if you wish to be paid."

Zach stared at him stunned. With those word, his confidence in his abilities plunged faster than a cheetah can run. Simultaneously, the pride of his work vanished and his shoulders sagged. His belief in his picture and himself disappeared. Self-doubt crept into his mind. What if he wasn't capable of working in Leo's job? Anxiety surged through his veins. The unsatisfying feeling of failure nudged his mind.

"Yes sir. Thank you," was all he managed to say. And he limped out of the room, as if there were no meaning to life. The antique paintings that hung in the hallways no longer held the same wonder as they did before, the breathtaking view seemed ordinary now. Zach had given up. However, he began to see the positive side to his job. He had a reliable income. His job always held his interest. Maybe he perceived Leo's and his job all wrong.

But he missed his old job. The thrill of uncovering clues, the intrigue and motivation of looking and uncovering why and how the individual's death occurred. He missed the excitement of finally resolving the mystery and finding out the motives behind the murder. Maybe he was crazy but he missed that. As he came to the resolution of finding out where Leo was, he bumped straight into him.

"Hi...What are you doing with a bloody knife?" Exclaimed Zach.

"Uh, you take it," said Leo in disgust shoving the sealable bag containing the knife to Zach. "But I think that I just uncovered the murder weapon."

"Quick, scan it for fingerprints," cried Zach, producing a small Ziploc bag containing powder to see the fingerprint. They needed to do this quickly if they wanted to finish this today.

Chapter 4

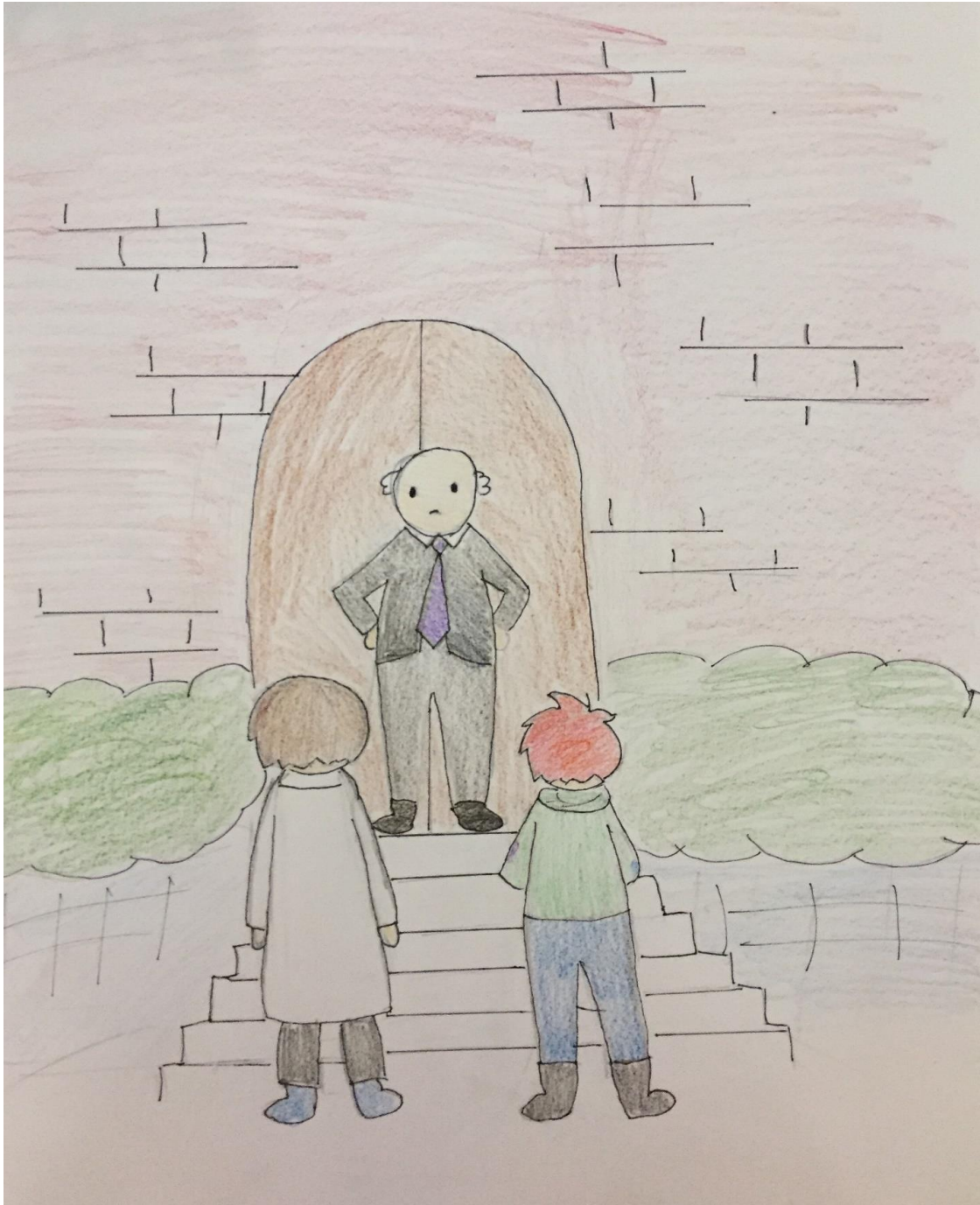


The fingerprints took a while to get identified but when they did, it shocked the both of them. Why would he have killed the horse? What does he have to benefit out of this? It was his own horse? What possible justification would the owner have for killing his own horse?

"Zach, what do we do from here?" Leo asked, completely unknowing of proper procedure.

"We should go talk to the owner. We technically do not have any jurisdiction over this, but we can, and hopefully will, determine the truth and find out what truly happened here." Zach replied with a certain strength behind his words.

Zach began to pack up his kit and Leo put all of his art supplies that Zach had used. He was slightly confused at the combination that Zach had used but decided not to question it. He did, however, wonder what he had created.



They walked across the soft grass, and made their way up the mansion. He couldn't think of a better way to describe it. It was huge. Yet another place that would make a wonderful addition to his portfolio. Stop. Focus. The silence between Zach and him was strangely comforting.

The door was fast approaching, and they began to knock on the very large, impressive door. The booming voice answer, questioning why he was being bothered once again. The door was opened by an elderly man. Zach seemed even paler then before. Leo wondered what happened. The old man walks outside, and shut the door behind him.

Leo addressed the man, "We just want to ask a few questions about the circumstances of your horses death."

"Sure. I have already told you everything, but I am willing to answer any of your questions." The man answered with extreme confidence.

"What exactly happened last night, and what were you doing at the estimated time of death?" Zach questioned.

"I was asleep by 10:30, and my wife will back up my word." The smirk on his face made this hard to believe.

"Do you happen to have security cameras, and therefore footage of this time?" Leo asked. Zach had a look of realisation. Maybe he hadn't asked this question last time. Point for Leo.

The old man stuttered his way through the sentence. "I... uh... I don't... uh... have access to the footage at the moment, because... ah... I don't."

"Why don't you have the access, that makes no sense..." Leo asked. The man started to act more suspiciously and almost guiltily.

"Because I don't. Isn't that good enough for you fools?" The old man retorted. He was highly agitated and was fidgeting with his hands.

"This is a forensic investigation. If you wish to find the truth as to what happened you must be completely candid with us." Zach stated, with a new found confidence. He sounded far more calm than he had before.

"I do think it would be unwise to continue this line of investigation." His tone was definite and unmoving. This all but confirmed what the two boys already knew. He began to close off his body language and become almost threatening.

Zach and Leo looked at each other, unsure how much longer it would be safe to remain in his company. Their mini non-verbal conversation ended, and they asked one final question.

"Was it you? Did you kill your own horse?" Leo boldly asked.

"Are you accusing me of this? Be very careful of how you proceed. I may blame everything that has occurred today on Mr Balthazar here. Wouldn't that do wonders for your future career?" The man threatened. His voice has raised and stance solidified.

They, again, looked at each other. This time they decided to run. Time to leave this place behind.

Chapter 5

When they reached their cars, Zach noticed something off about his car. The tyre's had been slashed. Zach had no idea how he was going to get home after a completely unsuccessful day.

Luckily for him, Leo's car remained intact, and he offered to drive the both of them home. The mansion was in Wollongong, so they had a long drive ahead of them as they both lived in Sydney.

Once the car started and Leo had set up his GPS on his phone, they were on the road. The silence was, once again, strangely comforting. They didn't need to talk, as they had Triple J playing in the background. It was good to know that they had a similar taste in music. Essential for all long car trips. But, there was something that had to be said.

"I am sorry for the way I spoke to you this morning, it was completely uncalled for. I was also wrong about your job. It was the opposite of easy, and customers can be very tricky. This may have also been because I suck at art. I cannot draw for anything." Zach confessed. He felt like it was necessary to clear the air. He didn't want to seem arrogant or overly-sure of himself, as this was not at all the truth.

"Don't worry, it's fine. I was wrong as well. I said your job would be easy, but it, suffice to say, was not. And how do you deal with the smell? It's horrific!" Leo answered. He had a large smile on his face as he briefly looked across at Zach, before returning to focusing on the road.

"Ok, but what about the talking millipede? What was that about? Were we dreaming or something? I'm very confused." Zach asked, the confusion evident on his faces.

Leo shrugged his shoulders as he responded, "Let's just blur over it and ignore all of that. There is no explanation for what happened. Shall we just forget that today existed?"

"I think that would be a good course of action." Zach replied as he looked over at Leo and then out of the window.

The two drove for the rest of the night, enjoying each others company. By the time that they got home, they had already become close.

And with that the story ends.



Book Summary

Group/Team Details

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Division: Middle School

Team Name: TEAM DAD JOKE

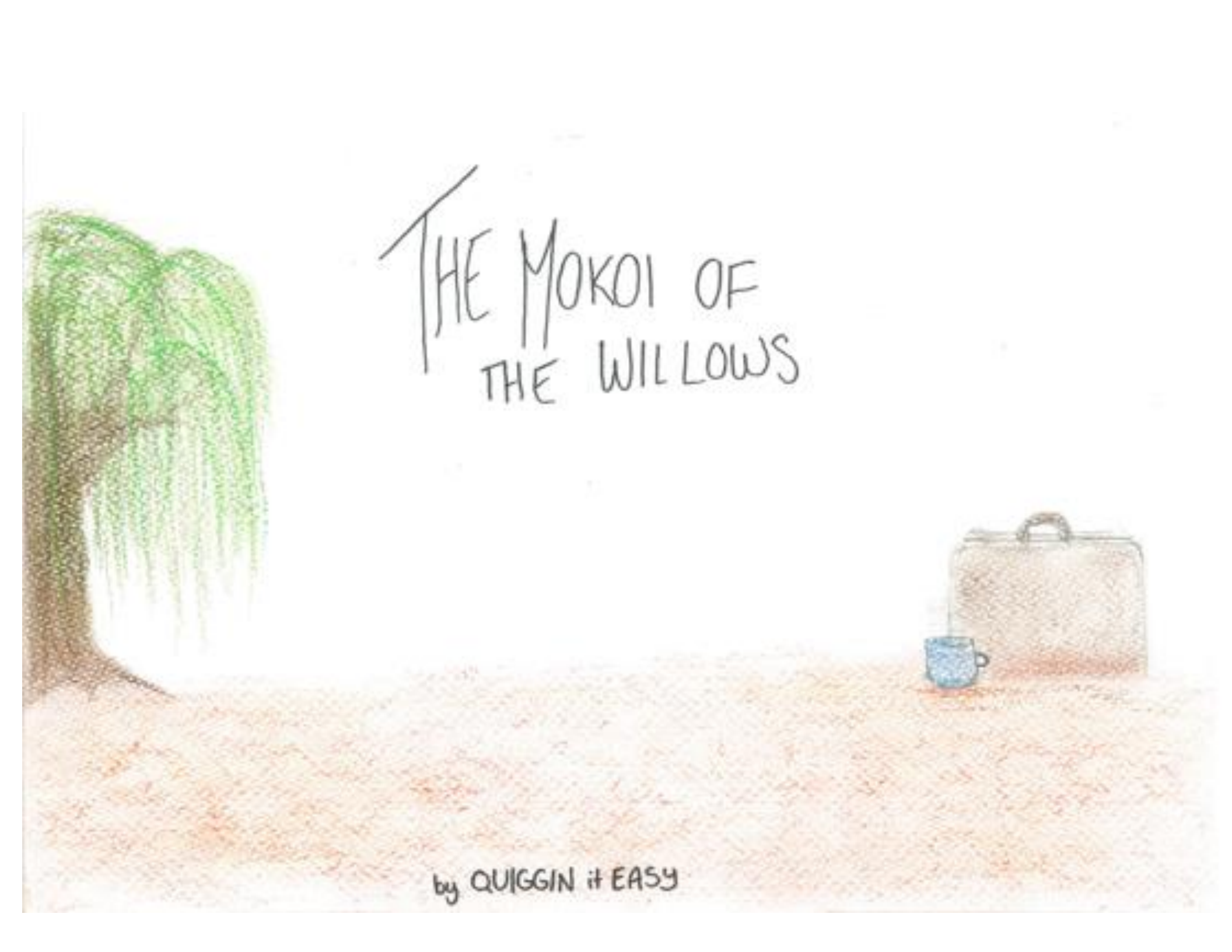
Team Members:

MAITO YAMAGUCHI	REBECCA ZIELINSKI
TANYA NAGRANI	ALEXANDER TAYLOR-
ZARA SMITH	GIRDLER
MARCUS NGUYEN	TAHLIA TRUDGETT
LARA SHIRLEY	MORGANE-EMILE
	GARRIER
	MAYA HOBLEY

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THE MOKOI OF THE WILLOWS

by QUIGGIN it EASY

The Mokoï of the Willows

Written and Illustrated by:

Alexandra Ggic

Annika Puhalla

Amy Jackson

Desmond Chuah

Dom Bensley

Jack Luke-Paredi

James Thompson

Mackenzie Quiggin

Sofie Smith

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The lights, the smoke, the endless trail of crawling traffic; it was all too much for you. So, you did what your university professor suggested years ago, and packed your battered suitcase heading for a new - no, better life. Little did you know that *this* life would include a crowd of sunburnt, red dirt stained delinquents with a complete and utter lack of interest of anything dramatic. The complete anti-thesis to your existence, to be melodramatic. Sometimes you dream of the life you could have had on these time crawlingly slow summer days where the sweltering heat swallows all signs of self-resolve.

You stop your daydreaming to focus on what's at hand; Jordan has found your secret stash of white board pens and is currently threatening his neighboring friends with them. So much for that relaxing outback life you had yearned for.

"Put down those pens, Jordan, or your sweet mother will know about it!" you yell. Poor Mrs. Morris had so much on her hands already with her clan of boys.

Instantly, he drops the pens arms up in surrender.

"Now let's get to work, Aaron, start from the birth scene." You repeat for what felt like the hundredth time that morning.

"I name him Jesus. My sweet baby boy has entered this world." Aaron recites with as much emotion as a leather shoe. Desperately you try to explain the feelings that occur when a child enters the world but he won't have any of it. Aaron has no interest in portraying any of the Christmas spirit you are seeking. Looking around the small classroom converted theatre you assess your cast, a merry band of emotionless, complaining kids not interested in the spirit of Christmas or anything to do with the nativity play. Most were here for the required community and service hours, others were forced by their parents. Somehow, you feel no sympathy. In an effort to keep your cool, you cancel the rehearsal for the afternoon and remind everyone to come focused and early for tomorrow's. Maybe it will all be better tomorrow.

Quickly, they disperse like cockatoos on a shaken gum tree. You take your time on the route home, passing the spread-out cottages and ancient shops with few tattered essentials in their windows. As a small community, you call out greetings to the locals parked on their porches enjoying the beautiful outback sunset occurring on the horizon. Night is quickly falling upon the dry spinifex and it is dark when you arrive at your lonely brick house. Something about the pitch-black night reminds you of the ghost Jordan rambles on about in class when really, he should be rehearsing his lines. The Moko Ghost; if you remember correctly is a distorted figure who travels on the winds of the night into children's bedrooms stealing them away to his cave in the Canyon near our village. There he decapitates their sweet dreamy heads and gorges on their flesh. Pleasant. Although it is a stupid legend that only stands to scare the rebellious and wandering children, you find yourself shivering and crawl straight into your squeaky single bed. Alone. You fall asleep wishing that the next day would be better.

The next morning you awaken with the sun and make your way to the small school buildings where you work. The students are in their costumes ready to go. A shocking sight to witness. But even more shocking, for some reason Jill, the village counsel, is standing and presumably waiting for you. She is dressed to the nines in a beautiful chiffon bridesmaid dress that must have come

from the city. You can't help but feel a sense of nostalgia as you remember the riches of the coasts where all your outfits weren't stained red with soil.

"Hey Jill, not that I don't love to see you, but, why are you here?" you ask. She's attending Alinta's wedding this afternoon so this must be urgent.

"I'm so sorry, but we don't have the funding for the nativity play this year. You won't be able to finish this performance" she says with a flat, emotionless voice and dismisses herself. For a second, you wonder if it would have hurt less if she had at least pretended to be sincere.

You feel your stomach drop. This is heartbreaking. You've already had a hard time getting the cast together, and you finally seemed to at least get through to them but now the show would most definitely not go on! It wouldn't even be funded!

Taking a deep sigh and counting to three, you rub your eyes with frustration. You swear you won't give up even it means the end of your career - not when your students finally seem to be interested. With new incentive, you storm out of the room, it won't end here! And you never stop working to fund this play. Over the duration of the term you organize fundraisers, you bake cookies, you host dances, you tell people how important this is to you. But it never seems to be enough with hardly any ticket sales. Sometimes, you have hard days where you question whether the Christmas nativity is worth it. But, it must be. *It has to be.*

The rest of the spring turned summer is made up of tiresome rehearsals, long days and the sound of cicadas among the tall grasses. It was a time of waiting. But what for? You weren't quite sure what. But there always seemed to be a forsaken event prowling in the gum trees, waiting for the right moment to pounce.

And the right moment indeed. It's your last play rehearsal before your performance and Christmas Eve. The wrath of the summer is making the air bitter and stale as you wait excitedly for the cast to arrive; you have Christmas presents for them. Hard work should be rewarded after all. Over time Aaron's awkward monotonous voice has become rather comforting and Jordan's rambling has morphed into vibrant background noise. You have settled into the comforts of this small town. Your ebullience begins to drift as the minute's tick by. Where are they? Surely, they know how important this play is. Everything was going so well. Had something happened? Had *you* done something?

After 15 minutes of waiting, you finally decide to suck up your hurt feelings and make rounds to each of their parents' houses.

"Why wasn't your child at rehearsal today?" You ask politely if not with a touch of acidity, standing on each doorway with the same question at your lips.

You receive the same answers over and over again.

"They're at rehearsal, trust me," They all say, "They all left together not 20 minutes ago, quite a sight if I must say"

So, you make your dejected way back to the school, lost in disbelief. None of this lined up at all.

Do you search for the children, or return home?

GO TO: HOME (Page 6)
SEARCH (Page 7)



Well, you see how it is. If no one even respects you here, you might as well just give up. They must be ditching today's rehearsal or playing a trick on you. The kids never wanted to do this play anyway. All the hours of work went towards what? A play that was never going to be put on anyway. You give up, it's pointless. Your eyes sting with barely held back tears, your dream to become an awesome drama teacher would never become a reality. You turn around and head back home. Whether this is to the warm and humble cottage you have come to love or to the familiarity of the skyscrapers where the red dirt will no longer stain the soles of your feet; you'll just have to figure that out later.

Go back to page 5 to try again.

You need to find your cast. Something must be wrong. You trust them - they wouldn't do this just to spite you. The vast desert-like terrain spreads out before your eyes as you walk towards the school. There are no clues as to where these mischievous children may have gone but some parents said they went towards the school. You stumble down the slope and look out across the crumbling dirt road. Why did they *have* to implement a crossroad? It seemed awfully inconvenient right now. The left road leads to a peaceful street enveloped in the shade that hardy trees provide. The right road follows an ancient chain link fence to what you know to be the playground. You see a foreboding track straight ahead that seems to go on forever. Which way do you go?

GO TO:

LEFT (Page 10)
RIGHT (Page 8)



You walk purposefully down the middle road, your energy expiring with every stride. Your arms are heavy as lead, your eyes are drooping. It feels like you have been searching for years and you can feel raw blisters tainting your tired feet. Yet you check your watch, it has only been half an hour. You *have* to find your class. Anything could go wrong... and it would be your fault. In front of you is another fork in the road. One leads left to a clearing, and one leads right to where you believe there is a river. Do you follow the road down to the river or to the grassland?

GO TO: **GRASSLAND (Page 9)**
 RIVER (Page 10)

The clear and peaceful field seems to stretch on forever. And while it is beautiful and calm, it is equally as long and yields no missing children. You start to regret your decision to go this way. There is literally nothing here, just a huge field leading to nowhere. Checking your watch, you realize time has flown by and you've been walking for a long time now. You have no food nor water, and you are starting to feel dehydrated. There is no choice but to go back now. You sigh in defeat and begin the long trek back to the crossroad.

Go back page 4 to Try Again

You soon find yourself before a familiar flowing river. It stretches wide across the banks, high above its bed. It seems to be a little out of control tonight the water running close to your feet like hands trying to drag you under. Which is quite *weird*. A shrill yet uniquely nice whistle echoes from further down the river bank to the east, sending uncontrollable shivers down your spine. The sound is almost as addictive as sugar. You head whips around, eager to perhaps see the source but it is too dark to see anything aside from the comforting branches of the towering willows. While searching in earnest for the source of the eerie whistle, your gaze falls upon a set of footprints urgently leading to the west. Could that be the kids? What do you follow?

GO TO: **FOOTPRINTS (Page 11)**
 SOUND (Page 12)

You decide to follow the footprints, stumbling after them in the thin light. The track is faded and worn, *a good sign*, you think. Don't most people stick to the path? The kids can't be much different. You continue along your way until you see a hint of orange in a distant clearing. Your feet seem to turn on their own accord, and they betray you by taking you further down the path. You arrive in a cheerful tent city, built around a humble fireplace. Happy faces bathed in the warm light, a group of campers sit. They talk, laugh and sing, and you watch them from the shadows. One man sees you and points, and the friendly light of the fire along with the now inviting crowd beckon to you. You draw closer and sit beside a tie-dyed, tanned girl a few years younger than you. The silence of the surrounding night and the atmosphere created by the group are enchanting. The girl on your other side turns to you and hands you a chilled bottle, while shouting a greeting above the addictive music. You return the smile, and take the bottle. Its contents smell incredible. You take a sip, and another, then sit up and beam. You stop the thoughts running around in your head and you turn a blind eye to the task you were so earnestly persisting at. The kids don't *really* need you. It will be okay! You'll search for them tomorrow, when the sun is shining down. For now, you need a break. A long, *long* break.

Go back page 4 to Try Again

Feeling curious, you decide to follow the mysterious whistle. Were the children playing tricks on you, courtesy of the boys? Or was it something more sinister? With footsteps light as a feather you follow the echoing whistles for a few hundred meters, the sound

subsiding as you inch closer. The whistling is overcome by a gentle gurgling of flowing water. Pushing your way through the long hanging leaves of a willow tree, you come across the riverbank once again, stumbling to regain your balance as you begin to slip over. The moon shadows your movements across the damp undergrowth, casting silver rays upon river that sustains this town. You have the feeling that you're going the right way there is something *strange* about this area, yet the whistling has stopped. However, it seems that you should cross the river to continue your hunt for the children. The river appears shallow enough to wade across, but despite the summer heat, the evening is choked with cold. Searching for an alternative, you see a path of mossy, submerged rocks that could work to cross safely - at least you would remain dry. How do you get over the river?

GO TO: **WADE WATER (page 13)**
 RUN ACROSS ROCKS (page 14)
 WALK ACROSS ROCKS (page 16)

The water mightn't seem that deep from your vantage point on the bank, but the enshrouding darkness makes it very hard to judge the depth of the river. With great hesitance, lessened only by the thought of your cast, you slide into the river, hoping that the water won't come above your waist. Luck is not on your side. You flail, failing to find the bed of the swirling, freezing river. In an attempt to escape the murky depths, you claw and grasp for the grassy water bank, your nails scratching in vain at the rocky bank. You don't register the pain. You fail to stay above the ice-cold water and your vision blurs. Your senses are on overdrive, your lungs slowly fill with water. You gasp for air, finding nothing. It's dark. You can't find the surface. You hope that your incessant struggle for survival will alert someone, *anyone* to your situation. Blackness fills your vision. You won't ever find the children now. No one will find you, either.

Go back page 4 to Try Again

Foregoing the safe route in an attempt to find your students quicker, you dash across the rocks with surprising speed. Growing with confidence you speed up, only to misjudge the traction on one of the rocks. This rock was lower than the others, not only wearing more algae, but also being quite wet. Sharp pain pierces your body as you plummet into the murky, frigid water. The pain blinds you and all sense of direction is lost. You feel your shoulder jerking outside its socket with agonizing speed. You can't move. It hurts. The intense river water tramples over your face as you struggle to stay afloat. Your body tumbles with the river as you try to grab uselessly for anything to keep you afloat. Another biting pain makes you cry out head hitting rocks on the bank. As you choke on water and sink towards the river bed losing consciousness, the faces of the children flash before your eyes. You remember the trust they held in you despite their lack of interest in the play. How they could still be out there lost without you. You feel like you've failed them somehow. The already dark and murky underwater turns to black.

GO TO: HOSPITAL (page 15)

You wake up. Your head feels light, yet it's very hard to think. As you peel open your eyes everything is white. Where are you? Is this the afterlife? Trying to garner your whereabouts you roll your head limply to the side and through some investigation realize that it rests on a feathery pillow. You try to remember where you are but it evades you. This fuzzy feeling of numbness overtakes you and you relax once again into your slumber forgetting all your troubles. When you come to once again, the doctor hovers over you, inspiring anxiety.

"You we're quite lucky those campers found you when they did" they say in a soft voice.

You ignore them.

"Where are the children?"

The doctor looks at you blankly, clinically with a small hint of pity - and you know that they are gone. The children are gone, the play is ruined and it's all your fault.

Go back page 4 to Try Again

You look at the stones, assessing your situation. If you hop over the river using the stones you could get across quite efficiently and you wouldn't get wet. The decision is in your hands. You don't know what you are going to do, the stones are looking unsteady but you need to find your students. But safety takes priority - you can't help them if you're in danger yourself. You hop over the stones, taking your time to go slow and steady. The bank on the other side draws nearer and nearer and your hope rises considerably as you make the last few jumps. Finally, you jump once more and your feet hit sweet solid ground again. Wiping your brow with relief. You sense alert you of a noise. You hear a multitude of whispers and jolting you look up at the trees with fright. To your surprise and relief, your students are dangling off the branches, gangly limbs wrapped around the wood. They look just as relieved to see you as you do them. Some have makeshift weapons such as a bucket with a rock in it. They seem quite frightened but determined to do something? Many of them, especially Jordan, are talking about the Mokoï ghost, again. What do you do? Do you get angry or take a deep breath and calm down?

GET: ANGRY (page 17)
LISTEN (page 18)

You are fed up with this. You just want to go home and rest. You are brimming with anger; these kids are being nuisances. You can't believe they were just looking for this stupid ghost, you know in your mind that ghosts aren't real and you don't know whether to break it to them or not. Was this supposed to be like Christmas? No matter, you need to get the play under control - it's tomorrow and having the kids not come to the last rehearsal because they are 'finding the ghost' really ticks you off. You try several times to get the kids attentions but they ignore you rather still discussing the supposed figure to be visiting tonight. You are past anger and break it to them with a loud shout.

'Guys, quit it, ghosts are mythical creatures and don't even exist! The Mokoï ghost does not exist!'

You see their faces, all staring at you like stunned mullets. Then they all start shouting. You can't bring yourself to care anymore - fed up with their disrespect.

'Guys, if you don't concentrate, I will cancel the play.' you threaten coming to your whit's end.

The kids continue to ignore you, screaming if not with more anger. You are disgruntled, but, you have had enough of all of this.

So, you cancel the play. And you return home, back to the city this time. Home. Safety. Why did you think you could make it in the country?

Go back page 4 to Try Again

You inhale slowing letting your chest rise and fall. Your meditation class from back at school kick in and you control your anger. You students are full of bubbly excitement and when you find them they tell you they are looking for a ghost. You are taken aback by this statement as you have always been told these creatures don't exist. You've never really believed in ghosts before, but why the hell not. You've heard this story before and you have nothing else to do tonight but watch old reruns of your favorite shows. You listen to the kids as they talk about this ghost, they can't seem to decide where the ghost will be. You sigh irritably, shivering in the sudden cold. As you rub your goose-bump riddled arms, one of the boys stops abruptly.

"It's cold... *really* cold. Doesn't that mean that a ghost is near?" He starts excitedly, grabbing the arms of the two boys beside him.

One of them shrugs him off. "Don't be stupid! How does *that* work?"

If it wasn't so cold, you would berate them for arguing, but you can't seem to stop your teeth from chattering.

"I don't know, man. But that's what the horror movies say, right?" The first boy argues back.

"Yeah, *no*. Come on, those things are called fiction for a reason!"

"So, what the hell are you doing here, then?!" The first boy's voice rises an octave.

"*I'm* here because you all dragged me here! It's dark, and cold, and I *want to go home!*"

"Oh, are you scared? Chicken! Why don't you run home to mummy, then?"

"You- I am *not* scared! I'm just tired of your stories and I have better things to do than chase your idiotic ghost!"

By now, the two are both yelling and look close to blows. The kids around them watch with barely disguised interest and anticipation.

The first boy opens his mouth to take a shot back, and you open your mouth to stop their fighting.

"Um... guys?" The third boy stammers. His voice seems to shrink back into his throat. This makes you and the other children look up.

"Th-there's something over there..."

Your head snaps up to look in the shadows. A faint light drifts behind the emerald willows. You freeze, adrenaline coursing through your veins, as the light shines through the willow fronds. It appears artificial in the dying sunlight. The light source drifts through the willows with terrifying stillness. The willows hardly rustle as the light moves ever closer. Some of the girls clutch one another's arms and the boys huddle closer. You step in front of them, in a half-baked attempt at courage.

The source of light is only shielded by one cascading willow, and it draws nearer still. You shuffle backwards and the children mirror your actions.

A towering, hairy beast glides from the shadows, a soft and supernatural light outlining its features.

You open your mouth to warn the children, threaten the creature, say something helpful, *anything*, but instead a blood-curdling scream bubbles up your throat and escapes, slicing through the cool night air.

The beast flinches and fades into the willows from where it emerged. A feral growl escapes its curled lips, confirming your suspicions that the beast is indeed not human. The light drifts further away until it disappears entirely, the only remainder imprinted on the backs of the witnesses' eyelids. You and the children stand there in a shocked silence, until at last you find your voice.

“Let’s go back.” You say, your voice more confident than you feel.

A murmur of agreement ripples through the crowd of (for once) silent teenagers, and you lead them back the way you all came.

The encounter with the ghost is behind you now. At least that’s what you all tell the very worried parents when the children returned home at the crack of dawn on Christmas Eve – not an ounce of sleep would be had for a while. You appreciated the children’s effort to put some realism into the scenes with an actual ghost (or at least that was their excuse) but you all agree the Mokoi is not the best ghost for this job. Sorry Mokoi, you’re fired. The play goes on with all the fundraising that you completed – it just scrapes through. Some would say just – ask the very badly crafted baby Jesus – but it went on and that’s all you care about. It’s a blast for everyone involved, and the audience eats it up. Especially Aaron’s very realistic – to the point of worry- reaction to the angels appearing. You feel like after the encounter with the *very* real Mokoi all of you have grown closer, and strangely enough a new theatric passion seems to have been birthed in your students after the experience. You sometimes joke that the Mokoi needs to show up more to illicit this amazingly attendance out of all of them. All of you secretly agree that no, that is not a good idea. Never again.

All of them, especially Jordan, are very determined to do something with the Ghosts of Christmas next year. And, well, you can’t say no to them when they are this enthusiastic. For the first time that you came to this rural town, you truly feel at home.



Ages 10 - 16

Mokoi of the Willow is the story of a fed up pessimistic school teacher who moves to rural Australia to escape from the exhausting city life. It incorporates the reality of education's and dramatic theatre's importance in the outback while telling a tale of a woman's journey in finding herself and accepting the environment around her. *Mokoi of the Willow* is a captive read where you can personalize the text through the make your own story aspect of the book. Basically, it's a choose your own adventure book.

BOOK REVIEW



Kurt Grgic

This interactive novel is a thrilling ride that would take years to write. It's amazing that nine hard-working teenagers can write this in a day! They really are the future of our world.

Book Summary

Group/Team Details

Writing Date: 10th August 2017
Division: Middle School
Team Name: QUIGGIN IT EASY
Team Members:

DESMOND CHUAH MACKENZIE QUIGGIN
JAMES THOMPSON DOM BENSLEY
JACK LUKE-PAREDI ANNIKA PULHALLA
SOFIE SMITH ALEXANDRA GRGIC
AMY JACKSON

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Somerset College
ABN 54 010 343 227
Somerset Drive Mudgeeraba
Queensland 4213
07 5559 7100
07 5559 7372
mail@somerset.qld.edu.au
www.somerset.qld.edu.au

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demonstrating INTEGRITY AND *valuing* DIFFERENCE