

## *Isabel*

The ruler turned in her hand, around and around. Nearly there, she thought with every passing minute. She took to grating her teeth across her bottom lip. Then she was looking out the window, out across the playground of hot sticky bitumen. Further, over to the earth-baked oval, the leafy peppercorn trees were catching the slightest of breezes. Their trunks were wrapped in flaky burnt amber bark that fell apart if you tried to carve your name on it. She bit her lip; she knew those trees too well—they had already consumed too much of her teenage years. All that time spent sitting in the shade and wagging about nothing was now gone.

At lunchtime, she had noticed alizarin crimson bugs on the trunks. A sign of rain, Sunny had once told her. But there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. What was that about?

The clock was too slow: ten minutes to go. She'd had enough of the stinking hot school year. It was taking forever. God, somebody help me!

She was even tempted to throw paper about with the dorks in the class, while their teacher, Kate Mckenzie, had her back turned. She wouldn't do it, of course. She and Kate were on a different level. Kate, however, was boring her, putting information on the blackboard about careers, jobs and what to expect if they were to leave school early. You're wasting your time, she wanted to say. There were only a couple in the class with an action plan beyond the holidays, herself included. The rest couldn't be bothered thinking now; they just wanted to get to the pool. And come Saturday night they had their end of Year 10 party. Maybe during the holidays a few others would get thinking about a future, though most would take the safe bet and just come back for years 11 and 12. Other than that, a couple of boys might get a job on a farm and the girls on a checkout or something. Not much to think about, really.

But Kate was hell-bent about life's big picture. If it's like painting, just give

them a big brush, Isabel thought. Give them an oil base so they can mess it up and change it later—have a sniff of turps. How had she been at their age?

“Come on, Kate,” she whispered. “We know what we want to do. Just let us out of here.”

There was a shelf full of art books in Isabel’s bedroom, telling her how to do it. She would become an artist. But at sixteen, university and a fine arts degree were too far away, meaning two more years of tedious schooling in Elura. She couldn’t do that time in school, let alone at Elura. She had to get out! One idea was moving to the larger town of Morella. It wasn’t so far away, there were different work opportunities and she could find tuition for her painting. Away from school, she was already keeping house, working the café’s counter and helping in the pub’s kitchen.

She sat next to Belinda Smith, a girl who had some ideas about life—a bigger picture, even if that meant priming herself for a business management degree. Somehow they did connect. Other than Belinda, she was struggling to name too many good friends, though Sara Jenkins hung out with them a fair bit. So what would happen to the three of them?

As it was, Belinda was off to boarding school next year; till that time, she could retreat to the farm and see out the days from a built-in saltwater pool, peering out through the landscaped garden and checking out the sweeping view of a couple of thousand acres of thriving cotton. In town, Sara had a peeling weatherboard to sweat it out in, a tin-sided scorched backyard; she could flounder in her kid sister’s blow-up pool.

They were a good contrast: the pony-club farm girl, the music-pumped town girl. Belinda’s mother frocked her up for the picnic races and the ‘set’ mixing. Sara jumped from baggy tracksuit pants to a skimpy skirt and headed off down the street, with a whiff that something was going on around town. But was there ever? The picnic races were every third year. That honour was shared with a couple of other far-flung towns.

The boys in the class: dorks and bodies without brains, who hadn’t managed to learn anything since Year 8. It was a small class, however, so they had all learnt to get along. Not easy! A couple of them liked to talk about tractors,

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others motorbikes, and music was either country or heavy metal. If you wanted some depth in your conversation with them, you needed to pitch in for a box of beer on a Saturday night and follow them to the oval.

Watching the clock tick down, Isabel began to drum lightly on the desk.

Belinda gave her a smug look. “Get a grip.”

Isabel reached across and wrapped her arms around Belinda. It wasn’t a polite hug, but a big squeeze of a hug. “How’s that?” she asked, still squeezing her.

Jeremy Clarke tapped Isabel’s shoulder. “Give her a tongue in the ear, why don’t ya?”

Isabel ignored him. He was a champion for spitting out rubbish and making a nuisance of himself—a real attention seeker. She only loosened her grip as Belinda gave her a gentle rub on the arm.

She held her for another moment, knowing it was one of those moments to cherish, for in a couple of minutes, and as Kate was saying, their future would depend upon themselves—their lives were their own.

Isabel leant back into her chair, wanting to plant a big kiss on Belinda’s cheek, but she knew that Jeremy Clark wouldn’t be able to control himself. He would call her a lesbian lizard or something. If he ever found out about her going after Scott McKenzie—God! But there was always somebody stirring somebody, trying for a bit of gossip. That’s how things were in a small dinky town. A word about her and Scott being together would whip through the streets in a day...if only it were true.

Scott was different; back in town from uni before he headed off to Italy, of all the places. In the meantime, she was helping him with his Italian. It kept her thinking, to the point of modelling herself like a dumb tart in the mirror: hair pinned up like a peacock, bangles and beads. What the hell was Scott looking for in a girl? She could be seeing Italy with him. If she looked anything like a twenty year old, perhaps? Passing for an eighteen year old was about her limit. And then, what would Kate be saying to her brother? He was twenty-three.

The bell rang and Kate was happy to let them go. It was over. Isabel gave a hoot with the rest of them, but stayed in her chair. She knew what was coming

as chairs and tables clashed and class barged their way out of the classroom. But not Jeremy Clark, who swooped from behind her and grabbed her letter.

“See ya at the pool, Izy,” he yelled on the way out.

She let him go. The noise had a grip on her. A couple yelled even louder to thank Kate, but the crashing noise was the worst of her accident nightmares—never forgotten.

When the noise cleared, Isabel carefully placed her chair under the desk. She was okay. It came and went. The important thing was to remember herself now, her mother’s spirit.

She made sure of herself next to the droning air conditioner, then began helping Kate tidy the classroom with Belinda. But what were they doing? School was over for the year, they should’ve been all going crazy outside—even Kate, she thought. How did she end up in Elura, teaching a bunch of feather-brained kids?

A minute later, a couple of Year 9 boys ran in, squirting their water pistols. Kate was hit on the shoulder, while Belinda deflected the shots with a book. Isabel, the boys’ main target, copped it twice across her breasts. She sprang forward and sent them running. “God, when are they going to grow up?” she said, brushing off the front of her blouse.

Kate leaned against her desk. “Boys will be boys. Well—that’s it for another year, girls. I wonder what they’re going to get up to in the holidays?”

Isabel pushed another chair in place. “Sit outside the café, I guess—looking, as they do.”

“We’re all looking for something, aren’t we?” Kate said, trying to sound more enlightened.

“Some aren’t looking very hard.”

“Some see things differently.”

“I don’t need them gawking at me.” She wiped over her mouth, suddenly feeling clutched by vanity. She looked to Belinda’s turquoise eyes for some help. “They might end up cotton chipping on Belinda’s farm.”

Belinda brushed back her fringe. “I don’t think they would even cut it as chippers. Dad wouldn’t have them.”

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Belinda then stepped forward and hugged Kate. “Thanks for everything, Kate. I’ll miss you.”

Kate rubbed her fondly on the back. “Good luck at boarding school. I’m sure things will work out.”

Kate turned to Isabel. “You were the best artist I had. Best of luck.”

For a moment Isabel just stood, thinking Kate would say more. Kate was her favourite teacher, had always encouraged her, and now it was to be the end of her schooling. Wasn’t there anything more to say? They would meet on the street again, but... The moment had her getting all knotted up inside. She had put it all in the letter to make sure it was right. Of course she could quickly say something, but it wouldn’t be enough. Jeremy Clark would get an earful.

Kate smiled. “Do I get a hug?”

Her step towards Kate was a little tentative; she was suddenly feeling indifferent about leaving school. Hugging was always to be cherished, however; sharing that surge of warmth made her arms tighten around Kate. She didn’t want to let go. It was the best thing of the year. “Make sure you come on Saturday night.” She stepped back from Kate feeling much better. “And maybe the three of us could meet for a coffee one day?”

“Sounds wonderful—and I’ll see about Saturday night,” Kate replied, before glancing around the room. “You better get out of here before you get stuck with me for the rest of the day.”

Like Belinda, Isabel strapped on her bag, feeling the weight of most of her books; the burden of a few memories.

Outside, the glare off the playground kept their eyes squinted until they made it to the peppercorn tree, where they dumped their bags at the gate. There was nobody about as they waited for Belinda’s father. The school looked deserted already.

They brushed at flies and began to pick at the pink seeds of the peppercorn tree. It was a bit odd, just the two of them. “Kind of weird, isn’t it? Not real exciting. I thought it would be different—not just a couple of water pistols.”

“Wait till Saturday night—I’m sure the boys won’t know what to do with

themselves.” Belinda rolled her eyes. “I can hardly wait for them to start throwing food in our hair.”

“It’ll be different when we’re famous... Though you wouldn’t bother coming back, then.”

“It’s still your home—where you grow up.”

Isabel shrugged. She didn’t have the ties like Belinda, whose father was a fourth-generation farmer. “I’m happy to make a new home somewhere else.”

“Then you have to start over again.”

“Good,” Isabel said, grabbing a whole bunch of peppercorn seeds. She then noticed the smudge of white paint on Belinda’s finger. “How did you get paint on your hands?”

“I helped paint this morning.”

“A picture?”

“A fence.”

“You’re keen,” Isabel replied, thinking nothing more of it.

Belinda pulled off a bunch of seeds and slowly started to sort them across her palm. “Izy.”

“Yes, Bin?” She sorted through her own seeds between her hands. “Is there something you want to say?”

“Yeah—there’s this boy who’s working for us.” Belinda slowly dropped her seeds. “Well, he’s older. I’ve—I’ve been thinking about him.” Her lips tucked up together. “I was helping him paint the fence at home... He gives me these looks.”

The way Belinda put it nearly cracked Isabel up; when it came down to it, her friend was pretty hopeless around boys.

“I’m sorry... Have you spoken much?”

“A bit.”

“How serious? How old?”

“Twenty-three—same as Scott.”

“Aren’t you a wicked thing? And does he fill out his pants?”

“Well, I can imagine that everything would be there.”

“I bet you do. Wicked.”

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“Anyhow...” Belinda hooked her hair behind her ear. “Are you going to do it with Scott?”

Isabel playfully chucked a seed at her. “Again and again. He’s the best thing in town. Do you want to watch?”

Belinda gave her a light kick on the ankle. “You haven’t seen Lester yet—the one I painted the fence with.”

“You’re sure he’s real?”

“Yes, and I think he wants to be with me.”

“So, what about you?”

“I’m thinking about it. What about you?”

Isabel threw another seed at her. Scott was hard up even holding eye contact with her, let alone anything else. “I’m not going to die a virgin.”

“What if you die before the holidays are out?”

“Who are you trying to be—Doctor Death?”

“I’m just thinking ahead. What would you do if Scott asked you?”

“If that day ever comes...” Showing a hint of uncertainty, Isabel turned on her feet. “I’ll be hoping that we’re at least in the same hemisphere.” She smiled more surely. “Don’t worry about it, Bin. You’re going to boarding school. You’ll run into a boy down there and be able to talk about it to all your girlfriends. You’ll be fat and married before you know it. Ask Kate, she’ll be married to a policeman by the end of the year.”

“I thought maybe you would tell me something.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you much about something that I’ve never done.” She gave Belinda’s leg a nudge. “If Sara and Ben did it in the toilets...”

“I don’t want to think about that.”

“Yeah—in those toilets. Maybe Sara could have thought of a better place for her second time.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe Scott will get me fat and married.”

“You’ll never get fat.”

“I’ve got a chance, with Dad at twenty-six stone.” Isabel spread out her arms and blew out her face, then wrapped herself around Belinda’s back.

“Are you—okay?” Belinda asked, with Isabel latched on behind her.

“Shhhh...” Isabel blew into her ear. “I’m being serious now. If you want to do it and if it means something to him—I’m sure it will be okay.” She brushed over Belinda’s arms, suddenly wanting to give a mother’s affection. “I don’t know about Scott or Lester. They might think we’re too young anyway. We’ve got something to think about at least—how much are you supposed to know when you’re sixteen? I suppose our mums were thinking the same thing.”

“You going to do some social work next?”

“I’m not making plans to.”

Mr Smith then pulled up in their flash new 4WD. “Are we giving you a lift?” Belinda asked, slipping out of Isabel’s hold.

“I’ve got to get that letter off Jeremy Clark.”

“Good luck. See you Saturday night.” Belinda grabbed her bag and got in.

Isabel caught the door before it closed. “And you better be wearing bells on your hips. And you better have ‘something’ to tell me,” she said, with a curt smile, letting the door pull shut.

The engine faded as they drove off and turned down the main street. And Isabel was left standing, hoping that Saturday night would be half decent for her and Belinda. The party could be their last hoorah in town. Afterwards, they could really start to get on with their lives. Couldn’t they?

For a moment she was twisting her ankle, dragging her sandal in a small circle against the kerb. It was a bit of history—the last time with Belinda at the school gate. “Okay, time to go.”

She lifted her bag up onto her shoulders and took her first step in the direction of the pool; starting the holidays. Following back around the school fence, her arms then waved off the flies as her legs got going; it was too hot to dawdle. Usually she would have her bike to ride. Being the last day of school, however, she hadn’t ridden it, thinking one of the boys would grab it as a good prank and ride off on it. Clarky got her letter instead.

Down along the oval, she said goodbye to the cement path and hello to the gritty dirt path with the scattered scourge of thorny catheads; the hated things that stuck into the rubber soles of her sandals.

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Barefoot, a cathead would make you scream in pain. With sandals, soles soon became embedded with the thorny spikes that crackled against the ground until they could be scraped off.

When she crossed the street, she stopped on the hard edge of the road's baking bitumen and raked the catheads from her sandals. She then dug her thumbs under her bag straps and got on with walking again. Let's go, holidays, she thought, trying to pick herself up a bit. Things were different now, and thinking that every step was part of her new life now wasn't bad.

Then a black cat crossing the street caught her attention. Jesus. That's a great omen for me.

I've got a black cat following me. Try following Belinda in her 4WD—when she goes to boarding school.

She got to the pool's chain-wire fence, less a few catheads. But with her head beginning to mix inside, her pace had slackened off. Did she really know what she was doing? How long was she sticking in town for? How much money did she need? Did she have the guts to leave?

Her hands came out from her bag straps and slapped down across her thighs to get them marching. She was going to leave, no matter!

The boys who had squirted her before were now bombing off the diving board, shouting and showing off to everybody. It looked fun—and it always was fun for them. They never complicated things and she had to like them for that. It never got much worse than one of them dropping their pants. They were harmless ratbags, without a care in the world. Everything would be a party, before and after Christmas. After the holidays—well, that was for them to decide. Until then, she was going to give them a few pointers on how to dive, rather than sending their arses down first.

At the pool gate, beneath the awning, Sunny showed off his gap-toothed smile. He was a likeable old rogue, one of the only Aboriginals left in town. He watched Isabel approach, as if knowing she was short of money today. "Come on, Sunny. Let me in for free. I've got to catch up with Clarky," Isabel said, stopping beneath the awning.

“Clarky had his money.” Sunny turned his palm over and casually tapped the counter. “And you don’t have any money again?”

Isabel tried out her best smile. “It’s my last day of school. My bag’s ripping my shoulders off. Belinda said yesterday she was going to pay for me, but now she’s not coming.”

“Well, there’s plenty of money in that family, but that doesn’t help you.”

She smiled again. “Aren’t you going to give me a job these holidays?”

“Looks like I’ll have to.”

“Yeah—and that’s why you’re going to let me in for free today.”

Sunny leant forward over the counter and cocked his brow. “Is that right, young lady? You’ll blow me a kiss and waltz through?”

“Now that you mention it.” Isabel then gave Sunny a phrase in Italian to think about. “*Mi piacerebbe avere un po’ di compagnia.*”

“Come on, spare us the fancy wog language. Give us a kiss on the cheek.”

“Don’t you want to know what I said?”

“Does it mean I’m going to get a kiss?”

“Let me in first.”

“I reckon there’s a couple of dollars in your bag—have you checked?”

“I think I know what’s in my bag, Sunny.” Isabel tried to hide her smile this time, knowing there were probably a few coins at the bottom. “Well, look away then.” She leant forward and put a quick peck on his cheek.

He waved Isabel through the gate. “Thank you, Miss Vivaldi. I won’t tell the missus about us.”

“*Grazie.*” She walked through the gate with a smirk across her lips. Harmless like the boys, she thought.

Away from Sunny’s reach, she paused inside the gate, pulling down on the waves of her hair. There were plenty in the pool. Where was Clarky?

Perhaps there wasn’t anything in her letter too private, but knowing the way Clarky would be bumbling through it to the others had her cringing a bit. “Ahh, forget it.”

She moved around to the other end of the counter. Joey stood there minding the lollies, while Sunny busied himself reading the paper by the gate.

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Isabel dropped her bag. “Some lollies, please, Joey?” she asked clearly.

“Which ones, Izy?”

She passed a look to her brother and spoke softer. “The free ones.”

Joey stood up, unusually prompt and straight. “They all cost—either one cents, two cents, three cents, five cents... Goes up to twenty cents.” She leant forward against the counter. “Thanks for that, Joey. I needed to know that.”

With a fly hanging on the corner of his mouth, Joey gave her a typically stupid smile. His shoulders drooped forward. “That’s alright, Is – a – bell.”

He was nearly twenty-five and was going on like a ten year old—and he seemed to stump her every time.

He was too big for his own good; six foot four inches when he pulled his ape-like shoulders back. Thankfully, he didn’t fill his gut as much as their father. “Joey, can I please have a couple?”

Joey shook his head, while making a clicking noise with his tongue against his teeth. “Nah. Unless you got one cents, two cents, three cents...”

“Hey, Sunny—can I have a couple of free lollies, please?”

Sunny stepped across to the lolly counter. “You’re gonna end up rich not paying for anything. Go on, Joey, give ya sister a couple of sticky jelly cats. She needs a bit of fattening up.”

Isabel beamed her pearly whites. “And two slippery snakes, please, Sunny—and I’ll never forget you.”

“Forget me in a minute, I bet. Go on then, Joey, two slippery snakes as well.”

Joey put them in a bag then held them up high. “Give in too easy, Sunny.”

Isabel half-heartedly raised her hand. “Hand them over, Joey, they’re mine.”

“Not yet, they aren’t.”

“Come on, you two, let’s not start fighting. Joey, give her the lollies. She’ll shrink away to nothing without them.”

Before Joey handed over the lollies, he crinkled up his nose. Isabel poked her tongue back at him. Sunny shook his head. “Why you people bother going to church, I don’t know.”