

Reading Media: A Phenomenology of Reading in a Multimodal Context

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This PhD project is an interdisciplinary Creative and Critical investigation into young adult reading behaviours. It is a dialogic artefact and exegesis. The creative component – the artefact is a new form of book-as-object – mBook, which forms 70% of the PhD. The critical component is an exegesis comprising 30% of the PhD.

The artefact is a young adult multimodal novel, generically named a mBook, for the 14+ reading demographic. The mBook contributes to current challenges of traditional understandings and definitions of 'book-as-object' by incorporating multimodality into its paper format with the use of Augmented Reality. Multimodal engagement with the mBook involves the use of a readily available smartphone application to project content onto the printed page. The exegesis situates the mBook into the lived experience of young adults reading in a post-convergent multimodal context.

Artefact title: I Know Why You Run

I Know Why You Run is a young adult psychological thriller. Protagonist, Ben, is a troubled young man who is being terrorised with less than flattering video footage of his interactions with his social group by an unknown stalker via social media. In trying to identify his stalker, Ben is forced to confront issues with alcohol, and process grief of the loss of significant people in his life.

Exegesis title: Phenomenology of Reading in a Multimodal Context

Reading, writing and understandings of literacy have changed significantly in the past ten years due to constantly evolving technologies. Though young adults are reading more than they have, their textual preferences are increasingly multimodal. This project explores young adult engagement with multimodal text and the consequences of that engagement for authors of young adult fiction.

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PART ONE

mBook

The Creative Component

Approximately 72 000 words including all components

I KNOW WHY YOU RUN

Khyiah Angel

Instructions for Reading the mBook

To experience the full potential of the mBook and its affordances, it is better to read the paper version.

- Step 1: Download the Aurasma App from the relevant app store to your smartphone. This App is free and available for IOS devices, android devices, and from GooglePlay.
- Step 2: Enter the following link into your browser: <http://auras.ma/s/rwo6u>
- Step 3: Tap on the link you have entered. Tapping the link in your device browser should do two things:
1. Open Aurasma automatically
 2. Follow the Private Campaign *'ikwyr'*
- Step 4: Test the App against the image you see below by aiming your device at the picture so that the frame of the picture sits entirely within your device screen.



You should see six small dots pulsing in and out from a centre dot. Once the app recognises the image, a larger circle will pulse momentarily until the content begins to play.

Troubleshooting

- If you do not see the pulsing dots, check your wireless connectivity, or your data availability.
- You may need to play with the angle of your screen by tilting your device slightly.
- Ensure there is enough light on the page.
- If there is no sound, check the volume controls on your device.

Chapter One

The steady hum of traffic reached him through vibrations in the pavement beneath his ear. The rise and fall of disembodied voices floated above and around him, as though he were an inconvenient obstacle in their journey. Much closer, glass shattering against an adjacent wall caused him to recoil, sending a wave of nausea colliding with the pounding in his head. Ben groaned.

He wondered how long he'd been here, and where 'here' was. He opened his eyes; he needed to get home. He rolled over and pushed himself up to lean against the nearby wall. The effort of shifting his weight around made his head worse. He stopped moving. Nausea fermented deep inside his pelvis before surging up his body and erupting through his nose and mouth. Brutal waves of spew rolled down his torso soaking into his crotch. It didn't phase him. It wasn't the first time he'd woken this way.

Twenty-one-year-old Ben Fitzpatrick had his first beer when he fourteen years old. It had been fun then. The thrill of illicit activity had added to the excitement as he and his mates pinched beer cans, two at a time, from parental fridges. But the thrill was short-lived and two beers now barely whet his whistle. He groaned as he tried to remember the session that resulted in his current state. He couldn't.

He tried again to open his eyes but even the slight flutter of eyelids sent his stomach into spasms. He took a deep breath and rode the wave of nausea until it tipped him sideways and dumped him back onto the rough gritty surface. The vomit slid sideways down his face this time, the warm trail a pleasant contrast to the cold concrete across which he was sprawled.

As the minutes passed, Ben became aware of the noises around him. But the feeling of a thousand worms battling the nausea in the pit of his stomach distracted him. He slowed his breathing and tried to focus on the sounds, hoping to divert attention from his churning guts. It failed.

He pushed himself back up against the wall and wiped the spew from his face with the back of his hand. A burning pain tore across his knuckles. He lifted his hand to eye-level, palm facing out, to find the source of the pain. Underneath the vomit and dried blood, sat two badly distended knuckles, and a finger that looked as though it might be dislocated.

What the hell? The hand fell to his lap and he dropped his chin to his chest and stared at it as though it belonged to someone else. When the pain hit and sucked the breath from his lungs in a gasping groan, he finally registered that the hand was his. He banged his head against the wall behind him as though it might help him to remember what had happened. It didn't. It just made his headache worse. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his temples with the heel of his hands. It was no good; he needed to get home, to see a doctor, to get cleaned up. He needed to sleep it off, maybe then he'd remember.

He rolled sideways onto his knees and pulled himself up the wall until he was standing. The effort exhausted him. He paused until his head stopped spinning. When he'd regained his balance, he opened his eyes to look around. He was at the back of a dead-end street. The traffic he'd heard was from the main road, 40 or so metres away. The road itself was narrow, the pavement alongside barely wide enough to walk down.

A brick wall slashed with graffiti and scarred by the occasional roller door ran along one side of the road. A concrete rendered wall, also dripping with graffiti and punctuated with doors, glared from the other side. It seemed to be some kind of service road. Ben guessed the doors were back entrances to restaurants or clubs and a shudder of recognition ran through him.

He swung his head around and surveyed the scene; rubbish overflowing from skip bins pressed up against the walls, stray cats prowling around and under them looking for scraps, cardboard boxes propped up in the corner and covered with a dirty worn tarp, and piles of junk scattered here and there. Double black steel doors recessed into the brick wall tugged on his recall. But it was the teapot lying on its side across the chipped tile stair, its broken spout gaping, that finally told him where he was. This was Mansion Lane, behind the World Bar in Kings Cross. He'd spent enough time drinking Tea-pot Cocktails here to recognise the crockery.

The sky was turning as the first tinge of morning light pushed through the darkness. Ben wondered why he was in the back alley but it was too much to think about in his current state, so he braced himself to head off. A few steps were all he managed before his knees buckled under him and he fell to the ground.

He groaned and rolled over coming face to face with a... lump. At first, he thought it was a heap of rubbish. But as he focused his eyes, it began to take shape. He reached out and touched it. It was solid. This was no heap of rubbish. Ben scrambled up to a kneeling position and pushed it. It was soft.

He pulled away a sheet of newspaper flapping around one end of it. His stomach dropped. His heart began pounding. It was a man. Face down. One arm bent unnaturally behind him, the other underneath him.

"Hey," Ben cleared his throat. "Hey, you."

No response. He reached down and grabbed one shoulder, pulling the man onto his back. Ben recoiled in horror, staring at the body before him. He leapt to his feet and staggered backwards until he hit the wall. How had he not seen this before? He tried to pull his eyes away from the bloody mess in front of him, but he was transfixed. It was sickening, fascinating, but sickening.

His breath stabbed at his lungs. His heart throbbed wildly in his head and his hands. His hands. He glanced down at his knuckles before looking closely at the face on the body. No. It

couldn't possibly be. The face was gruesome; one eye so horribly swollen and bloody that it protruded grotesquely from the socket, stretching the eyelid so taut that it had split. There was a gash on the side of his head through which blood had oozed into the hair before congealing in a mass of dark red, and a bulbous purple lump bulged beneath the cheekbone.

Ben bent forward, heaving bile onto the pavement. The image of the hideous face burned into his psyche. He fought the urge to look back; he didn't want to see anymore. Instead, he looked at the hands. He felt the blood drain from his face and drop to his feet, dragging his stomach down with it. He felt as though he might pass out and crumpled into a crouching position, head between his knees.

He lifted his fingers to his face and carefully prodded and poked. He seemed okay. Sort of. He looked from his damaged knuckles to the man's damaged face. Two blokes in the lane behind a popular bar. Injuries that match. They must've fought. It was the only explanation. But why? Who was this...?

He stared at the man. He didn't look like the hipster type that usually hung out at the World Bar. He wore a dark coloured jacket, jeans and runners, same as Ben. Same as any of the uni guys he'd have gone to the bar with. There was nothing on the outside that gave any indication as to his identity. Ben considered searching his pockets for a wallet. But what if he came around and thought he was being robbed? He avoided looking at the face and gazed at the body. He couldn't see the chest moving. And if the chest wasn't moving that meant he wasn't breathing. And if he wasn't breathing—

"Oh God," Ben gasped. He tried to move but his feet were frozen to the spot. He could do nothing but push himself back up the wall until he was standing. A few metres from the body. It couldn't be true. He couldn't have. Wouldn't have. Surely. But deep down he knew he could have. Would have, even. If he'd been provoked enough. He'd been in a few fights before.

And as soon as the thought registered with him, the only thing that mattered was getting as far from the scene as possible. The shock that had frozen him shattered. He ran. And ran. He bolted down the alley, leaping over rubbish, sending cats screeching out of his way. He ran down the main road, heart pounding in his ears, sucking in great gasps of air, lungs burning, eyes watering from the cold air.

He lost one shoe and his socked foot hit the pavement unevenly, nearly throwing him off balance. He veered wildly to the right, off the footpath. A horn blared and a car swerved to miss him. Still he ran. He ran blindly, not caring where he was or what direction he was going in.

Adrenalin surged through his bloodstream fuelling every muscle. There was no pain, or fear, just the urgency of distance. Landmarks didn't register as he ran into the breaking day. He ran with the flow of traffic, glad for the mostly deserted sidewalk. He crossed roads, raced up stairs, leapt over fences, and bolted through a park until he reached the harbour, then ran along the shoreline.

And when he couldn't run anymore, he collapsed onto the sand.

He lay on his back gulping for breath. And as the images of that body, that face, rained down upon him, he had no control over the tears that flowed with them. He stared up at the early morning sky and surrendered to them.

Chapter Two

It was raining. Gentle drops against his face roused him. It was not unpleasant, but the stinging in his hand that hauled him back to consciousness was. He opened his eyes to find that he was lying on his side; arms stretched out in front of him and sand coating the wounds on his knuckles. He pulled them into his body and sat up to brush off the sand. The smell of vomit and blood reached his nostrils at the same time the sight of his hand turned his stomach. He looked away.

The day was grey. But it wasn't so cold anymore. Rushcutter's Bay reached around him, deserted, but familiar. A grass verge extended into Yarranabbe Park behind him then stretched around the bay to the marinas on one side and a rock shelf on the other. The water glistened and danced as a light wind chased sheets of rain across it.

It was enticing. And it blocked the kaleidoscope of fractious images that taunted him. Ben stood up and stumbled toward the water. He needed to clean himself up. He pulled his hoody off over his head as he dragged his aching body into the bay. It occurred to him that perhaps he should've taken his remaining sneaker off first. It didn't matter; it needed a wash anyway. So did his hoody. He put it back on.

When he was waist deep, he let himself fall into the water and sink to the bottom. The salt stung the open wounds on his hand and he released his breath in a long underwater scream. He pushed himself back up for air, flipped onto his back and allowed the current to drag him out. Probably better that he drowned at sea than have to think about what had happened. What he did. Or what he would have to do next.

He allowed the thought to carry him while he wallowed in the swell of self-pity. Bad stuff always happened to him. He didn't know why. His father always used to tell him he was a useless good-for-nothing. Ben thought he was probably right. Nothing had gone right for him lately. His sister had gone overseas and left him alone, his girlfriend had left, he was on the brink of getting kicked out of uni, and now, now he'd killed someone.

The thought sank him. He was out of his depth. On the way down, he realised those awful images he'd been battling since he'd woken weren't the remnants of a drunken nightmare. His body hurt too much. He was glad that he was drowning. It meant he wouldn't have to deal with it—with any of it.

He couldn't hold his breath another second and was preparing to inhale a lungful of water when, unwillingly, his survival instinct kicked in. He broke the surface coughing and spluttering and smashed headfirst into a wooden pylon that seemed to appear out of nowhere. He wrapped his arms around it.

"Hang on, mate," a voice called down to him. A weatherworn face appeared over the side of the jetty. "Here, grab this."

The man threw a ring float over the side and Ben slid one arm into the centre of it, allowing himself to be dragged down the side of the jetty to the wharf. Two blokes then pulled him up onto the wooden platform and propped him against a storage container.

"Geez mate," the old man said. "Gave me a bit of a turn there. You alright?"

"Yeah," Ben pulled himself up. "Must've fallen asleep and rolled off the wharf is all."

"One too many, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that." The bloke had no idea.

"That pylon did you no favours," the other man said, pointing at him. "You should see your face."

Ben stared at the faded anchor tattooed on the man's gesturing forearm. "Ugh," he groaned, and sauntered off ignoring further comments.

He walked the length of the wharf and stood looking back to where he'd entered the water. The current had dragged him the wrong way. He cursed the fact that it'd brought him back into the bay instead of taking him out to sea; he'd have had a better chance of drowning without banging into d'Albora's wharf where some retired boatie do-gooders had to go and save him. He wiped blood from the laceration on his forehead courtesy of the pylon, and swore.

The wind picked up and the rain began to get heavier. Ben shivered. He needed to get home and get into some dry clothes. He wondered what time it was, what day it was. He patted his pockets looking for his mobile and was surprised to find it still in the back pocket of his jeans. Wet. Dead. Like that bloke in the alley. He drew it back over his shoulder and hurled it into the bay. He watched it disappear then immediately regretted it. He needed the sim card. He wanted to keep the same number just in case Liv ever decided to call. Liv. The love of his life.

He sighed and spat and headed off toward New South Head Rd, he wondered if a bus driver would let him on a bus. Probably not. Besides, if his face looked bad enough for those boaties to notice, he probably should stay out of sight, lest he drew attention to himself and someone asked too many questions.

He pulled his sopping hood down over his face, shoved his good hand into his hoody pocket and shuffled up the road. He realised his other shoe was now missing as well. Must've lost it in the water. No matter, one wasn't much good by itself; it was probably covered in 'evidence' anyway. He was better off with it at the bottom of the bay, especially since he had no clue where the other one was. It took him about an hour to get back to his flat in Bondi. He climbed the three flights of stairs, relieved to find his key still zipped into the inside pocket of his hoody. He let himself in, pulled a garbage bag from the kitchen drawer and peeled off items of clothing on his way through the unit, shoving them into the bag as he went. He'd get rid of it later.

In the bathroom, he stood naked in front of the mirror while he waited for the shower water to warm up. He held his hand up in front of him and gazed at his banged up reflection. He wondered why he didn't hurt more.

He carefully washed the last traces of blood and vomit from his body and shampooed his hair as best he could with one hand. Afterwards, he soaked the fingernails of his damaged hand in an antiseptic solution, and then cut them. He slathered his knuckles with the antiseptic cream he found in the cabinet, hoping it was strong enough to rid him of any kind of forensic evidence. He knew he'd have to get help to put his finger back into place, but that could wait. He was too tired to think about it right then. He donned boxers and went to bed. His bedside clock told him it wasn't yet 10am. He still didn't know what day it was. He didn't care.

The television was on. His flatmate, Raf, was sprawled across the lounge with his legs lying across Ash's lap. They both turned to look at him as Ben hobbled across the room.

"Geez, what happened to you?" Raf swung his legs around to the floor and sat up.

"Omigod Ben," Ash leapt off the lounge and stood staring. "Are you all right?"

Ben stopped and looked at Raf, he wondered if he'd been there last night. Did Raf know what had happened? What Ben had done? There was nothing but surprise on Raf's face, and shock on Ash's. Ben walked past them into the kitchen. He knew he couldn't ignore them for long but didn't know what to tell them. He didn't want to broach the subject if neither had been there, and saying 'I bashed a man to death' didn't really seem like a viable option. He rummaged through drawers and cupboards looking for painkillers. Anything would do, the stronger the better. The pain in his hands was worse than he remembered it being last night, and using them wasn't helping. He stopped.

"You right there?" Raf had followed him into the kitchen. He leant against the bench and watched him for a few seconds. Ben ignored him; he stood in the centre of the kitchen, supporting his crook arm with his good one, and contemplated his predicament. His head throbbed, his body ached, his hand felt like it was on fire, and he couldn't get the images of the grotesque body in the alley out of his head.

Ash walked in and raised a questioning eyebrow to Raf. Raf shook his head. Ash turned to Ben. "We can give you a lift to the hospital. You're going to need to get those fingers fixed."

Ben stared. Ash was right; he did need to get his fingers fixed. But he wasn't going to let them take him to a hospital where they'd ask questions he couldn't answer.

"What day is it?" he asked.

"Huh?" Ash looked confused. "Today, we'll take you today."

"What day is it today?"

"It's Thursday," Raf said.

"Thursday?"

"All day. Well, at least what's left of it," Raf looked at his phone. "It's nearly three. Look, I've got a tute at four, so we need to leave soon. We can drop you at the uni clinic if you like."

The UNSW clinic was a better option, but they'd probably send him to the hospital for x-rays anyway. He needed time to think. He shook his head.

"Suit yourself," Raf shrugged.

"We can't just leave him here," Ash said. "He's clearly not okay."

"Can't force him," Raf said. "He can text someone if he needs anything."

"Mobile's gone," Ben said, more to himself than them. "I need to get another one."

"What happened, Ben?" Raf asked. "Did you get rolled?"

Ben turned and walked out of the kitchen. He went back to his room and stood in front of his mirror. The bruising on his forehead was now a spectacular blend of purple, blue and green. His disfigured hand caused him the most angst because he couldn't use it. And the pain, well, he deserved that, so it was probably karmic that couldn't find anything to take.

"Ben?" Ash knocked on his door. "You coming?"

He grunted. Ash opened the door a crack, "what did you say?"

"Get out," he growled.

He eased himself back onto his bed, still holding his hand out in front of him. A twinge of remorse tugged at his conscience. It wasn't as though Ash even knew him. Raf and Ben had been mates for years, but Ash had only come along in the past few months and had no right to interfere. But when the front door slammed shut, it sent another pang of remorse reverberating through Ben. His pain seemed to be getting worse instead of better.

He spotted his wallet on the bedside table. He'd pulled the sodden mess out of his back pocket before throwing his jeans out earlier. It was still wet. No matter, his cards would still be usable. He got himself up and managed to pull on some trackie dacks and a t-shirt. He couldn't get his socks and shoes on so opted for thongs. He made his way down the road and into the local.

"Geez, mate, what happened to you?"

"Bourbon," Ben said. "Straight up."

"Reckon you need it," the barman said, pouring it in front of him. "So...?"

"Another," Ben slammed the empty shot glass on the bar.

"I don't think so," the barman pulled a schooner of New, placing it on the bar in front of Ben.

"C'mon Ed," Ben whined. "I need it."

"You need a hospital more like it," Eddy shook his head. "So what gives? You get in a fight?"

"Fell asleep on the wharf, rolled off and got slammed between a boat and a pylon," Ben told him. He was surprised, and pleased, that the lie had come so easily. It made perfect sense. The blokes who pulled him out of the water could verify his story, well, at least the part about falling off the wharf. It wasn't all that fantastical that he'd been slammed between the pylon and the boat, weird enough to be true. Maybe.

"Really?" Eddy eyed his knuckles.

"Yeah," Ben said. "Had my arms wrapped around the pylon after getting hit the first time and didn't get my hand out of the way before it swung back around. Crushed the knuckles on my hand, see?" He held them up in front of him. "Couple of old boaties had to pull me out."

"Geez," Eddy bought it. "Bloody lucky they was there then."

"Yeah," Ben said. He paid for his drinks, finished his beer and left.

Chapter Three

It was the perfect cover. Eddy, the barman, was a shrewd character. He'd heard his share of whoppers being told. He'd shared enough of them with Ben over the time Ben had been living in the flat and coming to the pub, and they'd laughed about some of the crazier anecdotes. But he didn't laugh when Ben told him what happened, didn't even raise an eyebrow. And if it worked with Eddy, it should work with everyone else.

Ben reached the bus stop just as the three-eighty approached. He stood in front of the Opal reader fumbling to get his card out of his wallet. The driver ignored him. He couldn't do it and gave up. He walked through the bus and sat in the seat behind the back door, ignoring the stares from the passengers already on the bus. He wished he'd grabbed a hoody, though he knew he wouldn't have been able to get it on properly. He was just relieved to know that he could get his hand fixed and rehearsed his story over and over in his head.

He needn't have worried; it was easier than he thought, well, aside from the six hours so far that he'd spent in Accident & Emergency. But at least no one seemed too interested in knowing the finer details of what had happened. They'd x-rayed his hand and arm nearly all the way up to his shoulder, cleaned and dressed his grazes and given him a shot of morphine. Turns out that as well as having two dislocated fingers, his middle knuckle and index finger were broken, and his right wrist was also fractured. No wonder he'd been in pain. Must've been a hell of a punch.

He lay on a trolley in a cubicle with his freshly splinted fingers and plastered wrist propped up on pillows, appreciating the relief the morphine gave him, when a casually dressed woman in her thirties entered his cubicle and drew the curtains to afford him some privacy. He thought this was strange given they seemed to have no problem stripping him down to his boxers to put the gown on him without the curtain.

"Hello Ben," she smiled. "I won't shake your hand."

Ben tried to read the identity tag swinging around her neck.

"My name is Sally," she said. "I'm a Social Worker here at the hospital."

Ben stared at her. Why would they think he needed a social worker?

"Ben, the doctor asked me to come along to talk to you about what happened."

"It wasn't that traumatic," Ben said. "I don't even remember much about it." At least that part was true.

"How much had you had to drink?" Sally asked.

Ben wondered where this was going. "A bit."

"How much is a bit?"

"I don't know," Ben frowned. He began to get annoyed. "A couple of schooners." He really had no idea how much he'd drunk, but it was a safe bet to assume it was more than 'a couple of schooners' and probably had included a decent quantity of some kind of cocktail, if he'd been at the World Bar.

"Were you by yourself?"

"No, I was with friends, I told them this already," he snapped. He just wished he could remember.

"So after a couple of schooners with friends, you decided to lie down and have a sleep... on a wharf?"

"Why are you asking me this?" His stomach muscles clenched sending waves of discomfort through his torso.

"How often do you have 'a couple of schooners'?" Sally ignored his defensiveness.

"I don't know... whenever... can I go now?"

"Is talking about your drinking habits making you feel uncomfortable, Ben?" Sally persisted. "Or is there something else going on with you?"

"What are you talking about?" Ben started to panic. He didn't understand the line of questioning. He wondered if he was being set up, maybe she was recording the conversation. Maybe the 'body' had been found and they knew he was lying through his teeth and wanted him to admit what he'd done. Maybe the police were outside the cubicle waiting to arrest him for murder. Maybe he should make a run for it.

He wriggled his way up the bed, but without the use of both hands, he couldn't put the safety rails down. Fear tossed and squirmed in his stomach until he could bear it no longer; he leant sideways and vomited. Globbs of alcohol infused mucus splashed over the floor sending waves of fetid fumes exploding into the air in the cubicle. Sally gasped and shoved her nose into the crook of her arm. She reached for the buzzer, but a nurse bustled through the cubicle curtains before she could ring it.

"Easy there," she said soothingly. "Sometimes the morphine makes people sick. Nothing to panic about."

She smiled at Ben while she held a steel basin under his chin to catch anymore that might come. A cleaner arrived to mop up the mess and Sally stepped out of the cubicle to allow them space.

When he was done, Ben lay back and the nurse wiped his face with a damp cloth. She checked his vitals and filled in his chart.

"When can I go?" Ben asked.

"Not for a while yet, but even then you'll need to contact someone to come and get you," the nurse told him. "The doctors won't release you otherwise."

"I can't contact anyone," Ben grumbled. "I lost my phone in the water and it's got the contact numbers for everyone I know on it."

"I can organise something for him," Sally poked her head back through the curtains.

"Okay," the nurse said. "I'll let them know."

"I don't need you to organise anything for me," Ben pouted.

"I know," she said. "But they're not going to let you go otherwise."

Ben glared at her, fear and suspicion hidden behind sullen defensiveness. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you organise anything for me? You don't even know me."

"Because Ben," Sally said patiently. "Sometimes people do things for other people, and that's okay."

Ben didn't have a response. But he couldn't help feeling suspicious. People did not do things for other people without a reason—that much he knew. He still thought Sally had an ulterior motive but he couldn't figure out what it might be.

"Anyway, it's not yet four hours since they gave you the morphine," Sally added. "And it's hospital policy to keep patients for the full four hours unless they have someone to take them home.... So... how's uni going?"

"How did you know I was at uni?" Ben asked. "And is that policy stuff really the reason you're here?"

"You said 'student' for occupation when they were doing the paperwork, and I figured you were too old for school."

"Oh."

"And as for why I'm here, well," Sally seemed to choose her words carefully. "The doctors noted that your accident happened while you were intoxicated, and that even though it happened a good 16 hours before you presented to A&E, your blood alcohol content was still quite high. You didn't list a next-of-kin. And, well, they were concerned about you, Ben."

"Oh," Ben was relieved. "That's just because I had a shot of Bourbon when I woke up this arvo because of the pain. I didn't have any pain killers."

"You've been drinking again today?" Sally asked. "You should've told the doctor."

"Why?"

"Because it's important for them to know how you're using alcohol."

"You saying I have a problem with drinking?"

"Do you?"

"No," Ben spat. "I do not."

"What actually happened last night?"

Ben felt his blood run cold. This was it, they were on to him. It had all been pretence and they were coming after him. He had to get out of there before the police came and arrested him.

"I told you," he spluttered. "I told them, I don't know. I can't remember. I want to go home now. Give me my clothes. Where are my clothes?"

"It's okay Ben," Sally remained calm in the face of Ben's distress. She bent down and retrieved the brown paper bag containing Ben's clothes from the basket under his trolley bed. She dumped them on his lap. "No one is keeping you here against your will. We are just waiting for your discharge papers. And your medical certificate for uni... if you still want it?"

"Yeah I want it, I need it. Otherwise..." Ben figured they didn't need to know that he was looking at getting kicked out.

The nurse opened the curtains around the cubicle and began fitting a foam sling around Ben's neck. She tucked his broken arm inside it. "How am I supposed to do anything like this?" Ben wrenched his hand free. "I'll be completely useless."

"Not completely," the nurse said. "It's no skin off my nose, but if you keep your hand and forearm elevated, at least for a few days, it'll help with the pain."

"Right. Ok," Ben said. "Can I go now?"

Chapter Four

"Sorry mate," Raf said. "Didn't realise you were here."

"Where else would I be?" Ben said. "I live here."

It had been too late to do anything about a new phone by the time Ben got home. He'd had to wait another hour or so for his medical certificate. And then convince the doctors that he would catch a taxi and call his sister the next morning. They didn't have to know that his sister had been overseas for nearly a year. It didn't matter; he was perfectly capable of looking after himself. And besides, the painkilling medication they had given him to take home had gone very nicely with the bourbon in his room, especially seeing as he didn't have to worry about uni for two whole weeks. He'd fallen asleep on the lounge in front of the TV and had woken when the front door burst open.

"So, feeling better then?" Raf grinned, and walked past him to the kitchen. He came back a few minutes later and put a travel mug with a handle on the coffee table in front of Ben, along with a laden plate.

"What's that?"

"Coffee," Raf said. "And toast."

"Huh?"

"Figured it'd be easier to manage with a lid... you know, while you're like that," Raf motioned toward Ben's arm. He sat in the chair adjacent to the lounge and picked up a piece of toast. "Listen, while you're here, I wanted to talk to you about something."

Ben picked up the mug in his left hand and fumbled around trying to open the lid. "What?"

"Well, you know how Ash and me have been talking about moving in together," Raf paused. He took the mug from Ben and opened the top before handing it back to him. "Well... the rental market is a bit tight at the moment and—"

"Ash is not moving in here," Ben snapped.

"Oh... okay," Raf said, "I just thought, you know, it'd make sense because it's a double room, and the one at Ash's is a single."

"No."

"And you'd pick up an extra hundred a week in rent..."

"Don't care. Don't need it."

Ben could be difficult, but Raf knew he just needed to mull it over for a while. "Okay, then. Well, I guess we'll just have to keep looking."

"You're gonna move out?"

"Yeah."

Ben stared at him.

"Well?" Raf sighed. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I guess," Raf looked intently at Ben. "It's just that..."

"When are you leaving?"

"Soon as we find a place I suppose," Raf ran out of patience.

"Fine," Ben stood up. "But you have to give me notice. Two weeks." He went to his room and slammed the door shut with his foot.

He lay on his bed and listened to Raf bustling about the flat and wondered why he really wanted to move out. It's not as if they lived in each other's pockets. They were hardly ever there at the same time. And when they were, they'd have a beer together and watch a movie, or go to the pub. If Ben had to share with anyone, Raf was a pretty good option. He was easy-going and never hassled him about anything. And they got on well. Very well.

They'd been mates since they were eight-years-old. Raf had arrived in Ben's class at school in the middle of their first term in year three. The teacher had told the class that he'd just arrived from Afghanistan and that his name was Rafiq Shanahwaz. As was the usual practise when a new kid arrived at school, the teacher allowed the class to ask questions. Rafiq had stayed silent, hung his head and blushed and it became apparent that he did not understand or speak English very well. The kids dismissed him. He'd kept to himself after that.

One morning a few weeks later, Ben had gone into the toilet block to find a group of older boys standing in front of a closed cubical door shouting insults to the kid behind it. The bell went and the boys left. Ben did what he came in to do, and went to the basin to wash his hands. He watched in the mirror as the door opened a crack. He pretended to be absorbed in the process of hand washing as the door opened a little wider and Rafiq cautiously stepped out. He wiped the tears from his face and snuck out behind Ben. Ben pretended not to notice.

At lunchtime that day, Ben collected his lunch, stuck his soccer ball under his arm and followed Rafiq out to the corner of the playground where he'd been spending his breaks alone. Ben sat next to him and silently offered him half of his Vegemite sandwich. In return, Rafiq had broken the biscuit he was eating in two and given half to Ben. They spent the rest of that lunchtime kicking the ball back and forth.

The next day, Ben had dragged Rafiq down to the oval with him for the lunchtime soccer match. "Raf's on my team," he'd announced, handing Raf the ball. "And we're kicking off." The other kids stared at Ben and Raf for a few seconds then launched into the usual bickering about who was on whose team. Ben grinned at Raf, and he smiled back. They'd been through a lot together since then.

Yeah, they were good mates. Ben just didn't like it when Ash was there because they were all lovey-dovey and it made him miss Olivia even more than he did every second of every day. But it didn't mean he wanted Raf to move out. He should've said something. Anything. Besides, he

really did need the rent. And the extra hundred would mean he didn't have to worry about trying to find another job in a hurry.

He wished he'd just told him he didn't want him to go. Damn it, he'd tell him now. He grabbed the bottle of bourbon he had stashed in his bedside table, and rolled off his bed. He needed to go to the toilet first. But by the time he'd finished, the front door had banged shut. Raf was gone.

Ben swore. He sat on the lounge and washed down the now cold and soggy toast with a swig of bourbon. He didn't get it. Why would Raf want to leave? He'd been sharing with Ben for years. Even when Liv was around Raf had never minded. Guilt throbbed in his fingers as he realised just how mean he had been to his friend.

He knew he was lucky. He and Raf were good together as flatmates. He wished he didn't keep stuffing things up. He sucked bourbon from his bottle. No one ever stuck around. Idiots they were. All of them. Ben laughed. He couldn't help it if the world was full of idiots. Just lucky he wasn't one of them. He took another mouthful from the bottle he was nursing, and then carefully sat it on the coffee table. He'd ring Raf and tell him he was sorry and that he wanted him to stay and that Ash could move in.

"I don't have a phone," he said aloud. "Somebody took it."

"...capsized just outside the heads... lost at sea..." the morning news presenter said from the TV.

"Thass right!" Ben said. "Lost in the sea. Fuck it."

He began to cry. Tears burnt the backs of his eyes before streaming down his face as he howled into the bottle. He cried and cried. Then as suddenly as it started, it stopped. He turned the TV off.

"There you go, you're all set, same number and all," the salesperson smiled. A tone sounded. "Sounds like you've got a message coming through already."

Ben plucked the phone out of the salesperson's hand and opened the text. He stared at the screen transfixed. It couldn't be! His stomach dropped. The colour drained from his face, he felt as though the walls were closing in on him and squeezing the breath from his lungs. His sight blurred and the floor below him suddenly felt like a tightrope upon which he had to fight to keep his balance. He couldn't. He gripped the counter and broke out in a cold sweat. A ringing in his ears got louder and louder and he started trembling uncontrollably.

"You okay?" the salesperson asked.

"Ugh," Ben gasped and shook his head to clear his vision. His chattering teeth echoed in his head, and his heart began racing. He tried to slow his breathing.

Another sales assistance approached. "What's up?" he said to the first, watching Ben.

"Um, not sure but..." she motioned toward Ben.

Ben glanced up and noticed other customers also watching. He left the kerfuffle behind him, walked out of the shop and hailed a cab, not daring to look at his phone again. Back at the flat, he put the phone on the coffee table and picked up the bourbon bottle. He walked the length of the lounge room before pivoting and walking back. He swigged from the bottle, put it back on the table and continued pacing. Up and down.

It couldn't be true. He must've imagined it. It's not possible. There was no one else there that night. It's just his imagination. His nightmares were getting to him. That's all. And with that thought, relief followed the warm flow of bourbon through his veins and he relaxed a little. He sat on the lounge and picked up the phone. He stared at it, wondering if his guilt and fear were causing him to hallucinate.

He pressed the button to bring the phone to life and tapped the message icon. It was still there. Open. Staring at him.



Chapter Five

Why would someone send him that? Maybe it was a mistake. Probably wasn't even him. He was just feeling paranoid because of what happened. Still, he didn't want anyone finding him. He went to the window and peered up and down the street through the vertical blinds before closing them. He checked that the balcony door was locked and switched the lights out. It was stupid, he knew. If someone he'd been out with last night had taken that pic, then they'd know where he lived. Probably even knew he was home right now. He needed some perspective. He needed to keep the demons at bay.

He swallowed another two of the pain meds and washed them down with the rest of the bourbon, then lay on the lounge watching daylight shadows dance on the ceiling. He needed to figure out what was wrong with his life. It didn't seem fair that he couldn't get a break. A beam of light through the blinds caught dust rising from the lounge, the movement of air swept the particles along the beam's length and up toward the ceiling to be trapped by the shadows and used in their dance. Ben was fascinated. It was the way of the world really; you got sucked in and spat out in the eternal ebb and flow of life without cause or consideration, without choice or form, and mostly, without even knowing about it. Yeah, that's how it was. He was impressed with his own profundity and decided to use it as the opening scene for his next film club film.

The sensations of bourbon and medication blended pleasantly pushing images of the night before deep into the recesses of his mind. But as he stared again at the dancing shadows, they trembled and blurred and laughed down at him. 'It's your fault,' they seemed to say. 'All your fault.' He shut his eyes tight and willed them away.

He shook his head to work the images loose and sat up. He covered his ears with his hands to block the wailing in his head. The action caused the pain in his hand to well and spread through his arm to his torso, then to his heart. He clutched his chest, rocking back and forth on the edge of the lounge. The wailing got louder; the rocking more vigorous,



until Ben toppled forward and fell through the gap between the lounge and coffee table. He lay on the floor and let the tears flow until he cried himself into oblivion. Again.

It was dark. Curtains flapped in the evening breeze and the aroma from the barbecue on the neighbour's balcony wafted through the window. The smell of sizzling sausages and onions was appealing enough to make his stomach rumble. But when he rolled over to push himself up off the floor, the pungent smell of urine turned the hunger to nausea. He'd been lying in a pool of piss.

He swore and staggered to the bathroom. He ran a bath, squeezing half a bottle of body wash into the stream of water. He sat on the edge of the tub and watched the water foam, and when it was almost full, he leaned over to flip the tap off and overbalanced, falling into the bath still fully clothed. He rolled and came up spluttering, spitting soapy water everywhere. It wasn't so bad. The water was nice and warm and he needed to wash his pants anyway. He relaxed and submitted to the tub, allowing the bath to swallow him. He sank as far down as he could and as the warm water lapped gently around and over his face, he felt peaceful. Almost. He closed his eyes and drifted in and out of awareness. Sinking deeper and deeper.

"What are you doing, Ben?"

His eyes snapped open and he shot up sending waves of foamy water breaking over the side of the bath. He spluttered and coughed and stumbled around trying to get out of the tub, slipping and sliding and fighting to keep his balance and get to the light switch. He whirled around as the bathroom exploded in fluorescent light. No one was there. He wandered through the unit from room to room leaving a soapy trail behind him. It was empty.

He was sure he'd heard her. He could never mistake that voice. He'd listened to her last voicemail message on his mobile over and over again, for months. Until one night, he'd deleted it in a fit of drunken rage at her leaving him. He'd regretted it the moment he did. But now, now he'd heard her voice again. He was sure of it. It was the same disparaging tone she used when she'd come around after he'd been on a bender. She'd sit beside him, and smile her disapproval in that infuriating, intoxicating way she had of making him feel simultaneously sorry, embarrassed, angry and completely beholden to her.

The door was ajar. He stood, dripping, in the middle of the lounge room, staring through the dim light at the doorway. Someone must've been in. He headed over to the front door and flipped the light switch. He was sure he'd heard her. She never did give her key back. Ben hadn't minded, in his head it meant that one day she might come back. He did another round of the unit, this time switching on the lights as he went, until every light in the unit was on and he was back at the door. Still no sign of anyone.

He closed the door and leant against it. The place was a mess. It stank, there were wet patches all over the floorboards, empty mugs and dirty plates on the coffee table, and there on the lounge where he'd left it, his phone. He stepped forward and grabbed it. His head ached. Liv had always hassled him about the way he kept the unit. She could've been there, taken one look inside and left again. He tugged his soaking wet tracksuit pants down and stepped out of them then pulled his t-shirt over his head. He wound one around each foot and skated between the lounge and the table mopping up the mess he'd made earlier.

He picked up the soiled, wet clothes and dumped them in the garbage bag with the clothes from yesterday. He shoved the kitchen tidy bag in on top of it, tied it up and dragged it to the door so that he wouldn't forget to take out the rubbish, then continued to his room and crashed on his bed. He couldn't make sense of it. If it wasn't her voice, then whose was it? He realised his phone was still clutched in his hand, and brought it up to his face to examine the call list and scroll through the messages. Five texts, two from Raf asking how his hand was, three from a number he didn't recognise, and THAT text, still there – haunting him. He deleted it.

He didn't know where his meds were; and he'd finished his bourbon. Couldn't get himself together enough to go out. He lay there trying to think, trying to figure it out; he couldn't. He felt heavy, very heavy. As though he were dead. It pleased him. The room began to spin. He let it. He wasn't bothered, just as he was drifting off he wondered if this was what madness felt like.

Something was wrong. He felt it even before he opened his eyes. It was a creepy uncomfortable feeling. Birds were chirruping outside his window, and as he did every morning, he swore at them and wished he still had his childhood slingshot to sort them out. He groaned and rolled over and out of the bed.

All else was quiet as he made his way to the bathroom. The tub was still full; he hadn't pulled the plug. He left it and walked back out to the lounge room. The bourbon bottle lay on the lounge, empty. Next to it was the box of pain meds, also empty. He couldn't remember taking all of them, now what was he going to do?

The cast on his arm was still wet, so were the finger splints. Maybe he should go to a doctor and get them replaced and get some more painkillers at the same time. He didn't need an appointment at the university clinic and he had to go out for more grog anyway. He may as well go to uni and hand in his medical certificate too. Kill two birds with the one stone. Three birds. He'd kill all those fucking birds if they didn't stop making such a racket.

He threw the empty pillbox at the window. It was pointless trying to scare them off because the people in the unit next door fed them on their balcony, that's why there were always so many around. He went into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, then took it into the lounge-room and sat down.

He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, but dismissed it as part of the bender he'd been on. The past couple of days had been rough. It wasn't until he spilt his coffee and stood up to make another that he saw it. The door was ajar, again. He was sure he'd closed it the night before. He stepped around the coffee table to close it, and froze.

There by the door, the garbage bag sat—still tied—in the same place he'd left it. But laid out neatly next to it were the jeans and hoody that he'd worn *that* night. Someone had come into the unit, opened the garbage bag, gone through the rubbish and pulled out his clothes then retied the bag. While he was sleeping.

Chapter Six

Whoever it was, *knew*. And that was even worse than someone letting themselves in and wandering around the unit while Ben was sleeping. Someone knew. And at that moment, as though his thoughts were being monitored, his message tone sounded.

He looked at his screen. It was a text message, no picture. The relief was palpable. Until he read it—*I know why you run*—Nothing else. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled sending shivers down his spine. He deleted the message and tossed the phone on the lounge. He looked around the room as though whoever sent the message might be watching him. At least the door was still shut, that was a good thing—for about a minute. Then he couldn't deal. He slammed the door shut behind him.

"You can buy paracetamol and ibuprofen over the counter," the doctor at the uni clinic said. "That should be enough now."

"But it's not," Ben whined. "It really *really* hurts still."

"Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if you wore the sling they gave you, and tried not to get your cast wet," the Doctor was adamant. "And if it is '*really bad*' you can get the paracetamol or ibuprofen with codeine, *over the counter*."

"But Doc—"

"Not going to happen Ben. The drugs they prescribed for you were supposed to do you for the first 48 hours. If the pain is still that bad, then you need to go back to outpatients and have them look at it again. They'll take x-rays and check that the break is setting properly."

"Whatever." Ben stormed out. He couldn't tell the doctor that he'd taken his 48-hour supply in less than 24, even if he had needed them. Fine then, next stop: bottle shop.

The locksmith was already waiting for him by the time he got home.

"Sorry mate," Ben said. "Took a bit longer getting home than I figured."

"No worries, only just got here myself," the locksmith smiled. "Let's have a look and see what's what."

Ben showed him the front door and the windows. He wanted new locks on everything. He wasn't going to take the risk of anyone getting in. Not now. The only lamentable fact was that if

Olivia did come back, she wouldn't be able to let herself in. But he consoled himself with the knowledge that at least he still had the same phone number.

When the locks had been changed and new keys handed to him, Ben felt a sense of relief. He had no idea who could've gotten into his unit and gone through his rubbish. Or why. The idea repulsed him. And scared him.

He had given keys to lots of people but he couldn't remember who exactly. His place was often used as a crash-pad for his uni mates, especially when Liv was out of town. He used to have multiple sets of keys but because he kept forgetting who he'd lent them to, he'd gradually lost all but one. Raf had had to get a set cut for Ash when they'd started getting serious, and then he'd complained about the constant stream of people through the unit so Ben had stopped offering the place up.

But now, it wasn't just someone getting in that worried Ben. What did that message mean? He wasn't running. He was home, where he always was. These days there were only three places he ever was. Home, uni, or the pub down the road. And given that he'd already been to uni today, and home was giving him the creeps, he shoved his wallet into his pocket, locked the place up from top to bottom, and headed down to the pub.

"Hey Benno," Eddy greeted him. "Feeling better?"

"I'd be feeling better still if I had the usual sitting here in front of me instead of your lips flapping," Ben grinned. Eddy slapped a schooner in front of him almost before Ben finished his sentence. "You psychic, or what?"

"Maybe," Eddy winked.

"Good," Ben took a long swig of his beer and sighed in satisfaction. "Should be able to tell me who broke into my place then."

"What?" Eddy put a little plastic tub of nuts in front of Ben, and pulled a handful out to eat himself. "You get robbed?"

"Yeah... well, no...," Ben wasn't sure what to tell him. "Someone broke in and went through the rubbish."

"Man, that's nuts," Eddy scratched his head. "What were they looking for? You storing stuff at your place? That's gonna get you in all sorts of—"

"I don't do drugs, Eddy," Ben said.

"Goodo," Eddy raised an eyebrow.

"I don't!" Ben banged his fist on the bar in mock outrage.

"Just pulling yer chain, mate," Eddy wiped the bar in front of him. "Settle down."

"You seen anyone around, Ed? You know, hanging around the block at all?"

"No one that I don't usually see. 'Cept that bloke from Pommy-land. But he wouldn't be breaking into no-one's house."

"What bloke?"

"Johnno's cousin. He's a teacher from London. He's checking out the scene to see if he wants to come out here to live."

Ben's decision to come down here was validated by the info he could get from Eddy. He owned and ran the pub, and Ben had been coming here since he first bought his unit when he'd turned 18 and his Mum's inheritance had come through.

Ben had developed a comfortable rapport with Eddy over the years. He'd spent enough time in the pub when there'd just been the two of them, to get know him pretty well. Eddy bought the pub when he'd retired from the merchant navy about the same time as Ben moved into the unit. He lived upstairs by himself, though he occasionally had a lady guest stay over. Ben used to take the piss about it, but Eddy never gave anything away, not even the identity of the lady.

Eddy would sometimes give Ben a hard time about the amount of time he spent there at the pub, especially when Olivia was around. But when Ben told him Olivia had left him, Eddy never said a word about it. It's why Ben liked him. He never seriously hassled him too much about anything. And he was a good listener.

"Where you been anyways?" Eddy asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't seen you much lately. Was gonna put out an ABP."

"You mean an APB?" Ben laughed. "It stands for All Points Bulletin. And you been watching too much American TV."

"Well, you ain't been round 'ere much to talk to," Eddy said. "And no other bugger spends as much time here."

"Mate, I been at uni," Ben slid his empty glass across the bar.

"No you haven't," Eddy refilled it.

"Huh?"

"I see you at the bus stop when you go to uni," Eddy said. "Haven't seen you there for ages."

"I was there this morning," Ben said. "You nosy bugger."

"Yeah," Eddy said. "You was."

"Anyway, what's it to you?"

"Somebody's gotta be looking out for ya," Eddy turned his back to grab a tea towel. "Anyways, I'm going broke."

"Yeah, me too," Ben laughed. "When I'm here."

"Well, you should be coming here for happy hour in the arvos," Eddy refilled the nuts. "Stead of poisoning yourself with that piss you been drinking."

"None of your bloody business what I drink, old man," Ben snapped. "How do you know what I've been drinking anyway?"

"Don't care what you drink, mate," Eddy turned to rearrange the bottles behind the bar. "Just saying you should be drinking it here is all."

"What? Why?"

"That stuff is no good for a young bloke like you," Eddy frowned. He flicked Ben with the end of the tea towel. "And I get sick of talking to meself sometimes."

"Righto then," Ben swallowed his protest. "I'll come down for happy hour whenever I can."

"Where's your flatmate these days?"

"Who? Raf?"

"Yeah, the old Raffo."

"He's moving out."

"Bugger," Eddy said.

"Why?"

"Well," Eddy rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Seems to me that if you got issues with people getting into your flat when they aren't supposed to, it'd be a good idea to have someone else there for when you're not, don't you reckon?"

"Yeah, suppose," Ben said. He knew Eddy was probably right. And he wasn't opposed to Raf staying. "I just didn't want Ash there all the time."

"Why not?"

"Because," Ben skolloed the rest of his schooner.

"Because why?"

"Um..."

"Would it really be all that bad having a third person there?"

"You don't understand," Ben said. He didn't understand himself. It wasn't as if he'd never lived with others before. He'd had his Mum and sister when he was little, then his sister until he was 18. And he'd wanted Olivia to move in with him for years. She had almost been ready to, before she left.

But maybe it wasn't about the number of people. Raf and Ash were pretty tight. Maybe Ben just didn't want to feel like an outsider in his own home.

"Least you'd eat better," Eddy grinned, breaking Ben's train of thought.

"What?"

"If Ash was living with you," Eddy flicked him with the tea towel again. "You look like a bloody bag-o-bones. When's the last time you ate a decent meal?"

Ben tried to think. Eddy was right. The last time he'd had a full meal was... was before *that* night. Before Raf moved out. Ash had cooked stir-fry chicken and veg and left him some in the fridge with a note.

"You know what old timer?" Ben stood up to go. "You're right. I'm gonna go tell Raf that they can both stay."

He slapped the money for his drinks on the bar and left. He knew he hadn't been fair to Raf. It was time he did something about his guilt. His phone was back in the unit. He'd find it and text him.

He felt quite pleased about the decision he'd made. As he trudged up the hill to go home, he tried to remember how long ago he and Raf had argued.

"Can't. Me and Ash just signed a lease," Raf said. "Moving in on the weekend."

"Already?"

"Yeah well," Raf snorted as he handed Ben one of the stubbies he'd bought over with him. "We were pretty lucky to get it in a week."

"A week?"

"Yeah why?"

"You gave me notice a week ago?" Ben didn't understand.

"Actually, it'll be nearly two by the time we move in on the weekend," Raf said. "Why?"

"Two weeks?" Ben couldn't help repeating himself. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, mate," Raf frowned. "What's going on with you?"

"Uh, nothing," Ben shook his head. "Guess I just been in a bit of a time warp. Must be the meds."

"How's your hand anyway? You been back to the doctor yet?"

"Yeah, it's all right."

"Good to hear. Anyway mate, I gotta split," Raf tossed Ben the rest of the six-pack. "I'll catch you next time."

"Yeah, righto. Thanks." Ben didn't get up. He watched Raf leave the flat and close the door behind him. It wasn't possible. Two weeks. Ben hated losing time.

He got up and went into the kitchen to put the remaining beers in the fridge. There was nothing else in there. He closed the fridge door and stared at the notice stuck to it with a magnet. If two weeks had passed, he'd missed his outpatient appointment.

The sound of the message tone drew him back to his bedroom to pick up his phone. Before he checked his messages, he opened the calendar. Raf was right. And not only had he missed his doctor's appointment, he'd missed his going back to uni date, and the appointment with the Dean.

Chapter Seven

He threw his phone across the room and lay back on the bed cursing himself. He didn't understand how he could've let it happen. He knew that a condition of the living allowance he received from his Mum's estate was that he had to be enrolled in, and successfully complete, a university degree.

It had been the same for his sister. They'd each received a lump sum when they turned 18, then if they were going to uni, they got a living allowance until they completed the degree, and then the rest was released in a lump sum when they graduated. It was all very complicated but if they chose not to go to uni, or didn't complete their degree by the time they were 25, not only did they lose their stipend; they had to wait until they were 35 before receiving another cent of the inheritance, and even then it was conditional.

Ben scrambled around his cupboard looking for the Terms & Conditions document he knew was stashed somewhere. He remembered the trustees giving him the document when they sat down with him and his sister after their grandparents died.

His grandparents had been engineers who'd lived and worked in Western Australia. They'd made a motza working as consultants during the mining boom and set up the trust fund for them. It was when their father died a few years after their mother that Rebecca got the trustees to release her money early so that they could keep going to school and she could look after Ben. Ben had wanted some of his money released too, but they wouldn't hear of it. His conditions remained the same – finish school, get some money at 18, then go to uni, or wait til he was old. Rebecca had made him use the money released when he was 18 to buy this unit. He was grateful about that, but now that he was about to lose his stipend, he would have no money coming in because he had no job and no flatmate.

He couldn't find the documents. He picked his way through the empty bottles littering his floor to retrieve his phone. He probably should ring the uni at least, to try and reschedule. Better still, he'd email. That way he might not come across as a blithering idiot; after all, he was a Communication major.

Finding his laptop in the disastrous state his room was in was another challenge. It gave him a headache even thinking about it so he was pleased to discover a packet of ibuprofen & codeine in his dresser drawer, conveniently located with an unopened bottle. He'd forgotten he'd put them there. He swallowed two tablets with a swill of bourbon, before locating his phone and shoving it

into his pocket. He found his laptop in the bottom of the wardrobe and staggered back out to the lounge.

He'd only just managed to find the power cord, plug in the laptop and logon to his uni account when his phone's message tone sounded. He picked it up and considered deleting the message without reading it, but what if it was Liv? It wasn't.

I know why you run. His stomach flipped. He settled it with another swig of bourbon. This was getting ridiculous. He had to know who was doing this. And why. He opened iTunes on his laptop and plugged the phone in to sync it. May as well find out now. Someone he knew must be doing this, otherwise how would they know to send *that* photo to *his* number?

It took a little while to sync but when his contacts were loaded and the phone began to feel a little more like his old one, he disconnected it and opened up the text messages. It told him nothing. Mostly because he'd deleted all but the one he'd just received, and that was still from an unknown number.

He put the phone down and turned back to the task at hand, composing an email to the Dean. Using the keyboard with his fingers still in splints was too hard. He'd also missed his appointment at the outpatients' clinic to dress his knuckles and check his breaks. If he saw a doctor, maybe he could get another medical certificate for uni and that would satisfy the Dean and the trustees.

Newly energised, he rang the outpatients clinic. He told lies about being sick and falling and hurting his arm again and they told him to go back to casualty, he'd just have to wait to see a doctor. It was something anyway. He could live with the wait. Not like he had anything better to do.

Someone knows why I ran. The thought repeated itself. Over and over. He couldn't get it out of his head. He'd received the message several times a day— every single day, starting a few days after that night. Sometimes with the footage, sometimes just the words, but every time, the message was the same. And that meant, someone knew. What he couldn't figure out was how or why they'd bother sending him the footage.

He'd examined it on his computer to make sure it was him. It was. The expression on his own face haunted him almost as much as the memory of the face on the body in the alley. Almost. He wondered why the police hadn't come for him yet.

It had been two days now, since the last message. Maybe they got sick of taunting him. Maybe they realised he just didn't care anymore. Yeah, that was it. With a self-satisfied snort, he collected his stuff and left for the hospital.

"Hey Eddy," Ben called to the barman as he pushed open the door to the pub and waved both hands in the air. Eddy looked up and scowled. He said something to the two well-dressed men he'd been talking to and they turned and left, eyeing Ben off as he passed them. "Geez, what's up with them?"

"Bout time you got the plaster off," Eddy nodded towards Ben's hands, ignoring his question. "It's been months, how they feeling?"

"They're feeling free," Ben smiled. "Check this out." He picked up the schooner Eddy had pulled for him and gulped down half of it before tossing it across to his other hand, catching it and skolling the rest. He put the glass down and wiggled his unencumbered fingers in the air.

"You act like you ain't been able to drink with the splints and plaster on," Eddy frowned. "But we both know differently. Anyways, skolling beer is not the way to enjoy a drink."

"Chill out, mate," Ben said. "You don't get how good it feels to have my hands back."

"Maybe," Eddy did not smile. "But you not gonna be able to enjoy it for much longer if you keep drinking like that cos I'll kick your scrawny arse out of here."

"What's up with you? I was only kidding around."

"Yeah well, some bugger dobbed me into the cops because of you," Eddy said.

"What?" Ben felt his stomach crash to the floor, dragging his good mood down with it. "What do you mean?"

"They was just here asking all kinds of questions about you," Eddy told him.

"The cops?"

"Well, they said they was cops," Eddy twisted his tea towel into a rope. "You seen em, they was just here."

"Those blokes who left as I was coming in?"

"Yeah, plain clothes mob," Eddy said.

"What'd they want?"

"I dunno but they was all formal and a bit aggro, you know what I mean? They reckon I been serving you 'irresponsibly' and I was gonna get fined and even have my licence revoked if I kept letting you get drunk here."

"What kind of stuff did they ask you, Ed?"

"How often you were here, what time you usually came down," Eddy scratched his head trying to recall the conversations. "How much you drank when you did... that kind of stuff."

"But why?"

"They reckon some of the neighbours complained about you pissing in their front yards on the way home."

Ben burned with embarrassment. The flush started at the top of his scalp and worked its way down his face, across his cheeks and down his neck before coming to rest in his chest.

"Once," Ben was mortified. "I did that once. And I only told you. No one else knew. And it was ages ago, when me and Raf used to hang out..." Truth was he couldn't even remember getting home some nights. The route from the pub to his place was so deeply entrenched in his consciousness that it had become a part of his body memory. He had no idea whether he'd pissed on the way home or not. But he'd had enough 'accidents' to know it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

He stared down at the bar in front of him. "Why would the cops come and see you instead of me?"

"Dunno mate," Eddy gently placed another schooner in front of Ben. "Shook me up but, this pub is all I got, you know. And I can't really afford to pay no fines."

"You want me to stop coming?"

"Are you kidding?" Eddy smacked him lightly over the side of the head. "Then I would go broke."

"That's a relief," Ben smiled at him, "because I had no intention of not coming." He finished his beer and left. On the way back to his flat Ben kept thinking about what Eddy had said. It seemed very odd to him that police would be asking those kinds of questions. He turned around and went back to the pub.

"Figured it was odd," Eddy said.

"Huh?"

"You left after just two," Eddy grinned. "Very odd."

"Oh yeah," Ben allowed him his joke. "But no. Ed, did they show you any ID?"

"Who? The coppers?" Eddy tugged on his earlobe as though it would assist with recall. "Nah, don't think so, they just said they was from Waverly police."

"Did they leave a card or anything?"

"No, why?"

Ben pulled his phone out of his pocket, and googled Waverly police station. He rang the number and after a short conversation he put his phone down on the bar and propped up his chin with his hands.

"Wasn't the cops," he said.

"What?"

"They said they didn't send anyone out, said they got no complaints about anyone relating to this establishment," Ben said.

"Then who—"

"I don't know," Ben didn't want to hazard a guess. "But at least you don't have to worry about being shut down, or pouring beers for me."

"Oh man," Eddy opened and closed his mouth several times as though he were waiting for the right words to come out.

"It's okay Ed," Ben said. "You didn't know."

"But," Eddy scrubbed at a spill on the bar he'd already wiped up. "I told them all that stuff about you. Did you tell the police that?"

"Nah, it's okay mate, don't worry about it," Ben slapped the old barman on the shoulder, then gave him a half hug. "I'll catch you later, hey?"

As Ben trudged up the hill back to his flat for the second time, he kicked a can on the footpath and sent it soaring across the road. He was mad. Not about Eddy giving those blokes information about him, but about them intimidating an old man. How dare those scumbags go into Eddy's pub and scare the crap out of him. Eddy was just an old timer who was living his dream. He just did his thing and minded his own business. Most days he was the only person Ben ever had a conversation with. If he ever found out who those low-life scum were, Ben would smash their heads in.

Eddy said he hadn't been scared, but Ben thought he had been. And even though he had been, he'd still refused to ban Ben from drinking at his pub. He stopped mid stride. That was

loyalty. He grinned to himself. Eddy wasn't a bad bloke; Ben knew he looked out for him. He would buy him a drink next time he was at the pub.

He paused by the letterboxes to check his mail. He was still waiting for his application for leave-of-absence from uni to come through. He'd got the documentation he needed from the hospital, and if the application were successful, he wouldn't have to worry about losing his stipend. He hadn't received anything by email yet, so he thought maybe they'd post it.

He pulled a handful of mail out of the box and leafed through it as he made his way up the stairs. There was a card from the post-office saying that he had to go pick something up. Maybe it was a registered letter from the uni that he had to sign for. Once inside, he tossed the rest of the mail in the recycling box, grabbed his wallet and left straight away.

Turns out the item was not a registered letter. It was an A4 enveloped marked 'Do Not Bend'. He wondered if Rebecca had sent him something. She sometimes mailed him stuff from her posting with doctors-without-borders.

He opened the envelope and pulled out the contents. It was not from Rebecca. It was papers. Photo printouts. Three of them. One was the same photo that had been sent to him via text of him running that night, only on this photo, his foot had been circled in thick red marker. One was a photo printout of the body he had run from. And the other was of a dirty old bloodstained shoe. His.

Chapter Eight

The envelope weighed him down and by the time he got home, he was exhausted. He couldn't face climbing the stairs so sat for a minute. Luckily no one else was around. He put the envelope on the step next to him as though the act of holding it was dangerous. But immediately he grabbed it again, he didn't want to accidentally leave it there and have someone else find the photos. That would be disastrous, he was too easily recognised.

He examined the large envelope for details. There was no return address, but he didn't expect there to be. He looked closely at the postal stamp. It had been posted at the GPO in the city centre, which told him that it could have been sent by any one of the millions of people who lived or worked in Sydney.

He didn't know what to do with them. Throwing them in the bin was too risky. He'd have to burn them. He got up and pulled himself up the stairs until he reached the landing for his unit. As he walked down the hall he noticed something swinging from his door handle. A few more steps towards it and he froze. A grubby shoelace smudged with dark red patches had been looped over the handle, a USB key swung like a pendulum from the end of it. Someone must have just hung it there. He looked up and down the hallway but couldn't see anyone. A shout rang out from behind his neighbour's door and he quickly grabbed the shoelace from the handle and let himself in.

He collapsed onto the lounge clutching the photos and the shoelace. Who could have done this? What did it mean? The shoelace looked like it had blood splatter all over it. He wondered if it was from the shoe he lost, and raised it to his nose to smell it. It smelled like ink. He might've felt relief if the blood was not pounding at his temples. Why would someone do this? First the photos—now this? And how did they get hold of his USB? He knew it was his because he'd carved his initials into the side of it with a nail one day so as he wouldn't get it mixed up with Raf's.

"May as well see what's on it," he told the empty room.

He found his laptop and shoved the USB in. Only one folder showed up. It was named IKWYR. Ben sucked in his breath. Someone had wiped his USB clean. All his uni work was gone. His finger poised over the touchpad, he hesitated, wondering what it could possibly mean.

"Only one way to find out," he said aloud, hoping the sound of a voice, even if it was his own, might comfort him.

His blood ran cold. He broke out into a sweat. It couldn't possibly be. He slammed the laptop lid down and leapt up from the table. He paced the room. There was no possible way. He must be imagining things.



He sat back down, opened the lid and watched it again. The footage was shaky but it was unmistakably him. He automatically reached for the bottle to calm his nerves. He didn't have one. He'd told Eddy that he would drink there instead. Eddy. Those blokes. Maybe

they were the blokes who were doing this. Maybe they were the ones who'd broken into his flat and who were terrorising him now.

He jumped up and raced down the hill to the pub.

"Eddy," he yelled across the room.

"What?" Eddy was mixing drinks for a couple of people down the other end of the bar, so Ben sat on his usual stool and drummed his fingers on the bar to wait. "You look like you seen a zombie eating your mother, what's up?"

"Those blokes," Ben began.

"Excuse me," a woman called Eddy back.

"Gimme a sec," he said to Ben.

"Argh," Ben did not want to wait. He threw death stares at the women. Didn't they know this was important?

"Mate," Eddy said. "Don't scare away me customers with your bloody aggro. It's been perfectly safe here."

"Huh?" Ben said.

Eddy reached behind the bar and pulled Ben's phone out and waved it in the air. "Did you think I'd let anything happen to it?"

"Where'd you get that?" Ben reached for it.

"You left it here, ya mug," Eddy put it on the bar in front of Ben. "Thought that's why you came back looking all panicked."

Ben stared at his phone blankly. He'd thought it was in his pocket.

"There's a message on it," Eddy said.

"Who from?"

"How would I know? The tone went off while it was sitting on the bar, that's when I noticed you left it here."

"Did you see it?"

"Yeah," Eddy said. "Yeah I seen it."

Ben didn't need to read the message to know what it said. He could see it on Eddy's face.

"I'll have a shot," Ben needed the strength. He watched Eddy measure it out and downed it the second he put it on the bar in front of him.

"So what's going on with you?" Eddy asked.

"Do you remember those blokes you were telling me about?" Ben ignored the question.

"The ones who told me they was cops?"

"Yeah. What'd they look like?"

"They looked like cops," Eddy said.

"What does that even mean?" Ben snapped.

"Well, they was wearing suits," Eddy pulled at his earlobe. "One of them had a clipboard thingy, and the other had one of them giant phone things like you got."

"Giant phone?" Ben snorted. "You mean a tablet?"

"Yeah I mean a tablet. Stupid thing to call a computer if you ask me," Eddy frowned. "Don't make no sense to me."

Eddy was a technophobe. Ben tried to hide his contempt. "What were they doing with it?"

"Dunno. Taking notes probably. They was writing things I was saying."

"About me?" Ben scowled.

"Yeah. You want a beer?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"So, what's going on?"

"Remember how I told you that someone broke into my place and I had to get the locks changed?" Ben sipped his beer. "Well, they came back."

"Did you call the cops?"

"No mate, no point. They couldn't get in."

"Well, how'd you know they came back?"

Because they are stalking me by text and now by mail. Because they left stuff at my door. Because they have information about me that could send me to jail for a very long time. And they want me to know it, but I don't know how they're going to use it.

"Just do," Ben said.

"Alrighty then," Eddy, the diplomat, said.

"Mate, I'm going to go away for a few days, so I won't be down for a while, okay?"

"Where you going?"

"Dunno," he finished off his beer and paid. "Just got to go."

"What you running from, Ben?"

It was like a stab in the heart. His blood ran cold. He couldn't answer. He got up and left the pub.

"See ya then," Eddy called after him.

Ben ignored him.

Chapter Nine

Back at the flat, Ben threw a pair of jeans, a few T-shirts and changes of underwear, and his laptop and phone, into a backpack. He shoved the shoelace, USB and the photo printouts deep in the bottom drawer of his wardrobe, behind his camping gear. It's unlikely anyone would find them there and it was safer than trying to dispose of them.

He grabbed a hoody, locked the flat and made his way down to the station, dropping into the bottle-o on the way. He had no real plan of where he'd go. Just knew he couldn't stay in the flat. It gave him the creeps. He thought they'd lain off when he hadn't had a message for a few days. Thought he was handling it.

He got off at Central Station and made his way to the country platform. He bought a soft drink at Hungry Jacks then wandered through the gates and saw a train sitting on the platform closest to him. He looked at the board. It was going to Lithgow. That'd do. He made his way to the turnstile, tapped on, and hopped on the train.

He glanced around and headed toward the lower level of the last carriage. He stumbled down the stairs, swung himself into the seat at the back and topped up his cola from his bottle, oblivious to contemptuous glances of other passengers. He shoved earphones into his ears, leant his backpack against the window to use as a pillow and closed his eyes, feigning sleep.

It was another ten minutes before the train pulled out and by that time exhaustion, or alcohol, got the better of him, and the tension he'd been holding in his body hummed with the rhythmic clickety-clack of the train, eventually calming him.

"Oi," the voice snapped. "Opal."

Ben woke with a start, his heart still pounding. He cowered from the figure standing over him and his backpack dropped to the ground. He pulled it up and held it to his chest, his eyes wide and his hands trembling.



"Do you have an Opal Card?" The voice was a bit gentler.

"Opal?" Ben stared at the man in uniform standing before him. "Yeah, yeah I do, sorry." He fumbled around checking his pockets until he found it, and handed it to the officer, who scanned it with his portable reader. "Where are we?"

"About to come into Penrith," the officer said. He gave Ben his card back and continued through the carriage. "Cards, please," he called.

Ben was still trembling. He set the crushed soft drink cup aside and rummaged through his bag looking for a drink to calm his nerves. He couldn't find the bottle he knew was there. He glanced around at the other passengers. A few people were watching him. He glared at them and snarled. They looked away.

The carriage was fuller than it had been when he'd left Central. But when the train pulled into Penrith, lots of people got up and left. Ben was glad. The less people around him the better he liked it. He used his t-shirt to wipe his eyes and noticed that he already had a wet patch on his shoulder and down his side, where he'd drooled all over himself while sleeping.

He put his hoody on and pulled the hood down to cover as much of his face as he could. People coming into the carriage took one look at him slouched in the corner with his backpack on the seat next to him, his black hood pulled low, and his arms crossed across his chest and kept moving through the carriage. He sniggered, better he look like a thug than a snivelling, drooling, pathetic mess.

The train slowed as it began to climb the mountain. Ben fought the images and memories invading his thoughts by concentrating on the scenery. It'd be nice to get out in the bush for a few days. The afternoon sun that had been glistening through the branches of eucalyptus trees, gave way to a light mist as the train climbed higher and the day got later.

He'd never been to the mountains before and there was something about staring out at nature that seemed to sift through the chaos in his mind. He shifted the weight of his head from the hand that had been propping it up, to lean his forehead against the window. His reflection stared back at him.

He gazed deep into his own eyes and wondered how he was going to get out of the mess he was in. He couldn't tell anyone what was going on. They wouldn't understand. Anyway, there was no one left in his life to tell. His grandparents were dead. His mother was dead. His sister had abandoned him. Olivia had deserted him. Raf had moved out. There was Eddy. But he was the barman. He may as well stay on the train forever; no one would notice he was gone.

The message tone on his phone interrupted his thoughts and he pulled it from his pocket absent-mindedly. He read the message on the screen. He sighed, same old, same old. He wondered why he bothered to keep the phone; it only gave him grief. Liv wasn't going to ring; it'd been six months now. Why couldn't he just let it go? He needed to move on, but the second the thought registered, he choked on it.

The man sitting in front of him turned around and glared at him. Ben scowled back at him and opened his mouth to say something when the message tone sounded again. Before he even looked down at this new message, the words of the first one registered. *I know where you run.* **Where?** What did that mean?

His insides groaned and churned. He opened the image sent with the text and his stomach dropped, sucking all the blood in his veins down with it. He leapt up, grabbed his backpack and raced out of the carriage to the toilet just in time.

The train slowed and pulled into a station. Ben burst out of the toilet and in three quick strides, jumped through the doors just as they were closing. The train pulled out. The platform was deserted. He was alone.

The platform sign said 'Medlow Bath.' It was dark. And cold. He ran down a short ramp off the end of the platform where he could cross the tracks and get to the road. Not far away, a sprawling building sat silhouetted against the night sky. He crossed the road toward it. A single spotlight shone across the grounds, eerily highlighting a crumbling brick wall with arched doorways every few metres.

Ben climbed through a hedge that ran along the front of the property to the driveway, keeping away from the main building. He wasn't sure what this place was, but kept to the shadows, stumbling across gravel toward the arched wall. He needed a place to hide.

He settled himself against the wall and sucked in a lung full of cold mountain air before looking at his mobile screen. It was a photo of him getting on the train at Central Station. The Lithgow train. Just a few hours ago. He had one hand on the door rail, one foot on the platform and the other balanced on the train. He was looking back over his shoulder at the electronic monitor saying where the train was going.

He released his breath in a long sigh. He tried to take in another breath but the air was too cold and it stuck in his throat. He coughed, and tried again. His body fought the air trying to get in and his breathing became shallower and shallower. Pins and needles pricked his fingers, working their way across his hands and up his arms. He wondered if spiders were crawling over them.

He jumped to his feet to shake off his hands. The pins and needles spread across his face and over his scalp. He still couldn't get air into his lungs. He staggered a few metres through the arch and across a flat surface until he bounced off a wire fence and crashed to the ground. He stared up into the night sky at thousands upon thousands of tiny lights. He'd never seen anything like it before. Awe overwhelmed the panic and his breathing eventually slowed.

He reached up with one arm, stretching his fingers as far out as he could. The lights seemed to sway and swirl within some kind of magic three-dimensional ribbon. He was sure he could touch them.

"It's the Milky Way," her voice said. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Ben pulled his arm back into his chest and sat up. He scrambled around looking for the phone he'd dropped and held it up to use as a torch. The dull glow from the screen wasn't enough to see anything much.

"I know you're not there," he whispered into the dark. Nothing. He collected his backpack and pulled himself up the wire fence. He made his way back through the arch toward an older looking out-building. His footsteps crunched on the gravel and he worked hard to step as lightly as he could. This building was surrounded by junk. To his left he spotted a set of old style French double doors and carefully made his way toward them.

He was focused on the doors and didn't notice the short concrete ramp that lead up to them and tripped on his feet landing heavily against them. The impact tore the bracket that padlocked

them together and as one swung open he landed heavily, knocking something that had been resting behind it over. A clang echoed throughout the building and Ben scrambled inside and pushed the door shut for fear that someone would investigate the noise.

He sat behind the door so he couldn't be seen through the glass and held his breath against the dust he'd kicked up. Minutes passed. He peeked through the glass panels in the door but could see no sign of movement. He used the light from his phone to look for something he could wedge the door closed with, worried that if someone did come, they might notice the open door. He spotted an old anvil along the wall and dragged it over behind the doors so they couldn't be opened from the outside. That would have to do.

He felt his way across the cluttered room. There was some kind of machine-looking thing, maybe an old phone exchange or something, that took up most of the space, and beyond this, the room was packed full of old pieces of furniture, farm equipment and timber. Ben sidled along the wall and, toward the back of the room, found a staircase. He began to climb but the stairs creaked and split as he went. He kept as close to the wall as he could. When he reached the top, he moved as far from the stairs as possible. He needed to be out of sight if anyone looked up here. There was another, smaller room further along and his phone light was enough to show him the old original furniture pushed to the edges of the room, with a gaping hole in the middle of the floor. He clung to the wall and inched toward an old sofa. Clouds of dust billowed up through the dim beam of light as he sat down.

At least he was protected in here—from the cold, from the voice, from his tormentors. He sat for a moment, then emptied his backpack next to him on the sofa and went through each individual item until he found the bourbon. He opened the bottle and took a swig, replacing the lid carefully. He didn't know how long it had to last him.

The warmth that flowed through him was comforting. He sat back and tracked the bourbon through his veins. It dissipated before it reached his extremities and it occurred to him that he was cold. Really cold. He couldn't remember ever being so cold. He reached for the clothes he'd pulled from his backpack and instead of repacking them; he pulled off his hoody and put each of his t-shirts on, one over the other, and then put his hoody back on.

Once everything was back in his bag, he turned his phone off and shoved it into the side pocket of his backpack. He grabbed the bottle, took another mouthful and lay down on the sofa, swilling the bourbon around his mouth before allowing it to slide down his throat. He was safe here. Even if they'd followed him on to the Lithgow train, they didn't know he'd gotten off. They wouldn't

find him here. It was a great hiding place.

Ben swore into the dark and scrambled up off the sofa. He staggered to a glassless window at side of the room, flopped it out and finished pissing through the gap. Most of it made it out the window, he didn't care about the splashback; he was used to it. He zipped himself up and stumbled back to the sofa.



Chapter Ten

The cacophony of bird noise sounded like a pneumatic drill banging against the inside of his skull.

"Shut up," he yelled. He rolled off the sofa; the thud ricocheted around the room before being sucked into the hole in the floor. He picked himself up and wiped the dust from his eyes. The early morning light shone through the window and doorway, there was nowhere in the small room he could go to escape it.

The glare made his head feel worse. He added a fart fragrance to the stale smell of urine wafting from the corner, before making his way back to the big room. He reached the stairs he'd climbed the night before and his stomach lurched. Probably just as well he hadn't thought too much about climbing them last night. They could easily have torn from the wall and collapsed with him on them. They were barely hanging by a few loose screws.

He wasn't going to risk it this time and returned to the small room he'd slept in. There was a door in the far wall. It was the same style as the main doors down stairs, the kind with small glass panels. He peered through. The door faced the road. He turned the handle; it wasn't locked. He carefully pulled it open and almost took a step before realising that it opened onto nothing but air. An external staircase had once been bolted to the outside wall, but now there were just gaping holes where the brackets had been, and a drop of a few metres. He felt sick.

There was nothing he could do. He'd have to risk the stairs if he wanted to get down in one piece. Holding his breath and working hard to control the trembling, he finally made it out, and crept back along the path. When he reached the arched wall he'd sat near last night, the nausea that plagued him most mornings evaporated. He stepped through one of the arches and found himself standing in the middle of a tennis court, staring through a wire safety fence at the most amazing view.

The tennis court sat atop a sheer cliff; the brick wall along one edge and the wire fence along the opposite. A valley expanded way into the distance where another line of cliffs reached for the sky. Ben stared at the site; he'd never seen anything like it before in his life.

Voices rang out behind him.

Ben jumped; a wave of nausea crashed around him and dumped him back in the familiar heaviness of a hangover. He turned toward the voices. A couple of men wearing hospitality uniforms were striding toward him.

"Hey," one of them greeted him. "You okay?"

A million disconnected thoughts frazzled Ben's brain as he tried to process the intrusion into his perfect hiding place. How did they know he was here? Where did he leave his phone? Did they follow him off the train? What time is it? What day is it? Did he put the bottle back in his backpack? What is this place? Who is that man?

"Are you a guest?" the other asked. "Cos if you're not, you're trespassing."

Ben tried to move but stumbled. He turned back to the bloke, trying to think of something to say. "I... you...", he backed away.

The man held his hands up in a surrender gesture in front of him. "Do you need help?" he said.

"No, I just," Ben looked over the man's shoulder to see two more people getting out of a car in the driveway. He tried to take a step but his feet wouldn't budge. The men stood watching him. The pounding in Ben's head was screaming at him to run, but he couldn't make his feet move.

The other two noticed the standoff and began making their way toward them. There was nothing Ben could do. He watched them approach pointing to the door Ben had left hanging open.

"You should probably go," the first bloke said. "That's the boss."

The 'boss' pulled out a mobile phone and, fearing that he might call the police, Ben burst into action.

He ran along the fence line until he found a gap and squeezed through it. The cliff wasn't sheer here; instead there was a narrow overgrown track that wound down the side of the mountain into the valley. Ben slipped and slid out of control along the track for a fair way. Sticks stabbed at him and the scrub scratched and tore at his clothes and face. He had no reaction time and when the track suddenly veered to the right, he did not. He crashed into a Banksia tree; banksias tore at his exposed flesh leaving droplets of blood oozing from scratches across his left cheek and ear.

He lay in the bush and caught his breath then disentangled himself from the underworld of the tree and plodded, dazed, along the track. He didn't know where it would take him; he didn't care. He just needed to find a clearing to rest.

The sun began to clear the mist, but the beauty of his surroundings was lost to Ben. He kept his eyes down on the track to avoid falling. It was slow going. After a little while, the track veered sharply to the left. He stopped and followed its trajectory with his eyes. It seemed to wind around a bit and head across the mountain. He didn't want to go back.

The humiliation of running away from the men burned the back of his neck and as he pulled his hoody up and over his head to cover it, he noticed a grey expanse through the bush to his right. He stumbled through the dry bracken until he reached it; a rock platform that protruded over the valley.

Ben dropped his pack and knelt down to rummage through it until he found his bottle. He gulped down a few mouthfuls and stood up, venturing a few steps forward toward the edge of the rocky outcrop. The view was intoxicating. Varying shades of deep green splashed the length of the valley in a carpet of treetops.

To the left, the canopy continued as far as he could see, occasionally parting to reveal bare patches of yellow grass, as though someone had come along with an eraser and rubbed out areas of trees. To the right, the mountain he had stumbled down wore the canopy like a poncho, falling in

folds, with thinning patches here and there, exposing pockets of rocks. Directly opposite was a mirror of the mountain he was standing on, complete with rock outcrops and cliffs pushing the bush aside to hang over the valley. It was breathtaking. Three black cockatoos soared through the valley calling to each other. They seemed to float in slow motion way above tree level but far below him, in a mesmerising display of tranquillity.

Ben watched them fly through the valley, and then craned his neck to follow them until they disappeared. He swayed and stumbled, stepped forward, then back. He regained his balance, arms out to the sides, one hand still wrapped around the neck of his bottle. He stood still, feet apart, solid, and then looked back out into the valley. A brown bird, larger than the cockatoos, flew into the vale. It seemed to stop mid-air. He stared at it. He couldn't tell if the bird was moving or if he was. The rock felt steady beneath his feet but the mountain seemed to be swaying.

The sensation was not unpleasant. The somersaults in his stomach were reminiscent of the giant swing he used to enjoy at fun-parks when he was a kid. He closed his eyes and raised his face to the sun, arms still outstretched. As the warm rays caressed his cheeks he smiled, but then the swaying morphed into spinning and the pleasant sensation was sucked into a violent bout of nausea that splattered him across the rock surface. He rolled as he hit the ground and managed to hold the bottle above him, splashing bourbon over himself but preventing the bottle from breaking against the rock.

He lay on the rock and closed his eyes to wait for the nausea to pass and the rock to steady itself. He wished he could fly like that bird; he wanted to be weightless, to feel the breeze against his cheek, the sun on his back, the wind beneath his wings.



Ben opened his eyes and stared into a blurry sky scattered with clouds. He turned onto his side to push himself up and tears rolled over the bridge of his nose splashing onto the rock. He used his hood to wipe his face and carefully set his bottle down, propping it up against the root of a tree at the side of the platform. He collected a few fist-sized rocks and put them in his hoody pocket then made his way to the edge of the cliff.

Halfway across he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to the very edge. He hung his head over to look straight down. If he was going to fly, he needed a proper idea of what he was facing. The rock he was laying on overhung the cliff face so there would be no danger of banging against sharp-edge rocks jutting out from the cliff. That was a good thing; it meant it wouldn't get too messy. The trees didn't grow all the way to the cliff, and the gap between the rocks and the vegetation looked like hard-packed dirt, though it was so far down Ben wasn't actually sure.

He reached into his pocket for a rock and dropped it over the edge. It took a few seconds to land and then shattered upon impact before he'd even heard the sound. The next rock bounced and tumbled further down the valley landing somewhere out of sight.

Ben wondered whether he would bounce or break. Maybe he would do both. Maybe if he landed on his body he would bounce and tumble like the second rock? But if he landed on his head, maybe he would break into a hundred pieces like the first rock did. The thought made him feel dizzy, so he inched his way backwards until he could get up on his hands and knees and crawl back to his bottle.

A mouthful was enough to abate the dizziness, he was glad he'd remembered to bring it, and even gladder that he hadn't been able to find it when he was on the train. He was going to need it to help him think things through. And this was as good a place as any to do some of that thinking. Contentment followed the bourbon through his veins this time. He had a plan. Coming to the bush was a good thing, it would give him the time and space to sort things out and get himself together.

Dragging the bottle with him he crawled back to the cliff edge and swung his legs around to dangle them over the edge. He wedged the bottle between his thighs and leaned back on his hands to maximise the view. There was something about the valley in front of him that he couldn't understand. It seemed to have some kind of power over him. A magnetic pull he couldn't make sense of. Like magic.

But he knew he didn't need to understand it because it gave him a kind of clarity of mind that he was unaccustomed to. He didn't feel hung-over anymore. He felt intoxicated, but not from the bourbon, the bourbon gave him the strength and courage to understand the magic of the valley. It was the valley that was intoxicating. It drew him in; called to him. He belonged there, in that valley. It wanted him to become a part of it. And he wanted to fly.

He wanted to fly so badly he could taste the sweet mist of the eucalyptus haze. He wanted to hold his arms out in front of him and experience the complete freedom of total free-fall. But he did not want to splatter against the rocks below. At least, he did not want to feel the impact of hitting the rocks.

He wondered if there was any reason he shouldn't fly. There was no one left in his life that cared about him. Bad things kept happening to him. He had done terrible things. People wanted to hurt him, and probably would if they found him. He couldn't keep running forever, but he had nothing to go back to either.

He didn't want to think about those awful things in this beautiful place. He looked over the edge again. Maybe, if he had enough of a run off, the wind would pick him up and take him far out into the valley. Maybe he really would fly. The breeze sighed behind him and seemed to move down the mountain in waves. Rustling leaves whispered the secrets of the valley and he heard them, felt them, on his face, in his hair, in the very core of his being. And he answered.

"I'll do it!" he shouted to the valley. "I'll fly."

He guzzled bourbon until his throat burned and he needed to calm it with cool air. He pulled his legs back over the cliff and swivelled around to face the mountain. He moved far enough from the edge that he wouldn't overbalance. He didn't want to go over screaming and out-of-control. He was going to fly.

He stood up, put the lid on his bottle and packed it carefully into his backpack. He thought about wearing the backpack, but then considered it might be too heavy for effective flying. And anyway, no one would ever find it here; he didn't even know where he was. He stood up straight, stretched his arms up high into the sky and wiggled his fingers.

His heartbeat quickened and he felt the adrenalin begin to fuel the butterflies in his stomach. He was going to do this. He really was. He was ready. He walked toward the mountain as far as he could go and turned back to face his destiny. He took a deep breath in, and released it. Once. Twice. Three times. He eyed the point from which he would launch himself and practised in his head. He would wait until the next wave of wind came down the side of the mountain, take one final deep breath, and run as fast as he could across the six metre rock platform and dive straight out into the valley.

Every nerve ending in his body tingled with anticipation. Every muscle danced. This was his bliss, right here. Right now. He knew it was the right thing to do. The valley called to him. He stood ready. Waiting for the final sign. Waiting for the wind that would lift him. And finally it came. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

Chapter Eleven

"What are you doing, Ben?"

"No," he said. "Not now." He didn't open his eyes; he wasn't going to allow his hallucinations to get the better of him this time. He poised himself; it was only seconds before the gust would reach him.

"Ben Fitzpatrick, don't you dare ignore me."

"Wha..." The air rushed from him as though he'd been punched. His eyes snapped open and he stared, speechless.

"What are you doing, Ben?"

"I... I... I'm flying," he stuttered.

"Why?"

"Because..." he said, simply. He rubbed his eyes with his fists, like a child, and stared. The wind he'd been waiting for blew over the top of him. He barely noticed. "Liv...?"

She smiled at him as she stepped through the bush onto the rock platform.

"Where... how... when...?"

"Come sit with me a minute," she said. She sat cross-legged on the rock and leaned back against the tree.

Ben stood, still staring. She sat, smiling, allowing his scrutiny. He shook his head, closed his eyes and opened them again. She was still there. Still smiling. He made a move toward her but changed his mind mid-step, and stumbled. He fell, winding himself. By the time he'd managed to catch his breath, get himself up into a sitting position and turn to where he'd seen her sitting. She was gone.

He roared like a wildebeest in pain, a deep guttural sound that sent birds screeching through the gully. Sobs racked his body as he cried like a baby. The sobs turned to screams of anger. The valley had deceived him. It had stolen the magic from him and left nothing but grief and pain in its place. He cried until he could cry no more, and lay exhausted. It was over.

He closed his eyes. Strange sensations moved through his torso. He reached down to pat his legs, just to make sure they were still there and felt his backpack. He dragged it up to his chest and stuck his arm inside, feeling for the bottle. He wrapped his fingers around its neck and pulled it free. He felt calmer.

The sun was high in the sky when he woke. He squinted through the glare, momentarily disorientated. As his eyes adjusted to the light, the heat registered with him. He was dripping. And he stank. A combination of body odour, stale alcohol and urine overwhelmed the sweet smell of the Aussie bush. He sat up and pulled off his hoody and the extra shirts.

His head pounded and he ached. Fragments of images and scenes battled for focus in his brain but clarity was not forthcoming. He sighed.

He looked out into the valley and was again struck by its beauty. He remembered wanting to fly and how good he had felt about it, and he remembered seeing Olivia. He sighed again. He'd heard her voice many times since she'd left him, but he had never seen her. Never spoken to her. He wondered if this meant he had finally lost it. Maybe he should forget about flying and just walk off the cliff.

He used his hoody to wipe the sweat from his face and then shoved his clothing in his backpack and raised the bottle.

"Really?"

He jumped. And looked up and around for the source of the voice. She sat between him and the edge of the cliff, watching him.

"Liv?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm still here."

"But how?"

"I followed you."

"Followed me?"

"For a while now," she said.

"You were at my place the other day?"

"Yes."

"And on the train?"

"Yes."

"And at the wall?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

She gazed at him for a while then looked back out over the valley. She seemed lost in thought and he waited.

"I know," she eventually said.

And with these two words, the warmth of the sun on Ben's skin froze. A chill ran through him from the top of his head to the tips of his toes until tremors began deep in his muscles. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists to try and stop the trembling. It was no good. His exhausted body gave in to the shakes as the memory of 'that' night in the alley, and everything that had happened since flooded over and through him, leaving him drowning in the memories.

He didn't want her to tell him what she knew. He wasn't going to ask her, it could only mean one thing. He closed his eyes to block the horror. Unsuccessfully. He stretched his trembling legs to try and release the ache in his muscles and the bottle clattered to the rock. He picked it up and looked at it. Another swig would ease his stress, stop his shakes, dull his memories.

"Please don't," she said.

"Don't what?"

She turned to face him. "I want you to come back with me," she said.

"I can't go back Liv," he took the lid off the bottle.

"So you're going to throw it all away?" Her voice was cool, steady. She always was the strong one. "Like you did me?"

"I didn't throw you away, Liv," he whined. "You disappeared. You left me."

"I remember it differently," she said, watching his hands on the bottle.

He paused. He had dreamt of this moment for the past six months. Of Olivia coming back to him, of what he would say to her. Of what she would say to him. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He wanted to hold her and kiss her and tell her how much he loved her and how much he'd missed her. He wanted her to tell him that she loved him too, and that everything was going to be okay, that they could live happily ever after. "Liv—"

"I didn't disappear on you," she continued. "You disappeared on yourself."

"No... I..."

"And I was still there for a long time waiting, until..." she shrugged and looked away.

Ben took the lid off the bottle.

"Okay then," Olivia stood up. She brushed herself off and stepped toward the track.

"Wait," Ben called. "Where are you going?"

"Benny I love you," she said, gently. "I've always loved you, but I can't watch you complete the destruction."

"What are you talking about?" He really had no idea. "The destruction of what?"

"Of yourself."

Ben stared at her. He didn't really understand what she was saying. He knew she was talking about him wanting a drink right then, but his head hurt, his body ached, and his nerves were on edge. She didn't understand that bourbon would help settle him. And then they could have a conversation. A real one.

"If you've been following me for days," Ben said. "Why didn't I see you?"

"You were drunk..."

"Not so much," he protested.

"And I was nervous," she finished her sentence.

"Nervous of what?"

"I was nervous that you wouldn't want to see me; that you wouldn't think talking to me was important enough to stop drinking, that it wouldn't matter enough."

"Liv..." Ben stammered. "You... you mean everything to me. I love you more than anything in the world."

"But not more than alcohol." Her statement hung between them in the dry hot air, before floating off over the cliff and into the valley. They both watched it go. "Okay then," she said. "I guess I had to know." She walked across the platform and stepped into the bush.

"No, wait," Ben yelled and jumped to his feet. "Liv!"

Still holding the bottle he took a few steps toward the cliff edge. He turned back to face her, to make sure she was watching him. He told himself he could do it. Told himself he wanted to do it.

He took a breath, raised his arm, and was about to throw the bottle as far as he could over the edge and into the valley.

"No," Liv called. "Don't!"

He hesitated. "What? Why? I thought that's what you wanted."

"Broken glass will start a bushfire," she stated.

"Oh," he dropped his arm, feeling stupid. He stood for a minute, then unscrewed the lid and held the bottle out over the edge, upending it. He watched the liquid flow out of the bottle. There hadn't been much left anyway, less than a quarter. When it was empty he put the lid back on and shoved it into his bag, slipping the straps over his shoulders, and stood facing Olivia.

They stared at each other for a few minutes until Ben began to feel uncomfortable. He shifted his weight from one foot to another. "What now?"

"Can you make it back up the mountain?" She looked doubtful. "Or do you need to rest some more?"

"Where are we going?"

"Home, Ben," she said. "We're going home."

"I can make it," Ben smiled. The butterflies doing a happy dance in his stomach settled into a flow of contentment unrelated to his bourbon intake. He felt good. Until he started walking, then he just felt sick.

He heaved into the bush. There was nothing in his stomach to vomit. It wasn't pleasant and he couldn't help groaning. Olivia made comforting noises while he tried to gain control of his rebelling intestines, but it wasn't helping.

When he thought he was done, he pulled up and sat on the log he'd been leaning over and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You need water," Olivia told him. "You're dehydrated."

"Yeah," he said. "Water'd be good. You got any?"

"No."

Ben gazed at her standing there, leaning against a tree watching him. She wore jeans and sneakers and a lime green t-shirt with brown and purple owls on the front. Her strawberry blonde hair was tucked neatly behind her ears, exactly as he remembered it. He didn't know how he hadn't seen her before, given that she'd been following him for days.

"Liv?"

"Yes?"

"Why?"

"Why what Bennikin?"

The use of her pet name for him completely disarmed him. It'd been so long since he'd heard it. He couldn't stop the tears tumbling down his cheeks and spilling onto his shirt. And for some reason he didn't want to, he let them fall.

Olivia stood, still leaning against the tree, watching him. He wished she'd come over to him and hug him. She didn't move. She just stood there, waiting for him to compose himself.

"Why did you follow me here?"

Liv reached above her head and snapped off a young fresh branch. She waved it about her head, as though swatting at bush flies. "I'm not sure you'd understand yet."

"Try me," he said.

"Well," she mused, leaning out from the tree, holding the trunk with one hand like a child around a pole. "Do you remember when I was really sick with the flu?"

"Yeah..."

Liv half swung, half walked herself slowly around the tree trunk until she was facing him again.

"And you came to my place and sat by my bed for three whole days. And you wouldn't leave, even when I asked you to? Do you remember making me soup, and cups of tea, and feeding me vitamin C, and wiping my forehead with a cold cloth?"

"I remember," Ben said. "You were so sick. I was freaked out."

"I know," Liv smiled. "And do you remember taking me to hospital and sitting in the chair beside my bed holding my hand and never leaving?"

"Yeah," Ben nodded. "I was so scared."

"Me too," Liv said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You're sick Benny. And I'm scared."

Chapter Twelve

It took them much longer to get up to road level than it had taken Ben to slide down. The going was tough. Pain threatened to get the better of him, and more than once he wished he hadn't emptied his bottle. They came up behind the Hydro-Majestic Hotel, and walked around the back of it, staying away from the hotel and the café on the other side of it. There was a petrol station next door and Olivia made him go into it and buy ibuprofen.

"Get something to take them with," she said. "A sports drink is best, it'll help replace your electrolytes and rehydrate you quicker. And get something to eat. A pie or something."

She waited for him outside. He came out and handed her the pie.

"I don't want it," she said.

"But you said to get a pie."

"For you," she looked at the pie in his outstretched, but made no move to take it. "I haven't seen you eat anything for days."

"I don't feel like anything," he complained.

"You'll feel better once you've got something in your stomach, and have had proper fluids and some pain killers," she promised.

And she was right. He swallowed the tablets with the sports drink, and ate the pie on the way back to station and by the time they got to the platform, he didn't feel quite so tragic, just exhausted. Forty-five minutes later, he was on the train sprawled out across the seat with his feet hanging over the side and his hood pulled down around his face. Olivia sat on the seat opposite, watching him.

He gazed at her and she smiled. He wished he could watch her forever, but as his eyelids got heavier and heavier, he allowed them to close, content in the knowledge that she was there.

"Anyway, so like I told him, if you look at The Hunger Games and compare it to The Lion,



The Witch and The Wardrobe, you'll see how they both deal with sacrifice and..."

Ben opened his eyes and watched the two teenage girls walk through the carriage and settle in a seat about halfway along. Their inane conversation continued at the tops of their voices. Olivia was nowhere to be seen. He sat up and realised he was trembling. Again. He stood and stretched and looked up and down the carriage. The girls ignored him and continued talking as if there was no one else in the carriage. It annoyed him.

He was about to go wandering when Olivia returned.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"I just went for a walk," she said.

"You should've woken me."

"Why?"

"Because..." he tried to gather his thoughts but the girls' high-pitched voices were jarring. They interfered with the sweet sing-song voice of his mother still playing somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind. It was an attack on his senses and he couldn't concentrate.

He turned to the girls and yelled. "Will you shut the fuck up!?"

The girls turned to him, shocked.

"Where'd he come from?" one said.

"Dunno," said the other. "Come on, let's go."

They got up and left the carriage, followed by the remaining occupants, an elderly man, two middle-aged women and a man with a toddler. Ben flopped back into his seat. Olivia followed the others out.

"Liv," he called. "Olivia. Come back."

He raced after her, but by the time he got to the end of the carriage, she was gone. He climbed the stairs. She wasn't in the upstairs section either. He doubled back through the downstairs section and then moved from carriage to carriage, doing the same thing, even checking the toilets. He searched the whole train to no avail. Olivia had disappeared.

Back in his carriage, Ben slouched in the corner seat at the back. He pulled his hoody down over his face and wondered what had happened. Anger simmered deep in his gut before boiling over and running down his legs. He kicked the seat in front of him again and again, until some of the pressure abated.

It was only when his legs gave out that he realised the back of the seat had come loose and was hanging off. He swore and got up. The last thing he needed when he was trying to remain inconspicuous was to get into trouble for vandalism. He tried to reattach the seat, to no avail. He left and sauntered through the train until he reached the front of the first carriage. At least when he got off he'd find Liv because she'd have to walk past him.

He tried to shake the horrible feeling inside him. A drink would do it. He'd go to the pub on the way home. The thought calmed him. He stared out the window and watched the world pass by in a blur. Images came into focus then whooshed by before he could quite grasp them, a boy on a push bike in the park, the horrible face of the man in the alley, the girl walking a dog along the footpath, the photo of him getting on the train, old men sitting outside a café, sipping espressos. The images outside the window all seemed so peaceful, so normal, so... not fair. Why couldn't his life be normal?

"What are you thinking about?" Olivia said.

"Where'd you come from?" Ben said, startled.

She was sitting in the seat facing him. She had her legs crossed and was leaning against the window, elbow on the sill and her head propped up in her open palm, as though she'd been there for a while. Ben stared.

"Well?" She smiled. "You were a million miles away."

"I... I..." Ben was completely disarmed by her smile. "I was wondering where you went."

"No you weren't," she said. Her smile vanished. "But since you asked, you could probably answer the question yourself."

"Huh?" Ben frowned. "How would I know where you went? Once minute you were there the next you were gone. I looked through the whole train for you."

"Hmm," she said. "Why do you think that was?"

"I don't know," Ben pouted like a child. "You tell me."

Olivia stared into Ben's eyes. He swore she could see right into him. It was unnerving and exciting at the same time. His stomach flipped and bounced around the inside of his torso. He put his hand over the top of it to try and settle it. He wanted to hold her. He reached his hand out to her. She didn't move. He beckoned with his fingers, she shook her head.

"What's the matter?" Ben asked.

"You're obfuscating," she said.

"What?" Ben was confused. He leant forward to grab hold of her but she slid along the seat to the end and jumped up before he'd reached the spot she'd been in. Ben held both hands up in front of him in surrender. "Wait, don't go. I'm sorry. Liv, please."

"I'll meet you at Central," she said. She turned and walked away without so much as a backward glance.

Ben watched her go, but this time something stopped him from following her. And it wasn't just his exhaustion. Something significant had happened, he just couldn't figure out what. He flopped back in the seat and sighed. He didn't understand and thinking about it gave him a headache. He closed his eyes. It seemed that only minutes had passed when someone shook him.

"Come on, mate," the conductor said. "All out here."

"Right, okay," Ben said. He grabbed the backpack at his feet and stumbled off the train. True to her word, Olivia was leaning against the electronic billboard waiting for him.

"Let's go," she said, and moved off.

"Hey, hang on," he called. "Where we going?"

"Your place," she told him.

"But I was going to..." he trailed off. He didn't want to tell her that he was going to get a drink before he went home. He sighed. He could always go to the pub later. Eddy sure would be surprised to see Olivia back. He smiled to himself.

Olivia ignored him and headed for the escalator down to the suburban platforms. It was busier down here and she weaved her way through the crowds to the platform for the eastern suburbs train. Ben followed as best he could and spotted her in the distance, stepping onto the train. He just managed to slip through the doors of the same carriage before they shut. He stood at the end of the carriage with half a dozen others, holding onto the support bars in the middle. As he

stood there craning his neck to look for Olivia, the teenage boy opposite him covered his nose with his t-shirt and sniggered to his friend.

"Must've fallen in a sewer," the kid said.

Ben turned to stare at him. His hood fell back and the kid froze and dropped his t-shirt. The teens both scurried away into the body of the carriage. Ben followed them with his gaze. He turned back to find the other people who had been standing with him had also moved away.

He was confused for a minute and moved from the centre poles to the ones by the door. As the train went through a tunnel, he caught sight of his reflection in the glass. Dirt was smudged across his face. He had a deep scratch across his left cheek from which dried blood had oozed and coagulated. Grazes on his chin and nose, and a swollen purple bruise on his right cheekbone added to the picture.

The fact that he stank was enough to deter anyone from standing in his vicinity, but add his battered looks to the equation and it's no wonder he'd cleared the carriage. He scowled into the glass, adding menace to his persona, and suddenly remembered shouting at those girls. He must have scared them half to death looking like this. A pang of remorse hit him and he wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

As the train left the tunnel and slowed down, he realised he was on the wrong side to disembark and turned around. Olivia was standing a few metres away, holding onto the centre poles, watching him. His stomach did the familiar flip.

"I wondered where you were," he said.

"I'm here," she smiled. The automatic doors opened. "Let's go."

They walked in silence. But it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Ben was happy to follow Liv through the station and out into the street. It was dark, but nowhere near as cold as it had been in the mountains. Still, he was looking forward to a shower.

By the time he'd showered, shampooed, shaved, and dressed in clean clothes – at least the cleanest of his unwashed clothes, Olivia had left. He was bitterly disappointed. He wandered from room to room and when he reached his bedroom he found a scrawled note. *Your place is filthy and it stinks. I'll see you later.* That was all it said.

He screwed the note up and threw it across the room. How dare she? After being gone for six months and after all they'd been through today, she had the hide to tell him his place was dirty? Rude. It wasn't that bad. He put his hands on his hips and looked around.

Okay, so he hadn't washed his sheets for about six months, but it wasn't as though he was dirty when he slept in them. Except for that time he vomited a while back. But he'd wiped that up. He found the very towel that he'd wiped it up with. So it was a bit crusty, who cares? He tossed it onto the pile of dirty clothes amassing by the door.

He used his feet alternately to sweep all the empty bottles and used blister-pack tablet sheets into the middle of the room. There, that wasn't so bad. Apart from whatever it was near his bedside table that was going mouldy. He bent down to examine it a little more closely but couldn't figure out what it might have been. He used the wet towel from his shower to pick it up then rolled up the towel and added it to the pile.

The lounge room was fine, except for the garbage he still hadn't taken out. He'd been too freaked out to get rid of it after the break-in incident. So there were dishes in the sink—that was no

big deal; he didn't mind using the same mug for coffee or whatever. It's not as if he ever ate here. The fridge was mouldy, the cupboards bare, the floor sticky, but apart from that, it was perfectly fine.

The only room in the flat that probably could use a clean was the bathroom. He wandered in and tried to look at it with fresh eyes. There was a black ring around the bath. Actually it wasn't really a ring, the bath looked as though it could've been made from a dark grey marbly type material, except for the white around the top. The shower recess was coated in black mould, so was the sink and basin. The toilet was—well, looking at it now even Ben had to admit that the toilet was quite disgusting. Festy looking scud marks coated the bowl and yellow stains were all over the seat and the tiles on the wall behind it. He really should work on his aim.

He kicked the pile of wet, smelly towels out of the way and noticed mould was also growing in the grout of the floor tiles. Dammit. So he'd clean. It wasn't that big of a deal. Tomorrow, he'd do it tomorrow. He was too tired tonight. And anyway, he still felt a bit seedy. He flopped onto the lounge, put his feet on the coffee table and turned the telly on. It was eight-thirty, there was nothing decent on TV and Ben thought he probably should go and let Eddy know that he was back, lest he worry.

Chapter Thirteen

"That right?" Eddy scooped up the empty and plopped another schooner in front of Ben. "Well, bloody good news then."

"Yeah," Ben grinned. He couldn't hide his pleasure from Eddy. He'd told him about the trip to the mountains, but hadn't included the details of course. Just told him that Liv had seen him getting on the train and had followed him and they'd gone bushwalking.

"So she beat you up for being a moron?" Eddy chuckled.

"What?"

"Your face," Eddy pointed. "Seems to me, someone has given you a work-over."

"Oh," Ben blushed. "Nah, fell down the bloody mountain trying to save Liv from a huge snake."

"That right?" Eddy raised one eyebrow.

"Anyhow," Ben downed the last of his beer.

"So where is she now?" Eddy asked, refilling his glass. "You didn't leave her in the flat by herself, did you? You'll never learn, you won't. I keep telling you—"

"Keep your dacks on, I didn't leave her in the flat. She was gone when I got out of the shower. Reckoned the flat was too dirty and smelly," Ben shook his head. "Go figure."

"And so you're down here drinkin, 'stead of up there cleaning?" Eddy flicked him with his tea towel. "Are you nuts?"

"Wha—"

"You been an old misery-guts since she left. Down here moaning and groaning bout how everything goes wrong for you. Drowning your troubles, drinking your sorry arse into complete chaos. And now you got another chance to make things better for yourself, and you're down here drinking again? What the hell's wrong with you, boy?"

Ben stared at Eddy. He'd never seen him go off like this. And apparently his tirade hadn't finished.

"You get up off that stool and get the hell outa here to the shop and buy whatever you need to make that place sparkle. Better still, here," Eddy turned around and pulled a battered old business card off the pin-board behind the bar. He slapped it down on the bar in front of Ben.

"What is it?" Ben was too shocked to say anything else.

"It's the cleaner that does the pub," Eddy said. "She'll get into your place and fix everything for you. It'll cost ya, but I reckon it'll cost you a hell-of-a-lot more not to do it."

Ben stared at the card without reading it. "The flat's not that bad," he scowled.

"Well, if it smells anything like you do when you come here sometimes, it is that bad," Eddy frowned. "I'm just gonna tell you straight Benno, you stink. There, I said it. Sometimes you come down here and I get worried that you gonna scare me other customers away you smell so bad."

Ben felt sick in the stomach. He didn't want to believe Eddy. A boiling mass of embarrassment and anger churned in his stomach.

"I thought you were my friend," he spat.

"I am your friend," Eddy said. "It's because I'm your friend that I'm telling you this. No one else is gonna tell you. If you don't get your shit together you're gonna lose her all over again."

Ben slammed his beer down on the bar so hard that the glass smashed. He leapt off the stool.

"That make you feel better?" Eddy asked. There was no one else in the pub. Ben turned to walk away.

"Sheila's aren't like blokes, you know," Eddy called after him. "They can smell things we can't. And they can see dirt we don't. And they won't sit on a toilet seat that you couldn't eat off." Eddy sighed and began to clean up the mess Ben made. "Now, if they could pee standing up, everything would be easier."

Ben sulked all the way up the hill to his unit, ranting and muttering to himself so much that people crossed the road to avoid him. He didn't notice. He let himself in and slammed the door shut, throwing his keys across the room. He stormed into his bedroom and plonked himself on the bed.

He swore and cursed Eddy for being so mean to him and Olivia for being a girl and wanting a clean toilet. The anger got the better of him and propelled him into the bathroom, where he ripped the toilet seat from the bowl and hurled it as hard as he could. The angle at which he'd thrown it meant that it soared like a Frisbee, straight through the open door into the hall. And lodged in the wall. He sniggered. Let's see her sit on that. But as soon as the thought registered with him, he realised how horrible he was being. He stepped over to pull it free, and guilt and remorse showered the floor with bits of plaster and gyprock.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed to no one. "I didn't mean it."

He dropped the seat on the ground. It had happened again. He let his anger beat him, and he wasn't even drunk. He collapsed onto the lounge and moaned.



A crashing noise made Ben jump in fright. He knew no one was there but he tiptoed through the flat to make sure. When he reached the hall he saw that another piece of the wall had fallen. He sighed. He'd have to get someone in to fix that.

Eddy would know someone; he'd go down and ask. Halfway down the hill he remembered last night's tantrum and hesitated. He really didn't mean to go off at Eddy; he knew he'd only been trying to help. He just hoped Eddy would still be talking to him.

He took a deep breath and pushed the pub door open. Eddy was putting the stools down from the tables getting ready for the day.

"Hey Ed," Ben said. Eddy glanced over at him and nodded. "I forgot to take the card."

"Still there where you left it," Eddy said. "Bit damp but."

"Mate, about that," Ben said. "I... er... well... you were right. I'm going to give them a call."

Eddy grinned at him. "Righto then."

"Uh... you want me to pay for the glass?"

"Nah, 's alright, I break enough of em meself by being clumsy."

"We good?" Ben asked, shuffling his feet.

"Yeah, we're good." Eddy slapped him on the back on the way to get the card for him.

Ben stood there looking at it. "Uh, Eddy?"

"What's up?"

"Do you know a plasterer?" He asked sheepishly.

"What for?" Eddy scratched his head.

"I got a little problem with the wall in my hall."

"Geez mate," Eddy rolled his eyes. "You make things hard for yourself."

Ben bit his tongue and swallowed a retort. Eddy pointed across to the notice board.

"People pin their cards up there," he said. "Tradies and the like. You might find what you looking for."

Ben wandered over and examined the cards. There wasn't a plasterer, but there was a handyman. He reached for his phone to enter the details, but couldn't find it.

"Ed, you got a pen? I lost my phone."

He walked out of the bathroom after hanging a new shower curtain to find her in the middle of the lounge room floor, arms out to the sides, twirling. Her calf-length multi-coloured, multilayered skirt billowed out around her. Her sky-blue V-neck t-shirt clung to her midsection highlighting her hourglass figure. Her eyes sparkled greeny-blue and her smile melted his heart. He stopped, breathless.

"It's lovely," she said. "So fresh and sparkly clean."

He smiled. The cleaners had done an amazing job. He hadn't realised how grotty the place really was until they'd finished and he saw the colour the floorboards were supposed to be. They'd cleaned and deodorised every single room. And he'd arranged for them to come back once a month to make sure it never got that bad again.

"And it smells really nice," she said.

"Liv," Ben stepped toward her. She skipped out of his reach and opened the balcony door, laughing as the breeze blew her skirt up.

"Doesn't it feel better to be in a lovely clean unit?" She said.

"Yeah," Ben couldn't deny it. "It really does."

"How's uni going?" She walked back and sat on the freshly steam-cleaned lounge.

"Liv, how did you get in?" Ben ignored her question.

"Through the door," she smiled. "You left it unlocked."

"I usually have the chain on," he said. He glanced across at the door. The chain was still on. Since he'd had the locks changed, he'd been pedantic about making sure he locked up. Liv must've put it back on. He smiled; she was good about things like that. But he would have to be more careful. "Where have you been?"

"Oh here and there," she said. "So, about uni..."

Ben flopped down in the chair opposite her. The weight of the question hung over him and his shoulders sagged. He exhaled heavily and ran his hand through his hair.

"I applied for a leave of absence and I'm still waiting to hear," he said.

"Why?"

"Because..." *Because you just up and left and ruined my life. Because I'm being haunted by someone I don't know. Because my life is completely shit.* "...I needed a break."

"So what do you do during the day?"

He didn't know how to answer the question. He slept a lot. He drank some. He went to the pub.

"I fixed the place up," he said. At least he'd made phone calls from Eddy's phone at the pub to organise others to come and fix the place up. "I bought new stuff."

And he had – the same day he'd come home from the pub and found the cleaners had thrown his sheets, some of his towels, the bath mat and the shower curtain out because they were 'beyond filthy.'

"So now that the place is finished," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to hang out with you," he said brightly.

"No, you're not," Olivia smiled.

"What?" Ben was genuinely surprised.

"You and me," Olivia said, gently. "We're not a thing anymore Ben."

"What?" His heart started banging in his chest, his stomach dropped to floor and his mouth dried up. He gagged. "I thought... I..."

He got up and went into the kitchen. He pulled a beer from the fridge and drank half of it standing there with the door still open. He put it on the bench and grabbed another one, and one for Liv, before closing the door. He leant against it and finished off the one he'd started.

What did she mean they were not 'a thing'? Of course they were 'a thing.' They'd been 'a thing' since they were 16-years-old. Then she'd left. She'd had a break, she might have needed it, he got that. But now that she was back, of course they were 'a thing.'

He picked up the beers and went back into the lounge room. Liv wasn't there. He put the beers on the coffee table and sat. Maybe she was in the bathroom. He drank one, and then the other and still Liv did not come back. He needed to pee, understandable after three beers in quick succession, but he didn't want to hurry Liv if she was in the bathroom. He needed to tread gently.

He waited for a bit longer but the urge became too pressing so he knocked on the bathroom door. No answer. He opened the door. It was empty. He lifted the shiny new toilet seat and did what he needed to do. He turned to leave, hesitated, then turned back and flushed the toilet and

washed his hands. Liv would never be able to tell him he or his unit stank again. He smiled to himself.

He checked the rest of his place to no avail. Liv was gone. He didn't understand. Why would she just up and leave without telling him, without even saying goodbye?

Chapter Fourteen

"Women are a complete mystery, Benno," Eddy said. "Don't even try to understand them. You just gotta go with the flow and don't take nothin' personal like."

"But we didn't even have an argument or anything." Ben couldn't let it go. "I just went to get a beer and when I get back she's gone. We were in the middle of a conversation."

"Well, what was you talking about?"

"We were talking about... um..." Ben tapped at his temple. He couldn't remember. The beers he'd had at the pub on top of the three he'd had at home were making his head a bit hazy. He didn't really mind. He was used to it. "I don't know."

"Mate, women like it when you listen to them sometimes," Eddy said. "And that means sometimes remembering what they's going on about."

"Yeah, I suppose," Ben sighed.

"It's just the way it is," Eddy asserted. "Take it from years of experience."

"What, yours?" Ben sniggered.

"Yup," Eddy said. "Been dumped more times 'n you've had hot dinners. If you bright, you learn a bit after each time."

"You can't be learning much if you keep getting dumped, Ed," Ben laughed.

"Cheeky snot," Eddy clipped him over the ear. "Me and my woman have a great relationship now. We been seeing each other a few times a week for eight years."

"Really?" Ben had no idea it was a long-term thing. Eddy very rarely ever talked about being in a relationship.

"Yeah. Now you get outa here and go ring your girl and sort it out," he said. "I'm gonna close early tonight."

Ben had a shower and went to bed. He'd figure out what to do about Liv in the morning. But sleep did not come easily. He tossed and turned on his comfy new mattress, cursing the images of smiling sleeping people he'd seen on the telly ad that had prompted him to buy it. A mattress alone did not a good sleep make. Nope, bourbon was what was needed.

He got out of bed and went searching; forgetting for a moment that he'd promised Liv he wouldn't drink it anymore. Anyway, what right did she have to tell him what he could or couldn't

drink? None, that's what. He launched himself back onto the bed cursing. He would buy a bottle tomorrow. And an extra one in case. He usually kept a few around so that when he couldn't find one, he'd have a backup.



He woke tired. It was always like this when he dreamed. And he always dreamed.

"I thought you were going to sleep forever," she said.

Ben sat up. "Liv?" She jumped off the desk chair near the window and walked across to sit on the end of his bed.

"Where's your phone?"

"Huh?" Ben rubbed his eyes.

"Your phone, where is it?"

"I don't know," Ben said. He was groggy and didn't understand what was going on.

"Can you find it please?"

"Now?"

She got up and left the room. He leapt out of bed and followed her. She was sitting on the lounge.

"Um," she motioned toward him, grinning. "You might want to..."

Ben looked down. "Oh yeah, sorry." He spun around and raced back into his bedroom and grabbed a pair of boxers. He put a t-shirt on and visited the bathroom before going back out to the lounge room and sitting in the chair facing her.

Liv smiled at him. His heart melted into soft warm fuzzy bubbles that floated around in his stomach. He looked at his feet and he... he wished... he wished he was someone else.

"What happened, Liv?"

She gazed at him until he looked up at her.

"When?" She said.

"With us," Ben frowned. "Why did you leave? Why did you come back? Why did you go yesterday? Why did you come back this morning?"

"Only you can answer those questions Bennikins," she smiled.

"What... how?"

"Your phone?" She didn't respond to his question.

"I lost it," he said.

"You had it in the mountains," she reminded him. "And put it in the pocket of your backpack when it ran out of charge."

"My backpack," Ben groaned. It hadn't even occurred to him to look for it in his backpack. He'd tossed it in his cupboard when he got home and had completely forgotten about it. But it's not like he cared about the phone anymore anyway. He'd only kept one in case Liv called, but now she was here he didn't want it.

"Where's your phone?" He asked.

"Don't have one anymore."

"At all?"

"Nope," she drummed her fingers on the arm of the lounge. "So can you get yours?"

He jumped up and went back to his room.

He pulled the phone from his bag and brought it and the charger out to the lounge room. He plugged it in. "It'll only take a few minutes to charge enough for you to use it," he said, turning back to Olivia. She was gone.

"Liv...?"

"I don't need to use it," she said, wandering back into the room.

"Then why..." he was interrupted by a series of tones indicating messages were downloading. "Oh no..."

"What is it?" Liv asked.

"Nothing," Ben said.

"Hmm, well 'nothing' has stolen the colour from your cheeks," Liv commented. "You look like..."

"Look like what? I can't help the way I look, Liv."

Olivia stood up and started toward the door. "Okay, then."

"No wait," he said. "Liv, I didn't mean to snap. Stay...?"

She turned back to him. He stood hanging his head, secretly cursing himself. She waited. He cleared his throat. "Please stay," he said again.

"I can't stay Ben," she said, shrugging. "I was never going to stay."

"But Liv—" he whined.

"No," she cut him off. "I'm only visiting. We're not together anymore."

"I thought you loved me."

"I do," she whispered. "But you need to understand."

"Understand what?"

"That I can't stay," she smiled.

"But you said if I cleaned up you'd come back," Ben whined.

"No Ben," she said. "I was merely making an observation."

"You mean I did all that for nothing?"

"You did it all for you," she said.

"Bullshit," he said. "Why would I do it for me? I was happy with how it was."

"Well then," she said. "You did it all for nothing."

He stared at her, gobsmacked. He tried to remember the note, hadn't it said that she'd come back if the place wasn't so smelly? Or had Eddy told him that was how it would happen? He couldn't remember. He turned back to the phone and opened the messages.

Sure enough there were eight new text messages and one voicemail message. He listened to the voicemail message. It was his sister, Rebecca, telling him she was finishing up in Mali and should be back in the country by the end of the year. He deleted it and turned back to Liv.

She was gone. Again. He sighed. This was so confusing. What was she playing at? He got dressed and decided to go out. It was too early to go the pub, so he headed to the supermarket. He needed bread to make toast and milk to make coffee. Actually he needed coffee too. Anyway,

the bottle-o would be open and he could stock up. He left the phone on the charger and headed out.

He stopped at the mailbox on the way back. He hadn't checked his mail since he got back from the mountains. It was full. Most of it was junk mail, but there were a few white envelopes and a yellow A4 envelope folded to fit into the box. His stomach lurched, remembering the last yellow A4 envelope he'd received.

Once he was back in his flat and had locked and chained the door, he dumped his groceries in the kitchen and took his mail to the table. He sifted through and tossed all the crap into the recycling bin. He left the yellow envelope on the table and took the others into the lounge to open them. He ripped open the first one. Electricity bill. The second one was a rates notice for the unit.

The third one was from the university. It was a formal letter advising him that his application for a leave-of-absence had been approved on medical grounds for the remainder of the semester. He would have to manually enrol next semester, and take all his subjects again. Relief flooded through him but was short lived when opened the final letter.

It was from the trustees who managed his finances. His stipend was to be cancelled from the date of his leave-of-absence until he re-enrolled, as per the conditions of the estate. His heart leapt into his mouth and beat furiously. His vision blurred. How was he going to pay his bills? What was he going to do without an income? He'd spent everything he had in his savings getting his place back in order.

He wiped the sweat from his brow and shook his head. Money was not something he'd ever had to worry about. He had never been without an income. He grabbed the uni letter and searched for the 'effective from' date. It was a week ago. That meant once his account was empty—that would be it, no money. What happened when people couldn't pay their bills? He'd heard of electricity being cut off, but what about water, and rates?

He wished he hadn't deleted his sister's message. But he didn't want to go running to her anyway. She didn't care about him; she'd taken off and left him. Nobody cared about him. His electricity would be cut off, his water would be cut off, and his phone would be cut off. He wouldn't be able to buy food. He didn't even have a car to live in. He'd end up on the streets and he'd be forced to turn into a hobo or a criminal or something.

Lucky he went shopping today. A loaf of bread and a litre of milk would do him for a few days. He'd also bought peanut butter, coffee and apples. And two bottles of bourbon. Phew. He picked up the mail and was about to head back into the kitchen when there was a bang on the door. He thought maybe it was Olivia and had the chain off and the door open before he'd considered it could be anyone else. It was Raf.

"What are you doing here?"

"Geez," Raf grinned. "Nice to see you too."

"Ugh," Ben grunted. "I thought it was someone else."

"Really, who?" Raf knew Ben had not had visitors since his relationship had broken up. He stepped into the lounge room. "Whoa! What happened here?"

"What do you mean?" Ben said.

Raf wandered through, mouth agape. He walked down the hall poking his head into both bedrooms and the bathroom, before following Ben into the kitchen.

"Very nice," he said. "Did you get yourself a new girl?"

"Why would you think that?" Ben scowled, none too happy about the intrusion.

"Seriously?" Raf laughed. "You mean to tell me you woke up one morning, peered through your hangover and thought, hmmm, I really need to clean this place up?"

"Maybe," Ben grunted, though a little sheepishly.

"Come on, man," Raf said. "What gives?"

"Got cleaners in," Ben said, pouring a shot. "Want one?"

"Nah, too early for me," he grinned. "I'll have a coffee though."

Ben motioned toward the fridge, downed his shot and poured a second. Raf put the kettle on, grabbed the milk from the fridge and opened the crockery cupboard and pulled out two mugs

"Geez, even your mugs are sparkling," he said.

"So what are you doing here?" Ben asked.

"You haven't been answering your texts," Raf said. "Thought I should check up on you. Came before but you didn't answer. Figured you were too pissed to hear."

"Why would you think I needed checking up on?"

"Such a friendly bloke, aren't you?" Raf grinned and punched Ben lightly on the arm. Ben would never have let anyone else get away with it, but he liked Raf. He was always happy, never lost his temper with anyone, never seemed to let anything get him down, despite what he'd been through in his early life. And he'd been through more than most. Ben often wished he could be as happy-go-lucky as that.

"How's the new place?" Ben asked.

Raf frowned. He finished making the coffees and sat at the table, placing one of the mugs in front of Ben. "Well, actually," Raf said. "It's not going so well."

Ben reached over and grabbed the mug. "What's going on?"

"Ash's sister got kicked out of her place and moved in with us," Raf said.

"Bugger."

"Yeah, it is a bugger. She's nice and all, but the reason we moved in together was to have more time alone, and well, that's gone down the tube. Jenna always has her friends over and Ash joins in and, well, you know how it is," Raf sipped his coffee.

"You can move back in here," Ben said. As soon as he said it, Ben realised that that was exactly what he needed. "I have to get someone else in anyways."

"Why?"

Ben pulled the trustee letter from the pile and handed it to Raf.

"Oh shoot," Raf said.

"Yeah."

"I didn't come around because I wanted to move back in," Raf said. "I just needed space from the siblings."

"I get it," Ben said, shrugging. "You don't have to, but it kind of makes sense doesn't it? I need the money, you need the space."

"Yeah I guess," Raf said. "I'd have to talk to Ash about it."

"No worries." Ben didn't understand why Raf couldn't make the decision himself. "But Ash can move in too, if you like."

"Wow," Raf raised one eyebrow. "That's a change of tune."

"Yeah well," Ben hung his head. "I didn't mean to be so... you now... before. I guess I just needed time to think about it properly."

"That's nice of you to say," Raf smiled. "But Ash will stay put. It's kind of working well with her sister and all."

Ben couldn't help feel relieved. "No worries," he said.

"When are you looking at getting someone?" Raf asked.

"Soon as," Ben said. "My last pay was last week."

"Coolio," said Raf, standing up. "I'm gonna go talk to Ash. Might come back tomorrow if that's okay. Ash and Jenna are having their cousins over for the weekend."

"Okay," Ben agreed. "But the cleaners threw all the sheets out. You'll need to bring some."

"Okeydoke," Raf rinsed his mug out, put it in the sink and walked to the door. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Ben said. "The cleaners are going to come once a month and go through the whole place, you up for paying half the cost?"

"Absolutely," Raf grinned. "Ash won't mind visiting so much if the place isn't such a dump."

"Hmph," Ben said.

Chapter Fifteen

"What do you think you're doing?" Ben yelled. Raf looked up from the table where he was examining the contents of the yellow envelope that Ben had left there. "You opened my mail? What the fuck?"

"I didn't open your mail, mate," Raf looked shell-shocked. "They were here on the table when I came in."

"The hell they were," Ben went to grab them, but Raf put his arm straight out and pushed him back. Ben lunged at him. Raf dropped the pictures and blocked Ben's punch, grabbing his hand around the thumb joint and twisting his arm up behind his back in a lock. Ben screamed. "Let me go or I'll—"

"You'll what? Piss on me? Cause that's all you'll be able to do until you bloody well calm down."

Ben tried to pull himself free. Raf grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and forced him down into the chair. "Don't be a moron, mate. You're pissed. And I'm a tae-kwon-do black belt, who do you think is going to come out of this better?"

"Alright," Ben spat. "I give."

Raf let him go and stepped around the other side of the table holding the printout up in the air. Ben stared at it. It looked a whole lot uglier when someone else was holding it. He slumped forward into the kitchen chair and let his head slam onto the table in front of him.

"Now you going to tell me what's going on?" Raf said. "Or am I going to start asking around?"

"No," Ben shot into an upright sitting position. "Don't you dare."

"Then spill," Raf sat in the chair opposite.

"Remember that day when I got all beat up?"

"Yeah."

Ben filled Raf in on the details he could remember. He gave him the phone and watched him scroll through the messages, half of which were from him. The other half was more of the same: *I know why you run.*

"I'm glad he's moved back in," Liv said. "That was a really good thing you did."

"Not like I had a choice Liv," Ben grumbled. "The trustees cut me off."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Ben pouted. "Sadistic bastards? It's my money. I can't see why I can't have it all now... so what if I'm not enrolled in uni at the moment? What do they think I'm going to do with it?"

"The trustees don't have a choice," Liv reminded him. "It was in the will and a will is a legal document. They're just following the law. It's not their decision either."

"You knew?"

"So did you," Liv reminded him.

"Still not fair," he scowled. Ben kicked a stone on the path they walking along, sending it careening further into the park.

"Hey watch it, mate," a man called. "That nearly hit my kid."

"Ben," Olivia said reproachfully.

"Sorry," Ben mumbled. "Didn't see him there. Wouldn't have happened if we were home where I wanted to be."

"Don't tell me."

"Sorry mate, I didn't mean for it to go that far," he called to the man.

The man grabbed the little boy by the hand and pulled him away. Ben watched them cut across the grass to the play equipment.

"How come we had to come out anyway?" He asked. "Raf wouldn't've minded if you were there. He'd be happy you were back."

"Have you told Raf about me?"

"Nah. Not yet anyways."

"Good," Liv stopped walking and turned to face him. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't tell Raf about me," she said.

"Why not?"

Liv ran along the path, jumped the low brick wall and skipped down to the harbour, stopping to sit on the pier and dangle her feet in the water. Ben stood watching her. She looked back at him over her shoulder. Her hair, shining with orange highlights in the sun, swished over her face. She was so beautiful.

He followed her down and sat beside her. "You still have your shoes on," he pointed out.

"They'll dry," she smiled. Her joy was contagious, and he couldn't help smiling back. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed. He wanted to reach out and gather her into his arms, but every time he'd tried to touch her, she'd move away. He shoved his hands under him and gazed out into the water.

"So why can't I tell Raf that we are, you know?"

"We are what?"

"Not back together," he said quickly. "But... ah... friends?"

"Yes, we're friends," she nodded approvingly.

"But I can't tell him we're friends?"

"I'd rather you didn't just yet," she said.

"Is it because you don't think we'll stay friends?"

Liv didn't answer. Instead, she jumped up and ran back down the pier, jumping off onto the sand.

"Come on," she called.

"Wait up," Ben yelled.

She jogged along the sand and up the bank, through the park and collapsed laughing under the shade of giant Moreton Bay Fig tree, nestling between two of the exposed roots. Ben walked along behind until he caught up with her and settled himself in between the next two roots. They gazed up through the branches and leaves into a clear blue sky. A light breeze tickled their faces and carried the sounds of children's laughter from the park.

The smell of salt and fish bait mingled with the fragrant magnolia tree further over, creating a pleasant summery aroma. Ben was happy. He couldn't remember feeling this content.

"This is nice, isn't it?" Liv said.

"Yeah," Ben smiled. "It really is."

"Can we make this a memory?" Liv asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Right here, right now," Liv said. "Under this tree, by the water, on a beautiful spring day. Just you and me."

"How do we make it a memory?"

"Close your eyes," she told him. He did. "Think about how the leaves of the tree looked when the sun made the raindrops sparkle. If you can't remember, open your eyes to check then close them and try again. Listen to the sounds of kids playing. Smell the fresh air."

Ben swallowed his smart-arsed comment and did as she asked. It wasn't that bad. Maybe the technique could help him in exams when he went back to uni.

"Are you sure it'll work?"

"It'll work if you don't wipe the memory," she said.

"What do you mean?" Ben opened his eyes. "How do you wipe a memory?" Ben had a few he wished he could wipe.

"I don't," Liv said. "The ones I like I keep, the ones I don't like, I just let go of." Ben looked at her. She was still smiling, still had her eyes closed. He wondered what memories she had that she'd want to let go of. But too much thinking gave him a headache. Besides, there was something else he wanted to ask.

"Liv?"

"Yeah?"

"How come you don't want me touching you anymore?"

She opened her eyes and looked across at him. "It's not time," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"For you to touch me," she smiled as though she were talking to a child, or a simpleton. It annoyed him.

"When will it be time?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe soon, maybe never. It depends on you."

"I don't get it," Ben was perplexed.

"I know," Liv stood up. "But you will."

Ben looked up at her. He yearned to hold her, to touch her, to feel her beautiful body entwined with his, feel the delicate softness of her lips, to taste her sweetness. He reached his arms up toward her. She stepped back. He stood up and brushed himself off.

"I just wanted a hand up," he said.

"You need to learn to help yourself, Bennikins," she laughed and ran off.

"Hey," he called after her. "Come back."

She waved to him over her shoulder. "See you next time." And then she was gone.

Ben shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and sauntered off the way they'd come. He wondered where she was going. Seems all she'd been doing since she got back was teasing him. He kicked at the path and scowled all the way home.

"She just comes and goes when she pleases," he told Eddy. "She doesn't even text to let me know."

"So?"

"So it's rude," Ben said. Eddy chuckled. "What?"

"Funny hearing you say she's rude," Eddy was still chuckling.

"Well it is," Ben skolloed the rest of his schooner. "Gimme another one."

"Cause of course, you're never rude, are ya?" Eddy shook his head and poured Ben's third beer.

"Please," Ben got his point.

"So would you rather she didn't come back?" Eddy walked down the bar to serve another patron.

Ben stared into his beer and pondered the question. He'd pined for months after Olivia left. He was beside himself. Couldn't concentrate at uni, couldn't keep friends, couldn't function at all. He just wished he knew why she'd left in the first place.

"So ask her," Eddy said.

"What?"

"Whatever you want to know," Eddy said. "Seems to me you been pussy-footing round so much that you not ever gonna find anything out. Less you ask her."

"It's not that easy, mate," Ben said. He was too afraid of upsetting her enough that she'd disappear again. And even though he didn't know why she'd come back, and it annoyed the crap out of him that she seemed to disappear every time he said something she didn't like, he still would rather see her sometimes than not at all. Maybe. But he still yearned to know what was going on.

The way things were, she blew in and out and expected him to drop whatever he was doing to accommodate that. Not that he was ever doing that much. Come to think of it, he mostly just spent his days waiting for her to pop in. And he got pissed when she didn't.

Chapter Sixteen

"What are you doing?" Ben asked. Raf was sitting at the table with his iPad and Ben's phone next to him when he got home. He looked up when Ben walked in. He didn't mind that Raf had his phone. He didn't want it anyway. It made him sick to look at it. The only messages he got were the scary ones. No one else texted him.

"Come and look at this," Raf said. His expression was grim. Ben glanced at the app Raf was pointing to.

"Instagram?" Ben said. "So?"

"So look," Raf said. He tapped on it to open it.

"What is it?" Ben hadn't used Instagram for months; he'd forgotten he even had an account.

"I'm not sure," Raf said. "But the last few messages that came through on your phone were videos and not just images...and..."



Observationist Ch1 @benfitzp Once upon a time there was a boy. He loved his mates, he loved his girl, he loved his drink more #staytuned #saqa #iknowwhyyourun

frowned at him but Ben left to get his laptop anyway.

"Alrighty," he said, setting it up.

"Go to your Instagram account and open it," Raf said.

"Huh?"

"They're all on Instagram," Raf pointed. "Read the next one."

Ben picked it up and looked at it. "Instagram? So?"

"Go get your computer and I'll show you," Raf said.

"Can't you just—"

"Ben, this is important," Raf snapped. "Go and get your laptop."

"Alright, alright, keep your pants on, you mad bastard," Ben laughed. He hadn't often seen Raf as uptight as this. Raf

"Okedokey," Ben said. "Oh."

He watched as the images filled his screen. One after the other. All from the same person. The same messages and pictures that had been texted to him.

"Why is someone sending me Instagram pics?" Ben asked, clicking on the pic. "I don't even use my account."

"Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"They're telling a story," Raf tapped Ben's screen. "Your story."

"Oh no..." Ben stared at the screen.

"Right?" Raf ran his hand through his hair. "Whoever this 'Observationist' is, is the same person whose been sending you those messages!"

"And now, they're telling the world... a heap of shit." Ben stared at Raf. He'd felt much better since he'd told Raf about it. Until now.

"Or your life story," Raf frowned and tapped on the screen. "Look here."

Ben sucked air in through his teeth. "It's not true!"

"Isn't it?"

"Oh come one," Ben fought back despair. "Look at the pictures; they're making me look like a psycho." Raf raised an eyebrow. "You were there mate, we were just hanging out like we used to."

"Maybe," Raf said. "But I think it's time you went to the cops."

"And said what?" Despair turned to annoyance. "That someone I don't know is sending me texts and pics because I got in a fight I can't remember, with someone else I don't know, and woke up in a strange place I couldn't find again, next to a corpse that, for all I know, could've been some homeless dude trying to rob me?"

"Yeah, well, we both know that part's not true," Raf said.

Ben stood up abruptly and stalked off to his room. He lay on his bed and simmered. He didn't want to get in an argument with Raf. Mostly because he didn't really understand why he was so upset. He stared at the ceiling.



Observationist Ch2 @benfitz He went on binges. His mates couldn't keep up. His girl couldn't keep up. This made the boy angry #staytuned #pisspot #iknowwhyyourun

"Ben," Raf stood at the door.

"What?"

"What are you doing, man," Raf said. "What's going on?"

Ben realised he'd been pounding on the wall beside his bed with his fist. Embarrassment filled him. "Get out of my room," he yelled.

"Geez," Raf shook his head and left.

Ben flopped back down. His pillow was saturated. He sighed and threw it across the room. He lay back down and stared at the ceiling eventually drifting off.

"You were mean to Raf," she said.

"Wha-?" Ben rolled over. She was sitting at his desk near the window again.

"Earlier," she said. "He was only worried about you and you were really mean."

"Did he let you in here?" Ben propped himself up on his elbow.

"No, he's gone to uni," she stood up. "He left the door unlocked."

"Geesh," Ben sighed. "Gonna have to get into him about that."

"Why? Because you don't want me coming in?"

"What? No, of course not," Ben sat up; making sure the sheet was covering him adequately.

"I like you coming to visit. You haven't been for a while."

"I came last week," she reminded him.

"Yeah, but that seems so long ago," he groaned.

"You making coffee?" She asked.

"I guess so," he laughed. "I'll be out in a minute."

When he was dressed and ready he found her sitting at the table staring at the laptop he'd walked away from last night. He reached over her and closed the lid.

"What did you do that for?"

"It's none of your... I mean, it doesn't concern..." he sighed deeply and turned to make coffee. "It's just..."

"Toast?"

"Huh?"

"Are you making toast, too?"

"Uh, sure. Okay. Vegemite or peanut butter?"

"One of each," she said.

"Righto." He bustled around making coffee and toast and when he was done, he moved the laptop and placed the mug and plate in front of her.

"I don't want any," she said. "I had breakfast already."

"Huh?"

"It's for you."

"Why did you ask me to make it if you weren't going to have it?"

"Would you have made it for yourself if I'd have said I wasn't going to eat?"

"Guess not," he couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten breakfast himself.

"Good then. Eat your breakfast."

He smiled. She was something else, all right. He closed his eyes.

"Are you still tired?"

"No," he said. "I'm making a memory."

"What of?"

"Us, here, together. Having breakfast," he said dreamily.

"Wonder how long it'll last?"

"What?" He opened his eyes and stared at her.

"The memory."

"What do you mean."

"Well, we have had breakfast together here before, you know, heaps of times," she pointed out. "But you don't seem to remember those."

"Oh."

"So I'm wondering how long this memory will last, that's all."

He felt deflated. But she was right. They would have had breakfast here at the table before. She used to stay over a lot. And he couldn't remember. He creased his brow trying to force the memory forward.

"Why can't I remember?"

"Because you are better at wiping memories than you are at making them," she stated, simply.

"I don't wipe memories," he said. "I wish I could."

"You do so wipe memories."

"I don't," he pouted.

"You know you do," she said. "Don't you, Benny?"

The gentle use of his name softened him and stopped his defensiveness growing into anger. He thought about all the things he didn't want to remember. Her leaving him. The trustees cutting him off. Failing uni. His dad. Arguing with Raf. He didn't manage to wipe those memories, did he? Olivia just gazed intently at him. Waiting. Ben shrugged.

"You have to at least try Ben," she said.

"I am trying," he scowled.

"Well, that much we do agree on," she got up from the table and left. She didn't say goodbye.

"Dammit," Ben thumped the table.

He dumped his dishes in the sink, and then reached back to take her mug as well. Cold coffee sloshed over the side. She hadn't touched it. Hadn't even had a sip. Ben tipped it out, and then filled the sink with hot water.

Dishes had littered the bench for days. He may as well wash up. He couldn't have Raf doing all the tidying all the time. It pissed him off the way Raf pottered around cleaning and tidying.

"That's why we have cleaners," Ben had complained to him.

"We have cleaners ONCE a MONTH to prevent a health hazard occurring," Raf had said. "Anyway, they need the space to clean when they come otherwise they'll throw stuff out."

He'd been right about that. Last month when they'd come, they'd collected anything lying around and put it in a big garbage bag and stuck it outside the door. When Raf had gone to take it down to the rubbish, it was heavy so he opened it to see what was in it and found dirty dishes, Ben's shoes, Raf's uni bag, wet towels from the bathroom floor, among other things.

Ben had rung them to complain and the boss had told him she wasn't his mother and wouldn't tidy up after him. She said that he paid her to clean and clean she would, and if anything got in the way of that, out it went. And that if he wasn't happy about it he could find someone else to do it. Suitably chastised, Ben and Raf had made an effort to stay on top of the tidying.

"There, that's a memory, it happened last month," he said to the empty kitchen. He was still peeved that Olivia had taken off so suddenly again. He thought back to what she'd asked him about how he dealt with memories.

Why could he remember something so banal as a conversation with a cleaner a month ago, and not something more relevant, like the last time he'd seen Olivia? He couldn't figure out why he couldn't remember specifics. Maybe it was because Liv had always been there. She knew stuff about Ben that no one else did. She knew his history; she'd seen him at his worst. She'd supported him when he'd been beaten to a pulp at home, she'd laughed with him when he'd plotted his father's murder, and cried with him after his Mum died. She'd yelled at him when he and Rebecca argued, and comforted him when his grandparents were sick. She'd stood beside him when he'd protected Raf from bullies in primary school and had been there with him when he finished high school. She'd commiserated when his team lost the grand final in Year 12 and celebrated when he'd gotten into the uni course he'd wanted. Not only was she his best mate, she was his family. They had known each other since kindergarten and were best friends long before they became a couple at 16.

So why didn't Ben remember the last time he'd seen her? He just couldn't figure it out. He finished the washing up and left the dishes piled haphazardly in the drainer to dry. He sat at the table and opened his laptop. An alert popped up on his screen that he'd received another Instagram mention. He stared at it momentarily, then gulped down his hesitance and clicked on it. Heart in his mouth, he brushed his finger over Liv's face staring morosely at the bar and the back of Ben's head.



Observationist Ch3 @benfitz He ignored his family. He ignored his family. He ignored his girl. He chased the bottle #loser #staytuned #iknowwhyourun

"I wasn't ignoring you," he told Liv through the screen. "I was getting a drink for you as well."

He closed the picture and logged into his Facebook account, something he hadn't done since before Olivia left. He wished she hadn't got sick of Facebook and deactivated her account. He would've liked to be able to keep tabs on what she was up to when she wasn't with him. He didn't know anything

about her life at the moment. Not where she lived, or who she hung out with, or where she worked. He knew nothing. They'd argued

about Facebook before she'd left him.

The memory hit him like a mallet on the back of the head and he choked on it. She'd complained about him stalking her when she hadn't been with him. He'd laughed about it.

"They don't call it Stalk-book for nothing," he'd told her.

But she hadn't found it funny. She'd cried and told him it was embarrassing that she didn't have any privacy, and that he'd questioned her uni friends on her wall, even the ones he hadn't met and didn't know. He had dismissed her complaints and told her she was being silly, told her he only wanted to get to know the people she knew. She had seen it differently and shut it down.

He remembered the argument. He couldn't understand why she was so upset about it. And he got mad that she'd closed her account because it meant he didn't know what she was doing or where she was or who she with when she wasn't with him. She'd told him he was too controlling; he told her it was only because he loved her. Maybe he had held on too tight. Maybe that's why she left. He hadn't really bothered with Facebook since.

He stared at the screen in front of him, trying to remember what he sat down to do. He couldn't. He got up and wandered around the flat. It was no good. He couldn't remember. He sat back down and scrolled through his newsfeed. Boring, boring, boring. Why the hell people posted photos of the food they were about to eat was beyond him. Did anyone really care about that shit?

He checked his friends list. He had heaps of requests but he ignored them. That's what he sat down to do, he remembered.

"Ha!" he gloated. "I can remember."

He scrolled through his friends to find Olivia. She still wasn't there. He sighed. He thought maybe she'd reactivated her profile since she'd come back. No luck. He closed Facebook and logged back into Instagram.

He searched for Olivia's profile. He didn't remember offhand what it was called, but eventually he found the right one; at least this profile was still here. He clicked on it and checked the last pic she'd posted. It was a picture of the sunset at the Bondi Beach six months ago. He posted *#whereareyou?* under it then sighed and shut the laptop.

Chapter Seventeen

"So whaddaya reckon that's about then?" Eddy grinned maniacally like some smart-arsed clown.

"You're scaring me Ed," Ben said.

"Mate, use your brain," Eddy said.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be down here asking you."

"You know," Eddy shook his head. "For someone smart enough to get to uni, you really are a dopey bastard sometimes."

"Yeah well getting in was a lot easier than getting through seems to be," Ben flicked foam from his beer at Eddy.

"Oi," Eddy protested. He wiped the foam from his cheek. "Mate, it ain't rocket science."

"WHAT?"

"Look," Eddy got serious. "You drink beer like it's water, and bourbon like it's coffee."

"I do not."

"Really? What time is it Benno?"

Ben shrugged. He didn't carry his phone anymore and he had never worn a watch so he never knew the time apart from, "opening time?"

"Well, it aint closing time," Eddy was triumphant.

"What?" Ben was confused.

"The only times of the day you know! Opening time and closing time."

"That's not true," Ben pouted. "And anyway, what's that got to do with anything?"

"Argh," Eddy threw his towel up in the air and walked away.

Ben watched him go. So what if he knew when opening and closing time was. You'd think Eddy'd be pleased about that. Ben was the one who practically kept this place running. He looked around. Well, except for the old timers in the corner that came in every day.

"Those four, have four rounds of middies," Eddy returned to pick up the towel and paused to follow Ben's gaze. "With lunch. Three times a week. That's it."

"You're getting to be bloody annoying old man," Ben said, disrespectfully.

"Yeah?" Eddy grimaced. "Well, I'm about to get even more annoying and cut you off."

"Cut me off?" Ben almost squealed. "Why? I've only had two."

Eddy motioned over Ben's shoulder. Ben turned to look and saw Raf walking purposefully through the door and up to the bar. He nodded to Eddy.

"We gotta go home," Raf said to Ben.

"What are you doing here?" Ben asked. "I thought you went to uni."

"I did," Raf grabbed Ben's arm and tugged. "But I came back and now we gotta go home."

"Mate, what's the deal?" Ben wanted to tell him where he could go, but there was something about the look in Raf's eyes that freaked him out.

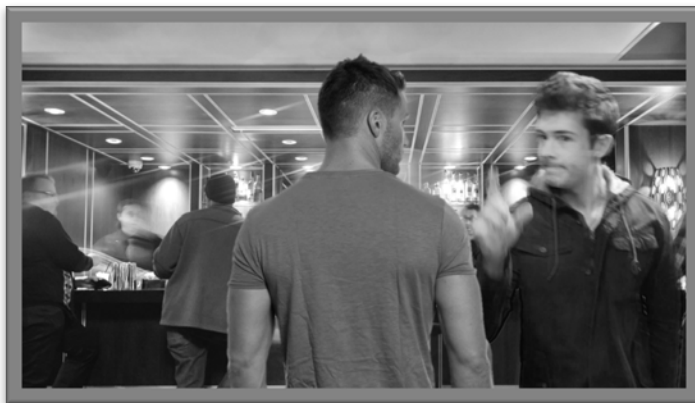
"Come on," Raf said. "Finish up."

"Righto," Ben downed the remainder of his schooner and tumbled off the stool.

Raf rolled his eyes at Eddy. Eddy grinned.

Back in the flat, Raf had Ben's computer open. He pointed to the screen.

"What gives?" Ben said.



Observationist Ch4 @benfitz One day the boy drank so much and got so angry that he got in a fight #cowardpunch #staytuned #iknowwhyourun

"Read," Raf ordered.

Ben squinted at the screen. Letters blurred and swam before him. "I can't see."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Raf leant down and read the hashtags.

"Come on," Ben whinged. "It's not even real. It's totally made up."

"It is real," Raf said. "It's at the Uni bar last year. Same night as the last one."

"I remember that," Ben said.

"You were there. That bloke had just made a move on Liv and wouldn't take no for an answer. I was telling him to back off. You laughed about it. Don't you remember?"

"Yeah but—"

"You've got to remember," Ben cut him off. He bent forward and pressed both hands over his stomach to quell the grumbling and groaning in his guts. "It's all out of context. Anyway, I would've seen someone taking a photo from that close."

"That's not all," Raf interrupted. He scrolled down to the next picture.

He clicked the link and another video filled the screen.

Ben gasped and sank back into the chair. Toast, bourbon and beer fought the wretchedness in his stomach, battling for an escape. As Ben leaned over the side of the table, the pungent mixture splattered all over the floor.

Raf leapt back out of the way. "Shit, mate," he said. "You could've given me some notice."



Observationist Ch5 @benfitz He hurt someone. Badly #cowardpunch #killer #staytuned #iknowwhyourun

"Eurgh," Ben gurgled. Raf poured him a glass of water, and handed him the roll of paper towels. Ben looked at them blankly.

"Well I'm not gonna clean it up," Raf said.

Ben sipped a bit of the water, then got down on his hands and knees and tried to wipe up the spew as best he could. But it made him heave and gag, and just when he'd cleared most of it, he spewed all over again. Exhausted, he climbed back into the chair and dropped his head on the table until the nausea passed.

Raf squirted floor cleaner over the wet patch, ran the foam mop under the kitchen tap and mopped over the mess, masking the smell of stale alcohol and spew with lemon scent. He dropped the mop where he'd finished using it and turned back to the computer. "Tell me it isn't," Raf implored. "Please tell me it isn't."

Ben shook his head.

"Are shaking your head because it isn't? Or because you can't tell me it isn't?"

Ben looked at the video again. It was him all right. That image was etched in Ben's consciousness and had been plaguing him since that night. It was there when he closed his eyes, there when he let his mind wander. It was there in the shower, and there in his dreams. And now it was there on the computer screen. Staring out at him; a horrid, real, reminder of that night. And what he had done.

"It's him," Ben spat out the distasteful words, and then washed them away with a shot of bourbon.

Raf closed the laptop and sat at the table with Ben, then poured himself a shot and downed it. Ben poured two more. They both downed them. Ben picked the bottle up again but Raf stopped him.

"No," he said, taking the bottle from Ben and screwing the lid back on. "You've had enough. We need to sort this."

Ben watched him recap and put the bottle in the cupboard. He could think of nothing to say. He watched as Raf put his elbows on the table and crowned his head with his hands, letting his hair poke through his fingers. Ben's hands were in his lap. Shaking. He stared at them until they blurred and started moving of their own accord.

Ben watched as his fingers moved in waves and wriggles in front of his face. Raf slapped them down.

"What are doing, you psycho?" Raf yelled.

Ben looked him, surprised. Raf's face was so pale it was almost green. His eyes were bloodshot as though he'd been crying but Ben didn't remember him crying. "S'alright, mate," Ben said. He tried to pat Raf on the shoulder but missed. "S'alright."

"No. It is not all right," Raf spat. "It is not all right that you could do that to someone."

"I didn't do nothin' to him that he didn't do to me," Ben said.

"What?" Raf began to blush. Ben watched, fascinated, as the redness rose up Raf's neck and into his ears, then spread across his face, angrily, and into his eyes where they shot daggers at Ben.

"Whoa," Ben said. He tried to back away but forgot he was in a chair and toppled backwards onto the floor. He rolled and covered his face with his arms.

Raf stood up and walked around to where Ben lay. "Get up," he said.

"Done hit me," Ben sobbed. Raf reached down and grabbed his arms, pulling him up. He dragged him into his bedroom and dumped him on his bed.

"Sleep it off," he said. He left Ben sobbing into his pillow.



"Wake up, Ben," he said.

"Wha..." Ben groaned. "Go away."

"Come on, man. Get up. I can't do this by myself."

"Fuck off..."

The door closed. Ben rolled over. He hadn't yet opened his eyes.

"That was horrible," she said. "I wouldn't be surprised if he moves out again."

Ben grumbled and griped, but rolled over and

opened his eyes. The room was empty. He groaned. She must've followed Raf out. He got up and, went to the bathroom and stumbled into the kitchen. Raf was at the table.

"Hey," Ben sat down.

"Hey," Raf responded.

"Sorry about that," Ben said. "I had a nightmare and... well... sorry, okay?"

"Okay."

"Did Liv come out here?"

Raf looked at him as if he was insane and Ben remembered he had promised Liv that he wouldn't mention her to Raf.

"What?" Raf asked.

"Er, nothing. I mean... I just... I had a dream," Ben said.

Raf looked at him hard. Ben felt uncomfortable, and not just because of the jackhammer in his head. He got up to partake in his normal morning routine of swallowing painkillers. He put the kettle on and turned back to Raf.

"Want a coffee?"

"Yeah," Raf said, his expression softening. "About time you did something for me."

"Spouse you want toast too?" Ben smiled, relieved.

"Nah, I had leftover pizza for breakfast," Raf said. "There's some more in the fridge if you like."

"Where'd this come from?" Ben opened the fridge and pulled out a pizza box. He brought it back to the table and opened the box. Half the pizza was left. "Supreme. Cool."

"I ordered in last night," Raf told him. "Wasn't sure if you'd wake up for dinner so got a couple delivered, just in case."

Ben looked at him blankly.

"You slept from lunchtime yesterday to now," Raf checked the time on his watch. "Which is nine."

"Nine?"

"A.M."

"I slept all yesterday arvo and last night?"

"Yep," Raf reached over and grabbed a piece of pizza. "Except for when you wet yourself. Which really was kind of gross."

"What?" Embarrassment flooded Ben's cheeks.

"Yeah," Raf washed the pizza down with coffee. "You got up to go the toilet but literally bounced off the walls all the way down the hall, then couldn't get your fly undone."

"Serious?"

"Yeah."

"How do you know?"

"You started carrying on like a wild boar in pain and by the time I got in there, you were in a heap on the floor and had pissed everywhere."

"Oh man," Ben drew the back of his hands across his eyes. "But I must've got them off because I wasn't wearing them when I woke up."

"Yeah, well, you had some help."

"Huh?"

"You were blubbering your head off, and saying sorry over and over. I couldn't leave you like that. I helped you get out of them, put you in the shower and got you back to bed. You bawled the whole time."

Ben stared at Raf. He was mortified. He usually locked himself away when he was on a bender.

"Anyway mate," Raf continued. "I thought about it all night and this morning and I—"

"You're not gonna move out are you?"

"Yeah," Raf said. "I can't deal with this shit. You got big problems Fitz. I mean, I want to help... But I can't do it by myself and you don't seem to care too much about what's going on."

"What do you mean? Of course I care," Ben fought the dread in his stomach.

"I mean, really," Raf continued. "I feel really bad about it, you know? You were so awesome to me when I was a kid. I wouldn't have survived a new country, a new language, a new culture without you as my mate. I don't think you realise what it meant to me and my family, having you and your sister around."

"Well, it worked both ways, you know," Ben fidgeted, embarrassed. They didn't usually get this deep about things. "You got me through some pretty shitty times too, you know."

"I know," Raf said. "We were good for each other. That's what mates do; it's the best thing about this country... but..."

"But what?"

"Well, you can't help people who don't to be helped," Raf finished the sentence.

"What do you mean?" Ben got up to look for the bourbon.

"Mate, that's most of your problem, right there," Raf said.

"What are you talking about?"

"The drink. You have a problem."

"I do not have a problem," Ben snapped. "You drink as well, you know. Or had that fact escaped you."

"Mate, I have a couple of beers a couple of times a week."

"You were drinking shots with me yesterday."

"Yeah, I was," Raf sighed. "And I should've known better, but that was an exceptional circumstance."

"Yeah well," Ben said. "My life is an exceptional circumstance."

"I know, and you need help to sort it."

"I do not need help!"

"It's nine o'clock in the morning and you're going for the bourbon already. You do need help."

"I just..." Ben couldn't deny that's exactly what he was doing. "I can stop any time I like."

"You reckon?" Raf sighed again.

"You don't?"

"No, I don't. You never used to drink like this. And I think it's way beyond you now."

"It so is not," Ben sat back down. "I can stop."

"Prove it," Raf looked him straight in the eye. "Prove that you can stop."

Ben looked back at him. Of course he could stop. He was no alco. He hated alcoholics; he thought they were filth. His father was one. Raf knew that. Ben was nothing like him. Nothing like that at all.

"Fine then." He could do this. No problem.

"And you can do your own washing," Raf got up from the table. "The gear you pissed on is in the machine."

"Righto. So will you stay?"

"Fine. But I'm telling you this," Raf stopped at the doorway. "If I stay, and you go on another bender like this week, I'm out of here. No notice. Just gone. You got that?"

"Whatever," Ben said.

"There's no whatever. I'm telling you the way it is."

Raf left. The door closed behind him.

Ben reached for the last of the pizza. He knew that if Raf left, he'd have to get a job because he'd have no money for food or bills or booze or anything. No, not booze. No booze. He wasn't going to buy booze anymore. At least, he wasn't going to buy bourbon.

He'd just have to be satisfied going down to the pub for a few amber-ales with Eddy in the arvos. He was pretty sure Raf was only talking about his bourbon drinking anyway. He finished off the pizza and tossed the box in the recycling.

He got up and cleared up the kitchen, feeling pretty pleased with himself that he'd done it for two days in a row now. Next he collected all the dirty clothes from his bedroom floor and added them to the machine to do a load of washing. Then he tidied his room. He walked back out to the kitchen and looked at the microwave clock. 9:30AM. Not even opening time.

Chapter 18

"Let's go for a walk," she said from behind him.

"Argh. You scared the shit out of me," he gasped. "Have you been here the whole time?"

She smiled. "You nearly gave me away."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I wasn't thinking."

"Let's go on a picnic," she clapped her hands. "I haven't been on a picnic for, like, ever."

"A picnic?" He couldn't think of anything worse. "Really?"

"Sure, why not?" She bounced up and down like a child. "We could make sandwiches and a thermos of tea and take a blanket to sit on and a book to read. It'll be fun."

"Except I don't have a thermos, or anything to put on the sandwiches," Ben scratched his head. "Or a book to read."

"You're just saying that," Liv said. "You haven't even looked."

Ben couldn't help getting caught up in her enthusiasm. His stomach flipped and turned inside out every time he looked at her. She just seemed so full of joy or something. He wanted to share it.

"Okay," he conceded. "Let's go see what we can find."

He made sandwiches with peanut butter and vegemite – there was nothing else in the pantry, and threw a few apples in a bag with the sandwiches.

"Wait a sec," he said. "Let me check my camping gear. I got a funny feeling there might be a thermos in there."

He wasn't going to mention that the thermos had been for storing alcohol on his camping trips. Olivia followed him into the bedroom where he pulled stuff randomly out of the bottom of his wardrobe. When he found the thermos he cheered and spun around to show Liv.

She was kneeling on the ground poring over some A4 paper printouts of photos. His breath caught in his throat and he snatched them from under her gaze and shoved them back in the wardrobe with everything else.

He leapt to his feet and raced out of the room. He felt sick. Not because she'd seen the photos, but because he had. Which made him remember. Again. He swallowed the lump in his throat and reached for a drink to wash it down. He scrabbled around the cupboard looking for the bottle for a few minutes. He couldn't find it. When he turned around, Olivia was sitting at the table watching him. He met her gaze. "What?"

"I didn't say anything," she said.

He sighed and leant against the bench. He knew what she was thinking. She'd probably heard him promise Raf. But one wouldn't hurt, would it? Just to calm his nerves. He opened the cupboard next to the one he thought the bottle was in.

"It's not there," Liv said.

He whirled around. "What?"

"It's not there," she repeated. "Raf poured it down the sink and put the bottle in the recycling."

"He did what?" Ben yelled, rifling through the recycling bin.

Olivia jumped up out of the chair and headed for the door.

"No wait," he said. "Liv, I'm sorry. I'm not mad with you. Please don't go."

He followed her into the lounge. "It's a good thing he did that. I'm glad about it. I told him I wouldn't. And I won't. I just..."

She stopped at the front door. "Well, bring the picnic bag," she said.

He half expected her to be gone in the time it took him to race back to the kitchen and grab the bag. She wasn't. She was still there.

"We didn't make the thermos," he said.

"Okay, well you go make it and I'll wait here," she said.

He did. She waited.

They lay side by side on the picnic rug, gazing up into a clear blue sky. A light breeze caressed them gently and the sound of waves crashing against the rocks far below, drifted up and over, embracing the pair with a symphony written just for them.

"Why did you want a drink this morning?"

"Huh?"

"Before we left," she said. "You were looking for a drink."

"Oh because..." he couldn't think of what to say. "I dunno."

"I think you probably do," she said.

"Huh?"

"Well, it was right after you saw me looking at those pictures," she turned her head to look at him.

"That had nothing to do with it," he said.

"Really."

"What do you want me to say Liv?"

"I just want you to think about it," she smiled. "That's all."

He thought about it. He remembered how he'd felt sick when he'd seen them again. How it had brought back that night all over again. And he just wanted to forget all about that night. "Oh," he said.

"That's it."

"You knew?"

"Yeah."

"Well why didn't you just tell me," he asked.

"Because you had to realise yourself," she said. "Anyway, you would've gone off your head if I'd have told you."

"I would not have," he scowled. "Well, not much anyway." She laughed.

He rolled on his side, put his elbow on the ground and propped his head up in his hand to look at her. She was still staring up at the sky and had her fingers intertwined across her chest. The fine tendrils of hair around her face danced in the wind and her long thick eyelashes glinted orange as they caught the sun on her skin. Just looking at her made him feel all gooey and tender inside.

"You're so beautiful," he said, reaching his hand over to caress her cheek.

She rolled out of reach and sat up.

"Why do you do that?" He pulled his hand back and laid it across his hip.

"I told you before," she said, hugging her knees to her chest.

"No, you didn't," he said.

"It doesn't feel right for you to be touching me when we will never ever be together again," she said.

He sighed. He still had hope; deep down, that maybe she would change her mind about that. He rolled back onto his back.

"It's not fair," he whined. "Why did you come back then?"

"Not to pick up where we left off, that's for sure." She gazed out over the headland to the expanse of the ocean below them, a forlorn expression dulling the sparkle in her eyes.

"What does that mean?" Ben sat up and followed her gaze out to sea.

"Don't you remember anything about our relationship?" She turned to face him, the intensity in her eyes made him squirm.

"Of course I do," he said. He flipped over onto his stomach, the scrutiny of her gaze too much, and propped himself up on his elbows. "We had some great times."

"We really did," she smiled at him. "What were they?"

"Well," he screwed up his eyes and thought hard. "There was that time we went to Surfers Paradise and did all the theme parks. We had a great time then."

"Yeah, we did," she agreed. "But we were 16."

"Okay, what about when we went to Tassie with Raf and his girlfriend at the time, what was her name? That was awesome. Remember? We went to Cradle Mountain and got lost and..."

"Her name was Taylor and it was during schoolies. And that was the weekend Raf and Taylor broke up. And we got lost because there was no mobile reception and you spewed all over the map and we couldn't read it."

"Are you going to find something wrong with everything I can come up with?" Ben didn't remember the details of any of these trips he just remembered the trip. "Why do you want to give me a hard time?"

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time," she sighed. "I just want you to remember what our relationship was like in its last year."

"You mean before you cut out?"

"I didn't cut out Ben."

"You did!" He started getting agitated and sat up. "You left me. Without warning, without a reason! You just left."

Olivia stood up. She took a few steps back from the picnic rug.

"Where are you going?"

"Think about it some more Bennikins," she said. She waved and headed off across the grass.

Ben squinted through the glare to watch where she was going, but by the time his eyes adjusted she had disappeared.

"Dammit to hell," he swore. "She does that every single time."

As the realisation of what he just said hit him, he sank back down on the rug. He thought back to each time she'd disappeared when they'd just been talking. He hadn't made the connection before. It was when he got mad; every single time he yelled or swore, or got a bit impatient with her, she split. Why couldn't she just have a normal conversation?

Chapter Nineteen

"It's because sheilas are into feelings and stuff," Eddy said. "They always want to know what yer thinking and how yer feeling. And you gotta let them say what they's thinking and feeling too."

"Well, it sucks," Ben banged his schooner down on the bar.

"Just the way it is mate," Eddy grimaced. "Like it or lump it."

"Eugh."

"Yeah I know," Eddy went off to serve another customer.

Ben watched him. He smiled and greeted each customer by name, or if he didn't know their name he called them mate. He asked them about their day, their work, or their families. He remembered stuff people told him and always followed it up the next time they came. Chitchat came easily to him. And people responded. Women flirted with him and men teased him. But they all loved him.

"How do you do that?" he asked when Eddy came back.

"Do what?"

"Get people to like you the way they do," Ben really wanted to know. He wanted to know how to make Olivia fall in love with him again. The same way he was in love with her.

"People like to be heard," Eddy told him. "Mostly, they just want to feel like they matter."

"Yeah well," Ben said bitterly. "Some of them don't matter."

"Not true Benno," Eddy stopped wiping the bench and looked directly at him. "Everyone matters. Everyone. No matter what they look like, where they come from, or what they done."

"What about criminals and child bashers and rapists?"

Eddy scratched his head. "We all start out the same way, even those mongrels," he said.

"Bullshit."

"It's true. Everyone was once a tiny little innocent baby who was completely dependent on the adults around them to take care of them," Eddy said.

"Yeah, but then they grow up and turn into violent alcoholic bastards who belt their wives and bash their kids." The bitterness oozed from Ben's pores, coating him in a cold sweat.

"Yeah sometimes they do," Eddy pulled up a stool and sat in front of Ben. He motioned his barmaid to take care of the bar and serve the customers that were waiting.

"So what about those people?" Ben challenged. "They don't matter. They're the scum of the earth."

"Well, maybe. But then what about those people's innocent little babies? They grow up learning how to be violent alcoholic bastards who beat their girlfriends and bash their kids as well," Eddy said quietly. "Cause that's all they was taught."

Ben started shaking. He couldn't control it. He lifted his beer to drink but his arms were trembling so much that beer sloshed out over the sides, spilling onto the bar and splashing over his pants. He put it down. And left.

Back in the flat, he was relieved that Raf was still at uni. His clothes stank of beer so he took them off and threw them into the washing machine. He wandered back to the kitchen table and logged on to his computer. The message tone on his phone had been going off but he'd ignored it. It didn't bother him so much when it vibrated on silent, but he figured he'd check it out now he was home.

Sure enough, The Observationist had posted again.

It was the same footage that was on the usb that had been left on the door. Almost. Only this time it was the whole clip from to end.

Ben tried everything he could to hack in to the site and delete the file; delete the whole site. But he couldn't. He could only wonder what it all meant and how many people had seen it. He slammed the lid of the laptop down.

Ben jumped in the shower and as the hot water cascaded over his face, it washed his despair down the drain. He shampooed his hair and scrubbed his skin until it was red raw, as though he was trying to rid himself of some terrible affliction.



Observationist Ch6 @benfitz He didn't care. He ran away #gutless #coward #killer #staytuned #iknowhyyourun



It was the smell of food cooking that woke him. He stretched and farted then got up and went into the kitchen. Raf was cooking.

"What's the occasion?" Ben asked.

"Um, dinner," Raf said. "Want some?"

"What time is it?"

"That would be dinner time," Raf grinned.

"Smart-arse." Ben looked at the microwave clock. It was 7:30. He'd slept all afternoon. "What is it?"

"You mean you can't tell from the delectable aroma?" Raf said. Ben looked at him blankly. "Fine, it's spag bol."

"Oh."

"So, you want some?"

"Sure, thanks."

He sat at the table. His laptop was where he'd left it. He pushed it aside as Raf dumped two glasses, Parmesan cheese, and forks on the table. He heaped spaghetti into two bowls and covered them with the bolognese. He put one in front of Ben then grabbed a bottle of coke from the fridge.

"So how's Eddy?" Raf asked, pouring the cokes.

"He's alright," Ben said. "Why?"

Raf twirled his fork around the spaghetti and shovelled it into his mouth, not looking at Ben.

"I just went to talk to him," Ben realised why Raf was asking. "He's my mate."

Raf continued eating his dinner. Silent.

"And I haven't had one drop of bourbon ever since," Ben said, defensively.

"Ever since yesterday?"

Ben couldn't believe it was only yesterday that he'd promised Raf he would stop drinking. He hadn't even lasted a full 24 hours. Unless he was only talking about bourbon, then he had. Almost.

They finished dinner in relative silence, and then Raf reached over and opened Ben's laptop. "Any new developments?" He asked.

"Dunno," Ben said. "Didn't check it today, went out for a picnic."

Raf looked up. "Really? Who with?"

"Yes, really," Ben motioned to the bag with the picnic rug, thermos and packed lunch still in. "With L... little old me. I went by myself, okay?"

The quizzical expression on Raf face would've been funny if it didn't get under Ben's skin so much.

"Well, what else was I gonna do? I couldn't sit around here getting mad at you for pouring my bourbon down the sink, could I? And I couldn't spend all day at the pub drinking beer cause that would be just as bad. A couple in the arvo is completely different to drinking all day long."

"Yeah I suppose," Raf conceded. "Good on you for taking it seriously, mate. That's awesome."

"Hmph," Ben grunted.

"Alright, let's check this psycho out, huh?" Raf opened Instagram and turned the laptop to Ben. Ben logged into his account.

Ben looked up at Raf, trepidation gnawing at his insides.

"C'mon then," Raf said. "Click the link. May as well know what we're dealing with."

"It's some random beat up dude," Ben said, turning the screen back to Raf. Raf winced at the bruised face that stared back at him from the screen.

"Do you know who it is?"

"No," Ben reached for the coke and refilled his glass. Somehow it didn't seem a fitting replacement for the usual drink he'd reach for about now.

"Click it, it's a video."

He did. They watched.



Observationist Ch7 @benfitz Many people did this boy leave in the wake of his tirades #destroyer #bully #thug #staytuned #iknowwhyyourun

"I don't get it. Why would anyone be doing this to me? They're just making stuff up."

"Did you do it? Any of it?"

"No, what kind of a person do you think I am?"

"Well," Raf chose his words carefully. "It's not as if you've never been in a fight."

"Come on," Ben hated that Raf was right. "Do you really think I go around belting up randoms?"

Raf ignored Ben's question. Now wasn't the time to get into it. There were more important things to discuss. "What are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"About you know what," Raf nodded to the screen.

"Nothing I can do," Ben sighed. "Just got to wait and see what happens I suppose."

"I still reckon you should go to the cops for harassment," Raf said.

"And that's exactly what they'd do," Ben said. "Harass me."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm going to bed," Ben stood up.

"You only just got up," Raf protested. "Anyway, I got a movie out."

"What is it?"

"New release X-men," Raf said. "It's awesome. Come on, you haven't seen it."

"How do you know I haven't seen it?"

"Because the night we went to see it, you were passed out on the kitchen floor and we couldn't wake you to go," Raf said.

"Oh," Ben supposed he should've felt shame at that, and he did. A bit. But the stronger urge was to go hide in his room away from the prying, nosey-parker, busy-body, in-your-face Raf and have a few shots so that he could go back to sleep. "Fine then. Put it on."

Chapter Twenty

"Ben," Raf called. "BEN!"

"Blerg, grff," Ben grumbled and covered his head with his pillow. His bedroom door opened and Raf's head appeared. Ben turned to yell at him then noticed his wild eyes and pale face.

"What?" He propped himself up on his elbows.

"You gotta come and see this," Raf said. "Now."

"What is it?"

"Just come," Raf disappeared.

Ben got out of bed and kicked the bottle under it, hoping that Raf hadn't seen it. He put his jeans on and went out into the lounge room. Raf wasn't there but the door was wide open. Ben raced back and grabbed a T-shirt, pulling it over his head on his way out into the hall.

He tugged the T-shirt down and froze. Raf was frantically pulling A3 size posters off the walls of the hall outside their unit.

"What the hell?" Ben stared. The posters had been taped to the wall in pairs. One was one of the pictures Instagram—the man in the alley; the other was of Ben. He had his hands in his pockets, and he was frowning as he walked along a path in a park. He recognised it immediately. It was the park he'd been walking in with Olivia the other day. Someone had taken a photo of him. There was a wide black arrow from this photo to the one of the alley man, across which were written the words: *he did this*, in big red letters.

"Don't just stand there," Raf said. "Help me before someone comes out and sees them."

Ben ran along the corridor ripping the posters down. They collected them all and walked back to the flat. Ben couldn't battle the pounding in his head anymore and flaked on the lounge. Raf sat in the middle of the lounge room floor and started ripping up the pile of paper. "This is insane," he said. "Whoever is doing this knows where you live?"

Ben had no answer.

"How did that happen?" Raf rolled the shredded posters into a ball.

"Eddy, I think," said Ben. "Some blokes called into the pub and told him they were police and asked a heap of questions about me. He told them whatever they wanted to know."

"Who were they?"

"Dunno," Ben shrugged.

"Mate, this is getting out of hand," Raf said. "You've got to go to the police."

"We've been through this before. There's no point. Making an Instagram account and sending texts or putting posters up are not crimes. Cops can't do anything. They'll just want to know why."

"It's cyber-bullying," Raf protested. "Harassment!"

"Yeah well," Ben leaned back on the lounge and closed his eyes against his thumping headache. "Not much I can do about it. It's just another person that hates me."

"For fuck's sake will you wake up to yourself and stop being such a freakin' victim?" Raf yelled, throwing a shoe at Ben. It hit him in the head. He opened his eyes and glared at Raf.

"What am I supposed to do?" he yelled.

"I don't know; something! Anything!" Raf was still yelling. "Just not nothing. You can't sit back on this, Fitz. You got to do something to help yourself before you lose the last people in your life that actually care about you."

"There isn't anyone left in my life that actually cares about me," Ben said.

Raf looked hurt. "What am I? Chopped liver? I thought I was your mate."

Ben stared at him. Were they mates? Raf annoyed the crap out of him with his old-man ways. He studied all the time and when he wasn't studying, he was hanging with Ashley or playing soccer. He cleaned the flat, took out the rubbish, cooked. It pissed Ben off. Because everything Raf did made Ben feel just that little bit more inadequate. And he harassed Ben something chronic, especially about his drinking. Did that make them mates?

Ben told himself that he was just using Raf to fund his lifestyle. He needed the rent. It didn't matter to him who moved in, so long as they paid their rent. And Raf paid the rent. And he was always on time.

"Right then," Raf said, getting up off the floor and walking toward his room. "At least I know where I stand."

Ben watched him go.

"Raf," she said. "Is he the only person you have left. You should be nicer to him."

"What about Eddy? I've got Eddy."

"Eddy is the barman. And you are his customer."

Ben scowled. He liked Eddy.

"Well, what about you? I've got you."

"No Ben," she stopped walking and turned to face him. "You don't have me. You let me go a long time ago."

"No, I didn't," he said. "You're here. You must've come back for a reason."

"I did," she nodded. "But it has nothing to do with us getting back together. That is never ever going to happen. You need to understand that. I need you to understand that."

Ben sighed. How could he make her understand that they were meant to be together? It was their destiny and neither of them had any control over it. But he had to go gently; he knew that now. He didn't want to keep scaring her off. They stopped walking and sat on the grass under a tree.

"Okay," he said. "So I'll be nicer to him."

"Do you even know what that means these days?" Liv softened the impact of her words with a smile.

"What do you mean?"

"You used to be such a beautiful boy," Liv tucked her hair behind her ear and stared off into the distance.

"What do you mean 'used to be?'" Ben quipped.

"You used to smile a lot more. You used to open doors for me without even thinking about it..."

"Liv, I'd still—"

"You used to go out of your way to help people," Liv cut him off. "You used to call in on the old lady down the hall to see if she was okay, remember?"

Ben winced. "She's gone now." The old lady had been moved into a nursing home a few months ago and Ben hadn't known until he'd seen new people moving in. He couldn't remember when he'd stopped visiting.

"She thought you were all that," Liv smiled, remembering. "You used to run her errands."

"Yeah," Ben nodded. "I did."

"You used to enjoy life... go out to the movies, to the beach, camping..."

"That was with you Liv," Ben said. "We did that stuff together."

"Not always. Sometimes you went with the boys. You used to have friends. The flat always had people coming and going."

"Yeah well," Ben sighed. "Things changed... when you left."

"I didn't leave Ben," Liv looked hard at him. "You let me go. There's a difference."

"Whatever," Ben sulked. It was all semantics. "Things still changed."

"Things didn't change Benny. You did." Liv stood up and stretched. She tilted her head to look up through the leaves of the tree. Standing on tippy-toes, fingers tips pointing to the sun; she reached as high as could through the sparkling leaves. Ben watched her and a warm glow in the pit of his stomach dissipated the resentment that had been sitting there. She was so beautiful. He could never stay cranky with her for long. She finished her stretch and crouched in front of him. "Where are your friends now? Did you let them go too?"

"No, I didn't. They... I..." Ben sighed. "It's just that... well, I don't need friends, I just need you."

"Everyone needs friends Ben. Even big tough bad guys," Liv said, ignoring the implication.

"I am big and tough," Ben pushed his chest out to prove it. "But, are you saying I'm a bad guy?"

"Are you?"

"No," he paused, pushing the memory of *that* face on *that* night into the darkest recesses of his subconscious. "No no no no, I am not..... at least, I don't think so..."

"Where are you?"



"What do you mean? I'm right here with you," Ben said.

"No, you're not," Liv watched him add a fourth sachet of sugar to the takeaway cup.

"Oh," Ben picked up the paper cup and started away from the kiosk. "I was just thinking about Bec."

"Have you heard from her?"

"Yeah, she rings and leaves a message every now and then," Ben told her.

"But you don't talk to her?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"Because..." Ben tried to remember why he hadn't spoken to his sister for so long. "She's overseas doing her own thing. She's busy. She doesn't care about me or anything that's going on here."

"That's not true," Liv said.

"Then you tell me," Ben snapped. "You seem to think that you know everything that's wrong with my life."

Liv stopped and turned to face him. People walking the other way stared at him and veered way off the path to avoid him. He glared at them as they passed.

"Just once," Liv said. "Instead of growling at everyone around you, you should try and figure out the role you play in all these awful things that you think keep happening to you."

The ground seemed to rumble under Ben's feet, a surge of energy moved up through his legs and sat in his belly, burning and hissing. He tried to swallow the fire in his gut but it gurgled hotter and wilder until it shot through his body and burst from his throat in a roar that sent children running to their parents and birds screeching from branches nearby. He threw his coffee cup as far as he could. It exploded against the tree they'd been lying under not long before, the burning hot liquid splattering everywhere.

"Oi," a man with a couple of kids yelled out to him. "What are you doing, you nut job? There are kids playing around here."

Ben glared at him. He stood stiff, fists clenched, heart pounding, fighting the urge to punch something, someone. He turned and walked, then ran, away. He ran for a few minutes before remembering that Olivia had been with him. He skidded to a stop and turned back.

"Liv," he yelled. She was gone.

He turned and walked home. Raf wasn't there. He locked himself in his room and retrieved the bottle from under his bed. He had a long swig of bourbon then pulled his laptop onto his desk and sat with the bottle nearby, at his computer.

"None of his damn business whether I drink or not," he muttered to himself.

He opened his laptop and logged on to check his messages. There was an email notification that he'd received an Instagram comment. He stared at it, unsure whether he should look at it or not. Maybe he should just delete his Instagram account as well. He didn't really need it now that Liv was back. Still, he'd need to login to it to delete it.

He sighed and opened Instagram. Another video, another comment. He stared at it for a few seconds, poised to delete his account, before curiosity got the better of him and he clicked on it.



Observationist Ch8 @benfitz But the boy wasn't satisfied with attacking people his own age. He went after smaller, weaker ones #attacker #abuser #staytuned #iknowwhyourun

had thrown the coffee at them. It was awful. It was awful. Scary. As though he could kill someone.

The thought hit Ben like a sledgehammer, and winded him. He gasped for breath. He had killed someone. It was him. He did it. This proves he was capable of it. And someone wanted revenge. Someone was telling the world what he'd done. And that they would come for him. And they would hurt him. Badly.

But not if he got to them first. That was it. He jumped up off the chair and started pacing the room again. He needed to find out who this was. He needed to find them, and he needed to kill them. He could do it. After all, he'd done it before. It wasn't hard. Okay, maybe a bit painful but that didn't matter; it was all part of the deal. And if he was smart about it, maybe he wouldn't even need to get hurt. Maybe he didn't have to fight them; maybe he could use a knife or a gun or something. He'd get a gun. Then he wouldn't even have to get near enough for them to hurt him. He could just shoot from a distance. But where could he get a gun from? It's not as if he lived in America and could pick one up in k-mart.

He paced and drank and paced and muttered and plotted and drank. Then he collapsed onto his bed, shoving his bottle under his pillow.



Ben woke crying. He didn't know what he'd been crying about. It always disgusted him. But at least he hadn't done it publicly this time. It was one of the dangers of drinking. Sometimes he got angry. But mostly he just cried. He hated that about himself. He'd rather deal with the vomit and the piss than the tears.

It was Sunday. He wondered if Raf was up yet, he hadn't heard him. He knew he

was home because Ashley and Jenna had hosted a hen's party at their house last night and Raf had been sent home before it started.

Ben got up and jumped in the shower. He brushed his teeth, gargled with mouthwash and used half a can of deodorant spray, before getting dressed. Raf was up and had coffee on by the time Ben made it to the kitchen.

"You smell like a chocolate shop," Raf greeted him.

"Better than smelling like a cow yard," Ben retorted.

"What are you suggesting?"

"Not a thing," Ben grinned. "But you might wanna to check your deodorant is still in date."

"Well, you don't seem to mind it," Raf said.

"Huh?"

"You just covered yourself in it."

"Oh," Ben said. "I thought it was mine."

"Hmm."

"Anyways..." Ben said. "You ok?"

Raf looked at him strangely. "Yes, are you?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, I give," Raf said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Ben said. "Why would you think anything's wrong?"

"Because in all the years I've known you, you have never asked if I was okay. Ever."

Ben thought about this. It was probably true. But he'd promised Liv that he would be nicer to Raf, so he was making an effort.

"Never, huh?" Ben grinned. "Damn. Best not start now then. I take it back."

Raf threw a spoon at him; Ben tried to catch it but missed. It sailed past him and clattered to the floor. Ben picked it up and tossed it across to land in the sink.

"Put some toast on will you?" Ben said.

"You put it on," Raf said. "I made the coffee. And I'm not your house boy."

"Whatevs," Ben got up and went to the freezer for the bread.

"You checked Instagram lately?" Raf took Ben's seat the table.

"Yeah. Another installment," Ben grabbed two plates and slid them across the table.

"Any vids?"

"Yeah," Ben paused. How much should he give away about Liv? "One of me throwing a cup of coffee."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Yesterday. Which means someone is following me around."

"Following you around? How do you know?"

"I was walking in the park yesterday and stopped at the kiosk. You know the one down near Rushcutter's?"

"Yeah," Raf frowned. "What were you doing down there?"

"Sometimes I just like to walk along the Harbour," Ben said. "But that's not the point."

"So," Raf said. "Not only do they know where you live, but they're following you around town?"

"Apparently," Ben bought the toast, margarine and vegemite to the table and sat down.

"Freaky, huh?"

"Mate, it's called stalking. When are you going to get it? You gotta go to the cops."

Ben shrugged and buttered his toast. He wasn't going to get into that again.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ben wondered when Olivia would be back. He hadn't seen her for nearly a week. Not since that day in the park. He'd really stuffed up by throwing that coffee. He knew that. But it was no reason for her to stay away. He wished he had some way of calling her, wished she'd call him. But he'd almost given up thinking that was going to happen. He'd checked his phone a million times a day, but she hadn't rung or texted him since before she'd left the first time. He really needed to get over it.

"Ben," Raf banged on the door. "You got mail."

"Huh?"

"From the uni," Raf called. "It's on the table. I'm heading out now, but don't forget about tonight. I'll be back to get you about eight, okay?"

Tonight? What the hell was tonight? He didn't remember making plans or agreeing to do anything. He groaned and cursed Raf before rolling over and getting out of bed. He tripped over yesterday's discarded clothes, swore some more and made his way out to the kitchen.

An official looking letter was propped up against a half-empty coffee pot. He grabbed a mug from the sink, filled it with the cold coffee and put it in the microwave. He opened the letter while he waited for his coffee to heat. It was to remind him that semester finished in two weeks, and he was due to recommence after the break. He had to re-enrol, which meant a trip to campus.

He could've done it online but he wanted his campus card as soon as he could get it. His student card acted as his debit card and was linked to the trustee account that financed him. It had been suspended when he'd taken the leave of absence, and he was hanging to get it back. Anyway, he hadn't been out of the house much in the last week or so, and he could do with the fresh air.

He tossed the letter back on the table and took his coffee from the microwave. He glanced up at the calendar on the fridge door. Today was circled in green text—that meant the cleaners were coming. Just as well he was going out then. He hated the cleaner getting in his ear about, well, anything really. He wasn't the chatty type.

On his way to uni he wondered again what Raf meant about tonight. Try as he might, he just couldn't remember ever making plans. He checked his phone but he hadn't put it in his calendar

either. It bugged him all afternoon, distracting him from the task at hand. Why would Raf say 'don't forget about tonight' and then not tell him what he meant. He couldn't let it go.

"I think I'm going mad, mate," he said to Eddy, when he called in for a quick one on the way home. He had time. It was only 5:30pm.

"Whaddaya mean *going* mad?" Eddy grinned. "You been mad as a cut snake for as long as I've known you."

"Geez, why don't you tell me what you really think," Ben eyed his beer like a long lost friend.

"Couldn't do that," Eddy said. "Not in front of the ladies."

Ben looked up and down the bar. A bunch of council workers sat down the other end having after work drinks. Two of them were women, youngish, one blonde the other brunette, both with long hair pulled back in ponytails. Ben supposed they could both be good-looking under the layers of grime. Not that he'd really had eyes for anyone but Liv. Ever.

"I'm sure there's nothing they haven't already heard working with that mob," Ben said. "Anyway, it's completely sexist for you to say that."

"Me? Sexist?" Eddy laughed. "I saw you looking them up and down, bet you didn't check out the blokes like that."

Ben blushed and turned away from them. Eddy roared laughing and made his way down to serve them. Ben whirled around on his stool and nearly choked on his beer when he saw Olivia standing just inside the door.

"Liv?"

He turned back to put his beer on the counter and stood up to greet her. But when he turned back around she was gone.

"Liv," he called. He ran across the room and flung himself out the door. Standing on the street corner, he looked every which way but there was no sign of her. He wondered if she'd gone to the flat. He started up the hill. Maybe that's what Raf was talking about. Maybe Liv had decided it was time to let people know she was back and had organised with Raf to go out. She'd always liked Raf; they'd gotten on very well.

The flat was empty. She wasn't there, neither was Raf. The cleaners had been and gone. It was always easy to tell because by the end of the month, the place started looking a bit ratty. Neither he nor Raf ever did much more than wash up every few days between visits.

He wandered from room to room, poking his head through doors, just in case. Definitely no one there. Back in his own room he sat at his desk wondering if he had time to go back to the pub. He pulled his phone from the desk drawer to check the time. Another notification. Another post. He couldn't help himself; he knew he should just delete it, but he opened it anyway. At least it wasn't a video this time.

It was Eddy. Ben's heart sank. He remembered the incident. It was totally misrepresented. It was the day he'd got plaster off his arm



Observationist Ch9 @benfitz And he went after those who served him #thug #traitor #staytuned

and the splints off his fingers; he'd been showing Eddy his knuckles. They'd been mucking around. It was Eddy's crooked smile that made him look scared and angry at the same time. Ben look liked a thug. So not fair!

He got up from the desk and gulped a few mouthfuls of bourbon from the bottle in his bedside drawer and headed for the shower. His intestines were riding a roller coaster of anger and fear. He tried to subdue them by focusing on getting ready to go out. It was exhausting, but as he stood under the shower, the hot water washed the competing emotions away and left resignation in their place. He sighed. There was nothing he could do about the posts.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and headed back to his room where he swallowed another few mouthfuls of drink. He popped some breath mints in his mouth; he didn't want Raf to know that he'd had a few. He hated arguing with Raf. He was such an easy-going bloke and so good-natured that Ben never came out of any argument feeling anything but a complete and total failure.

He pulled clean jeans and a shirt from the pile on his dresser and sat on his bed to put his shoes on. He jumped up and turned around. Something had clinked in his bed. He pulled the covers back to find two empty bottles of bourbon lying side-by-side between his sheets. Two.

Someone must be playing a trick on him. No way had he drunk two whole bottles since he'd told Raf he could stop. Who would've done this? It wouldn't've been Raf because he would've just gone off his head if he'd found them. Liv? But she hadn't been here. That left only the cleaners. It's probably something they would do. But only if they'd found them on the floor.

Ben knelt down to look under his bed. The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach told him that that was exactly what had happened. The carpet under the bed had been vacuumed. It was spotless. And Ben remembered shoving the bottle he'd finished drinking the other day under there. But two? That means he was onto his third.

It wasn't out of the realm of possibilities. He hadn't spent his money on anything else since he'd been off uni; just the pub and pizza and, as it turns out, the not-so-occasional bottle of bourbon. The door banged and Ben threw the covers back over the bottles, he would deal with those later.

"Yo, Fitz," Raf called. "You ready?"

"Where we going?" Ben met him in the hall as Raf came out of his room.

"Out," Raf said, shoving his wallet in his back pocket. "Told you. With some of the guys from uni. Time you got back into the swing of things."

"Why am I going out with your mates?"

"Really?" Raf pulled on the jacket he was carrying. "Is it that hard to imagine we might have mutual friends who want to catch up? You want to go through this again?"

"Nah," Ben shrugged. "It's okay."

"Right then, let's go."

Ben sat on the bus to the city and stared out the window. He felt sick. Even though he had no clue where he was going, a sense of dread gnawed at his intestines causing them to grumble. He put his hand over his stomach and wondered if anyone else could hear it.

He hadn't been back to the city since 'that night,' and something about the route they were taking made him incredibly nervous. He was about to ask where they were going again, when Raf jumped up and pressed the stop button.

"C'mon," Raf said.

"Where are we going?" Ben didn't move from his seat. He felt like throwing up.

"We're going to the World Bar," Raf smiled. "And yes, you can have a Tea-Pot cocktail."

Ben felt his stomach drop. He couldn't explain it. The sense of dread seemed to magnify until it engulfed him completely. He stood up and grabbed seat rails on either side of him to support himself. He was facing the back of the bus and as he glanced up, he saw Olivia sitting right at the back of the bus in the corner, staring out the window. He started shaking, and broke out into a sweat. The sides of the bus seemed to get narrower. He swayed. The bus lurched to a stop and Ben felt his knees give way.

"Whoa, there," Raf grabbed him and guided him off the bus.

He sat on the seat at the bus stop until his head cleared a bit.

"I... Liv... I... need to go home," he said. Raf stared at him. Ben waited for his head to clear a bit before looking at him. "No," he said. "It's not because... it's not like that. I was feeling crook before we left."

Raf continued to stare, contempt barely concealed by disgust.

"Seriously," Ben said. "I just couldn't... I didn't want to..."

"Whatever," Raf said. "But I made a commitment and I have to keep it."

"Okay," Ben nodded. "But I need to go home."

"You be alright getting yourself back?" Raf's tone softened.

"Yeah," Ben said. "Sorry, mate."

"Nah," Raf said. "It's okay, I thought you were ready, but I was probably wrong."

Ben watched as Raf walked off. Ready for what? He didn't know what Raf meant. He didn't understand what was happening. And why was Liv on the bus? Where was she now? He hadn't seen her get off. How long had she been following him around? Was it her that was...? He didn't know what to make of it.

He leant forward and dropped his head onto his knees. His breathing was coming in short sharp gasps and he couldn't seem to slow it down. His heart was racing, he was still trembling and he felt like crying.

"It's just a panic attack," Liv said.

"What?" He sat up to find her sitting next to him on the bus stop bench.

"You have to focus on your breathing to slow it down," she smiled.

He stared at her.

"You're taking in too much oxygen and not getting enough carbon dioxide," she told him. "Breathe into your hands."

"Too much oxygen?" he panted. "That's ridiculous, how can you get too much oxygen?"

"It's true. It's what happens in panic attacks. I was doing nursing remember?"

"I am not having a panic attack," he said. "I don't have panic attacks."

"You've had panic attacks for as long as I've known you," Liv said. "At least, you did when you were a kid. Your Mum would give you a paper bag to breathe into to get more carbon dioxide into you. Don't you remember?"

Ben shook his head. Something tugged at his memory, but the pictures wouldn't form properly. He looked away. "I'm not having a panic attack. I'm just feeling sick."

The couple walking along the footpath stared at him as they passed by the bus stop.

"What?" Ben challenged.

They hesitated and then stopped and turned back to him.

"Are you okay?" The man asked.

"I'm fine," Ben snapped. "Mind your own business."

The woman grabbed the man's arm and pulled him away. Ben watched them go.

"Ben," Liv said reproachfully. "They were just concerned because you yelled about your panic attack and about feeling sick."

Ben stood up. "Everyone just needs to leave me alone," he said.

"Okay then," Liv stood as well. "I guess I'll be seeing you then. Bye."

"No," Ben yelled. "Don't go. I'm sorry."

The couple stopped and turned back to look at him. Ben sat heavily on the bench. He felt frantic. His breath came in pants and he felt as though his heart might leap from his chest it was beating that quickly.

"I don't know what's happening," he said.

"Told you, it's a panic attack," Liv said. She stood a few metres away watching him. "You need to breath into a bag."

"I'm not having a panic attack," he said. "And I don't have a bag."

The man walked tentatively toward him. "Try holding your nostrils closed with your thumbs and cupping your hands over your mouth," he said. "Like this."

He demonstrated. Ben glanced over at Liv. She nodded. He figured that if he did what she wanted, she might stay. He watched the man and followed his instructions, covering his mouth with his cupped hands. He sat breathing into his hands for a few minutes. His head began to clear and the dizziness gradually abated. He dropped his hands and glance up at Liv. She smiled and mouthed the words 'be nice' nodding toward the man.

"Better?" The man asked.

"Yeah," Ben said. "Thanks."

"Can I call someone for you?"

"Nah, it's ok. I got my friend here," Ben said.

The woman stepped closer and was looking around.

"Okay," the man smiled. "If you're sure."

"Yeah, thanks. And, well... sorry about before."

"No worries," the man waved Ben's apology away and put his arm around the shoulders of his partner. They continued along their way.

"That wasn't so hard was it?" Liv asked, coming back to sit next to him.

"What?"

"Being nice to someone who was being nice to you."

"They were looking at me weird," Ben complained.

"Maybe," Liv smiled. "But they helped you deal with the panic attack, didn't they?"

"I keep telling you I wasn't having a panic attack!"

"When did you start feeling sick?"

"On the bus," Ben tried to remember exactly. "Maybe it was just motion sickness."

"Then you should be right about now," Liv said. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Are you feeling better?"

Ben thought about it. His stomach was still churning and his heart was racing, but his breathing had slowed. "I'm fine."

"Then you should text Raf."

"What?" Ben's stomach dropped. "No."

"Why not?"

"Don't want to," Ben pouted like a petulant child.

"Really? You don't want to... or you're scared to?"

"I am not scared," Ben yelled.

"Good to know," a voice said from behind the bus stop.

Ben leapt up and whirled around to find Raf standing there watching him.

"Where did you come from?"

"I came back for you," Raf said. "You really need to come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere except home," Ben parked himself on the seat.

"Fitz," Raf walked around the front of the bus shelter and sat next to Ben. "C'mon, let's go now."

"No," Ben scowled.

"Come on mate," Raf stood up. "You can't sit here all night."

"I could if I wanted to. But I'm going home."

"Then we need to cross the road to catch the bus back."

"Why?"

"Because we're on the wrong side."

"You go."

"Ben..."

"Leave me alone. I don't want to go. I want to stay here with Liv."

"Now you're just being ridiculous," Raf sighed.

Ben looked out behind Raf to see where Liv was. But he couldn't see her anywhere. He swore. Why did she always do that? It shit him. Why couldn't she just be a normal girlfriend and support him when he needed her to?

"Why?" Ben yelled at Raf. "Why is it ridiculous to want your girlfriend to be with you?"

"Mate," Raf put his arm across Ben's shoulders. "Liv is—"

Ben saw her standing on the corner across the road and leapt up. "Leave me alone," he yelled to Raf. He stepped off the curb and ran across the road. A car screeched and swerved, narrowly avoiding him.

Ben stood on the other side of the road and spun in circles. He was sure he'd seen Liv standing there on the corner, watching him. But now she was nowhere in sight. He screamed into the night.

Raf crossed at the lights and approached him carefully. Ben sat on the curb. Raf squatted next to him.

"Come on mate," he said, gently. "Let's go."

"But I—"

"There's a heap of people waiting for us," Raf said. "We're having dinner with them."

"But..."

"But what? What are you worried about?"

Ben raised his head and looked at Raf. "Who?"

"Who what?"

"Who is going to be there?"

"Come on," Raf stood and pulled Ben to his feet. "Let's go."

Ben stood wavering. "What's going on?" he asked. "Will they help me find her?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"I don't know," Raf carefully placed an arm on Ben's shoulder, guiding him back across the road.

Ben stopped short, in the middle of the intersection and whirled around 360 degrees. "Liv," he called at the top of his voice. He turned back to where he'd seen her standing. "Come back!"

"Will you stop screaming?" Liv said. "You're going to get yourself killed, you maniac."

"Liv," Ben smiled, relieved. "Where did you go? I was freaking out."

"I can see that," she said. "Now will you just cross the road so you don't get Raf killed?"

"Wha— oh," Ben turned back to Raf. "Right. Come on then, why are we standing in the middle of the road?"

Raf sighed and continued walking, his hand still on Ben's shoulder. They reached the footpath where Ben shook himself free and walked off.

"Hey," Raf called. "Where are you going? It's this way."

"I'm... um... I'm," Ben scratched his head. Where the hell was he going? He couldn't think. "I'm going to the pub."

"What?" Raf stared at him. "You can't be serious?"

"Why?" Ben screwed up his face to shield himself from the glare in Raf eyes. "Don't you want to have a drink?"

"Mate," Raf sighed and shook his head. He muttered more to himself than to Ben. "You can get a drink when we get there..."

Ben stood still, twisting his head at odd angles to look behind and over Raf's shoulder. He wished he would move so that he had a clear view down the street. He wondered where Liv went and thought maybe she was worried about upsetting Raf. After all, she seemed really stressed about Ben getting Raf hit by a car. Not about Ben getting hurt, but about Raf getting hurt.

Wait. Something pinged in Ben's head. His stomach dropped to his feet, and his heart followed it, draining the blood from his face. Maybe there was more to this than met the eye.

Maybe Raf had brought him here to meet Liv. Maybe that's who they were supposed to have dinner with. Raf was being a bit mysterious about it all. Maybe Raf was going to tell him that he and Liv wanted to be together. It would make sense. After all, Liv was always telling him that he should be nicer to Raf. And she hadn't wanted Ben to tell Raf she was back. But Raf knew she was back because he was about to tell him something about Liv; maybe where she'd been and where they were going. Or something like that. Maybe the whole time that Raf was gone when he moved out was because he was with Liv. Maybe Ashley was just a pretend girlfriend so that he, Ben, didn't realise that Liv had left him to be with Raf.

He leaned forward and grabbed Raf by the shirtfront. "You fucking bastard!" It all made perfect sense now. Liv telling him they were through was about preparing him. She'd just been waiting for the right moment to tell him. And she'd chickened out. Now she wanted Raf to do it with her. So gutless.

Ben screamed in Raf's face. "How could you do this to me?" He tightened his grip on Raf, drawing him as close to his body as he could and screamed again.

Raf pushed him back but Ben wouldn't release his grip. He swore and spat in Raf's face. "I thought you were my friend," Ben screeched.

"Let me go, you pathetic alco," Raf said through gritted teeth. He brought his arms up through Ben's and wound them around his hands, grabbing hold of his thumb in a classic self-defence move. He twisted Ben's arm around behind his back and spun him around, slamming him into the nearby light pole.

Ben's face was mashed against the metal pole. He couldn't move. Raf slammed one arm across Ben's shoulders, pinning him, and wiped the saliva from his cheek on Ben's shoulder without easing the grip he had on his thumb knuckle.

"You listen to me you fucking fruitcake," Raf hissed.

But Ben didn't listen. He couldn't. He was thinking about Liv and how humiliated he felt that she'd been planning to leave him. All along. Behind his back. And he'd had no idea. He'd loved her. Worshipped her, even. How could she have done this? Why would she leave him all over again? His knees buckled and he slid to the ground.



"Get up off the road you freaking lunatic." Raf tried to pull him back onto the kerb. But Ben lay in the gutter where he'd rolled off the footpath, with his arms over his head. "What the hell are you doing?"

"How could you do this to me?" Ben sobbed, the anger giving way to despair. He curled up into a ball.

Raf stepped over him and began prodding him in the side with his foot. "Get up before you get hit by a truck or something."

"Leave me alone you traitor," Ben screamed. "I thought you were my friend. How could you do it?"

"Do what?" Raf reached down and hoisted him over the gutter onto the footpath. "What the hell are you talking about?"

A few people had gathered and stood about watching the scene. Ben pulled himself into a sitting position and Raf squatted in front of him.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," he snarled.

"Come on mate," Raf cajoled. "Let's go and get a drink and we'll talk about it."

Ben hesitated. He needed a drink. Desperately. Why wasn't he in the local, talking to Eddy where he'd normally be at this time on a Friday night? He shook his head trying to figure out what was going on. He was mad at Raf. Why? Because he'd dragged him out? Because he'd made him promise not to drink? No, that wasn't it. He was mad because.... because... he screwed up his face trying to remember. He had a headache. His guts were churning. He really needed a drink. Or to sleep. Yes, sleep would do it.

He closed his eyes. A sudden sharp pain in his ribs jerked him into full alertness. His eyes snapped open. Raf had kicked him. He was about to tell him to 'fuck off' but choked on his words when the crowd of onlookers parted to let a police officer through. They dissipated on her command.

The copper stood talking to Raf. Ben strained to hear what she was saying but the sudden traffic noise drowned out the conversation. The sounds of Friday night in Kings Cross seemed to get louder and louder and he clamped his hands over his ears.

"Hey Ben," the Officer squatted next to him. "What's going on, mate?"

"He... they... she..." Ben couldn't figure out what the officer was asking him. "What?"

He looked at Raf, still standing nearby. Nothing made any sense. He squeezed his eyes shut tight. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe he was having another panic attack. He opened his eyes to find Liv sitting in the gutter next to him.

The sight of her prompted his recall and he blurted, "why wouldn't you just tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell," she turned her head to look at him. "You got it all wrong, Bennikins."

"Don't call me that," he yelled. "How could you call me that after you betrayed me with Raf?"

"I didn't betray you Ben," Liv stood up and turned to face him. "Raf doesn't even know I'm here."

"He does so know," Ben cried. "He told me."

Liv's shoulders sagged and she started walking away.

"Please don't go," Ben implored. "Don't leave me here alone with him."

"I'm not going anywhere," the Police Officer said. "I'm going to stay with you until the ambulance gets here."

"What?" Ben glanced at the Officer, confused. "I'm not talking to you."

The Officer looked back over her shoulder, then up at Raf who shrugged. "Ben, who are you talking to?" she asked gently.

"Liv," Ben scrambled to his feet. "Liv, wait!" He started after her, pushing people out of the way to follow her along the footpath.

"Ben, stop," Raf yelled.

"LIVVY," Ben screamed.

People jumped out of his way as he stampeded along, followed by Raf and the Police Officer.

"BEN," Raf ran after him.

“STOP HIM,” called the Police Officer.

Liv stopped and whirled around. Ben came to a screeching halt in front of her. Her expression was calm but her words stabbed him in the heart.

“DON’T follow me. We will NEVER be together again. EVER. We are FINISHED. For all time,” she spoke clearly, slowly, annunciating each word.

Ben stared at her, dumbstruck. Raf caught up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. Ben whirled around and punched him in the mouth.

“It’s all your fault,” he screamed. “You did this. You made her leave me.”

Raf stared back at him, blood dripping from his lip. He made no move to defend himself or to fight back. Ben went to swing again but the police officer arrived and pulled her taser out, pointing it straight at him.

“Don’t move,” she said.

He didn’t even register the Officer’s command and stepped forward, lunging at Raf. She fired, hitting him in the chest. In that instant, time seemed to slow right down and as he crashed to the ground, he saw by the pity in Raf’s eyes and the anger in Olivia’s.

Chapter Twenty-two

"You're lucky you've got good friends who care about you," Dr Fysher said.

"Huh?" Raf stopped halfway across the ward and turned back to face him. He must've heard wrong. He didn't have any friends. No one cared about him.

"The reason you are not sitting in a gaol cell right now is because your friend refused to have you charged," the Dr told him.

"Not even when the police threatened to charge him with obstruction," Sally added.

"What?" Ben's mouth went dry. He felt as though his throat was closing over and gagged. They knew. He'd known they'd find him sooner or later. Now they were going to... well, he didn't know what they were going to do. In fact, he didn't know what was going on at all, or why he'd woken to find himself in hospital. He shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes and pressed, as though that might clear some of the fog. "What are you talking about?"

Sally stepped forward and led him back to the bed. "Have a seat," she said.

"I don't want to sit. I want to go home."

"I know you do, but that's not going to happen. Not yet anyway. You can make this as easy or as difficult as you like," Sally said. "But you have no choice. You will be here for 72 hours. The doctor makes the decision about whether you leave or not."

"What? Why?" Ben patted himself down checking for injuries.

"You've been scheduled," Dr Fysher said. "If you leave here you'll be arrested and charged."

Ben looked blankly at the doctor and Sally. He wondered briefly if he were in another one of his nightmares. But he was usually much younger in his dreams.

"Who did this?"

"You," Sally said. "You did this. Luckily the police brought you here to the hospital instead of arresting you and charging you with assault."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because, Raf, the person you assaulted in front of several witnesses, including a police officer, being the friend that is, talked them out of it."

Ben flopped back on the bed and let out a huge sigh. He watched the confusion within it float off through the window.

"This is because I hit Raf?" he said to no one in particular. The relief was palpable. He almost laughed. It had nothing to do with the alley. Or 'that' night. They probably didn't even know about it. He ached because he'd probably fought; he always came off second best when he tried it on with Raf.

He lay back and grinned. Dr Fysher frowned. Sally stared at him. He glanced from one to the other; they really had no idea what a gift they'd just given him.

"Seriously? You think this is funny?"

"What? No!" Ben gulped down his pleasure and sat up, trying to look suitably contrite. "I don't! Not at all. I'm really sorry I got in a fight with Raf. You're right—he's my friend. I just had too much to drink. That's all. Can I go now?"

"You don't remember it do you?" Sally asked.

Ben was clear about one thing. He had to get out and find Olivia. She would tell him what happened. He remembered being out with her last night, but he didn't remember Raf being there.

"Yeah I do," Ben lied.

"Ben," Sally said. "You are here at the request of the Police under Schedule 22 of the Mental Health Act to be assessed for Mental Illness."

"What?" Ben stared at her. His insides twisted and froze. "Why would they think I'm mentally ill?"

How could they think he was mentally ill? He was the sanest person he knew. Okay so he had a few problems, but mentally ill? This was Raf's fault. They'd already told him Raf had talked them into bringing him here. He bet it was just because he'd been drinking. Damn Raf.

"You don't agree?" The doctor asked.

"No," Ben scowled. "I don't. Did Raf tell the cops that I was a nut job?"

"Why do you think Raf would've told the police that?"

"How would I know?" Ben dragged his hand threw his hair and winced. He brought his hand down and stared at it. It was moist and gritty. He glanced up at Dr Fysher.

"You hit your head on the pavement when you were tasered," he told him.

"I was tasered?"

"The police tasered you because you attacked Raf unprovoked, and would've attacked the police officer if she hadn't taken you down," the doctor said.

"Bullshit," Ben spat.

"Mr Fitzpatrick," Dr Fysher said. "Are you suggesting that your friend, a police officer, and several random witnesses have all independently attested to something that did not happen?"

Put like that, Ben realised he'd be on shaky ground if he continued to protest something he had absolutely no memory of. He felt trapped. He needed to get out.

"No, of course not. I'm sorry," He figured he might as well cooperate. He needed to get



home and sort Raf out. "What do I have to do to make things right and get out of here?"

"Dr Fysher here is the consultant psychiatrist," Sally smiled. "He needs to do the assessment and make the recommendation to admit you or release you."

"Admit me? Where?"

"To a psychiatric facility. It'd be the psych ward here at the hospital in the first instance."

Ben stared. He felt the blood drain from his face. It pooled in his groin and he clutched himself. "I have to pee," he said. He needed to catch his breath.

Chapter Twenty-three

"Okay, okay," Ben said. "I get it, geez."

"Do you?" Raf put the coffee in front of him. "Do you really?"

"Yeah," Ben said. "For fuck's sake, how many times do you want to go over it?"

"Until I get it," Raf sighed. "So tell me again. I just want to make sure you really understand what's going on."

"I'm not an idiot," Ben snapped.

Raf raised an eyebrow. "Fine. If you say so."

Ben grinned in spite of himself. "I'd had a skinful and freaked out and attacked you. The copper saw it and I tried to hit her. She tasered me. Was going to arrest me. You told them I had a drinking problem. Thanks for that by the way," he rolled his eyes. "So they sent me to the loony bin instead..."

"C'mon, Fitz," Raf swiped him with the rolled up newspaper on the table.

"...cos if I'd've been charged and convicted, I would've forfeited my inheritance and been forced to sell my unit to live off the proceeds because I wouldn't be able to get a job with a criminal record. And I would've ended up on the streets living the life of some drunk ole derro who no-one would ever go near cos I'd stink like hell. That just about cover it?"

"Yeah, just about," Raf chuckled.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"How'd you know the terms of the trust fund?"

"I was with you when the trustees were explaining why they cut you off when you got your leave-of-absence from uni."

"They didn't say anything about it," Ben said.

"Mate, read the small print," Raf pointed to the pile of legal papers on the table in front of them. "It's all there plain as day."

They read it together. Again. Ben had had no idea that the clause about cutting off his trust fund if he was ever convicted of violence was there. He could've lost everything. Affection for Raf welled inside him. It surprised him.

"We're mates, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we're mates," Raf said.

"Who'd have thought?"

"What? That we'd be mates?"

"That I'd be mates with... well... you know," Ben grinned. "Probably lucky I didn't go ahead with my plan to beat you senseless."

"Because that would've ensured you held onto your trust fund." Raf whacked him with the newsletter, smearing sarcasm all over him.

"Which is why I didn't," Ben grabbed the paper and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Yeah, but you didn't know about it then. So how did you manage to get out so quickly?"

"24-hours is not quick!" Ben grumbled. "Sally told me that if I admitted to the drinking 'problem' and agreed to go to counselling, that they'd release me on my own incognisance."

"Incognisance? Bahaha...."

Ben was confused. "That's what they said. The doc said I just had to agree to go to counselling with Sally and he'd sign the release papers."

"I'm pretty sure they meant REcognisance," Raf laughed. "Your INcognisance is what got you there in the first place."

"Oh," Ben blushed. "Incognisance, recognisance, whatever..." He got up and walked out of the room.

"Where you going?" Raf called after him.

"Going to see Eddy and let him know I'm back, not that it's any of your business," Ben sulked.

"Really? You're seriously going to the pub?"

"Eddy is my mate," Ben stuck his head around back around the door, glowering. He resented the implication. "I need to check on him after..."

"After what?"

"After the pic."

"What pic?" Raf raised an eyebrow. "You got another one?"

"The one of me and Eddy in the pub that came in the other day. Didn't I tell you? But it wasn't how it looked," Ben almost pleaded Raf to believe him. He pulled his phone out to show him, but instead found another notification. "Argh!"

"Geez," Raf grabbed his phone and opened Instagram. "Look at it!"

"Fuck me," Ben groaned. He dragged the back of his hand over his forehead to wipe the sweat that was sprouting. The look of madness in his eyes frightened even him. He grabbed the phone back, switched it off and shoved it into his pocket.

"I gotta go check on Ed and tell him I'm okay," Ben said. "Most times he's the only one looking out for me."



Observationist Ch10 @benfitz He even went after the constabulary #violent #criminal #staytuned #iknowwhyyourun

"What do you mean he's the only one looking out for you? What have I been doing for fuck's sake?" Raf scowled.

"I meant, only *other* one looking out for me," Ben backtracked.

"Just as bloody well," Raf said. He pulled a piece of paper from the pile and slapped it on the table. "So before you go down to the pub you need to come and look at this."

"What is it?"

"It's a contract."

"What kind of a contract?"

"A contract just between you and me," Raf rolled a pen across the table.

"Why do we need a contract?"

"Because..." Raf ran his fingers through his hair, and shoved his hand in his pocket. "I want to make sure you're going to be okay tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that."

"Why?"

"I just told you—"

"What's in it for you?" Ben dropped back into the chair. "I mean why would you care so much?"

"Okay," Raf sighed and looked away for a few seconds, as though he were looking for the right words. "Remember when I first started school here?"

"Yeah....so...?"

"...and you came over that day and sat with me and shared your lunch?"

"Yeah, the week you started," Ben nodded.

"Mate, I'd been at the school for six months by then," Raf frowned. "And every day for six months, I got beat up."

Ben was shocked. He knew Raf had had a hard time when he first started, but he never talked about it.

"On the way out here, to Australia, I was terrified. Everyone was. My family spent so long in war zones and then refugee camps, that we all thought we would die in one. It was awful. I watched my Mum get hurt. I watched my dad get hurt, I watched my sister.... Anyway... the only thing that kept me going, were the stories my folks told me about Australia. You know, being a beautiful and peaceful place where people helped each out instead bashing each other senseless or blowing each up...." Raf paused.

Ben didn't know what to say. He'd had no clue about what Raf had gone through before he got here. And he'd never asked. He sat, silent, and waited for Raf to continue.

"But it wasn't true, at least not for me. Every day here was just as bad as the camps. That day you came and sat next me? That night was the night I'd planned to kill myself..."

"What? How?"

"I'd been pinching my Mum's sleeping tablets one at a time so she wouldn't notice.... I figured it wasn't going to get any better, and I couldn't handle it anymore."

"No way," Ben was reeling. "You were eight!"

"Then you came and sat down and shared your sandwich and chatted away and took me to play soccer. And everything changed for me. Everything. And not just for me. For my whole family."

Ben shook his head. How did he not know this? How could he have been mates with Raf for so long and not known this?

Raf continued. "You dragged me along to Saturday soccer and got me on your team, and you introduced my sister to yours. My family came to Saturday games and got to know other parents and they started making friends and my Mum stopped having nightmares and my Dad started building shit again. Our lives changed that day. And I will never forget it." Raf punched him lightly on the arm. "So now it's my turn to look out for you."

Ben stared at Raf as if it he was seeing him for the first time.

"You can close your mouth now," Raf said, blushing.

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Didn't need to. Didn't matter. You were going through shit as well," Raf said.

"But you're so..." Ben couldn't imagine Raf being suicidal. Ever. He's so happy all the time. It was doing Ben's head in. How could Raf be so together after everything he's been through and Ben be so... well, pathetic.

"Anyway, anyone who tried to beat me up these days would end up much worse off," Raf said. "I started doing Tae-kwon-do so I could look after myself. And I can. But I can also look out for you. And that's what I'm doing with this contract. So..."

"I..." Ben started to protest.

"Mate, how is me stepping in to help you out now any different to when you step in for other people? You used do it all the time. Only now... well, now it's you who needs..." Raf pre-empted Ben's defence. "I mean... I just want to make sure you're going to be okay."

"Of course I'm going to be okay," Ben said, scratching his head. "Especially when I get rid of that cyberstalker."

"You're not going to be okay if you keep drinking every day, or don't turn up to your counselling sessions, or don't go back to uni." Raf threw his hands up in a surrender gesture stopping any more protest before the words made it out of Ben's mouth. "And I'm making no judgements if you do."

"Then what's the problem?" Ben was not sure where this was going.

"The problem is – what if you miss another clause of your trustee contract? You dodged a bullet you know, it would've been disastrous for you if I hadn't gotten you out of that shit."

Ben stared at him. He was right about that. He got up and wandered over to the window.

"And have you read the letter from the uni about your start date?" Raf was on a roll. "Do you even know what will happen if you don't re-enrol? You know you have a limited time to complete your undergrad, don't you?"

"What?"

"Yeah, and then you lose your stipend for good. And won't get your money until you're way too old to enjoy it."

"How long have I got to finish?" Ben dropped into the chair at the table. "And how do you even know this stuff?"

"I know this stuff because I take notice of things," Raf said.

"I take notice of things," Ben whined.

"Really?"

"Well, I try to... but sometimes..."

"Sometimes you just need a bit of help, especially when things aren't going so well for you," Raf said. "And I'm the person to help you. Because that's what mates do. They help each other out."

"How is signing a contract with you going to help?"

"It's just so I can look after your affairs for you," Raf held the pen out to Ben. "You know, look after the legal side of things so that you know what you have to do and when you have to do it."

Ben stared at Raf. He didn't know if this was a good idea or not. He thought Raf was making sense. It was true; Ben didn't know all the fine print in the Terms and Conditions of his Trust, nor did he care much for reading it. If Raf looked after all that kind of stuff, he wouldn't have to worry about getting cut off again. Raf could just tell him what he had to do and when he had to do it.

But. Did he really want to sign a contract saying Raf could look after all his affairs? He wasn't exactly sure what that would mean. But. It would be easier... so much easier.

"What do you say?" Raf waved the pen at him.

"Um," Ben hesitated. "But why do I have to sign a contract? Why can't you just do all that stuff anyway?"

Raf sighed. "Because no one will give me any information unless they have signed permission from you."

"But..."

"Come on mate," Raf wheedled. "Really, have I ever done you wrong?"

"I guess not," Ben dragged the back of his hand across his eyes. All this thinking was making him thirsty. "I suppose it can't do any harm."

"That's the way," Raf leaned forward and pushed the paper across to him.

"It's just so as you can help me out, right?" Ben took the pen from him. He didn't fully understand the implications of 'power of attorney' but seeing as Raf was studying Law, he figured he knew what he was doing.

"Yep, sure is," Raf smiled.

Chapter Twenty-four

"Geez," Eddy said. "You're bloody lucky then."

"Yeah," Ben sucked on his schooner. He'd told Eddy all about the drama but skipped the part about the role Raf claimed alcohol had played in his incarceration. Eddy was an astute character and Ben figured he knew. They didn't need to talk about it.

"You gotta watch that bleedin temper of yours, is all," Eddy dried the glasses as he pulled them out of the washer on the bench behind him. "Don't wanna have to be wondering where you is again, you know?"

"Yeah mate," Ben said. "I know."

"You got a good friend in the old Raffo."

"Yeah, I know that too," Ben stared into his beer. "He saved my butt alright. And now he says he's going to look after the legal stuff for me too."

Eddy looked hard at Ben. He frowned and focussed hard on the glass he was wiping, as though he was mulling something over.

"Hmmm," Eddy said, finally putting the glass down. "Not the first time he's saved your butt, hey?"

"What do you mean?"

"Those bozos that came looking for you? They came again and Raf chased them away."

"What? Who? When?"

"Didn't he tell you?" Eddy tossed his tea towel over his shoulder and stacked the glasses in the rack.

"No, he didn't," Ben drained his glass and slapped it onto the bar. "What happened?"

Eddy looked a bit uneasy. "He should probably tell you himself."

"You tell me Ed," Ben insisted.

"Well..." Eddy hesitated, staring in the bottom of the glass he'd picked up, as though he was examining the merits of telling him or not. "Well..."

"C'mon old man, spit it out."

"Okay, okay, keep your bleedin pants on," Eddy growled. "Give a bloke a chance to get his thoughts together, will ya."

"Geez Ed, what's wrong with you? Just tell me what happened!"

"Fine!" Eddy dropped the glass on the bar in front of Ben and looked straight at him. "They came here again. And Raf knew them."

"What?"

"He knew 'em. They called him by name and he shushed em up and sent em outside, I s'pose so's I couldn't hear what was going on. But I sent old mate over there out to see what was happenin." Eddy motioned toward an old timer sitting at the end of the bar.

"How could he know them?" Ben was stunned.

He glanced down to where Eddy had indicated and watched as the old man raised his glass to him. Eddy beckoned him over. They watched him make his way up to the bar.

"Hey Tez," Eddy said. "Tell the young bloke here what happened with Raf and them bozos the other day."

Tez scratched his head and nodded. He carefully placed his beer on the bar and propped himself up with his elbows on either side of the glass, ignoring Ben completely.

"They wanted to know if the kid here had been collared yet," he said to Eddy. Ben's stomach crashed to the ground. He stared at the space between his knees and barely heard what came next.

"Raf yelled at them about giving the game away or something like that," Tez continued. "I didn't get what. But Raf was fired up all right. Then he tells them it's not time, or something. Then the geezers started getting mad and swearing at him. Thought there was going to be a fight, so I came back inside. I'm too old for that shit."

"Hear that, Benno?" Eddy said.

"Yeah, I heard," Ben fought the rising dread and got up from the bar. "I'm gonna find out what's going on. See you later."

"Raf," he called down the hall. "Oi!"

There was no answer. The pile of papers was gone from the table; Raf must've cleared up. Ben sat and pulled out his phone to text him. He wanted to ask him directly, he needed to know what was going on. He began to compose a text, but before he'd finished, his message tone went off.

He groaned. He almost expected it. Being haunted was the price he paid for using his phone these days. The familiar sensation of goosebumps crawling across his skin made him shudder as he read the next instalment on the Observationist's profile. He stared at the accompanying picture and wondered if he should play it.

"Who the hell would video that?" he wondered. He wished he could

remember who else was there. He had no memory of the events of that night at all. None. But



Observationist Ch11 @benfitz He had no respect for anyone, not even himself #abusive #pathetic #staytuned #iknowwhyourun

neither did he want to be reminded of his actions. He logged onto Instagram and deleted his account.

"Thought you'd still be at the pub," Raf said from behind him.

"I came back," Ben whirled around to face him. "I wanted to talk to you."

"What's up?" Raf walked past him and put the kettle on.

"You know how I told you about the guys that grilled Eddy about me a while back?"

"Yeah," Raf spooned coffee and sugar into two mugs.

"Do you know them?"

"Why would you think I'd know them?"

"Just answer the question," Ben watched Raf's reaction carefully. Raf had his back to him while he poured the coffee.

He brought the mugs to the table and placed one in front of Ben. "No," he said, "I don't know them."

Ben sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Seriously? Why are you even asking?"

"Because Eddy said they were at the pub asking about me and you chased them away."

"Well," Raf cradled his mug and gazed into the coffee. "He's right about that. They were at the pub and I did chase them away."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were already freaked out about The Observationist, and I didn't want to freak you out even more," Raf looked directly at him. "I'm looking out for you, mate."

Ben was conflicted. He really wanted to believe Raf. But Eddy had no reason to lie to him. Maybe Tez misheard, he is pretty old after all.

"Anyway," Raf continued. "I did find something out that might be of interest if you really want to know."

"Yeah?" Ben fiddled with his phone, deleting the text he'd been going to send. "What's that?"

"Someone's been paying them to follow you around," Raf said.

"What? Who? Why?"

"I don't know who," Raf shrugged. "But I'm guessing it's to take video and photos for The Observationist."

"They're taking the photos? Did you see them the other night?"

"Nope, why? Did you get another one?"

"Yeah, but I deleted my Instagram account so it doesn't matter anymore."

"You dufus," Raf scolded. "Deleting Instagram won't make an ounce of difference."

"Yes it will," Ben shot back. "Means I won't get any more of those stupid notifications."

"But the rest of the world still will," Raf said.

"What do you mean?"

Raf leaned over and pulled the laptop toward him. He opened it and typed The Observationist into Google. Not only did the Instagram account pop up, so did a whole blog site called The Observationist. All the Instagram posts, including the jpegs and mp4s were there, including another few.

"Oh my god," Raf gasped. "Seriously!"



Observationist Ch12 @benfitz One day it all got too much and the boy found himself in the loony bin #psycho #nutjob #criminallyinsane #staytuned #iknowwhyourun

"What?" Ben leaned over Raf's shoulder to look at the screen.

Ben peered at the picture and then back at Raf.

"What?" Raf asked.

"You were there," Ben said.

"What are you saying?"

"No one else was there Raf," Ben swallowed the panic with the last of his coffee, not wanting to believe it. "Did you...?"

"Are you seriously accusing me of following you in the ambulance and then videoing you through the hospital door

when you were stripped naked and handcuffed to a bed?"

"Did you?" Ben held his breath.

"Dude," Raf stood up and put the coffee mugs in the sink. He swung around to face Ben. "Again, what kind of a person do you think I am?"

"I... er... you..." Ben looked away; he couldn't bear the hurt in Raf's eyes. He felt awful for thinking that Raf might be a part of this. "Mate, I..."

"I was really upset that night. Do you even know what you put me through? The battle I had, to talk the cops out of charging you? The excuses I had to make to keep you out of gaol? Do you remember anything at all?"

"I'm sorry..."

"While you were in hospital sleeping it off, I was at the police station trying to protect your reputation, trying to prevent you from getting arrested and having a criminal record. All the while..."

"Raf," Ben tried. "I just—"

"You know what?" Raf stepped toward the door. "Don't even worry about it. I'm done trying to help you out."

Ben watched him go. He heard the bedroom door slam shut. He had never seen Raf that deflated before. He wasn't sure what to do. He felt awful. And conflicted. He needed to clear his head.

Chapter Twenty-five

He crossed the road and walked to the park. It didn't make sense. Did Raf know the blokes who'd been terrorising him? Who could've taken that photo, if not Raf? What the hell was going on?

He plonked himself down on a park bench and stared aimlessly ahead. Thoughts and theories tumbled over themselves as he tried to make sense of what he'd heard from Eddy and what had happened at home.

Maybe he'd got it wrong. Maybe Raf didn't know them at all. And maybe he didn't take the photo, he'd seemed really upset. But the mess in his guts suggested otherwise. It made sense. Sort of. But at the same time nothing made sense. Was Raf a good guy or a bad guy? Ben couldn't figure it out. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed the heels of his hands to each temple to prevent his head from exploding.

"What's wrong, Ben?"

"Huh?" Ben snapped opened his eyes and stared straight into Olivia's. He jumped up to hug her but she sidestepped just as quickly. He tripped and fell flat. By the time he pulled himself up off the ground, Liv was sitting on the bench he'd just leapt from. He whirled around to face her.

"I thought I was never going to see you again."

"Well..." she said. "I wanted to wait until you came to your senses before we talked."

"What?" Ben had no idea what she was talking about. "What senses? What do you mean?"

A young couple wandered past. They kept stealing furtive glances over their shoulders as they walked. It was distracting. Ben glared at them. He didn't mean to frighten them but they broke into a jog. He turned back to Liv, but she was gone.

"LIV," he yelled, panicked.

She stepped out from behind the tree. "Really?" She watched the couple run off.

"I didn't mean to..." Ben said. He sat on the end of the bench and turned to look at her.

The late afternoon sun reached into the highlights of her hair, and lifted and dropped them sending them sparkling and dancing around her shoulders as she launched herself over the back of the bench. She sat, one hand on either side of her knees, gripping the seat and swinging her legs as though she didn't have a care in the world. For a minute Ben forgot the mess his life was in and became lost in her beauty. Liv gazed out past him into the distance; the sun in her hair

seemed to give it a golden glow. He manoeuvred himself so that he was facing her. "Where have you been?"

"Around and about," she said. "Where have you been?"

"I've... I've been... well, um..." Ben hung his head. "Liv..."

"You should be sorry," Liv pre-empted his apology. "You were awful. Going on like a psycho, one of these days they'll lock you up and you won't ever be getting out."

"Huh?" Ben looked up, wide-eyed. His breath caught in his throat. It couldn't possibly be... but she used the same words as...

"You can't just keep treating people like crap."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh come on, Ben," Liv rolled her eyes. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"You were there...?"

"Ben I can't—"

"Liv," Ben stopped her. "Is it you that's been sending those awful messages?"

"What awful messages?" Liv looked shocked. Her eyes glistened. "You think I..."

It was too much too bear. An urgency he didn't understand propelled him off the bench and onto the ground in front of her. "I'm sorry Livvy. Please don't be mad. I don't know what's going on. Everything is such a mess. I... I..."

"What is it Ben?" Her expression softened and she leaned toward him. "What's happened?"

"You were there, weren't you?" Ben repeated. "I don't remember any of it."

"And why is that?"

"Because I was... I'm so sorry, Liv," Ben glanced up at her. She just stared at him, her green eyes piercing under her furrowed brow. Her lips were pursed, her expression set, almost hard. Fear simmered deep in Ben's gut. "Please..."

"No," Liv said. She stood up. "I can't."

"Please Liv," Ben begged. "I can't do it by myself anymore. I don't know who to trust. Everything is so... so... screwed up."

"I have to go," Liv said. "But, walk with me."

They walked in silence. They kept walking as the light turned and the dusk played with the shadows at their heels. They walked as the last rays of light slipped behind the horizon and darkness swept a chill through their bones.

He told her everything he remembered and everything he'd been told. And when he'd talked himself out, she turned to him. "Where are you in all of this?"

"What do you mean?" Ben stared at her.

"Where are you?" She repeated.

He was standing right in front of her. Couldn't she see that? "I'm here," he patted his chest.

"But, are you really?" Liv, again, stared off into the distance as though she was looking for something.

He turned to look too, but whirled back just as quickly for fear she should disappear.

"Liv...?"

Her eyes swung slowly back until they locked with his. His stomach flipped. He stood, frozen. He wished he could stop time so that this moment could last forever.

"Sit," she plopped herself onto the ground and leaned back against a tree, patting the ground beside her. He sat, careful not to touch her. He couldn't stand it if he frightened her off again. "Where are you?"

"I don't..."

"You do understand Ben," she turned to look at him. "I think you've understood for a while. I just think you're too scared to acknowledge it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ben, think about it. Please. I don't have much time left to be hanging around doing this."

There was annoyance in her voice, and a gravity that scared him. He had never heard her talk like this before. She had always been so measured in her dealings with him. She was usually playful and gentle and calm. Sure, she got cranky and sometimes she'd even yelled at him. But something was definitely not right. He just didn't know what.

"I don't... wait, where are you going? Please don't go. I need you."

"No, you don't," she shook her head. "You need to start taking care of yourself."

"I've been taking care of myself my whole life, Liv," he sighed. "You know that."

"You think you have," Liv reached her hand out toward him, just stopping short of touching him. "But really, you've just been muddling through. I have to go soon, Ben. And I can't come back."

"Where? Where do you have to go? Can I come with you? Why can't you come back? What's going on Liv? You're freaking me out." Ben reached up to take her hand but she pulled it away and stood up.

"You need to try, Ben," she said.

Ben hung his head, defeated. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, his voice breaking. "I don't know anything anymore."

"Come on," Liv said. "Let's go."

Ben looked up and watched her take a few steps back, beckoning him. He suddenly felt exhausted. "I can't," he pouted.

She turned and continued walking away from him.

"Liv," he called.

"You gotta help yourself before anyone else can help you," Liv stopped and turned around to face him. "I never understood that when we were together. I do now, though. It's why I came back."

Ben went to her. She started walking again and he fell into step beside her. He didn't know, or care, where they were going.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I thought I could save you," she whispered.

"Save me from what?" Trepidation churned in his guts. "From who...?"

"From yourself, Bennikins."

Ben was stunned. He stopped dead. "What?"

Liv turned to look at him. Tears poured silently down her face. "I'm sorry, I couldn't save you, Benny. You'll have to save yourself. Just know that I love you. Always did."

Ben stared at her.

"I have to go now," she said.

He fell to his knees. The world seemed to crumble around him. He collapsed under its weight, falling sideways onto the path, hugging his shins into his chest. He rocked back and forth.



Chapter Twenty-six

"Ben...? Is that you...?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"What's wrong?" Rebecca asked. "What's happened? Are you okay?"

"Um," Ben didn't know what to say. He pulled the phone from his ear and considered hanging up.

"Ben...?" Her voice sounded a million miles away.

"Yeah," he sighed. "I'm here... how are you?"

"I'm okay," Rebecca paused. "What's going on? Where are you?"

"I'm at home. I... uh... I had... everything is so... so messed up and... and I... well, I just wanted to... you know... check in," Ben knew he sounded pathetic. He didn't know what else to say. But he'd promised Liv. Something had changed. In him. Liv said that he needed people around him he could really trust. She said Bec was the only other person aside from her that he could count on. And even if Ben wasn't so sure, he'd promised he would ring her.

"Benny," Rebecca said. "Did you get my message? I'll be home in a few months."

"Yeah," Ben said. "Yeah, I know." He put the phone down.

"Hey," Raf walked into the room. "Thought I heard you. Where've you been?"

"I went for a walk," Ben tried to remember.

"Must've walked a long way," Raf said. "You've been gone a while."

"Huh?"

"Haven't seen you around for a few days," Raf sat at the table. "You okay?"

"I haven't been a bender if that's what you mean," Ben scowled. He'd promised Liv that too, said he wouldn't touch a drop.

"I know," Raf said. "Eddy's been asking after you."

The message tone on Ben's phone sounded. He stared at it, empty-headed.

"You going to get it?" Raf asked.

Ben picked up the phone and looked at the message. It was another text.

Ben frowned. And fixed his gaze on Raf.

"What is it?" Raf reached for the phone. Ben let him take it out of his hand. Raf read the text. He stared at the picture on the screen, and then passed it to Ben.



Observationist Ch13 @benfitz He lost everyone #loner
#loser #pathetic #staytuned #iknowwhyyourun

Ben didn't want to see it. He couldn't think. His head was spinning. He took his phone, turned it off and left the unit.

"Bout bloody time you showed up," Eddy commented. "Was thinking you got done."

"Done for what?" Ben scratched his head. He did not ask for a drink.

"Dunno," Eddy frowned. "You alright? You look kinda beat."

"Eddy," Ben began. "You've known me for a while now."

"Yep."

"And you've known Raf for a while now, too."

"Yep."

Ben considered his words carefully. "Do you think..."

"Come on then," Eddy stopped wiping the bar in front of Ben. "Spit it out."

"Well... I don't know if... um, I mean..."

"What's wrong with you, Benno?"

"Do you think Raf is a good bloke?"

Eddy dragged his stool over and sat in front of Ben. "Well now, that depends on what you mean by 'a good bloke.' I been thinking something's not quite right there since those blokes came round looking for you."

"You have?"

"Yeah," Eddy pulled at his ear lobe. "It's all well and good to be looking out for yer as yer mate, but when he's talking about yer behind yer back to some other strange dudes who been pretending to be cops. Something's not right."

"Hmm..." Ben was distracted.

"What's going on with yer?"

"I've been getting these messages," Ben tried to explain the technology but he wasn't sure that Eddy was getting it.

"What kind of messages? Who's sending them?"

"Well, that's just it, see. I don't know who's sending them."

"Why not?"

"Because they don't exactly sign them," Ben snapped.

"Seems to me," Eddy said, ignoring Ben's slight. "That 'stead of just reading them. You should be trying to find out where they coming from."

"I've been trying," Ben sighed. "But I can't figure out who could've been taking all those pictures. It has to be someone who's been following me around for... well, ever."

"Snot me," Eddy said.

"I know that mate," Ben knew Eddy couldn't even use a computer. "But I thought you might be able to help me figure out who it is."

"Yer did, did yer?" Eddy beamed.

"Yeah," Ben smiled back. "Will you give me a hand?"

"Course I will," Eddy dropped his tea towel on the bar, glanced around the empty pub to double check there were no customers, then closed up shop. "Let's have a gander."

Ben pulled up The Observationist blog and handed the phone to Eddy. He watched as Eddy scrolled through the posts and pictures.

"What's this one?" Eddy pointed to the video.

Ben played it for him. Eddy's released the breath he'd been holding out in a whistle through his teeth, and looked back up at Ben.

"This you?"

"Yeah," Ben hung his head. "It's me."

"That when you hurt your hand?"

"Yeah." Shame and remorse melted over Ben under Eddy's gaze.

"Geesh," Eddy scrolled back through all the pictures again. "That's a bit full-on, mate."

"Yeah."

"And you think Raf knows who's doing it?"

"I didn't," Ben took the phone back and navigated to the last message he'd received. "Until I got this one."

He showed the screen to Eddy.

"What is it?" Eddy scratched his head.

"It's my Trust Fund doc."

"Huh?"

"It's a legal contract that says when I get money from my Mum's estate," Ben explained. "The only people in the world to have ever seen it are my folks, the Trustees and the executor, my sister and me. And Raf."

"Ah..."

"Yeah."

"I see what yer mean," Eddy nodded. "Did yer ask him about it?"

"Nah."

"Why not?" Eddy scrolled back a few photos. "And what about this one? Did yer ask him about this one?"

"What?"

Eddy pointed to the video of Ben in the gutter. Ben took the phone and zoomed in a bit to see what Eddy was pointing at. Whoever took the photo must've been standing across the road, pointing the lens toward the opposite sidewalk.

Raf was crouched by the side of the road, reaching down toward Ben, but looking up at the photographer. Ben hadn't noticed before because the person blended in with the background, and there were other people standing around, both in front of and behind the person crouching. Ben zoomed in further. Raf was—unmistakably, undeniably, looking straight at the camera.

"He must've seen who took the picture," Eddy said. "Don't you reckon?"

"Mate," Ben leapt off the stool. How had he not noticed that before? "You're a bloody legend."

He raced out of the pub, leaving Eddy behind the bar grinning maniacally. His mind raced as he trundled up the hill to the flat. There's no way Raf could not have seen who took the photo. Why wouldn't he have just told him? Instead of denying it?

"Raf," he called, opening the front door. Raf didn't answer but Ben heard the shower running so he sat at the table and waited.

Eddy was right. The only way to find out what Raf knew was to ask him straight. His stomach churned as he drummed his fingers on the table and he wracked his brain trying to remember something about that night. Anything. But as usual, he got nothing.

His message tone sounded and his guts clenched. It could only mean one thing. He pulled the phone from his pocket and his finger hovered over the delete button as fear battled his curiosity over what this next edition may be. Curiosity won. He read the message.



Observationist Ch14 @benfitz It's only a matter of time before he crashes and burns. Permanently! #crashnburn #psycho #staytuned #iknowwhyyourun

The footage was from yesterday. He knew exactly where it had been taken and wondered why Liv wasn't in it. She'd been right there with him. She must've seen who'd taken it. She'd know. She'd tell him. He had to find Liv. He jumped up to leave just as Raf came into the kitchen towel-drying his hair. And then he remembered why he'd been waiting.

"Hey," Raf threw the towel across the back of a chair and crossed the floor to the bench to put the kettle on.

"Hey," Ben stood, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

"What's up?"

"Um," Ben looked from his phone to Raf and back again.

"You got another one, didn't you?"

"Yeah..."

"What'd it say?"

"Mate," Ben drew in a deep breath. "Is it you?" There. He said it.

Raf was quiet as he finished making coffee. He brought two mugs across to the table and put one in front of Ben.

"We've been through his," Raf sighed. "Why would you think it's me? I've been trying to convince you to go to the police about it pretty much since it started."

That was true. But there was something about the measured way in which Raf spoke that set Ben on edge.

"I've been going back over the photos," Ben said. "And there are a few things that don't sit right."

"There's a lot more than a few things that don't sit right," Raf laughed uneasily.

Ben pulled the laptop across the table and opened it. The Observationist's website was already open. Ben glanced up at Raf with one eyebrow raised.

"I was checking out the photos," Raf said. "And I have a few questions of my own."

"Like what?"

"For instance, who else knows about your trust?"

"Huh?"

"The fact that you live off your inheritance," Raf said. "You who else knows?"

"No one," Ben said. "Except you." And Eddy, but he didn't count. "Why?"

"Because who else could've seen the contract closely enough to take a photo?"

"You mean apart from you? Because, you know," Ben shifted uncomfortably under Raf's gaze. "I've been wondering the same thing."

"I don't blame you really," Raf smiled. "It's pretty freaky."

Ben was so confused. He expected Raf to be angry or upset at his questioning.

"Yeah." It was all he could think of to say.

"I've been trying to figure it out for days," Raf continued. "You know the night you were in hospital? I was thinking that maybe someone paid off the nurse to get access to you."

"What?"

"Well, how else would someone get a photo of you like that?" Raf asked. "You didn't have handcuffs on when I got there."

"I don't remember having handcuffs on at all," Ben frowned into his coffee cup. "Maybe someone is photoshopping these pictures."

"Photoshopping them?" Raf scoffed. "Seriously?"

"Maybe," Ben said. The idea appealed to him. It was easier to think someone was photoshopping them than he was actually... well... you know.

"You've got to be kidding. I was in some of those photos Ben," Raf said. Frustration dribbled down the side of his face in little beads of sweat.

"Exactly," Ben thumped the table. "That's my point."

"What?"

"You're in the photo," Ben said. "So if it wasn't you taking it, then you must've at least seen who did!"

"What about the last message?" Raf yelled. "Was I in that one?"

"Yes, you were!" Ben yelled back. "And you were looking at whoever took the photo. And smiling!"

"What?"

"In chapter 11. You were—" The realisation that he just referred to the stalker texts as chapters of his life hit him like a sledgehammer.

"I was grimacing," Raf said through clenched teeth.

"It looked like—"

"My mate was rolling around the gutter having an alcohol-induced psychotic break," Raf spat. "And you think I was laughing about it??"

"Well," Ben knew he was on shaky ground, "I didn't show you the last text. How did you know about that?"

"It's on the website you freak," Raf said. "I keep telling you. Your life is being played out in the public arena."

"It's not my life!" Ben yelled, hurling the empty cup across the kitchen toward the sink where it shattered against the tiles.

"So that wasn't you rolling drunk on the ground in the park?" Raf shouted straight back.

"I wasn't drunk. And I wasn't in the park. I told you." Ben stared at the jagged ceramic pieces strewn across the bench and floor. They formed a pattern of obstacles not unlike those through which he remembered walking for ages. With Liv. She had been with him the whole time. She had told him stuff. She had said good-bye. She hadn't been in the photo.

Raf followed his gaze and sighed. The phone that lay on the table between them vibrated. Ben ignored it. Raf picked it up. He read the screen and held it out to Ben. "*Ch15: @benfitzp And that time is coming... soon... #canthide #staytuned #iknowwhyyourun,*" he read.

"Is this park you weren't in?" Raf pointed to the picture that filled the screen. It was of Ben walking, head down, hands thrust in pockets, scowling, same park as before.

"Did you follow me?" Ben asked, heart thumping in his chest.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Raf shouted. "Do you seriously think it's me that's doing this?"

"Are you?"

Chapter Twenty-seven

"I don't know what it means," Ben said.

"Can't help yer, Benno," Eddy put a schooner in front of him. Ben pushed it away. "Hey, what's up wiv yer? Not like you to knock back an ale."

"I don't know what it means," Ben repeated. "What do you reckon?"

"I dunno," Eddy shrugged. "What'd Raffo say?"

"He denies everything."

"Well, he would, wouldn't he, if it were him."

"I suppose," Ben scratched at the edge of the bar, his fingernail collected fine splinters of wood lacquer that he then flicked onto the floor. "But I'm not sure it is. He seemed pretty upset when I asked him."

"Yeah, imagine he would," Eddy lamented. "So, what'd the last one say then?"

"Huh?" Ben glanced up.

"Oi," Eddy scowled and swept Ben's hand off the bench. "Yer gonna carve a bloody rut in it and folks'll be spilling beer all over the place."

Ben looked up, surprised. It wasn't like Eddy to go off at him. And this was the second time. He surveyed his handiwork. He'd fashioned a groove that now hosted the excess fluid from Eddy's dishcloth.

"It said," Ben absentmindedly ran his finger over the groove. "Something about 'the time is coming,' but I don't know what that means."

"The time for what?"

Ben shrugged. "No idea."

"Hmm," Eddy turned his back to Ben to do something behind the bar. "Did it have a picture or anything with it."

"Yeah, they always do. But it was the same as the one before, without a video."

"Hmm... what'd Raffo say about it?"

"Thought I was pissed," Ben said. "But I wasn't. I'd been talking to Liv. She came and found me when I was in the park."

"Well," Eddy turned back around and looked hard at Ben. "That's a good thing isn't it? You was worried she wouldn't come back at all."

"Yeah," Ben sighed. He dropped his elbows on the bar and dropped his chin into the heels of his palms. "But now she's told me she has to go and she can't come back. Ever."

"Bugger," Eddy pushed the schooner back in front of Ben. "Here, take the edge off."

"I don't want it, Ed," Ben scowled. "I'm giving it up."

"That right?" Eddy raised one eyebrow. "And what'll that do for ya?"

"Huh?"

"It'll do yer head in is what. Cos you'll have no escape then," Eddy said. "A few beers in the arvos is yer only vice now yer given up the harder stuff."

"Geez Ed," Ben dropped his elbows and picked up the schooner. "One day you're telling me I drink too much and the next you're saying I should drink more! What's the deal?"

"Gotta be able to deal with the crap Benno," Eddy grinned. "Way I see it, it's a few coldies that'll help yer."

Ben picked up the beer and raised it to his lips. But as the pungent aroma of hops and yeast tugged at his senses, he put it back down on the bar and pushed it toward the barman. Eddy watched him.

"Don't want it," Ben told him.

"Righty-ho then," Eddy said. "But not much I can do with it now, 'cept pour it down the sink. Sure you don't want it? On the house."

"Yeah, I want it," Ben said. Eddy pushed it back in front of him. "I mean, yeah I'm sure." He started to push it back. "Aw geez, fine! I'll have it."

"Not gonna kill yer, mate," Eddy grinned, satisfied. He watched Ben down the ale and poured him another one.

"This one on the house, too?"

"I s'pose it'll have to be," Eddy said. "Else it'll probs be wasted as well."

"Lucky the first wasn't wasted then," Ben sighed. He really wished he hadn't started. He would've been fine without it.

"So..." Eddy said, tentatively. "Tell me about Raf."

"Tell you what?"

"You tole me that he was gonna be looking after yer legal stuff," Eddy said carefully.

"Yeah," Ben said. "He got me to sign some kind of contract so he could."

"What kind of contract?" Eddy asked, wiping up the bar where Ben had been scraping lacquer.

"I don't know," Ben frowned. Eddy didn't usually quiz him about his affairs. "Why?"

"Well, I was just thinking. You know if it is the old Raffo who's sending yer all those messages and givin' yer a hard time, do you think he's the best person to be looking after yer affairs?"

Ben sucked in a mouthful of beer and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He ran the fingers of both hands through his hair and leaned back. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. What do you think I should do?"

"Well..." Eddy began. "Maybe yer should bring that contract down here and let me have a gander."

"You?" Ben snorted. "What are you going to be able to do about it?"

"I can show it to me girl," Eddy said. "She was a solicitor."

"Seriously?" Ben couldn't hide his surprise. "Your part-time girlfriend was a solicitor?"

"No need to sound so shocked," Eddy frowned. "I'm not a complete moron you know."

"How'd you two meet anyway?" Ben asked. "You never did tell me."

"None of yer business, is why I never told yer," Eddy snapped. "Still not. Now I'm just trying to help yer out. You wanna bring it down or not?"

"All right," Ben sighed. "Suppose it can't hurt."

"Settled then," Eddy said.

"But what do I do in the meantime?"

"Dunno, but I reckon you gotta find out what role he's playing one way or th'other."

"But I already asked him," Ben whined.

"Maybe you gotta do more 'n ask him," Eddy said. "Maybe he needs a bit of encouragement to tell yer the honest truth."

"What do you mean?" Fear bristled against the back of Ben's neck and he brushed it off with one hand before trying to pull his hair down to protect his nape. "I don't know what you mean."

"It's alright Benno, don't get yer knickers in a twist. Did you tell yer girl any of what's going on?" Eddy asked. Ben nodded. "What she say about it?"

"She said..." Ben scratched his head. He tried to remember the conversation he was sure he'd had with her. He couldn't. Everything was so mixed up. The only thing he remembered was Liv telling him she couldn't save him. The backs of his eyes began to burn. His stomach dropped.

"What's up now?" Eddy asked. Before Ben could answer, the phone buzzed.

"Argh," Ben gurgled. They both looked at it.

"Why you still carry that thing around," Eddy frowned. "I got no idea."

"In... in case..." Ben stuttered. "Bec... or Liv..."

"Well..." Eddy pointed to the phone sitting on the bar. "You gonna pick it up?"

Ben picked the phone up and put it in his pocket. He didn't want to know.

"Maybe Liv changed her mind," Eddy said.

Ben said nothing. He knew otherwise. Regardless, with Eddy's prompting he pulled the phone from his pocket and opened the text.

He sighed and clicked through.



Observationist Ch16 @benfitz You can't run forever #warning #staytuned #iknowwhyyourun

His heart started pounding in his chest. The footage kept changing. In every scene, he was wearing different clothes because it had been taken on a different day. In every scene he looked harried, and haunted. And in every scene, he was running. Or staggering.

"What is it?" Eddy probed. No response. "Oi, Benno," Eddy leaned over the bar to look at the screen. Ben barely registered. He got up to leave but Eddy pulled him back down. "Mate, you gotta

confront him.”

“I don’t want to,” Ben mumbled. “I don’t want to go home.”

“You gotta,” Eddy urged. “You gotta have it out with him. This is doing you no good. You gotta make him own up.”

Raf looked up at Ben as he stepped through the door of the unit. He was sitting on the lounge with the laptop open in front of him on the coffee table.

“You’ve seen them then?” he said to Ben.

Ben stood in the middle of the lounge room, frozen. Did Raf just upload that footage? Was Eddy right? Was it him doing this?

“Why?” Ben could only manage a squeak.

“What?” Raf was ashen-faced.

“I didn’t... I’m not... I...” Ben wasn’t even making sense to himself. He couldn’t organise his thoughts. “Is it... I don’t know...”

“Is it what?” Raf asked. “You still think this is me?”

“I... I... I don’t... know...” Ben started swaying. His head was spinning. He stumbled to the lounge and sat. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

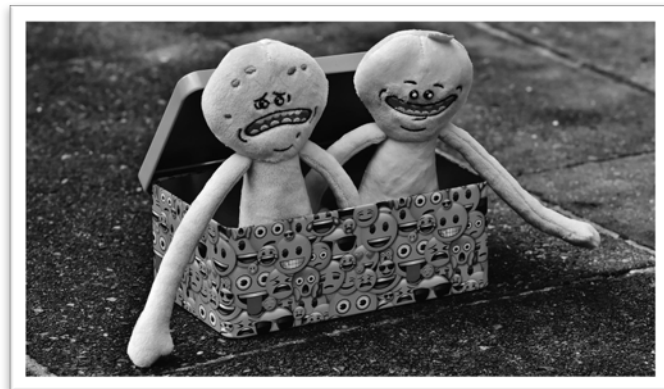
“Have you been drinking?” It was an accusation.

“Eddy,” Ben said. “He made me...”

“Eddy made you drink?”

“Eddy told me about you,” Ben whispered. “He said I had to come home and make you own up.”

Clattering from somewhere in the unit woke Ben. He was still on the lounge. The room was empty. The laptop was open. Ben sat up and shook his head to clear the fog in his brain. It didn’t work. He glanced fearfully at the screen; it was in stand-by. He didn’t want to know if the pictures were still there. He didn’t touch it.



Raf walked into the room with two mugs. He set one in front of Ben. He sat down and hit the space bar to activate the screen on the laptop. The homepage of The Observationist showed up. He navigated to the most recent entry—the footage compilation.

“This picture,” Raf said, pointing to the screen “Was the night you fought that dude in the alley, right?”

“What are you doing? How long did I sleep? Where is...?”

“A few hours is all,” Raf said. “We need to work this out Fitz. Before you lose it completely.”

"But Eddy said," Ben was nervous. Really nervous. What if Eddy was right? It made sense. No one else knew as much about Ben and where he went or who he hung with or what he did, as Raf. Raf was the common denominator in all of this.

"Look," Raf said. He seemed wound up. Was it because he'd been found out? "Just humour me for a few minutes, okay? If you still think it's me at the end of this, then I'll turn myself into the cops and move out."

Ben stared at him. Did he think he was stupid? Why would he hand himself in? There was no evidence. Even if Raf did front up to the cops and tell them everything. It'd mean that Ben would be charged not Raf. These posts made Ben look like a violent thug—not Raf. Ben stood up; he'd make Raf tell him the truth.

Raf pulled him back down. "Just give me five minutes, okay?"

Ben wanted to scream. He needed to find a way to get Raf to tell him the truth. Eddy said. But Raf was his friend. And his friend was a black belt. Ben figured five minutes wouldn't hurt.

"Ok." He sat back down.

"Was this taken THAT night?"

Ben nodded again. It was obvious. You could see blood on the knuckles of the hand he'd used. And he had one shoe missing.

"Right," Raf said. "So where was I that night?"

Ben thought back, "I don't know."

"Think about it," Raf snapped.

"I don't know," Ben whined. "I can't remember if you were with me to start with or not. I woke up alone and came home."

"Okay, what about this one?" Raf scrolled to the next photo. "Do you remember this one?"

"Yeah," Ben said. "It was in the park down the road."

"Was I with you then?" Raf asked.

"No," Ben admitted.

"How about here? Raf continued to scroll through all the footage of Ben running. "Or here... or here... or here...?"

Ben shook his head each time. He knew Raf wasn't with him. But that didn't mean he couldn't have taken the video.

"Okay," Raf pulled his feet up onto the lounge and twisted himself around so that he was sitting cross-legged and facing Ben front on. "Now think back to each of those places and try to remember what was happening."

Ben leaned back and closed his eyes to remember.

"Think of anyone that might've been at any of those places," Raf prompted. Ben opened his eyes and looked at Raf quizzically. "I mean, did you see the same person at any of those places?"

Ben closed his eyes again. He'd seen no one but the bloke he'd woken up next to in the first one, and the wharfies who'd pulled him out of the water in the second one. In the third photo he'd been with Liv, he was running after her. In the fourth one he'd been looking for Liv on the train after she'd disappeared. The next picture was after his picnic with Liv... and the one after that was when Liv told him...

He opened his eyes and sat up straight. "Liv...?!"

Chapter Twenty-eight

“What are talking about?” Raf repeated.

Ben was pacing the lounge room gesticulating and muttering madly to himself. Raf watched him from the lounge.

None of it made sense. It couldn't possibly be Liv. Liv was the love of his life. She meant everything to him. It wasn't possible. He loved Liv with every fibre of his being. Everything he did and everything he was, he owed to Liv. She was the light in his darkness, the magic in his mundanity, the good in his evil. Liv was the reason he survived his childhood. There was no way on the planet that Liv could be responsible for this. None.

But she was there. Where every single video had been taken, Liv had been there with him. Well, almost every video. She hadn't been there in the first two. At least he didn't think she'd been there. But she had been following him. She'd told him that herself. She'd been following him for a long time before she showed up. So maybe she had been there.

But she wasn't actually in any of the footage. And if a person was there when every video was taken but wasn't in any of the videos, it could only mean one thing. That that person must've been the one holding the camera.

Ben's knees buckled and he dropped to the floor. He bashed his forehead with the heel of his hand over and over again, as though it might dislodge the horrible thoughts running rampant through his brain. Not Liv. It couldn't be Liv. How could she do this to him? Why would she do this to him?

“BEN,” Raf grabbed Ben's wrists and tried to pull him to his feet. “What's going on?”

Ben pulled away. He opened his eyes and glared wildly at Raf. “It's Liv. It has to be. Olivia is the one. She's the only one that was there every time.”

“What?” Raf crouched down in front of Ben until they were at eye level.

“Olivia is The Observationist,” Ben stated, suddenly calm.

Raf stared at Ben. He couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. “It's not Olivia,” he said.

“Of course it is,” Ben said. “It's the only thing that makes sense. She is doing this to me as payback.”

“Huh?” Raf sat on the floor and leaned back against the lounge. He sighed and ran his hands over his face. “Payback for what?”

"Payback for..." Ben stared at the ceiling trying to think. What was it payback for? He couldn't think straight. It's not as if he'd done anything wrong. What had she told him? He couldn't remember. Something about being sick. But who? Her or him?

"Ben?"

"Liv," Ben repeated. "Olivia. It's Olivia."

"Mate, it's not Olivia."

"Yes it is," Ben said. "You said it yourself. No one else was there. Only her. Every time."

"Mate—"

"Every single time."

"She wasn't there," Raf said.

"She was there," Ben said. "She made me think she was around because she wanted to help me. She told me I needed help. And all the time—"

"Fitz, she wasn't there."

"All the time she was just setting me up to knock me down," Ben rocked back and forth.

"She wasn't there!" Raf yelled.

Ben stopped rocking. He looked at Raf, surprised by his anger. "It was Liv," he said. "She was the only one who was there."

"No she wasn't," Raf sighed. "How many times do I have to keep saying it? Olivia wasn't there. She couldn't have been."

Ben stood up. He was sick of this. Raf didn't know what he was talking about. Clearly. He went into his room and slammed the door. He had no idea why Raf would want to defend Olivia after she betrayed him like this. Or maybe he did. He thought back to the night he'd landed himself in hospital. He remembered thinking then that there was something between Raf and Liv. Maybe he was right. Or maybe Raf was so adamant that it wasn't Liv because it was him. Or maybe they were in it together. Yes, that was the most likely scenario. It was Raf and Liv. They're working together.

He furrowed around his room looking for the contract Raf had made him sign. He'd take it to Eddy, Eddy would know what to do. He tossed stuff all over the place as he hunted, muttering all the while. He finally found it stuffed in his bedside cabinet drawer. He shoved it in his pocket and headed out.

"Ben," Raf called as he opened the front door. "You have to listen to me. It's not Olivia. Because Liv is—"

"Both of them?" Eddy raised one eyebrow. "You sure about this?"

"Gotta be," Ben nodded. "Nothing else makes sense."

"Well, I never," Eddy shook his head. "Hard ter believe she's in on it."

"There's no other explanation," Ben was adamant. "She was the only one that was there where every video was shot. Had to have been her. Raf must've been driving it though. I can't imagine Liv doing anything like this by herself."

"Hmm," Eddy poured a shot and put it on the bar in front of Ben. "Get this into yer. Take the edge off."

"Thanks," Ben stared at the glass. Eddy knew Ben didn't drink bourbon anymore. They'd talked about it often enough. It was Eddy that had gone crook on him for drinking too much of the 'hard' stuff. "But—"

"What? Me drink not good enough for yer anymore?"

"Wha?" Ben was confused. "No... I mean, yeah... but I gave it up. I don't want—"

"If I remember right," Eddy said. "You gave it up for yer girl."

"Yeah," Ben sighed. Eddy was right. He'd really stopped drinking bourbon because he'd promised Liv he would. He must've told Eddy about it, he didn't remember. "I guess."

"So," Eddy continued. "Now you know the truth about it being the pair of them bastards that's been treating yer like scum and terrifying yer, yer may as well drink up and feel better."

"Yeah," Ben said again. "I guess."

"Don't worry mate," the old barman flicked Ben with his tea towel. "Old Eddy'll look out for yer."

Ben continued staring into the bourbon. The amber liquid beckoned, offering him comfort. Eddy was right. He would look out for him. He'd been the one consistent thing since Ben'd moved in up the hill. It'd been Eddy who'd listened to all of his woes over the years. Eddy who'd given him straight advice straight up. No pretence. No bullshit. Eddy was just a what-you-see-is-what-you-get type of bloke who Ben had always been able to depend on. He'd always made time for him, even when the pub had been busy. Some days Eddy was the only other person he'd exchange words with. He'd had all his 'hard' conversations with Eddy and he'd never given him bad advice. Well, except for that time he'd told him he should buy Olivia roses to make up after an argument they'd had. Turned out she was allergic to roses and ended up in Emergency. But at least his intention was good.

What harm would a shot do when Eddy was looking out for him? He picked up the glass and downed it in one gulp. He closed his eyes and tracked the warmth as it slowly moved through him. He'd missed the sensation of fire obliterating feeling. Bliss. He opened his eyes and smiled at Eddy. There was another shot sitting on the bar in front of him. He drank it.

"Okay Benno," Eddy smiled back. "That'll do yer."

Ben would've liked to have had another one or two or more. Oblivion would be welcome right about now.

"Okay," Ben sighed. "Schooner of New, then."

"Right," Eddy turned to pull a glass from the tray. "So did yer find that contract thingy?"

"Yeah," Ben pulled it out of his pocket and put it on the bar between them. "It's a but crumpled but."

"No matter," Eddy said. He put the schooner in front of Ben and used both hands to flatten out the paper. "What's it say? I don't got me glasses."

"I dunno," Ben said, sucking on his beer. "I didn't read it through. Just something about giving Ben permission to find out stuff for me."

"Yer didn't read it?" Eddy clipped Ben over the side of the head. Again. "What's wrong wiv yer? Smart bloke like you should know better than to sign anything without readin it first."

"Hey," Ben rubbed the side of his head and grinned at Eddy. "Ease up, you mad bastard. When did you become such a stickler?"

"I'm not a stickler," Eddy declared. "I'm just not an idiot."

"Really?" Ben had missed this banter with Eddy.

"Watch it, young-un, or I'll do more than clip yer over the ear," Eddy grinned back. "Now read it to me."

Ben turned the paper back around to face him. He stared at the text. Words swirled and swam in front of him. His alcohol-affected focus meant that he couldn't put them together enough to make any sense out of them.

"Read it yourself, old man," he said. "If you can read, that is."

"Cheeky bloody mongrel," Eddy said. He disappeared through a door behind the bar into the back room. Ben sipped his beer. Eddy came back a few minutes later with reading glasses perched on the end of his nose.

Ben laughed. "So, you can read."

"Yeah I c'n read," Eddy glanced at him over the top of the glasses. "So... what've we got here."

Ben watched Eddy's eyes as they moved back and forth across the page as he scanned the document. Ben finished his beer while Eddy read.

Eddy finally finished and looked up at Ben. "Geez mate," he said. "Yer don't make it easy for yerself, that's fer sure."

"Why? What does it say?"

"Says that yer want Raf to have the power to decide how to use your money if anything happens to yer," Eddy said, shaking his head. "That's what it says!"

"What?" Ben's blood ran cold. He folded his arms across his chest and shivered. He didn't remember telling Raf that he could do that. He thought it was just about giving Raf permission to talk to the uni or bank or trustees on his behalf.

"Means," Eddy explained. "That if something happens to you, he gets your money."

"No," Ben couldn't believe it.

"Yep. That's it," Eddy handed him back the contract. "Wonder what he's planning?"

"What do you mean?" Ben tried again to focus on the words across the page but after two shots and a schooner he had no hope, he focussed on listening to Eddy's words instead.

"Well think about it, Benno," Eddy said. "If fer instance, you dropped off—"

"What do you mean 'dropped off'?"

"You know, if someone did yer, like you did that bloke in the alley," Eddy said.

Ben shuddered. He couldn't help it. Hearing what he had done that night stated so matter-of-fact like that was awful. His teeth started chattering inside his head. He clamped his jaw shut.

"It was an accident. I didn't—"

"I'm just sayin it like it is," Eddy poured two beers and put one in front of Ben. "If you was dead, or badly injured so's you couldn't look after yerself no more. Or you went ter gaol, then bingo! Raf gets yer trust fund."

Ben knew the blood was draining from his face. He felt it surge into his stomach and through his intestines, dragging every bit of warmth in his body with it. He couldn't believe he'd been stupid enough to allow this to happen.

"What am I gonna do?"

“Not much you can do, buddy,” Eddy patted Ben on the shoulder and looked into his eyes. “Unless...”

“Unless what...?” Ben’s guts churned. The chill in his bones radiated out through his skin until every hair follicle cramped sending the hair on his body standing to attention. He ran his hands over opposite arms in an unsuccessful attempt to settle the goosebumps.

“It’s not rocket science Benno,” Eddy sighed. “You gotta take him out.”

“Take him out?” Ben echoed. “Are you nuts? Raf is my friend.”

“That so?” Eddy massaged the whiskers on his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “And what kind of a friend do you think he is that he’s doing all this Observationist stalkery shit to yer, huh? Answer me that.”

Ben couldn’t.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Eddy closed the pub. He sent his bar attendant home early and set about cleaning up. Ben sat at the bar staring into his empty glass. The idea of hurting Raf was abhorrent to him. He didn't want to think he was even capable of the thought, let alone the action. What Eddy was suggesting was just plain sick. What kind of a person did Eddy think he was?

He and Raf had been friends for much longer than he and Eddy had been friends. And he lived with Raf. And they'd been through a lot. But that was what made it so much worse that Raf was doing this to him. Eddy was right. He had to stop him.

"But there's got to be a better way," Ben said to the bar.

"Maybe there is," said Eddy from behind him.

Ben jumped, knocking the contract off the bar. It fluttered to the ground where Eddy bent down and picked it up. He pulled a stool over to sit next to Ben at the bar and set the page down between them. Pulling a pen from his top pocket, he set it atop of the page to hold it there.

"What?" Ben was desperate for another way. He'd welcome any alternative to violence.

"Well..." Eddy hesitated. He stared off into space as though formulating a plan.

"Come on Ed," Ben said. "What?"

"Well, I was thinking... this contract is just something Raf come up with, right?"

"Yeah, I think so," Ben affirmed. "But he said it's legally binding."

"Just cos he wrote it and you signed it...?"

"Yeah, I think so..."

"Well, what if you wrote on it that you wanted someone else instead of Raf to look after yer money if something happened to yer?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Raf must've had a reason to get you to sign that contract, right?"

"I suppose," Ben nodded.

"Well, what if that reason was so he could take you out himself? Then he'd get control of yer money and no one'd know anything about it."

"Don't be stupid Ed," Ben said. "Raf would never do that."

"Yer sure about that?"

"Course I'm sure," Ben said. But he wasn't sure at all. He didn't know what to think about anything anymore.

"C'mon Benno," Eddy said. "Think about it for a minute."

"I can't," Ben didn't want to hear.

"He's a black belt," Eddy reminded him. "And he's taken yer down enough times that you know he can stop yer in a flash."

That was true. Ben had never come out of any altercation with Raf victorious. But Raf had never hurt him during any of their melees. Not really. He mostly just used pressure points. But not hard enough to hurt for more than a few minutes, or leave any marks, even though he used to tell Ben he could finish someone off using the pressure point on the skull behind the earlobe and no one would ever know what caused it. Oh.

"Just because he could, doesn't mean he would," Ben pulled at his earlobe. He wasn't sure who he was trying to convince anymore, Eddy or himself.

"Folks'll do anything fer money, Benno," Eddy slapped him on the back.

"Yeah," Ben conceded the point. "Maybe."

"You know it," Eddy said. "But if yer said yer wanted someone else to look after yer affairs like, he'd have no reason to take yer out cos he wouldn't get yer trust fund anyway. So then you wouldn't have to take him out neither."

Ben stared at Eddy. Relief washed over him smoothing his goosebumps and lowering his hackles. It was so simple. He wouldn't have to hurt Raf at all. Ordinarily Ben hated the thought of violence. And even though Raf probably deserved it, Ben didn't want to be the one to perpetrate it against him.

"But who could I ask?" Ben whined. "I haven't got anyone who would do it."

"What am I?" Eddy said. "Chopped bloody liver?"

"You'd do it for me?" Ben felt like hugging him.

"Course I would," Eddy smiled. "Haven't I always looked out for yer?"

"Yeah," Ben's eyes misted over as he turned his gaze back to the empty glass. Appreciation wasn't something that he'd experienced very often. "I suppose you have."

"Yep," Eddy beamed. "I got yer back, Benno. Don't you worry 'bout that."

Eddy picked up the pen and handed it to Ben. He pushed the contract in front of him. "Here you go then."

"What do I write?" Effects of the alcohol were making it hard for Ben to concentrate.

"I dunno," Eddy thought for a second. "Why don't you just cross out all the places Raf has got his name and put mine instead?"

"Yeah," Ben said. "That's a good idea, I'll do that."

"Alrighty, then," Eddy slapped him on the back again. "You do that."

"What about Liv?" Ben asked. "What do I do about her?"

"What do yer mean?" Eddy said. "What does it matter now that she's gone?" "Raf was probably planning on takin' off and meeting her somewhere after he'd sorted you out, so they could live off yer money somewhere together without anyone ever knowing."

The thought of that made Ben sick to the stomach. The betrayal was agonising. He fought the bile that threatened to rise, pushing it as far down as he could. It frothed and gurgled deep in

his guts before sizzling and swelling and propelling him forwards, off the stool, out of the pub and up the hill to the flat.

"How could you do this to me?" Ben yelled as he burst through the door.

"Seriously?" Raf looked up from the computer. "Again?"

"How?" The fire in his belly, lit by fear, fanned by Eddy, and fuelled by alcohol, launched Ben across the room. He barely registered Raf rising from the lounge and moving to meet him halfway. "I trusted you!"

Ben lunged toward Raf and let fly with a massive punch. Raf blocked it with a swift defensive move and threw Ben to the ground.

"Will you just stop and listen for one second, you fucking psycho?" Raf yelled. He pinned him to the floor with a knee to the spine, and twisted Ben's arm behind his back. Ben screamed and squirmed but Raf just increased the pressure.

"Okay," Ben yelled. "Okay, I give."

Raf let go and sat back on his haunches. "When are you going to get it?" he said. "I had nothing to do with any of this."

Ben rolled over and sat up, rubbing his arm. He glared at Raf, but was too exhausted to do much else. He regretted letting Eddy talk him into having those shots. Maybe if he were sober he'd be better able to take Raf on. And Raf deserved to be squashed for what he'd done. Ben swore.

Raf walked off. Ben stood up and kicked the side of the lounge. It did little to quell the rage. He was about grab hold of the laptop on the coffee table and throw it across the room when the message tone on his phone sounded. He pulled it from his pocket and hurled the phone instead.

He collapsed onto the lounge. The message tone sounded again. He ignored it.

"You were at the pub?" Raf came back into the room.

"What?"

"Just now," Raf said. "You were at the pub."

"So?"

"So who else was there?"

"What's it to you?"

"Fitz, look at the website," Raf said. Trepidation had replaced the anger in Raf voice.

Ben's message tone sounded again. Raf walked across the room and picked up the phone.

"Give it here," Ben demanded.

"Look at the website," Raf repeated, scrolling through Ben's messages.

"Fine," Ben growled through gritted teeth. He hit the space bar on the laptop and stared at the monitor before him. Three new chapters adorned the screen. Back to back. There was no video with them this time. Only messages.

Observationist Ch17: @benfitzp I'm coming for you #staytuned #anydaynow bitly.hsk

Observationist Ch18: @benfitzp I know why you run #staytuned #killer bitly.qmd

Observationist Ch19: @benfitzp You can't hide #staytuned #pointless bitly.xjd

"And you seriously expect me to believe that it's not you?" Ben said, as much to himself as to Raf. Fear bristled across Ben's scalp as he looked at the photo with chapter 17; he was sitting at the bar with Eddy. The photo must've been taken within the last few hours.

"I was here the whole time you were gone," Raf yelled. "You want to know what I was doing?"

What Raf had been doing was obvious to Ben. "Nobody else knew where I was going," Ben said.

He stared at the photo with chapter 19. It was taken from behind as he walked into the main entrance of the unit block. Only minutes ago. He swung the laptop around so that Raf could see the screen. "Only you. Or Liv."

"For fuck's sake," Raf slapped the newspaper he'd been holding down on the coffee table in front of Ben.

"I thought you were my friend," Ben glanced up. He suddenly felt very tired. "But you and Liv...?"

"For the last time," Raf spat. "I had nothing to do with this. And neither did Liv."

"Yeah, right," Ben spat sarcasm all over Raf.

"I've been here, the whole arvo," Raf said through gritted teeth. "Looking for this. He swept the laptop to the side of the table, unfolded the paper and turned to the back pages. "Read," he demanded.

Ben looked at him. Raf looked back through steely eyes. His jaw was set. He was pale and a vein throbbed menacingly at his temple.

"Read what?" Ben asked. "Why?"

"Proof of why Olivia has nothing to do with this," Raf said.

"It has to be—"

"Ben," Raf softened his tone. "Olivia is dead."

Chapter Thirty

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ben said. Tiny pitchforks poked at his heart, draining his blood. He could feel it leaking from his body. “She was here the other day.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Raf said.

“You’re full of it,” Ben accused. “Olivia came back ages ago. We’ve been seeing each other a few times a week for months now.”

“Ben,” Raf sat next to him on the lounge. “Olivia died six months ago.”

“Stop it!” Ben covered his ears with his hands. “Why are you doing this?”

“Look here,” Raf pointed to a column in the paper.

Ben glanced at it, and did a double take when Olivia’s name caught his eye. He snatched up the paper and read the column.

Olivia Aroyan

1996–2017

Olivia Maddison Aroyan, 21, tragically passed away on 17/3/17 after a short illness. Olivia attended Rose Bay Secondary College and was a student of nursing at the University of Sydney. She is survived by partner Ben Fitzpatrick, parents Jackie & Leon and siblings Zac & Hannah. Olivia will be sadly missed by all. Funeral will be held at Eastern Suburbs Cemetery & Crematorium on 22/3/17 at 10am. All welcome. Donations to Meningococcal Research Foundation in lieu of flowers.

“We went to the funeral together,” Raf told him.

"No," he said. "It's not possible. I saw her. We talked. She knew things. Things that had been happening. Private things. She—"

"Fitz," Raf said gently. "You've pretty much been on a bender since Liv died. Six months ago!"

"NO," Ben shouted. He jumped up off the lounge and whirled around to face Raf. "You did this."

"What?" Raf sighed.

"This," Ben slapped the paper, still in his hand. "Somehow, you did this."

"Look at the date."

Ben turned the paper over to the front page. The date under the title was Wednesday 19 March 2017. Six months ago. He roared and ripped the paper in half, threw the pieces in the air and stormed out of the lounge room swearing.

It's just not possible. They're conspiring against him. He wants him to think she's dead so they can run off together. It's a hoax. A complicated and elaborate hoax. That's what it is.

But Liv had been so nice to him. So kind. She was always kind and patient. She gave no hint whatsoever that she was in this with Raf. None. She said she came back to help. She told him that she never left him but that he gave up on her. But she got it wrong; he never gave up on her. She gave up on him.

Ben sank to the floor of the kitchen. His heart was thumping against the inside of his chest so hard it made it difficult to breathe. The room swam before him. Liv had been the most important thing in his life. The only person that really mattered to him. He had only ever wanted to protect her. And he couldn't. At least not from Raf.



"Ben," Raf called. "Hey Fitz!"

The voice seemed miles away. Ben shook his head to clear it and tried to stand. His legs were wobbly. The room swam before him. He steadied himself against the bench and pulled himself up hanging onto the pantry door handles. He turned and leant, palms down, against the bench, trying to catch his breath. The fog in his brain made it hard to think straight.

"What is happening to me?" he asked the empty room. It didn't answer. Moments passed. It could've been minutes... or hours... He wasn't sure.

"Fitz," Raf said from behind him. Ben whirled around to face him. Raf stood in the doorway watching him. "You okay?"

Ben stared at him. Friend or foe? He couldn't remember anymore.

"Ben?"

Olivia is dead.

The message tone on Ben's phone sounded from the other room. Raf went and retrieved it. He brought it back to the kitchen gazing at the screen.

"It wasn't me," Raf whispered. His face had no colour. His hands shook as he held the phone in front of Ben's face. "I didn't..."

Ch20: @benfitzp I SEE EVERYTHING bitly.qphv #staytuned #bescared #beveryscared

A pair of eyes stared out at Ben through the screen of the phone. Just eyes. Nothing else. Black eyes. Angry eyes. Raf's eyes.

Fear shot through Ben jolting him into action. He leapt sideways and yanked the cutlery drawer open.

"Ben," Raf took a step back. "Just listen."

Ben reached into the drawer and pulled out a steak knife. It's the first thing he got his hands on. "Stay away from me."

"Ben, you have to believe me," Raf said. "I had nothing to do with any of this."

"Stay. Away." Ben felt the ground begin to move under his feet. He leant back against the bench to steady himself. The trembling moved into his feet and up through his legs. "Don't come near me."

"Fitz," Raf implored. "I'm not going to hurt you. Why would you think I want to hurt you? You're my mate."

"You... you want to... you want my money," Ben stumbled over his words. The trembling moved up through his torso and into his arms. "People will... do anything... for money."

"What?" Raf pulled out the chair and sat at the table. Ben didn't move. "Why the hell would you even think that?"

"Eddy said..." Ben tried to remember what Eddy had told him. "Eddy said... you and Liv wanted... wanted to..."

"Eddy told you I wanted your money?"

The trembling moved further up his body into his neck moving his head into a vigorous nod. "And Liv..."

Raf eyes opened wide. "Fitz, did you tell Eddy you were seeing Liv?"

"No one... could've taken... that pic so close," Ben said. "Proves it's you."

"Did. You. Tell. Him?" Raf ignored Ben's babbling.

"I told him she'd come back," Ben said.

"And he told you Liv and I were conspiring to get your money?"

"You made me sign that contract," Ben was trembling uncontrollably. "To... control my trust."

"Seriously?" Raf said. "Is that what he told you?"

"I... I..."

"And you believe him?"

"I..."

"I can't believe you," Raf yelled. He got up suddenly, knocking the chair out from behind him. It crashed to the floor. "After everything we've been through together. After everything we've shared. Seriously? I don't know who you are anymore."

Raf stood, glaring at Ben. Anger in his eyes. Ben stared back into those eyes. The same eyes as in the picture. The eyes of his tormentor. The eyes bored into him, burning him. Fire in his guts. The eyes were hurting him. Ben's trembles increased to keep time with his pounding heart. His breath came in short sharp bursts. Choking on, suffocating his words.

He tried to speak but the sound he heard coming out of his own mouth was tortured, as though it had been screamed into the barrel of a shotgun and shot off into the universe in a million different directions. He gurgled.

“You need to calm down,” Raf said.

Ben gasped. He couldn’t get the words out. Couldn’t stop the shaking. He gripped the knife with both hands. It weighed down his arm, heavier and heavier. Those eyes were watching him. Coming for him. He stepped forward.

In two quick movements Raf deflected Ben’s advance and disarmed him, sending the knife clattering across the kitchen floor. Ben threw a punch. Raf blocked it and punched him hard in the face, sending him flying across the kitchen. Ben rolled over and reached for the knife. Raf leapt across the floor and pulled him up. He slammed him against the pantry door and held him in a stranglehold, immobilising him.

“Wake up to yourself,” he screamed in Ben’s face. “For fuck’s sake.”

Raf released his hold on Ben’s throat and Ben slid down the cupboard collapsing onto the floor, gasping for breath.



Chapter Thirty-one

"I'm really sorry," Raf said.

"It's not your fault," she said.

"I'm the one who called the cops," Raf shoved his hands in his pockets and turned away.

"I'm the reason he's in here."

"I know," she said.

"You do?"

"Yes, they told me you called the police," she smiled. "It's why I went looking for you."

"I'm sorry," Raf repeated.

"You had no choice," she said. "I'm surprised you hung around for so long the way he was going on."

"Yeah, me too," Raf shrugged. "But I knew something wasn't right, I just didn't know what. I should've known."

"How could you have known?"

"I should've asked more questions. I should've seen. I should've known."

"It's not your fault," she said again. "He's not your responsibility."

"But he is my flatmate and my friend," Raf sighed. "I can't help thinking that I could've done more. How did I not know what was going on? I should've known."

The voices seemed to come from a long way away. Ben tried to open his eyes but they felt so heavy.

"Could've, should've would've," she said. "Doesn't do any of us any good at all."

"But I got so angry with him. I even punched him. That couldn't have helped."

"Raf, from what I've learned about everything that's happened over the past six months, he was really lucky to have you looking out for him the way you were. God knows what might've happened to him if he'd landed himself in gaol... or worse."

"Yeah, I suppose."

The talk stopped. Ben sighed, and drifted off again.

"How long will he sleep for?"

"He is sedated at the moment," the man said. "He's been through a lot. He needs to sleep."

Ben roused lightly and wondered who they were talking about. He didn't care. He liked that he could sleep. He'd missed being able to sleep without dreaming. And he was so tired.

"Man, I had no idea," Raf said. "He never said a thing about it."

"He'd probably blocked it out," she told him. "It's a lot for a ten-year-old to deal with. And he never talked about it once he'd finished the counselling sessions he had to go to."

"Is that when he went to live with his grandparents?" Raf asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Nan and Pop came to Sydney and got us out of foster care. They bought a place not far from where our units are and we lived with them until after everything was settled."

"Ben told me they died when he was thirteen," Raf said.

"Yeah, car accident," she said.

"Geez, so much death."

"Yeah. Mum first, then Dad a year later, then three years after that Nan & Pop," she sighed. "I suppose when Liv died too, it was just too much for him to handle."

"I can understand that," Raf said.

Ben started getting annoyed with the voices. Bloody do-gooders. They were talking about his life. And that was no one's business.

"Shut up," he murmured, fighting to open his eyes.

"Benny?"

Ben finally opened his eyes. He felt groggy, but relaxed. Very relaxed. He stared at the people sitting in chairs next the bed he was in.

"Benny," she said again. "How do you feel?"

"Bec?" Ben closed his eyes. He thought maybe he was hallucinating.

"Yep," Bec said. "It's me."

"But you're in—"

"I came home," she said, leaning over to take his hand. "A few days ago."

"A few days ago?" Ben repeated. "Why?"

"You called me," Bec said. "Don't you remember?"

"I called you," Ben echoed her.

"Yeah, and you didn't sound right. I was worried about you. So, I cut short my post and came home."

"You came home?"

"Yes, Benny," Bec smiled. "I'm home to stay."

"Home to stay?"

"Yes," Bec patted the back of his hand. "When you get out of here, you're coming home with me."

"But I have my own place," Ben protested. "I live there."

"Not for a while Benny," Bec said. "Raf is going to live there with Ashley. You're going to come and live with me at my place."

"Raf?" Ben scrambled to sit up in his bed. "Raf is the one. He—"

"Raf is the one who saved your life Ben," Bec said firmly.

"Raf—" Ben choked on his words. Bec handed him a glass of water from the bedside table. He took a sip. "Raf... eyes... I... Liv is dead..."

"Shhh," Bec stroked his forehead. Ben leant back against his pillows, exhausted. "Rest Benny."

Raf slipped out the door and closed it gently behind him.

Ben switched channels for the fifteenth time before switching off the TV. He tossed the remote on the lounge and wandered into the kitchen. Bec looked up from the table and smiled as he crossed the floor and put the kettle on.

"I'll have one too," she said.

"Okeydoke," he said.

There was a knock on the door. Ben ignored it and reached up to pull mugs out of the cupboard, leaving Bec to get up and see who was there. He heard her talking to someone, the low voices drifting in through the open door.

The voices moved closer and he figured they were coming in so he and grabbed another mug.

"Ben," Bec called. "We have a visitor."

"Yeah I heard," Ben said. "Does she want a coffee?"

"He would like a coffee," Bec responded.

Ben turned around. Raf was standing in the doorway. Bec stood behind him with one hand on his shoulder.

"Hey Fitz," Raf said. He put his hand out for Ben to shake.

Ben stared expressionless at Raf. He looked from his face to his hand and back again. Raf shifted his weight from one foot to the other uneasily. A tense few moments passed.

"About time you showed your face," Ben said. He broke into a grin, grabbed Raf's hand and pulled him into a hug. "Bloody took you long enough."

"Yeah," Raf smiled. "Sorry about that."

"Told you," Bec said to Raf. "Nothing to worry about."

Ben finished making the coffee while Bec and Raf sat at the table.

"This is exactly like mine," Raf said. "I mean yours. Sorry."

"Yeah," Ben smiled. "No worries, it's yours for a few years. If you want to live there, that is. And yeah, it is the same. All of them in these buildings were built from the same blueprints."

"Awesome," Raf said. "You going to stay here then?"

"Yeah," Ben put coffees in front of each of them. "Staying here 'til I finish uni. I'm going to finish my degree part-time, and work part-time."

"You're going to work?"

"No need to sound so shocked," Ben chuckled. "I start my new job next week. As a journo for the local paper."

"Serious? That's great," Raf said.

"Yeah," Ben nodded. "It's only a community online newspaper. But I guess it's the best I'm going to get at the moment. People aren't too keen to hire psychos."

"Ben," Bec scolded. "Don't use that terminology. You are not a psycho."

"So what was wrong with me for six months?" Ben winked at Raf. "That landed me in the loony-bin for a few weeks?"

"Having a grief-induced psychotic break, does not make you a psycho," Bec said. "And you weren't in the 'loony bin,' you were in hospital recovering from an illness. Same as anyone else who gets sick."

"Yeah, yeah," Ben rolled his eyes. "I've heard it a hundred times."

"Then you'd think it'd sink in, wouldn't you?" Bec snapped.

"Anyway," Ben tried to change the subject. "At least I'm not working in the pub. I could've asked Eddy for a job."

Bec snorted. "The less you have to do with that place the better," she said.

"It's not Eddy's fault," Ben said. "He was looking out for me."

Raf raised one eyebrow and Bec scowled at Ben. "You really think that, Ben. Whatever happened to responsible service of alcohol?"

"Oh come on guys," Ben said. "It's not Eddy's fault. I never did anything bad down there. Not at his pub. He's only not supposed to serve pissed people who are carrying on."

"That's not true Ben," Bec said. "RSA laws mean that he's not supposed to serve anyone who is intoxicated, no matter their behaviour."

"It's true," Raf said. "I just did my RSA at uni. Had to, to be a student advisor."

Ben grinned at him. Typical, he thought.

"Hey, they pay you to be a student advisor," Raf defended himself. "That's my part-time job."

"Okay, okay," Ben threw his hands up in surrender. "But don't be too harsh on Eddy. I really need to go see him. I promised him I wouldn't drop off again."

"You can't go the pub Ben," Bec said.

"What do you mean 'I can't go to the pub,' I am twenty-one, remember?" Ben was starting to get sick of Bec's fussing. She'd been fussing over him since she got back. Driving him to this appointment and that, cooking for him, nagging him about uni and getting a job and keeping clean. He was sick of it.

"I know that," Bec said. "But you can't drink while you're taking that medication."

"Who said anything about drinking?" Ben snapped. "I told you I'd given it up, don't you trust me?"

"It's not that I don't trust you," Bec said, waving her hand in the general direction of the pub. "It's Eddy I don't trust."

"You don't even know him," Ben yelled. "He was there for me when you weren't, and I'm not about to ditch him just because you want me to."

Ben stormed out and slammed the door behind him. He stomped down the hall and across the landing to the stairs. By the time he reached ground level, most of his anger had dissipated and all he could remember was the expression on Bec's face when he'd yelled at her. She looked as though he'd slapped her.

Guilt gnawed at him. He knew that his sister was only looking out for him. But she didn't know Eddy like he did. Eddy had been more of a father to him than his own father ever had been. And despite what Raf and Bec thought, he had been looking out for him.

"Hey Ed," he called across the pub as he swung the doors open.

"Well I'll be buggered," Eddy grinned. "He's back! Where you been Benno?"

"I been around," Ben told him.

Eddy pulled a schooner glass from the tray and went to pour a beer.

"Not for me," Ben said. "I am not drinking anything anymore. Well, at least for a while."

"Good fer you," Eddy said. "But how am I gonna pay me bills?"

"Not my problem old man," Ben grinned back at him. "Maybe you should advertise for alcos."

"None of them'd be able to match you, you bugger," Eddy poured the beer and placed in front of Ben.

"I told you Ed," he pushed it away. "I'm not drinking it."

"And here's me thinkin a celebration drink is in order," Eddy said. "It's on the house."

Ben looked at the beer in front of him. It was perfectly pulled with a frothy, not too high head sitting invitingly over the rich amber body. He hadn't had a beer for nearly four weeks.

"Uh-oh," Eddy said, motioning to the door with his head.

"What's up?" Ben turned to see Raf walk into the pub. He turned back to Eddy. "Oh it's okay. It wasn't Raf, Eddy, none of it was Raf."

"That so?" Eddy said, warily. He tracked Raf with his eyes as Raf made his way across the pub and pulled up a stool next to Ben. "Well, that's a relief."

"Yeah," Raf agreed.

"How you going Raffo?" Eddy looked nervously over Raf's head toward the door.

"Fine," Raf was curt.

"What are you doing here?" Ben asked. "Did Bec tell you to follow me?"

"Bec?" Eddy startled. "Yer sister is home?"

"Yeah, she came back a few weeks ago," Ben told him.

"So that's why you haven't been around," Eddy said. "You wanna beer Raffo? He aint gonna drink the one I poured fer him, you may as well have it or it'll just go down the gurgler."

"No thanks," Raf said.

"Suit yerself," Eddy walked down the other end of the bar to serve another customer. He left the beer sitting in front of Ben.

"I didn't ask for it," Ben said defensively. "He automatically pulls me a beer when he sees me at the door. Sometimes even before he sees me."

"I didn't say anything about it," Raf said. "Bec was worried about you so I said I'd call in on my way home is all."

"Okay then," Ben said. "You called in and now you can go home."

"Nice," Raf sighed. "Some things never change, do they?"

"I didn't mean you have to go now," Ben backtracked. "I just meant that I know the pub thing isn't really your scene and I didn't want you to think you had to hang around to look after me, is all."

"Okay then," Raf said. He slapped Ben on the back as he got up off the stool. "I'll catch you later."

"Yeah," Ben said.

Eddy wandered back down the bar and planted himself opposite Ben.

"So how's it going, Benno," he asked. "Last time I seen ya, yer weren't too crash hot."

"I'm alright," Ben said. "But I was wondering about something Ed."

"What's on yer mind?"

"You know how I was telling you about Liv?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you just tell me she'd passed?"

Eddy's jaw dropped and he stared at Ben. He raised and lowered his bottom lip a few times as though he was trying to speak, but no words came out. Ben watched his reaction carefully. It had been bugging him since the hospital. The psychiatrist had said he should just ask, instead of stressing about it.

"Well...?"

"Um... well... yer see Benno," Eddy floundered. "I figured that ya wanted...um, well... ya mighta needed to believe she was around so it was easier to accept she was gone. You know what I mean?" The more he spoke the more confident he sounded. "And I didn't wanna... you know, sorta... interfere with yer healing process. Cos I know grief is a terrible thing and I wanted ter be supportive, see."

"Hmm," Ben thought about it. It sounded plausible, sort of.

Chapter Thirty-two

"So really, he was looking out for me," Ben said. "In his own weird way."

"How is that looking out for you?" There was no mistaking Bec's disdain for Eddy.

"He thought he was doing a good thing, I suppose," Ben said. "He's not the sharpest tool in the shed."

"I don't know about that mate," Raf said. "I think you're underestimating him a bit. I reckon he's a bit clueyer than he lets on."

"Yeah, I'm with you on that one," Bec said to Raf.

"So gang up on me why don't you?" Ben was only half annoyed. "There was other stuff too, Sis."

Raf had come over for dinner and he and Rebecca were still hassling him about Eddy.

"Okay," Bec sighed. "What else can you remember?"

"Well," Ben frowned in recall. "He kept chasing away those bastards who were hassling me."

"What bastards?" Bec asked. "Who was hassling you?"

"You don't know?" Raf was surprised, he turned to Ben. "You didn't tell her?"

"Yeah, I told her about the stalkery shit." Ben hung his head. "I just didn't tell her about The Observationist."

"What is The Observationist?" Bec asked.

"Mate," Raf leaned forward on the table. "You got to tell her."

"No," Ben said. Embarrassment and humiliation burned his cheeks. "I can't."

"You have to," Raf was adamant. "Or I will."

"Tell me what?"

"Fine then," Ben conceded defeat.

Raf reached over and pulled Ben's laptop across the table, he handed it to Ben to logon. He opened The Observationist and swung the screen around so it was in front of Bec. She scrolled through the posts and played the videos from the website. Ben watched as the colour drained from her face and her expression got darker and darker. Raf narrated the story of the Instagram posts and texts and pics Ben had received over the course of the previous few months.

"You see what I meant about doing something earlier?" Raf said. He ran his hand through his hair and down over his face. "I'm so sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" Ben asked him.

"I'm sorry for everything," Raf said.

"Are you telling me it WAS you who did all this?"

"What? No, of course not," Raf said.

"Then you got nothing to be sorry about," Ben said. "You're the one who wanted me to go the cops. And I wouldn't... couldn't."

"You have to," Bec said, quietly. "You have to hand yourself in."

Ben stared at her. "You'd dob me in to the cops?"

"Ben, you have to deal with it," Bec said. "And we have to find out who is doing... this!"

"But... but..."

"Come on then," Bec said. She gathered the keys and picked up her handbag.

"What? Now?"

"May as well be now. You better come too, Raf. You'd have more information than I do."

"We haven't had a report of an assault, or a murder around the time in question," the sergeant told them.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep," the officer looked at the monitor again. "Can't charge you with a crime where there's no complainant and no evidence."

"Yeah," Ben released a huge sigh; he felt like the weight of the world had just floated from his shoulders.

"So," the officer said. "We got nothing here."

"Are you sure?" Bec asked. "We have evidence."

The officer looked at her over the top of his reading glasses while she explained. He bought the site up on his computer and glanced over the pictures.

"This it?"

"Yes," Bec nodded. "That's it."

"This is a serious business," he said. "Why didn't you report it as soon as it began to happen?"

Ben stared at the officer. A familiar fear ripped at his insides. This was it. Now they had the footage, it was the evidence they needed to put him in gaol. He started shaking. Bec put her hand on his arm. It wasn't reassuring.

"My brother has had some health issues—" she began.

The officer looked from her to Ben and frowned. "Well, I'm sure this hasn't helped. Have you got any idea who your stalker is?"

"My stalker...?" Ben could barely get the words out. "You... you want to know..."

They're not going to put in him gaol? The cops want to know who's stalking him. That's it? He's off the hook? Relief flowed through his veins into his—"I need the toilet."

The officer pointed down the hall and turned back to Bec and Raf. "All right, start at the beginning and we'll see what we can find out."

"...and you," the officer pointed at Ben as he rejoined them. "You might've just dodged a bullet with this carry-on. But I'm guessing you probably just freaked yourself out after knocking this bloke out, and he got up and walked off."

Ben couldn't find anything to say. He just nodded. And fought back tears of relief.

"I'm just glad it's all over," Ben said.

"Hmm," Raf tossed Ben's phone over to him. "Don't be too quick to assume it's all over."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Check out your messages," Raf said.

"Don't tell me there's more?"

"Came last week," Raf said. "Cleaner found your phone in the corner behind the telly yesterday."

"It's a wonder she didn't throw it out," Ben said.

"Yeah," Raf chuckled, but quickly sobered. "Anyway, it was out of charge, so I charged it before bringing it over. And the message tone kept going off, you know, like it does when messages are being downloaded from the server. There's only one message. But it was sent over and over."

Ben opened the message and read it.

Ch21: @benfitzp You will pay for what you've done #staytuned #poorboy bitly.wle

"Aw shit," Ben said. "Bec's going to flip out."

"What's Bec going to flip out about?" she said, walking into the room.

Raf and Ben both looked up at her.

"What?"

"It's another one," Raf said. Ben scowled at him. "What? She should know. It affects her too. She's a part of this now, you know."

"What does it say?" Bec asked.

Ben showed her the text. Raf pulled his laptop out of his bag and opened it. He navigated to The Observationist site to look at the attached picture. A pile of money.

"What the hell?" Ben leant over Raf to look at the picture.

"Well that's a change of tone," Raf said.

"I wonder what it means," Ben said.

"Means someone wants to make you pay?"

"How can I pay if they don't tell me who they are?"

"I think you've paid a lot over the past six months, for a lot of things you're not responsible for," Bec said.

"What do mean?" Ben asked.

"What if you weren't even in a fight?" she said. "What if the whole thing was fabricated to blackmail you?"

"I was in a fight," Ben admitted. "I broke my knuckles and wrist, remember?"

"Anyway," Raf put in. "I think it's more literal than that. I think whoever this is wants you to pay actual money."

"How would anyone know that a uni student has enough money to be worth blackmailing?" Bec asked.

"Unless it was you," Ben said to Raf, with a grin.

"Very funny. NOT," Raf frowned. "Anyway, if I remember correctly, you signed your power of attorney over to me. So I wouldn't need to blackmail you."

"Except that now, that contract has Eddy's name everywhere yours used to be," Ben said. "So no luck there for you!"

"What?" Raf and Bec asked, simultaneously.

Ben looked from one to the other. He was as surprised as the others when he'd heard himself say that he'd signed his power of attorney over to Eddy.

"What?" Raf said again, running his hand through his hair.

Bec snatched her phone off the bench and left the room. Ben could hear her on her phone talking to someone. There were long pauses and bursts of emphatic agitation from this side of the conversation.

"Who's she talking to?" Ben asked.

"I don't know," Raf said. They heard hang up and Bec swear. "But I think we're about to find out."

"Ben," Bec used an exaggerated patience, as she sat back down. "That was the solicitor for the board of trustees. You need to tell me exactly what happened."

"Huh? I told you everything that happened already."

"Tell me about Eddy," Bec demanded. "Tell me about the contract."

"Oh that," Ben scratched his head. "It's just that when Eddy thought Raf was the one who was stalking me, he said that I shouldn't let Raf look after my affairs, so he got me to change the names, that's all."

"But it wasn't about his money," Raf interjected. "I just wanted him to give me permission to talk to the uni and the cops and doctors on his behalf. Nobody would give me any info when I was trying to help him out because I wasn't next-of-kin. It wasn't about his money."

"But Eddy said—"

"I don't know what his game is," Bec sighed. "But Ben, Eddy is not a good man."

"What do you mean?" Ben said. "Of course he's a good man. He's my mate."

Raf shook his head. Bec stared at Ben as though he'd grown two heads. Ben looked from one to the other.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ben said. "I just—"

A phone message tone sounded. Bec and Raf reached for their phones but Ben ignored his.

"Not mine," Bec said. She put her phone down and picked up Ben's. Her eyes widened, and then narrowed. Ben snatched his phone out of her hand and looked at the screen. He read the message and played the footage. He dropped the phone and leapt out of his chair.

"What time is it?" Ben yelled.

"About half past three," Bec said. "Why?"

Ben ran from the room and out of the unit, leaving the front door to slam shut behind him. Raf and Bec stared after him; then at the screen on the table. Bec leaned over and tapped the link.



Observationist Ch22: @benfitzp the finale. Up to you how it ends. The money or the man. U got til 4 2day #allover #choices

Chapter Thirty-three

“Eddy!” Ben yelled as he burst into the pub. “Hey Ed!”

Ben skidded to a halt in the middle of the room. The pub was empty. He turned a full 360 degrees, and then took a tentative step towards the bar. Something didn’t feel right. The pub was never completely empty during opening hours and Eddy was always behind the bar.

He heard the door open and close behind him and whirled around to see who it was. Two men entered the pub. They stopped and stared at Ben. One of them was the man in the video. He watched him turn the latch on the door to lock it while the other one dropped the blinds.

Ben turned back to the bar. “EDDY,” he yelled.

Eddy came through the door behind the bar. He lifted the hinged part of the bar surface to walk through and then turned and carefully put it down. He sat on a stool and spun around to face Ben.

“Hello, Benno,” he said. “Glad you could make it.”

“Are you okay? That man, he was—” Eddy was silent for a moment. “Who are they? What’s going on?”

“Come and sit, Benno,” Eddy said. “We have some business to complete.”

“What?” A shiver ran through Ben. This was not the Eddy he knew. The familiar sparkle in the eyes was gone, replaced by a cold steely stare. Eddy was usually smiling, always pleased to see him. But not today it seemed. Today he stared at him as though he were a stranger. “What’s wrong Ed?”

“Yer not a bad bloke, Benno,” Eddy said. “So I’m gonna give yer a choice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I tried to get yer to do the right thing, but yer just didn’t get it,” he continued.

“Eddy, you’re scaring me,” Ben said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think yer do,” Eddy said.

“I really don’t,” Ben said. He took a step backwards. And another one. Without warning, strong hands gripped his upper arms and half lifted, half dragged him to the bar, forcing him to sit. He turned to look into the fierce faces of the two men who had followed him into the pub.

“There’s no runnin’ no more, Benno,” Eddy grinned—a horrible, mean grin. “It’s all over.”

“Huh?” Ben was desperate. “What is? What’s all over?”

"Gents," Eddy motioned for the two men to step back. "Give us some space."

"Not a chance," said one of the men.

"Not til we get what's owed," said the other.

"You'll get it soon enough," Eddy snapped.

"Are these guys threatening you, Ed?" Ben asked, slightly relieved. Maybe that's why Eddy is acting so strange. He's scared. Like Ben. "Maybe we should call the police."

Eddy laughed. "It's not me who's being threatened today."

"But... but the video... the knife..." Ben stammered. The two men stepped backwards and took up posts near the door. Ben looked from Eddy to the men and back. "What's going on?"

"It's over Ben," Eddy said. "I know why you run."

Ben froze. His stomach crashed to the floor. Time stood still as every text he'd received over the last few months slammed him in the head. It hurt. Really hurt.

"And there's no runnin' no more," Eddy said. "It's time to pay fer what you done."

"You...?" Ben couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I... it's... no... can't be... you?"

It couldn't be Eddy. He must've heard wrong. Must be a coincidence. Eddy was his mate. And mates look out for each other. "But... wh...why...?"

"Why don' matter right now, Benno," Eddy said. "Right now you gonna just give me what's rightfully mine."

"What's that?"

"It's yer money of course," Eddy laughed. "What did yer think it was gonna be? A ham sandwich and a glass o' milk?"

"My money...?" Ben couldn't make sense of what Eddy was asking him to do.

"I tried to do it nice like," Eddy explained. "But it turns out that that contract Raf wrote up wasn't worth the ink in the pen."

"Huh?"

"Turns out that the old Raffo's not such a hot lawyer after all," Eddy growled.

"What are you talking about?" Ben panted. "I don't know what you're talking about." His voice had a high-pitched edge to it as he felt himself beginning to hyperventilate.

A loud banging at the door prevented Eddy from answering as his attention was drawn to the two men guarding the place.

"Is it him?" Eddy demanded to know.

"Yeah it's him," one of the goons said, peeking through the blinds.

"Well then," Eddy said. "Let him in."

The men unlocked the door and pulled it open and Raf tumbled in.

"You okay?" he asked Ben. Ben nodded, dumbfounded.

"Ah Raffo," Eddy said. "You disappointed me."

"Suck it," Raf said.

Ben was surprised. He'd not heard Raf talk to anyone like that before. What the hell was going on? He could make no sense of any of it.

"You didn't stick ter your end of the bargain," Eddy said.

"Not you too?" Ben slumped on the stool, gazing at Raf, dumbfounded.

"No," Raf said. "You got it wrong. Don't listen to him. He's crazy."

"Crazy, huh?" Eddy laughed callously. "I'm not the one who's been locked up in the loony bin."

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" Ben implored.

"Well, yer see Benno, it's like this," Eddy turned to him. "I had a deal with Raffo here, to give me some info about yer whereabouts and the like."

"It's not how it sounds," Raf said, on the verge of tears.

"And he held up his end of the bargain fer a while," Eddy continued. "But then he got a bit slack. He dudded me on the contract what was meant to get me my money back."

"Stop it," Raf yelled. Ben looked from Raf to Eddy and back. The world started to crumble around him.

"So yer not getting yer money," Eddy said to Raf. "Not all of it anyways. Maybe I'll find it in me heart to give yer a bit, seeing as yer info in the beginning was helpful. As soon as Benno here signs it over that is."

"What?" Ben said. "Why? Raf?"

"Come on now," Eddy said. "Yer know why."

"I don't," Ben yelled. "Just tell me why!"

"Cos you been running yer whole life," Eddy spat. Running from the truth of what yer took from me."

"Wh... wh... what do you mean?" Ben struggled to make his dry mouth work. "What did I take from you?"

"What did yer take from me?" Eddy banged his fist of the bar, making the glasses jump and rattle, and scaring Ben out of his wits. "Yer took me only family, yer gutless little shit."

Ben stared. The old man was crazy. How could Ben have taken his family? He didn't even know his family. Eddy had never once mentioned his family. As far as Ben knew, Eddy didn't have any family. Only the part-time girlfriend he talked about, whom Ben had never met. It made no sense.

"What?" Ben said.

"Yer killed me brother," Eddy spat. "Yer killed me brother when I'd only just found him again."

"What?" Ben repeated. "You mean the man in the alley?"

"No," Eddy shouted. "Getting that photo was just luck, they'd already been followin' yer fer a while before yer clocked that bloke."

"Then what the hell are you talking about?" Ben shouted.

Eddy backhanded Ben across the head sending him sideways off the stool. Ben landed in a crumpled heap on the floor, his ears ringing. He stayed still for a minute until his head stopped spinning. He saw an opportunity and scrambled up to make a run for it, but the two men, still at the door, dragged him back and stood him in front of Eddy, remaining one on either side of him.

Eddy casually leaned over the bar and pulled a large wrench out from under it. He sat holding it in one hand and slapping it menacingly in the palm of the other, watching Ben.

"You not gonna run from this," Eddy said. "No more."

"But... who... who is your brother?"

"Me brother," Eddy drawled. "Was yer father."

Ben stared. Raf stared.

"My father...?"

"Yeah," Eddy said. "Yer father. We was taken away as nippers and put in foster care. They didn't let us keep in touch. Years I looked fer him. Years."

"But... but... your name is O'Hara and my father was Fitzpatrick..."

"His foster family changed his name," Eddy yelled. "I didn't even know. It's why I couldn't find 'im fer so long."

"But... but..." Ben struggled to accept what he was hearing. "Did you know...?"

"Did I know what?"

"Did you know about... us?"

"Course I knew," Eddy grinned that evil maniacal grin that terrified Ben. "We was just waiting until the inheritance came through..."

"What...?"

"Yer mother's inheritance. It shoulda gone to me brother when she died. That's what we thought was gonna happen," Eddy scowled. "But then the old biddies interfered and then even when they was off the scene, he still didn't get the money."

"My grandparents...?? Ben whispered. "You knew my grandparents. Did you...? Was it you...? My mother...?"

"And so then we figured...", Eddy drooled resentment. His eyes had glazed over, and he was talking as though nobody else was in the room. "...that finally the coast was clear. We was gonna disappear and go live the life we shoulda always been able to live. Together, as brothers. Just him and me."

"What about us...?"

"What do you mean 'what about us'," Eddy snapped out of his reverie and stared at Ben. "You were a snivelling snot-faced little shit who never stopped whinging."

Ben gasped and hiccupped. The words his father used to say to him rang in his ears and stabbed him in the heart. His knees buckled but the two standing behind him grabbed his arms and held him up before he hit the ground.

"And then you killed him," Eddy stated, in a matter-of-fact manner. "And now you gonna get what's coming to yer."

Ben shivered. He couldn't stop himself from trembling. "It was... an accident..."

"It was no accident," Eddy screamed. He was losing control and oozed danger. "Yer stabbed him. Yer can't stab someone by accident!"

"I... I was... I just..."

"You ruined my life is what you did," Eddy said. He was red in the face and started pacing in front of Ben, slapping the wrench in his palm with more and more force. Every now and then he'd stop and wave it in front of Ben's face. Ben couldn't move. Even if the men hadn't been holding him. "So I waited.... I bought this place and I followed yer... and I watched yer. Well, at least I had others watching yer."

Eddy pointed over Ben's shoulder with the wrench. Ben turned his head. Raf stood nearby, wide-eyed and pale.

"Raf?"

"No," Raf shook his head vehemently. "Not me. I didn't..."

"No point in bullshitting," Eddy said. "Raf here helped me out a bit with info here and there. He knew what was going on with you...."

Ben didn't know who to believe. Raf had moved in with Ben when he bought the place, they'd come down to the pub together a few times a month. They'd met Eddy at the same time. They couldn't have been in it together. Raf had never liked Eddy.

"Who... who is The Observationist?" Ben needed to know.

Eddy laughed.

"Years I stood behind that bar, biding me time, listening to yer whinging about yer life," Eddy continued narrating his story. "Years. Whinge, whinge, whinge... no-one loves me, everyone leaves me, life's hard, blah blah blah... sickening it was. You with all that money. Yer didn't want fer nothing... and all the while I'm here behind this bar, working me arse off so's I can eat."

Eddy stopped in front of him and turned to face him. Ben held his breath. Eddy raised the wrench and held it threateningly.

"And now..." Eddy looked straight into Ben's eyes. Ben held his gaze. "Now it's my turn."

"What are you going to do?" Ben whimpered.

"It's not what I'm gonna do Benno," Eddy said, lowering the wrench. "It's what you're gonna do."

"What...?"

"You're gonna sign over yer trust fund," Eddy told him.

"I can't," Ben said.

"Yer can," Eddy said. "And yer will. Or yer not ever gonna see the light of day again." He turned his back on Ben. "Sort him out," he said over his shoulder.

One of the men grabbed both of Ben's arms above the elbows and swung him around to face the other. The second man punched him hard in the stomach. Ben doubled over gasping, the wind knocked out of him. He fell to his knees. The man hauled him up by the shirtfront.

"Let him go," Raf screamed at the thugs.

Eddy came at Raf from behind and hit him across the head with the wrench. Raf didn't even see it coming. He went down like a sack of potatoes. Ben tried to get up but one of the men kicked him in the chest.

"You will sign the contract," Eddy stepped forward and stood over Ben with the wrench poised. "Or you will die. Just like my brother did."

Ben closed his eyes against the impending assault. But a humungous crash of glass shattered the momentary silence. All of a sudden a cacophony of shouting voices, stomping boots, scraping furniture, and strange clicks filled the pub.

Ben opened his eyes and saw dozens of blue legs. He raised his head to see the room full of police with guns drawn, all shouting at Eddy and the two men. And following them was Bec. She ran over to Ben and pulled him into a hug.

"Are you okay?" she cried, holding him tight. "Oh my god, I thought..."

Ben let her hold him. He hadn't quite got his wind back yet and was still gasping for breath. They watched as the police handcuffed the three men and read them their rights. The two men were hauled outside and bundled into a paddy wagon, but Eddy was left on the floor by the bar with his hands cuffed behind his back while the police searched the place.

Chapter Thirty-four

Ben and Bec stood on the corner outside the pub and watched as Raf was bundled into an ambulance.

"I can't believe he was involved in it all," Ben said, shaking his head.

"Don't be too hard on him," Bec put her arm around Ben's shoulder. "He had no clue what Eddy was up to. And he came through in the end."

"What do you mean?"

"Well after you took off like a bat-out-of-hell, he told me everything," Bec said. "It's how I knew to call the police."

"But Eddy said Raf—"

"Eddy did offer Raf money to keep tabs on you to begin with," Bec told him. "But Raf didn't know why. He thought it was because Eddy was worried about you. But after you got in that alley fight, and the texts started... he didn't know that Eddy had paid those thugs to set up The Observationist website."

"Really? I kinda thought it was Raf," Ben admitted.

"No," Bec said. Ben couldn't help feeling relieved. "But Raf suspected it was Eddy. He felt really awful about it because he was the one who'd told Eddy about your trust fund and the clause about the violence. It's why Eddy tried to drive you nuts."

"Yeah well," Ben wallowed. "He succeeded there."

"Maybe," Bec said, "Or maybe life just caught up with you. When Raf told Eddy he wasn't keeping tabs anymore, Eddy threatened him. But Raf doesn't scare easily and dismissed him as a cantankerous old man."

"But he didn't tell me about it," Ben whimpered.

"Would you have listened?" Bec said. "Raf said he tried to warn you about Eddy. And we both tried to tell you to stay away from him. You just got mad at us."

"Yeah I suppose," Ben conceded the point. "But I thought... well..."

"I know," Bec said.

"Did you know about Dad and Eddy being brothers?"

"I knew Dad'd grown up in foster care," Bec said. "Mum told me once. But I didn't know anything about a brother."

Ben sighed deeply and leaned back against the wall, watching the ambulance drive off. "What's he going to be charged with?"

"I don't know, but we have to go to the station and make statements. Me about everything Raf told me and you about all of this," Bec waved one arm over the chaotic scene around them.

"Bec...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Dad and Eddy killed—"

"Don't know," Bec cut him off. "I always thought it was Dad, even after the police said there wasn't enough evidence to charge him, but who knows about Nan and Pop... the police will work it out I guess. But we might never know..."

Ben noticed Bec's eyes mist over. He patted her awkwardly. She looked across at him and smiled. They stood silently, side-by-side, each lost in their own thoughts.

A commotion at the door told them that the police had finished with Eddy inside the pub and were bringing him out. An officer stood either side walking him out, hands cuffed behind his back, head down. He'd lost his steely bravado and just looked sad.

"Eddy," Ben called, stepping toward him. Bec placed one hand on his shoulder.

The officers with Eddy stopped. Eddy looked up at Ben, silent.

"Before I knew..." Ben spoke awkwardly. "I mean, before all this... I would've liked to have had you as my uncle."

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Hardware

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MacBook Pro

Actors

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Rafir	<i>Ahmad Hussein</i>
Olivia	<i>Any Eleanor Fisher</i>
Bec	<i>Chloe Angel</i>

Sound Effects

YouTube – <https://www.youtube.com/audiolibrary/soundeffects>
Sound Bible – soundbible.com/free-sound-effects-1.html

KINETIC TYPOGRAPHY EPISODES

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Software

After Effects
iMovie
Creation Art Effects AE template

Hardware

MacBook Pro

Exegesis

The Phenomenology of Reading in a Multimodal Context

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The philosophic consequences of all this are very grave. Our concepts of 'reading,' 'writing,' and 'book' fall apart and we are challenged to design 'hyperfiles' and write 'hypertexts' (Nelson, 1965, p. 1).

More than fifty years after Ted Nelson predicted that technology would challenge authors to write differently it is now widely acknowledged by theorists across disciplines, including New Media (E. Jenkins, 2013; H. Jenkins, 2013a), Education (Beavis, 2014; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Green & Green, 2013), Semiotics (Adami & Kress, 2014; G. R. Kress, 2010) and Literature (Serafini & Serafini, 2012) that reading and writing continues to change. In that context, the fate of the 'book' has been the subject of contentious discussion and debate for decades.

Concern that technology may undermine, or even lead to the demise of, the traditional long-form fiction novel, or 'book as a physical object' has been evident in the writing of many theorists over many years. Societal changes and interminable technological advances encourage the book's continual evolution from the historical codex with which readers are familiar to a rich architecture of content across multiple media and modes. As concepts and definitions of reading and writing continue to evolve, the general concept of literacy in a participatory culture is undergoing a paradigm shift (Jenkins, 2006, 2009b; H. Jenkins, 2013b). The subsequent revolution in reading will require an examination by authors—particularly those who write for the generations of young adults (YAs) born into, and consumed by, technology—of the knowledge and understanding of what it means to write in this ever-changing reading environment.

This project focuses on YA engagement with the novel, looks at the context in which YAs are currently reading for leisure and their emerging preferences for engaging with text, and suggests that authors of YA fiction need to extend their writing skills to include content development and/or multimodality as part of their writing toolkit, or at the very least to extend their knowledge base to include an understanding of the changing context of the reader–writer relationship, so that they may continue to reach the demographic for whom they write.

To this end, for the purpose of the exegesis, the research questions addressed are as follows:

- How do young adults engage with the long-form fiction novel in the current literacy climate?
- How can authors of YA long-form fiction diversify their writing skill-set (toolkit) to cater to that engagement?

The exegesis will begin with a chapter detailing the creation of the PhD artefact – the mBook. The mBook is a novel that incorporates multimodal elements into its paper format with the use of Augmented Reality (a digital layer applied over the text to create a composite view). It includes a combination of traditional and new media methodologies to develop the story, create the parallel narrative strands using different elements, and construct the book.

Multimodality is a theory that examines the different means by which people communicate. A multimodal text uses different modes of communication, with particular modes or combination of modes separately and independently offering opportunities or affordances for meaning making and can be structured, in multi-media formats and/or use non-linear hypertext (Kitson, 2011). In this multimodal text, it is the selection, use and placement of images acting as triggers, hyperlinks, frames, windows, and markers through which the author attempts to influence the construction of meaning and impose her intent, to communicate the story.

The process of writing and building the book was a laborious, and at times, problematic one. Visualising the digital components and then determining the skills needed to create them, followed by learning the skills and then discovering personal (and time) limitations in mastering them; and stumbling on workarounds to unforeseen obstacles to produce a product for which there was no model was a challenging and rewarding experience of narrative composition. Flower (1989) argued that individual cognition and individual human agency have to be included in any valid account of what it means to write, and that context in its many forms is mediated at all levels of awareness by the cognition of the individual writer (p. 289). Developing the capacity to engage with a subset of 21st Century skills, including, but not limited to, skills in digital technology, means that as the act of writing is evolving, the self-reflexivity to track this journey provides an insight into the constructivist process of contemporary writing.

Ethnomethodology, like much of composition studies, focuses attention on processes instead of products (Brandt, 1992, p. 330) and an auto-ethnomethodological approach was deemed the most suitable to observe and report on the development process. The mBook was created using a variety of software and hardware tools, some familiar and well-used, others new and challenging. The mBook chapter will outline the tools and methods used in the creation of the narrative arcs and explain how they are integrated to form a complete narrative where essential narrative arcs are read across different platforms including paper and smartphone or tablet, in different orders. As the basis of this chapter is self-reflexive, it diverts from the traditional third-person perspective used in the exegesis and is written in the first-person.

Chapter three provides a theoretical overview of the broader context in which young adults are reading. It looks at the convergent nature of a new media and participatory culture and the changing role of the 'book' within it. The most recent Australian reading data is unpacked and the education context in which young adult readers are reading, both for educational and leisure purposes, is discussed.

The next chapter outlines the qualitative research that took place to examine how young adults engage with a long-form fiction text such as the mBook, and discusses significant findings of the focus group research. The first part of the chapter identifies and discusses the two distinct 'types' of reading behaviours that emerged during the research – the Immersive Reader, who loses themselves entirely in the text, despite the format in which they chose to read; and the Intermittent (or distracted) Reader, who engaged in multiple simultaneous behaviours during the reading process. The mBook as a reading object is discussed as a reading experience conducive to encouraging the much valued 'deep-reading' process of both styles of readers.

Young adults educational and social reading expectations are discussed, along with what they are reading, where they are reading, and how they come across their reading material. In addition to this, that reading has become a fluid and adaptive process across platforms and modes as it suits readers' environments at any given point in time is explored.

The second part of the chapter examines participant reading behaviours from a phenomenological framework. It unpacks observations evident during the focus group that the participants, without being able to articulate any conscious awareness of doing so,

seamlessly demonstrated embodied actions such as clicking, swiping, zooming, scanning, and tech-based troubleshooting, that were required of them while reading in this multimodal context.

This then leads into chapter five where the changing nature of the role of authors in this changing environment is discussed, along with the implications for authors in the future. The final chapter brings the results from both the focus group research and the auto-ethnomethodology research together to draw conclusions based on the original research questions relating to YA engagement with long-form fiction multimodal text, and authors' response to the same.

Chapter 2. The mBook

For this project, *mBook* is being used as a generic term to describe this particular type of multimodal long-form fiction novel. The ‘*m*’ is representative of the multimodal format of the text and is used akin to the way the ‘*p*’ is used in *pBook* to indicate a paper format, and ‘*e*’ is used in *eBook* to indicate the electronic format of the text.

This specific mBook is a multimodal novel for young adults in the 14-24-year age group. It is a multi-layered psychological thriller with three parallel narrative arcs, each represented in a different format. The core narrative arc is presented in print-format and depicts the main character in the present. Another of the narrative arcs depicts the main character’s immediate past and is presented as a series of short video clips. The third narrative arc is the distant past and is presented in the multi-sensorial format of kinetic typography. Each of the narratives intersects at different points in the story, and while they can each be read and made sense of independently of the other, only when read together do they present the whole story.

The mBook incorporates multimodality into its paper format with the use of Augmented Reality App, Aurasma. The multimodal content in the novel is accessed by the reader scanning images printed in the paperback. These images then morph into either the video clip series or the kinetic typography series, both of which are then projected onto the page using the image as a background via the screen of the scanning device — a smartphone or tablet.

Readers have the choice to scan the images and access the content whenever they choose during the reading process. This may or may not occur in a linear fashion. Each of the narrative arcs is itself a chronological depiction, and though the narrative arcs intersect at different points in the complete story, readers can choose to access the content in different ways. They can view it as the images are presented in the text, interspersed with the print-text storyline, or they may choose to read the video content first, the kinetic-typography content first, or they may choose to complete reading the print-text before accessing any of the video text or kinetic-typography text. The creation/authorship of the mBook artefact also involved a non-linear (non-sequential) process. Understanding this process was conducted via a framework of auto-ethnomethodology.

Auto-Ethnomethodology

“A fundamental requirement of an environment for creative practice is that it supports and enables the development of new forms and the new knowledge that is required to achieve such outcomes.” (Edmonds et al., 2005, p. 4)

Typically, the creative process is an iterative one. Ideas are trialled and tested, and often discarded, during the process. Sometimes the most useful ideas or discoveries are those that occur as an off-shoot or side effect of the original idea, rather than the idea itself. Because of this, it is very difficult to describe creative acts in advance (Edmonds et al., 2005) which is why most studies of creativity, by necessity, occur after the fact as a reflexive process by the creative practitioner herself. This style of self-observation, however, has its challenges. Memory is flawed and sometimes unreliable, but the fallible nature of memory during the creative practice can, in part, be mitigated by journaling or note-taking throughout the creative journey as part of the research input.

Practice-based research is where “some of the resulting knowledge is embodied in an artefact. Whilst the significance and content of that knowledge is described in words, a full understanding of it can only be obtained with reference to the artefact itself” (Candy, 2006). The development of the mBook occurred over the course of years of writing, editing, designing, redesigning, developing, cutting, redrafting, and redeveloping multiple streams of narrative input with multiple representations in multiple formats, often concurrently, sometimes haphazardly. Though a comprehensive planning process took place prior to commencing the project, the creative process of development encountered many challenges, underwent many iterations, and experienced many complexities before draft completion.

To document this process, “[a] reliable account of perception must take action into account.... action, cognition and perception must be considered together in any adequate description,” (Candy, 2006, p. 6). As such, an auto-ethnomethodological analysis of the development of the mBook, based on personal reflections, documented communications and interactions with collaborators, and a series of monthly email communications reflecting on process as the creative journey progressed, is applied in this section. Though ethnomethodological research

is based in a sociological analysis of people's speech and everyday actions, it can also be applied to creative research to document the process as it focuses on a particular context.

Harold Garfinkel developed the methodology in the 60s and defines it as such: "Ethnomethodology's fundamental phenomenon and its standing technical preoccupation in its studies is to find, collect, specify, and make instructably observable the local endogenous production and natural accountability of immortal familiar society's most ordinary organizational things in the world, and to provide for them both and simultaneously as objects and procedurally, as alternate methodologies" (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 6). Or, in less convoluted terms, ethnomethodology is a form of analysis that studies the methods that people use for doing stuff (Brandt, 1992). Skains (2016, p. 1) observes that Garfinkel is "careful not to identify ethnomethodology as method, for, like practice-based research, its method must be designed on the basis of each individual study."

For the purpose of this individual study, it is deemed that an auto-ethnomethodological account would best suit both the writing and development process in addition to the media convergent analysis of the artefact's context.

Creating the mBook

As writers compose they create multiple internal and external representations of meaning. Some of these representations, such as an imagistic one, will be better at expressing certain kinds of meaning than prose would be, and some will be more difficult to translate into prose than others. Much of the work of writing is the creation and the translation of these alternative mental representations of meaning. (Flower & Hayes, 1984, p. 122)

The construction of meaning through story is multifaceted. Considering representations of meaning via technology essentially had to begin with the basics. Though the mBook contains multiple components in different formats, the narrative was originally written in the manner an author would traditionally write a book. An idea was sparked and characters emerged around this idea. Personalities were identified, developed and named, a loose plot was created and as the main character (Ben) began to provide more information about himself and his issues, the plot was refined. This is fairly typical of the narrative writing process. The

first-draft manuscript was an homogenous text-based story with the narrative arcs intertwined and integrated throughout.

I Know Why You Run — Story Premise

The mBook for this project is titled *I Know Why You Run*, and is a psychological thriller for young adult readers. It is about 21-year-old Ben who is struggling with adulthood. He relies a little too heavily on alcohol to manage complex emotional issues and his risk-taking behaviours isolate him from his friendship group. The reader meets Ben as he is waking from an alcoholic binge in an alleyway in the back of Sydney's Kings Cross precinct. He is hungover and disorientated and is horrified to discover the body of an unconscious man nearby, but has no memory of how either of them came to be in the alley. Ben assumes they fought and that he unwittingly killed the man. He runs away from the scene. A few days later he begins to receive text messages saying '*I Know Why You Run.*' The texts link back to a social media site (Instagram), where video footage has been uploaded with specific threatening hash-tagged messages for Ben.

The cyberstalking continues throughout the novel with a total of seventeen short video clips (Vines). The identity of the stalker is unknown and Ben is convinced that whoever it is must have witnessed the fight in the alley and is 'out to get him'. As Ben descends further into emotional chaos, fuelled by fear, his binge-drinking episodes, grief over his lost relationship, and the displacement of family, he experiences a series of disturbing flashback memory episodes from his childhood. The combination of all these factors leads him to the point of a mental health crisis.

Identifying Components

The original planning for the novel was to have the texts and video footage delivered to the reader as they were delivered to Ben — as live, albeit simulated texts and Vines via a QR code embedded in the text. But by the time the manuscript was complete to first draft stage, the use of QR codes was in steep decline and industry-based research consistently reported that teenagers did not use them (Youth Market Alerts, 2011). This was backed up by research

examining college-age student use of QR codes which found a general disinterest in their immediate use and a disinclination to “use them in the future” (Wallingford, 2014). The general lack of engagement with QR codes can be attributed, in part, to the rapid development of alternate options with greater mobile connectivity and which was more widely accessible to young people (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Remaining relevant and accessible to the readers for whom the mBook was developed was an important factor in deciding to move to web-based social media platform Twitter. However, again, by the time the video footage was designed and created, this too, had changed. Market research by the Pew Research Centre (Lenhart, 2015) showed that more and more young people were moving away from the text-based Twitter platform towards the image-based Instagram platform. The challenge of a relevant delivery method to the reader remained. Consideration was given to creating a blog via one of the mainstream blogging platforms (e.g., Wordpress, Blogger, Google Sites) to host the content, but this would require using a written link in the text which the reader would then need to enter manually on their device to access the content. This would have taken the reader away from the print text and situated them in a networked context risking a much greater distraction from the novel, or conversely, encouraging a disinclination to access the elements.

As mentioned prior, the preference was to keep ALL components of the mBook contained within a traditional paperback novel form. Links to internet locations would only be effective if the artefact included hyperlinks, that is, if the mBook was entirely in electronic format, for example, an enhanced eBook or an iBook. This was a problem that was revisited and reconsidered many times. With the rapidity at which technology evolves, accessibility and availability increased and improved over the term of candidature and a solution revealed itself in Augmented Reality.

Augmented Reality (AR)

Augmented Reality (AR) has become increasingly common and available over the last few years, though it has been around for much longer. AR combines the real and virtual to provide a multisensorial experience mediated by technology. There are many definitions of AR,

however, Klopfer and Squire (2008) define AR as a situation in which a real-world context is dynamically overlaid with coherent location or context sensitive virtual information. This can be done in two ways, the first of which is geolocation, where information is augmented according to the physical location. For example, the AR game, Pokemon Go, augments its characters in a geographically specific way where certain characters are found in specific landscapes (coastal, desert, bushland, rocky) or different countries (Kangaskhan is unique to Australia). The other way to use AR, as is used in the mBook, is by visual direct means whereby the user points their mobile device at a 'marker,' an image in the case of the mBook, to access content.

In the mBook when the reader sees the picture in the text, she uses her device —a smartphone or tablet, to scan. She simply holds the device over the picture with the app open, taps the icon, and the content (footage) plays on the screen of the device. From the reader's perspective, the picture at which the device is aimed will appear as if it is dissolving into the page and the footage plays against the page in its place. In the case of the Vines, the picture in the text is the same as the background picture in the footage. If the reader holds her device over the picture, the footage will play to its completion against the backdrop of the picture, but if the device is moved from the picture, the footage ceases to play. By all accounts, it appears that the picture comes to life. In the case of the Kinetic Typography episodes, the picture dissolves to reveal text moving across the page accompanied by narration and effects.

Narrative Strands

Whilst it was always the intention to create parts of the narrative in non-print-based formats, the first draft manuscript was written chronologically, in its entirety. Though the manuscript still contained all narrative arcs, a reading of the first-draft ensured reader progress occurred in a linear fashion, predetermining how and when the reader would be introduced to the narrative arcs. Reading print-based text this way controls the story by shaping the narrative experience. Plot points and storylines are revealed traditionally, bit by bit, in an order determined by the author.

Identifying the sections of the story to recreate and represent in different formats meant these whole sections needed to be removed from the story. For the remaining text to continue to make sense, it was determined that the narrative arcs would be separated in relation to the time frame in which they occurred. That meant the print text would depict the immediate present of the main character, Ben; the Vines would carry the narrative arc depicting the immediate past, that is, events that had occurred within the last few years of Ben's life which had been recorded by the unknown 'stalker;' and the narrative arc that depicted the flashback scenes to Ben's distant past, his childhood, would be represented in kinetic typography.

Separating the narrative arcs into time frames meant each narrative arc could be made sense of independently of the others. The plot lines were self-contained, which ensured meaning-making could occur throughout the reading process irrespective of the format/mode the reader was using. The reader could then choose the order in which she read the mBook elements. Though each of the story arcs has their own narrative chronology, the reader could read in a non-linear manner, if she so chose, by moving between the elements or reading each in its entirety before accessing the others. While "print culture positions itself as the sole communication between the author and the reader" (Modir, Guan, & Aziz, 2014) writing this way means the author has to surrender some degree of control to the readers. For example, the reader might choose to read all the text, and/or all the Vines, and/or all the KT episodes, or jump around and read episodes/scenes from the various narrative arcs at various times throughout the reading process. Though each of the narrative arcs can be read independently of the others, it is only when they are ALL read, does the reader access all information and is able to get the 'whole story.'

For an authentic multimodal experience, it is essential for each of the modes to contribute something different to the story (G. Kress, 1996) and though the narrative arcs represented by the video footage and kinetic typography are essential parts of Ben's immediate present, as they inform his behaviour and choices, the decision was made to remove the descriptions of and references to them from the print text. This left the images in the texts as prompts to the reader that narrative arcs intersected at that point, though it is not necessary for the reader to access them at that time if they chose not to do so.

Creating the Vines

“Artistic research does not imagine a separation between knowledge production, and making processes.” (Ravetz, 2014, p. 29)

The Vine series is a series of short video clips depicting scenes from the immediate past of the main character's life. The term Vine is used in reference to the Vine App, owned by Twitter, as a means of uploading video between six and 140-seconds duration (NOTE: On 26/10/16, Twitter announced its intention to discontinue the Vine upload service). The mBook contains fifteen such video clips, ranging in length between ten and thirty seconds. The Vine clips are presented throughout the novel as Instagram posts delivered to Ben via links in text messages. In the story, Ben clicks through to the social media platform to watch the footage on his smartphone. The reader uses the AR app to see on their own phone, what Ben sees on his.

The first step to creating the Vines was to identify and isolate the scenes that would become video footage, and then create scripts and storyboards for each of them. During the storyboarding process several critical issues arose. One of these was location. The scenes take place in a variety of sites, including city streets, Sydney Harbour foreshore, on public transport, in pubs, and in parks, and at different times of the day and night. To get access to these locations would have involved an exhaustive process of applying for filming permissions from the relevant authorities, and there was a prohibitive cost to access some sites. Another issue was the time involved in the filming process. It was clear that there would need to be multiple secondary and 'extra' characters involved in the scenes, in addition to the three main story characters. The sheer logistics of on-site filming made it an unfeasible option.

It made more sense logistically to gather all required personnel in one location to film the scenes. I wondered if it would be possible to take photographs of the locations needed for the scenes, and recreate the location after having done the filming. At this point, collaboration became critical to the success of the project. Not being a film-maker, I did not have the skill-set to know how to do this, or even if it was possible at all.

Collaboration has been identified as one of the four 'Cs' that have become requirements for success in a 21st Century working context (Jenkins, 2009b; H. Jenkins, 2013b; Keane, Keane, & Blicblau, 2016). Along with creativity, communication, and critical thinking, collaboration is

deemed a necessary literacy skill. Education departments and organisations across Australia such as the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in its Melbourne Declaration outlined the necessary skills students needed for successful participation in contemporary society (MCEETYA, 2008), and the Australian Curriculum Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) incorporated the development of these skills into the New National Curriculum (ACARA, 2013). This is reflected by similar organisations around the developed world, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010), European Union (Voogt & Roblin, 2012), and American Management Association (AMA, 2010).

Collaborating with a variety of people with expertise in film-making led to the realisation that though it was possible to manipulate scenery post-production (that is, after filming had been completed), I would need the advice of a cinematographer to assist in the setting up of the shots to ensure a realistic (or semi-realistic) representation. After a few false leads, I was able to identify someone (Bert —a pseudonym) who was available and willing to assist. Initially, Bert was appalled to learn that the scenes would be shot with an iPhone and insisted instead, that a digital SLR video camera be used for filming.

As part of this narrative arc in the story, the video footage is being shot by an unidentified stalker who had been following the main character around, unseen, who then uploaded the footage to a social media site as Vines. The stalker would have filmed using a smartphone so for the sake of consistency, I wanted the footage to be shot on a smartphone. However, in the first of a few creative differences, Bert (a film traditionalist) was adamant that filming on a smartphone would not produce the desired quality. We agreed to film using both styles of cameras. He would use the SLR and I would shoot with the iPhone.

The next step in creating the Vines was to gather actors. The main character, Ben, supporting characters, James (so-named at the time) and Liv, and featured extra, Bec, as well as about a dozen extras for crowd scenes were needed. It became apparent that the cost of hiring that many actors was going to be prohibitive, and approaching the university film department seeking student volunteers willing to take part yielded no results. A rethink was required.

Returning to the manuscript to examine and deconstruct the scenes further, I realised that I would need to rewrite some of the scenes to reduce the number of people in them. It was

during this process that I came to the realisation that the ‘extras’ were insignificant to the plot, and could be represented in the film with general crowd scene images that could be sourced from the internet under a Creative Commons¹ licence. Creative Commons is an international non-profit organisation that provides free licences and tools that copyright owners can use to allow others to share, reuse and remix their material, legally.

Placing an advertisement on StarNow — a site that mediates jobs for beginning actors/performers, for the featured characters, Ben, Liv, James, and Bec, produced the personnel needed. Filming was booked for one day, with the understanding that the actors may be required for a second day at some time in the future. A decision to film using the green-screen technique where the background could easily be edited out after filming, meant that inclement weather on the day of filming would not be an issue.

After examining the footage following filming, it became apparent that a second day would be required. The actor who played James, had attended the shoot ill-prepared and did not manage to successfully communicate the character — he needed to be recast. All actors were contacted and informed that a second day was needed, however, the character playing Liv declined to return. This meant both characters, Liv and James, needed to be recast, and all scenes that contained them would need to be reshot. The actor who played the main character, Ben, informed me that he was willing and able but had since been cast in a feature film and would not be available for a few months.

The delay in filming was filled by working to get the manuscript to second-draft stage. It was at this point that a plot hole opened wide enough to reveal the potential for—not just a rewrite, but an opportunity for readers to become involved in contributing content to develop subplots and alternate storylines for some of the characters. As boundaries between writer and reader continue to become blurred (H. Jenkins, 2013b) there is potential for the story to continue to grow and expand by readers becoming engaged in writing subplots that could take character development into areas previous not considered by the author (Leavenworth, 2015).

¹ <http://creativecommons.org.au>

The character of James was written out of the novel. In the first-draft narrative, James had been a friend from university with whom Ben shared his apartment. They had only known each other for a few years, and in the first-draft, James had been responsible for the stalking. The plot problem had to do with the lack of history between Ben and James rendering the interactions between them without depth or consistency. A new character, Rafir, revealed himself by means of a conversation with a friend who is a teacher. In conversation about my experience working with actors, including the disappointment with the 'James' character, my teacher friend shared an anecdote from his work with refugees, where a young man in his early twenties really wanted to become an actor, and though he had had no training or experience acting, and very little English, he kept everyone amused with impressions based on his observations of people in his new country and culture.

Inspired by this anecdote, I replaced James with Rafir, and redrafted the manuscript accordingly. Rafir had come to Australia as an eight-year-old who Ben befriended at school, and they'd been best friends since. Establishing the long-term connection between Ben and Rafir, and writing some of their history into the novel, effectively closed the plot hole that existed between Ben and his best friend. Now it remained that I needed to find someone to play Rafir. I returned to my teacher friend and asked whether he thought the young man he'd described might be interested in his first acting gig. He was. Rafir was played by a twenty-year-old refugee from Afghanistan with little English. And he did a fabulous job.

The second day of filming produced further complications with Bert unexpectedly being unable to attend. There was no option to delay further, and as all the actors, including the new Liv, could only come together on that day, I shot the scenes myself, using an iPhone. I uploaded all the footage and sent it off to Bert who had agreed to cut it together. Some weeks later, upon querying as to the progress of the scenes, Bert informed me that he could not do it. Apparently, it was taking much too long and there was too much 'camera-shake' because I had not used a tripod in filming. This setback nearly killed the project. I did not have the skills or knowledge to use the video-editing software or cut together disparate scenes and drop them onto a different background.

A serious workaround was needed. I spent the next few weeks trawling through YouTube Tutorial Channels on video editing looking for a quick way to learn to edit and compile video.

During my exploration, I found some animations where moving characters were walking through still backgrounds and wondered if I might be able to use this technique for the Vines. Drawing on the artefacts of distributed cognition and the benefits of collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2009b) in a highly networked context meant that information, instruction and expertise from a wide variety of people and sources was available to me in a manner that would not have been possible ten years ago.

Examining the storyboards for each scene, I discovered that if I could use a still-image as the background, the footage could play against it and that would solve the problem of having to edit character footage and site footage and cut them together. I returned to YouTube to learn how to edit green screen footage, and eliminate camera-shake, then began experimenting with the footage against a photo I had taken. It remained problematic. There was something inconsistent with the aesthetic presentation and I could not identify what it was. After much experimenting with different styles and techniques, to no avail, a conversation with a colleague about the impact of black-and-white photography sparked another idea. I put a black-and-white filter on the photographic-still I was using as a background and played the footage against it in colour. It looked better.

Using the scene story-boards, I identified the type of background photo I would need for each of the scenes and began my search to locate them. Pixabay² was my site-of-preference as the photos are all high definition with a 'creative-commons-no-attribution' licence.

The photo backgrounds were often very specific. For example, the scene where Ben throws a coffee cup against a tree in a park needed a photo that contained both a children's playground with a tree at the right angle for the footage. The cup (thrown against a green wall during filming) needed to look as though it were hitting the tree and bouncing off at the correct angle, as this was an important point in the story. Other scenes needed to accommodate different perspectives in the footage. For example, where Liv and Raf are sitting at a table in the pub, each with a beer, and Bec arrived looking for Ben, I needed to find a picture that would facilitate those actions, including the placement of the beer bottles and handbag on the table, and Bec walking in front of the table, rather than through or over it.

² www.pixabay.com is a free open-source image site where all images are offered free-of-charge

Some of the scenes required more than one photo/image to build the appropriate context. Another of the pub scenes had Liv and Raf standing with drinks, but other patrons in the photo were sitting or standing around barrels with their drinks. Layering images assisted to create the effect of the characters also standing behind a barrel. This was done by locating a clip-art image of a barrel, resizing it and placing in front of the characters.

Occasionally, a scene would have to be rewritten to suit the image used as background as a specifically detailed creative commons image could not be found. And on one occasion, the perfect photo was located but it was not in the public domain so I was unable to use it. I was however, able to use it as a source of inspiration to create a similar image using a compilation of public domain images cut, copied, layered, edited and collaged to recreate a similar image. This type of appropriation (Jenkins, 2009b) is typical of a post-convergence culture where remixing existing content to create new content has become a typical skill of the new literacy environment (Beavis, 2014).

Social Media

The narrative arc in the mBook depicted via these short video clips is introduced into the story via a series of Instagram posts, the links to which are sent to the main character, Ben, as text messages.

Instagram is a social media platform that launched in 2010. It is both a web-based platform and a free app for mobile devices, both of which allow users to upload, edit and share pictures and short videos with other Instagram users. The Instagram platform was selected as the preferred means of delivery as it is the fastest growing social media platform and 90% of its 600 million global users are under the age of 35 (Jang, Han, Lee, Jia, & Shih, 2016). Given that the target demographic for the novel is 14-24-year-olds, it was deemed the most relevant.

Instagram uses the language of hashtags to communicate its visual content. Hashtags have become a commonly accepted means of ordering and systematising 'subsets of discourse' (Heyd & Puschmann, 2017, p. 5). While the video-based narrative arc is presented via short clips, it is the hashtag identifiers that accompany the posted footage that communicate the

ominous nature of the seemingly innocent scenes depicted in the video in several different but meaningful ways.

(Zappavigna, 2015) observes that “[h]ashtags operate in posts both as part of the linguistic structure and discourse semantics and also as metadata.” Users assign hashtags to enable readers to both find and classify content. “This aggregating functionality enables the user to track in real-time unfolding discourse about a specific event or issue” (p. 277). In the mBook, the cyberstalker posts each of the video clips with the unique identifier #IKWYR — the initials of the texts that are regularly sent to Ben throughout the novel, and #staytuned to communicate that there is more of the story to come.

These tags provide the kind of metadata that is usually hidden in traditional information systems where it is separated from the main body of text (Zappavigna, 2015), but as is typical of the social media use of hashtags generally, this information “is incorporated into the primary communication and performs particular functional roles in the discourse itself” (p. 277).

(Heyd & Puschmann, 2017) observe that “...the hash has been recruited for a number of semantic, pragmatic and overall semiotic extensions in recent years” (p.2). Importantly, in the context of this mBook the narrative arc communicated via multiple social media platforms, the use of the hashtag serves multiple purposes. It

“...perform[s] the communicative functions of construing experience (e.g. labelling content), enacting relationships (e.g. indicating evaluative stance), and organizing text (e.g. marking metadiscourse via the # symbol). These functions are also all involved more generally in supporting ambient intertextuality in the sense that using a particular hashtag presupposes that there exists other texts that may contain the same tag, as well as putative listeners who might “tune in” via the social stream” (Zappavigna, 2015, p.288).

Indeed, the use of the hashtag #IKWYR provides the basis of a search, the results of which then connects the user to multiple social media platforms (Instagram, Blog). Other hashtags used in the posts communicate further annotative information about the footage as well as

insights into the perceived state-of-mind of Ben in what has become a typical “emblem of social media linguistic practice”(Heyd & Puschmann, 2017, p. 2).

Though hashtags are commonly recognised as topic identifiers, they “also possess the linguistic versatility to construe more interpersonal and structural meanings” (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 288). Subsequent posts in the novel create a less than positive perception of the main character, Ben, with such tags as #pisspot, #loser, #thug, #coward. As the story progresses the tone becomes more threatening with an increase in intensity, for example: #canthide, #warning, #beveryscared, #imcomingforyou.

The hashtags along with the sentence-long description/interpretation of the video footage together create a self-contained narrative arc that is independent of but contributes to the other narrative arcs in the novel.

Kinetic Typography (KT)

Kinetic Typography is way of presenting the written word in a dynamic manner accompanied by sound, images, and special effects.. It is “...not just an emotional overlay on words, but a means of expression in its own right, and just one aspect of a language of animated movement in which the participants can be letters or parts of letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, pictures or parts of pictures, or abstract graphic elements, or some combination of all of these, and in which these participants are related to each other to form meaningful wholes through animated movement...” (van Leeuwen & Djonov, 2015, p. 250).

Kinetic Typography (KT) had its beginnings in cinematography as a movie title sequence when graphic designer, Saul Bass, used animation in the 1956 Alfred Hitchcock film *North By Northwest* (Lee, Forlizzi, & Hudson, 2002). It is a means of writing that brings the written word to life in ways previously unimagined. In more recent times, KT has often been used in advertising and promotion, and is sometimes seen in music video clips. With society’s general preference for the visual over the linguistic (Hull & Nelson, 2005) adding sound and special effects to create an audiovisual expression of story enables writers to “restore the expressiveness of speech that derives from tempo, rhythm, intonation and voice quality” (van Leeuwen & Djonov, 2015, p. 246) while still focused on the written word.

The narrative arc following the experiences of main character, Ben, at various points in his childhood is presented as a series of flashback-type episodes in kinetic typography. As with the Vines (short video clips), this narrative arc is self-contained, independent of the others so it can be read separately, but contributes to the overall story by providing more information about Ben's early life thereby informing his present behaviours and recent past experiences.

Kinetic Typography was selected to create this storyline to differentiate from the 'present' conveyed in the static print text, and the 'recent past' depicted in the video footage. Though the episodes sometimes appear in the static print text as dreams or memories, they sit in the subconscious of Ben, an indicator to the reader of the baggage that he carries. Presenting this harrowing account of Ben's early life in a manner that, not only informs the reader, but provides a multisensorial emotional experience was the motivation for using kinetic typography as a storytelling device.

The written word is a powerful way of evoking emotion, however, adding music and movement and visual effects to the written word has the potential to make it even more so. Van Leewen and Djonov (2015) see kinetic typography as being driven "by broader cultural trends that manifest themselves also in other domains, more specifically by what we call pictorialization, informalization, emotivization and dynamicization" (p.245)

New ways of writing creatively are being enabled by the affordances of constantly evolving technology and writers of young adult fiction have the opportunity, should they develop their writing skill set, to take advantage of these new storytelling devices. With software such as Adobe After Effects available to the general populace "[a]uthorship now comprises capabilities for displaying inextricable con[fi]gurations among modes such as language, oral and written; images, still and moving; and sound, voice and music (Domingo, 2014, p. 261).

KT Text Elements

The software selected to create the KT elements was Adobe After Effects (AE). Though AE was designed to create digital visual effects and compositing in post-production for video and film, it lent itself well to repurposing as a writing tool.

Creating the text was the first of the KT elements involved in developing the episodes. To remain consistent in the visual storytelling, a unique font was selected for each of the characters depicted in the episodes. For Ben, the Noteworthy font uses rounded edges with a bubble-like shape depicting his innocence and youth. The font selected for the character of his mother was the cursive, Bradley-hand, a gentle sloping font suggesting both vulnerability and maturity, while the font for his father, Scratch, is a harsh and scary font that denotes severity and coldness in its sharp multi-lined edges. The font for Ben's older sister, is bold with a mix of circular and straight letters combining innocence with maturity reflecting the character's resignation and insight beyond her years.

Identifying the series of episodes to be recreated as kinetic typography was an easy process as these episodes have a clear delineation in terms of narrative arc. In the original first-draft manuscript these episodes were written in italics to differentiate them from the core narrative arc, so they were easy enough to isolate. As an author, the challenge became 'writing' the same episodes in a different mode. KT uses the words, but when we see text, and hear it, at the same as we are watching it move across the page in different ways, the words often need to change.

The combination of sensory receptors utilised in multi-sensorial reading appears to facilitate readers making sense of the language in a different way. Kinetic typography seems to create its own lexicon. The words that were used in the scene when writing it for print were not the necessarily the same words in the same order that were needed to communicate the same thing once they were combined with movement and effects. Punctuation became irrelevant. Upper and lower case letters were used to communicate emphasis rather than sentence beginnings and/or endings, and full stops and commas interrupted the flow of the 'sentence' by creating a jarring effect. The size of words, or letters within words, and the special-effects added to them (for example, a 'wiggly' effect can be designed to communicate fear, or sadness, or joy, depending on settings used) provided more information to the word than did the word itself. This reduced the need for other words that, in print text, may be needed to provide further information about the context. When kinetic typography is used to write, the reader can see and hear the context as well.

As cited by van Leeuwen and Djonov (2015), Leao (2012) suggests that kinetic typography has a grammar of its own. Domingo (2014) supports this with her view that when writing in digital environments where multiple elements are integrated “it is increasingly necessary to account for how multimodal ensembles are made coherent using grammars particular to digital environments [and that c]ontrary to traditional print-based texts organized in a linear reading path (i.e., left to right and top to bottom), modularity expands choices for organizing meanings using cohesive devices such as framing, color scheme, font selection, among other modal resources” (p.262).

Other conventions of text such as reading sentences from left-to-right and paragraphs from top-to-bottom also become irrelevant in a kinetic typography context. In the KT narrative arc for the mBook, words are presented in the same order (sometimes) that they are narrated, but their movement is not the typical left-to-right / top-to bottom. They may fly in from different angles, or appear and disappear suddenly; their trajectory is unpredictable and sometimes unexplainable, and it is only when they land—if they land—or when they are heard, can sense be made of their order.

Audio

Music, along with narration and/or sound effects, can interact with images and language “to construct distinctively different interpretive possibilities” (Barton & Unsworth, 2014, p. 4) from those written describing the same scenes in a text only version of the mBook. The use of music and voice in the kinetic typography episodes, and sound effects in the Vines provided further layers of narrative to the mBook. Barton & Unsworth (2014) note that research on psychomusicology suggests that “music can act as a trigger to evoke particular emotional reactions when combined with visual stimuli” (p.6).

Each of the kinetic typography episodes is set to a music track in the background. Each track is selected specifically to enhance the impact of the moving words, contributing to the overall tone of the episode. For example, a scene where anger is expressed or fear is felt by one or other of the characters, the text demonstrates aggressive behaviour by slamming down on the page, or appearing with jagged edges, or becoming much larger, and these episodes are

accompanied by music tracks that are fast in tempo, use dissonant harmonies and/or irregular rhythms and might increase in volume, inducing those negative emotions in the reader. These all “play a large part in portraying meaning and supporting visual imagery for the listener” (Barton & Unsworth, 2014, p.6).

In addition to playing against the background of a soundtrack, each of the kinetic typography episodes is narrated. The narrations were recorded in the author’s voice using the MacBook Pro. Much thought was given to whether a voice narration in addition to the music track would enhance or detract from the kinetic typography episodes. While voice narration, sometimes by the author, is common in audiobooks, adopting the technique for some scenes in the mBook, to synchronise narration with digital text presents a novel and innovative approach (Larson, 2015).

The narrations were recorded phrase-by-phrase in order that the spoken words matched the trajectory of the written words and the phrasing of the music track. Phrasing and timing of the spoken words occasionally had to be adjusted to allow for any special effects applied to the text to transpire in order that the synchronisation was effective.

The sound that underpinned the Vines was a series of relevant (Creative Commons) audio special effects tracks. The Vines were designed to appear as though they had been incidentally recorded using a smartphone by an unknown stalker. As such, the sound effects layered in to the video were complementary of, rather than supplementary to, the scenes being recorded. They were, for the most part, sound effects one would normally find recorded in those locations, for example, traffic and siren noises on roads, people chatting in pubs, a heartbeat monitor in a hospital, though occasionally, a sound effect was used stylistically.

Most music tracks were sourced from Creative Commons and the remainder were composed directly in the GarageBand software for Mac using a selection of the 16 bar instrument loops provided. All tracks — music, narration, and sound effects, were edited in GarageBand. GarageBand is available as an App for the iPhone, making it accessible, and popular, for young adults to use as part of their suite of options to create and/or respond to multimodal texts, should they so desire.

In fact, the Australian National Curriculum demands that young people “create multimodal texts that combine visual images, sound effects, music and voice overs to convey settings and events” (ACARA, 2011-2017). As observed by Barton and Unsworth (2014) so that they may fulfil these requirements “music will need to be included in the repertoire of compositional resources drawn upon using animation software and movie making, game making as well as in multimodal webpage design and new forms of multimedia communication” (p.14).

Constructing the mBook

Constructing the various elements of the mBook needed many more skills than the author personally possessed. Processes of appropriation, collaboration – both implicit and explicit, consultation, communication, and critical and creative thinking, were all necessary to allow a drawing on the benefits of distributed cognition to produce a product that, though imagined, could not have been developed with these essential 21st century practises.

Appropriation

Parts of the mBook involved a deeper engagement with and use of the talents and expertise of content producers by remixing and repurposing aspects of their design work to create new visual elements as an essential integrated part of the story. For example, the Vines make use of an After Effects template program created by a freelance designer, called Creation Art Effects (CAE). CAE was used as a filter to overlay the video footage and mask the effects of the camera shake. CAE’s purpose is to add artistic feature effects to existing video and still images to enhance video presentation. A highly customisable program, it has the potential to change the entire look and feel of the footage. And it did. Using a design within this template —the coloured-pencil-drawing effect, and adjusting some of the settings to achieve a uniform look and feel across all footage, changed the appearance of the video entirely.

Convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), where media flows across multiple platforms, provides a rich environment for this type of appropriation. Appropriation is explained by Jenkins (2009) as “the ability to remix and sample media content” (p.6). Jenkins believes appropriation is one of the essential literacy skills of 21st century because by engaging in appropriation, young

people are orienting themselves to their societal context by “taking culture apart and putting it back together again” (p.34).

Appropriation has a long history. Artists such as Andy Warhol repurposed existing images in his work to create new works of art, Shakespeare used characters and plot from other authors in his work, DJs mix and remix tracks. Engagement with existing cultural expressions requires a degree of analysis and commentary as Jenkins says “[s]ampling intelligently from the existing cultural reservoir requires a close analysis of the existing structures and uses of this material; remixing requires an appreciation of emerging structures and latent potential meanings.” This remix culture is an important component of how we interpret and apply new media, and an “integral form of the contemporary moment as well” (Dinnen, 2012, p. 213). Though appropriation takes place across professional and organised channels, it has equal importance in the informal, social domain, where remix culture thrives as part of the young adult experience, either by producing content or circulating others’ remixed content (Jenkins, 2009b).

Implicit Collaboration

In literature, appropriation is frequently a gray area between inspiration and plagiarism; electronic literature, however, with its frequent merging of the visual and literary arts (among others), its engagement in the free-sharing culture of the internet, and its use of easily duplicated and re-applied digital resources, lends itself more readily toward collaboration and appropriation (Skains, 2016, p. 1).

As flagged, collaboration has been hailed by many researchers (Griffith, Simmons, Wong, & Smith, 2012; Tompkins, 2014; White, 2013) as a necessary skill for 21st century literacy. But implicit collaboration is closer to appropriation than it is to consciously collaborating with others. Implicit collaboration occurs as part of a remix culture where works are sampled, combined, and circulated to be sampled, mixed, and circulated again, and again (Jenkins, 2006). It is, as Skains (2016) suggests, a “collaborative gift economy” (p.2), but, as she observes, the process raises questions about and concerns with “attribution, copyright, monetarization, and the increasingly nebulous notion of authorship” (Skains 2016, p.2).

At a more general level, in the current technological context where it is typical for authors to use computer programs to write, they are already entering into implicit collaborations with those who designed the software. Even in the most basic word processing programs, the author makes some determination about how she wants the manuscript to look by setting some of the parameters, but she “has no control over the concrete details of the work – these emerge as a result of the interactions of the rules” of whichever program she is using (Manovich, 2001), “Of course humans have designed these tools, so it would be more precise to say that the author who uses electronic/ software tools engages in a dialog with the software designers” (p.5).

It is not uncommon for individuals to appropriate software programs created by others, building on their work to develop templates to sell, for the express purpose of further appropriation. This kind of implicit collaboration, both conscious and unconscious, contributed heavily to the development of elements in the mBook. Both the Vines and the KT episodes were created with the influence of templates created by other authors. The aforementioned Creation Art Effects program was purchased from an online open marketplace where individuals can design and upload templates they have created using commonly available software programs such as After Effects. The KT episodes, however, involved an implicit collaboration of a different kind. There were a great many kinetic typography templates, both free and from the marketplace, available for use, however, these were almost entirely designed and developed for use in advertising and promotion in business, rather than as part of a narrative. But imitating the techniques, and copying and pasting some of the keyframing, enabled the production of an entirely new piece of work for an entirely different purpose. This practice of appropriation between the author and the digital designer whose work was appropriated, is arguably a form of shared authorship (Skains 2016).

Using these programs this way reinforces Schroter (2011) point that media do not exist disconnected from one another because there are no single media but that “intermedial relations take place ubiquitously” (p.2). Voyce (2011) suggests that “digital technologies expand the possibilities of appropriative art and writing” (p.408), which is a view reinforced by Manovich (2014) that software is the common core. Manovich goes as far as suggesting that it is no longer ‘the medium that is the message’ (McLuhan, 1967) but in these times, “the

software is the message'. Continuously expanding what humans can express and how they can communicate is our 'content' " (Manovich, 2013, p. 81).

Despite ongoing discussion and debate about appropriation, authors need to recognise, as Voyce (2011) observes, that "[a]ll literature is borrowed to varying degrees, insofar as genres, forms, and language are shared, and condition the possibility of all communication and cultural production. Acts of appropriation are ultimately shaped by our attitudes toward originality, authorship, property, and the ontological status of art objects. Although it may seem obvious, appropriation can be considered subversive only if a given society, and its attendant legal apparatus and cultural institutions, deem it illicit" (p.408).

Building the mBook

The Vines, KT episodes, and print text, contributing to the artefact, then had to be integrated in a paperback novel form. Images were selected and matched to each of the 17 Vines and 18 kinetic typography episodes and these were then uploaded to the Aurasma server and identified as triggers for the content. They were also added to the print text to become markers on the paper page. Following this, the multimodal content was also uploaded to the Aurasma site, clip by clip. Prior to this, consideration had to be given to the ease and speed of streaming access on all devices which meant clips needed to be reduced in size as much as possible without losing too much quality. As both the iPhone used to film the Vines, and the After Effects program used to create the KT episodes used high definition outputs, file sizes for each of the content pieces was quite large.

The process of developing and creating the mBook was enlightening, enjoyable, and informative, though not without its challenges. The challenges and broader implications for authors are discussed in further detail in the latter part of chapter five.

Following development and construction, the completed artefact was then used as a basis for the qualitative focus group research to examine how young adult readers engaged with the mBook.

Chapter 3. Engaging with long-form fiction: Theoretical Understandings

“[N]o age has witnessed a quickening in the production, delivery, and consumption of written text comparable with the one launched by today’s compulsive digital connectivity and its stress on unconditional instantaneity and cotemporality” (Koeppnick, 2013, p. 233).

Reading in a Participatory Culture

Reading is not changing in isolation. Western society is experiencing a metamorphosis as culture shifts from one of passive consumption to one of active participation. Technological development has enabled and encouraged users to actively seek out information and/or experiences that interest them, and contributing to discussions and creating content in various formats across various modes has become a normal—and sometimes, expected, response. But developing the capacity to meaningfully engage in this kind of participatory activity requires a much broader skill-set than that needed to partake in the preceding culture of passive consumption. According to New Media theorist Henry Jenkins, this shift ‘sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages, as they once were, but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined’ (2013, p. 2).

This is an important shift in understanding how readers engage with ‘text’. Traditionally, the publisher as central authority cast readers as passive receptors of information fed to them via ‘books’ the publisher selected and whose editing and distribution processes they controlled. More recent understandings of what constitutes literacy subvert that approach by placing readers in the position of active participants in the reading/writing and distribution process (S. Young & Collins, 2015).

Readers now have the potential to influence the writing that is produced. This does not necessarily mean that every single person must contribute, and indeed some choose not to, but ‘all must believe they are free to contribute and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued’ (Jenkins, 2009a). Irrespective of whether one chooses to be an active

contributor to a story or a passive reader of it, the basic skills (cultural competencies) required to participate fully in this changing cultural landscape now include ‘play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation’ (Jenkins, 2009a, p. 4).

Young adults are spending an increasing amount of their leisure time online (Rideout et al., 2010) engaged in a plethora of activities that require these skills. There is a substantial amount of analysis around this, much of which perpetuates the fear that it is because of these multimodal, multimedia activities that reading is in decline. But the decline in reading long-form printed books as a recreational pursuit has been a consistent trend since the 1970s (Milliot, 2004; Nugent, 2011; Robertson, 2001). ‘Reading’ here refers to traditional interpretations of reading for leisure—that is, engagement with long-form fiction in a text-based print format. But although reading a paperback novel may not be at the top of the YA leisure priority list, it is disingenuous to suggest that YAs are not reading, or are reading less. They are simply reading differently.

Participatory culture provides a cultural and technological framework for reading activity to take place in different modes and media. Historically, each new technological development brought with it an associated literary paradigm shift, but with each shift people have developed new literacies and new practices around those new literacies. Although the last thirty or forty years may well have seen the decline of novel reading, the internet and associated technologies have effectively restored reading and writing as central activities in Western cultures, and new norms will continue to develop around these new literary practices, “essentially re-engineering the ways that young adults engage with ‘reading’; primarily through their interactions with computational devices” (Hayles, 2007).

What is a ‘Book’?

Young adults tend to develop their attitudes towards reading—in particular, novel reading—during their early school years (Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2012). With the amount of screen-time engagement surpassing paper-time engagement, both at school and at home, the multimodal forms of communication they use in their online worlds has

transformed their expectation of and orientation toward texts (Cloonan, Kalantzis, & Cope, 2010).

Eighteen years ago, Brody (1999, p. 12) F. Brody asserted that a new memory culture would eventually emerge that would generate its own rules and its own books, and that the task would be to ‘overcome the limitations of an old medium by ways of a new medium by changing not the technology, but the concepts’. We are in the midst of that time now. What we now understand a book to be—a physical object comprising sheets of paper on which text and/or images are printed, and enclosed by a more solid paper-based cover—is broadening to include other modes, other formats, other technologies. In *Crossing Media Boundaries*, Alexis Weedon (2014, p. 108) argues that the book’s social function as a ‘high-status vehicle for communicating new ideas and cultural expressions is being challenged by sophisticated systems of conveying meaning in other media’.

Gamebooks, such as the *Fighting Fantasy* series (first published by Puffin in 1982), a choose-your-own- adventure style online book series recently recreated by Neil Rennison of *TinMan*³ games, require readers to make choices about the direction the story takes by manipulating content during the reading process, further pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a ‘book’. Transmedia storytelling adventures such as the *Inanimate Alice* series⁴, by the Bradfield Group, immerse the reader in a wholly online episodic story context. As novel reading increasingly shares channels with other media, a wide range of new and emerging media forms or ‘books’ such as these continue to appear, so much so that it is ‘becoming less clear whether one should consider the work a book, or a story told in another way’ (Weedon, 2014, p. 110). There is now the need for continuous review of the definition of the ‘book’, as Weedon suggests, ‘moving from one bound by its material form to one determined by its function as a means of communication’ (2014, p. 110).

What is now being marketed and consumed as a book is very different from what was accepted as a book a generation ago. The technologies used to produce books and the economic model under which they will be marketed for the next generation will be very different again (Angel, 2016). Any text, and a ‘book’ in particular, is rarely a standalone affair

³ <http://tinmangames.com.au/blog/>

⁴ <http://www.inanimatealice.com/>

anymore. Horizontal integration, where story content can move from one medium to another, one mode to another, and back again, all telling the same narrative across different formats, is common practice and effectively blurs the boundaries of the 'book' as an object. Is a chronicle that provides multiple simultaneous iterations of story still to be considered a book? Young adult series including *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Cherub* demonstrate this in various ways, including some, or all, of the following: movies, print and electronic texts, console games, merchandise, websites that include resource and game downloads, and social media networks across multiple platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), complementing the more traditional forms of fan-fiction engagement.

Spreadable media

Such texts, in many formats, across many platforms, lends itself to what Jenkins defines as 'spreadable media' practices (H. Jenkins, 2013b), that is, 'the never ending cycle of sharing, adapting, and resharing content'. Technological developments and their widespread uptake have made it easier to engage with, as well as participate in, and through, media on a broader scale than previously seen. Digitisation has made it cheaper and easier to produce, upload, download, remix, embed, change the format of, and circulate content (H. Jenkins, 2013b).

With the increase of leisure time online (Rideout et al., 2010), YAs' social interactions are increasingly mediated across a variety of online communities, and communication is taking place during the process of creating and sharing content (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Young people's textual experiences have diversified to include online activities such as: fan fiction discussion sites; making and creating supplementary or complementary texts for film, manga, TV, and other narratives (Beavis, 2013); creating new versions and chapters of favourite books; and making spoof or tribute memes, videos, or songs and uploading and sharing them through social media networks.

Though 'audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows' (H. Jenkins, 2013b, p. 2), it is not only the creation of text that lends itself to this type of participatory involvement. Conversation and circulation, traditionally the domain of word of mouth, reach far beyond local, geographic, or demographic communities and fan groups and have potential

to influence culture at a much deeper, though often unpredictable, level. Factors that determine the rate of circulation have less to do with technical prowess than with social appraisal, and the success of such can often be quite random, but, as Jenkins states, ‘what we are calling spreadability starts from an assumption that circulation constitutes one of the key forces shaping the media environment’ (H. Jenkins, 2013b, p. 194).

Competing media

Screen-based reading not only occurs in the midst of converging modalities, but, as previously mentioned, is ‘situated in a world of converging—and increasing— media consumption: a world not only of textual media but also of radio, television, films, games, as well as shopping and other newly “mediated” [and remediated] activities’ and pastimes (van der Weel, 2009, p. 150).

Reading books, particularly novels, is traditionally a solitary and isolated experience in which cultural value rests on the reader being willing to ‘extract themselves from the diversions of the everyday, whether material or mental’ (Koepnick, 2013, p. 223) and enter into a level of intimacy with the story. However we regard the functional materiality of the book, the act of reading a novel remains a personal, interpretive experience unique to the individual. It is not the change in the mode of delivery of the book from print to e-reader which has contributed to the decline of engagement with the novel, but the technological context within which reading takes place (Jenkins, 2006).

More recent e-readers, as well as the improving capacity of tablet-based reading apps, offer much more functionality, which essentially takes reading the novel out of its relative isolation and situates it ‘within the entire range of modalities converging in the digital realm’ (van der Weel, 2009). It is here, in this networked, highly social, and permanently connected environment where distractions abound, that a reader’s capacity (or desire) to establish the level of intimacy required to engage with the novel may be impacted upon (Koepnick, 2013; van der Weel, 2009).

Australian Data

As YAs increasingly seek out multimodal reading experiences (Rideout et al., 2010) and become more adept at reading in non-linear formats (Brody, 1999; Hull, 2003; Moje et al., 2008; Rideout et al., 2010) the competition between textual formats remains biased towards networked experiences, placing teens' textual worlds in flux (Groenke, 2011).

In Australia, there has been very little recent research into the leisure reading habits of children (Dickenson, 2014). A recent literature review of research into children's reading, commissioned by the Arts Council for Australia, and published in 2014, identified a lack of specific, recent (last 10 years) research into reading habits across different formats or media. It also found that ABS research data on children's cultural and leisure activities, the source of the most recent statistics on young people's reading, failed to adequately define what constituted 'leisure reading practices' (Dickenson, 2014) or to provide a comprehensive view of narrative or literary text in online worlds.

The most recent ABS data confirms that young people are reflecting international reading-for-pleasure trends—with a statistically significant drop for children between the ages 5 and 14-years-old, from 80% to 77% for girls and 69% to 65% for boys between 2006 and 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). This data also notes that reading for pleasure as an activity declines rapidly in frequency and intensity as children approach adolescence. Leisure reading competes with a range of other recreational activities, but the balance of these activities has shifted away from watching TV, DVDs, and video, in favour of internet access (Dickenson, 2014). The average time spent passively viewing media dropped from 22 hours (per week) in 2003 to 15 hours in 2012, while the proportion of children accessing the internet increased from 64 per cent in 2003 to 90 per cent in 2012 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) and by the beginning of 2015, young people aged between 15 and 17 years old were the group with the highest internet usage at 99% (ABS, 2014-15).

This data is supplemented by the West Australian Study into Adolescent Book Reading (WASABR) conducted by Margaret Merga, who engaged in qualitative and quantitative research across 23 schools in Western Australia to explore the habits and preferences of adolescent leisure reading. Merga's research is the most recent Australian enquiry into YA reading. In her research, Merga (2014a) suggests YAs may not necessarily find eBook reading

any more appealing than print texts in relation to novel reading. It is not unreasonable to suggest that, as a much greater proportion of their leisure time is spent in highly social-networked environments online, if the reading of 'books' by those who do read novels is not taking place in this space, then discussions about the books they are reading will be (Angel, 2016).

Dickenson (2014) notes that in the 2013 Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report, "58% of children aged 9-17 years said that they would always want to read print books, even though eBooks were available. The advantages of print books were that they are easier to share with friends and preferred bedtime reading. Ebooks were seen to have an advantage when travelling or for out of home reading...." (Dickenson, 2014, p. 20). Similarly, the convenience factor may determine the selection of format, despite the expressed preference.

(Merga, 2015b) came to a similar conclusion in her study, finding that there was no clear preference for one format (pBook or eBook) over the other. She expresses concern that "some school and community libraries in the US and Australia [are] removing paper books entirely and replacing them with eBooks. This change is occurring despite the current lack of empirical evidence to support the contention that all young people fit the digital native characterisation of broad technological confidence, preference and proficiency" (p.239). Indeed, the school library in which the focus group research took place was devoid of paper books. The students reported that the bookshelves and books had been removed earlier in the year and new furniture, such as sofas, beanbags, and 'reading chairs' had been added to the desks and chairs that had sat among the bookshelves. Students were now allowed to "read comfortably" on their devices by reclining in "comfy" chairs or laying on the floor.

(Merga, 2015b) calls for "research without overt bias" regarding young adult preference for pBooks or eBooks. She expresses concern that "adolescents have much to lose if characterised as a homogenous mass of digital natives before this characterisation is valid" (p239), and asserts that "access to both paper books and their electronic counterparts should be made available (p.240).

The Educational Context

Given the shifting mediascape, Jenkins (2009b) called for education systems to acknowledge and respond to the phenomenon of shifting literacy practices by ‘fostering such social skills and cultural competencies as part of a systemic approach to media education’ (p. xiv). Since then, the education context in which young adults are reading has changed dramatically. New incarnations of digital technologies have contributed to this change, with cheaper computing devices, e-readers and the introduction of tablets such as the iPad in 2010. The teaching of reading has seen school curriculums across the western world reflect this change with an increasing focus on multimodality across all key learning areas. Cope and Kalantzis (2015) note the “widespread and prolific research into the integration of digital technologies in the area of literacy education” citing examples such as Snyder, 1997; 2007; New London Group, 2000; Kress, 2003; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Unsworth 2006; Beavis, 2007; Coiro et al., 2007; Baker, 2010; Walsh 2010 (p.98). Across the technologically developed world “the Digital Media and Learning movement has sought to reshape schools to incorporate ‘connected learning’ and to insure that young people acquire the skills needed for meaningful participation” (H. Jenkins, 2013a) in contemporary society.

This view is reflected in new Australian National Curriculum documents where the focus of literacy development is as much on content creation for general and social purposes as it is on ‘reading, writing and interpreting a range of multimodal and traditional print texts’ (ACARA, 2013). The National Curriculum, rolled out from 2014 to 2018, is underpinned by General Capabilities that include an ICT Capability. Though students might already begin school proficient in consuming multimodal text (Levy, 2009), their subsequent education is designed to ensure that in addition to developing their proficiency in reading multimodal texts, they also become proficient *creators* of multimodal texts. In Australia, they are expected to create and consume multimodal texts from the very beginning of their school years. They are taught how to engage technologically as a necessary means of effective participation in contemporary culture, as well as being prepared for whatever technologies and practices that they may be using by the time they finish high school. Australian education theorist Catherine Beavis notes that the ‘capacity to copy, mash, change, spoof, and in other ways create and share new literary digital texts or paratexts is an important affordance of contemporary technologies and central to participatory culture’ (Beavis, 2013, p. 246). At present, students

are completing the first phase of their education—primary school—using reading technologies that were not invented when they began school. We can only imagine the reading technologies they will be using by the time they finish high school (Angel, 2016).

In this context, new reading and writing spaces continue to open up for young readers. A focus on multimodal text for school-based literacy instruction continues to build on Western culture's changing preferences in imagery. Over a decade ago, (Hull, 2003) recognised that “the pictorial turn has supplanted the linguistic one, as images push words off the page and our lives become increasingly mediated by a popular visual culture”. Although that may have been an accurate assertion at that point in history, in the 14 years since Hull made that statement, the rapid advances in portable technologies that facilitate easily filmed and uploadable video means that it is now the moving image that is pushing the still image off the page (Angel, 2016).

This is not to the exclusion of more traditional print text formats, but rather, in addition to them, as “students are encouraged/required to ‘interpret, appreciate, evaluate and create’ literary texts in many forms and modes” (Beavis, 2013, p. 242). The development of critical literacy skills is fundamental to effective participation (Beavis, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Moje et al., 2008; Pahl & Rowsell, 2011) and ensuring students are able to engage in the consumption and creation of texts of all kinds is paramount to twenty-first-century literacy.

Literacy, and literacy education, has always been about making sense of the society in which one lives and at this point in time it is important to recognise the context in which sense-making is occurring. Converging modalities have, in effect, changed the definition of literacy. Reading and writing is occurring in a different world, using different modes and mediums, for different purposes, however, it is the engagement with the long-form fiction novel that is the focus of this project.

Reading for Pleasure and Educational Outcomes

There is a long-established connection between the quality and quantity of young adults' reading-for-pleasure and their level of achievement in Education contexts (ACER, 2010; Manuel, 2012; Merga, 2015a). Reading long-form fiction novels is advantageous to

adolescents required to demonstrate “higher-order capacities for sustained engagement in ‘continuous’ texts, interpretation, speculation, reflection and evaluation” (Manuel, 2012). But in an era where young adults are reading more than they ever have, levels of engagement with long-form fiction novels remains lower than that of engagement with text in other formats (Manuel & Carter, 2015).

Reading for pleasure is supported and encouraged in primary school contexts with many classrooms making space for quiet reading time in their day-to-day schedules. This is often supported by a reading-at-home program where, as part of teaching reading practices, students are encouraged, and rewarded, for reading books of their choice in their own time (Merga, 2015a) but by the time students reach high school, “there is a paradigmatic shift in emphasis [from learning to read] to reading to learn. Once students reach high school, they are required to ‘grapple with texts that are expository, dense, and full of new, more difficult vocabulary’” (Manuel, 2012, p. 51). It is at this stage of their education that engagement with long-form fiction declines rapidly.

Manuel (2012) notes that there is an “overwhelming amount of research linking reading failure, reading resistance, reading reluctance, apathy or a decrease in motivation levels in adolescents to ineffective and even counter-productive classroom reading pedagogy” (p.51). This view is supported by (Merga, 2015a) who maintains that by the time students reach the secondary classroom, they have lost the “will” to read (p.37). She says this can be, in part, because of an assumption that by the time they reach high school students have already mastered the skill of independent reading; that parents assume teachers are taking care of it and teachers are assuming parents are taking care of it, meaning students are left to decide for themselves whether or not they choose to read-for-pleasure (Merga, 2015a), and if they do choose to read what they choose to read and in which format they choose to read it.

The reasons for this are many and complex. The standardised testing regime in Australia, as with other countries, is arguably placing an enormous amount of pressure on schools to perform, resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum and an increased pressure on teachers to teach to the test (Manuel, 2012; Manuel & Carter, 2015; Merga, 2014b) which, in turn, leaves less time for unstructured leisure-reading activities in the school context. However, as (Merga, 2015a) observes, it “is not just high-stakes testing that limits in-class time for reading for

pleasure. The complex, diverse, and frequently changing curricular requirements also place rigorous demands on class time.”

The connection between reading-for-pleasure and academic achievement is acknowledged by most Western education systems and the lack of classroom time allocated to free reading is a contributing factor and recognised as a significant issue in the UK. However, “[w]hile current UK education policy seeks to arrest a “decline in reading for enjoyment” as part of its brief for “moving English forward” (OFSTED, 2012) in both primary and secondary schools, Australian education policy does not expound a similar mission” (Merga, 2015a, p. 36).

In addition to this, time outside of structured lessons where teens can choose to read for pleasure, is also a very crowded space in terms of choice and availability of leisure pursuits. An Australian research project (Manuel & Carter, 2015), which collected data between 2006 and 2010 on teenage choice of and preference for leisure activities, showed that the two most popular options by far were ‘hanging out with friends’ and ‘use computer including internet, games, social media/networking’. ‘Reading a book’ was voted the second ‘least preferred’ activity, with the absolute ‘least preferred’ option being ‘reading a newspaper’. This was reiterated in the ‘most preferred’ activity option, falling last but one out of the eleven options proffered (Manuel & Carter, 2015). These findings are reinforced by the U.S. based M2 research which reported that teenagers engaged with print media the least, and the levels of engagement with such declined sharply between the ages of 8-10 and 13-15 (Rideout et al., 2010).

With the numbers of young adults who do choose to read books as a leisure activity quite low, in this context of enhanced digitality and competing modes of TV streaming services (e.g., Netflix), games console platforms, social media and other networked activity, how do they locate and select the reading devices and/or material with which they choose to engage?

The next chapter looks at how young adult readers engaged with the artefact as a new reading object, and examines the observed reading styles and behaviours that were evident during their reading process. It also uses data collected from the focus group interviews and surveys to inform discussions about how young adults engage with text in a broader social and educational context and situates young adult reading behaviours within it as lived experience.

Chapter 4. The Qualitative Research

To better understand how young adult readers engage with text in a multimodal context, a focus group of young adults was conducted. The focus group research served a dual purpose, one of which was to observe specific reading behaviours, as well as the level of engagement with the artefact as a new form of book-as-object by young adults who were already keen readers-for-pleasure. The other purpose of the focus group was to explore in depth these readers' thoughts about what, how, and where they read for pleasure, as well as how they source, and process or respond to, their preferred reading material.

Examining how keen readers read long-form fiction (as opposed to blog posts, social media feeds, websites, etc.), whether they were willing and/or able to use the technology required to read a novel across formats and modes, whether they enjoyed the process, and what their level of conscious awareness of reading this way, as well as learning their thoughts about the general state of young adult reading is useful information for authors, educators, librarians, publishers, and book sellers in the current reading context.

Key Findings

1. Two different 'types' of reading behaviour were consistently demonstrated throughout the focus group research. The first of these was the *Immersive Reader*. The *immersive reader* was the student who engaged wholly with the text to the exclusion of external distraction for sustained periods of time, irrespective of format. The second type of reading behaviour that emerged was the *Intermittent Reader*. The *intermittent reader* did not focus on the text for sustained periods time and was more likely to read in a non-linear format. This type of reader interspersed reading with chatting to others, surfing the net, bantering and engaging in playful physical interactions. Sometimes, these behaviours occurred simultaneously with reading the mBook.

2. Reading formats are fluid and adaptive. Long-form fiction reading takes place in both online and offline contexts, in different formats at different times, often simultaneously. For example, participants reported using paperbacks at home but switching to eBooks when travelling, and to smartphones at school, all to read the same text.

3. Technology has enabled reading and writing to become a more collaborative process. Creating content in response to text is a normal (and sometimes) expected means of responding to it, irrespective of the format in which the text was read.

4. Students were not consciously aware of the embodied actions required of reading this particular multimodal text. Though they demonstrated automated subconscious skills in engaging with the devices and processes required to read this way, they were unable to articulate the actions required to operate the technology and use it to access the multimodal content. The only point of difference they were able to identify was the use of a particular App to read, rather than needing to use the smartphone or tablet to access parts of the story presented in different formats.

The Focus Group

Students in a large Sydney public high school were offered the opportunity to participate in a day-long reading workshop in lieu of normal classes during the last week of the school term. The students self-selected based on the following criteria:

1. That they are avid readers who enjoy reading fiction novels for pleasure
2. They must be volunteers
3. They must be at least 15-years-old

The focus group comprised eleven fifteen-and-sixteen-year-old Year 10 students from the school, which was located in the Northern Suburbs of Sydney. The school is a 'partially selective' public high school⁵ with a student population of approximately 1100; it has three selective streams⁶, one enrichment stream⁷, and three comprehensive streams⁸. The school is in a middle-class, culturally diverse suburb, from which students in the comprehensive and

⁵ High schools in NSW comprise six year levels from Year 7 (approx. 12 y/o) to Year 12 (approx. 18 y/o)

⁶ Students in the selective stream are identified based on results of a public state-set (NSW Department of Education) standardized exam taken towards the end of their final year in primary school.

⁷ Students in the enrichment stream are identified at a local level based on the results of an exam set and assessed by the school.

⁸ Comprehensive students are students who live in the catchment area for whom the school is their local public high school.

enrichment streams are drawn, however, students in the academic selective streams come from across Sydney.

An open-ended interview protocol was used to guide an initial group discussion, followed by observations of participant behaviour and interactions while reading a multimodal long-form fiction novel – the mBook.

Of the eleven students, nine were female and two were male across academic streams. The participants volunteered to take part in the focus group in response to an expression of interest put to Year Ten students ‘who enjoyed reading for leisure and who would be happy to spend the day chatting about their reading habits and reading a book.’ They were advised that they would be reading an experimental work and would need to have with them a smartphone or tablet device but were given no further information about the nature of the mBook.

The focus group began with a general discussion about participants’ current reading habits and behaviours. Questions posited included what they were currently reading, how and where they sourced their reading, material, how they read it, how and to whom they talked about it. The discussion was open-ended with participants responding both to the initial questions and to each other’s responses, which sometimes lead the discussion into other unforeseen areas (for example, writing practices). The discussion was audio recorded on a MacBook Pro placed at the centre of the table around which participants were seated for the discussion.

Following the discussion, participants were each given a copy of the first twenty-one chapters (107 pages) of the mBook. Little instruction was provided to the students, other than that they could use the Ausrasma App to assist them in their reading should they choose to.

Participants were free to roam and read howsoever they chose. Written observations were made about their physical locale and positions (e.g., sitting at a desk, laying on the floor, etc.), their reading behaviours (listening to music / chatting /surfing the web, wandering around) and if / how / when they were using the technology available to engage with the mBook. Upon completion of reading the mBook (or the end of the school day - whichever came first) participants completed an exit survey.

Data Collection and Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed word-for-word and entered into a spreadsheet and coded thematically. The written observations and notes made during the reading sessions were also entered in a spreadsheet thematically. The participants themselves completed a paper-based exit survey asking them to describe their personal observations of their reading behaviours and engagement with the text. The students took an average of 15-20 minutes to complete the exit survey, writing in detail their thoughts and observations of their experience. The results of these surveys were also entered into a spreadsheet and grouped according to question responses. Following this, participant observations of their reading engagement and behaviours were compared against the researcher's observations of the same.

The Reading Experiment

Each reader was provided with a clipped paper copy of the manuscript containing the first twenty-one chapters (107 pages) of the story. The following was provided on the inside cover of the mBook:

Instructions for Reading

I Know Why You Run is an mBook. Parts of the story are in different formats. To read this book, you will need to download Aurasma from the App Store. Aurasma is free to download and use. When you see an image in the text, you may need to open the Aurasma App on your smart phone or tablet and use it to scan the picture. This will enable you to see other parts of the story that have not yet appeared on the page.

The focus group took place on the lower level of the school library during class time. Armed with the manuscript, readers were free to go wherever they pleased (within the lower level of the library), make themselves comfortable, and enjoy reading in whichever way they chose. They were given no other direction.

Four readers chose to sit together at a small table with a laptop open between them, each with their smartphone on the table next to them. Of the others, one curled up in a lounge-

type chair, two opted for the sofas, and one lay on her stomach on the floor, and four more all sat together at a large table, two at desks.

Mini iPads with the Aurasma App preloaded were made available for those readers who did not have, or did not wish to use, their own devices. Most readers opted to use an iPad. Those who did choose an iPad first swiped through the multiple screens, tapping on the various folders to see what other Apps were on it, prior to locating Aurasma.

Six of the eleven readers immediately put their headphones on and used their smartphones to select music to listen to while reading. None of the readers needed prompting to read, and though their reading behaviours and styles varied, they each engaged with all elements of the text throughout the day.

How and What are Young Adults Reading?

As discussed in chapter 3, there is limited Australian research into young adult reading behaviours. The Australian literature review conducted by Dickenson in 2013 found that the research on children's reading preferences that did exist — including international research, is "scant and quickly outdated, given the pace of technological change" (Dickenson, 2014, p. 16). This same review found no Australian research compared children's leisure reading using different formats or media, or compared reading engagement using digital or paper based formats. However, a more recent review (Merga, 2015b) of the global research literature published between 2010—2015 into adolescent (10-19 y/o) preferences between eBook and pBook reading formats, revealed that though there had been several studies completed (Jeong, 2010 in Korea; Dundar & Akcayir 2012 in Turkey; Tveit & Mangen 2014 in Norway; Deirking 2015 in U.S.) and overall analysis revealed that there was no clear preference for one format over the other. Neither of the literature reviews mentioned, nor the studies cited, specifically targeted reading for pleasure or long-form fiction.

WASABR, the aforementioned research conducted in Australia about young adult reading behaviours, is the most recent in the Asia-Pacific. WASABR collected quantitative and qualitative data from 520 young adults 13–16 years old in 23 schools across Western Australia including public, private, and independent schools, crossing socio-economic and urban and

rural areas. Participants were asked about their book reading habits, interests, and behaviours. Though this study is limited, both in location and text-type, it is the only Australian-based study looking specifically at young adult engagement with “book reading” and defines “book” as such: *“For the purpose of this study “a book” includes both fiction (story books) and non-fiction (information books). It includes regular books as well as online books or eBooks (such as.pdf and.mobi files). “Books” doesn’t include, comics, graphic novels, magazines, websites or newspapers”* (Merga, 2014b, p. 5).

Though Merga’s study was focused on young adult engagement with long-form fiction that included graphic novels and web novels in addition to paper books and electronic books, responses from the focus group participants during the discussions that took place prior to their reading, are not dissimilar to those Merga reported. When specifically asked about their choice of reading format, seven of the eleven respondents claimed to prefer paperback fiction novels over eBooks, two cited a preference for eBooks and one for web novels. Interestingly, as the discussion progressed in a more unstructured manner among themselves, all eleven respondents reported that the format they chose to read in was based on convenience and dependent upon their reading location and mood. They all accepted that long-form fiction books came in different formats and across different modes and most admitted to switching between formats.

“If it’s in paper I’ll read in paper form... but um... if it’s... like I read a lot of online...”

“I change from paper to eBook, especially if I have to carry something...”

“I read paper because it’s better for your eyes, but if it’s online I’ll read it online...”

“I download the eBooks because it’s much more convenient for me, especially if I have to go out...”

“I’ll read in paper... but I’ll also listen to the audio books...”

It was evident from the discussion that though the majority of the group expressed a preference for paper, these teenagers readily switched the format and mode of their reading material to that which best suited their circumstances at any given point in time.

Genre

Participants were asked about two types of fiction novels that they read most recently. The two categories were novels 'read for school' (ie. Prescribed texts) and those 'read for pleasure' (own choice outside of school). Participants' preferred choice of self-selected genre was Fantasy. This was true of all participants, male and female. These results were the same as the large-scale quantitative study of teenage reading practices conducted by Manuel (2015) from 2016-2010 which found that Fantasy was the preferred genre of all participants. These findings "align with the Australian book industry data on the most popular fiction for this age group, with best-seller lists typically dominated by Fantasy" (Manuel & Carter, 2015, p. 124).

Fantasy, however, is not all unicorns and rainbows. Manuel and Carter (2015) observe that "[t]itles such as Victor Kelleher's *Taronga*, John Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began* series, *Back on Track: Diary of a Street Kid* by Margaret Clark and Isobelle Carmody's *The Gathering* thrust young characters into sinister and confrontational situations and infuse settings with dark thematic concerns such as incest, drug abuse, paranormal powers, invasion and war, and suicide" (p. 132).

The rise in popularity of dystopian fiction is testament to this. Manuel and Carter (2015) asked students to name their favourite fiction titles and discovered that in those books named the protagonist and/or narrator was, typically a young adult character facing some level of personal conflict "with peers, adults and the 'self', or a combination of these; and an exploration of darker, gritty themes, 'coming-of-age' issues and violence" (p.120)

Focus group participants were eager to discuss the books they had self-selected and were currently reading, becoming quite animated when describing characters and plot. Some had read the same books, some indicated their intention to read books others had spoken about. The discussion was rich and enthusiastic, however, the tone of the conversation changed dramatically when the group was asked about the last book they read for school.

When the question was first posed, there was a pause as they all looked around at each other, before one participant asked "*do you mean actually read... or were meant to read? Because I'm pretty sure I read something in about Year 5...*" Though the comment received a few chuckles, the general response was tacit agreement. One participant offered "*[I read] Lord of*

the Flies” but was quickly rebuked by another with, “*You didn’t read Lord of the Flies,*” to which the first participant responded, “*Well, I watched it.*”

Discussion around the question “Don’t you have prescribed texts for English that you are required to read?” met with a general response of

“But they’re so boring...”

“Yeah, but I never do...”

“I watch the movie if there’s one, otherwise...”

The school librarian, who sat in for part of the discussion, asked whether their teachers read to them in class. Students reported that they were expected to read prescribed texts themselves. A few students who were in the same English class indicated that their teacher allowed about twenty minutes of class time for them to begin reading a new text, with the expectation that they will continue reading it at home, because “*there’s never enough time in class to just read. Teacher says there’s too much to get through.*” This statement was met with general agreement and another participant proffered the fact that in her elective history class, the teacher read parts of important texts to them “*because Mr **** knows that no one will read it otherwise.*” The students’ perspectives here reinforce research suggesting that “[t]he complex, diverse, and frequently changing curricular requirements also place rigorous demands on class time” (Merga, 2015a, p. 45).

When the participants were asked how they managed to get through their studies successfully without reading the prescribed texts, a number of workaround solutions were provided, including the aforementioned proclivity to ‘*watch the movie, if there is one*’. A workaround for the more erudite students was “*I look up the plot points or chapter summaries online, and then if it’s interesting and I’ve got time, I might go back and read the whole thing.*” Though following this statement, when challenged by another student, the participant acknowledged that reading the ‘whole thing’ didn’t happen very often because “*there’s just not enough time.*”

The general sentiments of this focus group were consistent with other recent research findings. In the Manuel and Carter (2015) study “[r]eading school-based materials ranked last

in terms of preferred reading” (p.122). The same study identified that the “[s]election of inappropriate texts for compulsory reading, and/or ineffective pedagogy associated with the study of these texts, can have deleterious effects on the longer-term attitudes and practices of teenagers” (Manuel & Carter, 2015, p.125).

Merga (2015a) observes that books occupy a ‘marginal position’ in schools, and acknowledges that this may be perceived negatively by students, particularly reluctant readers. The focus group participants dismissed school prescribed texts, almost automatically, preferring instead to select their own reading material to read in what little leisure time they may have, at the expense of the prescribed text.

When and Where do Young Adults Read?

Finding the time to read for pleasure in the increasingly crowded and busy lives of young adults has been identified as a significant issue (Manuel, 2012; Manuel & Carter, 2015; Merga, 2014b, 2015a), particularly for those who are approaching their senior years of high school. Increasingly competing demands means compromises need to be made for those who wish to continue to read for pleasure. One young adult explained it: *“that’s why this generation is so tired because we get so much random schoolwork that no one wants to do because we want to read....”* She, like the rest of the participant group, is an avid reader, and did not want to compromise on reading time. As with many of the group, she regularly read well into the night, and reported feeling chronically tired.

The majority of participants (eight out of eleven) admitted to reading in bed, some in the mornings when they wake, and all at night before they sleep. The discussion around the times and locations of their reading practice revealed an interesting concern. Participants consistently expressed frustration around the lack of available time to read for pleasure and six respondents indicated they took time to read at the expense of sleep which led to fatigue. Interestingly, the two who stated they did not read in bed were the two whose preferred mode of reading was online.

“I read when I’m free... which sometimes leads to me not sleeping til like three in the morning... I’ll just continuously read until I finish reading the novel.”

This comment drew general agreement from the group, and discussion continued around ways and means of finding time during the day to read if they had found a particularly ‘captivating’ book.

Apart from reading in bed, participants found snippets of time throughout the day to read, in different locations and different formats. These included *“reading during maths class on my laptop”* and *“reading [in paperback] at my family’s restaurant in the afternoons after school”* and *“at recess and lunch on my phone.”*

(Merga, 2014b) identifies ‘time availability’ as a factor that influences book reading frequency, citing research by Gordon (2010) and Hughes (2008) to support her analysis. Frustrations over not having the time to read was expressed repeatedly by focus group participants throughout the research, during the recorded semi-structured discussion and throughout the reading process as they engaged with the mBook. *“It’s so nice just having the time to read,”* was said several times by different participants throughout the day, and again in the ‘Any other comment’ section of the exit survey.

How do Young Adults Find Their Reading Material?

Word-of-mouth recommendations remain a very popular means of discovering new reading material for young adults (Manuel, 2012; Manuel & Carter, 2015; Merga, 2015b, 2016) and all focus groups participants reiterated this. They find their reading material through conversations with friends who have read similar books. But in a 21st-century literacy context where ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ has changed, so too, has ‘speaking’ and ‘listening.’⁹ While there is no doubt that face-to-face conversations continue to take place between young adults, conversations in other contexts also take place with as much, or more, frequency (Rideout et al., 2010).

The word-of-mouth conversations of the young adult focus group participants are also taking place in such contexts as social media, blogs, fan-fiction sites, and other websites. One participant mentioned that they chatted about what they were reading on Tumblr, another mentioned Facebook conversations. One of the participants rued the fact that she could not

⁹ Reading, writing, speaking, listening are all strands in the K-10 Australian English curriculum

adequately communicate her enthusiasm about a book or gauge another's reaction to what she saying when chatting online, *"Yeah, I do [chat to others about books online] but it's weird talking about a book on social media cos I like to see their reaction and share the emotion."*

When asked about how they find the books they read, all the participants admitted it was in online spaces that they were more likely to find book titles. One participant also reported having a favourite bookshop she travelled to in the city where she had developed a rapport with booksellers and would ask them for their recommendations based on a book that she had read and enjoyed. The participants used various means of online enquiry, including but not limited to book blogs, author sites, online magazines, and 'lists' appearing in their social media feeds, for example, one participant located her favourite book by browsing a list of '25-books-to-read-before-you-die'. Many participants indicated that if they read a book they *"really liked"*, they would *"Google the author and find everything else she has written."*

The young man who preferred to read online stated that he found the current book he was reading thus: *"I stumbled on a website when I was looking for a forum and there was a bunch of books on it so I decided to read there..."* Another respondent liked to post her own writing online for feedback and sourced titles for new books to read from commenters, *"I have an account where I post a lot of the writing I do and people will comment and say 'oh if you like that genre, then you'll like this book', and so I'll go and read a book about that..."*

Participants also shared books among themselves and reported that once they had found a book they *"really liked"* they would continue to search for items relating to that book. *"I'll look for other books by that author and then if you google that book, it'll come up with suggestions for other books that you might like so I'll go read them..."* Another participant indicated that the she would *"watch the movie - if there is one."* All participants agreed with this statement with varying levels of endorsement ranging from *"Of course!"* and *"everyone does,"* to *"yeah, I do too, but it's not always as good."* Another respondent indicated that *"I'll buy a lot of the merchandise... I have a Dr Who themed bedroom... which says too much about me..."*

These young adults accept as quite normal, and expected, that reading a book is not an independent affair. Seeking out the movie, and/or merchandise as well as other information and material relating to the book is a natural part of the reading process. It speaks to Jenkins'

(2013) concept of spreadability and Weedon's (2014) notion of boundaries between text in different formats being blurred.

Observations of Participant Reading Styles

"[R]eading changes our brains, and our brains change our reading" (Kokkola, 2016, p. 69)

Following the initial group discussions, participants were provided with the mBook and instructed simply to read it. The participant readers made themselves comfortable and began reading the mBook. The researcher selected a location where all participants could be observed unobtrusively throughout the day. Observations of reader interaction with the mBook, the technology, and other readers were recorded via notetaking throughout the reading sessions.

All reader participants (and the researcher) experienced initial frustrations with internet access. This was due to the fact that the school's wireless technology was unreliable. The researcher rerouted the wireless connection of readers' devices by setting up a hotspot on a personal iPhone, thereby allowing the selected devices to connect to the internet using the phone's data. This appeased the students somewhat, as they were very reluctant to use their own phone data, but very keen to embrace the multimodal reading experience.

Two distinct reading styles emerged during observations of reading behaviours. The first, and more common among the group participants, was the *Immersive Reader*. This style of reader fully immersed themselves in the text to the exclusion of external stimuli, irrespective of the format in which they chose to read. These readers read for extended periods of time, fully engaging with the mBook content. They did not chat, or consult their devices beyond accessing the multimodal elements, nor did they take breaks to look around the room or watch the others. At times, they appeared oblivious to their surroundings, until the school bell rang to indicate a change of period or a break. Seven of the eleven readers read in this style. They preferred their own space, two selecting separate sofa chairs, one sat on a lounge, one lay on the floor under an unoccupied table, and the other immersive readers sat at a table.

The second style of reading appeared to be *Intermittent Readers*. These are the participants who, although they engaged with the mBook, they did so in a very different style to the immersive readers. These readers chose to sit in close proximity to each other at a shared table with their devices (laptop or iPad or smartphone) on the table next to them or between. The four intermittent readers read for shorter periods of time than the immersive readers, looking up from the text often. They engaged in other activities during their reading, for example, chatting with those next to them or consulting their devices, or looking around the room, often simultaneously.

Observations of the immersive readers made it clear that those participants were reading, consistent embodied actions such as eye movements, page turning, image scanning, all indicated a total engagement with the text. There was no doubt that these readers were reading the mBook. Observations of intermittent readers, however, were not as clearly attributed solely to the actions required to engage with the mBook. At a distance, these behaviours may have been indicative of a loss of concentration, a disengagement with the specific text, boredom, or other such external motivation drawing them away from the reading process. However, these observational musings were contradictory to discussions taking place among the intermittent readers about the mBook content, both during and following the reading sessions. These readers were reading the text; however, their process was very different to that of the immersive readers.

Immersive Readers

Observations of the immersive readers suggested they were engaged in a process of 'deep reading.' Deep-reading (S. P. Birkerts, 1996) is a term used to refer to "the intense submersion in the world or argument of the book, when the world outside the reader seems temporarily suspended (Kokkola, 2016, p. 64). Wolf and Barzillai (2009) expand on this understanding by placing it in a pedagogical context and explaining it as "the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight" (p.33). Many education researchers regard deep reading as an extremely valuable process for students to engage in, and lament the loss of a 'deep' engagement with text as digitality increases and text form changes. Some (Bauerlein,

2008; Carr, 2011; Shirky, 2010), like Socrates before them (Plato, 370BCE), go as far as to predict the demise of intelligent engagement with information/content as the internet 'rewires our brains'.

The immersive readers in the focus group displayed behaviour consistent with deep, engaged reading. Shortly after they began reading the mBook, one participant paused to draw the attention of the others at the shared table. The readers then entered into a discussion about the preferred nature of their reading and they all agreed to continue their reading without interrupting each other for any reason so that could get into the 'zone'. They agreed that each time they heard the school bell (at 50 minute intervals), that they would then pause their reading so that they might discuss the content.

According to Hayles (2012) deep reading "is a slow, immersive process in which a reader requires time and cognitive space to engage in deep thought. Deep reading is characterized by inference, analogical thinking, critical analysis and deliberation, contemplation, and—in its highest forms—insight and epiphany" (p.236). Many of these behaviours were observed in the immersive readers, indicated by the discussions that took place during their pre-arranged breaks. They shared thoughts about protagonist motivation, drew conclusions between narrative arcs, and made inferences and provided suppositions of plot and sub-plot points in a surprisingly insightful manner. These teenaged readers were thoughtful and, indeed, insightful about the text with which they were engaged.

All young adult readers participating in the focus groups were self-identified keen readers. They enjoyed reading for pleasure and expressed appreciation for having the opportunity to do so uninterrupted. But learning to read is a complex, and sometimes difficult process. Unlike oral/aural language which is learnt naturally as part of a genetic predisposition and cultural immersion, humans do not have a natural predisposed capacity to 'read' (S. Birkerts, 2010; Kokkola, 2016; Wolf, Gottwald, Galyean, Morris, & Breazeal, 2014), rather reading is a process that has to be explicitly taught, and learned, by means of rewiring the existing neural pathways that are genetically innate.

Those who lament the loss of deep reading skills at the hands of the internet and the nature of multitasking, argue that the increase in networked technology and multimodal reading experiences do not allow for the time and space to engage solely and wholly in one piece of

text, as is traditional with long-form novel reading. For example, Mangen and Kuiken (2014) suggest that a “primary incentive for reading a literary narrative is to become immersed in the story world that is conveyed by black marks on a white page. One condition for such immersion is the diminished sensory salience of the modality of written text (as opposed, for example, to audiovisual modalities)” (p.151). Wolf and Barzillai (2009) posit that the properties of print “also play a role in shaping the reading circuit. For instance, the stability and linearity of printed text as well as the layers of thought and composition that it represents invoke the reader’s complete attention to understanding the thoughts on the page” (p.34).

The notion that young readers’ deep reading experience is diminished by multisensorial input, however, was not evidenced by the immersive readers in the focus group. The mBook, as previously discussed, is a multimodal novel; it is long-form fiction across platforms, using different modes—it is a multisensorial reading object. It can be read in non-linear manner if chosen, but if it is read linearly it requires the reader to move from paper to device to view video and kinetic typography, and back. The immersive readers were able to do this without breaking concentration, without disengaging with the reading process, and without interrupting each other. Though they chose to access the multimodal content at different times, in different orders, it appeared by observation, that these readers remained wholly engaged in the text, retaining their ‘deep reading’ experience despite the mBook’s multimodal nature, or its requirement that the reader move from paper to device and back again.

Despite this, the immersive readers’ reflections of their own reading processes occasionally contradicted external observations of their reading behaviours. In the exit survey, participants were asked *Did having parts of the novel in different formats interrupt the narrative flow? How?* In response to this question, all Immersives responded in the affirmative, and most qualified this response with a reason they considered it so. However, contradictory to this, another of the questions asked was *Were you able to get into the story?* to which five of the seven Immersive Readers responded affirmatively, and one said *‘a fair bit, but I was constantly exiting the story as well, so, technically no.’* Though researcher observations of the Immersive Readers suggested that these readers were wholly engaged, or ‘lost’ in the narrative, the readers themselves reported a disruption to the narrative flow—though not enough of a distraction that they were unable to get into the story. For example,

the same participant who responded affirmatively to the question about different formats interrupting the narrative flow, *'yes, as switching mediums for the story cut off how it flowed'*, also responded in the affirmative when asked about whether or not they were able to get into the story, saying: *'yes, the story was well written and the use of a device made it interesting.'* The Immersive Reader who did not feel that they were able to get into the story reported the reasons as: *"I think that moving between platforms helped the overall storyline, but the constant on again back again did make it slightly harder to enjoy. If the book was in ebook format, viewing the videos would be much easier and less distracting from the story."* This comment suggests that the reader would find an eBook a more immersive reading experience than a mBook.

"The conflation of reading, the book, and literary fiction into one indivisible union is indeed unravelling, and, despite arguments to the contrary, that's a wonderful development because it allows for a more sophisticated understanding of the current state of reading" (Collins, 2013, p. 207). Digital media may not, as many fear, bring about the end to deep reading, but may, if these young readers are typical, provide many more opportunities for authors and educators to engage those readers who may be more reluctant than those in the focus group, to re-engage with text. As Kokkola (2016) suggests, though "we must take the risk to deep reading posed by digital media seriously, and I think the way forward is to complement such reading with books that hone in on our desire for social information" (p. 69). Long-form fiction novels in different formats, across different platforms requiring the use of different modes may well provide that opportunity for young readers.

Intermittent Readers

"Given the increase in digital reading, obvious sites for new kinds of reading techniques, pedagogical strategies, and initiatives are the interactions between digital and print literacies" (Hayles, 2010, p. 65)

The readers not observed as being immersive readers all displayed similar reading behaviours and patterns. They each had a device in close proximity to their printed text, though unlike the immersive readers who picked up the device for the specific purpose of reading the

multimodal text content, the intermittent readers consulted their device more regularly than required for reading the mBook. They took time to check social media, scroll through messages, and share content with those nearby. These readers did not enter into an agreement with their 'reading buddies' as did the Immersives, choosing instead, to spontaneously interrupt one another to engage in conversational banter, related or unrelated to the text they were reading.

A concern of educators is that the increasingly ubiquitous nature of technology is changing children's reading habits and that this will impact on their capacity to concentrate and engage with traditional long-form print text. It is, by now, well acknowledged (S. Birkerts, 2010; Collins, 2013; Kokkola, 2016; Mangen & Kuiken, 2014; Wolf et al., 2014) that the brain functions differently when reading in digital environments than it does when reading print text. As Kokkola (2016) puts it: "Our brains are changed by what and how we read" (p.68).

Kokkola (2016) also notes that "digital texts typically contain numerous links to other texts, images, film-clips and so on, all of which can be accessed with a single click" (p.67) While this may be true of online texts, the mBook required a focussed scanning action to access the multimodal content, and by observation, it was not necessarily the action of picking up the device to scan the image markers in the text that provided the distractions for these readers by leading them to other places. Rather, it appeared that in order for them to engage in the reading process, they needed to be doing several things simultaneously, such as chatting, scrolling through messages, or viewing something running in the background of the open laptop positioned among them, all throughout the reading process.

It was impossible to tell, upon first observation, if the more regular breaks in reading required by these readers was a result of disengagement with the specific text—the mBook, the excitement of a day off regular classes, or the reduced capacity for concentration, though much of the research literature on distracted reading suggests the latter. For example, (S. Birkerts, 2010) asserts that "[c]oncentration is no longer a given; it has to be strategized, fought for" (p.44), and Hayles (2012) notes Carr's concern that reading in the new media reading context "leads to changes in brain function that make sustained concentration more difficult, leaving us in a constant state of distraction in which no problem can be explored for very long before our need for continuous stimulation kicks in" (p.67).

Eavesdropping on conversations between the Intermittent Readers at various times throughout the day indicated that though they were, indeed, distracted by other interests, for example, one participant shared his latest Manga interest on the laptop between them which resulted in a discussion about Manga art. This discussion then led back to discussion about the art effects of the Vines in the mBook, which suggested that they were still engaged with the text. They continued, intermittently, to talk about the content throughout their reading experience, often watching together on one device instead of scanning and viewing independently as did the Immersive Readers. However, as (Collins, 2013) notes, a “literary experience is no longer restricted to the printed page. Reading is no longer a uniquely solitary practice—it is alternately solitary and social (p.208). As with the Immersive Readers, this group of Intermittent Readers valued the opportunity to discuss what they were reading as they were reading it, the two groups merely differed in the way they conducted their social interactions. The Immersive Readers chose a pre-planned face-to-face interactive session, and the Intermittent Readers chose more spontaneous, and sometimes technology-based interactions.

Though the research is not being analysed through the lens of gender, it was interesting to note that both male participants were Intermittent Readers and both were proponents of online reading. One of these reader’s preferred reading medium was web novels; the other also preferred reading online, though his choice of text was narrative-based games. Further research into the gender-based reading styles, behaviours, and preferences would be interesting to explore the correlations in reading differences.

The Intermittent Readers also reported that they were better able to ‘get into the story’ reading this way. One participant observed *“I personally, really enjoyed reading this way, as I am a person who learns by being shown things,”* and another said *“it gives a context that [I] otherwise would not have gotten.”* Another suggested reading this way *“allowed me to read more of the novel, also experience the actions scenes and skip the boring scenes.”*

(S. Birkerts, 2010) suggests that “[t]he reader who reads without directed concentration, who skims, or even just steps hurriedly across the surface, is missing much of the real point of the work” (p.44). However, every reader’s process of making meaning from text is different. Though the reading process of the Intermittent Readers was such that they appeared to be

skimming the print text in favour of the multimodal content, it was not evident in post-reading discussions that this group of readers ‘missed much of the real point of the work.’ As with the Immersive Readers, these readers were also able to engage in rich discussion about plot and character. Their discussion may have had different insights and different opinions about character and story, but for *this* text in *this* format, they were able to demonstrate a rich comprehension and reasonable analysis of story.

The mBook: Reading Object consistent with Immersive and Intermittent reading styles

Changing the material form of the book does not necessarily result in a domino effect whereby close reading and extended narrative inevitably disappear (Collins 2013, p.210).

These two distinct reading styles though conducted differently, were not unusual or unexpected in the current reading climate. The focus group participants did not require instruction or demonstration to engage with the technology required to read, however, some did need initial support to troubleshoot connection issues as a result of school-based wireless connection challenges and the reluctance of most to use their personal device data limits to read the mBook.

Though not the focus of the research, these types of connectivity issues raise the question of access and equity to mobile reading experiences for young adults. Those students who have the benefit of unlimited data, or a mobile phone plan financed by well-off families, may be more willing and able to spend the time seeking out reading experiences beyond social media, than those students who have limited data plans for whatever reason. Further research into this issue as it relates to reading would also be beneficial.

Once the connection issues were addressed and the readers were free to engage with the mBook, both groups of readers, the Immersives and the Intermittents were able to demonstrate an interest in and engagement with the artefact. Both groups were able to discuss aspects of plot and characterisation typical of post-reading conversation of any long-form novel, and both groups indicated that they enjoyed the reading experience.

There is a great deal of concern about the way in which children’s changing reading practices are altering their neural pathways not the least of which is because “there is sufficient

evidence available to claim that following hyperlinks and other link-click-link literacies do forge different neural pathways from traditional print narratives” (Kokkola 2016, p. 68). The extent to which this may be detrimental is a continuing debate, however, theorists predicting the demise of young readers’ capacity to concentrate to the point of losing a ‘deep reading’ ability as a result of digital media engagement (Bauerlein, 2008; Carr, 2011; Shirky, 2010) are being challenged by theorists who are beginning to recognise that processing text differently does not necessarily mean the loss of sustained engagement with it (Domingo, 2014; Wolf et al., 2014).

“The debate between the defenders of traditional literary experience and the celebrants of digital culture has created a discursive roadblock that we can clear away only by identifying and disentangling the discrete aspects of a literary reading” (Collins, 2013, p.210). Technology hardware and software are merely tools to facilitate delivery of long-form fiction. How we define long-form fiction or understand the constitution of literature, is more important than the tools used to engage with such. The format of the narrative is of less relevance than the reader’s capacity to wholly engage with the text. While Kokkola (2016) acknowledges that “[w]hen children play video games or surf the net, they are wholly consumed: like the deep reader of the book, the world outside their experience appears to disappear as they focus intently on the screen” (p.66). This may indeed be the case, but ‘focusing on the screen’ is not the same as deep engagement with the text and while a good quality game-based text can, and often does, facilitate deep engagement, it is the action of linking through from site to site via hyperlinks that, whilst may be wholly consuming, does require the use of different level of concentration or distraction and is the action that forms the basis of most theorists concern about changing neural pathways.

The mBook does not contain any hyperlinks. The core text is in print format and while the multimodal elements are in other formats—video and kinetic typography—they are self-contained; they do not give the reader any option but to return to the print text once the content has been viewed. The reader can access the multimodal elements whenever they choose during the reading process, and the focus group readers, for the most part, selected the manner in which they accessed the content individually and independently, contingent on their personal preference. Some readers from the Immersive Reader group selected a non-linear trajectory of reading, but **all** readers from the Intermittent Readers group selected a

non-linear trajectory. The remaining readers in the Immersive Reader group chose to read in a linear format.

The mBook offered an immersive reading experience that appeared to cater for all styles of reading, in a single book. The print basis of the multimodal elements of the mBook provides the opportunity for the reader to engage in the ‘deep reading’ so strongly advocated by theorists such as Wolf and Barzillai (2009) while still meeting the needs of those readers who read in shorter bursts broken up with multimodal options of text in other formats. As Beavis (2013) states, “[c]hildren’s textual worlds, and the kinds of ‘literary’ texts they encounter, include but extend beyond traditional forms of literature and print literacy” (p.244) — the mBook does this in one self-contained object, using the technology tools now available to authors, and commonplace to young adults.

Observations of Participant Reading Behaviours

From a phenomenological perspective, (Heap, 1977, p. 104), talks about reading as an act of sense-making. Sense-making, however, can only occur when the reader has an understanding of the mechanics involved in engaging with text. Traditionally, this meant picking up the book, opening the cover, interpreting marks on the page (letters) and patterns (words, sentences, paragraphs), following the ‘rules’ of writing (grammar, punctuation) and following the conventions to read sequentially in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom manner, and then ‘imagining’ the content based on the reader’s lived experience (education, imagination, external stimuli). In a new media/multiliteracy context this process is essentially broadened to include the necessity of understanding and engaging with software and hardware in its various iterations. Multimodal reading requires a working knowledge of the technological aspects of the ‘Book,’ whether it be an eBook, a PDF, a mBook, game, video, or website. Understanding that the reader must engage in navigational actions necessitates a decision-making process not previously needed for reading.

Reader Engagement with the mBook: a phenomenology

The mBook is an example of such a text mentioned above. Reading it involves additional embodied actions not required of reading traditional print-based texts. The three parallel narrative arcs in the mBook are each in different formats, and intersect at various points in the story. Focus group readers were given little direction about how this might work, or what they would specifically need to do to read all parts of the text.

Despite this, *all* readers understood that images on the page indicated content in a different format. And though none had knowledge of the Aurasma App or its affordances prior to participating in the focus group, they did not seek assistance to use it, choosing instead, to explore the app and work out its functions for themselves.

Some readers flicked through the paper manuscript until they located the first of the images and immediately used the app to scan it. Others read the text until they reached the image before scanning it. Some readers scanned to view all the content at once, either prior to or following reading the print, and others scanned the images as they appeared in the order they appeared in the text.

Notwithstanding the minor connection issues, readers used their knowledge and experience of their technology-rich world to effortlessly access the multimodal content. They made the necessary navigational decisions required to move through screens, tap and/or scroll where required, use the device volume controls, and position and angle the device accurately to ensure the content displayed on the page in the correct place.

Upon completion of reading the mBook, readers were asked to complete a survey of their reading experience. First they were asked ‘What actions did reading this novel involve? Describe in detail everything you had to do to read this book.’ Of the eleven participants, not one reader described the specific actions needed to open the App (swiping, scrolling, tapping), only two referred to the fact they were required to scan the image to access content in other formats and though they did, it was in very general terms.

“[R]eading this novel involved a mix of actions, including general reading and scanning the images to view the animated scenes.” Another participant observed: *“Throughout the pages, there were several photographs that could be scanned using the application called Aurasma.*

Using the app, the photos turned into a video with audio that told the backstory of the main character and provided me insight as to why the character was behaving this way.” Neither respondent specified the actions needed to scan (aligning app frame to image, moving device closer or further back, tapping).

Two participants did not refer to using the technology at all, instead focussing on other physical actions they deemed important for reading.

“While reading the novel I had to listen to music. I tend to move around when I read to find a comfortable position. It ranges from lying on my side, sitting upright or sitting cross-legged. I would also have to take a break from reading to absorb everything I read and take a breathe (sic)...”

“I had to sit in a comfortable position where I had the device in one hand while reading the novel with both hands. (Participant D)

All reading participants interacted with the relevant device to access the multimodal contents of the mBook, yet none demonstrated a conscious awareness of doing so.

(Carusi, 2006, p. 172) states that “Phenomenology aims to describe experience; in particular, it tries to bring out those aspects of experience which are so taken for granted that they are overlooked in subjects’ own accounts of what they are undergoing. These taken-for-granted aspects are, however, the very ones which are supporting and forming the experience.” The fact that none of the eleven reading participants were able to specify or articulate the actions they had engaged in during the reading process effectively demonstrates that these embodied actions are now second-nature to them. They do not require a conscious awareness; they are developed and informed by the lived experience of 21st Century young adult readers. That is, engaging with different text types in different formats, different modes and different media, sometimes simultaneously, is what reading is. And though, as Heap (1977) suggests, “the very focal shift of reading does not allow attention to the document as a perceptual material object. Instead in order to read, consciousness passes through the document to the text, a passage which does not allow the document to be noticed, though it must be seen” (p.106). In this case, it is the technology that is being bypassed as a perceptual material object by young readers.

“When I am absorbed in reading, a second self takes over, a self which thinks and feels for me” (Poulet, 1969, p. 57). The mode in which the focus group participants were reading became irrelevant to them. Software programs have controlled our access to reading material for a very long time — whether in paper-based or electronic. But accessing contemporary reading material now requires enough functional knowledge of software processes and programs to be able to locate and access text in its various formats. It also requires an understanding of networked media and knowledge of how the various multimedia platforms interact before readers can engage with the actual text. This is so for even the youngest of readers or pre-readers (for example; the two-year-old who knows and understands that swiping the screen of the tablet or smartphone takes her to the next page).

Asked whether reading this way, that is, accessing the story, or parts of the story, in different modes was different to the way in which they normally read, only four of the eleven participants acknowledged a difference in their ‘normal’ reading behaviours and attributed these differences to the use of an app. Interestingly, three of the intermittent readers did not notice a difference in the way they would normally read, and responded to the question with a simple ‘no’. One of the immersive readers acknowledged the only difference was the physical position in which they read. *“[Y]es, because I usually read at home either on my bed or relaxing in my chair on my side. Sitting upright was a change from the norm.”*

Another participant pointed out the only difference was using an iPad instead of a smartphone to read. She said reading this way was different because *“I had to carry the ipad with me...if I had used my phone, I would have used my data, something many children consider before doing something online.”*

The use of the iPad (or smartphone) is not an unusual means of reading for these young adults. For them, accessing the narrative in different formats appeared to be par-for-the-course. The point of difference for this reading experience, as previously mentioned, was the specific use of Aurasma app rather than the engaging with technological devices to facilitate the reading experience, or reading across formats.

Poulet (1969) talks about the barriers between the reader and the object (book) falling away, so that the reader “becomes inside the text and the text becomes inside the reader” (p.54). The reader then becomes aware of the consciousness of another (the author) allowing the

book to lose its material reality and become “a series of words, of images, of ideas which in their turn begin to exist” in the reader’s “innermost self” (p.54). Reading in the kind of multimodal context afforded by the mBook involves the consciousness of many others simultaneously; the author, programmer, graphic designer, artist, animator, videographer, actors, software developers, composers, musicians, sound engineers, etc. The reader, facilitated by the affordances of the technology enabling the coming together of these consciousnesses, absorbs them entirely, dissolving all barriers until the “opposition between the subject and its objects has been considerably attenuated” thus providing a freedom from the “usual sense of incompatibility between [the reader’s] consciousness and its objects” (Poulet, 1969, p55).

The hardware itself was a natural part of the reading experience for these readers. Responding to a question about the experience of reading this way, one participant stated that she appreciated how the multimodal elements “...enhanced the [reading] experience by bringing visuals and collaborating with our imagination”. This reader was able to articulate the notion that the content usurped the physical object with, as Poulet (1969) describes, “a congeries of mental objects in close rapport with [her] own consciousness” (p.55)

Throughout the very act of reading, a transformation occurred within these young adult readers that enabled them to absorb and process the ‘thoughts’ of a multitude of others involved in the creation of the mBook and internalise them as their own to create an overall reading response.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls this ‘phenomenology of perception’ a merging of consciousness that creates the essence of an object, rather than the object itself. “In perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world” (p. 238).

Embodied Actions

“The thing-as-read is always sensuously encountered within the world, that is, as within the course of someone’s life. It is from that life that the thing-as-read draws its sense, even when it lends sense to that life.” (Heap 1977, p104)

Sense-making, as the cornerstone of literacy, enables a person to interact effectively within whichever context they exist at any given point in time. Communication is the basis of this. But nearly two decades into the 21st-Century, means and methods of communicating have evolved. Central to this is reading and writing. Reading and writing have changed, and with them, the embodied actions required to engage in reading and writing practises.

Heap (1977) says ‘reading is a journey in and for which the text is the guide’ (p.106). A reader engages with a text with a particular motivation to gain something from the story contained (entertainment, information). They follow the conventions of reading and perform the necessary mechanics of reading with the expectation that it will all make sense at some point. “That assumption is the interface between the mechanical acts of reading and the reflective activity of making sense of what is read through those acts” (Heap, 1977, p107). Without that expectation, there would not be a reason to read.

Storytelling has always taken place in different modes and mediums. From traditional dances and visual-based artworks to film and music, and later the scroll or codex. Story reflects the context of the reader back to them, both in content and in format. In our current context; a technology-rich environment provides the form and function of reading material, meaning the traditional codex has less of role in reading engagement of young adults than it once did. And while the embodied actions may be different, the general reading process is the same. Readers still need to make sense of that which they are reading in whatever format it is presented. Heap (1977) explains it as thus: “In order to realise the intended sense of the text the relevant parts of the document must be read” (p.108). The ‘book’ (pBook, eBook, mBook) or text must be read. And part of this is determining what effectively counts as the text. “This decision is essential to, and an essential part of the mechanical acts of reading” (p.108).

What constitutes a book-as-object now is quite different to previous understandings and definitions of a ‘book’. Text is presented in many different formats and young people are accustomed to, and show preference for (Beavis, 2014; Rowsell, 2014; R. Young, 2013) multimodal and digital reading experiences. Visual and audio stimuli have all but supplanted the print-based text in comparative mass consumption terms. However, this does not mean young people are reading less — they are simply reading differently.

The mBook combines traditional understandings of story (chronological, linear) and skills required of reading (page-turning, left-to-right/top-to-bottom, front-to-back), with contemporary understandings of story (visual-based, non-linear) and skills required of reading (tapping, scrolling, zooming, swiping, scanning) in order that the reader may make sense of the story based on lived experience of the technological context in which they operate both educationally and recreationally. Though the several narrative arcs contained within the mBook are presented in different formats, it is essentially up to the reader to determine how and when any, or all, parts of the text are read.

Some of the participants chose to scan all the images first, some scanned as they appeared, some read the print-based narrative first and once they had finished returned to the beginning and scanned all the images to access the content on the different platforms. They offered varied explanations of the reasons behind this. *“[R]eading the novel with this application allowed me to be constantly engaged with the story as when you keep playing more clips, you are able to piece together everything, which I found more fun.”* This comment from a reader who scanned as they proceeded through the manuscript in a chronological way, demonstrated a preference for the story in a linear narrative arc. Whereas another reader opted for a non-linear trajectory through the narrative by reading the print text first then going back to access/view the narrative arcs in different formats; *“it was confronting at the start but when I saw more clips, I began to make more sense of it and it was easier to follow.”*

“Traditionally...In print-based texts, readers experience narratives through characters’ actions and reactions within settings to a series of events. Readers reflect on actions, but there is less of an embodied interaction with stories and characters compared with the embodied interactions involved in [for example] playing a video game” (Rowse, 2014, p. 122). The mBook affords the capacity for the reader to adjust the manner in which they read the text. As the alternate narrative arcs represent different times and perspectives in the ‘whole’ story, the reader makes decisions about which format and/or arc they wish to engage in, and when they wish to engage with it. Rowse (2014) observes that multimodal forms such as films typically adopt a linear narrative within which a story-telling model the reader/viewer cannot change its trajectory through actions or embodied interactions but can only change stories in their heads. While the narrative arcs presented in the mBook are done so in a chronological and linear fashion, it is up to the reader to decide whether or not they will follow this order. By

adopting embodied actions of contemporary multimodal reading, they can alter the way in which they receive the story, i.e., where it begins and ends and the order of progression (but they cannot change characters' actions).

Each reader, then, makes sense of the story independently and differently. Carusi (2006) observes that "[b]ecause the reader does not perceive the object all at once, and is exposed only to aspects of it at any instant, s/he is always dealing with an incomplete manifestation of whatever s/he is making sense of" (p.173). The reader, must fill in the gaps for herself. Gaps in viewpoints, in character actions, in plot points, but also gaps in the navigation, the technology, the vines and the kinetic typography. Carusi uses Iser's (1978) explanation of 'Blanks' to explore these gaps as such: "Blanks 'indicate that the different segments of the text are to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so'; they are 'the unseen joints of the text'" (p.183). "The object must be constructed by relating together these viewpoints" (Carusi, 2006, p. 173).

The parallel narrative arcs in the mBook are not explicitly connected. Each can be read/viewed independently of the others. The reader herself must make connections between them, via both employing a different set of embodied actions to access them, and a different cognitive assessment of them to construct meaning as a whole. This proved to be a challenge for some readers. *"I've got the basic plot but some parts were all over the place,"* said a reader who chose to access content randomly. Alternatively, another reader found filling the gaps to construct her own meaning more accessible by employing the affordances of the multimodal content. *"Reading the novel with the videos helped gain a better understanding of where Benny came from...I was able to regain the information much easier."*

This chapter has outlined and discussed observed reading styles, reading behaviours, and reading engagement all related to the reading of a specific multimodal text – the mBook. While further research to determine whether the behavioural results related to this new reading object can be replicated would be beneficial, the next chapter looks at the changing role of 'author' and her relationship with her young adult readers in this new context.

Chapter 5. The role of Author in the New Environment

The author–reader relationship

Authors who remain out of contact with the demographic for whom they write may find themselves without any connection with their readership. Understanding the worlds, cultures, and subcultures that their readers inhabit is paramount to establishing and maintaining good author–reader relationships. Authors once relied purely on their skills as wordsmiths to communicate effectively to, and with, their readers. However, it is increasingly important to be able to communicate with readers in the manner and format with which those readers communicate most often and most comfortably. If they don't do this, authors risk becoming irrelevant—or, worse, invisible—to their readers. YA authors' technological skills can therefore have an impact on their capacity to connect with their readers.

Regardless of the format in which YAs choose to read, it is in the online and networked context that YA authors will find their readers (Angel, 2016). To reach them, authors need to delve into their worlds, since it is 'becoming increasingly important to experiment with new strategies to deliver content to audiences on the platforms where those audiences actually are' (Ellingsen, 2014). Traditionally, authors connected with their readers via offline fan fiction communities or through publisher-initiated activities. Though word of mouth is and always has been a powerful means of sharing preferences, in this hyper-networked culture of circulation, book promotion now relies as much on circulation by the reading public as it does on commercial distribution (Doctorow, 2008-2014, 2010; H. Jenkins, 2013b). Engaging in conversation with readers, via author or book fan sites, blogs, and social media, is essential. We are, as Jenkins (2013) writes, *"[i]n a world where if it doesn't spread, it's dead, if it can't be quoted, it might not mean anything. Where the social practices of spreadable media necessitate material that is quotable—providing easy ways for audiences to be able to excerpt from that material and to share those excerpts with others—grabbable— providing technological functions which make that content easily portable and sharable."*

For authors, this may mean, at the very least, creating and distributing material via the following means: e-copies of chapters, character interviews and/or blogs, or graphics, videos, memes, or other such media that readers can easily engage with and share. Young adult

author Cory Doctorow believes that value and meaning are created as grassroots communities tap into creative products as resources for their own conversations and spread them to others to who share their interests. He encourages readers to download free copies of his books *Little Brother* from his website and, under its Creative Commons licence, to ‘remix it to make new and exciting stuff—videos, audios, new stories, anything else you can think of (games? Toys?), and redistribute them’ (Doctorow, 2008-2014). Contradicting many authors’ fears of book piracy, the paperback version of the same book was a New York Times bestseller and continues to sell as a mainstream published book available in both physical and online bookshops. Subsequent books continue to surpass expectations of publishers in foreign markets, still under a Creative Commons (no derivatives) licence. In the foreword of his novel *Homeland*, Doctorow (2013) outlines exactly what the Creative Commons licence means for readers:

“I draw your attention to article 2 of all Creative Commons licences: Nothing in this Licence is intended to reduce, limit, or restrict any uses free from copyright or rights arising from limitations or exceptions that are provided for in connection with the copyright protection under copyright law or other applicable laws. Strip away the legalese and what that says is, ‘Copyright gives you, the public, rights. Fair use is real. De minimus exemptions to copyright are real. You have the right to make all sorts of uses of all copyrighted works, without permission, without Creative Commons licences.’” (p. 4–6)

Doctorow invests in his readers; he understands that in the current context having the capacity to recreate and contribute to a story does not diminish the work, but in fact often enhances it and ensures its shareability, and for him, it has been a very successful strategy. This is becoming a much more commonplace occurrence with authors offering their work on sites such as Smashwords and Amazon at no charge so that they may gauge reader interest and ‘get their work out there’.

In a White Paper commissioned by the Ford Group, the Research Director in the Center for Media & Social Impact, Jessica Clarke, notes that ‘users’ are employing multiple means of seeking out and comparing media on issues that matter to them and acknowledges that ‘this places pressure on many makers to convert their content so that it’s not only accessible across

an array of platforms and devices, but properly formatted and tagged so that it can be discovered' (Clarke, 2009).

Connecting with readers has always been an essential part of being an author. Predicting the success of a book is an ongoing challenge, but as Eric Jenkins cites economist Richard Caves as arguing, 'uncertainty of demand is an everyday reality within the creative industries. These questions are exponentially harder to answer in today's spreadable media landscape, where many longstanding models for understanding audiences no longer apply' (E. Jenkins, 2013). For authors of YA fiction, one thing is clear: regardless of the format of the book, or the platform on which it is created or distributed, it is no longer enough to simply write the manuscript. A working knowledge of or, at the very least, a familiarity with the full range of communication tools, modes, and media is essential to understanding the context in which young people are developing their literacy, reading recreationally, connecting socially, and sharing information (Angel, 2016).

The reader/writer connection

"[B]eing a prosumer – being active in both consuming and producing – plays a vital part in how the stories are created as well as in the learning processes of the fan fiction website contributors (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 2010, p. 50)

Four of the eleven focus group participants, without prompting, stated that they also sourced reading material from fan-fiction (fanfic) sites. When the question was posed to the remaining participants as to whether they, too, read fan-fiction, a few more indicated they did by putting their hand up. This led to an interesting discussion within the group.

One participant challenged those who had not admitted to reading fanfic as thus: *"anyone who is not currently raising their hand is lying – either to themselves, or to–"* Another participant interrupted with: *"Okay fine, I use to, so much, but the writing isn't... the writing isn't always perfect... and..."*

Interestingly, this sparked an animated discussion on the quality of some fanfic writing compared to others, as well as the quality of different fanfic sites, followed by a debate about

whether certain fanfic ‘canons’ had been adequately met by a particular identity in one of the fanfic sites.

Fan-fiction is not new. Though its origins are unclear, some “have been traced back to science fiction magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, but links have also been drawn with oral and mythic traditions (Thomas, 2011, p. 1) far before then. There even are claims that Shakespeare lifted *Hamlet* and *King Lear* from literary and historical sources (Pich, 2013, p. 63), however, the term fan-fiction has its roots “in the 1960s to describe stories published in homemade fanzines” (Leavenworth, 2015, p. 42) but, according to Thomas (2011), “remained a fairly underground and marginalized activity until the advent of digital technologies” (p.2).

Writers of fanfic use existing published works, including characters and plot-lines, to create new stories based on the original. It can take characters into new situations, relationships, interactions and, more recently, across platforms and modes. The internet has facilitated an explosion of fanfic sites, the most populous being FanFiction.net. A quick exploration of this site revealed nine categories including, but not limited to: ‘books,’ ‘movies,’ ‘games,’ ‘TV shows,’ even ‘musicals’ featured. In each of the categories there are hundreds of titles with hundreds of thousands of contributions. For example, in the books category, *Harry Potter* had 757,000 pieces, ranging from book length works to merely a paragraph of interaction between characters. Popular series for readers at the younger end of the YA scale, *Percy Jackson*, had over 70,000 entries. The games category had over 90,000 stories for *Pokemon*, and more than 7,000 for *Minecraft*. The cartoon section included the cartoon, *My Little Pony*, which attracted 28,000 stories. Most of these titles are works for young children, and browsing the pseudonymous profiles of writers, it is clear that many are, themselves, school-aged.

Leavenworth (2015) observes that these types of fictional worlds are often found within the popular culture sphere in a media climate that encourages rather than dissuades audience participation in processes of meaning-making (p.41). Readers of fanfic have the opportunity to post comments on and reviews of the works they are reading which writers can use to either shape the direction of their next entry and/or improve the quality of it, effectively “challeng[ing] boundaries between authors and readers, creation and interpretation” (Thomas 2011 p.3). Jenkins notes that “[w]riting becomes a social activity for these fans,

simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a form of collective identity” (Jenkins 1992 p.154). His view in 1992, was that the type of “participatory culture” created by fans would lead to a new means of cultural production. And so it has.

Indeed, participating in fanfic provides the opportunity to co-create work, across platforms and text-types, and provides the opportunity for writers to socialise, make new friends and gain new knowledge during the creation of these cultural products (Olin-Scheller & Wikström, 2010). This is true for those focus groups participants who acknowledged they wrote and contributed to fanfic, though did not identify the platform, they had earlier mentioned Tumblr – which is a very popular site for posting fanfic.

Some said that they do not necessarily post directly to fanfic sites, preferring instead to co-write stories using ‘Google Docs’ (a cloud-based collaborative writing tool), or the collaborative writing app ‘Inkvite’. *“We write stories together... and I’m the kind of writer who will volunteer to edit anyone’s writing...”* This kind of collaborative, dialogic style of reading, writing, and content creation, is one of the ways fan practices further blur the distinction between reading and writing (Jenkins, 1992).

Research (Olin-Scheller & Wikstrom, 2010; Black, 2010) suggests that there are many advantages for young adults engaging in fanfic practices as it can support and enhance literacy development. The kind of informal mentoring that occurs between readers and writers who co-create is of benefit to both developing writers and developing readers. Olin-Scheller & Wikstrom (2010) note that “on many fan fiction sites the informal mentoring is partly organised as a sort of editorial feedback called beta-reading... The beta-reader function in fan fiction is a peer-to-peer teaching activity and is an important part of the informal learning culture” (p.51).

Distributed Authorship in a Multimodal Context

I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author-function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemic texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one

which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced (Foucault, 1979, p. 222).

In highly networked online social environments where young people do the majority of their reading and writing (Rideout 2010; Koepnick 2013), or where they seek and/or purchase their offline reading materials, and where conversations about, and responses to, the books they are reading take place (Angel, 2016), texts comprising a range of modes and media are the standard. It is in these spaces consuming (and creating) these types of texts, that young adult readers' expectations and perceptions of, and mental associations relating to, reading are shaping writing culture (Stroupe, 2007).

YA readers are being conditioned to expect multimodal reading experiences. As Luke (2003) observes, "multimodal readings and experiences of the world begin in infancy and constitute the social practices of everyday life" (p.398). As such, an examination by authors of what it means for writing practice and authorship is required, as the concept of authorship in relation to multimodal text types becomes increasingly blurred once we begin deconstructing the texts themselves. Considering all elements that contribute to a multimodal text, including but not limited to, graphic design, software design, app development, music composition, fx creation, navigation, animation, and story creation, "technologies can be seen to engage in an authorial partnership with the composer, "collaborating to create new media," new narrative forms and practices" (Skains, 2016, p. 183).

The skills of authorship are longer restricted to plot development and written expression as visual elements become increasingly important to young readers (Beavis, 2013; Hull & Nelson, 2005). However, expertise in creating different story elements need not be restricted to individual authors, rather the development of a broader skill set that includes the 'cultural competencies' of a literate society in a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009) such as collective intelligence, distributed cognition, collaboration — explicit and implicit, appropriation and networking.

Reader/Author Collaboration

Interaction and collaboration between authors and their readers has changed dramatically over the past ten years (Goldsmith, 2016; Murray, 2015; Throsby, Zwar, & Longdon, 2015). A ‘modern’ understanding of authorship arose from “relationships among publishers, the changing literary marketplace around the time of writers like Byron and Jane Austen. It was constructed at the intersection of socio-economic practices and artistic creativity” (Tetreault, 2012, p. 30). However, socio-economic practices and artistic creativity, as previously discussed, look very different in a 21st century context.

The book publishing industry has undergone much change as a result of technological advancement, and it continues to evolve. Digital publishing and the networked social context we live in has meant vast and rapid change to way in which books are written, promoted, discussed, distributed, bought and sold (Martin, 2010; Murray, 2015). In this context, the ways in which readers contact and communicate with each other and with authors has resulted in significant changes to the author–reader relationship, and the way genre fandoms communicate (Goldsmith, 2016, p. 32).

Recent research into the Australian book industry (Throsby et al., 2015) reported that genre fiction has seen the greatest change, with nearly two-thirds of authors reporting they are able to reach their readers using new technologies. The same research found that “over half of authors report that new technologies have opened up new avenues to publish paid, original work, with genre fiction authors (78.5%) and poets (69%) the most affected (Throsby et al., 2015, p. 5). Authors of YA fiction have “enthusiastically embraced an interactive—even distributed—model of online presence-management” (Murray 2016, p.322) which is vital in reaching the spaces YA readers inhabit.

It is in these online spaces, where authors seek to connect with their readers, that opportunities exist to seek feedback from them. Being “engaged in one-to-many or even one-to-one real-time relationships with readers”, means that authors can benefit from readers providing suggestions on their latest projects, writing reviews, or sharing the author’s work. Authors can also contribute to the direction of discussions about their work by “selectively endorsing, correcting, or otherwise mediating reader discussions” about it (Murray 2016, p.323).

Murray (2016) observes that “o]ne of the digital literary sphere’s most intriguing phenomena is the emergence of what presents as user-generated forums—for example, Goodreads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari—allowing avid *readers* to catalogue and annotate their book collections, connect with those of similar tastes, receive and make recommendations, and rate and discuss particular titles” (Murray 2016, p.324).

The notion that readers might contribute to the development of an author’s work, not considered viable previously, is becoming more popular with YA authors. Throsby et al. (2015) reports that “nearly one quarter of all authors have shown drafts of their work in progress in online forums (closed or public) to gain feedback from other authors or readers” (p.5). Authors such as JK Rowling, take interest in encouraging and responding to fanfic contributions and is especially prolific on Twitter (@jk_rowling).

The mBook, like many works for YAs (for example, Cory Doctorow’s books), is designed to encourage contributions from readers. Readers are urged to explore yet-to-be-developed subplots of minor characters and create content for them, then upload the content to the mBook’s website. The structure of the artefact is such that if a minor character, whose own story is undeveloped, is written/developed/created by readers, and uploaded to the mBook site, there is scope for readers to take the story in directions not envisioned by the author. The potential exists for readers to collectively create a transmedia storyworld comprising contributions from many readers to broaden the work, because as Zezulкова suggests, “media are produced and dialogically engaged with—and can be said to under appreciate how children operate across complex intersubjective systems in which all media (indeed all aspects of lived experience) are interconnected (Woodfall & Zezulкова, 2016, p. 98)

Author Challenges

Responding to the changes in reading and writing is a challenge for authors. Recent reports that eBooks sales have stabilised and paper book sales have improved slightly (BookScan, 2016) have been generally interpreted as suggesting that YAs prefer reading in paper-based formats (Merga, 2015; Manuel, 2014). But this view neglects to consider a few important issues; firstly, that these statistics are only referring to those who are keen readers of long-

form fiction, and secondly, that even those keen readers who are buying books, are talking about them in online spaces and combining their reading preferences with online multimodal reading contexts.

Connecting with loyal readership as well as reaching potential new readers is vital for authors writing for any demographic, but connecting with young readers is particularly challenging for those authors who do not explore and/or understand YA reading culture. A paradigm shift in thinking about the skills required to read and write in a multimodal context is required, even for those authors writing conventionally. Challenging the traditional notion of authorship as a solitary pursuit to consider the value of collaboration, both explicit and implicit; understanding the nature and purpose of appropriation; developing the capacity to engage in online reader forums; and creating and maintaining an author platform, are some of the skills now required of authors in the still evolving book industry (Murray, 2015; Throsby et al., 2015; Weedon, 2014).

Upskilling oneself in the art of writing is becoming increasingly important. Not only are authors required to interact with software and hardware not previously necessary, they are increasingly expected to develop and maintain an author platform to establish their ‘brand’ (Throsby et al., 2015) to promote their work. Once the domain of publishers, in the current context, “literary phenomena such as book trailers, authorial blog-tours, online writers’ festivals, and social media–hosted book clubs constitute digital paratexts that crucially mediate the author-reader encounter” (Murray, 2016, p.334). Skills needed to navigate these spaces extend far beyond use of a word processor, because as observed by Throsby et al. (2015) in Briefing 5, “[t]he majority of book authors, especially trade authors, are experiencing significant changes in their writing practice” (p.4).

Learning about, and engaging in, social media spaces, practices, and etiquette has become a fundamental writing skill for authors to develop as it is here where authors develop and maintain connections with their readers.

Challenges in mBook Development

The development of the mBook necessitated a considerable broadening of the author skill set, not the least of which was recognising absent skills. The process of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), where parts of the story were recreated in other formats to develop the multimodal component of the mBook, was challenging. Though, reimagining these scenes as being represented differently was less challenging than identifying the potential means of making that representation a reality. For example, for the flashback scenes, I imagined text flitting across the page accompanied by dream-like effects and music, however, initially, I had no knowledge or understanding about how I could make that happen.

Seeking this new knowledge and understanding meant a significant amount of time invested in collaborating with others in online spaces, drawing on their skill sets to explore the possibilities. Discovering that the art of kinetic typography could produce the desired results sparked a time-intensive process of skills development. Several programs that had the potential to create the kinetic typography episodes were explored (Adobe After Effects CC; Apple Motion) but the choice to use After Effects (AE) was made based on the proliferative, and free, availability of instructional videos on YouTube and Vimeo.

Taking advantage of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) such as Udemy and Coursera provided a graduated skills development process from complete beginner to more advanced techniques) that could be regularly revisited. These MOOCs, along with other common and freely accessed sites like iTunesU are easily accessed by anyone with an internet connection, and provide learning on a vast variety of topics from Philosophy to Watercolour Painting, Quantum Physics to Flower Arranging; the course lists are endless.

For the purpose of developing the skills needed to create the KT episodes, the MOOCs taught the basic skills of key-framing, animating, image and video formatting and editing, compositing, and rendering. They were supplemented by following step-by-step instruction tutorials created and posted by other users of the software program to learn a particular method for a specific purpose, e.g., morphing letters to shapes. That so many individuals freely create and post tutorials for others, places the learning and development of new skills in much greater proximity than traditional ways of learning.

Identifying the specific skills needed to effect the writing practice for authors need not be insurmountable with the plethora of commonly available tools and technologies, as well as the ease of accessibility to instructions about how, when and where too use these tools. If authors choose not to write multimodal works, diversifying their skill set to include a working knowledge of multimodal content and contexts, would enable them to present their books to audiences in appropriate and relevant arenas.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) most recent research about internet use in Australia reported that for the 2014–2015 period, 97% of all households with children under 15-years-old had internet access. Of these households 86% used smartphones and 62% used a tablet device, noting that 94% still used a desktop or laptop computer and households often have multiple devices. The average number of devices used to access the internet at home in these households was seven. In addition, 99% of young adults in the 15-17 year age group were the highest users of the internet (ABS, 2015).

These numbers are indicative of a significant shift in the way young adults spend their leisure time engagement in online spaces where multimodal text is the norm. Similarly, the school curriculum in Australia recognises this shift in technological engagement and embeds the teaching of multimodal text throughout the learning area of English at all levels of compulsory schooling (ACARA, 2012). This increased “centrality of multimodality in the curriculum is due in large part to the transformative impact of digitisation on the very nature of texts and its influence in redistributing the creation and sharing of representational modes from technical specialists to contemporary students’ in their homes” and classrooms (Cloonan, 2015, p. 98).

The literature young adults are being exposed to in an Education context from the beginnings of their school lives reflects the recreational practices they involved with outside of school where “[I]n addition to watching videos, playing online games and using social network sites, the textual experiences of young people include participation of a different kind – visiting fan fiction sites, making and creating paratexts for filmic, manga, TV and other narratives, creating new versions and scenarios, making and uploading spoof or tribute YouTube videos and so on” (Beavis, 2013, p. 246).

Print text remains an important part of young people’s literacy education, however, convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) means that multimodal text is becoming increasingly

recognised as a critical component of fundamental literacy practices where physical and virtual spaces are “mutually constituted and flow between each other” (Rowse, 2014, p.119).

“This view of literature is consistent with the recognition of the diverse and multiple ways in which contemporary meaning is made, and the need for students to be critical, capable and creative users of digital and multimodal forms of literacy, alongside traditional print-based forms.” (Beavis 2013, p.244)

In this context where young adults are educated in creating multimodal texts, consistently seek out multimodal reading experiences that authors are creating textual experiences for their young adult readers. Diversifying their writing tool-kit, i.e., expanding their skill set to make use of the affordances of a range of technological tools, programs, and environments is increasingly important to ensure longevity and relevance to and within their reading demographic.

Distributed Cognition

In a participatory culture the focus of literacy shifts from individual expression to community involvement (Jenkins 2009). Reading and writing have the potential to become agents of collective intelligence producing storytelling works previously unimagined. Jenkins (2009) identifies a participatory culture as one that includes low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement and strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others. The rapid proliferation of social media environments and networked communities continues to facilitate a broad engagement by the masses, the rate at which our communication, content creation and circulation has the capacity to shape our collective agendas (Clinton, Jenkins, & McWilliams, 2013, p. 7) and influence the culture at large.

Distributed cognition plays a role in this process. Distributed cognition is understood as being the flow of information across people, artefacts and environments (Hutchins, 1995), or as Jenkins (2009) explains, the way in which we use technology to expand our cognitive capacity by “thinking with and through [its] tools” (p.37). This occurs at all levels of engagement — professional, amateur, or recreational.

Though evolving 'writing culture' is dependent upon the "kinds of critical or creative consciousness enabled by its production and reception" (Stroupe, 2007, p. 422), drawing on the skills and talents of a broader society in a process of distributed cognition does not mean an absence of the need for young adults to learn traditional means of reading and writing. On the contrary, to be able to meaningfully participate at any level, people need to be able to read and write in a traditional manner in order that they may connect their contemporary literacy experiences to an older tradition (Clinton et.al. 2013). But although "the fundamental principles of reading and writing have not changed, the process has shifted from the serial cognitive processing of linear print text to parallel processing of multimodal text-image information sources (Luke, 2003, p. 399). And this requires engagement with a variety of technology tools to both create and consume text, for example, software programs that others have designed, developed, and distributed.

The creation of the mBook is an example of one such text. Writing the mBook utilised essential technology such as video, image, and animation editing software (e.g., iMovie, Photoshop, After Effects), layout and design software (e.g., InDesign, Word) music composition software (e.g., GarageBand, Audition) and hardware tools such as mobile phone camera and laptop (iPhone and MacBook Pro). By utilising the affordances of these tools, benefiting from the talents and expertise of those who developed the programs, authorship was, essentially, a journey benefiting from distributed cognition processes.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

“Books are not going the way of the dinosaur but the way of the human, changing as we change, mutating and evolving in ways that will continue, as a book lover said long ago, to teach and delight.” (Hayles, 2002, p. 33)

Books are Changing

When Hayles (2002) made the above assertion fifteen years ago she could not have imagined that eight years in the future, technology would evolve enough to have revolutionised book reading and further challenge concepts and understanding of the book-as-object. Tablet technology swept across the western world and quickly became an integral presence in school classrooms. Education systems were challenged to adapt and restructure their syllabus requirements resulting in new curriculums being developed in Australia (ACARA 2012) to account for the new technological tools and methods of reading and writing.

Currently, students continue to be exposed to, and enjoy, books in many formats across different platforms, accessed by multiple tools as we, as a society, continue to adapt to technological change. Some theorists were a little more circumspect with regard to reading practices suggesting that “a change of expectations will change reading practices is a matter of pure speculation, since reading practices are dependent on expectations which are formed not only in reading but in lived experience” (Carusi, 2006, p.175).

That young people are reading and writing more than they ever have previously has consistently been proven by many researchers in many fields and is now indisputable. Using tablets, gaming consoles, smartphones and other portable devices, as well as laptops both recreationally and educationally *is* the lived experience of the majority of students in the western world. Students are comfortable engaging with technological devices from their earliest years and are familiar with multimodal texts prior to beginning their formal education (Levy, 2009; Miller & Warschauer, 2014).

At a fundamental level, books are changing because literacy is changing. Literacy, being the practice of sense-making (Adami & Kress, 2014) in order to function effectively in the society

to which one was born, necessitates developing an effective and coherent means of communication which includes reading and writing. Networked technology has facilitated a movement toward social media that has opened up a plethora of online spaces in which young people conduct much of their communication in textual formats. Learning the art of effective communication in these channels is a challenge for both students and teachers, but it is —as it always has been, what provides young people with the skills to engage in leisure practices that include reading for pleasure.

As society continues to shift further into the technological era, the book-as-object will (or should) continue to morph into formats that include the type of media that reflects young people's engagement with and use of technology. Ensuring young adult readers are presented with a variety of options for engaging with long-form fiction means understanding how young adults experience leisure reading.

How do young adults engage with the long-form fiction novel in the current literacy climate?

The lived experience of Young Adults includes technological immersion. The majority of young adults walk around with a networked computer in their pocket or backpack. At a local level, this was evidenced by the researcher walking through the school playground at break time where large groups of students, ranging in age from 12 to 18-years-old across the academic stages, were either sitting or walking with their eyes focussed on a screen. They were gaming or reading or checking social media feeds, but during the brief 20 minutes of leisure time, they were fully engaged with their devices.

This evidence of pervasive technological engagement suggests that using technology devices to read, play, and communicate at every opportunity is a normal means of interacting in the 21st century, and is reinforced by the research findings that young adults do not demonstrate a conscious awareness of embodied actions when using devices. Young people are so accustomed to such actions as swiping, clicking, and zooming, that is as much of a natural and subconscious action for them, as was turning a page in a book for their parents and grandparents.

Though they spend a great proportion of leisure time in online contexts using different platforms and devices, when it comes to formats for engaging young adult readers in novel reading, this project's focus group participants showed no clear preference for the format of the long-form fiction with which they engaged. The format and/or platform in which participants chose to read varied according to personal circumstance. The adaptive and fluid nature of reading formats meant that the selection of format was secondary to where they were and what they doing. This ranged from laptops at home, paper books in bed, e-books while travelling, and smartphones at school, sometimes to read the same book. Convenience was more important than format; participants were happy to read in both online and offline formats at different times.

This is supported by research into the use of media by slightly younger children (6-11-ys) which found in several separate studies “children tended to address media in a *platform agnostic* manner and offered little sense that they saw the media platform itself as being of overriding significance to their holistic media engagement. Ultimately, if children's lived media engagement is dialogic and holistic, then focusing on only one discreet media utterance (like television for example) can be said to become deeply problematic to those within children's media practice, education and research” (Woodfall & Zezulakova, 2016, p. 98). Similarly, with regard to children's and young adults' reading engagement, if we focus on one format (or platform) for the 'book' to the exclusion of others, we do young readers a great disservice by limiting their options to engage with long-form fiction. These findings—that young adults do not have a preference for format, reinforced Merga's (2015) findings, as well as her assertion that young adults should be presented with a range of options for engaging with long-form fiction in order to maximise their opportunity to read.

In addition to engaging with a variety of media in a platform-agnostic manner, the focus groups indicated that young adults experience reading long-form fiction in different ways. Some readers preferred linearity in their reading, choosing to move through text in the order in which is it presented; others chose to read different parts in different format and different orders. Some readers chose to engage with the text in addition to simultaneously accessing other media. However, despite detractors of tech-based reading suggesting that this type of distracted book-reading experience is detrimental, these readers were able to describe the

text and engage in conversation about character and plot in a manner that indicated comprehension of it consistent with traditional leisure reading.

An amusing response to the type of unfounded concern from theorists about reading books in different formats in the early days of e-reading, came from (Collins, 2013) when he said: “Change the object that is the book, and suddenly attention spans shorten, long-form narrative shrinks into sound bites, deep reading is no longer necessary, and literature departments are obsolete. According to this scenario, reading literary fiction on an e-reader is a gate-way drug that leads to the hard stuff of digital culture—become psychologically dependent on that e-reader, and you’ll find yourself in an alley somewhere with a cell-phone novel written by promiscuous Japanese teenagers sticking out of your arm” (p.210).

Books will continue to morph as formats adapt and platforms continue to change, but books, as communicators of the culture, will continue to play a role in the textual lives of young adults, as everyday storytelling practices continue to be harnessed by educators to support literacy practices (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). What is important is that authors and teachers continue to provide young adult readers with a variety of options for engaging with long-form fiction reading experiences.

How can authors of YA long-form fiction diversify their writing skill-set (toolkit) to cater to YA reading engagement?

Not all YA authors are inspired by the narrative possibilities of digital media (Skains, 2017), nor do they have the knowledge or understanding of the tools and technologies available to them to begin composing narrative in different formats. However, we should be able to assume they have some knowledge or awareness of the changing technological context in which they are writing, particularly if they are writing for children and/or young adults. The fact that networked technology dominates young people’s social lives is well researched formally and well-represented anecdotally in the mass-media.

If authors want to keep producing works of fiction that engage young adult readers, they need to understand the context in which they are writing. “If the ubiquitous myth of the solitary author obfuscates the social production of literature, then, in the case of twenty-first-century

experimental writing, it also conceals a deliberate political project informing both social practice and compositional practice: that is, an open source poetics advances in defence of a shared cultural commons (Voyce, 2011, p. 409).

Developing a willingness to learn about and engage in the 21st century literacy practices, including contemporary communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Crossman, 2012), is crucial to understanding that reading is now structured around an “expanded view of literacy that recognises the changing and dynamic nature of text and textual forms” (Green & Beavis, 2013, p. 10). Competence in the variety of technology tools is less important than understanding the need to connect with others who do have those competencies and enter into collaborative writing practices that may assist authors to explore the affordances of digital technologies and discover how their story may be represented in other formats, other locations, on other platforms.

As Jenkins et.al, (2009) reminded us, “just as the emergence of written language changed oral traditions and the emergence of printed texts changed our relationship to written language, the emergence of new digital modes of expression changes our relationship to printed texts” (Jenkins 2009, p.19) and, necessarily, to the readers of our works. Young adults will continue to seek out long-form narrative reading experiences, but they will only read what is of interest to them in the formats that engage them. The practice of reading-for-pleasure for young adults is as essential as part of their developing literacy reflecting socially situated cultural practices (Green & Beavis, 2013) that are increasingly diverse and continually evolving.

The mBook provides a reading experience of long-form fiction that caters to the young adult reader’s increasing desire to choose the format and the linearity with which they want to read, allowing both Immersive Readers and Distracted Readers opportunities to choose their linear preferences. The mBook offers readers the traditional paper-based linear reader experience, should they choose to take it, but it also offers a broader narrative across different platforms in different modes that can be accessed at different points in the story should the reader choose to take a non-linear, augmented reality reading experience.

It has been suggested that “what is currently missing and is urgently needed is a digital literary studies that is both contemporary *and* contextual” (Murray, 2016, p.319) and it is clear that

further research into the reading practices of young adults needs to take place to explore this junction.

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