

Transl8or

ASLP	age, sex, location, picture
bf	boyfriend
f	friend; female
☺	fun
3:o)	girl
gf	girlfriend
intRStd	interested
knO	know
l8r	later
LOL	laughed out loud
p2p	person to person
plAc	place
reg	regular
thx	thanks
3sum	threesome
2moro	tomorrow
2	to
V	very
w8N	waiting
Wbcam	webcamera

From a Friend

Sometimes you know something bad is about to happen before it does. You know something's not right, you get a really bad feeling.

That's exactly how I felt. *Something's not right.* I stared at the keyboard in front of me and then up at the screen. The bad feeling was threatening to overwhelm me; my stomach twisted and my skin broke out in tiny goosebumps. I clenched my fists tightly, forcing myself not to get up and walk away from the desk.

I took a deep breath and stared at the keyboard again, each letter a menacing silhouette against its stark background. And then the desire to know overcame the bad feeling. *Just do it.* I watched my fingertips quickly hit the keys that made up my password. I listened to them *clunk, clink, clunk, clink*, each letter with its slightly different tone. The two icon figures twirled and twisted together, like dancers, as the page flashed the words *Signing In, Signing In*, to stop me clicking the mouse too soon. The sense of dread engulfed me. This was going to be very bad.

Signing In. Signing In.

Hurry up. Now I was impatient. Tapping the surface of my desk with a pencil, my eyes darted to the screen of my mobile phone, its message still visible. The page was still signing in. I drummed my fingernails against the base of my keyboard. *Come on.*

And then the blue background of my Hotmail account appeared. As promised, I had mail.

Folders

 Inbox (1)

Now my impatience fled and I had to steel myself again. I shuddered violently, my skin prickling with a shiver that started in my teeth and finished at my knees. My hand moved the mouse. My eyes were fixed on the screen. The cursor landed on Unread Mail.

Deep breath. Left click.

	From	Subject	Date	Size
	afriend	Your reputation	Feb 3	1KB

I looked at the title suspiciously. *Your reputation.* My stomach twisted painfully again and I swallowed with difficulty. Who was 'a friend'? Slowly I moved the cursor and clicked on the message.

From: afriend
Sent: Tuesday, 3 February, 3.45pm
To: Avalon@hotmail.com
Subject: Your reputation

Dear Avalon,

This is to let you know that your reputation is being discussed at length and the general opinion is you're a slut. As a concerned friend I think you should check out the blog page at www.rublogging to see what the population thinks of you. Click on the blogrings tab and open Westerly SHS link.

A friend

I stared at the email in disbelief, the skin around my mouth prickling in horror. This was much worse than I'd anticipated. What the hell was a blog page? I had to know what they were saying. Something told me I shouldn't, but I couldn't help it. I shut my eyes and clicked on the link.

I waited a moment and then opened my eyes, breathing in deeply. The online journal page opened. Numbly I followed the directions as instructed. My neck was rigid and my hands trembled as the page took a lifetime to load. And then, there they were. My eyes quickly skimmed them but my stomach was churning and tears blurred my vision. Six entries about the new girl at school. They were all about me.

The A-Bomb

You know how you feel at the start of the school year: nervous, anxious, sometimes even excited? Me and my mates used to get together in the weeks before the first day, worried about which teachers we might get, or curious to see if there'd be any new people. This year all those feelings were magnified ten times, because I was going to be the new student.

Mum had got a posting back into the metropolitan area. After serving ten years in the country, she finally got a Head of Department position. I'd grown up in Grace Point, just outside Margaret River. We arrived there when I was four, so I'd been at the same school all my life. I knew everyone in town; I had heaps of mates and a social life. It wasn't much, going to friends' houses for movies and watching the local teams on the town oval, but I was always busy, every weekend. I was captain of the hockey team and a member of the swimming squad.

The night Mum and Dad sat me down and announced their new plans was, at the risk of sounding overly dramatic, like the bomb the Yanks dropped on Hiroshima.

'It'll be fantastic,' Mum said. 'We can move up to Sorrento and be near the beach. We're looking at some really great, top-ranking schools for you. And if you want to go to uni, we'll be close enough that you won't have to board.'

I sat there in disbelief. What were they thinking? Grace Point was all I'd known. What could possibly be fantastic about leaving it and going somewhere new? What about my friends — and the hideous prospect of having to make new ones?

'No way,' I said, ignoring the tears that were threatening. 'I'm not going. It's not fair. This is my home. You dragged us out to the middle of Woop-Woop and now you think you can shift us back, just because you want to. What about me and Ruby? What about what we want?'

'You'll make new friends, Avalon,' Dad said, 'and you'll still keep your friends here. We're not moving to another country, it's just a few hundred kilometres.'

Three hundred and four to be precise. I wasn't going to back down. I didn't want to change and I was angry with them both. They were full of this crap about the better lifestyle you could have in the country, with cleaner air and fresh, organic produce. And how we could live more individual and fulfilled lives, free from the life-draining, soul-destroying city, with its crime and drugs. Now they were saying the city had better opportunities for me — I felt like an Amish kid being thrown into Rumspringer.

And Mum and Dad believe in democratic decisions. Everyone is supposed to have a vote in our family. Well I was

strongly voting a definite NO, but Mum and Dad kept on at me; they weren't going to stop until all votes were YES. Strange idea of democracy, hey?

And they're cunning too. They made sure to deliver their bombshell at the start of the Christmas holidays. That gave them nearly seven weeks to wear me down. Every weekend we were off to Perth — to beachside houses and posh-looking schools, shopping for the latest fashions and swinging by the gelato shop for a large three-flavour we'd eat as we watched the sun sink into the Indian Ocean.

Their trickery started to work on me. I began to see how exciting it might be. The houses we were looking at were new and modern, with theatre rooms and separate teenage wings. They were so different from our haphazardly planned and tacked together house in Grace Point, where every room radiated off the kitchen, a gigantic brick-floored room with an enormous old wooden butcher's block that served as a bench. And Ruby and I would have a bathroom to ourselves while Mum and Dad had their own — surely a better option than queuing cross-legged on a Sunday morning while Dad read the entire *Sunday Times* on the only dunny in the house. If you were desperate enough, you'd venture to the rickety old loo out the back, cautiously lifting the seat to check for red-backs underneath, the whole time twitching and shuddering if a tendril of weed touched your bare legs — like a spider running, or a tiger snake circling.

And Mum's master shot had been the university reference. It's kind of expected in our house that I'll go there after Year

Twelve. With a family of teachers, what real choice do I have? Over the last few years my local school had dropped its tertiary entrance subjects, and kids wanting university acceptance had to travel an hour and a half to the nearest Senior High for years eleven and twelve. Even then, the uni offers were limited. The idea of leaving my family to go to uni had always freaked me out a bit, but if we all moved, I wouldn't have to worry about being so far away.

Christmas holidays were a blur of packing and travelling between Grace Point and Perth. We spent hours on the road, Mum, Dad, my little sister Ruby and me. Those trips were long and tedious. I'd watch the stretch of bitumen in front of us, our car gobbling up the broken white line as Ruby and I sat in the back singing Wiggles songs.

Ruby is a lot younger than me; I was eleven when she was born, but the age gap has never bothered me. After my birth, Mum, who wanted five kids, couldn't get pregnant again. I was happy as an only child. Sometimes I thought I'd like a brother or sister, but Mum and Dad always had heaps of time for me and I never felt that I was missing out on anything. When Mum found out she was pregnant apparently she said to the doctor, 'But how did this happen?'

The way the story goes, he looked over the top of his glasses at her and said, 'Mrs Maloney, as a Maths and Science teacher I would expect you'd know!'

I've spent heaps of time looking after Ruby, helping bath her and feed her and even — I know it's gross — changing

her crappy nappies. I never understood when my friends complained about their annoying siblings. Ruby was like my mini friend.

On those journeys in the car I'd think about what was going to happen next year. I'd look out the window and watch the long stretches of dry brown grass give way to tall white gums closely lining the edge of the road and then the first sparsely placed houses, becoming denser and denser until we reached civilisation. Driving back was like watching rewind, the houses gradually disappearing, trees becoming further apart, then the patchwork brown and green paddocks that indicated we weren't far from home. I'd think about all the things I wanted. I was in the mindset now that this was going to be a great change. When I thought about my new school I hoped I'd fit in and make real friends. I wanted to join the hockey team and the swimming squad, meet people I could go to parties with, the movies, all that sort of stuff.

When the time came to say goodbye insecurity overwhelmed me again and I clung to my friend Jake. We'd been best friends since kindy, when I'd thrown sand in his eyes and he'd run screaming to his Mum.

'I don't want to go,' I said, suddenly frightened of all the possibilities. I buried my face in his flannel shirt. He had that unmistakable warm, earthy smell of horses mixed with the sweetness of freshly cut hay.

He ruffled my hair, a thing he knew always pissed me off.

'You better not cry,' he said. 'You were always going to leave one day.'

I nodded and swallowed hard, remembering all the times I'd sit watching him milk the cows and telling him of my plans to travel the world. But it was easy to be brave and adventurous when there was no opportunity to put it into action. In the milking shed, listening to the milk squirting into the metal drums, everything seemed more appealing. Who'd want a life where a holiday was the five-kilometre trip to the front gate? Where even though everything was so far away, when you got there nothing was any different from what you'd just left? The people in town were all fourth and fifth generationers who'd warn, in their knowing way, that once you come and live in Grace Point you never leave.

'I know,' I said, turning to look at Mum and Dad waiting for me in the car. The engine was running and they were listening to Carole King's *Tapestry* on Dad's new six-stacker boot loader. Ruby was in her booster seat reading her nursery rhyme book upside down.

'And it's not that far,' Jake said, trying to sound convincing. 'If you don't like it you can always come back.'

I nodded and took a deep breath. We both knew that would never happen. I was going, for good, and it would just have to be wonderful.

Bye, bye Grace Point, I waved out the window as we joined the stream of traffic heading north. To Perth.

First Day

The new school had a strict uniform: knee-length navy-blue skirt and a white shirt with the school crest on the pocket, all hair to be tied back and minimal jewellery. The guys wore the same, except for the skirt of course; they had to wear navy trousers. It was really different from the relaxed uniform at my country school, which was more a dress code, not enforced at all; this was mature looking. I really felt like things were changing when I put it on. It was like I was leaving the old me, the boring country girl, behind and becoming someone new. It seemed to hold out the opportunity to be anyone I wanted. The night before school started I looked at it lying on the end of my bed like a flattened person and I was excited. You know the way you feel when you don't know what to expect, but have so many expectations?

I couldn't sleep all night, stressing out over what would happen on my first day. At breakfast I felt really sick. Looking at my bran flakes floating in a puddle of milk made me want to puke.

'I feel the same way,' Dad said, watching me over the top of the paper.

'What?' I asked, willing the vomit not to rise. Around me the timber and granite kitchen was still piled ceiling high with unpacked boxes of cups and plates and stainless steel appliances.

'Sick,' he smiled and drank his caffeine-free coffee. He didn't look sick at all to me, the way he bogged into his eggs and vegetarian not-bacon. The smell made me feel like retching. 'I'll be the new kid too.'

'We all will,' said Mum, sitting down on the chair next to me, 'even Ruby.'

Ruby looked up from where she was kneeling on the kitchen chair, porridge in her wispy blonde hair and hanging off the end of her nose, and responded by flicking globs of it at Mum. In a way Mum was right. We were all going to new schools. Ruby was starting day care — I hoped she'd fit in with all the other two and three year olds, and nobody would steal her box of sultanas — and Dad was teaching in the English department at the same school where Mum, who I blame for the whole shift, was the new Head of Maths. And I was about to enter an enormous metropolitan high school, population 1500 — I don't think that many people lived in Grace Point. It was a small mercy that neither Mum nor Dad was at my new school.

Dad drove me to school. We got there early and sat in the car watching the students arriving. They all looked so neat

and professional. Not like at Grace Point where the kids tied surfie jumpers around their waists and the girls wore mini skirts, or hipsters, in school colours. These students looked practically adult.

The school was modern, it couldn't have been very old. Perfectly manicured lawns separated the buildings, with their names — English, Maths, Social Sciences — displayed on the portico entrances. Each building was surrounded by rose gardens, whose perfume we could smell from the car. Tall, leafy, light green trees shaded the lawns. On one side of the grounds there were netball courts and playing fields and on the other was an enormous two-storey building labelled Administration.

It was a far cry from my country school, which catered for pre-primary to Year Twelve: a single rectangular building of red brick, probably built by the first convicts, surrounded by verandahs with chipped, faded painted railings; where the playing field was the local town oval and the netball court was a warped, volcano-like bitumen surface that also accommodated square ball and hop scotch. I sat in the front of Dad's car, sweat sticking the backs of my legs to the vinyl seat, feeling intimidated by the size of the place and the maturity of the students.

'Looks big,' I said to Dad, not taking my eyes off the school. My stomach gurgled like a washing machine.

'And new,' he replied, looking at me closely. I felt his eyes on my face, so I turned to him, swallowing my anxiety and trying to be brave.

'You'll be fine Avalon, you'll make friends quickly.'

I nodded my head, of course I'd be fine. Fitting in had never been a problem before, what was I scared of?

'Okay.' I leaned over and kissed Dad. 'Have a good day too. Don't let anyone take your lunch money!'

He laughed. 'I'll be here at four thirty, after hockey tryouts.'

As I stood at the edge of the drive watching his battered Ford Escort fart and burp its way down the road, I realised people were looking at me. I tried to look casual and calm as I started walking to the Administration Building. Mum had wanted to come with me but I was fourteen, I didn't want anyone thinking I needed to hold mummy's hand.

The front office was divided in half by a tall reception counter. There were about five women working behind it at desks and computers. People kept coming and going through several different doors, smiling and grumbling, '*Back again — another day, another dollar,*' and '*Holidays already seem like a memory.*' A few of them smiled at me as I waited behind a man who was talking to the office lady. I looked at the photos and awards on the walls, achievements for sport and academic excellence, artwork by Year Twelve students that was so good I was almost embarrassed about the quality of work at my last school. The office lady was laughing loudly with the man in front. I critically assessed him from behind. No doubt a young and potentially cute teacher. As I waited and waited I began to feel like a hillbilly

trying to integrate into the big sophisticated city.

Finally it was my turn. The office lady gave me a huge pile of papers and pointed me in the direction of my home room.

‘Mitch,’ she called to the man who was just going out the door, ‘can you take Avalon to her home room? She’s new.’

I wanted to die. How embarrassing! I didn’t want all the kids to see me being walked to class by a teacher. I opened my mouth to say I was all right but Mitch spoke.

‘No worries Ms Johnson, I’ll see she gets there okay.’ He smiled at me with perfect white teeth and then I saw the school crest on his pocket. He was a student! My face started going red; it always happens when I’m embarrassed, and then knowing it’s happening makes it even worse. Suddenly I was hot and sweaty.

‘Come on then ... sorry what’s your name?’

‘Avalon,’ I said through dry lips.

‘That’s a nice name — different.’ He took the messy pile of papers out of my hands.

‘My parents are a bit different,’ I said quickly, looking at my feet, my embarrassment intensifying.

‘Right, my name’s Mitch, I’m Year Eleven and you are —’ he looked down at the papers in his hand, ‘Year Ten. That’d make you fifteen, yeah?’

‘Fourteen.’ I was stretching my legs to keep up with him. He was over six foot tall, perfect athlete’s build, and had a really long stride. ‘I was put up a grade in Year Seven.’

‘You must be pretty smart then?’ He looked at me with

admiration and I felt myself blushing again. We were crossing the lawn to a building near the netball courts.

‘Oh I don’t think so. I guess it was all the extra stuff my dad made me do. He’s a teacher,’ I said, by way of explanation.

‘Cool.’ He pushed open the door of the building. Inside, students were laughing and pushing each other, or standing in groups talking. The hallway smelled of new carpet and the walls were decorated with more prize-winning artwork. Mitch stopped in front of a door marked SS4. ‘This is your home room, teacher is Ms McKenzie who, by the way, is really cool. Have a good day — I’ll probably see you out there. Gotta go, I’ve got Mr Truman, a bit of a wanker.’

He waved at me and left.

I put my head around the door. There were about twenty students, sitting on desks or rocking back on chair legs, talking and laughing. They looked so much older than me and far more confident. I was still aiming for casual but I walked in stiffly and self-consciously, and sat at a desk in the front. I heard their whispers, ‘*She must be the new girl,*’ ‘*nice hair,*’ ‘*where’s she from?*’ ‘*I heard her mum’s a principal.*’ I sat uncomfortably with my new, rigid school bag on top of the desk, pretending I couldn’t hear anything. I rummaged through it determinedly until I found my school diary, and then made like I was engrossed in reading the school rules and policies. I hoped someone would come and talk to me. The next minute a messy body flopped onto my desk,

pushing my bag to the floor and obscuring my reading.

'Hi,' he thrust his hand in front of my face, 'I'm Caleb and you are ...?'

'Avalon.' I looked up. He had long, dirty blond dreadlocks, pulled back into a leather lackey. His white shirt was open, revealing a leather necklace with a Rip Curl logo. Half his shirt hung out of his pants and his odd laces were undone. Compared to the rest of them, Caleb was a slob.

'Sweet,' he said, shaking my hand hard. It felt like my fingers were breaking. 'Hey guys, this is Avalon,' he shouted over my shoulder. I turned and smiled, a few of them smiled back and one girl waved. But some of them didn't even look at me. Immediately, I felt embarrassed and insignificant.

'Don't worry about that lot,' he said, pointing to a group of about six girls who hadn't looked my way. They were all pretty, with long straight hair and no fringes, their uniforms immaculately ironed and shoes that looked brand new. 'They're the stuck up snobs.' One of them heard and shot Caleb a murderous look.

'Piss off you surfer dickhead,' she spat.

Caleb was completely unfazed. 'See what I mean?' He pointed to another group. 'Those girls over there are all okay. Pretty quiet, but you should get to know them. And most of the guys are okay.' I was grateful he'd come to talk to me. He was a typical surfer with brown face and freckles. His washed-out blue eyes had red patches under them, his nose was peeling — rough pieces of brown skin stood up from newly exposed pink flesh — and his lips were chapped.

Just then the door opened and a young, pretty teacher walked in. Caleb slid off the desk. 'Gotta go,' he said. 'Talk to you later.' He moved to the back of the class. Ms McKenzie smiled at me straight away.

'Hi,' she said, and came over and looked at my timetable. 'Who's got English first up?'

I looked around the room as several people put their hands up. Unfortunately Caleb wasn't one of them. He shrugged his shoulders resignedly as I made eye contact with him.

'Alice, will you take Avalon to class?' I looked over at Alice, who smiled sweetly at Ms McKenzie. She was the one who'd told Caleb where to go.

'No worries Miss Mac.' The way she said it made it sound like *Miss Smack*. 'I'll help Avalon settle in.'

I looked at her appreciatively, but she'd already lowered her eyes and was whispering into another girl's ear.

The bell sounded and the room was instantly full of noise and movement, the scraping of chair legs, the rustle of paper and the whisper of synthetic bags brushing against cotton clothing as everyone headed for the door. They waved and smiled at Ms McKenzie who made comments to each of them as they left.

'Now Caleb, I see you're breaking dress standards again.' She sounded stern but I could hear the smile in her voice.

'Oh Miss,' he leaned against the table as if he was chatting her up, 'at least I've tied it back.' He picked up the ends of his ropey hair and waggled them at her.

‘Go on, get to class; you know Mr Truman will issue you with a bluey for those,’ she pointed to his shoes, one with a red lace, the other a blue.

‘They’re school colour,’ he insisted, turning his toes in and out.

‘Caleb!’ she said. ‘I don’t know why I bother with you, I’m always trying to get you out of trouble.’ She shook her head and rummaged through her leather briefcase.

‘Coz I’m one of your favourite students,’ he said, tucking his shirt in for her approval.

‘I wonder. Here,’ she flicked a small blue packet at him. He deftly caught it, snatching it out of the air like it was a flying insect.

‘Shoelaces!’ he said smiling at her. ‘Miss, you’re full of surprises!’

‘Yeah right, like we haven’t done this every year since Year Eight. Now don’t be late to class.’ She waved him out the door. Laughing to herself, she looked up and saw me still filling my bag. I was unsure what to do. Alice was busy talking to a friend and hadn’t looked my way. I felt like a spare.

‘Now Avalon, Alice will show you to your class — and Alice,’ she smiled at the girl who was now waiting impatiently for me with her arms crossed, ‘play nice.’

‘Of course Miss,’ Alice said. ‘Avalon’s in safe hands.’ She grabbed my elbow and led me to the door protectively, like a big sister would. Out in the hallway she dropped her hand. ‘We’d better hurry, we’ve got Smith and he has a cow if you turn up late to class.’

She walked quickly in front, her blonde hair swinging from side to side, glinting with golden highlights. She wore her uniform casually and well, confident she looked good. She reminded me of Lara from my old school, a girl who could get any guy in any year she wanted. I could never really see why guys liked her: aside from the fact she was pretty — and wore a C cup — she was a right bitch. Like Lara, Alice was very pretty, with perfect, clear skin and pale green eyes. I felt kind of drab and clumsy next to her.

As she pushed open the doors to take us outside I saw her eyes light up. I’m good at picking up tiny details. Dad reckons I’m like a detective. He says I could have a career in forensics, searching for missing clues. Her walk changed from brisk to casual and I noticed a very slight sway develop. She was walking slower now, towards two guys sitting under the leafy canopy of a plane tree. We were almost next to them when Alice suddenly started showing great interest in my timetable and explaining to me each teacher’s nasty habit.

‘Mr Cartwright has really foul breath and he’s a close talker, so you always want to keep the conversation short. Ms Taylor calls everyone folks, like she’s really cool, but she doesn’t know that we all think she’s an old fogey.’

Then suddenly, without any reason for it, Alice laughed loudly, swung her hair and lightly tapped my arm. ‘Oh don’t look so surprised, it’ll all be okay.’

I had no idea what she was talking about.

I opened my mouth to speak but the next second she’d

tripped, fallen onto the lawn and ended in a heap on one of the guy's bags. I stood there in shock, embarrassed for her. I expected her to be humiliated but she just laughed loudly.

'Oh God, help me up,' she offered her hand to me and flicked her hair again. I dropped my bag to take her hand but the two guys had already leapt to their feet and were fussing around her.

'Alice,' the tall one said, pulling her up, 'are you all right?' She stood up straight, bits of grass sticking to her skirt. Her eyes were about level with his chest.

'Sure, I'm fine, just a klutz ...'

But then he looked at me and cut her off. 'Hey Avalon, thought I'd see you around, but not so soon.'

'Hi Mitch,' I said, feeling the warmth rise in my cheeks. *Not again!*

'Jeremy,' he turned to the other boy, who was picking up Alice's bag, 'this is Avalon, the girl from this morning.'

Alice's eyes had narrowed when Mitch greeted me. Now her teeth were clenched, there was a pulsing in her jaw and she shot me a deadly look, similar to the one she'd given Caleb.

'You know each other *already?*' she accused me.

'We met in the front office,' Mitch said dismissively. 'What class have you got now Avalon? I can take you.'

'We're fine thanks.' Alice's words were sharp and she took a step closer, putting herself between Mitch and me. 'I'm showing her where to go.'

Mitch laughed. 'At least you're not telling her where to go. I know how much you like doing that!'

Alice looked majorly pissed off. 'We're late. See you at practice after school, yeah?'

He turned and looked her squarely in the eyes, giving her a Hollywood smile. Suddenly her face softened. 'Yeah,' he said. 'See you both later.'

I looked back to see him wave as we walked away.

Alice opened the doors to the English department and we walked into a central area off which classrooms radiated like spokes on a wheel. The grey concertina doors to each room were drawn shut, but I heard the low drone of teachers' voices as we passed by.

'That's our class there, but come with me.' She led the way across the back verandah to a small building detached from the rest, its door marked Female Students.

She pushed the door open to the smell of stale cigarette smoke mingled with the harshness of bleach. Resting her bag against the white basin she pulled out a packet of Winfield blue and a tiny cigarette lighter.

'We're late anyway,' she said through lips clenched around the yellow filter. In the silence I heard the tobacco sizzle as she sucked in a huge lungful. 'You keep near the door, in case anyone comes.' She nodded her head towards the door. I didn't want to be her lookout; none of the girls I'd hung out with smoked. If you got caught at my old school, you'd get suspended. How bad would that be? My parents would both drop dead if they were called to the principal's office. Alice offered me the cigarette. 'Want a drag?'

I shook my head. It stank and the room was filling up with smoke. I knew it was getting in my hair. I just wanted to go to class, not be stuck in the girls' loo with Alice, who was turning out to be unpredictable.

'Mitch is really hot,' she said, looking at me stonily. I watched the way her lips narrowed as she sucked on the cigarette. 'He split up with his girlfriend over the holidays, so now he's available.' She was watching herself in the mirror as she spoke. 'We hooked up at a party at Ranga's on New Year's Eve, but he's not ready to commit.'

She put her cigarette out in the basin, it hissed softly and then she flicked the butt into the toilet. She sprayed herself with deodorant and squirted a shot of toothpaste into her mouth. She used her tongue to coat her teeth with it, then swirled water in her mouth and spat it in the sink. 'But soon he will.'

She winked at me in the mirror as she put her things back in her bag. She was as obvious as a male dog marking territory, from her phoney act of being happy and laughing with me to her pretend fall. She was so transparent I felt embarrassed for her.

'I'm not interested in Mitch,' I said, though I had thought he was pretty hot. I really wanted to get to class. I knew this would make a bad impression. Mum and Dad harp on about lateness like it's a capital offence. Alice visibly stiffened and sneered at me.

'I'm not worried about *you*,' she said, like I was a cockroach that had just run over her shoe. 'I was just being

friendly.' She ground her heel on the cockroach and pushed past me to class.

All the students were sitting quietly, heads bowed over their workbooks, pens moving quickly over the lined pages as Alice pushed the door open.

'Sorry we're late,' she said to Mr Smith, a large, sweaty teacher with several strands combed over his shiny head. He was perched on the edge of his desk like Humpty Dumpty. 'I found the new girl wandering around lost, and brought her here to class.' She gave me one of her deadly sweet smiles. 'Isn't that right, Avalon?'

I didn't want to agree with her, and I certainly didn't want to start my first day by lying to my English teacher, but Alice had hidden dangers lurking beneath the surface of her pretty face. She was obviously the kind of girl you didn't want to piss off. Everybody had stopped working and was watching us.

'Yeah,' I mumbled guiltily.

'Okay,' Mr Smith said, 'seating arrangement's in alphabetical order, so that's you there Alice and you there.' He pointed to a vacant chair next to a girl with long brown hair, who was so skinny she looked like she'd snap in two. I was relieved not to be next to Alice for the next forty minutes. As I walked past Mr Smith his smile shrank from a half ellipse to a hyphen. His eyes narrowed slightly and I watched his nose twitch, sampling the air around him.

'Avalon,' he said really sternly. I felt myself blushing. 'I