

Riddle Gully Secrets

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FREMANTLE PRESS

CHAPTER ONE

She darted along the shadowy trail, adrenalin sparking through her limbs. Her eyes scanned for the snatches of white shirt flickering through the trees of the forest ahead; her nostrils twitched for shifting scents; her ears strained for every snap, every cry, every rustle, every ...

‘Let’s go back now!’

The voice was like a frypan clanging on the head of Pollo di Nozi, Youth Reporter for the *Coast* newspaper. She leapt around to face its owner.

‘You can’t be serious, Will!’ Pollo hissed. ‘We’re chasing the first case we’ve had in weeks and you want to go back?’

‘The first case *you’ve* had in weeks,’ said Will.

‘I thought you wanted to help.’

‘All I know is it’s stinking hot and there are bull

ants everywhere and you won't let me wear these.' Will pointed at the rubber thongs sprouting from his hip pockets. 'I do want to help but – Ouch!' He slapped a fat red ant off his foot.

'You were going to give us away in those things! Flap-flap, flap-flap! Why aren't you wearing runners?'

'Hang on!' said Will. 'One minute we're washing windows in the main street of town. Next thing we're tailing someone on Diamond Jack's Trail! How did I know to wear runners?'

'I've told you a million times, Will Hopkins – a good investigator is always ready for action!'

'You're the investigator, not me,' muttered Will.

Pollo squinted through the haze of dust motes and tiny bugs, the sun bouncing off the eucalypt leaves. The flashes of white were getting harder to spot.

'Okay,' she whispered, 'put your thongs back on. But for goodness' sake, try to be quiet! Ash Swift's in some kind of trouble. We don't want to spook her into running away!'

CHAPTER TWO

It had been Will's idea, three hours earlier, to wash windows and earn a bit of cash. Somehow he'd got through the pocket money meant to last to the end of January. Mr Squeaky the window cleaner was holidaying at the coast – and Will saw an opening.

Their first stop was the Riddle Gully Second-Hand Emporium where the owner, Sherri, was an old friend of Pollo and her family. It was only when Will broke the second item in the window that Sherri seemed to get tetchy.

She waved them out the door with the dustpan brush. 'Okay, here's five bucks each. It's time you skedaddled. I've got a mountain of work to do. Thanks for all your help!'

'But we're only half-finished,' said Will.

'Really?' Sherri looked along the glass shopfront

with its smears and swirls. 'Looks great to me!' She shut the shop door firmly, its bell tinkling.

'I reckon Sherri wanted to get rid of us,' said Will, flopping down on a low wall where the Rotary Gardens met the footpath.

'She was worried there'd be nothing left to sell if we stayed,' said Pollo, sitting beside him. 'Put it this way, I think Mr Squeaky's business is safe.' She swatted a fly. 'Anyway, I should be out finding news stories, not washing windows.'

'But it's summer holidays!' said Will.

'Not for much longer. My first column of the year is due next week. My editor emailed me yesterday just in case I'd forgotten. Next week, Will! And I've got zip! Since New Year there's been an outbreak of goodwill and happiness.' She pointed to a large black sedan parked in the shade nearby. 'Even Mayor Bullock's been behaving himself.'

'Just 'cos nothing *bad* has happened,' said Will, 'doesn't mean nothing *newsworthy* has happened. What about the home you and your dad found for those ducklings? There's such a thing as good news, right?'

'Good news is strictly a last resort.'

'Maybe you could write about Shorn Connery and Ear wrecking your back fence and having to be sent off

to your cousin's farm while your dad fixes it. You could turn it into some kind of "pets and the funny stuff they do" story.'

'Sheep push down fences all the time,' said Pollo. 'It's not enough.' She tossed a woodchip from the garden high in the air and batted it with her palm. It hit Mayor Bullock's car with a soft thud.

'There's a thought!' said Will. He slid off the wall and picked up an old ballpoint pen from the dirt. He pulled out the inner tube and turned to Pollo, a glint in his eye. 'Got any paper?'

Pollo drew her notepad from under her T-shirt where it hung with her pencil on a leather thong. She ripped off a page. 'Here you go. I sure don't need it to take notes on any news.'

Will began tearing the paper into pieces and popping them into his mouth.

'What are you doing?' said Pollo.

Will, his cheeks puffed out, grinned. He waved for more paper ... and then more. After serious mashing he took the gooey greyish-white glob from his mouth and divided it into twelve greyish-white gobettes. These he rolled into balls and lined up on the wall.

He fed one into the barrel of the empty pen, narrowed his eyes and brought the loaded pen to his

lips. ‘Rear-view mirror,’ he said. He blew hard and fast. *Thew!* The paper dob hit the mayor’s car window, where it clung like a bird dropping.

Pollo swung around to see if anyone had noticed. But the few people on the street all had their heads lowered against the sun, barely looking beyond their feet.

‘Here, give me a go!’ She grabbed the pen barrel, loaded it and took aim. *Thew!* Her spit-ball hit the back passenger door.

They giggled. Will’s next one hit the front wheel, then Pollo scored the rear-view mirror at last. Soon they weren’t aiming at any part of the mayor’s sedan in particular. They were ripping out the pages of Pollo’s notebook and chewing them into gobs as fast as they could muster spit.

Will was taking aim for the twentieth time when Pollo grabbed his arm and pulled it down. She pointed to the Federal Hotel across the street. Three people were shaking hands on the top step, the familiar flaxen toupée of one of them gleaming.

Mayor Bullock! Pollo squinted. His companions, Pollo guessed, were both in their late twenties. The man was as broad as Mayor Bullock but far more muscly. His watch looked big enough to direct a NASA

space probe. The woman was elegantly dressed, a floaty scarf at her throat, but when she yawned she didn’t bother covering her mouth.

The mayor’s friends went back inside. Mayor Bullock clapped his hands, then danced sideways down the steps, splaying his arms as though in a Las Vegas show. He sauntered jauntily towards his car.

Will moved to scarper, but Pollo clamped a hand on his leg. ‘Don’t move! If we run we’ll look guilty!’

‘We *are* guilty!’ said Will.

‘Mayor Bullock doesn’t know that! Hold your nerve! Trust me!’

Will thought of the scrapes that trusting Pollo had got him into. But the mayor was approaching – it was too late to run now. He shoved the pen under his thigh and tried to think non-guilty thoughts. *Pancakes ... peanuts ... prison ... No! Start again!*

Mayor Bullock was closing in. The spit-ball dappled vehicle beeped twice and amber lights flashed as from ten paces away he unlocked it.

‘Whatever you do, don’t look at the spit-balls!’ Pollo hissed.

Mayor Bullock spotted Will and Pollo and saluted. He was as cheery as Pollo had ever seen him.

‘Hail, young citizens of Riddle Gully!’ he called.

‘What brings you onto the streets? Not up to any shenanigans, I hope?’ He fished a humbug lolly from his pocket, tossed it in the air and caught it in his mouth like a hungry carp. He peered at them expectantly, sliding the sweet from cheek to cheek.

Pollo pointed to their buckets on the footpath. ‘We’ve been washing windows. What about you, Your Worshipfulness? You don’t have any news, do you? Something to do with those people you were with just now, maybe? My column’s starting up again soon and you’re always so ... so ... newsworthy!’

‘Newsworthiness is both a privilege and a burden of leadership,’ sighed Mayor Bullock. He nodded towards the edge of town. ‘I trust you’ll be reporting on the Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre – the establishment named for my noteworthy ancestor. It’s coming along nicely. I must say, without me, this region’s bushranger heritage would dwindle and die. ’Tis I who keeps the flame of history burning bright.’

And lines his pockets along the way, thought Pollo. ‘Those people at the Federal Hotel,’ she persisted, ‘– they looked like the sort of ...’ Pollo chose her words carefully, ‘... *influential* types who make things happen, like you.’

Will shifted on the wall uneasily, trying to keep his

eyes from flicking to the polka-dotted car panels the mayor couldn’t see. Mayor Bullock leaned on the roof of his vehicle. Will prayed the mayor’s gaze would stop at the edge.

‘They make things happen, alright,’ chuckled the mayor. ‘You don’t know the half of it, Miss di Nozi.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Pollo, picking up what remained of her notepad. ‘That sounds a bit suspicious to me.’

Will expanded his prayer to include his sudden disappearance.

Mayor Bullock pursed his lips. ‘Let’s just say that great riches lie in what history overlooks. You can write *that* down, young lady!’ He popped another humbug into his mouth and slurped. ‘I might make it my family motto!’

The mayor suddenly turned his gaze to Will. ‘You’re Sergeant Butt’s boy, am I correct?’

‘I’m his stepson,’ said Will.

‘Quite,’ said the mayor. ‘Well, Sergeant Butt’s stepson, do me a favour and exterminate those wretched snails there beside you.’ He nodded at the wall. ‘They’ll be eating my cherry tomatoes by the end of the day.’

Will looked down. Two spit-balls were sitting on

the wall in full view. A small white snail had ventured from the garden behind and was sallying forth towards them.

‘Those snails remind me,’ the mayor went on, ‘of the spit-balls I whipped up as a youngster. Good old-fashioned fun they were – a pastime for which the youth of today lacks the imagination, your brains all fried by computer games, as they are.’ He chuckled. ‘My spit-ball victims always squealed, especially at the old people’s home, but there was no harm done.’

As Will gathered up the snail and spit-balls between his palms, Mayor Bullock winked at him. ‘Females don’t have the stomach for spitballs, lad, but you really ought to have a go some day.’ He tapped the side of his nose. ‘Don’t tell your stepfather who put you up to it, mind!’

Will opened his mouth but no words came.

Mayor Bullock’s smile slipped from his face, his goodwill exhausted from extravagant use. He opened his car door. ‘Pray, continue to languor in the sunshine while the glow of youth still alights upon you. You’ll have arthritis and debts up to your neck soon enough.’ He slid into the driver’s seat, revved the engine and rumbled off down the street.

CHAPTER THREE

Will hurried to a bin outside Sherri’s shop and tossed the pen barrel into it. ‘I’m not waiting around for Mayor Bullock to notice his car’s new paint job!’ he squawked. ‘Let’s go! Let’s get out of here!’ He began waving both arms at Pollo like he was mustering cows.

Just then the shop door opened and a thin figure, head down, rushed out, copping Will’s arm fair in the face. The young customer reeled and fell to the kerb, a canvas shopping bag skidding across the ground. Will bent to retrieve it as his victim lurched to get up. They clunked heads and both sprawled backwards onto the ground.

Will sat up, rubbing his forehead. ‘Heck, sorry! I didn’t see you coming.’ He looked at the boy. Something about him didn’t add up. He was wearing a school uniform, for starters – and school was still a

week off. His polo shirt and grey shorts looked clean, but his long hair was like a bird's nest, and his legs and arms were a mess of scratches.

The kid said nothing, just rubbed his jaw and stretched his neck, moving his head in slow circles.

Pollo picked up his bag and a book that had spilled from it – *World's 100 Most Hilarious One-liners*. She watched him get to his feet and brush off his clothes, working his way over them like they were the best he'd ever owned. He looked vaguely familiar.

'You okay?' Pollo stepped closer and handed him his things. She sniffed the air. 'Phew, what's that smell?'

The boy's eyes flickered like a wild animal's. Suddenly he darted away, leapt onto the wall they'd been sitting on and raced into the park. He'd disappeared by the time Will got to his feet.

A terrible thought hit Pollo. She ran to Sherri's shop and flung back the door. 'Sherri! Are you okay?'

Sherri, sitting behind her computer screen, jerked her head back, her pen clattering to the floor. Bubl , her budgerigar, skittered atop a filing cabinet and flapped onto a lampshade. Sherri blinked at Pollo beneath her pile of bright crimson hair, her earrings swaying. She slipped a crossword under her computer. 'Pollo? What on earth ...?'

'Have you called the police?' Pollo puffed.

Sherri retrieved the pen and eyed the bird. 'Do you know what she's on about, Bubl ?'

'Didn't you just get robbed?' said Pollo. 'That kid just now ...'

'Him?' Sherri laughed. 'Not likely!' She pointed to a chair on top of which were some neatly stacked clothes. 'Those old school uniforms over there – I had them ready to take to the charity shop in Maloola. He wanted to buy some shorts and a polo top and wouldn't hear of me giving them to him. Said he was no charity case. So I charged him fifty cents and he counted out his money to the last five-cent coin. He seemed tickled pink with himself.'

'Then why did he rush out like his pants were on fire?' said Pollo.

Sherri winced. 'That might have been my fault. He went out the back to change into his new things and when he returned I said he was welcome to use the wash basin out there. To be frank, he was a bit on the nose. I thought I was being subtle, but he took off like a greyhound, poor kid.'

'I thought it was the rubbish bin that smelled,' said Pollo.

'Any idea who he was?' asked Sherri. 'It's unusual

for a young person to buy a school uniform.'

'Let alone wear it when they don't have to,' Will added.

'I think he's in the year below us at school,' said Pollo. 'Aa-ha! I've got it! No ... hang on ... the person I'm thinking of is a girl.'

'It *could* have been a girl,' said Will. 'The long hair and everything. Just not a very girly-girl, if you know what I mean.'

'I suppose I was largely going on the clothes he picked out in thinking he was a boy,' said Sherri. 'His hair was certainly longer than usual.'

'But the person I'm thinking of is all flowery and colourful,' said Pollo. 'Never wears all her school uniform at once. And I've *never* seen her in shorts, let alone school shorts.'

Sherri's eyebrows lifted. 'You should have seen what this kid was wearing when he – or is it she? – came into the shop! Baggy, bright-patterned long pants and a grubby orange T-shirt. Like a young hippy. I thought I was back in the City Theatre Cooperative.'

Pollo scrunched up her eyes and put the clothes Sherri described onto the figure she'd seen on the footpath. They fitted nicely. 'Come to think of it, it probably *was* Ash Swift.'

'That's young Ash?' said Sherri. 'Her mum Ellie's in the repertory club with me. She joined soon after they moved here. She's great to have around – just quietly organises everything backstage. No fuss.'

'I don't think I know Ellie,' said Pollo.

'She works at the Town Council. She and Ash sound like they're from different universes, if you ask me. Ash is a free spirit, to use Ellie's words. She likes to go bush every now and again, whereas Ellie likes things done properly. Ash worries Ellie awfully, but poor Ellie's learned they're both happier in the long run if she lets Ash have her freedom. Ash is off stargazing at the moment, I believe.'

'I don't know Ash but I've met Ellie,' said Will. 'She came round to our place when they were new in town. HB had to organise a search for Ash. They found her camping at the rubbish tip, watching the lunar eclipse.'

'Ellie mentioned that little episode,' said Sherri. 'The tip? Why you'd want to watch the moon from there beats me.'

'No street lights,' said Will. 'And there are some pretty comfy old couches to stretch out on – if you don't mind a spring jabbing you every now and again ... and spiders.'

'Yurk!' said Sherri. 'My backyard's just fine, thank you.'

Pollo pulled out her notepad and pencil. 'Did Ash buy anything else?'

'There was a joke book,' said Sherri.

'Aah,' said Pollo. '*World's 100 Most Hilarious One-liners.*'

'That's the one.' Sherri leaned back in her chair. 'I must say, this Ash isn't what I'd expected. She seemed skittish like a kitten, whereas the daughter Ellie told me about is dreamy and a bit of a loner – not the joke book type.'

Pollo jotted something in her notepad and underlined it twice.

Will grinned. 'Maybe there's a brainwasher on the loose!'

'Brainwashing ...' Pollo tapped her pencil on her chin. 'You know, I'm beginning to think there's some snooping to be done. This could be just what I need for my news column!' She grabbed Will's arm. 'Come on, let's get out of here!'

'Not so fast!' said Sherri. 'What about tomorrow night? Will, are you coming?'

Will's eyes darted around the room looking for clues. 'Umm ...'

'You mean you've forgotten the Repertory Club's production of *Les Misérables*?' Sherri grinned.

'Oh, that,' said Will. 'Angela and HB are making me ... err ... I mean, I'm going with them.'

'You never know, you might enjoy it. And there's supper afterwards. Your dad's still coming, eh, Pollo?'

'Yeah, course. Oh, and sorry about the mix-up with the tickets.'

'Nonsense. Too eager, that's me! We'll find someone to take the spares.'

'Dad said he's looking forward to hearing you really belt it out.'

Sherri blushed. 'Well, let's just hope a horse doesn't fall in a ditch or anything. I'd hate him to miss the show.'

'He won't,' said Pollo. 'By the way, what's it been like rehearsing with Mayor Bullock? If you ask me, His Wondressness has been a bit odd lately.'

'To tell the truth,' said Sherri, 'he's been astonishingly chirpy.'

'Exactly! It's disturbing.'

'I'm sure it will pass,' said Sherri. 'I'm in his good books because I donated an old map to his Tourist Centre museum ... and of course he's loving playing the lead role of Jean Valjean.' A devilish smile tweaked the corners of Sherri's mouth.

'And?' said Pollo.

Sherri chuckled. 'Well, he claims that Valjean

would have had a similar hairdo to Elvis Presley! He's taken to wearing an Elvis wig to rehearsal instead of his usual toupée. He can't pass by a mirror without stopping.'

'He probably wears it round the house!' said Will.

'If only I could get a picture of *that* for my column!' said Pollo. Which reminds me ...' She flipped shut her notepad and began edging away. 'Will and I need to go see what Ash Swift's up to.'

Pollo called to Sherri, her hand on the doorknob. 'I'm still helping you set up at the Town Hall tomorrow at five?'

'Oh, yes please! It's always a bigger job than I expect.'

'I'll come too,' said Will. 'It'll help make up for the stuff I broke washing your windows.'

Sherri smiled. 'You've got a deal!'

CHAPTER FOUR

Pollo was squatting, head down, tracing her hand over the footprints that Ash Swift had left in the garden bed at the edge of the Rotary Gardens.

'See anything?' said Will.

'From the angle of the toe indentations,' she announced, 'we can conclude that she came from the direction of the footpath.'

'Yeah, well, we kinda saw that,' said Will.

'And observe the way the great toe print is elongated? This tells us that –'

'Pollo?' Will interrupted.

Pollo cranked her head around to frown at Will. 'This requires total concentration, Will!' She turned back to the footprint. 'It tells us that she was running –'

'Pollo, I think you should look up.'

'– in a north-easterly direction,' Pollo persisted. She

sprang to her feet and began striding off, beckoning Will to follow.

‘Pollo!’ Will hissed. ‘She’s over there!’

‘Who?’ said Pollo.

‘Ash Swift!’

Will pointed at a rest spot fifty metres away. There were a seat and fountain from Victorian times, built in honour of some old hero, with a pretty garden bed and rosemary hedge surrounding them. Ash was at the fountain, stretching her new polo top away from her body, washing herself with water cupped in her hand.

‘Yes, well, she obviously circled around to get there,’ muttered Pollo.

They hovered behind a tree. Ash ran wet fingers through her shaggy mop, combing it as flat as she could. She then crossed to the hedge, broke off a piece of rosemary and rolled it between her palms. She tucked her hands one at a time under her shirt and rubbed her armpits vigorously.

‘Holy moly!’ said Will. ‘My mum just uses deodorant.’

Pollo frowned. ‘Why would she wash at a fountain when she has a perfectly good home to go to?’

‘And a mum who’s worried about her.’

Suddenly Ash picked up her bag and headed back

to the street. As she walked along, Will and Pollo darted from one hiding spot to another, following. A few minutes later she was scampering up the steps of the Community Library.

‘The library?’ groaned Will from behind a postbox. ‘Of all the places she could lead us! Do we have to go in? It’s school holidays!’

‘They’ve got comics in there,’ said Pollo. ‘Besides, it’s air-conditioned.’ She trotted up the steps, Will trudging behind.

They spotted Ash at a desk in the far back corner of the Local History section. After a moment, she ducked behind a returns trolley. She emerged holding a computer tablet, an iPad by the look of it. Her fingers working fast, she began pressing buttons and swiping the screen, staring intently.

‘I didn’t think Ash Swift would know iPads even existed,’ whispered Pollo. ‘Looks like she’s been charging it.’

‘Weird that she’s charging it here,’ said Will. ‘Do you reckon she’s run away from home?’

‘A runaway wouldn’t go shopping and visit the library in their home town,’ murmured Pollo. ‘None of it adds up.’

‘Do you think we should call someone?’

‘It’s not like she’s doing anything illegal,’ said Pollo, ‘and she’s not in actual danger yet, as far as I can tell. She’s just acting differently. Would you like it if Angela and HB came chasing after you just because you were acting differently?’

‘I guess not,’ said Will.

‘Let’s just watch her a while longer and see where she leads us.’

But after ten minutes of studying Ash on her iPad, even Pollo had had enough. They were about to abandon surveillance when Ash abruptly rose and tucked the tablet into her bag. The hairs on the back of Pollo’s neck prickled.

Pollo and Will watched as Ash headed for the exit. She paused to study a large photo taken the previous summer from the Town Hall roof to mark Riddle Gully’s sesquicentenary – before Will and his mum Angela had come there to live with HB. All the townspeople were arranged in the numerals one, five and zero. Pollo and her dad were on the zero’s bottom curve. Ash was running her fingertips over the upturned faces when a librarian approached. She withdrew her hand like the photo had nipped her and hurried away.

In the late afternoon, Ash walked along the main

street of town with quick steps, head down and skittish as though wary of something. Yet from time to time she stopped and gazed around as though seeing everything for the first time.

Twenty minutes later, Pollo and Will were still following Ash but the main street of Riddle Gully was far behind. Instead, the tall dim forest of Diamond Jack’s Trail leaned in, twisted branches arching over the hiking track that led to the gorge and the old abandoned railway bridge. In the stillness of the forest, the flip-flap of Will’s thongs sounded with each step like a rifle being cocked and pointed at them.