

**There were six in the bed and
the little one said
'Roll over, roll over'
So they all rolled over and one fell out'**

PROLOGUE

A LIGHT DRIZZLE falls upon a car. It rests on its side on the gravel edge of the road. The road is on the outskirts of town — just past Mansion Acres, near The Woods — where the dips and curves of the landscape plunge it into deep shadow. Residents have complained about the road. Instead of following the natural curve of the dense forest, they want it straightened, but the plans are stuck in Council at the moment.

It is a small car. A light-coloured car. Hard to determine exactly what colour it is in the grey of the pre-dawn — maybe white or silver or pale blue. All is quiet, save for the ticking of the cooling engine and the bark of a neighbourhood dog.

Soon this will change.

A car travelling down the road, driven by an early morning shift-worker, will round the bend, its headlights sweeping the scene. The driver will call the police using his mobile phone. He will hesitate, then approach the car, noting a hand protruding from the emptiness of the back seat window that is now facing the sky. For a moment he may think that the hand waves at him and he will falter in his approach, but it is only his imagination and the grey light playing tricks.

Finally he will reach the car, but it is too hard to see inside. He has a torch in his car boot, but he knows the batteries are dead.

‘Hello?’ he will say.

There may be a groan from within, or it may be just the sound of the car settling into position. He will wonder what to do. What to do? His brain will quickly flick through the possibilities, but then get stuck on a replay from a Hollywood scene — *Die Hard* perhaps or a *James Bond* classic — where a crashed car suddenly explodes into flames. He will step back and consider the ramifications of moving people out of the car. The decision will be taken out of his hands as the morning stillness is interrupted by the arrival of more people. People in charge. The flashing lights of the ambulance mingle with police car lights, reflecting off the wet bitumen.

The shift-worker will have to tell his story about finding the car — once, then twice — before he abruptly sits down on the road, his legs giving way with shock. Someone will

cover him with a blanket. He will not go to work today.

Later there will be more questions for other people.

But the facts are simple. A recipe for disaster.

One car.

Five seatbelts.

Six people.

A late night party.

A generous splash of alcohol.

A sprinkle of bad weather.

Two P-plate signs.

But for now, all is quiet. Less than a minute after the car spun on the roadside gravel, clipped a tree, rolled, then landed on its side, the rain drizzles down and a neighbourhood dog barks. Then, inside the overturned car, a mobile phone breaks into a musical ringtone. It is someone checking up on a daughter or a son or a friend.

But no one will answer it.

YEAR 11 YEAR BOOK

Cooper, Tom

Nickname: Coops, Cooper, Hoops

Achievements: Winner, Cross Country Regionals, Year 8

School positions: Student Rep Year 7, first in line at canteen

Goal: To be rich

School highlights so far: Making some good friends — you know who you are!

Most embarrassing moment: Walking into the girls' toilets on my first day of school

Year 12 plans: Not to stress out too much

Cashin, Finn

Nickname: Fish

Achievements: Firsts footy team

School positions: None

Goal: Sports commentator

School highlights so far: Year 11 footy trip

Most embarrassing moment: Dunno

Year 12 plans: Looking forward to end of year footy trip

Harris, Poppy

Nickname: None

Achievements: Learned how to read the timetable by Year 8

School positions: Always last to class

Goal: To be happy

School highlights so far: Meeting my BFFL, Sair

Most embarrassing moment: There have just been so many. Oh, wait, going up to the stage in assembly hall to receive someone else's award (Sorry Matty)

Year 12 plans: I'm not sure, but it's going to be really fabulous

Nicolson, Jacob

Nickname: Nico

Achievements: Vice-captain Year 10 Firsts footy team, vice-captain Senior footy team

School positions: I like hanging around the footy ground the best

Goal: To make it through at least one footy season without a blood nose

School highlights so far: Holidays

Most embarrassing moment: When I kicked a goal for the opposition. I'd just been knocked down five minutes before that, so maybe I had a concussion. That's my excuse, anyway

Year 12 plans: Can't wait to get a car

Lum, Sarah

Nickname: Sair

Achievements: Class Dux, Year 7 to Year 11, captain of interschool winning debate team Year 10 and Year 11

School positions: Prefect, Student Rep Year 10 and 12

Goal: To make a difference in the world

School highlights so far: Being chosen as captain for interschool debate team. (Oh, and meeting my best friend, Poppy)

Most embarrassing moment: I'd rather not say

Year 12 plans: Making sure it's my best year at school ever

Sloan, Virginia

Nickname: Just Virginia, thank you

Achievements: Regional finalist, Truth is Stranger Than Fiction Competition, member of runners-up group for Rock Eisteddfod Year 9

School positions: Choreographer, cheerleading team, Year 11

Goal: To be famous

School highlights so far: Lead in school musical, Year 10

Most embarrassing moment: Having to make a speech at the Year 11 awards and forgetting the teachers' names

Year 12 plans: Lots of dancing, lots of parties, bring it on!

Here we go 'round the
 Mulberry bush
 the Mulberry bush
 the Mulberry bush
 Here we go 'round
 the Mulberry bush
 early in the morning

1 SARAH

THAT SUMMER, OUR last summer of school holidays, was the best summer of my life. The long, drawn-out days had a reassuring sameness to them, a languid summer feeling that stopped people from rushing about. The morning air that crept through my open window was already warm on my skin when I woke. By mid-morning the light was so clear and bright that it hurt my eyes as it bounced off the flat surfaces of the 'burbs. Afternoons were hot and breathless, though sometimes a limp northerly would puff even hotter air about, making it hard to breathe and driving people inside for relief.

News and current affair shows — brought to you by the latest air conditioner — featured global warming experts and bankrupt farmers. Daylight stretched into long evenings and the streets were alive with the drone of mowers, kids laughing and the smell of sacrificial meat sizzling on the barbecue grill.

So — on the surface — just another summer.

But underneath the usual summer rhythm was something else. I know we all felt it — everyone heading into senior year. Time was marching on and taking us to a place that we could only imagine. That summer we were invincible. Some of us had holiday jobs, but nights were for partying, or small gatherings where we talked about everything and nothing, where we drank, ate rubbish and did things because they felt good. Some of us drove around the streets with L-plates stuck to car windscreens, hostage parents in passenger seats, their feet tapping urgently on non-existent brakes. A few cars wore their P-plates like a badge of honour, windows rolled down, music blaring.

The gossip that summer centred on Virginia Sloan and Finn Cashin, the golden couple of Silver Valley High, whose relationship had combusted in a dramatic public blaze before Christmas. It was hard to fathom the effect this had on people. It was like the Earth had tilted slightly off its axis and the things that we took for granted suddenly seemed built on shifting sand. Not everyone was unhappy about the golden couple's break-up, though.

Plans were already under way for the end-of-year celebrations — Schoolies — where we would forget about homework and study and exams and just party on. My biggest problem would be getting my parents to let me go. I was sure they still saw me as that six-year-old girl who needed a night-light on in her bedroom. In the meantime, though, I worked in my family's cafe in my spare time, saving my money for Schoolies and a car.

If I wasn't working, that summer, or catching up with friends, I was going to summer school. My parents insisted I attend summer school in their quest for the perfect exam score. My cousin Michael had gone to summer school before his Year 12, but he'd used it as another way to socialise. I had no friends at summer school, but it was definitely a better option than babysitting my little brother, Jefri. Getting up early was a chore, but going to the uni for classes gave me a glimpse of what my life might soon be. University was my parents' dream, and I could see the appeal. The gated university on the edge of the city was surrounded by ancient trees and manicured lawns. The grey stone buildings with their crumbling facades stood firm with gentle dignity.

Most days after class my best friend Poppy would meet me at the uni cafe — on reduced service for summer break — and we'd walk into the city hub. Sometimes we'd go to the cinema, talking non-stop on the way, or check out boutique stores for fashions we couldn't afford, or drink coffee that kept us awake into the early hours of next day. We owned

those afternoons; Poppy in her floaty gypsy outfits, her hands a flash of colour and movement as she talked, the jingle of her bracelets a musical accompaniment. Then there was me, an insipid-looking mouse, who could outtalk even Poppy, although I can't remember now how we found so much to say. Sometimes we'd see Virginia Sloan on the train home and we'd wave, or peel off our hot seats for a chat, even though she would barely speak to us at school.

That summer, Virginia Sloan had been offered a role in a semi-professional production of *Guys and Dolls*. Everyone knew about the offer, it was all over Facebook, and no one was surprised. Virginia was a serious dancer and at one point there had been talk of her aiming for the national ballet company. But now it looked like her plans had changed. Whenever I saw Virginia she was just coming or going to rehearsals or dance class or voice production — by herself. It took a while to get used to seeing Virginia not hanging off Finn Cashin's neck.

And Virginia Sloan wasn't the only person I kept bumping into that summer.

Tom Cooper was saving money in a secret hiding place in his bedroom. I knew this because he'd told me about it when I'd dropped by the supermarket one day. Cooper — no one called him Tom — was mopping the floor and I made a remark about Cinderella or something. I hadn't meant to say anything, but he'd looked up when I tried to slip past him and he fixed me with a stare. That's when I babbled

something stupid and he told me about the hiding of the money so his parents wouldn't find out. I actually thought it was a bad idea — what if someone stole it — but I didn't say anything to him.

Cooper and Poppy had been an item for three seconds in Year 8, but I didn't know him that well. Some girls at school thought he was sweet, but I had always found him a little creepy. I saw him a few times after our talk in the supermarket, usually when Poppy and I were on the train, and once I remarked that it was strange how Cooper seemed to be around all the time. Poppy just jangled her bracelets, hands moving, as she explained that Cooper was a tortured soul — with a green aura, which pointed to great intelligence — who needed my understanding, not my ridicule or suspicion.

Finn Cashin — love of my life — jogged that summer. I know that because he flew past my house just on dusk every day. He usually wore a pair of incredibly baggy shorts that flapped about his thighs, and a singlet, which had a large tear on the left shoulder. I wondered if he ever washed those clothes, but mostly I wondered how it would feel to have that toned, sweaty body pressed up against mine. Sometimes his friend, Jacob Nicolson, jogged alongside him. I tried to be home at that time of day, even though I never talked to either jogger. Just to see Finn loping past made my life hum like the cicadas outside my bedroom window.

And Jacob Nicolson — Nico to his friends, school football

star and solid wingman for Finn — didn't know it but he was about to fall in love with a girl he barely knew. That girl was my best friend — Poppy.

Poppy Harris was possibly the most misunderstood, misquoted and misguided person I knew. She was convinced that she had a Power that gave her insight into the future and people's true emotions. A lot of people at school made fun of Poppy, but many more would seek her out. Boyfriend trouble. Teacher trouble. Home life or work trouble. And they would ask her advice about anything from when to book their car licence test to what questions were going to be on the end-of-year exams. When we were younger I used to play along with Poppy's Power talk, but as we got older I ignored it and she respected that, although sometimes she couldn't help but tell me something if she thought it would help me.

Still, even Poppy didn't see it coming. The drama that was to unfold and become just another sound bite on the radio, a grab on the TV news, another headline in the daily newspaper, another breathless Tweet, another misspelled text, just one more Facebook memorial site.

So that was our last summer of school holidays. And it was perfect, until the nearly end. Which was good, because after what happened later, the memories from that summer were something to hold onto.

This is the story about how a car with six seniors rolled on the night of the Year 12 Formal after-party.

Although, it's not just my story. And it doesn't start on the night of the accident. It starts six months before the accident, on the second-last day of summer holidays.

Poppy believed in fate. I guess it was fate that threw the six of us together, if you believe in that sort of thing. Or destiny.

Fate or destiny — is there a difference?

**Sugar and spice
and everything nice
That's what little girls
are made of**

2 SARAH

MY STORY STARTS on one of the hottest days of that summer. It was what the weatherman might call a 'sultry' day, with a tropical kind of heat where the air was heavy with moisture and the sky was covered in dense clouds.

I hadn't planned to go to The Woods that day. There were only two days to the start of school and Mum wanted to take me shopping for a new school dress at The Mall. But on the morning of the proposed shopping trip Virginia invited Poppy and me around for a swim in her salt pool. Just the thought of shopping made me feel lethargic, so the