

A Call from the Dark

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How to Get Ready for Work in Half an Hour

I've never been very good at getting up early on Saturday mornings. I'm usually wasted after frying my brain all week at school and Dad never stirs unless he's working, so there's not much incentive. I used to drag myself up, get a bowl of cereal and hop back into bed, watch music videos and then go back to sleep for a couple of hours. Those awesome mornings have long gone.

I wish I hadn't taken them for granted, cause who knows if I'll ever get to sleep in again? Things have changed. I have to get up for work now, and since I walked to work I had to leave way too early. That didn't mean I get up when I should though. I always leave it as late as possible. So, on the weekend that my life took a serious plunge down the toilet, I woke up at nine after forgetting to set my alarm, leaving me only half an hour to get ready.

Unlike what I was about to go through, this was something I could handle easily.

First, I made sure I had the fastest shower possible. That's difficult. I love long, hot showers, washing my blonde hair slowly and rhythmically, just letting the steam clear my head and the soap wash all over me. It's probably the most peaceful part of the day.

Then, standing at the kitchen counter, I ate my cereal as fast as I could. I rarely eat anything else. That's probably why I'm as skinny as my dad. Sometimes I have a glass of orange drink (not orange juice, it's way too expensive), but most of the time I just wolf down the cereal and slurp the milk from the bowl.

I quickly stuck on the same clothes I'd had on the night before. I've got pretty simple tastes – jeans, white T-shirt, suede ankle boots. I wear the same thing almost every weekend. Half the time the T-shirt has fallen off the chair in my room and is all creased, but that's OK. Customers never seem to notice.

I never wear much make-up, so that's not a big problem either. I put on some foundation to cover a few annoying zits and some eye shadow, but I kept it to a minimum.

My hair is not even shoulder length and is dead straight, so I put it in a hair band and a couple of clips and was ready to go.

This took less than half an hour. Walking to work took longer. But at least I'd be on time. In fact, I'd probably be there before Crass and I'd have to wait until he turned up fifteen minutes late looking like a human hangover.

I like walking to work when the weather's nice. Not too hot, not too windy, and definitely no rain. If it rained, I had to wake Dad up, and getting Dad up nowadays was not an easy job.

I walked through Jubilee Park. Only a couple of people walking their dogs and me. The dogs were all excited, straining at their leashes or running maniacally after tennis balls. Dogs are always so happy. Every time I see a dog I wonder why I don't have one. In fact we don't have any pets at all. They've all gone and died, including a couple of cats, a goldfish and a white rabbit called Snow that Mum and Dad bought me for my ninth birthday that lasted about two weeks before it escaped and feasted on snail bait next door. Dad found it stiff as cardboard in the neighbour's rose garden. We buried Snow in the backyard and even now I don't like stepping on her grave near the lemon tree. Somehow I think it's bad luck.

I couldn't handle a pet, anyway. Who'd feed it? Who'd walk it? I do enough. But it'd be nice to have some company on a weeknight when I'm alone in the house. Although that's not so common anymore. Usually Dad's home, watching TV or swearing at the buzzing fridge that has been threatening to blow up for, like, the last two years.

I could hear kids playing cricket somewhere behind the bowls club as I made my way towards Main Street. Saturday is the big shopping day around here and the Rising Sun bakery was pretty full when I walked pass it. Men with the newspaper stuck under their arms were buying coffee and pastries and women loaded loaves of bread into the storage compartment of prams. One mum was trying to coax her son into shutting up by offering him a gingerbread man, but it didn't work. He went on crying and she came out the door with an exasperated look in her eyes. I heard her say, 'You can't have a

meringue worm this early in the morning Damien!’ and he shouted back, ‘I want a worm! I want a worm!’

I wondered what my Mum did when I was a snotty brat? She wouldn’t have put up with it. Primary school teachers are experts at getting kids to behave. I wouldn’t have got a gingerbread man as a bribe, that’s for sure.

My boots were beginning to hurt by the time I reached the store. They’re not great to walk up hill in. I reminded myself to charge my MP3 player so I could listen to some music after work for the walk home tomorrow. I finished early Sunday mornings and Dad had stopped picking me up once Daylight Savings had started. I like the peacefulness of the early morning, but I liked listening to music to unwind at the end of the shift.

The door to the store was opened when I reached it. Right on ten o’clock. Crass was on time for once.

‘Oh well’, I said to myself as I walked in, ‘another day, another dollar.’ That’s an expression I read in a book somewhere that stuck with me. It’s like the motto of the casual student worker who does the stuff nobody else wants to for half the pay. I guess there’s worse ways to spend a Saturday morning.

Boy, was I ever wrong.

A Strange Return

I pretty much started wishing I was back in bed as soon as Robert Keppler walked into the store. Anything would be better than having to put up with Robert Keppler. He's a seriously weird guy.

I'd had my suspicions when I first met him three months ago. The fifteen minutes he'd just spent taking me scene-by-gruesome-scene through a horror movie called *Night Falls* confirmed it.

He is really, really strange.

I still don't know why he felt the need to tell me everything about a dopey horror that I have absolutely no interest in at all. I'd rather talk about Mexican Walking Fish, and they totally creep me out. I felt like telling Robert to go and tell someone who cares. But I didn't. For some reason I just let him keep talking.

'*Night Falls* was kinda lame in parts, but generally awesome,' Robert said, his tongue flicking between his teeth and his eyes bulging like ice cream tubs. 'It's about this old woman, right? Her name's Matilda. She lives way back in the 1800s in a town named Night Falls. Pretty stupid name for a town, hey? But it *is* a horror movie, you know?'

I tried to smile while at the same time scan in a pile of DVDs. He didn't seem to get the hint that I wanted him to go...away...immediately.

'So this old woman used to pay the local kids for teeth they'd lost, sort of like the tooth fairy, yeah? But then these two kids mysteriously disappear, and the locals freak out and they think she's murdered the kids, so they hang her, right?'

As you do.

'Sounds pretty freaky,' I said, my eyes still on the DVDs I was returning.

I could smell his body sweat from the other side of the counter. It was a bitter, sour aroma, like the smell of my dad's work jumpers in summer. When I wash Dad's work clothes I feel the sweat cling to me for the rest of the day until the following morning's shower. Gross.

Robert's heavy, knee length black coat clung to him tight, like cling film. It was about two sizes too small. And what was with that coat anyway? It was almost summer and I was only wearing a T-shirt.

Everything Robert wore was, in fact, black. His tight jeans with the frayed seams, his faded *Korn* T-shirt and the scuffed Doc Martens with the flapping sole. The worst was his beard, a scraggly thing that didn't seem to know how to grow properly. Patches of it covered up rashes and pimples on his blotchy face. At least he wasn't wearing his hair out this time. It was tied back in a pony tail. If he let it loose, wisps of hair would plaster themselves to his forehead and neck like bits of loose cotton from his T-shirt.

'Pretty freaky?' he said, 'Hell yeah! She's standing in this kid's room! Wouldn't *you* freak if you pulled back your sheets and saw her standing by *your* bed?'

I looked at him and thought I wouldn't freak as much I was freaking out right now. He eventually left. As usual he didn't say thanks or bye, he just suddenly turned and left mid-sentence, mumbling to himself. He talks, but he never talks to you. He never looks you in the eye. It's weird. He definitely has social problems.

Crass laughed from where he was standing in the comedy aisle. I'm glad he found it funny. Robert gives me the creeps. I mean, I'm a fifteen-year-old girl. Horror movies scare me. Grown men who are obsessed with horror movies scare me even more.

I picked up the DVD cover. It had two large hands pressed against a red, burning sky, making it look as if someone was trying to escape from a stained glass bowl. There's no way I'd watch something like this. I'd be sticking with Ben Stiller and Drew Barrymore. At least they made me laugh.

'So, did ya have fun with Robert?' Crass asked as he walked towards the counter.

'Thanks for helping me out there,' I replied. 'I think he's totally strange and you just left me with him the entire time.'

Crass just laughed. 'You know he's rented almost three hundred movies over the past year? A load of them were horror movies.'

'Really? I didn't even know we had that many.'

‘Yeah, I looked at his rental history on the computer. I’m telling ya Stacey, that’s almost one every couple of friggin’ days!’

That made Robert the Video Saloon’s best customer by a mile.

Sighing, I opened the DVD cover of weirdo Rob’s movie to scan and return it. The wrong disc was inside. It was a plain TDK disc with the words: “NIGHT FALLS: MASTER COPY” scribbled in jerky, green marker pen.

‘Crass, look at this.’ I showed him the disc. ‘It’s a copy. The original disc is missing. I reckon Robert has burnt the DVD and returned the copy by mistake.’

‘Jeez, he’s an idiot.’

‘You reckon he’s been burning all the movies?’

Crass shrugged, picked up the disc and twirled it around his finger. ‘I’ll give him a call and ask him to return the original. God, what a total friggin’ loser.’

‘I bet he copies all those horror movies so he can watch them a hundred times each,’ I said. ‘He probably memorises the lines.’

Crass took the disc and put it in the top pocket of his shirt. ‘Hey, wouldn’t it be the worst if you were trapped in some old house with Robert?’

The thought made my skin crawl. ‘I’d totally freak.’

I placed the empty *Night Falls* cover to one side and gathered up the rest of the returned videos and DVDs. There weren’t as many as there used to be on a Saturday morning. The new Blockbuster store just out of town was slowly taking all our business since it opened last Christmas. Nobody wants to go to a crummy old movie store when you have a brand new Blockbuster. The Video Saloon had been opened in town for fifteen years or more, but I wondered how much longer it would last. The December summer holidays were coming up and school finished soon. I hoped I still had my part-time job by then. At least the weekends continued to be busy – mainly because of the half-price overnight offers we had. We were pretty busy Saturday afternoons and evenings, which was good. Otherwise I’d have been outta here.

I returned the DVD discs to the shelf in the back of the store. In Blockbuster all the DVDs were kept in their covers on the shelf. Not at the Video Saloon. We didn’t have

any security gates so we had to walk out to the back office and get every disc or video game off the shelf. It took ages.

Crass walked out with me to pick up his large green gym bag from the office. Every Saturday afternoon he spent his lunch hour or two at the local gym. I didn't mind. It was peaceful without him, even when he got back so late I didn't get a proper lunch. At least I didn't have to put up with him playing his hip-hop music over the stereo system and I could even watch the odd romantic comedy when the store was really slow.

'Catch you later, dude. Hey, maybe Robert will come back to keep you company,' laughed Crass as he walked out of the store.

I cleaned some shelves and stood watching a preview disc of a kid's film about superheroes training robots to fight in a gladiator's ring. I couldn't really make much sense out of it. Topps arrived soon after. He often dropped in on a Saturday afternoon when he knew the coast was clear. With Crass gone we could talk in peace.

Before Topps could even give me a wave a customer walked in wearing plaster-splattered overalls and smelling of sawdust. I put on my best friendly, welcoming smile. 'Can I help you?'

'Yeah, hi. Colin, the young guy who works here, said he a package for me. I'm a bit early, I think, to pick it up...'

I looked at him blankly. Crass (Colin Sass was his real name, though nobody called him that) said nothing to me at all about having a package waiting for this guy.

'Don't worry, I can come back,' he said when he realised I didn't know what he was talking about. 'While I'm here, though,' he added, 'my son reserved the cardboard cut-out of Jim Carrey you had in the window a while back. Can I collect it? I have my ute, so I'll grab it now. It'll be easier to carry.'

'Did Colin say where he put it?' I couldn't remember seeing a Jim Carrey cut-out anywhere.

'Dunno. Maybe in the back somewhere?'

Jim wasn't out the back. Perhaps down in the basement? That's where most of the cut-outs were kept. I'd been working in The Video Saloon for three months and had only

been down to the basement once. Steps at the back of the office lead down to it. The basement was full of old and broken video covers, shelving, tables, posters and broken recorders. It was dark, dusty and cold. No way would I have volunteered to go down there on a Saturday night by myself.

I looked for Jim, making it extra quick and snappy. It was scary down there. I glanced under the stairs, behind some shelving and tossed a few movie posters around. You'd think with a rubber face like his, Jim would be easy to spot. But he didn't want to be found. 'C'mon Jim, it's your pal Stacey. Where are you?' I whispered.

I made it to the far end of the basement. Nothing. Crass could have put it anywhere.

Towards the corner of the basement sat a forlorn old shelf, empty apart from a couple of dusty video covers. I moved it out the way, trying to avoid the dust heaped on the top shelf, peaked over it, and gasped.

The Basement

Behind the broken shelf was a Laminex table. On the table were five large stacks of DVDs. There must have been a hundred discs – perhaps more. Next to the DVDs lay a pile of glossy colour-copied covers of movies, most of which had not even been released on DVD yet. Some, including one with Tom Hanks and another with Charlize Theron, weren't even in the cinemas in Australia as far as I knew! A list of labels with addresses lay on top of postal envelopes on the ground. Unopened plastic boxes of blank DVD discs were stored neatly under the table.

On the other side of the table lay a handful of console game discs next to a pile of clear plastic covers and photocopied covers. I recognised one as a favourite of Topps'.

It looked like a real sneaky little operation. The DVDs and console games were obviously copies. I picked up one of the discs, a film about drag racing in the streets of Los Angeles. It was definitely pirated. Whose were they? My boss Vince was the only one who bothered with anything down here. Crass just threw down empty boxes and the odd poster. And what was with the envelopes and labels?

Kids were always swapping copies of DVDs, music and games at school, but they didn't look like these. They were always downloaded off the Internet or in photocopied covers, bought in Fiji or Bali by older brothers and sisters on holiday. I once saw a *Spiderman* movie on a pirated disc and had to put up with a lady suffering a sneezing fit and the guy holding the camera moving it down to his lap when he reached for popcorn. Then I'd missed the entire ending when a guy stood up in front of the screen and practised what looked like Tai-Chi.

The covers of the DVDs, however, looked like the real thing. I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference from a new overnighter at the Video Saloon and one of these. Someone had put a lot of effort into them.

I took the drag racing DVD and walked back up the stairs. I didn't want to be seen down here.

The customer had left when I returned to the counter. Weird, I thought, I'd only been gone a few minutes.

'What took you so long?' said Topps. 'I'm running out of movies to recommend...' I reached out and grabbed his arm in an effort to shut him up. 'Topps, you'll never guess what I've just found.'

'A signed poster of Megan Fox?'

'No! Just take a look at this.'

I held the pirated DVD cover up to his face.

I let Topps take a good look at it, which he did with a slight look of bewilderment, as if he knew he should be surprised or shocked, but couldn't figure out why. 'Yeah, it's a rev-head movie, like *Fast & Furious*. So what?' he said.

'Take a look at the disc and cover itself, Topps. Doesn't it look suspicious? Like, it's not really *original*. There is a mega load of the stuff down in the basement too.'

It was only then I noticed Overalls-Man staring at me from the small snack bar on my right. I hadn't seen him when I bounded up from the basement and I thought he must have left. Instead he had grabbed a DVD and a Diet Coke from the fridge and was now staring at me with more than just casual bemusement.

'Sorry, I couldn't find the cut-out,' I told him shakily. 'You'll have to come back when Colin is here.' He shrugged his shoulders and paid for the movie and Diet Coke. 'You could have told me he was still here,' I hissed at Topps as the guy walked out. 'He probably heard everything.'

'Where did you think he'd gone?' said Topps. 'He was hardly going to run out of the store. Anyway, I don't know what you're talking about, so I'm sure he doesn't either.'

'I'm talking about pirated DVDs,' I said. 'Topps, I think Vince may be involved in it big time, cause right below our feet in the basement is a big pile of illegal DVDs. All the latest movies as well as covers, blank discs and loads of envelopes. It's like a small business down there.' I gave Topps the drag racing DVD as proof. 'And there's games too.'

‘Wow,’ said Topps, examining the cover and then the disc inside. ‘Nice cover, pity about the disc. They could have done better than this. Obviously used a simple design program and printer to apply the disc title.’ He put the disc back in the cover. ‘Do you think Vince is selling the copies? Or perhaps he’s renting them out to customers?’

‘I don’t know, but there’s a lot of movies down there. Man, Vince must be stupid. If the police find out they’ll shut the Video Saloon down for sure. Then I’ll have to work at The Chicken Shack for six dollars an hour.’ I pulled at my blonde split ends. ‘Do you think we should tell?’

Before Topps could answer Vince Gurrieri, of all people, walked into the store. Topps made himself scarce and investigated the latest release section. Not a good look to be talking to friends when the boss walks in and it wasn’t the first time he’d caught Topps and I gossiping.

Vince looked stressed out. He had very little hair and the worry lines stained into his forehead like the ochre swirls of an aboriginal art painting seemed out of control today.

‘Where’s Colin?’ he asked.

‘Gone to lunch Vince.’

‘I don’t like him leaving you alone. I told him before,’ he snapped.

Vince always treated me as some little girl who couldn’t handle herself without a guy around. It’s probably why he’d never let me work alone, which sort of defeated the purpose of hiring cheap labour. Sure, he paid me nothing, but he had to pay Crass to look after me on a Saturday afternoon.

Then he looked around the empty store. Topps was the only one in it. He was pretending to read the back of a *Battlestar Galactica* TV series cover.

‘So, the joint is empty again,’ Vince said. ‘Every day is slowly getting worse. I should get you a microphone and make you spruik for customers outside.’

‘I wouldn’t know what to say. It’d be a disaster.’

‘Hey, my cousin Frankie is missing his two front teeth. Having a conversation with him is like talking to a wind tunnel. But he stands outside his restaurant and drags in three hundred, four hundred people a night. Why couldn’t it work for us?’

I didn’t say anything and just let him have his whinge. Then I saw that Vince had the pay envelopes in his hand. Boy, did I love those little white envelopes. Even more than Vince loved whinging. I loved tearing mine open to see the orange tip of a twenty dollar note poking out. Not that the envelope was often full. The only reason Vince hired me was so he could pay me peanuts. Eight dollars an hour – and that’s on weekends.

‘Mate, what do I have to do to make more money?’ Vince asked, putting one arm over my shoulder and gently squeezing it.

‘I don’t know, Vince. I often think that myself,’ I said, squirming a little.

‘Well, you’re no good to me then,’ he said, removing his arm. ‘Money is money, and I need ideas. Now with that bloody Blockbuster store all my customers are beginning to leave. I gotta start branching out. There’s no money in DVDs anymore.’

Vince gave his wart on the back of his neck an angry massage, complained that Blockbuster was only popular because their store smelt “new” and that most of the films made this year were rubbish and he wouldn’t watch them for free, so why would customers pay six dollars to hire them? Then he left.

‘Vince sounds like he needs some happy pills, and what’s with the little hug?’ said Topps.

‘Yeah, he does that a bit,’ I said, ‘it’s kinda totally creepy. Anyway, what’s up with the DVDs though? Would he risk keeping pirated DVDs in his own store?’

‘Hey, maybe he watches too much *Sopranos*; you know, thought some old-fashioned *Cosa Nostra* counterfeiting might make things spark up.’

I had to admit Vince was looking more and more desperate. The last time I worked with him, all he did was complain. But that was Vince. He whinged about his estranged wife’s spending habits and child support of his kids, his 4WD that kept breaking down, about government taxes and GST and the film distributors who charged him a hundred

dollars a DVD. I looked around the empty store. Vince probably did have a good excuse to resort to renting and selling illegal DVDs.

Topps walked behind the counter and into the office. 'I'm going to take a look. See what sort of operation Vince has.'

'What about Crass? He'll be back soon.'

But Topps had already gone out the back and down the stairs. Oh, man. I'd admit he was one of the smartest kid I knew, but sometimes he just had no idea. I could feel myself immediately beginning to sweat. I was about to yell out to Topps to get his butt back to the counter when the store door opened.

It was Vince again. 'Topps!' I tried to hiss as I backed away from the counter, trying not to look panicky and suspicious. Instead my voice froze up in fright.

'I hafta grab...something,' Vince said as he walked around the counter towards the back. What if he found Topps poking around the office or down the basement with a couple of Vince's pirated DVDs in his hands? I had to do something and fast.

'VINCE!' I said, a little too loudly. He jumped.

'What?'

'Er...I was thinking. The new Nicole Kidman movie.'

Vince raised his wormy eyebrows and looked at me. 'What about it?'

'It's just that you've put it on the bottom row of the new releases. I heard it was really good. Don't you think we should move it up so customers will see it?'

'Do what you want,' said Vince. 'As long as they rent the stupid thing.'

He walked into the backroom towards the stairs. I heard the first wooden stair creak. Then the second. He was going down the basement. Oh man, this was bad. This was really bad. I hadn't wanted Topps to go down there in the first place. And he was such a skinny little runt, with his gawky stare, his glasses and slouchy walk and hair stuck up like a carrot. Vince would probably beat him up.

'Hey, VINCE!'

He rushed back to the counter thinking something serious had happened.

I didn't have a clue what to say now. I just wanted to give Topps a warning. I fumbled around with ideas. 'Um, Vince, I wanted to ask you about the err...' I looked around the counter wildly until I saw the cash register. 'The emergency alarm underneath the register. Does it still work?'

Vince didn't say anything for a minute. Then he looked really annoyed. 'Yes it still works! Why do you ask me these stupid questions, eh?'

'Well, you know, what if there was some sort of emergency?' I reasoned. 'Is it connected to the police station or something? I've never been told.'

'Why don't you press it and find out, yeah? I sat on it three years ago and the police where in here in five minutes waving their revolvers around, so I'm guessing the thing is still okay, okay?' He threw his hands in the air again, turned around and walked straight into Jim Carrey.

Vince staggered backwards and Topps put the cut-out on the ground. It was life size and taller than his slight frame.

'I found Jim,' said Topps. 'He was hanging around beneath the stairs. A customer asked for it.'

'Gimmie a break here,' said Vince. 'What are you doing the hell in my office?'

'I'm Peter Topolski, I come here all the time. I've rented every one of your *South Park* discs and most of your Manga titles. I just wish you'd get more in.'

Vince looked at me and narrowed his eyes. I could see his nose hairs sprouting defiantly as he flared his nostrils. A most unpleasant face. 'What's going on here? The office is for employees only. Not your boyfriends.'

'Sorry Vince. He was helping me out.'

'Maybe I should hire him instead then, yeah?'

Vince stalked out the back and down the stairs. Topps looked at me and grinned like a moggy cat. 'He called me your boyfriend.'

'He didn't say it in a nice way. He said it in a really sarcastic way.'

'Are you sure? He seems like a serious sort of guy who wouldn't throw around words like that.'

‘You wish.’

I grabbed the cut-out of Jim and made a big deal of putting it safely behind the counter. Topps was my mate; a good mate. Just like Skye. We’d been best friends for two years but we weren’t a couple and, as far as I was concerned, we never would be. I just didn’t have any feelings for him beyond friendship. Why couldn’t it have stayed that way? I guess deep down I knew he liked me, even though he pretended to only joke about it. It got a reaction from me because I didn’t find it funny. I just hoped it was his hormones and he’d grow out of it.

At school I had to put up with constant questions and teasing and laughs about me and Topps. Girls like Courtney Jarratt, who thought because she had a boyfriend we all needed one. So she went out with Year Nine’s resident hero because he made it to the All-Schools long jump championship and came second. Big deal, he could jump a couple of meters, so what? And so what if they’d been going out for a year and a half and he’d given her an forty dollar gold necklace from Bevilles? Did that give Courtney the right to set up every other girl in our class?

No, I liked things the way they were. Being able to watch Anime or Jack Black movies without Topps trying to slip his arm around me, or getting all mushy when we were alone walking through the park. We could just have a good laugh and goss. That’s what I wanted in a friend at the moment. All that romantic stuff was sort of gross, if you thought about it. I’d never tongue wrestled a guy, and I wasn’t about to start. French kissing? Yuck. It’s okay for people like Jessica Alba. They got paid millions to do it.

‘Try and make some money for me, yeah?’ said Vince as he left, a bunch of paperwork stuck under his arm. ‘And make sure your boyfriend pays for his movies.’

When Vince was gone I said, ‘You were lucky to get out of that, dopey, but hey, did you get down to the basement?’

‘Yeah, but I only got a real quick look. The covers are good quality, that’s for sure. Digitally printed. You can tell they’re fake, but people would pay seven, maybe eight bucks for them, no problem...’

But Topps didn't get time to even move. Crass walked in as we were arguing. He didn't look happy. He dumped his gym bag in the backroom and came out brushing his peroxide blonde hair in that spiky-echidna look he loved.

'Any action?' he asked.

'Vince came in to drop the pay packets off. They're in the top drawer.'

'What? Oh man, he hates me leaving you here alone.'

'He said that too.'

Crass swore for at least half a minute. Something was bugging him. A few customers came in so Topps waved goodbye. I told him I'd speak to him later.

'That your boyfriend?' said Crass as he scanned videos in for a customer.

'No. He's just a mate.'

'Righhht...' he said, drawing out the word sarcastically.

'He really is just a mate.'

'You two seem to hang out a bit though.'

'Yeah, as mates.'

'Righhht...'

I gave up trying to justify myself.

Then the last person I wanted to see walked, or rather, stalked into the store.

Robert Keppler.

When Night Falls

The Video Saloon store wasn't very popular. It's big, old and crusty. Movie posters peeled off the wall and paint flaked off the white ceiling. Everyone in town called it the "Video Loon" because the "S" and "A" were missing from "Saloon" on the sign outside. I thought Vince should change the name completely. I mean, we don't even rent videos anymore. Should it be called the "DVD Saloon" or "The Movie Saloon" or something?

It was too big as well, almost four times the size of the other shops on Main Street. It looked bare and cold when there were no customers, and dark and dreary in winter. The counter was right at the back of the store and customers were always complaining because they had to walk all the way down the store to make a return, unlike other rental stores, where the counter is always at the front door.

Still, at least I had a job. There weren't many jobs in Rosedale. Not for year ten secondary school girls, unless you put your name down on the Coles waiting list or didn't mind putting up with greasy hands and the smell of fried fat at the Chicken Shack.

I worked with Crass on weekends and an evening or two during the week. Crass worked at the Video Saloon full-time where he spent most of his day watching the store TV. My dad would have called him a no-good slacker before my dad actually became a no-good slacker himself. That's why I got this job. Anyway, one thing for sure, when I'm 19 I won't be working in a video store like him. I'll be out of this town. Live in Rosedale all my life? That's not for me. Who'd want to live in a town in the far reaches of the galaxy? It's so far away from anything.

Not everyone thinks like I do though. My friend Skye lives in the Bracken Lake estate just outside of Rosedale and she loves the place. 'Stacey Fallon, you're wrong, Rosedale is so cool,' she said to me during my last rant about the town as we walked around the lake that her estate is named after. 'It has tennis courts, bike paths and it even has a *skating rink*.'

A skating rink? Whoopee! Awesome! Let's stay here forever! Anyway, compared to a hole like Bracken Lake, Rosedale would seem like some bustling metropolis.

The best thing about getting out of Rosedale? I wouldn't have to put up with Robert's total weirdness.

Robert looked tired, like he had just got out of bed. To my relief he ignored me and went straight to Crass. He gave Crass a DVD disc. Crass walked to the counter and casually dropped it in front of me. It was the *Night Falls* disc. Crass had obviously rung Robert and asked him to return it.

Robert followed Crass to the counter. He looked embarrassed and kept his eyes on the ground.

'It's illegal to burn DVDs mate,' Crass said to him with the same soft-as-barbed-wire tone as my principal, Huffy Kilpatrick (named because of her habit of huffing at you before the start of any conversation) used during school assemblies. He handed back the blank silver disc Robert had accidentally returned to us, which I thought was overly generous. It was a copy after all. I thought he should have thrown it away. Crass held it away from Robert's grasp for a few seconds, as if leaving the disc where we could all see it magnified the crime.

'Yeah, I know,' said Robert, his shoulders hunched and hands in his coat pockets. 'It was just for my own collection, you know, just so I could watch it again.'

'Pretty stupid to give back the copy then. Or were you trying to rip us off by keeping the original?'

'No! It was a mix up. I'm sorry man, yeah, it was stupid.'

Crass turned to me with a smile. 'So Stacey, think we should slap a ban on him for this or what?'

For copying one DVD? When there were hundreds right under our feet in the basement? I told Crass that it wasn't a big deal. Robert paid to rent the DVD, that was the most important thing.

'Paid?' laughed Crass. He looked at Robert with a sneer. 'I've always wondered Robbo, where *do* you get all the money for your DVDs? You're unemployed, right?'

Robert nodded his head sullenly. 'So then, a DVD is six dollars a night and half-price during the week. You watch a couple of hundred a year. That's a lot of dosh. You must be raking it in.' Robert didn't answer. 'Go on, get out of here,' said Crass. 'And if you want to copy DVDs, burn them from Blockbuster. Not from us!'

Robert gave Crass a sharp look, then hurried out of the store with his bouncing, gaping walk. 'I don't know if I'd have said that, Crass,' I said when he'd gone. 'He'll never come back here again and he's out best customer.'

'Doesn't mean anything to him. He's a geek,' said Crass, dismissing Robert with a wave. 'He's used to people talking crap to him. Anyway, he'll be back tomorrow. He likes the staff.' Crass gave me one of his thin lipped smiles and walked back to the console games shelf. He could be so obnoxious sometimes. It made me want to thump him.

I snatched the *Night Falls* DVD and squeezed the scanner trigger. The movie was added to the "Returned Rentals" list. If a customer returns a DVD late a warning flashes onto the screen. You could also press the F7 key and take a look at the customer's profile: address, fines, rental history, how much money a customer had spent. Usually I took little notice of customer profiles.

I saw that Robert's fines were zero. He usually came in every Saturday afternoon I worked and as far as I knew he'd never handed in his rentals late. I wondered just how much money he had actually spent on rentals. It must have been hundreds and hundreds of dollars. If Robert was unemployed that'd mean he spent most of his money in the store. Was it possible? I suppose if you don't have a job, watching movies is one way to pass the time. Then why didn't he just download them from the Internet for free?

Feeling slightly self-conscious and sneaky, I pressed the F7 key and then selected "rental history". At the top of the screen was a text box which read: TOTAL RENTAL SPEND FOR YEAR: \$34.00.

Thirty-four dollars in ten months? That couldn't be right. That'd be only eight or nine rentals, even if he did get them at half price. I downloaded his rental history. Holding down the cursor I ran through the list of rentals. It was long. I knew it would be.

277 films in the past year, exactly the same number as Crass had told me. He has a good memory. I scanned through the names: *Wolf Creek*; *Saw IV*; *Land of the Lost*; *The Notebook*; *Semi-Pro*; *American Gangster*; *Wrong Turn*; *Blade Runner*; *The Hills Have Eyes*. They weren't all horrors, that's for sure. And what was with *The Notebook*? That was like a mega weepie film from years back. That was a really weird choice for Robert.

Next to each film on the rental history was the charge for each rental. Nearly every one of them was listed with the same charge: CREDIT \$0.00. A credit meant we'd rented it out for free. Robert hadn't paid for hardly any of his movies. Fair enough, he may have used the odd shop-a-docket voucher or his privilege card to get free rentals, but surely he had spent more than thirty-four dollars?

Next to the charge was a code for the staff member who completed the transaction. You had to logon each time you used the computer. That way if you didn't collect fines or if you charged the wrong amount or the end-of-day balance didn't add up, Vince would have known who stuffed up.

Next to nearly every one of Robert's recent rentals was Crass' login name: COL. I kept scrolling until I saw STA. My login name was only next to a handful of titles. I always made him pay. I looked at some of the titles under my login name. The last one was a gory slasher flick. I remember renting it out to him a month ago, because Crass had gone to lunch and Robert had gone on and on about the director of the film being the best new director out there. The film had been paid for at half price, as Robert had a Saloon privilege card – a scheme Vince had tried a couple of years before, but it had never caught on with customers – that gave you half price on new releases during the week. Soon enough you could get half-price overnights any weekday regardless. But Robert still liked to use his card.

It was weird that Robert rented so many videos but hardly any from me. Always from Crass. Yet I remember him constantly returning DVDs to me, sometimes up to three or four on a weekend. I saw him every weekend, yet I'd only ever rented four or five titles to him.

I scrolled back to the top of the list to look at the transactions from earlier in the year. Again, Crass completed nearly all the transactions until around March. Then I saw another regular login name – KAT – beside a number of titles. The dates for KAT's transaction ended in June. I started in mid-July when I answered an ad in the local paper, along with nearly every other teenager in town. Again, nearly every rental charge of KAT's read: CREDIT \$0.00.

KAT? Who was KAT? I thought back to the previous assistants. I never took much notice of them when I was a customer – which was rare anyway. Topps or Skye seemed to do all the renting, as I couldn't afford a movie every week. I remember a guy who always wore a red baseball cap. I didn't know his name. And an older girl from school. A pretty blonde. Was she KAT? And if so, what was her name? Kate? Katrina? I'd ask Topps. He'd been a regular at the Video Saloon for years.

I was so absorbed I failed to notice a customer standing at the counter. I looked up to see him politely waiting. He had put his hands on the counter and was staring at a movie playing on the store TV – an old kid's super-hero animation film, *The Incredibles*, that I still found cool. That was the one really good thing about working at The Video Saloon. You could watch any movie you wanted. At other DVD stores you were supposed to run a preview tape of all the latest releases. So it was like watching an eight-hour clip of the same movies, over and over again.

The man had on the crispest, best ironed shirt I've ever seen. I noticed the sharply ironed folds, like the ridge of a inclined hill, on his sleeves. He was old, maybe fifty, with a pepper-and-salt moustache splashed with silver and streaks through his thin hair. He looked tired, his eyelids were slightly droopy and when he smiled it looked like it took a lot of energy out of him.

Crass was at the other end of the store pretending to tidy up the comedy section. He looked like he was counting the number of videos, a strange habit of his I'd noticed not long ago. He didn't bother to make a move when he looked up and saw the customer at the counter.

'Hi,' I stammered. He had given me a fright.

‘Hello there, I wondering if Mr Gurrieri is in.’

‘No, he doesn’t work on the weekends.’

The man reached into his pocket and took out a business card and showed me. The title on the card read: *Detective Sergeant P C Rooks, Croydon CIU*.

‘I was talking to Mr Gurrieri a while back,’ the man, obviously Detective Rooks, said. ‘Can you ask him to contact me? My number is on the card.’

‘Okay, I’ll leave it for him.’

‘It’s nothing important, get him to give me a call sometime next week. I’m visiting all the video stores in the area. I’m part of a regional response unit dealing with pirated goods.’

‘Oh, really, like pirated discs?’ I asked, my voice raising a higher octave than usual. I felt my face flush slightly. The detective looked at me for about a second longer than I felt comfortable with.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘We’ve caught a few people selling them at local markets. I’m asking around to see if any of the stores have had any problems. Any distributors offering to sell illegal discs or computer games to them, that sort of thing.’

‘Okay, I’ll get him to call you.’

‘Good girl,’ said the detective, giving me a smile and walking out. Crass, listening, watched him go and then sauntered to the counter.

‘What was that about? After copies of *Police Academy: Pigs on Patrol*, or what?’

‘No. He was asking about illegal discs. Copies. Caught people selling them at local markets.’

I had to watch what I said. I wasn’t sure that Crass knew about the DVDs downstairs.

‘What did he ask you?’

‘Wanted to know if Vince had been sold illegal copies.’

‘Don’t think so. Have you noticed any?’

Me? Yeah, Crass, as a matter of fact I had noticed a few. Such as the huge pile sitting in the basement. Perhaps I should have told the detective about them. I could have got myself a big reward. Would I have dared to? If I did Vince would be in big trouble.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I could tell the difference between an original and a copy anyway.’

Crass snorted. ‘I don’t like cops,’ he said. ‘My older brother was always getting in friggin’ trouble with them. They had it in for him big time. Got him driving an unregistered GT Ford doing 150 down Main Street. Also turned out to have some contraband in the back seat – a decent bag of dope that wasn’t his. Got done big time. So let Vince deal with ‘em. It doesn’t worry me. As long as they leave me alone.’

That was when Crass saw the computer screen. I followed his gaze to Robert’s rental profile. I had forgotten to logout of it when Detective Rooks had turned up.

‘What are you looking at that for?’ Crass asked.

‘It’s just Robert’s rental history. Remember you said I should check it out? Well, I thought I would see how many horror movies he had rented. You’re right, it is scary!’

I left it at that. I knew when you tell a lie you shouldn’t go into a long explanation. Leave it short. Otherwise it gives you away. I got that from *Law and Order*. There’s always someone lying on that TV show. You can tell when they’re telling the truth or are all shifty and flat out lying.

Crass thought about what I’d said for a moment. ‘Perhaps I should have told that cop about Robert pirating our movies.’

‘You’d really do that?’

‘Nah. Just joking. After all, he’s our best customer.’

Beef Lasagne

I'd been cooking for Dad for a couple of years. It was either that or live on a constant diet of fish & chips and BBQ chops with over steamed vegies. Dad was never a good cook and it gives me something to do at night instead of watching TV.

My favourite is lasagne. It took me at least five attempts to get it right though. The first few times I kept tearing the pasta layers apart, the white sauce could have been used in art class for glue and the pasta sauce was bitter.

So I did some surfing and came up with a sure fire hit. First, use instant lasagne sheets. Second, make the bolognaise sauce yourself with tomato soup, crushed canned tomatoes and a couple of spoons of brown sugar to make it sweet. I also use celery, mushrooms and a few slices of bacon strips. Beautiful. The white sauce still gets me, but as long as you keep stirring it, no problems.

The best thing about lasagne is freezing it. I can get three, sometimes four meals out of one tray. There's no way I'm cooking every night, and lasagne actually tastes better with age. It can be too sloppy when freshly made.

When I got home from work I threw two pieces in the microwave and then cooked up my second speciality – roasted vegetables. It's something I worked on at school and have perfected over the past year. The secret to good roast potatoes and pumpkin is to smother it all in heaps of olive oil and sprinkle on seasoning and garlic powder. Dad doesn't like buying olive oil because it's too expensive, but since I do the shopping with him I always smuggle it into the trolley. It's way better than sunflower oil.

The roasted vegetables sizzled in the oven as I set the table. Dad was watching a reality cooking show in the living room. This was bad news, as Dad hates reality TV. When he watches crap it usually means he's on a downer. Usually I'd just plonk his plate on a tray and we'd both eat in front of the TV, but my lasagne and roasted veggies deserved better than that, especially as I actually worked all day as well. I think I was beginning to realise what a lot of married women's lives were like. Work hard, come

home and have your partner sitting in a recliner itching his bum with you in the kitchen. Sounds kind of sucky if you ask me.

I don't think we've had new utensils or a table cloth since Mum died, but I tried my best anyway. I used the two plate coasters with the Matisse paintings, two clean glasses and even put out some paper napkins.

'Table's looking good.'

Dad stood leaning on corner wall watching me finishing the table.

'Yeah,' I said. 'You know that lasagne and roasted vegetables deserve the full treatment. May as well put some effort in.'

Dad rubbed his whiskered cheeks. 'Perhaps I could go whip down the shop and buy a Danish for dessert?' he said.

'Nah, we've got ice-cream, and I can open a can of fruit salad,' I said. Dad look relieved he didn't have to go out, and I knew he didn't want to spend any money on dessert. The ice-cream and fruit salad were both cheap home brand and they were for special occasions. The only time we'd get away with a Danish would be if Queen Mary of Denmark popped around for a chat.

I made sure the lasagne and vegetables were steaming hot before I served them (nothing worse than a lasagne with a cold centre) and we both sat down to eat. I did most of the talking, as usual. Dad just smiled and listened.

'Vince is really angry because the games are coming back scratched,' I said, giving Dad the highlights of the day. 'He just bought another copy of *Assassin 2* and now we get it back today, and I go to return it, and there's an awesome scratch right across the disc. He's going to go, like, off his head when he finds out tomorrow. They cost a hundred dollars each.'

'Crazy,' Dad said, smiling. He usually perked up a bit after my lasagne.

I went quiet for a bit, thinking about what else happened. There was no way I was going to bring up the pirated discs until I spoke to Topps. I thought I'd just leave that one lie for a while. It was when I went quiet I noticed how big the kitchen table was. I used to sit against the wall, Dad next to me and Mum across from me nearest to the kitchen. It

took a couple of years for me to change seats and sit where Mum always did. But the table still looked too large even with half of it full of bills and letters and hardware tools. I suddenly decided I preferred to eat in front of the TV. It wasn't as if Dad had a huge deal to say anyway.

'It's amazing how customers treat the games and DVDs,' I said. 'They must play Frisbee with them or something.'

Dad laughed. 'You wouldn't believe some of the items they return at the Hardware Barn either,' he said, scooping up a fork full of lasagne and roast carrots. 'The other day, or was it the other week, well, a lady brings in a gardening fork and asks to return it. Too heavy for her, apparently. Only problem is it's caked with dirt. She's used the fork in the garden, probably planted what she needed too, then when she's finished with it she's decided she wants a refund!'

'Did you tell her to *fork* off?' I laughed. Dad pointed the fork at me. 'No, but that's what we should have done. Good one Stacey.'

The laughter sort of broke the unspoken feeling of sadness that sometimes descends on us at dinners. It still happens. It's good to see Dad laugh.

'Oh, I need a beer,' he said, still smiling and getting up from the table. 'Want anything?'

'No,' I said, wishing he could leave the beer alone for one night. 'But you can't have beer with lasagne, it ruins the taste.'

'Nothing can ruin the taste of a cold beer,' Dad said, opening the fridge.

'I meant the taste of lasagne,' I said.

Later I piled the dishes into the sink while Dad sat down with his beer and his ice-cream and fruit salad. This'd be the best dinner we'd have for a few weeks, that's for sure, because I wasn't going to put in an effort like this every night.

I started to fill the sink, then turned the tap off. Let Dad do it, I thought. He wasn't going anywhere for the next few days. It'd give him something to do. Why should I do all the work? But then I saw the lasagne dish. White sauce and burnt pasta had dried along the rim of the dish and bolognaise stained the base. It looked so dirty and Dad wouldn't

clean it properly either. He'd probably leave it in the sink until the end of the week. I hated having the dishes pile up. So I ended up washing them myself. I didn't even use the dishwasher, a horrible old thing that was loud and wasted too much water.

Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing but a fifteen year-old housewife.

Questions Not Answered

I waited until I could hear Dad snoring in his recliner before I rang Topps. I didn't want Dad to listen in. 'Hey dude,' I said when Topps answered. Even though there was five in his family, Topps always answered the phone at his house. I think it's because a cordless phone sits right next to his computer.

'Hey,' he replied absent-mindedly.

After hearing that far away voice, I knew immediately that Topps was either playing *World of Warcraft* on his PC; updating his homepage or fiddling around with something technical such his remote-control car motor that was always in need of repair.

I love talking on the phone. It's much better than face-to-face. I just feel more comfortable and free to speak my mind. Skye is my best phone-buddy. We can talk about everything and anything, seriously, for an hour without stopping for breath. It's one of the reasons I'm not allowed a decent mobile, though I'm planning on getting a Motorola this Christmas from Dad. At the moment I have to put up with a pre-paid phone that is at least five years old and dies at random times throughout the day.

My all-time phone record? Last summer when Skye had come back from the Gold Coast with an awesome story about almost drowning in the surf. It took two and a half hours to tell it.

Now Topps, he's different. He loves to talk but on the phone he's really average. He's always distracted and never listens to what I'm saying. 'Ah...huh...yep...okay,' he'd mumble as I waxed on about the store or an assignment or my dad's latest bad mood. Boys just don't get phones.

This time, however, he listened.

I explained about the visit by Detective Rooks and Crass being fairly unhappy about it. Then I told him that according to the store computer Robert Keppler had rented almost three hundred DVDs in the past year – most of them for free.

‘How does he get DVDs for free?’ asked Topps after I had explained how so many of his DVD listings displayed CREDIT \$0.00 and how easy it was to credit customers for rentals. ‘You think Crass rents them all to him? Crass doesn’t exactly come across as a generous sort of guy.’

‘Dunno. Perhaps Crass feel sorry for him because he’s unemployed?’ Although, I thought, his smart arse cracks this afternoon said otherwise.

Then I remembered the previous login name I saw: KAT. I asked Topps who it could be. He knew immediately. ‘Only the second best looking chick who ever worked at the ‘Loon.’

‘Do you have a name Topps, or are you going to start drooling down the phone?’

‘Of course. Who could forget her? Caitlin Allende.’

Caitlin Allende. I knew who he was talking about. Caitlin Allende of the swirling blonde hair and the blue eyes and the school uniform that was just a little too small. A very deliberate ploy, I felt, to show off her long, tanned legs. She was in Year Twelve and had played the lead role of Sandy in the school production of *Grease*. I thought her rendition of “Hopelessly Devoted to You” sucked, but Topps loved it and sang it at school the next day all through our game of indoor hockey.

Being incredibly beautiful, popular and two years old than me, I had never spoken to her. Topps wanted to change all that.

‘We should talk to her, you know,’ he said. ‘She suddenly left The Video Saloon several months back. I was heartbroken, of course. It’s like losing your first true love.’

‘Give it a rest Topps. You’ll make me throw up. Why would we want to talk to her anyway?’

‘She could help us out. Give us some clues. Perhaps she knows something about the stash of DVDs in the basement? Hey, you could also apologise to her too.’

‘For what?’

‘Taking her job. You replaced her.’

‘Should it be a verbal or do you want me to write a formal “sorry”?’

‘Verbal will be fine.’

I thought it was a dumb idea to speak to Caitlin, even though she had, like Crass, rented out DVDs to Robert for free. A coincidence? Still, I thought it was pointless and I definitely didn't want to tell her about the stash in case she told Crass or Vince.

'C'mon Stacey, this is like one of those awesome *Secret Seven* books we read in primary school where the kids solve the crime,' said Topps, all excited. 'We've got to take this further by talking to Caitlin.'

Before I could tell Topps how much of a stupid idea it was, Dad barked from the living room: 'Stacey, would you get off that phone! You've been on it for ages!'

'You just want an excuse to talk to Caitlin,' I said, trying to finish off the conversation. 'She isn't that great.'

'Hey, I never said she was. After all, I said she was the *second* best looking chick at the Video Saloon.'

'STACEY!' my dad bellowed from the family room. I heard him shift on the recliner. I used it as an excuse to hang up on Topps. I didn't want to hear who he thought was number one.

I went and apologised to Dad. I'd virtually sat on the phone this week. Better to say sort, it would save a beery lecture later on. Still, if we had broadband I could use Skype for free.

'Stacey,' he said, 'you know how tight money is at the moment.'

'We're not exactly at the starving stage Dad. You make us sound like we're like, totally poor. If we can afford beer, we can afford a few phone calls.'

Dad, cut, shrunk back down into the couch. 'They've reduced back my hours at the store. So it'll be fairly tough going this month until they need me again full-time for Christmas.'

Dad worked at a hardware store out of town. One of those giant warehouses that blight the landscape. He used to be manager of the tradesperson's accounts but quit when Mum died. He couldn't handle the stress. Now he shelves nails and helps answer customer queries about outdoor acrylic paint. I don't think he enjoys it.

It's one reason I was so happy to get the job at the Video Saloon. I hated asking Dad for money and this way I earned my own cash. If it wasn't for my job I'd never get to the cinema, never get any new clothes and I'd even struggle to buy my magazines each month. I'd even paid for a birthday present for Skye last month because I didn't want to ask Dad for any money. If I wanted anything, I had to pay for it. How we'd afford the text books for school next year when the workload started to really increase, I didn't know.

I'd be jeopardising what money I did earn by telling him about the DVDs, that's for sure.

'Don't worry Dad,' I said, patting his hands. I drew them over my shoulder and hugged him. Something I don't do so much anymore. He hugged me back and I could feel his bony ribs. He'd lost weight this year. He was skinnier than me. It made me feel sort of sad. I felt his bristles rub against my cheek. He had bad skin. Wrinkled and blotched and tight with worry. His grey hair looked limp. His general appearance was not helped by a boring, daggy grey tracksuit than hung off him like a scarecrow.

I think I got over Mum's death a whole lot quicker than he has. In fact, I don't think he's made any progress at all. I read somewhere that men fall into two categories: men who want to look after their women, and men who just want to be loved by them. Dad is definitely in the second category. He relied on Mum a lot. I guess Dad was always a bit of a dreamer, a romantic. She was the hard-headed, no nonsense one who ran the house, paid the bills, made the tough decisions and even bought his clothes. I guess I take after her. I get over things and just keep working. Boy, the ways things are going it'll only be a few years until I'd be buying his Bonds undies for him.

Mum was a primary school teacher. A good one. She was always busy, always running around organising picnics and school dances and our camping holidays to Lakes Entrance. I don't think any of us could believe it when she got cancer. Except her. She told me before she died she always knew she had been living on borrowed time. It's why she hated wasting it, why she was always so busy. Something had happened years before.

A scare. Or more. I never did find out exactly what. It was the reason she couldn't have any more kids after me. Something to do with her ovarian tubes.

Anyway, out came the library books, the therapies, the all-natural pills and meetings with self-help groups. But it didn't do any good. She hung in there for a long time. The cancer was like a see-saw. Up, down, good, bad, temporary remission, hospital. Dad fell apart soon after, although everyone else thinks he's more-or-less held it together. But he hasn't. He doesn't play in his night tennis competition anymore, he can't face Lakes Entrance even though we used to spend almost a month down there every year for as long as I can remember; he dresses badly and he has to force himself to even smile. The only thing he still does is fish, but most of the time he comes back empty handed. I think he just sits by the Yarra River (his favourite fishing spot) and stews.

God, it's hard to see your dad down so badly. Although it has made me more independent. I don't know any other fifteen-year-olds who do the laundry, cook spaghetti bolognese dinners and buy the groceries every week. I just want to get on with life. That's what Mum would have wanted. I try to tell him that, but there's a barrier between us. I just don't feel like talking about these sort of things. I can talk for hours about gossip, school, TV. Just not feelings. That's probably why I have a boy as my best friend. I feel freaky talking about feelings. I like action, as the saying goes, not words.

Dad sighed. 'I have to get back on the treadmill,' he said. 'Back to some decent work. I owe it to you.'

'Yeah, when you're ready, Dad. You don't need to rush things.'

This wasn't true. I wanted him to get back to full-time work. I wanted him to be able to buy me a decent birthday present instead of a Sanity record voucher I got this year. I'm in year ten, but I'm still getting primary school presents. It didn't even buy me a full-price CD! I want to come home without seeing him staring emptily at the car racing on the box, or staring out the window as he shovels a saucepan of baked beans around. Most of all, I want to be able to be a daughter, not a surrogate mother. The fact I'm an only child makes it worse. I've got nobody else to help me out.

‘Stacey, I have to get a move on. We’re not saving anything. Your mother’s money isn’t going to last forever,’ he said.

That’s what’s saved us. Mum’s life insurance. Her superannuation insurance wasn’t much, but it still paid off the mortgage so we now own our house. But the insurance, I think, let Dad off the hook. He preferred moping around and not dealing with stuff. Two years after she died he still only works a couple of days a week. The money has dwindled and if this continues we’ll really be stuck. I know he hurts. I know he even suffers a bit of depression from time to time. But what sort of life does that leave me with? A dead mother and a dad that’s all worn out.

‘Then what about looking around for another job?’ I said. ‘There’s some decent stores around that’d need full-time work.’

‘Stace, it’s not that easy. I’ve tried, but...’

I let him trail off. It’s always the same. Spell out the problem and then discuss why it can’t be solved.

The next day at school Topps virtually dragged me towards the Year Twelve home room where Caitlin was most likely to be. He was that excited.

‘I thought computer geeks weren’t interested in girls,’ I said as we walked to the portable. It came out more cutting than I meant (both about him being a geek and being uninterested in girls), but I was feeling uncomfortable and silly about talking to Caitlin and I felt angry at Topps because of it. What, exactly, were we going to ask anyway?

Topps wasn’t an easy boy to upset. He never had been. ‘C’mon Stacey, you’ve seen *Revenge of the Nerds*’ he said. ‘Remember that line: “All jocks think about is sport. All nerds think about is sex”’. There’s an honest truth about that quote.’

I pretended to be unimpressed and told him I’d never seen *Revenge of the Nerds*.

It’s hard to say if Topps is really a geek or not. He loves computers, he has an encyclopaedic knowledge of movies, he can ace a test without studying and he wears glasses that don’t suit him. Also, he can’t play sport to save himself, except for badminton, and prefers to listen to video game soundtracks and electronica created by MySpace weirdos than Video Hits. But he’s confident and friendly with strangers, which

is decidedly un-geekish. And he's not a real geek because he wears Globe skate shoes and Ever Tough shirts his mum buys him. I think he's a unselfconscious half-geek/half-cool sort of guy, a bit like a werewolf that uncontrollably changes at every full moon. It's a fairly good personality mix.

We've been best friends since year seven. We hooked up in the first week during a game of softball. We both sat on the fence at the end of the batting line trying to avoid playing. 'Don't you think softball is, like, illogical,' he had said. 'It doesn't make sense. You hit a ball, you run around a diamond and you just end up back where you started.'

'I'm thinking of making it more interesting by just running to first and doing a handstand on the base,' I had said.

'I'll give you a can of Sprite if you do.'

'You're on.'

But I never got the chance. I got struck out and the ball was thrown to first base before I took a step. I wouldn't have done it anyway. It takes a lot for me to do something that makes me look ridiculous.

From then on we clicked. We'd been through a lot together: the infamous shepherd's pie food poison outbreak at school camp, the school bus crash last year that broke Trevor Gilchrist's nose; Helen Dudley's birthday party where Topps ignored me after I'd replied 'true' when asked the question: 'You'd rather kiss road kill than Peter Topolski, true or false?', and as a result we didn't speak for the rest of the night. And of course, my mum's death.

So he's been a good mate.

We found Caitlin reading over school notes. Year twelves seemed to do nothing but exams and homework. One of her friends – Becky someone, I think – was with her. They both looked up at us in surprise.

'Hi Caitlin,' said Topps. 'I was wondering if we could talk to you for a minute?'

'What about?' she asked hesitantly. Obviously she had no idea who we were.

Topps looked at Becky and back to Caitlin. 'It's private,' he said. 'It's about the Video Saloon.'

Caitlin gave Becky an exasperated look. Becky turned up her nose at us and left, obviously annoyed.

‘What about the Video Saloon?’ Caitlin asked, but before Topps could answer she looked at me. ‘Say, don’t you work there? You took over my job.’ She didn’t sound very happy about it.

‘Yeah, I thought it would be good if Stacey apologised,’ grinned Topps. ‘And while we’re here, I was just wondering, did anything funny go on before you decided to leave?’

‘What do you mean *funny*?’

‘Like, anything that was perhaps not one hundred per cent normal?’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Stacey just has this feeling about the place, you know, that things are a bit weird. Like that guy, Robert Keppler. We wanted to know a bit more about him – like, he freaks Stacey out a bit, and I was sort of wondering, is he dangerous or what?’

‘I only worked there Friday and Saturday evenings,’ Caitlin said, ‘I don’t remember every customer.’

‘Horror movie fanatic,’ said Topps. ‘Likes the freaky stuff. Looks like that old wrestler, The Undertaker, if The Undertaker had gone on a Subway diet.’

‘Oh, yeah, him. Robert Keppler. I sort of remember. I dunno, I was only there six months. He seemed...harmless. I wouldn’t worry about him. Nah, he’s just a bit weird, that’s all. Why, has he been hassling you?’

‘No,’ I said, wanting to tie this pointless conversation up, ‘I just wanted to know.’

‘Hey Caitlin, why did you leave anyway?’ asked Topps as I took his arm and turned to leave.

‘My dad knows the manager of the new Blockbuster store. I’m going to be working there over summer.’

Which didn’t answer the question because the school year wasn’t over for a month and Caitlin left the store around four months ago. I surprised myself by speaking up again and asked, ‘How did you find Vince and Colin?’ I wanted to know if she’d seen either of

them getting up to mischief down in the basement with the pirated discs, but I didn't want to spell it out yet. I still didn't feel I could trust Caitlin enough.

'Oh, I dunno, I wasn't there long, so...'

The morning bell interrupted us. Caitlin seemed relieved. She told us she had to go and quickly picked up her notes and rose from the bench. I saw Topps glance at her legs as she did. I gave him a nasty look and he shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, "She's wearing a really, really short skirt, what did you expect me to do?"

'Thanks Caitlin for your help, we'll see you round,' Topps called after her. She ignored him. He seemed reluctant to leave but I dragged him away.

'Seems a bit strange,' I said to Topps as we walked to our homeroom. 'Caitlin wasn't telling us everything.'

'Like what?'

'I dunno. But she seemed uncomfortable, like she didn't want to talk about it at all.'

'Perhaps she was dazzled by my wit and charm?' said Topps.

'No, I'd reckon it was more freaked out.'

'Why don't we just tell her about the pirated gear?'

'Because we don't know all the facts yet. And that little discussion didn't help at all. We didn't even ask her about the free rental credits. Besides, I don't feel comfortable talking about it with her.'

Truthfully, I was almost ready to ignore the pirated discs anyway. If Topps hadn't been so pushy about talking to Caitlin, I would have never gone near her.

Later that afternoon during lunch I left Skye (Topps had gone off with his mates to the IT room) for a toilet break. As I walked into the toilet block with its harsh antiseptic smell and faded graffiti half-heartedly rubbed off by the cleaner I bumped right into Caitlin. She gave me a fright. 'Oh, sorry,' I said, a little shaken.

She ignored me. Instead she looked around, as if she didn't want anyone to hear. She leaned over to me. I could smell sweet perfume and tangy shampoo on her skin. 'Listen, I just want to add one more thing about that store,' she said, almost whispering

now. 'I didn't want to say anything in front of your friend, but watch yourself. Just keep your head down...'

Before she could finish her friend Becky called her from outside the toilet block. 'Just watch yourself,' Caitlin said hurriedly. She started to leave but stopped again, turned to me and said, 'And don't ask me anything about that store again, because I don't want to talk about it.'

What' s a Little Fight between Friends?

I sat in the backroom of the Video Saloon during my lunch break and stared dejectedly at my souvlaki. I took a piece of onion out and threw it in the bin. I don't even like onion in my souvlaki, but when Toby from the fish and chip shop asked if I wanted onion, I said sure. I wasn't even listening to him properly. I was thinking about other things. And now my breath would smell of garlic and onion the rest of the day. Gross.

It'd been a week since Topps and I had spoken. I knew it was my fault, but Topps didn't understand anything. He thought we should have been gung-ho and gone straight to Detective Rooks and told him everything that we knew and had Vince busted.

'So what are we going to do?' Topps grinned when I had told him later what Caitlin had said in the toilets. 'Do we fry Vince today or tomorrow?'

'I'll tell you after I think about it a little more.'

'Oh man!' laughed Topps. 'This is gonna be fun!'

Yeah, I thought, a real blast.

I'd made up my mind what I was going to do later that night. I'd told Topps the next day. 'What do you mean you're not going to do anything?' Topps had said in disbelief when I said we were just going to forget about it. 'Caitlin tells you they're, like, maxed out dodgy!'

'We haven't got any real evidence about what they're up to.'

'Oh, come off it Stacey. Only a basement full of DVDs and a girl who thinks the place is straight out of an asylum.'

'Topps, stop exaggerating. She didn't say anything like that. Anyway, who cares about pirated DVDs anyway? Every kid in this school copies console games and downloads music all the time. Just last week Xavier gave Skye about a hundred songs on CD. How about that then? I suppose I should dob Xavier and Skye in to Huffy, should I?'

Topps flushed. He hated it when I was sarcastic. I reserved that tone for the moments when I was really angry or frustrated. Like now. I stopped and eyeballed him. 'Topps, do you want to know the real reason I'm not going to do anything?'

Topps shrugged and refused to look at me. I told him anyway.

'I need that job over the summer holidays because Dad is broke. Last night I found him crying at the kitchen table. Crying! He had a bank statement in his hand. We've got almost nothing left! That's what he said. I don't know how it happened but all of Mum's insurance is gone. Dad can hardly pay our bills and what am I supposed to do? There's no other decent jobs in this town and I need to make some money. So what if Vince sells pirated DVDs? It's not as if it's dope, is it? It's not as if what Vince is doing is any different to any other guy with a DVD burner. So what? Big deal!'

Topps looked me with hurt in his eyes. 'Because I think what Vince is doing is wrong, and if you know about it and let it happen and...and you keep working at the store *knowing* they're selling pirated gear, it means you're just almost as bad as he is.'

I hesitated for just a second, but all I could think of was seeing the jagged stream of tears and the red eyes of my father. I'd walked in after school expecting him to be at work on one of his rare days out of the house. Instead I heard him sniffing at the table. He looked, I thought as I threw my school bag on the sofa, pathetic. Beaten. The bill lay on the table crushed, as if Dad thought screwing it up would make it disappear. He was always vague about finances and I never took much notice before anyway. I knew we didn't have much – we never did when Mum was alive anyway - but I knew things were serious when Dad said we were only just scrapping by. That we had an overdraft that was continually growing. That we owed the bank too much money.

Dad wasn't just crying about the bill. I knew that. It wasn't if our house was getting repossessed. It happens every month or so. The crying, that is. It all catches up to him. The work, the depression, Mum. He goes on a downward spiral for a day or two.

The first time it happened I wasn't sure what to do. We were at Bracken Lake a couple of months after Mum's funeral. Just watching the ducks and the little kid's play on the swings and slides. We'd driven to the estate and were going for a walk together

around the lake, like we've done at least a hundred times since. We'd gone a quarter of the way around when Dad stopped and looked out across the shallow, dank water (there was a warning sign about swimming in it). 'I used to love walking around here with your mother on a Saturday morning,' he'd said quietly. 'It's so quiet, we even thought about moving to Bracken Lake estate we loved it so much. Sometimes they'd be mist over the lake. On a summer morning it'd be so bright you couldn't even look at the water without sunglasses. Lora used to love feeding the ducks. She loved those ducks...' The ducks set him off. He stood on that path and heaved and blubbered. I hugged him and he said, 'What am I going to do, Stacey? What am I going to do?' As if I had an answer to that! I wasn't even 13! How could I even comfort him?

Every child thinks their father is so strong. Emotionally, I mean. "Nothing could ever hurt my dad" is what every kid says. A father isn't supposed to cry, to be vulnerable. I learnt that wasn't true. I knew he wasn't as strong as I'd once believed.

That's why I didn't really care if copying DVDs was wrong or not. There was more important things in life. 'You're only saying that 'cause that's what your dad says,' I said to Topps. 'You don't really believe it.'

I knew his dad was totally against copying of any sort, even CDs. Topps wasn't allowed to use pirated computer games and, once, when his dad found a pirated games disk he had snapped it in half. Topps had told me this with more pride than anger.

I'd been at his house once for lunch last year and Topps was eagerly telling his dad how he was going to download the special edition of a sci-fi film, and it hadn't even hit the cinemas yet!

'I hope you're not going to watch it,' Aleksander, his dad, had said.

'Sure, why not?'

'Because it's illegal, that's why. You've stolen it.'

'C'mon Dad,' Topps had laughed. 'Sci-Fi producers are like multi-billionaires. They're not going to care. I'll probably go and see it at the cinema anyway. I just want to catch it early.'

Aleksander had put his soup spoon down. He always gave this look where you knew it was time for a lecture. His eyebrows pointed towards his nose and his lips became thin and he didn't move for a few moments. Not a muscle. He just stared at Topps. He did his lecturing often enough, according to Topps. He thought doing the right thing was so important he'd even made Topps read books on ethics.

In his deep, serious Polish accent of his Aleksander had said, 'Pirating is stealing, no matter who you're copying from. You think filmmakers spend millions and millions of dollars making a film just so people can download it for nothing? You enjoy it, you pay for it. Otherwise they'll be no more *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings* anymore. It's become too much. It's an epidemic. Music shops have disappeared because nobody buys CDs anymore, what next, cinemas? Well, they'll be no copying in my house, Peter, that's for sure.'

'Right. So I'll take that as a no, we can't download it,' Topps had said, embarrassed that I was witnessing his dad's morale outrage.

But his dad hadn't finished. 'Just think,' he continued, 'if you'd spent years writing and planning and producing a movie only to have people copy it just so they could see it a couple of days early. Wouldn't you rather they pay you for two hours of decent entertainment? It's not a free world, Topps. It doesn't exist just for your amusement. Morality and ethics start with the very basics - *Do not steal*.'

'Okay Dad, jeez, take a chill pill,' Topps said. 'I get the message.'

I'd said nothing. Dad and I didn't really have these sort of heavy conversations with words like "ethics" in them. Besides, I had recently copied at least eight CDs from Skye and bought a bunch of dodgy DVDs from the Rosedale market to go with our new DVD player. Dad hadn't said anything about it when I told him triumphantly that each disc was only five dollars each. In fact, he'd sat up and watched a Will Ferrell comedy that night with me and laughed all the way through. Most of my music and movie collection was copied.

In response to my jibe Topps said, 'Actually Stacey, I do believe what my dad says. He's right, that's why,'

‘Oh, it’s okay for you to go on about it Topps, your dad is a big shot software engineer,’ I said. ‘So your parents are rich. Need some money for a new pair of jeans? Ask Dad. Need a new pair of Globes? Just ask Dad. “Sure Peter, here’s a hundred dollars, have fun out shopping!” Then, when it’s Christmas, here, have a new mountain bike and then it’s off on holidays at your beach house. Well, I can’t do that! I have to work. So go off and tell the cops!’

Pretty dramatic, but it worked. I felt better too, even though I was basically using Topps as a punching bag for my frustrations.

Of course, Topps didn’t do anything about the Video Saloon. He also didn’t speak to me for the rest of the week. Not that we didn’t sit together or totally ignore each other, just that he was hurt, I was angry and we both went into a bit of sulk. Me, because I was just basically angry and Topps because I’d gone and burst his little adventure balloon.

I felt sorry for Skye the most. She’s a good friend too. Someone who’s intensely loyal. She may be a scatter brain and a loudmouth sometimes, but she’s never let me down. Now she had to sit awkwardly between us in class or at lunch. She’d ask us what was wrong, but neither of us would say. It was a bad week.

A couple of times I’d reached for the phone at home or tried to crack a joke at school, but nothing happened. I knew I’d have to apologise eventually. Which I hate doing. I was hoping the argument would just fade away and we’d be back being friends again.

Anyway, I thought I was right with what I had said. If you’ve got money, you can afford to decide what’s right and wrong. You can be picky.

I angrily threw away two pieces of onion from the souvlaki as I thought about our conversation. Who was Topps to make me feel guilty? I have a father who works part-time and who still can’t cope with losing his wife and I’m supposed to just throw away my job? And so what about a bit of pirating? As if every kid in school isn’t in to it, from Rebecca Kite and her 2500 songs on her iPod, all downloaded from the Internet – she had once boasted the last time she’d actually paid for music was a Wiggles cassette ten years ago - to that Sri Lankan guy from year eleven who gave out lists of PS 3 and X-Box 360

console games he'd sell you for eight dollars a game or two for ten. All copies. So, what was a few DVDs in the basement of a down-and-out video store?

I didn't care. I really didn't. When Vince came in that afternoon and gave me my pay packet and I ripped it open and saw the crisp ten and twenty dollar notes, it was settled, as far as I was concerned those illegal DVDs never existed.

This strategy lasted exactly a week.

Topps and I had slowly begun to mellow out at school. We were still angry at each other, but I did lend him my copy of our literature class novel, Sonya Hartnett's *Sleeping Dogs*, when he had left his at home, and he did give me his spare packet of Burger Rings for morning break. Still, it was an awful week. I felt a guilty knot in my stomach every time I saw Topps. This was the longest running feud I had ever had with a friend.

On Saturday afternoon I joined Crass in the Video Saloon for an afternoon and evening shift. I rarely had to work the mornings. The afternoon was busy though. Summer was only a few weeks away but the weather had turned cold and dreary. This always improved business. And we had a new deal – five weeklies for five bucks. It got us pretty busy.

Crass and I got to talking about being broke. He understood where I was coming from. His dad had nicked off to work in the mines in Western Australia and his mum worked in a crummy bakery. They never had any money.

'You're skint too?' he asked.

'Pretty much. I want to save money to buy a car in a few years time. No way could my dad buy me one.'

'Know how you feel. Vince pays us chicken feed. That's why I try to earn a little on the side.'

I suddenly became uneasy. Very uneasy. 'What do you mean?' I asked.

Crass scratched his peroxide hair. 'I run a little business. It makes a bit of money. I could always do with some extra help, too.'

I had a bad feeling where this was leading. 'What sort of help?'

‘Packing and posting DVDs, maybe some console games or CDs, for my own customers. You could help me get the labels ready, pack some boxes, all easy stuff. You can even do it from home.’

A sinking feeling, like you get in a real fast roller coaster, hit me hard. So Crass was in with Vince too? ‘Nah, it sounds a bit fiddly and stuff. I don’t reckon I’d be good at it,’ I said.

‘Hey, it’s no big deal,’ said Crass. ‘I just sell a few DVDs. If you want to help, that’d be cool, but it’s up to you.’

‘I...I’ll think about it, yeah, I dunno,’ I stammered.

Oh man, I couldn’t believe it! I find the DVD stash and then a couple of weeks later he asks me to help *sell* them? This was crazy! What were the chances? Why would he ask me to help him out, anyway? What was the point? A customer came in and asked Crass to recommend some good comedies for her daughter’s slumber party. Crass walked with her to the comedy section giving me some valuable time to think.

What did the Caitlin’s warning mean? “*I didn’t want to say anything in front of your friend, but watch yourself. Just keep your head down.*” It sounded sinister to the max.

Crass rented out an average comedy (it was the *Princess Diaries 2* which is way unfunny compared to the book) and turned back to me. ‘Thought about my little business proposition then?’

‘It sounds okay, but, you know, I’m not sure,’ I said.

‘Hey, it’s no big deal. It’s not as if I’m getting you to sell stolen goods or anything, just help me out with a couple of DVDs. Besides, I thought you said you needed the money? Just trying to help you out, you know.’

Crass rubbed his hands up and down his T-shirt. A customer returned a bunch of videos. Crass took them and held the first cover up and studied the blurb. It was from the classics section, *Honour Among Thieves*. Very appropriate.

Crass put the video down. ‘Listen, do you want to make some extra money or not?’ he asked.

I thought about Dad and the bills. Then I thought about Caitlin's warning. Not for the first time in the past few weeks I said: 'Let me think about it.'

Making Up

I had to forget about my stupid pride. I think I realised that if I didn't do something about Topps and I, we'd never become friends again. It's not as if he didn't have other friends. He could forget all about me if he wanted. Sure, he's one of my best friends, but it's not as if we hung out together every weekend and sat together every class. His mates, Will Phillips and Ray Knipe, were basically computer geeks like him. They hung out a lot together, but for some reason he preferred my company. 'You know why,' Courtney Jarratt would have said with a wink. I'm not so sure. If he was friends with me just because he thought that one day we'd get together, he'd have given up long ago. I'd made it clear I didn't like him in that sort of way.

But I really did care for him, so I was ready to do the apologetic stuff to get him back onside. I knew how, too. Compliments. It works every time, especially when you compliment a guy. They're suckers for it. I don't mean I was being manipulative, I just needed a springboard to reach the next level: an apology.

So during computer studies I waited until he was finished updating his homepage, walked over behind him, leaned over and read the content of the screen. I told him, as I placed my hand on his shoulder, how cool it was. He smiled and looked at my hand, which I left on his shoulder just a second longer than I normally would as I kept reading the screen.

At lunchtime he caught up with me at the canteen and bought me a raspberry liquorice strap.

'A peace offering,' he said as he handed me the liquorice.

'Thanks Topps, but it should be me apologising to you.'

Topps snatched the liquorice from my hands and bit off the end. 'Apology accepted then,' he laughed, chewing madly.

It was good to be friends again. It's the worst, having to ignore each other. You want things to go back to the way they were but you don't want to have to be the first to

say you're sorry. If we ever have arguments it's Topps who usually breaks the ice. I wish I could, but I can't. I don't know why.

We didn't talk about the Video Saloon. I think Topps didn't want to risk another argument and neither did I. I'd made up my mind, anyway. I was going to say no to Crass and start looking around for another job. I'd try Coles or even the Chicken Shack. There wasn't a whole lot of options for me, but I guessed I'd get something.

The following weekend summer made a sudden appearance in the form of a hot, aqua blue Sunday afternoon. My fingers made sweaty prints on the DVD covers and I had to keep wiping the covers clean. Melbourne weather is like that. Hot days just creep up on you and knock you around, burn your shoulders and make you sweat. Then the next day it could be all windy, miserable and cold. Weird.

I was in the weekly release section checking out a Ben Affleck film, *Surviving Christmas*. It was one of the flicks that totally skip the cinema and sits forlornly by themselves in the weekly section. It seemed to refused to rent itself out.

Ben Affleck used to be my favourite actor. In two years he made three brilliant films: *Good Will Hunting*, *Chasing Amy* and *Shakespeare in Love*. That film made me go funny in the stomach. Really. It was so romantic in a real sort of way. I still watch it every three or four months. It's my comfort film. Then what happens? *Gigli*, *Daredevil*, *Pearl Harbour*. That's what. I've seen them all. They suck! Sure, I'd love to be in a romantic but doomed love triangle with Ben, but only in a decent movie. Anyway, that was a long time ago and I'd almost forgotten about Ben now.

Since working at the store I've watched a lot more videos and read about a lot of movie stars. I always found it funny that actors star in some of the best movies ever and then suddenly string together complete duds for five years straight. It's like they hit a wall and that's the end of their career. Or is it just bad luck? Is picking a movie basically random, like the Saturday night lottery? Did Ben just get lucky when he made all those great movies?

I continued dusting the shelves when a girl in a tight black T-shirt, hipster jeans and tussled brown hair came up and asked for Crass. She could have been out of *Neighbours*

– she'd be one of the bitchy girls who tries to move in on taken guys. Before I could answer, Crass called out 'Hey ya Toni!' and walked over to us.

He obviously knew her. She put her hand on his arm affectionately. I counted at least five cheap gold rings on her fingers. Classy. I thought I remembered seeing her around town a few times, but I'd never seen her at school before. I guessed she was around 18, so she may have left.

'Crass, how ya doing?' Toni said. She was all smiles. I tried to make myself scarce and kept on dusting.

'Toni, looking good,' Crass said.

'Awh, you're sweet,' Toni purred. 'Now, what about my summer job? Have you asked your boss yet?'

Crass jerked his head over towards me. 'Sorry, man. We don't need anybody at the moment. Stacey is working the weekends for us. I can put in a good word for you though.'

Toni gave me a dirty look, as if *I* had taken her job. They spoke a little more before Toni said, 'Well, I'll catch ya mate,' and wiggled her way out of the store. Her bum was swinging so much it could take kids on a playground ride.

'Is she looking for a job?' I said with obvious loathing.

'Yeah. Man, is she one hot chick, or what?' I took that to be rhetorical question and didn't answer. 'Perhaps I should let her in on my little business venture?' Crass said. 'She needs the money. Unless, of course, you've changed your mind?'

I was hoping he'd forgotten about it. 'Crass, I still dunno. Why do you need me to do it anyway?'

'Stace, all I'm asking you to do is hand a few customers some packages every now and then. It's simple. Easy money, man. See, I can't be here all the time and I just need someone to hand over the goods and take the cash.'

'And all I have to do is hand over the packages?'

'Yeah, that's all.'

'Does Vince know about it?'

‘Yeah, he knows, but, well...he’s cool about it, only I don’t like promoting the fact I’m selling them on his time.’

‘I still don’t know.’

Crass took a DVD cover from the shelf and flicked it into the air. ‘It’s up to you,’ he said, catching it in one hand, ‘but I know plenty of others who’d be happy to earn a few extra bucks working here.’ He walked back to the counter with the DVD in his hand, stuck it in the player and began to watch it.

I kept up with the dusting. Crass didn’t seem to be too cut with me. But was that a threat? *‘I know plenty of others who’d be happy to earn a few extra bucks here.’*

I’d already gone and put my name down in Coles but the assistant manager, a woman named Raz with hips the size of a ute, told me every teenage kid in town was on the waiting list – they all wanted jobs for the summer holidays. The Chicken Shack didn’t even take my details. They said they advertise in the front window when they need someone. ‘I’d just lose this,’ the bristly manager had said, giving back my resume. That left the bakery and a few smaller stores. I guessed I’d have to go to Ringwood and the big shopping centre there, but it’d mean a bus and then train journey. Not something I was looking forward to.

I kept on dusting and began to think it was actually worth risking a few over-the-counter sales of pirated discs just to keep my job. Who’d ever know? I could blame Crass if I was caught. I could do with the extra money too.

I tried to put the idea out of my head but later that night I started to ponder over it as I half-heatedly finished some algebra problems at the kitchen table. The kitchen was getting feral. Ridges of dirt trailed around the edge of the cupboards, the fridge and oven were streaked black with grease and the frying pan hadn’t been washed in three days. Congealed fat lay as smooth as an ice rink on its surface. Mum would never have let us get away with this. She wasn’t the world’s greatest cleaner, but the house never looked grotty. It was always neat. I felt the place was starting to slowly fall apart.

Dad was fairly hopeless tidying up and I only glossed over the real dirty bits. I’d vacuum but I didn’t dust. The white windowsills were now camouflaged with grime and

the shower had bits of my mousy hair and dad's beard (when he bothered to shave) guttered around the plug hole.

A pile of bills and letters lay next to my homework. I left my textbook and absent-mindedly sorted through the letters as I thought what to do about the Video Saloon. I had one over on Crass, that's for sure. I knew about the copies in the basement. If he hassled me about handling the discs I could bail him up and tell him what I knew. That'd shut him up. Perhaps I could blackmail him? Tell him I was keeping the job and if he didn't want me to go to the police, he should just leave me alone. Man, I could make *him* quit. But that was wishful thinking. The best I could do was keep stringing him along and remain ambivalent by not giving him an answer.

A Visa bill caught my attention. I always thought credit cards were a cool idea – spend money you didn't have. I could buy a car tomorrow. Just having the freedom to take off whenever you want without asking Dad for a lift or waiting for the bus. The day I get my P Plates I planned to drive along the Great Ocean Road all the way to Port Fairy. Mum and Dad only took me down there once. Usually we went east along the Princes Freeway to Lakes Entrance. I can still recall every major country town we went through on that three hour drive: Warragul, Moe, Morwell, Traralgon, Sale, Bairnsdale. One after the other, like suburban train stations on the way to the city.

Dad liked to get off the Freeway and stop at one or two of the towns before we reached the coast. He said he felt guilty bypassing them. He liked the open cut mines and the hard working people of the towns. He even liked the huge power station outside of Moe that looked like something from Chernobyl, the nuclear reactor that caught fire in the Ukraine. I did an assignment on it once. I found the power station ugly, but Dad thought the men and women who worked there were honest and tough.

My grandpa used to work in the paper mill in Traralgon before he married Nan and moved to Melbourne to work in the city as a printer. They're both dead now, but Dad always felt closer to them when we stopped in Traralgon.

Mum and I preferred getting to Lakes Entrance as quickly as possible; Mum for the beach and me for the strawberry milkshake we got from the fish & chip shop as soon as we stopped at the caravan park.

We'd been to Lakes Entrance so many times every trip had faded into just a few distinct memories: the big trevally Dad caught that faked being dead until I touched it and it suddenly leapt at me, its mouth gaping and desperate and me squealing my head off. Or buying a cheap kite from the corner store and flying it in the park, only to have the string snap and the kite fly into the ocean that lapped at the park's edges. I cried so much that Dad even attempted to wade out and get the kite back. My favourite memory, though, was making a train with Mum and Dad on a giant slide in a Bairnsdale park one summer's day. The slide went down a hill and was the biggest I've ever seen – I was only eight or nine at the time, but I remember thinking it was like a roller coaster. I was at the front, my Mum hung onto me with her bare, brown legs and my Dad had his bony hands on her shoulder. Then he pushed us off too hard and we went flying down the slide, Mum screaming louder than I've ever heard her before and Dad yelling "Whoop-Whoop!" until we hit the bottom, me hitting the dirt hard and Mum landing on top of me, Dad jumping off the slide and leaping over us. All of us laughing so hard as we lay in the dirt. I've never seen my parents laugh so much. Dad was actually crying with laughter because Mum's legs were up in the air and I was squashed underneath, neither of us able to move. I don't think I'll ever forget that.

But I remembered our one trip along the Great Ocean Road like a movie you've seen six or seven times before. I remember every detail. Every frame. The smell of salt in the air, my CD Walkman lying next to me in the car forgotten as I watched the waves hit the beach as we drove into Lorne, bouncing on the trampoline with Mum along the beach and even the flavour of the ice-cream I had: rainbow with a Flake chocolate bar stuck into the top. I loved the Great Ocean Road, loved the winding road along the coast and the small towns that we drove through. I wanted to go back there, but I wanted to do the driving.

How old did you have to be to get a credit card?

I looked at the Visa bill. The credit limit for dad was \$7500. That's huge money! I reckoned I could buy a second hand Mazda hatchback with a thumping stereo for that.

I'd never really thought about banking before. Now, with the job, I'd started to get into the whole finance thing. I had my own tax file number and pay slips and had started to study my banking statements I received every month too. Each week I'd put half my pay into a savings account. I loved to see my account gradually rise when I ripped open the bank statements.

Then I noticed Dad's balance. It said the balance was \$4500. That's how much he had used on the credit card. It was a lot of money to pay back. I knew if you didn't pay off your credit card each month you had to pay interest. A lot of interest. How was Dad paying it off? How could he owe so much? I took a look at the description of payments on the bill: Coles supermarket; a bottle shop; Repco car repairs; water and gas bill; doctors; electricity bill; telephone bill; the bottle shop again. On and on. Everything was going on the credit card. And there was also a cash advance of \$1000.

'Taking an interest in the finances, Stace?'

Dad had come in from the lounge room and snuck up behind me. I jumped and dropped the Visa statement.

'Just wondering how it all works. It's a bit confusing.'

'How it works is the bank says I owe a lot of money and I have to pay it back as soon as possible. Fairly simple.'

'We owe a fair bit, don't we Dad?'

'I'm afraid I've let the bills creep up on us.'

'How do we pay it off?'

Dad sat down and sighed. We'd never really discussed finances before. Dad did everything. Sure, he'd whinge when I needed money for clothes or an excursion or a movie, but I just thought that's what dads did. I never knew we were really poor.

'When we got your mum's life insurance I paid off a lot of what we owed for the house. The rest I put into a long-term deposit account,' Dad said. 'For you.'

'For me? What for?'

‘The future. You know, university, a car, rent and bond when you move out of home, even backpacking overseas if you wanted. Thought it’d make a nice eighteenth birthday present. Grandpa and Nan could never help me out much with money, they never had much spare, and your mum and I wanted to give you a good start.’

‘Gee, thanks Dad,’ I said, not knowing what else to say. I wanted to ask exactly how much he’d put in to the account, but thought it might be pushing it.

‘It’s just a pity that money has been tight in the past year,’ he said, ‘but I didn’t want to touch your account. And I haven’t. I...I know I have to get back to some decent work...and I will...so don’t worry about this, hey?’ He picked up the bill and put it underneath the pile of letters.

‘Dad, you can’t keep using your credit card for everything,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you take some money out of my account to help pay it off? I don’t need it right now.’

‘What? Nah, I don’t want to do that. Things aren’t too desperate, not yet. We’ll see what happens. But, if things get too bad, I guess I could...’ He rubbed his head. His skin was sallow and tight and his fingernails were bitten to the quick.

I knew offering money from my account meant I was letting Dad off the hook with work. But he was – and I hated saying this – probably pretty useless at work at the moment. I could still see the haunted look of Mum in his eyes. He needed another woman to look after him. I know daughters are supposed to feel all funny about their dads marrying again, but I reckon I’d welcome it. Then I wouldn’t have to be the one to look after him all the time.

God, this was worse than I thought. I imagined ourselves having to sell the house and living in one of the dumpy units near the secondary school where all the social security dropouts lived. I’d have to wear school uniforms from the Brotherhood of St Laurence like a couple of kids at school. The uniforms were always faded with loose bits of cotton hanging from the hems. “Povos” the kids were called.

One thing was for sure, that Motorola mobile phone I was looking at for Christmas wouldn’t be under the tree this year. Not unless I paid for it myself. Not unless I found a better source of income and earned a bit more money.

And, I thought grimly as Dad slumped on the sofa and despondently turned on the TV, I knew where to get it.

Running with the Wrong Crowd

I didn't have to wait long to tell Crass the good news. Vince rang Monday night and asked if I could work Tuesday after school. Crass couldn't make it in until seven o'clock, so I took over from Vince until Crass had made it back.

Late afternoons on a weekday were always fairly quiet. It's mainly mums on the way home from picking their kids up at primary school and lonely looking men getting their five weeklies. Vince had left me a pile of discs in the return box to deal with, so I didn't have to sit around watching the store TV.

By then Topps and I were fully back on best-friend terms. He gave me a blow-by-blow commentary on his *Medal of Honour* on-line win against ten rabid Nazis played by various geeks around the world. It's one of his favourite game series. You run around a World War II battlefield shooting up enemy soldiers with hand grenades and machine guns. I have no interest in the game, but faked enough enthusiasm for him to keep talking about it as we watched a Year Twelve inter-school basketball game.

Personally, I preferred platform or puzzle games or karaoke. They're way more fun. Killing Nazis and aliens is sort of just mindless and so boy-ish. Topps always complained about my choice of games when I would take console discs from the store to Topps' on the weekend. 'Not another one of those girl games,' he'd groan when I turned up with a cute, cuddly console game in my hands.

The worst, for Topps anyway, was when I turned up at his house with Skye, two microphones and *Singstar*. It's a karaoke game where you sing along to a video film clip and the game scores you out of 10,000 points for your singing ability. Ray Knipe was there too and groaned. 'I'd feel unnatural playing that,' he said when he saw the game. 'It's totally for girls.'

The funny thing? Ray Knipe stood in the rumpus room holding the microphone, his eyes shut, his fists clenched and his gangly frame swinging in time as he sung. He was

really good! He could actually sing in-tune. Properly! He rocked! Skye and I burst into laughter when he finished. More out of shock. He scored 9,300 points, which was 2,000 more than either of us.

Officially, we weren't supposed to take games for free from the store. We got half price off overnights and games and we could take up to three weeklies for free. But Crass and I never paid for our overnights or games. We just entered it in as a full credit. I was always careful to never take more than one or two, though.

Still, I could never really take full advantage of the free games. I must have been one of the only kids at school without either an Internet connection or a games console. It was only thanks to our broken video recorder that Dad bought a cheapo DVD player.

Topps didn't try to raise the topic of the Video Saloon that week, which made me happy. I didn't think Topps would take my news very well. I was sure he'd bring it up again though. I thought lying would be the best thing to do. Tell him I hadn't seen any evidence of pirated discs since – it must have been a once-off. Hopefully I'd be out of there with a new job or Topps would forget about it anyway. Or both.

Crass came in late and mumbled something about helping his brother buy an old motorbike off a mate. He started hoeing into a vanilla slice as I got my bag to leave. I sort of hung around a bit waiting to see if he'd bring up the "helping hand" request he'd asked me for. He said nothing, just pointedly ignored me with his down-turned mouthful of icing and custard.

This is ridiculous, I thought. Now I want to help him out and Crass doesn't want to raise the subject. I hoped from foot to foot and feigned interest in a Coca-Cola promotional sign on the counter.

'So, Crass, what you said about helping you out, I'm kinda interested,' I eventually said, before quickly adding, 'I need the money.'

'Helping me out with what?' he asked.

'You know, selling the DVDs to customers – giving the customers packages, whatever.' I still didn't exactly know what he wanted me to do.

‘Oh, yeah, that. Sure, if I have something for you to do. I’ll see what’s coming up.’ He scoffed the rest of the vanilla slice. ‘Need the dosh, hey? You and me both.’

I gave him a forced smile. ‘Thanks then, see you on Saturday,’ I said and walked home.

Boy, I thought, that was easy.

The following Saturday Crass showed me a box of envelopes he kept under a bench in the back room. The box held a mix of thin yellow and white padded and sealed envelopes. They were all labelled with first names.

‘These are for my customers who may come in this weekend,’ he explained. ‘What they owe is written on the back of each envelope. Just take the money and throw it in the tin.’ He pointed to an empty Milo tin in the box. ‘I’m out of here Sunday afternoon so you may get a few customers in then. If they don’t pick them up by Monday, I’ll post them. I’ll pay you twenty bucks for helping me out.’

Twenty bucks! It seemed like a lot of money for just handing over some envelopes. It’d take me three hours of work after tax to make that.

‘Another thing,’ said Crass. ‘Can you leave the box underneath the lunch table when you’re finished? I like to keep the box out of Vince’s sight.’

‘Are you sure Vince is cool about it?’ I asked. ‘And he’s coming in Sunday night.’

‘No worries, he’s cool. He knows what I do, I just don’t make a fuss about it.’ He pulled up his sleeves of his hooded jacket and pushed the box in a little further on the shelf. ‘I told him I’d stick to posting them, that’s all. He doesn’t like me handing them out over the counter. Anyway, I better phone a few customers who are coming in today so they know you are kosher.’

‘Kosher?’

‘Yeah, you know, you’re OK. That you’re in with my little business.’

Crass made it sound, like, totally sordid. I wondered how long this had been going on for. Obviously his customers hadn’t ever asked me for packages, but I’d never seen any evidence Crass had been selling them during business hours – except for the pile of DVDs in the basement and overalls guy, that is.

‘You’re not scared about getting caught?’ I asked him. ‘I mean, you could get really busted if you were sprung.’ I remembered the video piracy warning that came up at the start of every DVD. I never took much notice, but it always sounded ominous.

‘Nah, I’m small fry. It’s just a handful of customers. Big deal. Probably get let off with a warning, that’s all. Besides, I’m careful. I never have more than a handful of DVDs or games here. I’ve been doing it a while now and it’s been easy money. The cops don’t care. Haven’t you been to the market? They’ve sold copies there for the last two years. If the cops cared they’d have shut them down yonks ago.’

‘Then what about the policeman who came in the other week?’ I said. ‘He was talking about pirated DVDs doing the rounds at video stores – and he wanted to talk to Vince about it.’

Crass yawned, as if to show how boring and girly my worries were. ‘Different thing altogether. That’s all about renting out illegal DVDs in the store. Some distributors send us copies instead of originals. It happens. That’s where the big money is, anyway, cause it’s just a few guys doing it right around Australia.’

I was in the back sorting through some new Blu-ray discs that Vince had asked me to stick barcodes on when Crass’ first “customer” came in later that afternoon. I recognised his voice clearly as Overall Guy who asked me for the cut out of Jim Carrey.

‘Did your friend agree to help out with the business?’ asked Overall Guy.

‘Yeah. Thanks for the tip. Good to have her on board,’ Crass said.

Both Crass and the customer seemed fairly oblivious to the fact I was in the back room. Overall Guy must have told Crass when he saw me and Topps with the pirated disc that time. So did Crass decide to get me on board just in case I was going to squeal on him or was that just a coincidence? I didn’t know what to think. What I did know is that money was more important at this very moment. I’d made my decision. There was no use in trying to change my mind now.

Feeling like a big pretender, I walked out of the back room holding the box of Blu-ray discs. ‘Hi,’ I said to Crass and the customer as chirpily as I could and taking extra effort in looking at the package Overall Guy held with complete nonchalance.

Overalls Guy hesitated for a moment, looking at Crass for confirmation that I was cool. Crass raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'She's cool.'

'Present for my daughter,' the man explained to me. Taking Crass' cue, he took out some of the covers and had a quick look at them: cartoons and animations. I noticed a couple of *Spongebob Squarepants* discs – one of my favourite cartoons. Most of the others were Disney. 'Wow! They look great,' he said. 'She'll love them.'

'Bit cheaper than buying ten DVDs from K-Mart, hey?' said Crass.

'Yeah. Thirty bucks each! Rip-off. Wouldn't buy them. Guess I should learn how to download them instead, but I can't be buggered,' Overall Guy said, handing over a bunch of notes. He didn't get any change back. I realised that this must be a real nice earner for Crass.

'Well, this is easier and better quality than downloading them. And if you're after any of the latest releases, I have them,' said Crass. 'Or if you're after anything for yourself,' he added.

The customer smirked at Crass, then at me. 'Not sure if the wife would like that,' he said, taking the package and walking out. I grimaced, not quite sure what Crass and he meant, but not liking the sound of it.

Crass pocketed the money. 'Should help me on the way to buying that motorbike a little quicker,' he said to me.

The next day I was by myself for the quieter Sunday afternoon shift. I had to admit I felt slightly edgy, even a bit pumped, about the agreement to help Crass out. I'm not a risk taker, but the ball of nervousness that had been rolling around my stomach had been replaced by the electric tinge of anticipation. I was finally doing something on the edge! I wasn't boring old Stacey with the dullest life in Rosedale. I was a dealer making black money! My mum would have killed me, for sure, but what would Dad do? Nothing. I was virtually on my own now, and so I had to help myself.

Half an hour into it a guy with dark curly hair and a small birthmark under right his eye told me Colin said I may have an order for him.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked, trying to hide the nervous tone to my voice. I’d been trying to convince myself that morning what I was doing was OK, and I’d only just succeeded. I mean, buying CDs and DVDs and console games *were* a total joke. Up to a hundred bucks for a few plastic discs? Rip-off. How did they expect kids to buy them when they cost so much? Games cost up to a hundred, CDs around thirty – yet they’re aimed at kids like me. If the companies were so worried about people not pirating their stuff, they’d lower the price, wouldn’t they?

‘Me name’s Eric,’ the man said to me, grinning. ‘Don’t worry about no surname. I’m not a member here.’

I went out the back and found his first name on one of the sealed envelopes. It felt like it only had a few DVDs inside it. On the back of the envelope Crass had scribbled \$45.

‘Enjoy them,’ I said, not sure what else to say.

Eric gave me a big smile. I saw the flash of a gold tooth. Then he gave me a fifty-dollar bill. ‘Youse can keep the change,’ he said.

‘Gee, thanks,’ I said. This was beginning to look like a lucrative business.

‘Yeah, I sure am gonna enjoy watching these,’ said Eric, putting the envelope under his arm.

‘Er, great,’ I said, not really understanding his over enthusiasm for the movies.

Eric was starting to give me the creeps. I was wearing a fairly light, tight-ish white T-shirt and I felt as if he had locked his eyes onto my chest. I crossed my arms defensively. He seemed to get the hint and walked out. ‘See youse!’ he waved.

Another two of Crass’ “customers” came in during my shift. Once, when it was fairly busy, the guy hung around the new releases until the store was empty. He was a younger guy about Crass’ age. He seemed a bit nervous too, quickly paying and leaving the store with the package in his backpack.

Boy, Crass must have really let his customers know that I was his new sidekick quick as. They knew who to ask.

Vince was due in at six, so I hid the box under the desk in the back. There were still a few packages left, which Crass said he'd deal with Monday morning. I wondered how much Vince knew about Crass' operation. Perhaps they were splitting the profits? Or was Vince totally blind about what was going on? One thing for sure, if Vince found the box of DVDs, I was going to act dumb.

Vince came in complaining, as usual. 'Bloody Colin,' he said, 'making me work Sunday afternoons. Not as if I live next door, is it? I hafta drive from Box Hill. Shouldn't have let him take the evening off. That's why I hired you, Stacey, so I don't hafta work weekends.' He took a look at Saturday's balance to see how much money we had made. 'Four hundred? Ah, bloody hell, it's all going down the gurgler. I remember we used to make double that on a good Saturday – we had to have three kids working here.' He sighed and I felt happy I'd be out of here in a couple of hours so I wouldn't have to listen to him go on all night.

Vince took two bottle of Sprite, opened one and handed the other to me.

'That's for being such a good little worker,' he said. 'I wish Colin was as good as you. You're reliable. That's what an employer wants. Thanks for your help tonight.'

I took it warily and watched him carefully as he went to the backroom again. What was the sudden free Sprite and encouraging words? Totally unlike Vince. Then again, Eric had put me on edge. Perhaps it was just me being super sensitive. Even so, I was glad to get out of there.

Not that home was much better. Dad picked me up and I could immediately smell the stale, sweat-tinge aroma of beer on him. Two unopened beer bottles of Carlton Draught in an otherwise-empty six-pack lay on the back seat. He'd obviously been around at Dave's again. Dave the home motor-mechanic was his boozy mate. My mother never really liked Dave but since her death Dad had spent a lot of time at his bachelor pad (Dave's wife left him years ago and he never seems to hang on to his girlfriends). What did they talk about? Nothing much, if Dave's conversation was anything to go by. All he seemed to do was tell corny jokes. It was always a good excuse to do my homework or

listen to music in my room when Dave came around. He reminded me of Barney from *The Simpsons*.

‘Good day?’ asked Dad, reversing the car.

‘Yeah. OK,’ I lied. I didn’t think telling Dad that I’d just become part of a local pirate distribution ring would go down to well.

‘Anything exciting happen?’

I looked out of the window at the flaky, faded Video Saloon sign. *Video Loon*.

‘No. Nothing out of the ordinary,’ I said, continuing to stare at the sign. ‘Just the usual.’

Just Friends

Skye receives more text messages than anybody else I know. I'd only been at her house for half an hour and her mobile had beeped three times. Breaking off our group science assignment where we were supposed to be examining the differences between concave and convex lenses, she scrambled to read the messages.

'Hey, it's Lucy, she wants to know how we're going with the assignment,' Skye said after we'd been interrupted for the third time.

'Slowly, if at all,' I said.

Skye expertly punched the keypad of her phone with her thumb. 'I'm just telling her we're finishing question three,' she said, repeating the message aloud she was inputting: '*OMG Q3 2Hrd S.*'

'Skye, is it possible for you to concentrate for just ten minutes so we can get this finished?' I sighed.

Skye beamed back at me, 'Sure. Let's go! Now, what was the question again?'

I laughed, shaking my head. Her short bob and impish ears and liquid blue eyes made her impossible to stay mad at. 'Like I said about five hundred times, we're trying to think up an experiment we can use to show how convex lenses are thicker in the middle than the ends.'

'With spoons?'

'What?' I said, throwing the pen down.

'Does the experiment have something to do with spoons?'

'We already did that in class. To show how light bends. A spoon is not a convex shape, anyway. God Skye, you're such a bimbo sometimes.' Skye, as she often did when I got angry at her, changed the subject by picking up her MP3 player.

'You know, this is two gigs but I can only fit, like, 400 songs on it. That's not much, is it?' she asked, concerned. 'It's, like, full already and I've only had it two months.'

I didn't say anything. I just gave Skye the stare.

'Oh c'mon Stace,' she said when she realised I wouldn't bite. 'We've been at this for ages. I'm stuffed. I need a few biscuits or a bowl of popcorn...something to eat.'

'Oh yeah,' I said with mock-horror, 'it's been over twenty minutes! I forgot, you suffer cerebral brain haemorrhages if you study for over half an hour straight.'

Skye looked hurt. 'You shouldn't make fun like that Stacey. You know my uncle died of a brain haemorrhage,' she said quietly. 'He was in terrible pain.'

I didn't know what to say. 'Oh, I...I didn't know,' I mumbled.

Suddenly her face lit up. 'Got ya!' she laughed. 'I don't even HAVE an uncle!'

I grabbed a pillow from her bed and gave her a whack over the head with it and she went into hysterics. 'You should have seen your face!' she said as I kept hitting her. 'It was all, like, "My God, what did I just say? I've just totally devastated my best friend!"'

In the end Skye got her way, as usual, and we ended up sitting at her kitchen counter eating Extra Creamy ice-cream with chocolate topping and magic sprinkles.

'How much money would it take for you to go out with Eric Marshall?' Skye asked as we licked the spoons clean.

Skye often asked silly questions like this: "what if?" or "how much?" or "would you?" questions. We'd be sitting eating lunch and she ask us, 'If you could have cosmetic surgery on any one part of your body, where would it be?' or 'What if Huffy asked you to sing the national anthem by yourself in front of assembly in return, for like, top marks in science. Would you do it?' When I first met her I thought she asked stupid questions because she was, in fact, pretty stupid, but I've since discovered it's her way of dragging personal information out of shut up people like myself. She is sometimes vague and silly, but she's a good friend to have. She talks more than she listens and possibly has Attention Deficiency Disorder but she takes in a lot. I predict she'll be a counsellor or psychologist when she's older.

'How much have you got?' I said, chasing a puddle of syrup around the bowl. 'Cause I would NEVER go out with Eric.'

‘I’d do it for three hundred dollars,’ Skye said. ‘As long as I didn’t have to, you know, go the grope or anything.’

‘Come off it Skye! That’s completely wrong. He’s gross! I wouldn’t even hold hands with Eric, even for a thousand dollars!’

‘Gee, I thought you were, like, short of cash. You’re fussy! How about Peter then?’

‘Who, Topps?’ I said, knowing exactly who she was talking about. I knew where this was leading – one of Skye’s regular incursions into the very unromantic life of Stacey Fallon. She was always trying to get me to describe just what my feelings were like for Topps. I think it was a constant source of amusement for her that a 15-year-old girl could have a boy as such a good friend.

‘I’d ask for a four figure sum, at least,’ I said, hoping she’d change the subject.

‘No way, you two would make a great couple!’ Skye said. ‘Yeah, he’s no Zac Efron, but he’s funny, he’s friendly...and he’s rich.’

‘I’ve told you about a hundred times Skye, I just don’t like him that way.’

‘But you’re practically best friends! How many girls are best friends with a guy!’

‘Skye, I don’t know how many times I’ve told you this but Peter...Topps...he’s a nice guy, but you know, when I get interested in a guy I want him to be more, I dunno, *exciting*. Topps is into computers and electronics and geeky stuff. He’s going to turn out just like his dad, you know, he’ll probably work in an office his whole life and live in Rosedale and never move...’

‘And what’s wrong with Rosedale?’ cut in Skye.

‘Yeah Skye, I know you think this place is like Disneyland, but I when I get a guy I want him to get me out of here! I want someone who’s gonna take me places, on an *adventure*.’

‘You don’t need to travel to have an adventure,’ said Skye, licking her spoon.

‘Yeah, I don’t want a boring guy either, but Topps isn’t like that. I like him.’

‘Then perhaps *you* should go out with him,’ I said.

‘Maybe I will,’ said Skye, arching her eyebrows at me.

‘Good. You can send me an invite to the wedding, now can we get on with our assignment please? I’m tired and I’ve got to go home and cook soon.’

At that moment I felt like a total mum, babysitting and telling off Skye, cooking for my dad, hassles with money...wasn’t this what a mother was supposed to do? One thing for sure, I *was* going to have an adventure when I reached eighteen, with or without a guy. Right now the most exciting thing to ever happen to me was handing out pirated discs in a dumpy video store. In a way, perhaps it was something I was looking for, something to break the monotony of life at home with Dad. Who knows, that’s perhaps why girls fall for guys like Crass. Sure, deep down we know they’re really just losers and nothing we can do will change that, but they offer a thrill that guys like Topps never can. They offer a life beyond cooking spaghetti pasta and group assignments and working dead end jobs in weekends. They give you something to look forward too, they offer an escape. Not that I liked Crass, like, at all, but I can understand why other girls might.

Skye plonked herself on her bed as I opened the text book for the twentieth time that evening.

‘Why do we have to learn the difference between a convex and concave anyway?’ Skye asked as she smothered herself with a pink, frilly pillow.

‘I dunno,’ I said, truthfully. ‘We just have to.’

‘That’s a stupid reason,’ said Skye.

‘Sometimes there isn’t a reason why we have to do things,’ I said. ‘They just have to be done.’

A Sleaze in the Park

I could feel my blue chequered school dress sticking to my back as sweat patches broke out in random blotches like islands on a map. My bag felt so heavy I had to sit down, but I thought Eric may suddenly appear from the park, so I kept on, half walking, half running to Coles.

As I ran through the car park I almost ran into an elderly woman carrying two green, environmentally friendly shopping bags. She must have noticed my pale face or the slight panic in my eyes.

‘Sorry,’ I mumbled, inadvertently clutching at her shoulder for support.

‘Are you alright, dear? Is anything wrong?’ she asked. ‘You look off-colour.’

‘No, fine...it’s OK,’ I said, even though I felt like yelling at her that no, I wasn’t OK! That I hated men. Hated, hated, hated them! I was sick of the whole lot of them. I wanted to scratch their eyes out, beat them around the head and yell, ‘It is not your right to do this to me! You can’t treat me like trash! DO YOU (*smash head against wall*) UNDER (*slap across face*) STAND!’ (*throw bloodied pulp body across footpath*).

I had been walking home from school – it’s about half an hour and sometimes I enjoy the peace – and was cutting through Jubilee Park next to the bowling green. I was having a rather ridiculous daydream about Ms Adams, our English and Literature teacher, announcing to the class my argumentative essay on capital punishment would be short-listed for the Victorian Schools Essay Competition (we’d received entry forms a few weeks back, but I hadn’t entered anything yet, and probably wouldn’t) when a customer who had given me a sleazy grin after picking up one of Crass’ packages suddenly appeared at my shoulder. I was so caught up in my daydream I didn’t even hear him approach.

I didn’t say anything, but immediately looked around to see we were the only two people in the park and I still had about five minutes of fast paced walking until I reached Coles, which backed on to the road that ran past the park.

‘Hey,’ he leered. He had patchy hair stuck to his scalp and a fat gut that strained under his wrinkled yellow polyester shirt and looked every bit the sleazebag. The gold tooth didn’t help.

‘Hello,’ I said, coldly.

‘Say, you know, it’s really good to see you again and, man, you deserved that five buck tip for those films. You do a great job, so I thought I’d give you somethin’ else.’ He reached into his tight jeans pocket, fumbled around for a second, then took out a twenty dollar note and handed it to me.

‘That’s too much, the five dollars was generous enough,’ I said. Twenty dollars? What sort of weirdo hands out twenty dollars in a park to a teenage girl? There was no way I was going to take it. I tried to quicken my pace to give him the hint I didn’t want anything to do with him. God, what was his problem?

‘Hey, just go ahead and take it,’ said Eric, walking after me.

I was almost tempted to take it just to fleece the sleazebag out of more money. I held up my hand to him and told him to take it back. He held it out for a few moments more before pushing it back into his pocket.

‘So, you do anything after school usually?’ he said.

‘Sorry?’ I said.

‘You know, you have a boyfriend or anything?’

I wasn’t sure what he was trying to get at, but thought it better to lie. ‘Yes. Yes, I do. We’ve, er, been going out a long time.’

‘Lucky guy. I bet you’re a good kisser, hey?’ Eric laughed, quickening his pace so he was walking next to me. He was wearing cheap aftershave. He smelt like a lolly shop.

‘That’s none of your business,’ I said with just a touch of venom. He got the hint. ‘Oh, right, okay,’ he said, once he realised I didn’t want to continue with the conversation. ‘I guess I’ll be seeing ya round then.’

I kept walking, too scared to glance around to see if he was following.

I remember my cousin Mindy telling me about getting chatted up when she was working at Just Jeans last year. I had told her I was looking for a job and she told me

retail stores were loads better than supermarkets and fast-food restaurants; it was the reason I applied for the job at the Video Saloon. ‘You don’t need to work as hard and you get out right on closing time,’ she said. ‘But then, you get more weirdos, for sure.’

She said a short, bald guy with a bad comb-over and a stubby pig face had once come into the store and she’d gone and made one bad mistake: ‘I was friendly and asked him if he needed any help. Then I went on to recommend the Levi Red Tabs because they were my favourite jeans.’ The mistake? ‘The guy had obviously never had a girlfriend his entire life and had become completely desperate – he thought I was chatting him up.’

The guy had asked for her phone number. When Mindy had refused he left, only to turn up the next day to ask her to the cinema. She told him to get lost. She wasn’t a push over, she always spoke her mind, so I could imagine her tone was pretty forceful. So he left, but then turns up the next day and just watches her. Sits at a seat near the store for about an hour. She just ignored him. Finally, when she spotted him following her to the car park, she called security who gave him a bit of a push and a slap. He got the message and never went near Just Jeans again. ‘He really did think I was interested in him, right up to the moment security kicked his fat arse out of the shopping centre,’ Mindy said.

Mindy was right about the weirdos, anyway. I’d met enough of them and I’d only been at the Video Saloon three months.

I’d just about reached the edge of the park when I heard footsteps running up to me. Hard, urgent slaps on the concrete. It was Eric again, struggling to run a few dozen paces. For one horrible moment I thought he was going to attack me. I could imagine it: the screaming, the hair pulling, getting dragged back towards the empty lawn bowls club . . . I felt my stomach cramp up and I involuntarily hunched my shoulders.

‘Hey, one minute,’ Eric said. I was half torn between dumping my bag and running for it or just screaming, but Eric didn’t grab me. Instead he stood in front of me. Traffic was coming down the road, so surely he wouldn’t try anything?

‘You ever want to make a little extra money?’ he asked. ‘I could do with some company. You know, go out for dinner and stuff? I’m pretty easy going, yeah?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I don’t think so...I’ve got to get home now.’

‘C’mon,’ Eric said, ‘I just wanna a little company, you know, someone young and sweet like you...just to hang out.’

‘No!’ I yelled, frightening myself with the forcefulness in my voice.

He seemed startled as he left me to cross the road. Once I was across and almost at Coles I heard him yell out angrily, ‘Youse is just a friggin’ teaser!’

I kept walking.

A teaser? What the hell was he talking about? I felt real fear build up inside me and I started to shake and sweat, and then I ran into the old lady. Home was only five minutes away but I felt safer here in the shopping centre. I couldn’t understand what Eric had wanted – and why? Why did he think a fifteen-year-old would ever want anything from such an ugly, creepy old guy?

‘Are you sure you’re alright? You really don’t look a hundred per cent,’ said the lady, her cold hands on my shoulder. ‘You look a little sick.’

I tried to give her a reassuring smile. ‘It’s no problem, I’ll be right, just a bit of a pain in the stomach,’ I said, gently shaking her off and walking towards home.

I told Topps about it on the phone as soon as I got home – I desperately needed someone to talk to and Dad was working that afternoon so I didn’t feel safe by myself either. Topps said he’d come around.

I only told him a half-truth. That some customer who I had only seen once before had tried to chat me up in the park.

‘Boy, did it make you freak or what?’ asked Topps as we sat on my bed listening to the radio.

‘He was just an idiot, that was all. We were in the park so I didn’t feel that safe.’

‘You should tell the cops, for sure, get him reported. If he’s a member you could get his contact information.’

‘I can’t remember his name, I’ve only seen him once before,’ I lied, not wanting to go any further. I knew Topps would go totally ape if he found out about I was helping Crass with his pirating.

‘Gee, nice to have an admirer,’ Topps said. ‘Perhaps he’ll send Interflora flowers to school next?’

‘He got the message,’ I said. ‘He won’t bother me again.’

‘Why don’t you report it to the police?’

‘It’d be a hassle and nothing would happen, that’s why. He only tried to ask me out, as freakish as that sounds.’

‘Can’t say I blame him, someone as gorgeous as you,’ laughed Topps. I smiled. He was about the only guy I knew I’d consider dating, that’s for sure.

‘Thanks Topps,’ I said, giving him a hug – something I don’t do too often. It’s difficult enough trying to keep just friends without leading him on. Topps let the hug go on a little longer than I would have liked. I pulled away and I think he realised what he’d done. He immediately stood up and turned up the volume of my little Sanyo portable stereo player. ‘I’ll fry his stinkin’ ass if he tries something like that again!’ he said in his best Robert De Niro voice.

‘You’re my hero, Topps.’

Topps smiled.

* * *

Crass didn’t mention anything more about helping him out with the DVDs at work but I saw a small box underneath the desk out the back with a handful of packages in them – two of them were sealed, bubble wrapped packages. They were exactly the same as the packages I’d given Eric. There was something about what Eric had said that made me think there were more than just Will Smith films in those envelopes. It was the way he had treated me, as if I was leading him on because of something I’d said or done: ‘*Youse is just a friggin’ teaser!*’ What was that supposed to mean? A teaser? Why would someone think I was interested in them just because I gave them some pirated DVDs. What was the connection?

I wondered if it, in some roundabout way, had anything to do with the packages.

I waited until Topps had gone to the bakery and then went to examine the box. I took out a yellow envelope and noticed the flap was only lightly stuck on. I could almost lift it up without tearing it or leaving a mark. I grabbed a knife from the sink and found it sliced through the sticky substance on the envelope easily. I looked inside and saw a stack of about ten DVDs in slimline cases. They looked like the DVDs I had seen in the basement – Scarlet Johansson’s latest, a horror – something about a psycho scarecrow that we had in the store, a comedy I’d actually seen in the cinema a few months ago and a bunch of films I’d never heard of. All of them obviously copied.

I re-stuck the envelope flap down and took out one of the padded envelopes that were similar to the one I had given Sleazebag Eric. Why the padded envelope? Was there a difference between these and the yellow envelopes? It was well stuck down. There was no way I’d manage to open it without tearing the entire flap. I looked at the other padded envelope and noticed it hadn’t been sealed properly. In fact the flap still had the protective paper covering the seal. Crass had obviously forgotten to seal it. I opened it and peered inside to see about four DVDs with an elastic band around them. Keeping an ear out for Crass I slid the DVDs out of the envelope.

These were pirated too, but they weren’t videos we rented. “*Bikini Girls Go Wild!*” and “*When Good Girls go Bad!*” screamed the lurid yellow titles. The covers were full of blonde bimbos in small, tight bikinis. They all had breasts that bulged out of their bikini tops like basketballs. They were either shouting or pouting at the camera.

Crass obviously had a sideline in bimbo films. Eric must have thought it was a turn-on to get this junk from a young girl! I was so mad at Crass. Not only were the videos pirated, they were totally sleazy.

I seethed for the next half hour until Crass returned with his ridiculously huge gym bag. I grunted when he told me he had my money from last weekend. I knew I should have never got involved in this. I was mad at Crass and doubly mad at myself.

‘Did all right last week,’ Crass said, handing me over forty dollars. ‘Haven’t sold that many for ages.’

‘You didn’t tell me what type of DVDs they were.’

‘What do you mean? Latest releases, mainly. A few old school comedies from the store. Some games. Why?’

‘Because one load of DVDs slipped out of their envelope’ – and I was lying here because I didn’t want to say I’d been snooping – ‘and I saw what they were. Stupid bikini girls with fake boobs that all look like stupid Pamela Anderson.’

Crass went silent. ‘Ah, yeah, right. Well, you know,’ he mumbled, fidgeting with the cash in his hands. ‘Men love it. Call it a weakness. If you saw the butt-ugly wives some of them have to put up with, well... you’d understand. I feel sorry for some of em.’

Who, I thought, the men or their wives?

I said, ‘If you want to deal with sleaze, I guess it’s up to you. Do what you want, but I don’t want to help you anymore. It’s disgusting. One of the customers even tried to chat me up. I think I’ll leave it to you from now on...’

‘Hey, Stacey, it’s sweet money. All you have to do is...’

I cut him off quickly. ‘I don’t like selling creepy films to creepy customers. I’m not interested anymore Crass. Just leave me alone to work here without having to deal with that sort of thing.’

‘C’mon, it’s all about supply and demand. That’s what the guys want. It’s not as if...’ Crass, sensing I was really, really peeved off, suddenly gave up. ‘Sure, have it your way then,’ he said, stacking a pile of returns on the counter and scanning them in. ‘Like I said though, Stace – there’s lots of others who are.’

‘Lots of others who are what?’

‘Interested. In helping me out.’

Oh, grow up you little idiot, I thought. Another threat about replacing me with plastic-fantastic Toni? Go ahead and try it. I’ll just give the police a little tip off about your hobby.

Crass basically ignored me the rest of the night. If he thought I was going to quit, though, he was wrong. I can be real stubborn, that’s for sure, and I was determined to stay here and collect my wages and not give in to Crass. There was nothing *he* could do now. I knew too much.

Shopping Rage

Looking back, it probably wasn't a great idea for Dad and I to go shopping for shoes after school. We were both in irritable moods, and for both of us work was to blame.

I was no longer shaken at what happened at the park, I was just really angry for getting involved in the whole sleazy piracy thing. Dad was just plain angry. He'd got a speeding fine a few days earlier driving to work and he was still seething; everything he said dripped with a potent mix of anger and self-pity. He ranted on about us living in a police state where everyone had to be punished like little children and that speeding fines was all about the government grabbing money off poor buggers like himself.

'Jeez work was boring today,' he said the minute he picked me up outside school. He didn't even ask me how my day was. 'Spent the morning sorting through excess stock out the back, there was hassles with builders, and the whole day's pay is going to pay for that damn speeding fine. What a load of crap!'

'You don't need to go on about the fine anymore,' I said, staring out the window as we drove the shopping centre. I didn't feel like any of his work-related sob stories today.

'Oh sorry, I mean, it's only a whole day's wages gone,' he said, a look of grim death on his face. 'And if I have to take any more crap from my manager...'

'Well maybe if you hadn't quit as a manager yourself...' I mumbled., instantly regretting it.

Dad said nothing, gripping the steering wheel tighter to control himself from exploding. He scratched his leg, which must have been itching because he was wearing his jeans and not his tracksuit pants for once. He never did like jeans.

We drove the rest of the way in silence except for the blaring car stereo that Dad had decided to crank up as loud as his Cold Chisel cassette tape could go. I just said nothing. Cassette tapes. I mean, what a joke. This car was a joke. And *he* was the biggest joke of all. Man, I was angry. I could get in some angry moods sometimes, but Dad was

usually the last one to cop it. I knew what he had gone through after Mum died and I was still pretty patient with him. But I didn't feel like being Little Miss Nice today.

Things didn't get much better at the skate and surf store. I wanted some flat sole skate shoes, specifically Vans, because even though I love my leather ankle boots, they killed my feet when I had to stand up all day at work. Vans were comfortable but they looked cool on girls too. Unfortunately they were over \$100, which for someone who only wore discounted builder's boots or thongs like Dad was the equivalent of eating at one of Gordon Ramsey's five star restaurants instead of McDonald's.

'Come off it Stacey, you can't be serious!' said Dad when I tried them on. He had immediately asked how much they were. 'I told you the other day I'm watching the money...and after the speeding fine too...and you go and think you can buy these.'

'Yeah Dad, don't go and blow your hard drive, jeez. I *said* I'd pay for half of it. I knew you wouldn't pay for it all anyway.'

Dad stood there, hands in his pockets, looking faintly ridiculous slouched over with music pumping and a group of grommets wearing full skate gear pushing each other around in the background. He really, really looked like he'd rather be at Dave's. I didn't care. I wanted the Vans.

'It's still too much,' he whinged. 'What's wrong with K-Mart?'

'As if,' I said, 'These are for work and I'm not wearing K-Mart shoes at work. I'm not in primary school anymore. And I'll pay for them all anyway, so don't worry about it. I can handle it.'

A sales assistant with highlights in her blonde hair and a cute smile came over to ask if we needed any help. 'I love Vans, they are like *the* most comfortable shoes,' she said. 'They will last you for ever too. Guaranteed.'

'You'd want them too at that price,' growled Dad.

'It's worth it,' said the girl, 'they're quality shoes.'

'Whatever you reckon,' he grumbled. He turned and walked out of the store. The store assistant gave me a grin. 'Parents,' she said, 'you can't live with them, you can't sell them on eBay.'

‘Yeah, I’d only get a few dollars for him anyway,’ I said, taking the Vans off.

‘So then, the Vans...?’ said the girl.

‘Oh, I’m taking them,’ I said.

‘That’s what I like to hear,’ she laughed.

I made sure I swung the plastic bag with the Vans in them as if it was a Gucci handbag, wanting everyone to see that I had just spent \$120 of my own money on a pair of shoes without any help from my deadbeat father. He just snorted when he saw them.

We walked to the car and I made a big deal of getting the box out of the car and examining the white and pink Vans in minute detail. ‘These are so cool,’ I said, with mock enthusiasm. ‘These are most awesome shoes, and so worth it. Such a good price, I think I should have bought two. What do you think Dad?’

‘Can’t you shut it,’ he said, looking dead straight ahead.

I shut up after that. It was the worst fight my dad and I had had for a long time. He never told me to shut up, and I was rarely such a smart arse. I was on a roll. First the argument with Topps, then Crass, now Dad. A hat-trick! What a winner I was turning out to be.

I didn’t know what to do when I got home. I just knew I didn’t want to be around Dad. So I stayed in my room and listened to music and read, trying to get those words out of my head. *Shut it*. Ugly. That would take a while to wash off. I could sulk with the best of them. I wasn’t going to forgive him for saying that, not for a long time. Even if it meant getting up for breakfast early and leaving school before he woke, or going to Skye’s every night for a week and coming home late, I’d avoid him. Let him cook his own dinner and we’d see how much he liked toasted cheese sandwiches. Perhaps I could leave some recipe books out for him, circling the easiest recipes? Like scrambled eggs. Let him get the hint that I was done with him. That’d shut *him* up.

I heard the front door slam and the car start up. He was going to Dave’s, for sure. One day he was going to get caught by a police breathalyser. Then we’d see how much he liked spending his money when got some huge fine. At least I was alone now and

could go and watch TV. But Dad had never just stormed out of the house without saying something, no matter how mad he was.

After a few minutes I walked out into the kitchen. On the table was a note. As I suspected, it said, “Gone to Dave’s. Back late” scrawled in black pen. Underneath the note I saw the corner of a twenty dollar note. I lifted up the note and saw there was a bunch of notes. I counted them. \$120 exactly.

I sorted the notes out neatly and held them in my hand. Almost a weekend’s pay, after tax. Should I keep it? I deserved it. I mean, Dad probably spends that much on booze every second week. I even unconsciously smelt the notes as I thought about it. The notes stank, like a stale cupboard open for the first time in months. Why did money smell so bad? Wasn’t it just paper? Money stinks.

After a few moments thinking, I left the money back on the table and went and got a bowl of Nutri-Grain.

I could pay my own way.

Alone

I knew Topps would eventually raise the whole piracy thing. It was during an Australian History class. Ms Levante had to rush back to the staff room to collect her teacher's "study help" book (a.k.a. answer book) – we were studying the Eureka Stockade and she had forgotten exactly why it had started. She was always doing that. Rushing back to the staffroom for something she had forgotten. Some kids said it was because she needed a cigarette, which she'd puff secretly in her office. Apparently, she smokes two packets of Winfield Blues a day. She sure smelt like it. Her fingers were stained the colour of honey and her teeth were off-white. I didn't blame her though. If I had to control thirty kids every hour, five days a week, I'd smoke too.

'So, how's life at the Loon?' Topps asked.

I had Skye sitting next to me on the other side and didn't really want to share too much information in class. 'Yeah, it's sorted,' I said. 'Doesn't seem to be much going on.' There was no way I could tell him about my decision – even though it had only lasted one weekend – to help Crass out.

'You haven't seen...anything more in the basement?'

'No. Haven't been down there. It must have been a one-off.' I noticed he was being cautious with his questions, not wanting to get back into the same argument as before. I thought I could make him lose interest if I didn't give him any decent feedback.

'What do you think Crass and Vince did with the discs?' he said, leaning even closer to me and whispering so Skye couldn't hear.

'Hey you two, no getting it on in class!' Eric Marshall, resident idiot, suddenly shouted, pointing us out to the rest of the class. 'Man, they were getting it on! Honest truth!'

The entire class let out a prolonged and high-pitched 'woooooooh!'

'C'mon Topps you stud, leave it for the bedroom!' cried out Chris Noel.

‘Hey Topps, you’re my main man!’ laughed Will, who was sitting on the other side of Topps. He punched Topps on the shoulder. ‘And with the Staceman too!’

Topps looked genuinely pleased. ‘Hey, you’ve got to get it anyway you can,’ he laughed.

I said, ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

I hated being the spotlight in class, but it was probably a good thing to have happened. The subject of the Video Saloon was abruptly cut short.

I let the rest of the class fall into a slanging match about who was kissing whom and who wanted to get it on with whom. I’d tell Topps one day. About the Video Saloon, that is. I’d just make sure I was safely in another job before I did. No way did I want the added pressure of Topps telling me to quit, or worse, trying to convince me to tell the police what was happening.

Ms Levante returned to happily announce to us that did we know that the Eureka Stockade rebel leader Peter Lalor, who had his left arm amputated as a result of the battle, became a well respected politician, but in an awful twist, both his children committed suicide in his house in Richmond where he also died and the whole family are said to haunt the residence?

She was extremely happy with herself until Julia Carapellotti, who never let a teacher get away with anything, asked, ‘But Ms Levante, I still don’t understand. How did the Eureka Stockade actually start?’

Ms Levant’s face fell. ‘I’ll be back in a moment,’ she said and left the room again.

* * *

I was more than happy to discover that Crass seemed to have forgotten about my decision to snub his little piracy business. I walked in Saturday afternoon to find the place fairly humming. Melbourne had had a cold snap and it was one of those days where the sky had the drab greyness of a school jumper and you knew it would basically not stop raining for the rest of the day. That’s when the Video Saloon got really busy.

I often wondered why Vince bothered hiring two people for the weekend, but at times like this you'd struggle by yourself. Saturday was the busiest day. There had to be at least forty DVDs and videos in the return bin, another stack of returns waiting to be shelved and a big list of reservations in the reservation book.

The reservations were the biggest hassle of the job. Someone would ring up (usually when you were in the middle of serving another customer) and ask for that film where that black guy fought androids or that blonde chick falls in love with the baseball player, and you'd have to remember the title and check if it was in, and then if it wasn't you'd take the person's name and number and then you'd have to make sure you reserved a copy when it came in. It also meant phoning the customer to tell them it had arrived.

Unlike Blockbuster, we didn't have thirty copies of the one title so it meant we had to deal with a fair few reservations. I had only come unstuck once. I was asked to reserve a Nicole Kidman supernatural thriller. A copy was returned but before I could even scan it another customer saw it in the return pile and asked for it. We had around six copies due for return that night, but I still thought I better call the woman who originally reserved it first.

Nobody answered, although admittedly I only let it ring a half dozen times. I then rented it out. Of course, with my bad luck, no other copy of the film was returned on time. At eight o'clock the woman who'd originally reserved rang and wanted to know if a copy had come in. I'm not sure why I'd admitted it – perhaps because of her psycho voice – but I told her one had come in, only I'd rented it out again. 'I tried phoning you but there was no answer,' I said. She didn't sound pleased. She said she'd wait until another copy came in, which it did, an hour later.

The woman turned out to be one of those fat, demanding old bags who always look like their husband had spent the weekly wage at the pokies. The type who complain at McDonald's if their fries are cold or if you even dare to whisper in the cinema.

'It's now nine o'clock; almost too late to watch anything,' she whinged. 'I don't know why I bothered to come down and pick it up at all. I was really looking forward to it as well.'

Again, I tried to explain to her I'd given her a call, but she told me she'd been sitting by the phone all evening, *waiting* for my call, and it had definitely not rung at the time I'd claimed to have phoned.

Sitting by the phone? Was she that excited about renting the film? Nicole Kidman is cool, but worth sitting on the couch stuffing your face with Doritos as you wait for the phone to ring? I don't think so.

'Look, I think you're lying,' she told me when I gave her the video. 'I don't think you phoned me at all.'

'You think I'm lying?' I had spluttered, my face blushing. What else could I say? I was so angry I charged her the full rental, even though she obviously expected me to give it to her for free. Still, besides her, Robert Keppler and Sleazy Eric, I haven't had too many problems with customers.

I noticed, as I was collecting a few old videos from the back, that the box of DVDs from under Vince's desk had gone.

Later that afternoon when the place had quietened down Crass walked out of the store. 'I'm going for a ciggie,' he said. 'Be back in a few minutes.'

I let him go and finished dusting the rather neglected special interest section. It was full of old WWE wrestling and Rex Hunt fishing DVDs. For some reason the store collected dust like Topps' younger sister collected Bratz dolls. If a DVD had been languishing on the shelf for longer than a week it was usually covered in a thin layer of dust, and I enjoyed cleaning them all up, making them look used. I felt sorry, for some strange reason, for DVDs nobody wanted to rent anymore.

I had just started on the action aisle when the phone rang. The Video Saloon is a big store and I had to run to catch it.

'Hello Video Saloon, Stacey speaking,' I said, puffed.

Silence.

'Hello?'

I could hear a whirring sound, like a spinning top, but nobody said anything. It was a bit freaky. Then whoever it was hung up.

A customer walked in and I put the call to the back of my mind. A lot of kids who should have been studying for final exams came in to hire five weeklies or take out Disney films for babysitting jobs. They all said hello. That was the good thing about the Video Saloon, you became well known at school.

‘You doing anything tonight?’ Crass asked me out of the blue later that evening as he ate Chinese sweet and sour from a plastic container.

‘No, I’m going straight home. Why? Are you?’

‘I wish. Toni, the girl who was here last week, is going clubbing in the city tonight. I’d kill to go with her.’

‘Why don’t you?’

‘Cause I have to lock up here. I won’t be finished until ten-thirty. I wouldn’t get in there way past midnight. By then she’ll be half smashed.’

I looked at my watch. 8.30 pm. I finished in half an hour when my dad usually picked me up. I lived about twenty minutes walk away and Dad didn’t like me walking home late at night.

‘Maybe you could leave early?’ I suggested. ‘Lock up at nine.’

‘Nah, Vince would get aggro if he found out.’

Crass had to stay behind and count the money, print out the daily activity sheet and balance the till. I wasn’t allowed to lock up by myself. I’d locked up a few times with Crass when Dad was running late, so I knew how to do it. I’d sure get on Crass’ good side if I let him hook up with Toni.

Crass had the same idea. ‘Stacey, do you think you could help me out? You know what to do. Could ya lock up tonight?’

‘I dunno Crass, I’ve never had to do it myself.’

Crass became stuck on the idea. ‘No problems,’ he said, ‘you don’t even need to print out the activity sheet. Just leave the computers on. I’m in early tomorrow anyway. I can do it then.’

It wasn’t the locking up that was worrying me. It was being by myself in the store late at night.

‘C’mon Stacey, it’s easy as.’

I really did want to smooth things over with Crass, so I relented and said I’d do it; but only this once.

He was out the door an hour later. ‘Thanks dude!’ he waved as he ran out to Main Street.

I hoped he was happy I was letting him get off his face with Toni. Who knew what those two would get up to. I went to give my dad a call on my mobile and discovered the battery had died again – I’d left it on all night and forgot to charge it, and the battery was dodgy anyway. It barely lasted a day. I phoned him from the store phone and asked him to pick me up after ten. I didn’t tell him I was locking up. He’d freak. I told him it was so busy Crass asked me to stay with him to help shelve returned discs.

‘Okay, I’ll drop by at Dave’s first; bit of car trouble,’ he said. I reckoned they’d be downing a few stubbies instead. The car, which actually was in need of a service, was an excuse.

Nobody came in at all after nine-thirty. I put on an old Britney Spear’s movie, *Crossroads*, and watched it for the tenth time. Other girls at school hated the movie, but I thought it was fun. I sang along with “I love rock n’ roll”. It took my mind off the fact I was alone.

I stopped the movie close to ten o’clock, emptied the bins, turned the lights out at the front of the store and locked the big glass door. I left the keys in the inside lock of the front door. I’d seen Crass do that; you don’t want to lock yourself in and then lose the keys. Then I put the money on the counter and began to sort out the bills and coins. Two hundred dollars had to be put back in the register for tomorrow’s float, the rest was for Crass to count. I only had to bag the money and hide it under the counter.

I began to feel more comfortable about being alone, although I would have felt better if Topps was here. I should have asked him to cycle down and keep me company.

I folded the bills and coins and put them in a bag. Then the phone rang. The shrill ring echoed around the store and gave me such a shock I put my hand over my mouth and said: ‘Oh!’ It sounded so much louder in the quietness of the store.

Who would be phoning me at this time? I thought it was Dad or a customer wanting to know if we were still open.

I picked up the phone.

‘Video Saloon, Stacey speaking.’

Silence. Just like the call from earlier this evening. I felt myself stiffen with fear. My hand gripped the telephone so tightly my fingers turned white.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’

Again, silence. Then, just as I was about to put the phone down, a hoarse voice whispered almost inaudibly: *‘Be afraid...be very afraid.’*

A Call from the Dark

I think I may have gasped. Then I felt fear, a hard, fearful wave of terror wash through me.

‘What?’ I said, my voice cracking.

‘I can see you’re afraid. That’s good. Be afraid...be very afraid.’

Oh, my God. I’m alone at ten o’clock at night and a prank caller says he can *see* I’m afraid? I felt like being sick. Before I had to hear that prickly, nasty voice again I pressed down the receiver. I immediately rang my dad, praying he wouldn’t have left yet. ‘C’mon, c’mon,’ I pleaded as the phone rang an eighth and ninth time. He didn’t have a mobile and I didn’t have Dave’s number, so he was no good to me. I gave up and, with a shaking hand, rang Topps.

This time I connected to the answer phone. I remembered Topps telling me they were going out to a family dinner at his uncle’s. What was his mobile number again? My heart did a backflip when I remembered the battery on my phone was dead. I could remember Skye’s number, but I knew she was off at the cinema tonight and I thought I was being too hysterical phoning her parents.

I was alone.

Oh man, I had a sudden flash back to a junky thriller I’d once watched with Skye at my house late one Friday night: *When a Stranger Calls*. We’d only watched half of it, but that was enough for me to remember one particularly scary scene. The main character, a babysitter, was alone with two kids, who’d gone to bed in an upstairs bedroom. Then later that night she started to get prank calls. She’d panicked and called the police who said they’d trace the calls. They rang back soon after. “We’ve traced the call,” the police operator had said, ‘and it’s coming from inside the house!’ Shadows edged down the stairs as she made a mad run for the front door...the psycho was phoning her from inside the house!

I tried to stop thinking about it. I looked at my watch. 10.10 pm. Surely Dad wouldn't be much longer? Though after our argument he seemed to be being even less responsible than usual, like he was trying to punish me or something. Should I call the police or was it just a prank? Perhaps I was overacting. I felt totally vulnerable standing at the counter though. The store stretched before me, dark and swathed in shadows. I could see traffic along Main Street beyond the large glass windows at the front of the store. It was a quiet town and fairly dead by ten o'clock. I knew, though, that La Porchetta's down the road would still be open. I'd feel a whole lot safer with other people around. I'd be able to see Dad park in front of the Video Saloon from there. One thing for sure, I was getting out of here now.

I ran out to the backroom and grabbed my Billabong bag. I had left it unzipped and a couple of books fell out when I picked it up. Stupidly I wasted a few moment sticking the books back into the bag. Then I high-tailed it to the front door. It only took about a minute but it felt like ages. I reached for the keys to unlock the door.

They were gone.

I swore and grabbed the handle and pulled. It was locked. Had I left the keys behind at the counter? I was sure I hadn't.

Now I was really scared. My throat was impossibly dry and my head was spinning. I kept thinking how stupid I was to let Crass leave early.

I ran back down to the counter to search for the keys, frantically pushing aside the video covers, paper and pens left on the counter. The keys weren't there. I checked my jeans pockets, my bag and searched beneath the counter. I couldn't find them.

Spare keys; I knew Vince kept a key to the front door in the register. I opened it up, lifted up the black metal money box and, to my relief, found a silver key tied to an elastic band. I looked down the store to the front door. It was still in darkness. I should have lit the whole place up when I had the chance, but the light switches were at the front door. Now I'd have to run through the darkness to get to the front door again. Suddenly that front door looked a long way away.

Then I heard it. An evil little giggle. It came from the horror aisle. In the deathly silence of the store it sounded awful and loud. There was someone in the store with me! This was *When a Stranger Calls* for real. I was trapped inside the Video Saloon. Now there was no way I was going to reach that front door. I'd have to make it past the horror aisle first.

'I'm calling the police!' I yelled, picking up the store telephone. It was dead. Somehow the intruder had killed the phone when I was grabbing my bag. My mobile phone was out of credit, and right at that moment I couldn't remember if I could call the police without any credit or not. I had to try.

'Leave me alone!' I screamed into the darkness as I fumbled for my phone in the backpack, 'Go away!' I felt the hot prick of tears on my cheeks.

A voice, high and monotone, said, '*Yes. We all go a little mad sometimes.*'

It sounded like the intruder had come closer to the counter but I still couldn't see anyone. I forgot about the phone and took a pair of scissors from the counter and held them in front of me. 'Don't come any closer or you'll get it!' I shouted. My voice was pained, scared, cracking.

From the darkness I thought I heard the floor creak near the comedy section. The intruder was getting closer and closer to the front counter. A shadow, reflected by the one light at the counter, jerked near the aisle. He was moving close.

I looked around wildly for another sort of weapon for protection. Then I saw the emergency alarm underneath the register. It was the small red button connected, I hoped, to the police station. Vince had said it worked. I pressed it three or four times. I'm not sure what I expected to happen; a shrieking alarm or wildly flashing blue lights would have been nice. I didn't know if it had worked or not. It was a good opportunity to warn the intruder the police were on the way. 'I've called the police!' I said. 'I've used the emergency button and they'll be here any minute!'

There was no answer to my threat, just the eerie 'whoosh' of a car driving down Main Street outside.

‘You’re gutless!’ I said with as much anger as I could muster. ‘You can only pick on girls! You stupid, idiotic prick! I hope the police kick your friggin butt!’

‘That’s gonna be difficult,’ hissed the intruder. *‘After all, you can’t kill the Boogeyman.’*

Then the intruder stood up from behind a shelf. He was tall, wearing a black coat and a black ski mask, like a bank robber. I was so terrified I dropped the scissors and half ran, half fell into the backroom.

The intruder started to come towards me.

Then, in a panic and with nowhere else to go, I did what every moronic teenager does in those stupid slasher horror movies. I broke the first rule of avoiding axe-wielding maniacs.

RULE ONE. To avoid axe-wielding maniacs NEVER go down the basement alone.

I ran down the stairs to the basement. Alone.

I took the stairs three at a time, just like the hop-skip-and-jump at school sports day. It was pitch black and I found myself stumbling over posters and boxes as I ran to the corner of the basement. Right where I found the pirated DVDs. Only now the table was empty.

I ducked behind a broken shelf just as the stairs began to creak.

The intruder came down the stairs a few moments later. I could hear each step creak as if in pain. He seemed to be taking each one with deliberate sluggishness.

‘I know you’re there,’ he called out. *‘Because I can smell your brains.’*

Okay, this guy was a certified wacko. Everything he said was in a sarcastic, mocking tone, as if he thought the entire incident was just hilarious. Except he was putting it on. It wasn’t his real voice. It was totally random. I thought I recognised it.

The intruder stopped. I couldn’t see him from behind the shelf but I heard him trying to find the light switch. It clicked on and lit up part of the basement. Now I was in trouble. I knew what I had to do though. I’d wait for him to walk around beneath the stairs, then I’d make a run for it. I only hoped the police would be there waiting for me.

I heard him kicking posters with his boots. He snarled, *'I've gotta warn ya – you're doomed if ya stay here!'*

At least I knew where we stood. No prisoners.

Then I heard the cardboard cut-outs being moved around beneath the stairs. It was a mess and he must have thought I was cowering in the corner. I took my chance and ran for it. I shot out from behind the shelf, jumped over a pile of old video covers and sprinted towards the stairs.

That was when rule number two of horror movies came into effect.

RULE 2. Never run up stairs. The axe-wielding maniac will always grab your ankle from beneath the stairs, making you trip and fall just as you think you've made it to safety.

His hand tried to grip my runners from underneath the stairs and I felt myself stumble and then fall heavily onto the top stair. My knee hit the edge of a step. I gasped in pain.

The intruder came up the stairs as I tried to get to my feet. He was quick. I had only managed to crawl and get to my knees when he reached the top of the stairs. I was crying now, gulping down the pain and shock with blotchy tears.

"Oh, no tears please... it's a waste of good suffering!" he said, his lip curling underneath the cut out of the mask.

He came towards me and I kicked out at him desperately. I got him right in the balls. He took two steps back and tripped over a cardboard cut-out that was poking up from below the stairs. He swung his arms wildly trying to keep his balance before twisting in the air and toppling down the stairs, face down.

He fell onto his back and slid all the way down, his head making a reassuring *bok-bok-bok*, like a hammer hitting a nail, on every step. He crumpled to the basement floor and didn't get up.

I looked down at the cardboard cut-out and saw a smirking face poking up from the stairs. It was Brad Pitt. Brad Pitt had saved my life!

Despite my throbbing knee, I made it to the front door in record time. I took the spare key from my pocket, rammed it into the lock, opened the door and almost fell out of the store. I then half-limped, half-ran towards La Porchetta's.

I stopped a second when I reached the road to rub my knee and wipe away the tears from my white, cold cheeks. I bent down and rubbed my knee hard, sniffing and breathing and feeling totally spaced out.

From the darkness I felt a stiff hand grip my shoulder.

I screamed, turned around and found myself in the arms of my father.

'Sorry Stacey, the car broke down again and I had to walk. It's not far, I tried to ring but there was no connection...'

Before he could finish I burst into tears.

Totally Out of It

I was off the planet for the rest of evening. Escaping from the clutches of a ski-masked psycho will do that to you. If it wasn't for Brad Pitt I'd have been mincemeat. I remember Dad making me sit down at a bus-stop as I cried, 'I pushed him down the stairs!'

'Who did you push down the stairs?' asked Dad. Who knows what he imagined happened, what with me in hysterics and running around the town in the dark.

'The man in the mask!'

'A man in a mask? Who do you mean Stacey, what happened?'

By the time I explained everything to him Dad was ready to go into the Video Saloon himself. 'I'll punch that punk's lights out!' he said.

'No, he'll kill you!' I cried, grabbing Dad. I'd become slightly unravelled by this stage. I felt like there was a great big ugly gargoyle loose inside my head, stomping around and smashing things up, making everything dizzy and awful.

Because neither of us had a mobile phone that actually worked Dad decided to go to La Porchetta's and call the police. They still hadn't turned up at the Video Saloon so the emergency alarm mustn't have worked.

When Dad came back he hugged me hard. 'I'm so sorry for what I said in the car to you when you bought the shoes,' he said. 'I'm so stupid. Anything could have happened to you tonight...I'm so sorry Stacey, I'm so sorry. You'll be okay, I won't ever speak to you like that again.'

I let him hug me until a police car turned up about five minutes later. Both officers went to investigate the store as soon as Dad told them what had happened, but they returned shortly after. 'It's locked, we can't get in,' one of the officers said, a big guy with a crew cut. 'We've rung someone to get down here and open it up. The perpetrator could still be inside. We don't want to break the glass just yet.'

'But I didn't lock it,' I said.

‘Do you have a key?’ asked the other officer.

I nodded and searched my pockets. I couldn’t find it. ‘I must have dropped it or I could have left it in the lock,’ I said, ‘I can’t remember.’

Crew Cut looked at his partner, a man with a flat nose, like a boxer. ‘Could explain why it’s locked. The perpetrator may have gotten themselves a key.’

Then they asked me a load of questions: what happened, what did the intruder do, what did he look like, how did he get in the store and did he try and hurt me? I tried to answer them the best I could, standing outside in the cold and feeling my knee throbbing like an engine.

‘What I’d like to know is why you were left there alone in the first place,’ said Dad. He wasn’t happy that Vince left me alone to lock up.

I told him it wasn’t Vince’s fault. I had agreed to lock up so Crass could go to a party. Flat Nose said he’d contact Vince immediately about the break in. There could be money stolen. Meanwhile, I’d better go home and rest my bruised knee. He’d call tomorrow if there were any developments or further questions.

They took us back to the station to fill out a statement and told us they’d drive us home. Just as Crew Cut, or Officer Miller, as he introduced himself, was asking me more questions Flat Nose popped his head in and said, ‘Got in and checked the premises, no sign of a perpetrator. Doesn’t seem to have taken anything – the till was unopened and untouched. I’ve put out an APB and sent around a few cars to see if we can spot anyone.’

‘He’s going to have a nasty head wound,’ said Officer Miller.

‘He bashed his head all the way down the stairs,’ I said. ‘I thought it would have knocked him out.’

‘I’ll alert the boys, keep them up-to-date,’ said Flat Nose.

So he’d got away. Pity. I wanted to know who the creep was. Then I wanted to kick him in the nuts again.

On the way home Dad said he didn’t want me to work at the Video Saloon any more. I think he was more freaked out than I was. I feebly protested about needing the

money, but he cut me off. 'You're too young to be working in a store alone. Anything could have happened to you.'

'But Dad, I need a summer job!'

'I'll see what I can do at the hardware store,' said Dad. Then he sighed. 'Stacey, I've already lost your mother. I don't want to risk anything happening to you.'

So that was settled. Once my mother came into it there was no turning back. Goodbye job.

Dad didn't talk about Mum all that much. He thought about her, though. More than I did. When he sat in his chair staring at the TV I knew he was reliving memories of their time together. He kept her inside his head, like a digital camera full of pics, looped over and over.

I guess he'll never get over her.

Vince phoned me up the next day and said he was angry about what happened. He kept on saying, 'A terrible thing to happen to such a young girl!' and then threatened to sack Crass: 'I'll hang him up by his bloody ears!'

I wish he had sacked Crass. He deserved it. I hope a night out with Toni was worth what I went through. Even worse, I was going to have to unpack paint tins all summer because of her.

Topps was totally sympathetic. He came over the next day and brought a large block of Cadbury Fruit and Nut chocolate, which we ate in front of the TV as we watched a cheesy talk show ("My girlfriend is pregnant – should I marry her? You decide"). Topps suggested that counselling would be a good idea. He thinks I could end up suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or something.

'I'm not that excited about walking around in dark basements anymore, if that's what you mean,' I said.

'What about nightmares?' said Topps. 'Or being afraid to be alone? What happened to you was the worst.'

'It was the stupid voice the creep used, saying these totally random things, like a psycho from the movies,' I said.

‘What did he look like?’

‘Black. All in black. And he wore a ski mask.’

‘Was he...did he have a weapon?’

‘No. No, he didn’t. I didn’t see anything, no knife, nothing.’

‘At least you gave him a good bruising,’ said Topps.

That was true. I had told him about kicking the intruder down the stairs. ‘Pity I didn’t knock him right out. Now the police think there could be someone after me.’

‘Are you for real? Who?’

‘I don’t know. But having your own personal stalker isn’t what I wanted for Christmas. Dad is even talking about leaving town and moving in with my aunt on the Gold Coast for a while.’

Topps said he and Skye would stay with me everyday. They wouldn’t let me out of his sight.

‘Yeah, I’m sure Huffy would be real happy about us home-schooling ourselves.’

‘I’m serious Stace, I’m gonna stay with you every day’.

‘Just bring me home any assignments from school. You don’t need to baby-sit me. I’ll be back at school soon enough.’

Still, I appreciated his offer. As I said, he’s a good mate.

He left around lunchtime and said he’d be back after he did his homework. Dad stayed with me. He wanted to talk with the police as they were going to visit later that day. When the knock on the door came, I expected it to be Topps, Skye or Officer Miller, but instead Dad came into the lounge room with Caitlin Allende.

‘A visitor for you, a friend from school,’ said Dad. He looked curiously at me, as he obviously hadn’t seen Caitlin before. Dressed in a loose, smart brown jumper and cream three-quarter pants with a large black hip belt, she could have easily passed for twenty-one. He must have known she wasn’t a Year Ten.

‘Are you up for more visitors?’ asked Dad.

‘I won’t be long,’ said Caitlin soothingly. ‘I just wanted to see how Stacey was.’

I didn't know what to say. The last person I expected to see in my home was Caitlin Allende. It just felt so weird, having one of the most popular girls in school standing in your lounge room. She'd only ever been a mythical figure you'd see on the occasional lunchtime surrounded by friends, laughing and flirting and looking beautiful.

'Have a seat, I'll get you a drink,' said Dad.

Caitlin sat next to me on the sofa. 'How are you going?' she said, playing with her blonde ponytail. She looked nervous.

'You heard about it?'

'Yeah, from a...well, you know, from a friend. Don't really know how he found out.'

'Great. Good news travels fast.'

'It must have been horrible.'

'Yeah, I still feel freaked.'

Caitlin stared at our old telly, thinking about something else. 'When I saw you and your friend at school you sort of hinted that something funny was going on at the store,' she said, continuing to stare at the TV. The soccer was on. Someone had just scored a goal and the players were hugging each other in the middle of the pitch. I reckon sport is the only time Aussie males hug. 'You know what's happening at the Video Saloon, don't you?' Caitlin asked.

Where was she coming from? Did I really give a hint that something was up at the store? I defensively pushed myself up into the sofa, rearranged the pillows, scrunched up the foil from the chocolate wrapper. I didn't know how to answer.

'I really need to know Stacey. I warned you about those guys, at least I tried to, and I'm really sorry about what happened, but I've got to warn you about something else.' There was a subtly commanding tone to her voice. Used to getting what she wanted. She wasn't threatening me or anything, but I felt I had to tell her. My mum used the same technique with her students – firm and assertive. On the other hand, I didn't want to just go and blab about what I knew or how involved I was.

‘I...I think there was some pirating going on in the store,’ I said. ‘I was just suspicious, that’s all, it’s not as if anything really did go on, or anything...’

Caitlin whistled under her breath. She looked deflated. ‘I thought so,’ she said. ‘Listen, Stacey, I’m going to tell you something. It’s private. I don’t want you going and blabbing this around the school, okay?’ Again, the command. I nodded. ‘I don’t know how much you were involved, but Crass is into pirating in a big way. And...’

Caitlin hesitated, looking at me. Seeing if I could be trusted.

‘...and I was involved.’

‘What? How? You gave the packages to customers too?’ I gasped, before I realised I’d just implicated myself. I can be so dumb sometimes.

Caitlin folded her arms in attempt, I thought, to calm herself. She looked as if she was almost disappointed in me. ‘Stacey, have you told the police about this?’

‘No. They’re coming around later today. I suppose I’ll tell them then. Why?’

‘Stacey, I want to tell you what happened to me before you do. I was only there four or five months when Crass came back from his trip to the gym, like he did every weekend.’

‘Big green gym bag?’ I added.

‘Yeah. And it was that damn bag that spilt a whole load of DVDs over the floor one afternoon. Right in front of me. He’d told me he was going to the gym but there wasn’t any towels or socks in that bag. Just DVDs. At first I thought he’d gone and stolen a load of them from the store. But they were obviously pirated. I noticed straight away. So, his cover was blown. What could he say?’

‘He never went to the gym,’ I said, more for my benefit than Caitlin’s. Figures. He was unfit, and definitely not toned at all. And how health conscious was he? Spent every break smoking and eating junk food. I should have known he was lying.

‘No he didn’t, but he didn’t tell me where he *had* gone. What he did do was offer me a bit of work in his business. He told me he imported DVDs, sold them to a few friends, made a bit of money. Nothing big. And I really didn’t care. What’s a few copies anyway?’

‘So you helped him out? Like...like me.’

‘Yes. I...I needed the money, actually. Just two weeks before I’d done something really dumb. I was at Hamish Stewart’s spa party – he’s a university student at La Trobe now - and I drank a few more Breezers than I should have. Jumped in the spa with my clothes on. And my mobile phone.’ I looked at her with a slight grin. ‘I was spastic, okay?’ she said, over-defensively. ‘Anyway, that phone cost me three hundred dollars. There was no way I could tell my dad. I tried to get it fixed, but they said I’d have to replace it. I’m on a contract, I needed the phone. So I agreed to help Crass out.’

‘We’re both idiots,’ I said.

Caitlin gave me a look, went to say something, and then thought better of it. She went quiet for a minute. ‘Yeah, you’re right Stacey, oh my God, we’re both so stupid!’ She covered her face in her hands; her nails were bright red and manicured. I thought she was going to start crying. Her voice had sped up and she sort of blurted out, ‘And that’s why you can’t tell the police. Because I...we...we’d both have to take part of the blame. I helped Crass sell those DVDs to his customers! I even kept a load of them at home for him, posted them, helped pack them!’

I could hear my dad in the kitchen and was hoping he couldn’t hear us. Caitlin’s voice had raised itself higher and I signalled to her to watch it. She lowered her voice again. ‘That’s why you can’t tell the police. And not only that, I think Crass could get dangerous. He...he told me if I ever told anyone about his business he’d lie and exaggerate what I’d done. Say that I was involved big-time and I’d get done in too. I don’t want a police record! I want to go to university and do law. I can’t become a lawyer with a police record! My dad would kill me!’

‘Why did Crass threaten you?’ I asked, putting my hand on her knee to calm her. It was the first time since I met her I didn’t feel like her kid sister.

‘It was after I quit. I think he got worried. Thought I would go and, like, tell the police. I remember he sounded really scared I’d dob him in – I think he was scared. But I was never going to do anything about it. I just hope some of those customers I sold the

copies to forget I was involved. I knew some of them, kids from school and stuff. God, I was so stupid.'

'My dad made me quit,' I said. 'I was working there by myself last night. You obviously heard about that?'

'Yeah...'

'I wonder if Crass is worried about me? Bad luck for him, you know, having both girls helping him out and both quitting. Something for him to stress over.'

'Are you going to tell the police?' asked Caitlin. I could see in her eyes that's what she was really worried about, not what happened to me last night. 'Because Crass would take you down too. I...I know he would.'

'I guess not,' I said. 'After all, I was involved. It doesn't have anything to do with why I quit, it'd just be complicating things. I don't have to talk about it to the police. They're just interested in the intruder.'

Caitlin looked relieved. My dad came in and Caitlin told him she was going. I walked her to gate. Somehow I felt an affinity with her now, as if we were either victims – or conspirators. Both guilty of the same crime. My life felt all dark and dreary right at that moment, like everything had gone impossibly wrong. I stood by the gate in silence, watching Caitlin walk away.

Nightmares

I started to have nightmares. I kept dreaming I was in an old-fashioned English hedgerow maze with high, green walls being chased by a man in a frizzy-headed clown mask with a hideous grin and crazy red makeup, a bit like the Joker in *Batman*. I managed to escape each time only to race around a corner and continually come up against a dead end. The man would appear from behind and slowly remove his mask. The first time it happened he turned out to be Jim Carrey with a real goofy expression, just like in *Ace Ventura*. The next night it was Vince.

I woke up heaving for breath.

I stayed home from school all that week. I just couldn't face the thought of sitting in class and having everyone staring at me, whispering: *"Did you hear what happened to Stacey? A stalker is after her. Yeah, but you know what she did at the Video Saloon? Pirating. That's what happens to you when you get mixed up in weird crap. It's karma. Man, what comes around, goes around. She deserved it."* Paranoid, yeah, and I must have had a hundred of these little scenarios playing around in my head each day.

I also spent a lot of time thinking. Why would someone want to hurt me? Had the intruder waited for weeks to make his move until he knew I was alone? How did he get out of the store after I locked it? And there was virtually no time between the phone calls and the chase. With a chill I realised the intruder must have been calling when he was already inside the store. He must have been squatting down near the children's or horror section at the front of the store where I couldn't see him. In the shadows, sneering, laughing at me. Waiting for the lights to go out. It mad me mad that someone could make me so scared, make me feel so vulnerable. How dare he? Nobody had the right to do that to anyone else.

Dad took a week off even though I knew he couldn't afford it, he'd already taken up his sick leave months ago. Then Officer Miller visited to talk about the stalker. They didn't have any suspects and he wanted to know if I'd been hassled since.

I didn't tell him anything useful, although I was tempted. I kept hearing Caitlin's plea: "*Don't tell the police.*" So I just went through the motions, retelling him about what happened that night – the phone calls, the chase, escaping. That was it. Any idea of who it was? No. Any previous anonymous calls or unwanted attention from customers? I thought of Eric, but how could I explain it? No, I said, nothing. I didn't have any idea who it could have been.

A journalist from the local *Rosedale Leader* paper phoned, as well as a couple of kids from school, but apart from Skye and Topps I didn't really want to talk to anyone.

By Thursday, however, I just wanted to get out of the house. I felt claustrophobic. Topps, who'd come around with Skye each day after school, brought over a cutting from *The Herald-Sun* newspaper's "CrimeStoppers" page. The headline read: "Girl Terrorised in Video Store". It felt bizarre reading about myself:

Police have requested information from the public after a store assistant was terrorised by a masked intruder on Saturday night. The fifteen-year-old girl was alone at The Video Saloon, in Melbourne's outer eastern suburb of Rosedale when the intruder entered the store around 10pm. After a brief struggle, the girl escaped from the store.

The man is described as being around 185cms tall and wearing a black jeans and black jumper. Crimestoppers wants to hear from any member of the public who may have seen a man acting suspiciously around the video store on Main Street, Rosedale, around 10pm that night.

'How cool is that, Stace, you're in the newspaper!' said Topps, pinning the article on my little cork notice board above my bed.

‘Yeah, but I’d rather not be on the Crimestoppers page along with a bunch of graffiti artists from Noble Park and a serial bank robber,’ I said, scanning the rest of the page.

‘How are you feeling?’ Topps dumped himself next to me on the bed. I noticed one half of his shirt collar was stuck under his school jumper, so I reached over and pulled it out, then straightened his collar.

‘Better. Sick of being in the house now. Might go for a walk if you want to come,’ I said, folding the collar neatly along the seam. ‘There, that looks better. You were probably wearing that collar crooked all day.’

‘Yeah, thanks Mum,’ said Topps. ‘But it’s great you want to get out. I thought you were becoming like some sort of hermit with a phobia. You know the ones, they get hives every time they leave their house.’

‘Well, I was chased around the store by a ski-masked maniac. I think I deserve a little understanding,’ I said testily. I didn’t like the insinuation that staying inside all week somehow indicated I had become a bit mental. Truthfully, I was getting worried myself in case that was exactly what was happening to me. It was like that kid from year eleven at school who was beaten up by a group of older guys at a party after an argument over beer. He had had his nose and a rib broken. Apparently he was so traumatised he refused to go to school anymore. His mum had to home-school him for the rest of the year and he spent the weekends in his room on the Internet and eating peanut butter sandwiches on white bread for dinner. Or at least that was the story.

‘Sorry Stacey, it’s not as if I wouldn’t have done the same. It’s just that I was worried about you,’ said Topps, placing his hand on my knee to placate me. ‘I didn’t want to have to be slipping messages under your bedroom door in a year’s time.’

I stood up and laughed. ‘Yeah, I could become like Howard Hughes. I could grow my hair to my knees and my fingernails would be so long, they’d be curled like a Roll-Up.’

‘You could use them as a tape measure.’

‘Gross.’

Howard Hughes was a very, very strange American billionaire who had gone off his head and become a recluse, lying in bed for twenty years in hotel rooms in the dark. He had a phobia about germs and used to wear Kleenex tissue boxes on his feet. Topps had read about him on Wikipedia.com for an English project and then passed the article on to me. Then we'd watched Leonardo Di Caprio in *The Aviator*, the film about his life, but we were both disappointed the tissue boxes and long fingernails hadn't featured prominently.

I sighed. 'Topps, we may as well get this over and done with so I can get it out of my system. C'mon, let's go for a walk. I'm sick of being inside.'

Dad was sitting in the lounge room working through a pile of bills with a worried look on his face – I knew we hadn't paid the phone or gas bills on time – and looked up, surprised to see me heading to the door.

'I'm going for a walk, get some fresh air,' I told him.

'You'll be right?'

'I'll be right.'

We walked towards the park where Eric had freaked me out. As we got there I had a sudden urge, as bad as having to go to the toilet on a cold winter's morning, and I just couldn't keep it in anymore. I had to tell Topps everything that had happened.

'Topps, you know those pirated DVDs from the basement?'

'Yeah?'

'Well, I sort of helped Crass sell them.'

And that was it. Everything came out. Every dirty, steamy bit of it: the offer made by Crass; selling the packages; sleazy Eric; refusing to help Crass out anymore; the green bag full of DVDs; and, though I regretted it immediately, honouring Caitlin's request not to tell the police anything.

Topps took it all in. He was quiet for a moment, which is unusual for Topps. I hoped he wouldn't go all mad at me for helping to sell the DVDs. I couldn't face that.

'Firstly, man, I can't believe you'd get in on something like that. But anyway, it's over. You've done it, no use getting mad at you. But you know, though, that there's a

load of things that don't add up here. There's some sort of connection between Crass asking both you and Caitlin to help him out. Why would he want to do that? It's not as if you were both vital to the business – you just handed out packages to customers. So what? He could've done that himself. Why'd he want to risk you guys going to the police? Why did he ask you to help?'

'Caitlin found out what he was up to when a whole lot of pirated discs spilt from his green bag when he came back from the gym. He was sort of stuck then, I guess. If he got her involved, she wouldn't go and tell the police.'

'Yeah, so why did he ask you to help him then?'

'He knew I needed the money. But I reckon he knew about the stash in the basement.'

'Yeah! That's got to be it! But how did he know?'

Topps was really getting into this. There was no stopping him. It was like living a real life Alex Rider teen-spy adventure.

'I overheard Crass and that guy who was in the store with you and I when I found the first DVD,' I said. 'The guy was asking if Crass had got me to agree to help out with the business, and then Crass thanked him for the tip off. What a bastard! He went and told Crass! Damn. So if he'd told Crass, then Crass would have figured out I'd busted his stash. So if he gets me involved...'

'...it'd be just like Caitlin; you wouldn't have any reason to dob him in anymore because you'd get in trouble with the cops as well,' Topps said, finishing my sentence for me.

It was starting to make sense, in a vague sort of way.

'What I think is really weird is how Caitlin knew what happened with the stalker Saturday night,' said Topps, sensing I was warming up to the mystery. 'She comes around the next day to ask you not to squeal, but how did she know what happened?'

'Perhaps it was on the radio or something?'

‘No one at school knew about it until the article came out in the *Herald Sun*. I did tell Skye and a few others and you know how fast Skye spreads gossip. But Sunday afternoon? I wouldn’t have known if you hadn’t called me.’

‘She didn’t tell me how she knew, come to think about it – but she seemed to know exactly what had happened. Not just about the intruder, but about the pirating. Probably because she was so involved herself.’

‘That’s weird as she came around though. I don’t feel real sorry for her, that’s for sure! And to think I was in love...’ Topps laughed and looked like he was about to continue with the joke when he suddenly stopped, his mouth went taunt and he stared into the distance. ‘Oh man, speak of the little red devil,’ he said, pointing to the other side of the park.

Walking down the footpath, his big heavy green bag over his shoulder, listening to a pair of headphones, was Crass. He hadn’t seen us.

I can’t explain why, but I immediately felt dizzy and wanted to run back home. ‘C’mon Topps, let’s go, I don’t want him to see me,’ I said with an icy fear in my voice.

‘You head back, Stace, I’ll see you later.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘He’s got his little green bag. I’m going to follow him.’

‘No way Topps! Don’t be stupid!’

‘I’ll be back in a minute. I want to know where he’s going with the bag.’

‘No!’

But Topps was already jogging away from me though the park.

An Awful Disclosure

I waited and waited for Topps to come back. It was awful. I listened to music, I pretended to watch TV with Dad, I flicked through an *Empire* movie magazine. All the time I was waiting for the doorbell to ring. Fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour went by. Nothing.

Topps is so stupid. Why did he want to go after Crass? What was the point? Already my instinct was to just forget about the whole thing and go back to my very boring life – that’s my normal reaction. It happened, deal with it and move on. It served me well with Mum. That’s why I handle it better than Dad has. He has never forgotten. Still dwelling in the misty world of some past life, when we were a happy family on holidays in Lakes Entrance or sitting around playing The Game of Life or eating tuna casserole as we laughed about some of the ratbag kids Mum taught.

If it was up to me I’d be back at school Monday and never bother with the Video Saloon again. In a few years all that would remain would be the muddled memories of a few months of stupid decisions and a really bad ending. I just hoped I’d be okay being alone in dark buildings again. I don’t think I’d take the night shift in a morgue, that’s for sure.

Over an hour later and with visions of a bloodied Topps lying in the gutter somewhere with his neck broken (I was sure Crass had caught him), the doorbell rang. My dad answered and Topps walked in, giving me the “eyebrow”. It meant he had some important news for my ears only. The last time it happened was when Courtney Jarratt had boasted about her top marks for her Foundation Mathematics test. Up went Topps’ eyebrow over the top of his glasses. I bent over and he whispered Courtney had the answers and formulas written on a piece of paper stuck up her jumper sleeve. He’d seen her cheat.

We walked to my room as casually as we could. Dad watched us go. I still don’t think he thought it normal one of my best friends was a guy and it was all purely platonic.

At least from my end. I think he had images of Topps trying to get his hand up my top as we lay on my bed.

‘So?’ I asked as I turned on the radio.

‘Well, I followed him.’

‘And you were gone for half an hour. What happened?’

Topps picked up a tattered *Dolly* magazine. He read from a random article: “‘Relationship boundaries – are your friend’s ex-boyfriends really off limits?’”.’ Hmm, I say no.’

‘Stop being a bugger and spill it, Topps, where was Crass going?’ I said, hitting him on the arm.

He pointed the magazine at me and putting on the voice of a prosecuting lawyer said: ‘My dear Stacey, I can definitely confirm our friend Crass was *not* going to the gym for a vigorous workout, I can confidently say he has *never* been to the gym and I can self-assuredly say he is a *profiteer* of pirated DVD discs.’

‘Alright Judge Judy, just tell me what happened.’

Crass threw the magazine on the ground and grasped me with his arms. His eyes shone behind his glasses and his grin was like a little birthday boy. He was loving it. ‘OK, I followed Crass parallel to the park. I knew where he was going, down past the park and primary school towards the ghetto flats.’

The ghetto flats were a block of thirty or forty grey, depressing flats inhabited by lonely men and single mothers. Dad called it “The Incubator” because the single mothers who lived there seemed to pop babies out of nowhere. There were always kids riding old bikes or kicking a footy on the street out the front. It was as far away from Melrose Hill and Topps’ house as you could get. There’s a stripped Holden Commodore sitting by the footpath like a beached whale. It’d been there years. It seemed to sum up the place. I often had a feeling of dread Dad and I would end up living there soon enough. We didn’t live far from the flats.

‘So I see Crass go into the Ghetto Flats. I hightail it behind some of the cars parked out the front. I see him walking up the stairs to the flats on the first floor. He walks along

the landing to flat five. Knocks on the door and goes in. But I didn't get a good look at who answered the door. So I thought I'd hang around until he came out.'

'Didn't anyone notice you?'

'A couple of kids sharing a skateboard and a guy in work overalls. He gave me a greasy. But he drove off and the kids ignored me. Fifteen minutes later the door of the flat opened and Crass walked out with that green gym bag. And it was full. I noticed when I followed him it was empty; when he came out it looked pretty heavy.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yep. It was definitely empty when he went in to the flat. When he walked out he was struggling with it. He steps out of the doorway and I get a good look at who he has gone to see.'

'Who?'

'The one and only Mr Horror Movie Connoisseur and the Video Saloon's number one customer himself.'

'No way. Robert Keppler.'

'Yep. Positive.'

Topps had seen Robert a couple of times in the store before. Once, when Robert was going on about the differences between Japanese and American horror remakes to me, Topps walked in and started pulling faces behind his back. I almost died. After he'd left, I told Topps who it was. Topps was chuffed to actually see the legendary Robert in the flesh after I'd whinged about him so much at school.

'Robert? Man, this is freaky,' I said. 'Crass must have taken off to Robert's house when we ran out at lunchtimes. But why?'

'Robert must have something to do with the pirated DVDs,' said Topps. 'Maybe he stores the copies in his flat. Or he copies them for Crass. Crass then picks them up at lunch time.'

'Crass went out almost every day I was at work,' I said. 'He'd come back with the bag full. Then he'd always bring the bag out to the back – or perhaps down into the

basement. From there he must put them into envelopes – the envelopes I gave to his customers. I mean, he must have been getting them from somewhere!’

‘It makes sense,’ said Topps. ‘He gets copies from his own supplier or originals from the store and he then burns a load himself – or more likely gets Robert to do it for him. He can offer his customers new stuff or quality copies of original movies and games. But then why does Robert come to the Video Saloon so often?’

‘He has to come in to pick up the original discs that he burns copies from – then he drops them off again the next day.’

I remembered the blank disc in the cover of the horror movie Robert accidentally brought it. What was it? *Night Falls*? He’d told Crass he was copying them for his own collection. Crass had teased him about it. The disc must have been one of the pirated discs they were going to sell. The way Crass had treated him, I never would have guessed. Crass must have been covering it up. More likely it was arrogance. Robert had stuffed up by accidentally bringing in a copy, so Crass played up to it, giving Robert a good run down in front of totally naïve Stacey. What could Robert do about it? Nothing. He had to play along. And he got those rentals for free, too. That must have been why there were so many credits on his rental history. It was just bizarre that Crass rented them out instead of just giving them to him on the sly. Although that meant Robert could return some of the discs each day without arousing suspicion. Crass would then only need to go to his house once, to pick them up.

‘Or perhaps Robert comes to the store because he has a sort of wannabe romantic, slash, psychotic relationship with the staff,’ said Topps, interrupting my train of thought.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean, that’s not all. Robert comes out onto the landing for a second and I see a mega-sized bruise on his head, right on his forehead, as big and purple as an eggplant.’

‘Oh, man.’

The intruder had fallen down the stairs, twisted around as he fell, and hit his head on the steps. It would have given him a huge bruise, if not concussion. It couldn’t have been a coincidence. It made too much sense. ‘Robert must have been the intruder,’ I

gasped. 'He was the one inside the Video Saloon. He chased me down into the basement. He's the psycho!'

'Are you sure it's him though? Why would he do it? Does he want to be a real life stalker or what?'

'I dunno. But I reckon Crass must have had something to do with it, though. There has to be some connection between Crass leaving early that night and Robert stalking me. How else would Robert have known I was alone? I'm never in the store at ten o'clock.'

Topps shook his head. 'Why would Crass want Robert to scare you half to death? What'd be the point?'

I knew exactly why. 'To make me quit!' I said. 'To get me out of the way. If both of them work together on the pirating, why couldn't they be working together on the staff harassment thing? I knew about the pirating and I wasn't too polite when I found those bikini discs— I half threatened Crass when I said I didn't want anything more to do with his business. Now, if he had wanted me gone, it's worked, that's for sure.'

This was all too weird. Crass and Robert in on the DVD copying business together. Then what about Vince? Crass said he knew about it, he just made sure he turned a blind eye. This was all like a sick prank. We both sat in silence, just taking in what Topps had seen.

'Why would Crass risk doing that? You could just phone the police and tell them everything,' said Topps eventually.

'Because I was in on it as well. I *can't* tell the police. Man, it adds up. I locked the door when I left the store but by the time the police searched the place Robert had disappeared. Crass must have set it up, that's why he got me to lock up and he left early. He leaves, gives Robert his key, Robert hides down the front of the store until I lock up, he gives me a series of prank calls, I freak, job gone. Crass must have known I wouldn't come back.'

'So he gets Robert to chase you down into the basement?'

'Dunno, but I wouldn't put it past him. I really reckon both of them are sick in the head.'

‘You’re wrong, Crass isn’t such a dumb punk after all,’ laughed Topps bitterly. ‘He keeps his nose clean, do you realise that? He gets Robert to copy the movies and stalk you, then he gets you and Caitlin to hand the discs out to customers and he uses Vince’s premises to keep them all in. Makes it hard to point the finger at him.’

‘I reckon he told Caitlin to warn me about telling the police, too. There’s no way she would have known about what happened so early. She was scared about getting in trouble, he knew that. He’d have known she could put on the drama to stop me telling the police about the pirated DVDs.’

Topps was fiddling with my shell bracelet I left on my cabinet; he never could keep still long. ‘And now our friend Crass will get a new assistant,’ he said, trying the bracelet on. ‘Someone else to hassle and do his dirty work for him.’

‘I just wonder if Vince has anything to do with it.’

‘If he does, he’s kept quiet.’

Man. It made me mad. Really angry. If what we both thought was true, I was just another useless little plaything to them. I hated being treated like that. Mum always taught me to stand up for myself. I remember her saying people deserved to be treated with respect. She hated bullies. She once taught a kid named Gregory Thubron in her Grade 5 class. He was sort of slow, a bit of a loner. He got picked on badly by a bully named Evan. So Mum got Gregory and Evan out the front of the class. Then she had the rest of the class tell her why Gregory deserved to be picked on. Of course, nobody gave any decent answers. Evan said it was because Gregory smelled bad, but he got booed for this, so he shut-up. Then Mum asked why he *shouldn’t* be picked on. The kids came up with a couple of answers each and soon the entire blackboard was filled with good reasons against bullying. One of them was that if Evan got to know Gregory better, he may actually like him. This gave Mum an idea. She made both of them sit together and gave them bin and duster duty together for the rest of the month. Soon they actually *did* become friends. Mum was proud of that.

Well, there was no way I was going to become friends with Crass and Robert. I’d tried being friendly. And they weren’t going to get away with this. I was just a dumb

chick who had been treated like a piece of kid's Play-dough. Moulded, squeezed and thrown out. As tempted as I was just to let it all slide, I had a burning desire to get back at Crass. I knew Topps would be in on it too.

'Topps,' I said. 'I reckon it's time to get even.'

Topps broke into a grin. 'Cool idea, but how?'

I reached into my pocket and brought out the store key I had accidentally taken with me the night Robert had spooked me. I'd found it a few days ago, wedged into the money pocket of my jeans.

'This could come in handy,' I said with a wicked grin.

'The store key! You can get into the Video Saloon?'

'Yep.'

'And you know the alarm code?'

'1-2-4-8. Easy. Every number doubled. Vince never changes it.'

'You're not serious are you though Stacey? It's illegal. We'd be breaking and entering.'

I was getting excited now. It's usually Topps jumping up and down when we're working on a drama play about Viking raids for a history assignment or playing a console game and we get to the twelfth and final level, and me trying to calm him down. Not this time though. I could feel the adrenalin starting to pump like I'd never felt it before. 'I reckon Crass'll keep his DVDs in the store basement next week. He works Monday and Tuesday by himself, it's the perfect time to keep copies in the store. He brings them back, sorts them out, puts them in envelopes, bags them up and distributes them the next day. Easy. There's nobody there to bother him. We've just got to get to the pile of DVDs first.'

'Yeah, but you're not really serious about breaking in are you?'

I was pumped. 'We get a bunch of samples – including those smutty DVDs – we bag them up and send them express to Detective Rooks. Write him a short explanation note. He investigates, Crass gets done, hopefully with Vince and Robert Keppler along the way.'

‘Yeah, good thinking Stacey, but you’re not really serious, about breaking in?’ said Topps again, adjusting his glasses and biting down on his bottom lip.

‘The only problem is Crass will be mightily angry if he discovers what I’ve done. It just means we have to compose our letter to the detective very carefully. Here Topps, grab a pen, let’s write a draft. Then we’ve got to organise how to get down to the store next week – it has to be past midnight. And we’ve got to get in and out fast.’

Topps looked at the pen and paper I’d shoved at him, looked up at me holding the store key and saw the manic glint in my eye.

‘You are serious, aren’t you?’ he groaned.

Skate City

I was so anxious and over excited about the plan I guess I forgot to be surprised when Dad asked if Skye and I wanted to go to Skate City Monday night with him. I mean, I don't know what was more shocking: Dad wanting to take me somewhere, Dad actually paying for me *and* Stacey to go somewhere, or going out on a Monday night with school the next day. Okay, Skate City wouldn't have been my first pick – perhaps a night of musical theatre in Melbourne or my first big concert or something, but it was still a surprise.

'I just feel we should get out a bit more,' Dad said to me when he told me. 'Skate City is a pretty good place to start.'

'Really? And you're going to go skating as well?' I was a bit incredulous, I mean the last time Dad took me to Skate City was with Mum for Stacey's eleventh birthday. She pretty much has her birthday at Skate City every year, but Dad hasn't been since then.

'Why? You think your old man can't handle a pair of inline skates?' Dad laughed.

'I somehow doubt it,' I said. 'Even if you were a roller skating king a few centuries ago.'

'You better believe it.'

Dad loves to tell me he'd skate around the streets all day, once without a shirt on in the middle of summer. He got so sun burnt he had to spend three days in bed with Grandma smothering his back in calamine lotion.

'You better bring the newspaper along just in case.'

Skye was totally up for it. 'Monday is Super Skate night! They play 90s hits and there's like a great crowd there,' she squealed over the phone. 'And it's half price.'

Half price. I bet Dad did a bit of research into that one. He would have done anything to avoid paying full price for all three of us!

'I've been thinking, really we should go out once a week together,' Dad said as we drove to Skye's house. 'Just you and me.'

'Really?' I said. I mean, go out with your dad on a sort of date? Sounded a bit weird.

‘Nothing spectacular,’ said Dad. ‘I mean, just to a McDonald’s even, you know. And you can bring Skye or even Topps. Even once a fortnight, you know...’ he started to fumble a bit. It was obviously a big deal for him. It had been that long since he’d taken such an interest in our relationship. I guess I thought he’d always remain this distant, lost sort of guy I bumped into before and after school, someone I wouldn’t have too much to say to anymore. Even someone I’d never feel totally comfortable with again.

‘Sure Dad, that sounds cool,’ I said before he got his tongue totally in a twist. He seemed relieved I’d cut in. ‘We could go to the cinema and stuff. Skye can get us free tickets.’

‘I’d like that,’ he said. ‘It’ll be the first date I’ve been on for years!’

‘Yeah, settle down Dad!’ I laughed.

Skye was totally up for Skate City. She even brought her own inline skates along. Seriously, she thinks the place is like the capital of awesomeness in the outer eastern suburbs. I was dragged along every now and then, and I guess I didn’t mind it. Topps and his mates never went, and I hadn’t been since starting work at the Video Saloon.

When we were in the car Skye asked me to do a quiz. She’d obviously been reading about it on the Internet just before we picked her up, as she couldn’t help herself. As soon as she said hi to Dad, she asked me five questions straight away.

‘Okay Stacey, you’ve got to try this. First, just tell me your favourite animal and what you like most about that animal.’

‘What? Er...my favourite animal has always been the Meerkat because I love the way they work together and always look out for each other. And they’re cute.’

Skye seemed to be memorising what I’d said. ‘Got it,’ she said. ‘Now, name a really cute guy from year ten at school.’

‘Does it have to be from school?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, let’s try...Ryan Dowling from 10C. He’s got a nice smile.’

‘Wow! Yeah, you’re right,’ said Stacey. ‘Now, what is your favourite dessert and describe why you like it.’

‘That’s easy,’ said Dad. ‘It’s apricot Danish with vanilla ice-cream.’

‘Definitely,’ I laughed. ‘Because it is nice and crusty, but really sweet too.’

‘Okay, last question. Describe the ocean.’

‘The ocean...um...it’s pretty scary because you can’t see what’s underneath you, but it’s something you can’t wait to dive into anyway. You just hope there’s no creepy crawlies waiting to bite your toes. But I love the ocean cause I’ve got good memories of it.’ I saw Dad slowly nod in acknowledgement when I said that.

Skye clapped her hands. ‘Okay, this is how it goes. I’ve changed the questions and used your answers for the new questions. The first is, how would you describe yourself? The answer you gave is that you love working together with others and you look out for them too. And you think you’re cute.’

‘She’s right, Stacey is cute,’ laughed Dad.

‘As if,’ I replied, secretly chuffed.

‘For the second question, you have a major crush on Ryan Dowling. Why? Because he is nice and crusty, but really sweet too.’

‘Crusty? Sure you’re not talking about me?’ said Dad.

‘No, I said sweet,’ I said, ‘but you’re right about the crusty bit.’ Dad pretended to whack me.

‘Finally,’ said Skye, ‘what is your attitude towards life? You said you love life even though it’s pretty scary because you can’t see what’s underneath you, but it’s something you can’t wait to dive into anyway. You just hope there’s no creepy crawlies waiting to bite your toes. But you love life because you’ve got good memories of it.’

I was quiet for a moment as I thought about that answer. ‘Even though the other questions were stupid, that last one was pretty cool,’ I said.

‘Yeah, it’s a psychological test,’ said Skye.

Did I love life? I guess so. It could be pretty scary sometimes and I learned first hand there definitely were creepy crawlies waiting to take a bite of me. But I did have good memories of life, especially with Mum and Dad together. I just hoped those memories wouldn’t fade and be replaced with nightmare stuff like the past few months.

‘Maybe you’re gonna be a psychologist Skye?’ said Dad.

‘Nah, you need to be smart for that. I’d like to be a school counsellor or something though,’ replied Skye.

‘You’d be good at that, for sure,’ I said. ‘Or perhaps you could be a professional rollerskater? Wait till Dad sees your moves. He’ll be impressed.’

I think Dad regretted taking us the minute we walked into the place and Hanson was thundering out this sugary pop classic called “*MMMMBop*” that Skye immediately started singing along with as loudly as she could. A mirror ball shot traffic lights of colour across the skating rink, the ice machine looked like it was ready to blow and everyone was shouting and laughing trying to do barrel rolls and grapevine tricks. Dad looked a bit shell shocked. ‘I think I’ll have a Coke and take a look at the paper,’ he said to us. ‘You both have a good time.’

‘Gee, your Dad is cool taking us skating,’ Skye said, easing onto the rink as easily as a seal sliding into an aquarium pool.

‘Yeah. The whole Video Saloon thing really shook him *and* me. It sort of gave him a head spin. It made him think of someone other than himself,’ I said as I stuck one hand on the barrier. It always took me a few minutes to get back into skating.

I struggled to keep up with Stacey who, as usual, hurtled off around the rink. She was like some frisky mare. You just had to let her go for a few laps of the rink before she would settle down. I tried to speed up a bit, but it didn’t really work for me. I felt the skates zig-zag left and right and the wheels slide on the slippery surface. I stumbled forward, then overcorrected myself and fell hard on my bum.

A hand reached down to help me up.

It was, of all people, Ryan Dowling. ‘Need any help?’ he said, as I grimaced and held his hand. He flicked his fringe away from his baby blue eyes as I stood up, and smiled at me. I was right, he really did have an awesome smile. We were in different classes, so I didn’t get to see that smile much. A pity.

‘Thanks,’ I said, smiling back.

‘No probs. Cool, see you later,’ he said, giving me a wave before joining up with his friends.

‘Oh my God Stacey,’ said Skye, flying up behind me and grabbing my hips. ‘This has got to be, like, fate! I mean, he really *is* sweet.’

I just smiled.

Fate! It can be fickle. But I hoped it would be good to me tomorrow morning at the Video Saloon. Was I being stupid? Was this the world’s worst plan? No. I had to go through with it. Life was feeling a bit more normal but I really, really wanted to go through with my plan. It’d work.

I put on a burst of speed and, for the first time ever, overtook Skye.
Tomorrow is going to go off, I thought. And there's nobody who can stop me.

Alarmed

I'd never walked down Main Street at two o'clock on a Tuesday morning before. It was completely empty. No cars, no people, no noise. Just the dim humming of the street lights. It was cold too. But in a way, it was nice. Soothing.

Topps was wearing a cap that was pushed down to his nose and had his coat collar was pushed up over his face. He kept on looking anxiously up and down the street, before removing his glasses and cleaning them, then scanning the street again. 'The cops will pull us up for sure,' he said. 'This is crazy Staceman.'

Topps only called me "Staceman" when he was over-excited or really anxious. Like when we first went on the Big Dipper at Luna Park and I discovered he really didn't like heights, or when he found an ultra rare card in a *World of Warcraft* booster pack and waved it around in triumph. I couldn't blame him for being so anxious. My hands were thick and clammy and my throat was dry.

'Are you still for real, orange peel?' he said as we walked past the Rising Sun Bakery.

'Are you in or out, brussels sprout?' I retorted as the blue fluorescent glow of the Rosedale chemist sign turned us into ethereal ghosts.

'I'm in...just.'

We reached the Video Saloon. A crumpled, torn poster for *Knocked Up* still hung on the window despite it being a weekly rental for, like, years. It was one of Crass' favourite films.

I turned the key and discovered my hands were slightly shaking. With more difficulty than normal I opened the large glass door and hurried inside, let Topps in, then relocked the door. I found this really difficult to do, but not just because of nerves. It was as if I was cutting myself off from an escape route – just like I'd done a week before.

Topps squeezed in beside me. He turned on his small head lamp, which was stretched over his head with elastic webbing. I hadn't even thought of bringing a torch. It was a good idea. Probably not a good thing to turn on the store lights when you're breaking and entering. I flicked open the small alarm system box and quickly keyed in the code: 1-2-4 ... then forgot the last digit. My brain froze.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Topps as the alarm gave off three indignant beeps. It made me even more nervous. ‘I can’t remember the last digit,’ I said.

‘What? Just double the previous number. Four, double it, eight! Push eight!’

I pushed the number and then “OK”. The alarm gave three sharp beeps, but it didn’t die.

‘What’s happened?’ said Topps. We were both staring at the “Activation On” light that should have now turned off.

‘Oh God, I dunno, I must have messed it up,’ I said. I keyed in the numbers again as carefully as I could. 1-2-4-8. Then I pushed “OK”. Again the alarm refused to die. It gave off three defiant, belligerent beeps.

‘Vince must have changed the alarm code!’ I said. ‘He never changes the code!’

‘Are you sure you’re right?’ said Topps. ‘We’ve only got one more try. It’ll blow if we get this wrong.’

‘He’s changed the code, or perhaps Crass did,’ I said as the alarm continued beeping hysterically. I only had a few seconds to enter the code again. As I did I told Topps to open the door so we could get ready to run for it. Then I finished the code entry.

For a second I thought we’d done it. The alarm died, but before I could even sigh in relief it erupted in an ear-piercing squeal. A blue siren above the door (I’d never even noticed it before) spun like an old-fashioned police car.

‘Run for it!’ yelled Topps.

I almost tore the door of its hinges as I tried to unlock it. Once we were outside I locked it again. Topps was already half way down Main Street before I had turned the key. He waited impatiently before I caught up with him. Breathlessly, with Topps five steps ahead, we sprinted for the park and home. Thankfully not one car passed us on the street as we wheeled past the estate agents and made it to the park. I’ve never run so fast in my life. My legs felt like they were running on air. I could have run all the way to Lakes Entrance the way I was going.

‘What were you doing?’ Topps said as we rested at the children’s playground. I could still hear the alarm like a cat’s wail.

‘Locking the door,’ I said, my hands on my knees, my bum resting on the kid’s slide. ‘That way it wouldn’t look like anyone had broken in.’

‘Man, we got the code wrong,’ said Topps wiping his brow. ‘That’s the end of that brilliant plan.’

‘Vince has changed it for sure. Damn, it was such a good idea too. I’m sure those DVDs are inside as well.’

Topps took off his glasses to clean them for the tenth time that night. ‘Well, there’s other things we could do. We could forget about it, that’s the first option.’

‘Would have agreed with you a few days ago. Now? No way,’ I said. ‘I want a bit of payback here. What’s next?’

We both started walking home, keeping to the path and on the look out for the police. The alarm died. Someone must have turned it off.

‘We could sneak into the store during the day,’ said Topps. ‘You know where the box is kept. I could divert Crass’ attention, and you could sneak down to the cellar and take some photos...’

‘We’re not ninja Topps. As soon as he sees me he’ll be suspicious. And what if he caught me? No, it wouldn’t work. Too much of a risk.’

‘And breaking and entering isn’t? Well, an anonymous telephone call to Detective Rooks then,’ said Topps.

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘We probably could do that, though that’d make me feel like a primary school dobber. It’d have been nice to have included the bonus DVDs with it. Good, hard evidence and I’d feel like I’d actually done something. This was a stupid idea anyway. Let’s just forget about it.’ I was suddenly feeling dejected. What did I think I was going to do? Walk into the store and find all the DVDs just waiting for me? Gung-ho wasn’t my style. This proved it.

‘Hey, Staceman, don’t give up yet,’ said Topps as we reached my house. ‘I’ve got one more idea if you really want to get your hands on those DVDs. We can still get the code for the store. I’ll explain it at school. When are you coming back?’

I sighed. ‘I’ll be there. Thursday. I need a sleep in tomorrow.’

* * *

I did, as it turned out, return to school on Thursday. Dad wasn’t so sure but I convinced him I felt fine. I was over it.

Everyone wanted to know what had happened. I was sick of talking about it. I must have answered the same questions a hundred times: “Did you totally freak out?”, “Did the dude have a knife?”, “Have the cops caught him?”, “Is he still after you or what?”

Kids I didn’t even know stared at me in the hallways. I was pointed out and gawked at all day. Two year eleven boys hummed the theme from *Psycho* when I passed them in the canteen. I felt like giving them the finger. Creeps. Even the teachers weren’t sure how to treat me. It was all, “How are you coping, Stacey?” and “If you need another week on your project, that’s fine Stacey.”

Topps kept quite. He and Skye shadowed me protectively around the school, as if they were bodyguards. He sounded out a few students who asked too many questions or stared for too long. It was kinda sweet.

That afternoon I spent some time with the school counsellor, on instructions from both Dad and Huffy. It would help me cope better at school, apparently. I spoke with the counsellor, a woman with a crooked nose and large eyes named Ms Tonkin who drove a pink VW Polo and ate lima beans for lunch, but she was cool. I talked to her non-stop for an hour. Let go of a lot of crap and felt better when I left her. She wanted to keep telling me nothing that happened was my fault, that I was the victim here – if only she knew the true story. I was almost tempted to tell her exactly what I had done, but I didn’t.

Funnily enough, I got a sort of supporter base going, especially amongst the girls. Caitlin passed me that afternoon and gave me a quick, urgent smile, but never said anything. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be mad at her or not. It sort of felt she had been on Crass’ side. I was tempted to confront her, but I didn’t. Not yet.

Topps grabbed me on the way home. ‘Something to show you,’ he said.

When we reached the plaza he took a small box out of his school bag.

‘What is it?’ I asked. I was feeling tired now and had bought a can of Pepsi to try and wake myself up. It’d been a big day.

‘A mini wireless spy camera,’ said Topps. He showed me the camera. It was incredibly small, about the size of a ten cent coin. The lens was about the size of a pin head. It was connected to a 9-Volt battery. An antenna a quarter the size of a straw stuck out of the head of the camera

‘Where’d you get it?’ I asked, holding the camera between two fingers. It was featherweight. I still wasn’t sure what he planned to do with it.

‘My uncle. He imports security and surveillance equipment. Gave a bunch of samples to Dad a while back. I play around with this one sometimes. It’s about five hundred bucks worth. I rigged it up in the living room once, hooked it into my TV and watched my sister pick her nose all the way through an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants*. It’s amazing. It transmits to a receiver, which you hook in to a TV or video, or you can connect it with a USB connection to a laptop. The range is good – it goes straight through a couple of walls for a hundred metres or so – and it’s got a good picture too, colour with audio. It’s clear. Clear enough to record Crass or Vince inputting a code number, for example.’

‘Oh man,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘You told me it’d be too much of a risk to sneak in behind the Video Saloon counter during the day, but you’re going to put a miniature camera in the store instead. This is such a lame idea...’

‘No way Stacey! It’d work. I’ve thought it through. I get Will and Ray to come with me just before closing time. Ray’s brother Justin will drive us. As they rent some DVDs I can install the camera in the children’s section, right next to the alarm. It’d take half a minute, max. Nobody’d see it. It’d click onto the shelving and fit right between a couple of videos at shoulder level. The big problem is the camera receiver. I’m going to have to hook it up to my laptop, and then get Justin to park down the road from the store. We’ll have the receiver and laptop in the car. The receiver has a range of up to a hundred metres, and it’ll go through the Video Saloon wall easily enough. I’m just not sure what the visuals will be like. We stay there until Vince or Crass locks up, record the image of them inputting the code, then I go back the next day and collect the camera. Man, it’d be easy. The risk is trying to line the receiver up with the camera to get the best possible image and then getting the camera at the right angle to record the input of the code. Hey, who’s on tonight?’

‘What?’ I said. I was only half listening. It all seemed too random. Being back at school had dampened the desire for revenge. The weekend raid on the Video Saloon had been enough. It hadn’t worked and now I didn’t want to go any further. ‘Er...Vince, I suppose. Monday night is his night.’

‘And is Vince left or right handed?’

‘What...right, I guess. Why?’

‘If he’s right handed he’ll stand slightly to the left of the alarm system. Meaning I’ll have to install the camera closer to the door.’

‘Topps, why don’t we just let it go? I don’t want to sneak back into the store. Not after what happened on the weekend. And what if there’s no pirated DVDs when we go back? I’m not going to get up at midnight every night for the next week.’

Topps put the camera delicately back into a box and then placed the box into his bag. ‘Stacey, you wanted the perfect revenge. This is it. It’ll work. All you have to do is trust me.’ He reached over and touched my cheek. He looked at the ground, then back at me. ‘Stacey, Crass took away your smile. I’ve never seen you so miserable over the past week since...since your mum died. Now it’s up to you to wipe the smile off *Crass*’ face. Payback. Remember?’

Topps was one of the few people I knew who could talk about my mum’s death with me. I’d rather talk to Topps than Dad. Dad always ended up morose or in tears. Topps actually stood next to me at the funeral, his hand on the small of my back the entire time. I cried at that funeral, but it was nothing like the night three weeks later when we sat on his couch watching a re-run of *The Simpsons*. The one when Bart gets expelled so he has to be home-schooled by Marge in their garage. ‘Can you imagine your mum being your teacher?’ laughed Topps. I think it was those two keywords: mum and teacher. It trigged me off. I really bawled. I soaked Topps’ T-shirt, but Topps didn’t mind at all. I couldn’t imagine any other boy his age allowing a girl to cry on his shoulder. But he let me. For over 15 minutes I cried, until Ray Knipe knocked on the door wanting to borrow a console joypad.

I looked at him for a moment. “‘Crass took away your smile?’” I laughed. ‘Where did you pull that one from?’

‘Dunno. Just thought of it then. Dramatic, yeah?’

‘No. Corny as.’ I punched him in the arm. ‘Anyway, if you’re going to use the camera, do me a favour and write your will beforehand.’

‘Anything you want?’ Topps asked.

‘Yeah. Your CD collection, your PC, and while we’re at it, your mobile phone too, cause I wouldn’t be in this mess if I had a decent one.’

‘Deal.’

Blurred Vision

I was absolutely, positively sure the fourth number on the security panel was seven. 'You can see Vince's hand move down to the bottom corner of the panel,' I said.

'I'd say four,' said Topps, his finger tracing Vince's pixillated, ghost-like hand on the computer monitor. 'Oh man, if only he'd stayed still a second longer.'

It was late Tuesday afternoon. We were sitting in Topps' awesomely large bedroom. My entire bedroom could fit into his walk-in wardrobe. His computer desk was as big as my bed, and it was filled with enough gadgets to make a computer geek drool: a desk top computer, a lap top, flash drives, wireless router, an iPod, a digital Skype phone...I didn't even know what half the stuff did.

Ray Knipe sat on Topps' bed reading a PC Gamer magazine and drinking a cup of red cordial. He was ignoring us. He kept cleaning out his ear with his right index finger and clearing his throat. He's a bit of a strange guy. Very smart, but never studies. He says he doesn't have much time for school work. He's arrogant and serious. He has thick eyebrows and long dark hair that flops over his forehead that makes him look very intense. He likes computer games and stereo music equipment – and karaoke. He has the best stereo in year ten, actually. A Kenwood he's modified himself that could shatter glass if played at maximum volume, according to Topps. He listens to hip hop and electronica music that gives me a headache. Topps thinks he'll be way rich when he's older. He makes everything look so easy, without even trying. Except sport. He's hopeless at sport. So he definitely has something in common with Topps and me.

Will Phillips sat next to Ray. He was reading a Mad magazine he'd borrowed from the library and also drinking red cordial. Every few minutes he'd laugh with his high pitched squeal. The worst laugh in year ten. It made him sound like he was choking. He's funny, but always stressed out and disorganised and panicking about forgetting permission slips the morning of an excursion or answers to science tests. He must have left his flash drive in the computer room at school at least eight or nine times. He's clumsy and tall with a bewildered look on his face as if to say: "What am I doing here?" He likes long fantasy novels and YouTube and playing the piano, even though after eight years of lessons he's not very good. I get on with Will better than Ray, because you could

boss Will around. Ray just doesn't listen to you. They're good friends of Topps, even though Topps always complains about them being *ubergeeks*, which is why he prefers to spend more time with Skye and me.

The TV was on, but Will and Ray didn't seem to be giving too much attention to the DVD that was playing.

Topps told them about what happened to me at the Video Saloon. I didn't want him too, but he did. He can't keep a secret for long. Anyway, he claimed they kept pestering him when he asked them to come down to the Video Saloon the night before. 'Renting a video at 9.45 at night during a school week and then sitting in Ray's brother's car for an hour isn't something I regularly do,' Topps had told me at school this morning. 'Ray and Will, not to mention Justin, were going to be pretty suspicious sitting in a car with me, a laptop and a camera receiver. I had to tell them.'

'Are you stupid?' I said angrily. 'If one of them blabs then the whole school will know we're trying to set Crass and Vince up. It'll be a disaster. Crass has friends in this school. We'd get taken out in the change rooms for sure.'

'Hey, credit please Mr Music,' said Topps. 'I didn't tell them *everything*. Just enough to let them know why I was setting up a surveillance camera in the store. I didn't even hardly mention the piracy.'

'Hardly?'

'Yeah, just a few excerpts. The funny bits. Besides, I got the new security code, didn't I?'

I had to give him that.

He'd given me a blow-by-blow account what had happened: After Topps, Ray and Ray's older brother Justin had driven to pick Will up, and Will had eventually come up with a story to convince his parents he should be let out of the house at almost nine-thirty at night, they'd driven to the Video Saloon. Ray and Will had borrowed a bunch of weeklies, and even had an argument over an old Japanese anime called *Bubblegum Crisis* (Ray doesn't like anime). There were a couple of other customers there too, which was good for Topps as he had more of a diversion – as long as none of them ventured into the children's section.

Vince had gone out the back to get the DVDs, allowing Topps to set up the camera. It fitted in perfectly on the top corner of the shelf, aiming right at the security panel. 'It

clipped right onto the shelf, and I wedged it between a couple of old Scooby Doo and Rugrats discs. No-one will borrow those, for sure,' said Topps.

'What've happened if Vince had seen you?' I said.

'I'd have done a runner and left Will and Ray to sort it out,' Topps had grinned.

It had taken less than a minute. Topps made sure it was working as best he could and then got out of the store before Vince had even returned to the counter with the five DVDs. Then they'd all piled in to Justin's car, which was parked on the other side of the road, as Topps was sure it would still be in range, armed with the receiver and laptop.

Then, this morning Topps and Ray had braved missing a double period of English to return a couple of the DVDs. Crass was in. Topps had headed straight for the children's section, his heart in his school shoes. The camera was still there. In the light of a warm Melbourne morning it was far more visible than the previous night. 'I don't know how Crass could have missed it,' Topps had said. 'You could spot it a mile away. I didn't realise it was so visible.'

I said, 'He probably had a hangover and couldn't focus. It was ten o'clock in the morning, after all.'

Now we were sitting in Topps' room after school trying to figure out what the security code was. Ray and Will had insisted in coming along, although they'd lost interest fairly quickly. We were watching the digital video. I found the image on the PC too dark.

'The signal's not great,' Topps said. 'Everytime a car passed us it broke up.'

I saw Vince move into camera range. The key pad was a bit fuzzy and out of focus, but I could make it out more-or-less.

'I thought the picture would be clearer,' I said, as static washed over the picture.

'Considering I'm using a receiver that's trying to pick up a signal from a thumb sized wireless camera on the other side of a brick wall, I think it's pretty good,' said Topps, defensively. 'Anyway, you'll see the real problem soon.'

Vince stood to the left of the panel. Topps zoomed the picture in, pixillating the numbers of the panel even more, but we could still make them out. He pushed the first three numbers that I recognised as: 3-6-6... Then Vince moved slightly to the right and even with the camera on a tight angle we couldn't see the last digit. It was definitely on the left side of the panel, as the 3, 6 and 9 were still visible.

‘You can see his hand drop,’ I said. ‘I reckon he pushed seven.’

‘That’s the problem we had last night. We all agreed on the first three numbers. But look closely,’ said Topps, ‘his hand is right next to the five key. It’s definitely a four.’

Ray jumped off the bed and walked over the computer and peered closely at the screen. ‘I told you last night, it’s a one. For sure.’

‘What do you know, numbnuts?’ growled Topps. ‘His hand is too low. A one? As if.’

Ray shrugged and went back to the TV. ‘It’s a one,’ he said, lying down.

We tried replaying the scene, zooming in as close as we could, but Vince’s jacket covered the panel, blocking out the far left numbers on the pad. The static didn’t help things.

‘Well,’ said Topps, ‘we know it’s a four or a seven. We’ve got a good chance.’

‘We get three shots at this,’ I said. ‘If that alarm goes off again, that’s it, revenge or no revenge, that’s the end. I’m forgetting about it.’

‘Oh man!’ cried Will, in disgust.

‘I don’t know what you’re worried about Will,’ I said. ‘It’s got nothing to do with you.’

‘What?’ said Will, the familiar look of bewilderment crossing his face. ‘I’m talking about *Bubblegum Crisis*. Ray was right, it *is* lame!’

Ray shrugged and emptied his glass. He was always right.

Four Digits

‘So is it a four or a seven?’ I said, my finger hesitating an inch above the security pad. I found myself doing circle eights with my index finger over both numbers.

‘Jeez Staceman, you’re going to kill me,’ hissed Topps. ‘I told you it was four, but you said you were positive it was seven!’

‘Yeah, I was. But now I’m not so sure.’

‘Well, push seven. We’ve still got two more tries after that.’

It was Friday night. Three days after Topps installed his surveillance camera. We’d decided to wait in case Vince had been spooked by our last effort (although Topps thought that since we locked the door, security would consider it a malfunction) and I was confident Crass was more likely to load up the basement for the weekend on a Friday night, since Vince rarely worked on Saturdays. We could also sleep in tomorrow. It was almost one o’clock in the morning and I liked my ten hours sleep.

I’d spent the evening with Skye. Topps had to go to a family dinner. She knew something was going on after Will, the big dope, had wished me good luck for my “midnight adventure” in front of her at the bus stop.

‘What was Will saying today?’ said Skye as we sat on her floor reading her Cosmo and Smash Hits simultaneously.

I told her. It wouldn’t have been fair otherwise, and she was a best friend. Anyway, if I hadn’t said anything, Will or Ray would have, and I’d be in trouble. Besides, she’d put up with the week long snub between Topps and I.

‘Oh, Stacey,’ she said. ‘And you’re really going to go and break in to the Video Saloon Friday night? It’s just so risky.’

‘Yeah. I’m not that cool about it anymore myself. I was at first. Revenge, getting Crass back for making me leave the store. Lots of reasons. But it sounds stupid when I talk about it, doesn’t it? Like something out of an action movie.’

‘What do you think will happen when you get the DVDs anyway? What will the police do?’ said Skye.

‘I don’t know,’ I had said truthfully. ‘I never thought that far ahead.’

I wish I had. Because right then I was in the middle of setting off the alarm for the second time in a week. I wish I had really thought this through, because I'm sure I'd have come up with a far better plan this.

I entered the first three digits: 3 – 3 – 5. Then with a grimace I pushed 7.

The alarm gave its by now familiar warning flash and high pitched squeal. It was the wrong code.

'I told you it was four! Man, you never listen to me,' said Topps. 'Come on, do it again. Press four.'

I re-entered the three digits, then pushed the number four. The alarm refused to die.

'It was wrong too!' I said. 'We must've stuffed up. They're both wrong! Damn it!'

'Oh man, only one attempt left Staceman. What're we going to do?' said Topps.

The alarm's red "activate" flashed ominously, as if it were alive, a Cyclops staring out of its cave, waiting, just waiting for a victim to pass by. It'd activate in a few moments, regardless if I entered another code or not.

I entered the first three digits, as I was sure they were correct. But what was the fourth number? I could only come up with Ray's suggestion – one.

My finger hit the one button on the security pad and I pushed OK with my head against the wall and my eyes shut, expecting the shrill alarm to send us sprinting out of the store again. Topps had already unlocked and opened the door, ready for a fast exit.

The alarm died.

For a second neither of us moved. I looked at the alarm in disbelief. It serenely displayed its green light – disarmed. Topps looked at me with a grin and raised his eyebrows.

'One. Ray was right after all.'

'Damn. Like always,' said Topps. 'We won't tell him though. He's up himself enough as it is. Just say it was four.'

'Forget that, Topps! I reckon it was seven all along!'

Leaving the lights off, we walked down the empty and dark aisles to the back room. Topps turned his head lamp on and illuminated the stairs. 'That's a long way to fall,' he said. I pushed past him. I was beginning to feel really anxious. The memories of this place weren't good. I wanted to get this over and done with. Besides, Dad thought I was sleeping. He'd die if he came in to the room to find me gone.

I turned on the basement light. Back to the scene of the crime.

I could hear Topps breathing heavily as we walked down to the basement. I was sweating. The alarm episode had spooked us both. I half expected it to re-activate.

I reached the corner of the basement first, pulled the broken shelving away and then pushed it against the wall. It slid away easily.

The table behind the shelving was crammed with DVD and game discs, coloured labels, a pile of DVD covers and postal envelopes. One pile of envelopes had already been labelled. A number of coloured marker pens lay on the table.

‘I think we just hit it lucky big time,’ Topps said.

‘Dragon’s gold,’ I laughed.

Topps handed me the letter we’d carefully written and to Detective Rooks and a sticky label we’d made up earlier that night.

I selected a large empty Postpack envelope from the table. ‘Let’s be selective with the movies,’ I said. ‘Don’t take too many.’

Topps chose a collector’s edition of *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* (it was one of the few DVDs with an-almost original cover. I was pretty sure Crass had copied this one himself from the store, considering how old the movie was) and I chose a George Clooney action film and a Johnny Depp flick. The cover of the Johnny Depp DVD had Chinese lettering on the front of it. Obviously an import. We threw in some Nintendo Wii and Playstation console games for a bit of variety.

After exploring the piles of discs further, I found a collection of movies at the back. I picked up one called *College Hot Tub Chicks*.

‘Hey, you think it’d be wrong if we actually kept a few of these...as back up,’ Crass said when I showed him the cover. Disgusted, I didn’t answer him. ‘Just one more reason not to feel guilty about dobbing Crass in,’ I said, dropping the DVD into an envelope. I only wanted to take a handful of DVDs so Crass wouldn’t be suspicious.

Then I put in the letter, stuck the address label onto the package and sealed it.

‘You’ve got a date with Australia Post,’ said Topps, putting it into his backpack.

We walked up the stairs and to the door. Just before I re-entered the code I turned and looked around the Video Saloon. ‘Adios Amigo,’ I said, saluting the store. ‘It was nice working with you.’

One sure thing, I was never coming back in here again.

‘I’m going to miss the free X-Box 360 rentals, for sure,’ sighed Topps. ‘Oh, the agony of departure!’

I went to re-arm the alarm when a set of headlights burst through the front door and swept across the store.

‘Get down!’ hissed Topps, pushing me to the floor as the lights passed over our heads. We heard the running of a car outside, then the lights died and so did the engine.

‘Someone’s parked outside,’ said Topps, clicking his head lamp off.

I heard a car door open and footsteps coming towards the glass door. Luckily for us the *Knocked Up* poster covered the lower half of the door or we would’ve been seen for sure.

‘Quick, get into the kid’s section, we haven’t got time to get to the basement,’ I said. We both scurried along the carpet (I never realised just how revolting and dirty it was) and made it to the kid’s section, which was enclosed in wooden, chipped yellow walls made to look like a castle and surrounded by shelves of DVDs. We rolled along the floor behind a mini table full of jigsaw puzzles that Vince thought would distract kids from pulling covers off the shelves. Topps hit his head on the kids table and swore.

A pair of keys rattled in the lock before the door opened. From the security light outside the store we saw a shaven headed stocky man with three earrings and a blue uniform walk in. A patch on his sleeve said “TUBBS SECURITY”.

Great! Vince doesn’t bother fixing the alarm to the police station but he decides to use the local security firm to help him out. Just our luck.

The security man shone a torch at the alarm system, took a walkie-talkie from his pocket and said: ‘Hey, it’s Ahmet. Yeah, you’re right, the Video Saloon alarm was disarmed but the door’s locked. I’ll have a quick look around, but it looks like a malfunction again. Yeah. Right, mate. Get back to you.’

I was praying Ahmet wouldn’t turn the lights on; we’d be seen for sure crouched in the corner of the kid’s section. He reached for the switch, but then suddenly changed his mind. Instead he walked to the back of the store, shining the torch around the shelving as he went. I was almost tempted to make a run for it but Topps held me back. ‘Don’t even move,’ he whispered.

We heard the guard tapping the register and small safe, perhaps making sure nothing was missing. Seemingly satisfied, he walked back down the aisle. I could hear

his leather boots squeaking ominously and then he was so close I could smell the last cigarette he had had.

‘Hey, it’s Ahmet again. I’m re-arming the alarm. Nothing disturbed in the store. Yeah, definitely...the alarm’s as old as my aunt’s chin growth. I’ll put in a report. It needs replacing. Yeah, I’m heading down to the industrial estate now.’ He punched in the numbers, locked the door and headed back to his car.

‘We’ll set the alarm off as soon as we move,’ I said in desperation. ‘We’re fried.’

‘Security alarms give you clearance time,’ said Topps. ‘We’ve got about half a minute to get out the door. Just wait for the car to go.’

The alarm gave off three short sharp beeps as the security guard started his car and reversed fast out of the angle parking at the front of the store.

‘C’mon, let’s go,’ said Topps. We both made a run for the door. I stuck the key in and tried to open the door too fast.

‘Turn off the alarm!’ I said. ‘It’ll go any second!’

‘No! Just get the door open. Move it!’ said Topps. He reached for the key but I refused to let go. We both grasped at it as we unlocked the door, threw it open and crashed into each other as tried to get out.

‘Hold on idiot,’ I said, ‘let me out first!’

‘Just hurry up dopey!’ shouted Topps.

The tension had gone to our heads. I re-locked the door just as the alarm let go with a longwinded beep. It had re-armed itself.

‘Man, let’s get home before I wet myself,’ said Topps. ‘This is, like, full on ridiculous.’

‘Hey,’ I said, ‘you’re always playing those stupid shooter X-Box games. Now you’re *living* one. Don’t tell me that didn’t get you pumped. Besides, it was your idea.’

I was right. It *was* his idea. And I was also pumped. This had been the best night of my life. I felt like I could do anything. As if no-one could stop me from doing anything in my life every again. Most of all, I felt the sweet, sweet euphoria of perfect revenge. ‘Let’s go via the post,’ I said. ‘I won’t feel good until that parcel sits right at the bottom of the post box.’

‘We haven’t got any stamps,’ Topps reminded me.

‘Oh man, you’re such a stickler for the rules,’ I said, laughing hard with nervous energy.

Topps grinned. ‘I’ll send it tomorrow. Man, I just can’t wait to see Vince’s face once Detective Rooks gets this.’

‘Let’s hope my letter works,’ I said. ‘I want to leave this all behind me now. I just want to forget the Video Saloon even exists.’

‘After Detective Rooks get this little package, it probably won’t for much longer.’

Topps walked with me home and then took his bike and peddled back to Melrose Hill, his head lamp throwing spots of light across the road.

As I was getting into bed I noticed my Video Saloon staff card on top of my lamp stand. I took and threw it, Frisbee-like, across the room. It bounced off the wall and into the cane rubbish bin.

It felt like closure.

In the News

Nothing happened for weeks. The year was almost over, exams had just about finished. I don't know what I had expected. I thought I'd get a phone call or visit from Detective Rooks for sure, but there was no progress at all. The Video Saloon was still open. Crass still worked there. I still had the odd recurring nightmare.

I felt a bit defeated.

At least Dad had managed to get some good pre-Christmas work at the hardware store. Most afternoons I found myself walking into an empty house. Something I used to enjoy. So I started spending more time at Skye and Topps' or at the library, only going home around six, when I knew Dad would be there in front of the telly. I didn't like being home alone very much.

One afternoon I was in the library borrowing a couple of books; Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and Sonya Hartnett's *All My Dangerous Friends*, when I felt a hand gently grasp my arm. It was Caitlin. She had a bunch of books under her arm. She was wearing a bright orange short skirt, an eggshell blue T-shirt and a white leather belt. Topps was right, she did have the best legs in the school. From where I was sitting I could see they were shaved as smooth as a wax candle.

'Listen Stacey, I'm really sorry about what happened in the store, but thanks, thanks for not dobbing me in,' she said.

'You don't know if I did,' I replied. I was still angry with her. Her pretty face fell for a moment. 'But I didn't,' I quickly added. I was going to leave it at that, but there was still one thing bugging me. 'Caitlin, there's one thing I really want to know,' I said. 'I hope you'll tell me the truth. Did Crass tell you to threaten me?'

The corners of her lips drew back. She paled behind her foundation. She sniffed and sat on the seat next to me. It was one of those big soft red couches that you just sink into. I wish we had one in my lounge room instead of our threadbare recliner.

'Yeah,' she said quietly. 'Yeah, he...he did. He rang me out of the blue Sunday morning, the day after what happened to you in the store; I didn't even know he had my number. He told me you were helping him out with his business, just like I had, but you'd

had an argument with him and left the store. He thought you were about to spill your guts to the police. I asked him why you'd left. He said you'd wanted a bigger cut of the profits. He said you got greedy.'

'What!' I said, my hands gripping the books tightly, 'That's a lie! I didn't care about the profits, I quit because one of his sleazebag customers cracked onto me and he was dealing adult movies! He lied to you!'

Caitlin looked down at his shoes again. 'I was pretty sure, you know, that he was lying. But what could I do? Anyway, he said a friend had given you a little scare the night before, as a bit of an incentive to leave.'

'Robert Keppler,' I said, grimfaced.

'He didn't say. Just that his friend had got a little carried away. He was only supposed to spook you. But Crass needed to make sure you wouldn't say anything, that you kept quiet when you left. So he told me to warn you about what would happen if you told the police. So that's what I did. The very day after it happened. I'm...I'm sorry – he *threatened* me, you know? I really did think I'd get into a lot of trouble, and you would too, if you said anything to the police.'

She looked back at the ground. I did too. If the police did arrest Crass, I was sure he would mention names, out of spite. I hadn't mentioned mine or Caitlin's name in the letter to the detective. Instead, I'd made it anonymous, outlining that I was a customer who had found pirated discs from her son (this was Topps' idea) and who discovered they'd been bought from the Video Saloon. I had claimed to have written it anonymously to protect my son and had requested no mention of the tip-off be made if there were any arrests. It made me feel better not providing my name. Still, I half expected a call from the police after they'd arrested Crass and Vince. Or so I thought. It looked like the cops hadn't done anything at all.

'Well, this little trick of Crass' worked,' I said. 'Looks like he'll get away with it too, cause he got what he wanted. I left and the police know nothing. That's how things go, I guess. Kinda sucks.'

I left her standing by the seat. I didn't want to hint that Topps and I had taken matters in to our own hands in case she really was friendly with Crass, but I doubted that now. Anyway, I'd done her a favour and I wasn't going to do anything more than that.

Then, in late December during the final week of term, the most amazing thing happened. Skye was reading *The Herald Sun* during our free period in the library as I was drawing cartoons in my school diary. She squealed and called me over. She pointed at a small article on page 17. It read:

PIRATES GET BURNT IN VIDEO STING

Five men and two women were questioned this week by police in regards to a quantity of illegal copies of DVDs and computer games found at two eastern suburb markets and a video rental store in Rosedale. The flat of one of the men interviewed was also searched.

Croydon regional response unit officers and Australian Federation Against Copyright Theft investigators seized 400 pirated DVDs, computer games and karaoke discs in the basement of the Video Saloon store in Main Street, Rosedale. Over 1000 pirated DVDs were discovered in the flat of an acquaintance of one of the employees. The fraudulent copies were worth around \$28,000 on the local market. Two computers and duplication equipment worth almost \$8,000 were also removed from the flat.

The DVDs were sourced from overseas or burnt from original copies within the store.

Officers claim the operation was capable of producing almost 100,000 discs and games a year.

The manager and two employees of the store were interviewed after police alleged that the DVDs were sold to customers over the counter.

Three market stall owners were also being interviewed after large numbers of illegal DVDs and console games were discovered for sale at the Eastside and Heatherdale markets.

Detective Sergeant P C Rooks from Croydon CIU, who lead the raids, said anti-piracy investigations had been undertaken over the past twelve months. 'This is just one in a series of raids the regional response unit and Federation Against Copyright Theft investigators have planned,' said Detective Rooks. 'Piracy continues to be a threat to legitimate businesses. Hopefully this will act as a disincentive for illegal activities in selling pirated goods in the future.'

The names of the two men and one woman from the Rosedale store questioned over the pirating have not yet been released. Detective Rooks would not confirm if formal charges had been laid in relation to the crimes.

'Investigations are continuing,' he said. 'We're trying to establish what the roles of the staff were in regards to the copying and selling of the DVDs, and their relationship to the man who held the illegal stock in his house of residence. While this was not a large scale operation, selling pirated DVDs over the counter of a video store was particularly brazen.'

Investigators went undercover to buy pirated DVDs from the store and the market stalls in the weeks leading up to the raids.

The illegal copying and selling of DVD movies is a multi-million dollar industry in Australia. Illegal copies are easily obtained at market stalls and on-line. This costs the Australian film industry an estimated \$400 million a year. It is estimated that 10 per cent of all movies distributed and sold in Australia are illegal copies, double the figure of six years ago.

Wow. I mean, WOW. Crass AND Vince were sweating it up with Detective Rooks! Even better, there'd be no more Robert Keppler and his evil stalking ways. I felt like punching the air. It was as if I had been part of the raids and I had snapped the cuffs on Robert and Crass. The letter and midnight excursion was all worth it. Topps and I had done it.

'Staceman, yeah!' Topps said when I showed him the article. 'Justice has a new name...and its name is Stacey Fallon!'

'You're an avenging angel!' cried Skye.

'Yeah, I guess. Just a pity it had to come to this. If they'd just let me be...' After the initial jolt of triumph when I had read the article, I felt a little bittersweet, as if I'd just won a 100 metre sprint at the Olympics but I'd had to sacrifice most of my life to get there, and I wondered if it was all worth it.

'C'mon Stacey! They were into this big time. They made thousands of dollars and tried to get you and Caitlin to help them out. What would have happened if you had been caught along with them? Crass would have let you burn. He was a coward.'

What *would* have happened if I had been caught? I thought our story about being a concerned mother kept me pretty safe, but who knew if Crass would give Caitlin and my names to the police? Would I be in trouble? Would I go to court or be fined? Just the thought of having a police officer knocking on my door made me sweat.

For now, everything had worked out fine. A raid of the store well after I'd quit and arrests at the two markets. It was co-ordinated. A twelve month investigation? Crass wouldn't – couldn't – be suspicious. Perhaps my package wasn't even needed? Perhaps they had tabs on the Video Saloon anyway? Is that why Detective Rooks wanted to have a talk to Vince?

Even though I thought I was safe, I still didn't want to meet Crass, Vince or Robert in a dark alley in the near-future. I was guessing that I wouldn't be on their Christmas card list this year.

The only real regret I had was the loss of my summer job. The end of the school year was only a week away and I didn't have a job. Dad said the hardware store didn't need casuals until stocktake. That meant money would be really scarce again, unless the Chicken Shack needed someone to scrape out their deep fat fryer.

'I wonder if old Vince was involved after all?' asked Topps.

‘Yeah, I’m not sure I’m looking forward to finding out, but who are the two employees?’ I wondered. ‘Crass is one, who’s the other?’

‘What? Didn’t you know?’ said Topps. ‘You’ll remember her. She was about three years older than us. That girl who dropped out of school in year eleven, what’s her face – the one who always wore pink socks – um, Toni someone. She’s working there. I saw her a few weeks ago.’

Toni. The girl who Crass wanted to so desperately meet in the city that night. The girl who was pushing for my job months ago. Now she had it. I was certain she would have been an enthusiastic player. Pity, because now she’d be getting grilled too. Wrong place, wrong time.

‘Topps, I said. ‘I reckon it’s over.’

‘Yeah, Staceman. We did it. The perfect revenge.’

Topps hugged me, and I let him hold me for longer than I usually felt comfortable with. I felt his hands on my back, soft and gentle. My blonde hair brushed against his cheek, and he looked at me expectantly. I saw a look in his eyes and knew nobody else cared for me like Topps did. I know that there aren’t many boys like him. For one moment I thought I was going to kiss him. What would have happened if I had? We would have stayed there, embracing and letting the last few months wash away, not caring what had happened, not worrying about the results of our actions, just being together. I think I would have liked that. But I didn’t kiss him. Not on the lips, anyway. Instead I pecked his cheek, then pulled away. He looked embarrassed. I smiled. Perhaps one day.

‘Yeah,’ I said to him as he stood there in silence, ‘perfect.’

The End of Summer

I stood in aisle five of the Handy Hardware Barn trying to find where 65mm chipboard screws were stacked. I knew a lot about Aisle Five: Screws and Nails. I always seemed to be here, stacking shelves and emptying boxes. Four weeks straight without a let up.

Dad was at the tradie counter, which he now managed, talking and laughing with the men in their overalls who smelt like wood and white glue. I hadn't seen him so happy for a long time. He had finally made the step up and accepted a full-time job again. It didn't pay so much, but he was happy. He'd kept away from Dave's, he'd managed to keep his downer moods under control (although Christmas wasn't a barrel of laughs – he gets melancholy remembering the beach barbecues we used to have) and he'd even talked about heading back to Lakes Entrance for some fishing. He said I could bring Skye along too.

Then he got me a summer job here, six hours a day, stacking shelves. I started two days after Christmas. Stacking shelves. How awesome. Skye was working at the cinema behind the candy bar, which would have been way better than this. It made me totally jealous. Topps had gone off to Cairns snorkelling with his family and playing with his new iPod Touch he got for Christmas. I don't even want to think about that.

It was almost the end of the January holidays and it was a stinker outside. There was no air-conditioning and no air in the Handy Hardware Barn. My shirt stuck to my back and my bra felt like a thick elastic band. The visor I had to wear to pull my hair back from my face didn't help things at all.

I sighed and dug into the box of screws again. I almost wished I was back at The Video Saloon. It had closed down just a few weeks ago. One day all the stock had just disappeared, the place left with just the white Formica shelving and the dirty carpet. I never realised how dirty that carpet was until I'd been forced to crawl over it with Topps. The *Knocked Up* poster was still stuck on the door.

The store was going to become a Westpac bank, apparently.

I was surprised, even though I shouldn't have been. The Video Saloon was almost deserted after the articles in the paper. People just didn't go there anymore. Topps went down to take a look one time and said Vince was the only one working behind the

counter. There were “FOR LEASE” signs stuck up on the window and tables of DVDs and videos laid out in the store. Vince was selling off his stock.

I felt sort of bad that I had helped wreck Vince’s business, even though Detective Rooks assured me Vince had plenty of irons in the fire. But he wasn’t involved in the piracy. Crass and Robert were though. Not only that, but Robert was charged with assault. I know because Detective Rooks had phoned Dad and spoken to me as well.

Detective Rooks had given us a run down. The piracy had worked like this: Crass rented out DVDs and game discs to Robert for free, Robert copied the covers and discs and Crass picked the copies up and returned them to the basement of the store. Robert would then return them legitimately to avoid suspicion. They had moved into importing and selling games, karaoke discs and adult movies from the Eastside Market. They then sold the discs over the counter to a select number of customers and they also had a mailing list. Detective Rooks had found a substantial amount of pirated discs in the store basement. More than enough to justify charges.

Luckily he didn’t mention how he’d been tipped off.

Not only had Crass and Robert confessed to importing and burning pirated movies and then selling them over the counter and to local markets, but Detective Rooks said that Robert had admitted he was the intruder in the store. He’d blamed Crass, who had apparently organised it all to scare me into quitting. It had worked, but obviously it went far further than Crass had anticipated.

Dad had been so angry after Detective Rooks had called. ‘I hope they get their arses kicked nice and hard,’ Dad has said grimly.

They were both out on bail and would be up to the Magistrates Court in a few months. If the assault charges stuck, Robert could be in more trouble than that, according to Detective Rooks. He was pretty sure they’d get a suspended sentence and a fine for the piracy – but the assault charges were more serious. It meant jail. And it meant I’d be called as a witness. Getting up in front of court had totally freaked me - it still does - but Detective Rooks told me to be calm and worry about it when the court case came around. Easy for him to say.

Vince had been apparently blind to it all. Detective Rooks had said Vince had threatened to kill Crass during questioning. It made me think that if I had gone and told Vince about Crass when I first found the pirated gear none of this would have happened –

but what if he was the mastermind? Topps was certain Vince was in on it right up until the end.

I had seen Robert again, during the post-Christmas sales. He didn't see me. He was hunting through the bargain bins at an Electronic Boutique store, his arms full of discount computer games. He was mumbling to himself. He still wore his black coat and long, greasy ponytail. He looked a bit off his head, to tell you the truth. I wonder what would have happened if I'd have confronted him? Asked him why he'd done what he had. I sort of felt sorry for him.

Crass disappeared around the New Year. Daryl Landon told Topps his brother had told him Crass was working the lobster boats in Queensland. Obviously he didn't want to hang around and face the music. I'm not sure if that's true or not, but it'd be hard work on the boats. Crass would be hating it. I wondered if he'd be back for the court case. Probably not.

Caitlin looked spooked in the days following the article in *The Herald-Sun*. She never spoke to me again. Just looked at me with vacant eyes, obviously wondering if I'd had anything to do with the raid. She tried to look fierce, sort of angry, but it never worked. She just looked scared, wondering if she'd get a call from the police and her precious university place would disappear. I doubted it.

I gave the shelving space a quick wash before I restocked it. This might sound silly, but I was imagining the dirt and grime on the shelf was every awful thing that had happened during the past year. And I was washing it all away, picking up each ugly germ and bit of grit to leave a gleaming, clean slate. I loved how something so dirty and dusty could look so new so fast. Perhaps it was a metaphor for my life?

With the upcoming court case I couldn't put this behind me yet, but it was a new year and I was ready to face whatever came my way.

Dad came walking down the aisle, inspecting the shelves like he always did just in case I'd stuck the tapping screws in with the wood screws. He gave me a smile and a quick salute.

'How are things going?' he asked.

I held up a packet of rivets. 'Just riveting,' I joked.

Dad laughed and gave my arm a gentle squeeze. 'Well Stacey, what do ya reckon? We're both stuck together in an oversized shed full of wheelbarrows and paint tins and we've got a tough few months ahead of us. Reckon we can handle it?'

'Just you and me against the world, Dad.'

Dad gave a wry smile. 'I just hope the world is ready.'