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Jason
Versus
the
Thing

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Prologue

Deep in the forest, a long time ago in Gondwanaland, something strange and unearthly began to grow. Over time as continents separated and the first peoples flourished in Noongar Boodja land, the strange object kept growing and growing. Animals and birds used it as their nesting place. The first peoples camped in its shade and recorded their stories on its sides. Children climbed on it and slid down it. When white settlers ploughed the land and displaced the first peoples, the mysterious lump of matter was left where it sat. By now it was too big to do anything about.

Chapter 1 - The Thing

Many years ago, on the south-west corner of Australia, at the end of a grassy paddock near a slow flowing creek that joined a faster moving river, in a town called Grevillia, was a very big thing. It was known as The Thing because when people saw it, always asked, “what IS this THING?” But no-one knew. The paddock, the farm and The Thing belonged to Gus and Ida Brown. All had been in Gus’s family for generations.

No one knew when The Thing first appeared. ‘Way, way back in time’ was as clear as anyone could get when trying to estimate its age. Despite the mystery surrounding The Thing, it was simply accepted as part of the landscape. Gus and his ancestors before him had thought about removing The Thing but it seemed too much trouble, so it

stayed where it was, right at the edge of the lower paddock, close to the creek. They planted and ploughed and grazed their animals around it and didn't mind it taking up the space. It wasn't doing any harm and it was a rather large farm.

Gus liked to take visitors to see The Thing and get their opinion on what they thought it might be. Some said it looked a bit rock-like, others said it looked a bit tree-like, some said it was a combination of the two. A few even suggested it could be from outer space as it looked like nothing on earth. Gus just chuckled. He'd heard it all before. Everyone did agree on one thing however. "Jeez, it's ruddy big!" they would all declare and no one could argue with that.

Gus and Ida had four fine sons, Ted, Alf, Ern and Tarquin. As youngsters, all four would amuse themselves for hours each day playing on The Thing. Ida would pack them a large, wholesome lunch and send them down to the lower paddock with clear instructions to stay out of her hair until teatime and not fall into the creek. The boys were happy to oblige her on both counts.

They'd climb all over The Thing using its handy foot and hand holds, slide down its smooth sides and drape pieces of tarpaulin over parts of it to make a cubby. Tarquin would collect flowers, feathers and leaves and decorate The Thing. He was a dreamy child, very gentle and considerate, not at all like his brothers who were tough, back-slapping kind of boys. Gus wondered whether calling the lad Tarquin had anything to do with it. He was rather keen to call him Perce but Ida loved the name Tarquin (it had been her favourite uncle's name), so that was that.

Ida loved her four boys or, as she used to joke to friends, “my five boys, counting Gus!” She cooked huge meals for them, darned their socks and read them bedtime stories until they were well into their 20s. Such was the role of women back then. Maybe not reading fully grown men bedtime stories, but certainly cooking, washing, mending, cleaning and helping around the farm. Not to mention resolving conflicts, finding things that no one else can find, planning family parties and gatherings, remembering birthdays, fixing things and so on and so on.

In between doting on her boys, she was quietly researching and trialling different natural fertilisers to improve production on the farm. She was so successful that she won first prize in every “large vegetable” category (her large parsnips were legendary) at the local show for ten years running until the Chair of the Agricultural Society asked her to let others have a go. She graciously complied. But no one then or since has produced large vegetables like Ida’s.

Ida was always busy and always happy. She put love into everything she did – except darning socks.

Chapter 2 -Tarquin

Eventually the boys grew into men and one by one they married. All except Tarquin who didn’t seem very interested in settling down like the others. A proud introvert, Tarquin was happy with his own company.

All four siblings worked the farm with Gus and in time, built houses for themselves on the land near the old farmhouse. Tarquin built a very trendy cottage in the bottom paddock, not far from The Thing. His cottage was quite different in style and substance to his brothers' more serviceable homes. He decorated it in a monochrome pallet, and invited his night school friends over on weekends for fondues and sing-alongs.

While Tarquin was taking a course at the local technical college in accounting, he met a number of people in the same course who, like him, were also interested in renovating and decorating houses. They loved to share tips and ideas during the break and soon they formed a group and met in each other's homes once a month. Over a home-cooked meal they discussed the latest trends in interior design and swooned over the pictures in the latest design magazines. The group was a secret he didn't share with his family; they wouldn't really understand.

His interest in beautiful things didn't mean that he didn't love the farm. He did. Passionately. It's just that he preferred to work indoors changing things from subtle to bold and back to subtle again using colours and placement and light, and the occasional bowl of cane balls as a centrepiece. The outdoors seemed far too large and unmanageable to the sensitive, creative Tarquin so over time he withdrew from the heavy work on the farm. Instead, he took over managing the finances and developed a real flair for making money, which pleased all of the Brown family.

His favourite money-making venture involved opening up the back paddock and charging people to experience The Thing. It was quite the attraction for the people of Grevillia and beyond. The Thing

experience was a popular choice for birthday parties for young and old. There had even been a wedding held on top of The Thing. The wedding party and guests however, became somewhat carried away climbing on and sliding down The Thing, as tended to happen when people came in contact with it. They were enjoying themselves so much that the celebrant actually forgot to perform the ceremony. The bride and groom only noticed this omission many years later when they were filing for divorce and discovered they weren't ever actually married to begin with.

Soon enough, Gus and Ida had a fine collection of grandchildren all of whom loved to play on The Thing as much as their fathers before them. They climbed on it, slid off it and made cubbies, inside which they would eat the nutritious lunches their parents made for them.

Then quite suddenly, one day, many years later, old Gus died. It was very quick and painless, which was a mercy for him but very sad for everyone else. Not long after, Ida decided it was her time to go so she too, quietly slipped away.

The boys became the joint owners of the farm and for several more years continued to work it. All except Tarquin, that is. Shortly after his parents died, he sold his share of the farm to his brothers, relocated to the city and opened a very successful real estate styling business. There he met Paula, a divorce lawyer. They married and moved into a very smart, inner city terrace house together. Tarquin changed his name to Bruce. He'd secretly hated being called Tarquin, but didn't want to upset his Mum.

Over time, the three remaining brothers found it increasingly hard to make a decent living from the farm. Climate change was playing havoc with the weather, wool and wheat prices were down, the Australian dollar didn't know what it was doing and they were, quite frankly, ready for a change. Added to which they had a large number of young mouths to feed with modern tastes to satisfy. The children were still very attached to The Thing, but as they grew older and more sophisticated, they transferred their preferences to video games, trail bikes, jet skis and other expensive pastimes like axe throwing, polo and snowboarding.

So, when a developer, named Jason Brown (no relation) representing Brown and Brown (still no relation) Development Pty. Ltd. offered the three brothers what they considered to be an obscene amount of money for the land, they hardly raised an eyebrow or batted an eyelid before accepting.

Land around Grevillia had become quite desirable over the years as large numbers of cashed-up city folk sought the authentic country get-away experience. What these city folk considered "authentic" seldom involved actual authentic country experiences, such as driving long distances for shopping and entertainment, working the land, managing pests, wildlife and weeds, and paying far too much for goods and services. No, they wanted the authentic country experience as long as they were near facilities that they were used to, like shopping malls, cinemas, cafes and fast-food outlets.

Enter Brown and Brown Development Pty. Ltd. Jason had an eye for an opportunity and was very pleased the three Brown brothers were so easily won over. He and his partner, Eric, had been prepared to offer them far more than they finally accepted.

Settlement day dawned and it was time to view his investment up close and personal. So, Jason, clad in suit, shirt, tie and entirely inappropriate footwear, jumped into his brand new, beautifully polished black SUV and took off down the highway to Grevillia and Brown's Farm. It was the longest drive he had ever undertaken. The furthest he drove normally, was the short commute between his inner-city apartment and the inner-city office where he worked – a trip spent mostly stationary in heavy traffic. It was also the fastest he had ever driven. He would have preferred to limit his speed to what felt comfortable for him, but the traffic that was banked up behind him had other ideas. Tailgated by a particularly imposing sixteen-wheeler, Jason felt it was in the best interests of his safety and the preservation of his new SUV that he put his foot down on the accelerator.

More than three hours later, he entered Brown's Farm by the gravel road leading off the highway. He parked on top of the hill, climbed out of the SUV, slid on the gravel in his leather shoes, fell onto his rear end, picked himself up and tried his best to get gravel dust off the seat of his pants.

It was only then that he surveyed his property for the first time, having not yet visited the site. In keeping with current practices, he had completed all the sales transactions remotely. The sheer size of the land made his head spin. Oh! The potential! The money he could make! Life was good, Jason Brown, young-gun developer concluded.

Jason flared his nostrils, looked up at the sky and took in a big breath of fresh country air. This was a mistake for two reasons. Firstly, from an early age he had suffered from hay fever brought on by proximity to any type of grass (a commodity Brown's farm was well endowed

with). And secondly, he had a tendency to sneeze whenever he went out into the sun. Today, the sun was shining brightly in a vivid blue, cloudless sky and millions of tiny grass seeds were swirling in the breeze around Jason's head. Soon the big, deep breath turned into an enormous and undignified sneeze. The allergens celebrated victory inside his body gifting him with red rims around his blue eyes, an itchy, runny nose and an annoying tickle at the back of his throat.

None of this improved his rather bland, forgettable appearance. Jason was one of those unfortunate individuals that no-one can ever remember when he's not around. He would make a perfect criminal. "Can you describe the offender, Madam?" "Not really, Constable. He was average height, average build, sort of brownish hair and he wore a suit, brown, I think. He was between 25 and 50 but I couldn't be sure."

Jason Brown, was in fact only twenty-seven years old, which is quite young in the property development world. And he was actually reasonably tall, if ever he held himself up straight. He was also quite slim, but for his middle, which had never been introduced to core-strengthening exercises. He compensated for his lack of years by trying to look what he thought was the part of the successful, modern developer. He would spend a long time in front of the mirror trying to persuade his unmanageable mop of unruly sandy hair to look at least a bit "on trend". Each day his hair was shampooed, conditioned, blown dry, and covered in lashings of product. Each day his hair resisted all attempts to tame it. He splashed the latest aftershave onto a very ordinary, quite sad looking face that had the unfortunate knack of breaking out into various rashes at various (and inconvenient times) for various reasons.

Jason took out a large wad of tissues from his fake crocodile skin briefcase and honked loudly into them. Failing to clear the now well-entrenched congestion, he soldiered on with his task of overseeing the first phase of the development. Today he had organised a local demolition company to level the main paddock from below where he stood to the creek. Everything on the land had to go. This was his favourite part of the whole development process. In fact, despite clogged ears, he could hear in the distance the sweet sounds of bulldozers and earthmovers clunking towards the farm to start their task of destruction.

Reaching into the glove box of his vehicle he removed a pair of binoculars and happily gazed down the hill, past the farmhouse, beyond the Brown brothers' homes, around Tarquin's trendy cottage, through the bottom paddock and towards the slow-moving creek. Suddenly his mouth dropped open.

Chapter 4 - Jason meets The Thing

"What in blazes is that?" he asked no one in particular when his eyes landed on The Thing. He jumped into his spanking new SUV and bounced down the dirt track to take a closer look, kicking up a cloud of dust as he went.

"What in blazes is that?" he repeated unnecessarily when the answer still hadn't presented itself to him. Then he remembered. The Brown brothers had mentioned that there was a large something or another in the bottom paddock that was very special to the family and the community, and how they hoped he'd leave it where it was. They

called it The Thing, he recalled. This must be what they meant. He shook his head in disbelief. “What IS that THING?” he asked himself.

Jason closed his eyes, opened them again hoping it wouldn’t be there, but it was. He looked at it aghast. “Jeez, it’s ruddy big!” he told the wind who’d heard it said so many times before. “But it can’t stay here! It has to go!” he pronounced. (“That’s new,” the wind thought. “Never heard anyone say that before.”)

The Thing stood, lay, presided, reposed, reclined, lounged (there didn’t seem to be an accurate verb to describe how it intersected with the earth beneath it) right where Jason planned to build a shiny aluminium and glass shopping mall, mega-screen cinema complex, and office buildings with beautiful pastoral views from every window. With the slow-moving creek dammed to create a lake to reflect the whole complex, The Thing played no part in his vision. “It’s ruddy ugly too, so that’s that!” he exclaimed slapping his hands together for emphasis.

When the bulldozers and excavators finally rumbled to a halt nearby, he walked towards them and pointed in the direction of The Thing. He ordered the foreman, Doug, to start demolishing it.

Chapter 5 – Doug

Doug was actually more at home digging holes than knocking things over. He suspected that his name may have had something to do with this particular interest. He often wondered why his parents, Mr and Mrs De Graves called their only son Douglas knowing full well

that it would be shortened to Doug. So, Doug De Graves passed an uncomfortable childhood putting up with young and old alike thinking they were very funny telling him he was going to be a grave digger when he grew up. Nonetheless he was fascinated with digging holes, anywhere and everywhere as long as they weren't in cemeteries.

To make matters even more interesting, when he met and fell in love with his partner Andrew Duggan, and they decided to get married, combining their names seemed like the right thing to do.

"You can't choose who you fall in love with," Doug would often say. "Nor the name their parents gave them. So, you may as well celebrate it!"

Thus, Andy Duggan became Andy Duggan-De Graves and Doug became Doug Duggan-De Graves.

Doug was a big, muscular and thoroughly nice bloke with a smile and a helping hand always at the ready. Despite having a joke name, he had a natural ability to get along with and organise people, which made him a very good foreman with the Grevillia Diggers and Demolitions. His team of hard-working men and women made quite a good name for themselves, and a decent income, preparing land for new houses, knocking down old farm buildings and digging holes for a variety of purposes, none of which had yet involved grave digging.

So, when the thoroughly nice Doug Duggan-De Graves was asked to remove something beloved by the townsfolk, he simply couldn't put work first and principles last.

"I can't do that!" Doug said with conviction. "It's the Browns' Thing. It's been here since Adam was a lad, longer even."

He looked up at it in awe, with his back to Jason. "Jeez, it's ruddy big! Never seen it up this close before."

He took off his hard hat and rubbed his crew-cut, bright red hair backwards and forwards as if to massage the image of The Thing deep into his brain.

If Jason had thought for even a moment to expect on day one of his development dream, it wouldn't have been what just happened. He was completely taken aback. When taken aback, Jason tended to change colour. He went a deep shade of red in the face and started spluttering incoherently. The words that he wished to use to express his displeasure, left his brain quite intact, and were lined up to come out of his mouth. But they never made it.

He opened and closed his mouth like a dying goldfish for several seconds before more words formed in his brain and pushed their way through the seething mass of anger in his belly, in an attempt to find his mouth. Reversing course, they rose up through his very tense body to seep out of a very tight pair of lips.

"What do you mean you won't demolish it?" he hissed.

"No can do mate!" Doug replied. "It's a legend around here. You won't find anyone who'll lay a finger on it!"

Jason went an even deeper shade of red and tried his best to sound authoritative, which failed abysmally since he could only manage to squeak rather than roar.

"Knock it down now. Now! I want it gone, today, legend or not. I hired you to level this paddock. That means everything goes including that eye-sore. You don't get to cherry-pick what stays and what goes.

We had an agreement and you need to keep your part of it. What would the world be like if people only did part of what they agreed to? A mess. That's what. A chaotic mess... Where do you think you're going? I'm talking to you!"

But Jason, who by now was finally on what he considered a passable authoritative roll, was talking to himself. Doug turned and strode over to the other workers in the crew and started pointing in a very animated way towards The Thing and then back towards the almost apoplectic Jason. Before long the crews' heads were together in a tight huddle with the occasional arm escaping to point here or there. Low muffled voices came from the huddle with the volume increasing as the seconds ticked by on Jason's stylish counterfeit Swiss watch.

Eventually Doug's head and body broke free from the huddle and an animated and purposeful group of women and men followed him as he pushed past Jason and strode down the hill to The Thing.

"Jeez, it's ruddy big," they said or "I'll be...!" or "I've heard about this" or "Look at that!" Some of the crew who'd already experienced its wonders assumed a certain status in the group as they shared their intimate knowledge of The Thing. Meanwhile, Jason was completely ignored, a situation he most certainly didn't appreciate. He sidled down the hill and from a safe distance watched the group of workers with disdain as they continued to wax lyrical about the indescribable lump of matter that was blocking the realisation of his beautiful dream.

Then Doug turned towards Jason. "People, this developer here wants to destroy The Thing. What do you say to that?" Doug said the word "developer" like it was a swear word.

A chorus of “Shame” and “No way!” and “Over my dead body!” erupted from the angry group. They glared at Jason shaking their fists menacingly. Jason spluttered and stammered as he beat a strategic retreat back up the hill to the safety of his now rather dusty SUV.

He watched aghast, as the crew seemed to forget their anger and turned their attention back to The Thing. Some of them climbed on it using the handy foot and hand holds, others slid down its smooth sides and a few even fetched tarpaulins from their machines and draped them over parts of The Thing to create a cubbies to sit in. One burly fellow called Spider wandered around The Thing collecting flowers and leaves to decorate it. No one knew that Spider’s Dad was an old night school mate of Tarquin’s. Spider grew up being inspired by his Dad to take any opportunity to embellish and style his environment. Everyone thought Spider was just a backhoe driver, which only goes to show you never can tell.

From within the safety of the cabin of his SUV, Jason watched the strange scene unfold before his disbelieving eyes. A dozen of the most stereotypical working men and women you could imagine, dressed in hard hats, hi viz vests, grubby navy-blue shorts and steel capped boots, behaving like a bunch of little children. Each one playing happily on an extremely ugly lump of indeterminate matter that had nothing to do with his lovely plans for the development.

“It has to go!” Jason said again, bashing the steering wheel to make his point and rupturing a blood vessel in his middle finger in the process. He picked up his (latest model) mobile phone, stepped out of his SUV, checked to see if he had a signal (two bars) and called his partner in the steel and glass office tower in the city.

Chapter 6 – Eric

“Eric! We seem to have a slight problem!” Jason pronounced. “No, the machinery and crew have arrived. No, they haven’t demanded a pay rise. No, it isn’t raining any more... Damn it, will you listen for a moment!” That last comment was a mistake, which he immediately regretted. Only one person in their partnership was allowed to raise his voice, and it wasn’t Jason.

Jason held the phone away from his ear while Eric exploded into expletives about being spoken to in such a manner. Finally, Jason took a deep breath and did his version of bellowing back. It wasn’t what is commonly understood to be bellowing – more like talking in a normal voice but with bellowing intentions.

“Eric! There is a huge something-or-another in the bottom paddock and the demolition crew say they won’t demolish it!” he paused while Eric exploded again. “Something-or-another, I said. No, I have no idea what it is! People just call it The Thing,”

Jason was interrupted again by Eric’s explosive response. “Listen, no matter what it is, I’ve been told quite emphatically that no-one in town will touch it! Yes, I’ve reminded them they have a contract with us. No, I can’t force them to demolish it. No, I had no idea this lump of matter was on the land so I couldn’t have foreseen this happening. Yes, I know – something has to be done about it. That’s why I’m calling you...”

The noise from the other end of the phone was so deafening Jason dropped the phone into a muddy puddle left over from rain the night before. This was both good and bad news for Jason. The bad news was that the phone no longer worked. The good news was that he had a legitimate reason not to communicate with Eric for the time being, which was rather a relief.

He stood and rubbed his hair messing it up even more than normal while he planned his next moves. Clearly the demolition crew had lost their collective minds and couldn't be reasoned with. Not to mention how demeaning it would be to even try and reason with a bunch of adults playing like little children. No, he had to think of something else. For several minutes more he stood still staring into space. Nothing came to him. He tried pacing and thinking.

Some of the crew who looked back and up at Jason concluded that he too had lost his mind, pacing around his SUV with his mouth opening and closing, gesticulating to some invisible entity. But compared to the fun of playing with The Thing, Jason's drama seemed plain boring so they shrugged their shoulders and ignored him.

Chapter 7 - The Thing in peril

Following his disastrous conversation with Eric, little seedlings of ideas started to sprout in the recently assaulted brain of Jason until one (obviously a weed because it grew so quickly) smothered all the others. He shut his mouth with a snap. "That's it!" he shouted triumphantly, as he jumped back into the cab and turned over the motor of his now quite dusty, but still relatively spanking new SUV.

Doug, Spider and the rest of the crew looked down from the top of The Thing when they heard the SUV speed off down the track.

“Good riddance!” Doug announced to the assembled and a chorus of “Too right” and “You said it!” erupted. “I don’t think we’ve seen the last of him, team,” Doug added. “He’s got it in for The Thing so we’d better make sure he keeps his hands off it.” Another chorus of “Too right!” and “You said it!” followed his pronouncement.

Overhead a flock of strident black cockatoos swooped and looked down upon the strange sight of twenty or so large human beings sitting in a circle on top of The Thing flapping their featherless wings and making odd noises. Had they known The Thing was in peril, these cockatoos might have joined their human counterparts in their plans to save it. But they didn’t know, because of course they are just black cockatoos. So instead, they shrieked and hooned their way off into the bush to find a suitable tree to peck to shreds.

The discussion between the members of the demolition crew continued on well into the late afternoon with many suggestions debated, examined, supported, rejected and otherwise thrown into the ring. Some were clearly unacceptable as they involved such things as blunt objects, engaging criminal types, unethical behaviour and far more money than they possessed. Other ideas had some merit but required more time than they thought they had. Finally, they settled on the best option of the lot. Satisfied with their plans, the crew slid down The Thing, climbed into their vehicles and headed home to start working on their individual parts.

Chapter 8 - Jason tries again

Dawn broke the next day over old Gus's farm. The silently grazing kangaroos looked up as they once again heard the distant rumble of heavy machinery heading down the track to the lower paddock. Clicking to each other in irritation at being disturbed for a second morning in a row, they hopped off to the safety of the bush paddock where they could observe in peace and safety.

Leading the convoy of machinery was a very excited Jason driving a recently cleaned SUV. He imagined what it must feel like to be a fearsome general heading his troops into battle. Each metre they progressed down the track brought him closer to victory, fame and the respect of his business partner. This was more like it!

The previous evening, having been unable to contact Jason on his mobile phone, Eric tracked him down to a budget, out of town motel. He insisted in his customary imperious way, that the manager put him through to Jason's room. The manager, did not like being told what to do in such a manner, so she left Eric on hold for a good five minutes. By the time Jason finally picked up the phone, Eric needed a step ladder to climb onto his high horse.

Eric was not someone you hung up the phone on and he was keen to finish saying to Jason what he thought of him. Loudly, of course. He started by expressing regret at ever having gone into business with Jason in the first place. This was not news to Jason. Eric told him this particular fact regularly. He then moved onto Jason's obvious lack of management skills citing past and current perceived and actual examples. Eric continued expressing his belief that Jason was

incapable of managing the development and if only he (Eric) wasn't so busy, he would do it himself.

Jason on a number of occasions during the tirade, thought about defending himself, but he knew from experience, that disagreeing with Eric was an exercise in futility. Eric was not open to any points of view other than his own. Jason sat on his bed with the phone next to him while Eric continued, without taking a breath, his assessment of Jason's competence or lack thereof. At this point Jason realised that trying to talk to Eric about his idea to progress the demolition phase of the development was never going to happen. He would be better off just getting the job done himself so, mid-yell from Eric, Jason hung up on him, again.

Jason was well connected to the influential world of demolition. One phone call to his next-door neighbour in the city did the trick. His neighbour knew a man whose uncle owned an earth moving company (Buster Brothers – "Obliteration is Our Business") that liked nothing better than to sneak behind enemy lines and demolish the buildings that wimpy, greenie, pinko, dinosaurs refused to touch. Luckily, despite the short notice, a Buster Brothers demolition crew had had a last-minute cancellation and was free to start the next day. Jason was over the moon. Yes, he had the right men for the job this time! He'd show the other so-called demolition crew the power of big business and teach them a lesson they'd never forget.

So here he was again. Another day, another crew and victory so close he could smell it. Or maybe the smell was the air freshener the people at the Car Spa had hung from his rear-view mirror. Either way, he was lost in his dreams of revenge.

Jason drove up the track to the top of the hill overlooking The Thing when he noticed something wrong.

“What the...!” he shrieked, lost for words. “No! This can’t be...!” he stumbled on regardless.

His face felt flushed as the first signs of deep red started to appear. An even more absurd sight than just The Thing greeted him. Camped around the base and under the tarpaulins draped the day before were legions of men, women, their families, friends, pets, the mayor and town councillors – one and all.

Braking just in time before colliding with a chemical toilet, Jason shot out of his SUV and hopped from one fake Italian shoe to another still trying to string a sentence together. The convoy of earth moving equipment also drew to a halt and a large number of big men jumped out of their vehicles and gathered behind Jason.

Seeing the convoy arrive on the hill, the campers emerged from tents, from behind The Thing and from under the tarpaulin. They joined the group keeping watch around the big gas barbecue and the group walked towards the newcomers. With hands on hips, they stared menacingly at Jason and the demolition crew, daring the group through sinister, half-open eyes to take even one step closer.

Each group stared at the other for a minute or two until one of the Buster Brothers men remarked in an awe-inspired voice.

“So that’s The Thing! My cousin got married on the top of it, at least he thought he’d got married. He told us The Thing was something else, but I never imagined it would look like this. Jeez, it’s ruddy big!”

The other men mumbled their agreement. Nodding and mumbling they wandered past Jason, down the hill and over to The Thing to satisfy an irresistible urge to run their hands over its sides. The members of the group (now known as the Hands Off Our Thing Society or HOOTS for short) who were camped around The Thing, joined them to share their intimate knowledge of and concern for The Thing.

Before long the HOOTS people were inviting the newcomers to try The Thing out for themselves. Shyly at first, they grabbed onto the hand holds then placed their feet in the foot holds. In no time at all they were climbing and sliding and hiding under the tarpaulin as if they'd done it all their lives.

Doug, Spider and Doreen (one of the councillors) fired up the gas barbecue and invited everyone to join them for a hearty breakfast of sausages, tomatoes, bacon and eggs. Rose Woods, the diminutive Mayor of Grevillia, stood on a milk crate and made a formal and very dull welcoming speech, to which no one paid any attention. On the spot the new demolition workers signed up as members of HOOTS. All the families and friends sat down together and ate a huge breakfast while the children and pets played on The Thing until they could play no more.

Unable to get a full sentence out of his mouth despite repeated attempts, and equally unable to attract any attention at all, Jason retreated to his SUV once again. There he sat taking very deep breaths and repeating "I am in control! I am powerful!" over and over again. He learned this technique from a very expensive life-coach only a month ago and was assured it was one of the secrets of successful management. Maybe it was for some, but not so in Jason's

case. All he managed to achieve was to give himself a headache, and he felt neither in control nor powerful. But still, he persisted with the mantra. His life-coach had said it was important to persist. “Fake it until you make it,” she had advised. He wasn’t altogether sure what she meant.

After twenty or so minutes of “I am in control! I am powerful!” Jason felt well enough to drive off to a saner place where he could review his battle plans.

He returned to and checked out of the motel. It was comfortable enough as basic accommodation goes, but it was located right on the main road into town at the bottom of a steep hill where huge trucks laboured loudly going up, and attempted land-speed records going down. He also accepted that the first phase of the development was going to take more than the few days he had allocated and therefore, he needed to find cheaper and more accessible accommodation in town.

As he handed back his room key, the hotel manager passed Jason a bundle of fifteen phone messages from Eric. Jason thanked the manager and put them straight into the bin. He drove to what he hoped was a quiet little bed and breakfast in the centre of Grevillia that earlier in the day he had booked online. There he intended to stay for a few days while he sorted out the demolition debacle. With the mobile phone still out of action and Eric unaware of his new abode, Jason was assured of a little peace for the time being at least.

Chapter 9 - Magda

Jason knocked on the door of the B and B, which was opened by Magda, the large, elderly, cheerful, talkative host. A big smile broke her round, shiny face in two making her brown eyes almost disappear into deep folds. She smoothed her voluminous blue cotton frock with work worn hands and adjusted her frizzy, grey hair. Content in the knowledge that her appearance was up to scratch, Magda was ready to greet Jason.

“There you are, Love,” she said. “Come in, come in. I’ll show you your room then I have to go out for a while. You’ll be OK if I leave you to settle in? Make yourself at home. You can watch the telly in the loungeroom. If the picture gets all snowy, just bang it on the top. That usually works. There’s fresh milk in the fridge in the kitchen. Help yourself. You have a kettle and tea things in your room. Watch the mat in the hall. I’ve nearly tripped over it a few times myself. I really must get it tacked down.”

Each time Jason thought he could get a word in, Magda talked about some other aspect of her B and B. Finally, she drew a breath and ushered Jason down the long, narrow hall. With several doors opening from it.

“Now I must be getting on. Here is your room,” she said opening the door and turning on the light.

Jason thanked Magda and was very glad to be able to close the door with her on the other side of it. He listened at the door just in case she came back and was relieved to hear her clump down the hall and out of the front door. The sound of her footsteps was amplified both by the polished, jarrah floorboards, and her considerable girth.

Satisfied that he was alone in the house, Jason looked over the room. It was furnished with an old-fashioned oak double wardrobe, a desk that held the tea things, a wooden chair, and a floral upholstered two-seater couch. There were heavy burgundy velvet curtains on the window, and a yellow candlewick bedspread on the double bed. Jason tried the bed. Despite the ghastly colour scheme, the room was comfortable and the bed didn't squeak. There was a small bathroom leading off from his room with a shower behind a bright blue plastic curtain depicting frolicking whales. The toilet bowl and hand basin were a very awkward shade of green. He left his toiletries in the bathroom, tried to ignore the colour scheme, filled up and put the electric kettle on to boil.

After a few cups of strong, sweet tea he made for himself in his room, and a change of shirt and tie, Jason felt like his old self again. Scrolling through dozens of contacts in a spreadsheet on his laptop, he finally settled on one.

"Yes, that's what this mess needs," he told the plaster kangaroos on his bedroom wall. "A good dose of Hurricane Hal!"

Chapter 10 - Hurricane Hal

Hurricane Hal Merriweather was so-called because he was both unstoppable and destructive. The most feared developer in the Southern Hemisphere, with suitably large bribes to officials, and without batting an eyelid, managed to develop a World Heritage listed endangered forest into a rainforest theme park. The once glorious Lake Superb was now the largest shopping mall in the

country. Sunset Days Retirement Village became a mega-sports complex. The scandal created by evicting eighty elderly people hardly registered with him. He didn't bother with such matters. That is what he paid a team of seven former gangland lawyers for. Nothing stopped Hurricane once he'd set his mind to it. Not even his conscience, if he had one.

Jason left his room at the B and B and walked down to the Post Office to phone Hurricane. It never occurred to him that this simplest of plans would also be fraught with difficulties. He'd clearly never lived in a country town. Once outside on the streets and removed from the safe haven of the B and B he could barely put one elegant, fake Italian shoe in front of another without someone confronting him and saying "Shame," or "How could you?" or "Fancy trying to demolish The Thing." Some couldn't even find the words and were only able to shake their fingers or mutter "Tut, tut!" at him.

Lowering his head and trying to look invisible, Jason ducked into the phone booth to dial Hurricane's number. It was one of those old phones booths that only takes coins and Jason didn't have any. Muttering under his breath about life being too complicated and what was wrong with using cards instead of coins and why are things so backwards in the country, Jason vacated the phone booth and joined a queue in the Post Office to get some change. A simple task, or it should have been.

There was only one, middle aged and very friendly Post Mistress, Dot, behind the counter. Every customer was greeted by name and encouraged to share information about Annie's baby, and Jan's mother-in-law and Ron's recent hip replacement surgery. By the time Jason reached Dot he could barely get the words "coins for the

phone” out of his mouth, let alone the word “please”, he was so worked up. Added to which Dot seemed to know who he was and what he wanted to do and spent his valuable time trying to talk him out of it.

He bristled internally. “Talk me out of it?” he thought. “Ha! My beautiful development! Don’t people know when they are well off?”

Anyway, being in somewhat of a hurry, he kept his mouth closed, endured her sermon, paid his money and left the Post Office clutching ten dollars’-worth of twenty cent pieces.

Of course, given his current luck, the phone booth was now occupied and of course the occupant had a great deal to say to the person on the other end of the phone. Jason muttered meaningless affirmations to himself to prevent his headache getting any worse, and sent invisible daggers from his eyes into the back of the phone box occupant. After a seeming eternity the phone box was vacated and with a loud “yes!” Jason claimed it as his own. He inserted a number of coins (not without difficulty) and dialled Hurricane Hal’s city office. A beautifully modulated voice on the other end of the phone greeted him.

“Merriweather Developments, how may I assist you?”

I need to talk to Hurricane – I mean Mr Merriweather,” Jason replied. “It’s rather urgent.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Merriweather is very busy at present and can’t be disturbed. If you’d like to leave your name, I’m sure he will be happy to return your call later this week when he’s not so occupied,” the beautifully modulated voice replied with a smile.

“Please, I must speak to him,” Jason pleaded with a note of desperation in his voice. “I’m from Brown and Brown Developments. I’ve run into a rather unusual problem and he’s the only one who can fix it! It’s the kind of problem Hal is famous for solving. I really need his help.” By now Jason was sounding both obsequious and desperate.

“Look Mr Brown, no promises, he’s a very busy man,” said the smiling voice. “But I’ll see if he can talk to you.”

The line went dead for a moment before chimes playing "Für Elise" started ping-ponging in his left ear. Jason held the phone away from his head, which he then swivelled around to ease the tightness in his aching neck. He wished he hadn’t. Outside the phone booth were a number of locals all banded together, shaking their heads and “tut, tutting” at each other. Feeling decidedly trapped, Jason nearly dropped the phone and ran, but mercifully "Für Elise" was replaced by the beautifully modulated voice again announcing, “You’re in luck, Mr Brown. Mr Merriweather will take your call. Putting you through now. Please go ahead.”

“Is that you again, Eric?” a huge voice boomed through the phone. “Been trying to reach that dimwit of a partner of yours all day.”

“Hurricane!” Feeling somewhat aggrieved at being called a dimwit by someone who was not Eric, Jason nonetheless quickly interjected. “It’s me, Jason Brown...!”

“Oh, it’s you!” Hurricane also interjected rather unnecessarily. “Got rid of that damn whatchamacallit yet?”

“No. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I didn’t know you knew anything about it,” Jason said.

“Been talking to Eric. He told me. Said you couldn’t stand up to a few locals. You need guts in this game, boy! Guts! I always say.”

Hurricane continued his lecture down the phone for a good few minutes extolling the virtues of guts.

Hurricane continued his lecture down the phone for a good few minutes extolling the virtues of guts and showing people who is boss and not letting namby-pamby, greenie, pinko, dinosaurs shove you around. What he didn’t say was that when Eric phoned earlier to ask his advice, the cunning old fox in him realised the Thing problem may be to his advantage.

Jason listened with growing irritation wishing for a break in the monologue so he could try and put his side of the story. Fate intervened when Hurricane took a sip of water that went down the wrong way. Despite Hurricane coughing paroxysmally into the same ear Eric had assaulted earlier in the day, Jason seized the moment.

“It’s not that simple, Hurricane,” Jason forged on bravely. “It’s as if the Thing casts a spell over people. All the people who go near it behave like silly children and I can’t get any sense out of them, let alone get them to do their job...”

Hurricane interrupted. “What are you talking about boy? Spells? Magic? You’ll be telling me you’ve met a unicorn next.” Hurricane laughed at his own joke creating another opportunity for Jason to interject.

“I know it sounds far-fetched, but it happened not once, but twice and I need your advice on what to do next.”

“Advice you want? Advice you say, Boy?” Hurricane boomed.
“Hurricane doesn’t give advice. He sells advice. Nothing for nothing, that’s what I say! You want my advice on how to get rid of that whatever-it-is; I want a piece of the development. How does 25 percent sound? I get rid of that Thingamabob, you cut me in for 25%.”

Jason felt the first flush of red cross his face, such was his surprise. He opened and closed his mouth several times before any words came out that didn’t include swear words or the insults he was longing to deliver.

“I’ll have to talk to Eric,” he finally managed to utter through clenched teeth. Being diplomatic was so ANNOYING he thought to himself. Here was someone who deserved a good serving of home truths, but Jason knew from experience that it wasn’t a helpful strategy. More to the point though, he was very bad at it. Hours after the event he thought of the cutting, clever things he could have said, but didn’t.

“Well, you do that, Boy! And be quick about it!” Hurricane replied.
“Strike while the iron is hot, I always say!”

Jason agreed to call him back and quickly got off the phone before he was subjected to any more of what Hurricane always says.

Chapter 11 Jason tells a fib

Jason stood in the phone booth dripping with sweat at the thought of calling Eric, knowing he would be abused all over again. But when he

glanced around at the rapidly growing crowd of hostile Thing supporters, he decided talking to Eric was actually his preferred option. The other option of leaving the phone booth looked decidedly unattractive.

With growing trepidation, Jason dialed Eric's number and chanted "I am powerful, I am strong" to himself while the phone on the other end rang in his ear. Finally, Eric picked up the phone.

"Is that you Eric? Thank goodness! I've been wanting to reach you all day," Jason lied. "My mobile's out of order and I haven't been able to get near a phone until now."

Defensively, Jason held the phone away from his ear while Eric responded to the greeting with what he thought of his partner, past and present. After a few moments, Eric ran out of descriptions and Jason was able to jump into the comparative silence.

"I've been talking to Hurricane Hal. He says you called him too, so you must know that he wants a 25% cut of the deal if he can get rid of the Thing."

Jason prepared for another explosion but it didn't eventuate. "Eric? Are you there?" he asked tentatively.

Another voice spoke on the phone. "Hilda here. Looks like Eric is having one of his turns. I'll get him to call you back later. What's your number there?"

"Don't worry. I'll call him," Jason replied and quickly hung up the phone. Obviously, he couldn't pursue the Hurricane option until Eric recovered so he had to think of something else in the meantime to manage the difficult situation he found himself in with the locals.

Getting out of the phone booth alive was his first step. He had to create a diversion, but what? While he racked his brains, he picked up the phone and pretended to dial someone else. This gave him both some more legitimate time in the phone booth, and delayed the inevitable time when he would need to exit and face the crowd. While mouthing words into the phone and smiling, his brain started ticking over considering his predicament and what he could do about it.

Outside the phone booth with their noses fogging up the glass as they pressed in as close as they could, the crowd was growing bigger and more hostile by the minute. He momentarily thought of phoning the police and asking for protection until he saw a familiar black and blue hat atop one of the pressed faces.

Suddenly the solution presented itself to him. With a hearty pretend laugh, he slammed down the phone, turned to face the crowd through the glass and gave them the thumbs up.

“What’s he on about?” someone in the crowd muttered.

“Why is he giving us a thumbs up?” said another. “These city folk...”

“It’s OK!” he yelled to them. “I’ve saved the Thing!”

“What is he saying?” a large, very old woman asked Constable Bob who was standing next to her.

“I think he said he’s saved the Thing,” Constable Bob replied.

The crowd pulled back a little and Jason tentatively pushed the door of the phone booth open a crack.

He put his face close to the crack and shouted, "I've talked the development company out of demolishing the Thing. It's safe. I've saved it! When I told them what it means to the townspeople, they agreed it should stay. I had to do some pretty fast talking to begin with, but I did it. You have nothing more to worry about."

Word of the salvation spread through the crowd rapidly and a hearty cheer erupted. The once loathed developer was able to leave the phone booth only to be hoisted high onto the shoulders of two burly shearers who bore him through the throng like a hero. Finding himself airborne and high above the crowd was not something he had expected to happen. When the initial fear of falling had passed, he found that he quite liked the view from this vantage point.

For a moment Jason allowed himself a feeling of guilt for deceiving the crowd, but it didn't last long. "The fools," he thought to himself. "People that gullible deserve to be misled. Anyway, they'll really thank me when the beautiful buildings and facilities are built. They won't even miss the stupid Thing."

With a smile of contentment on his face, he directed the two shearers to Magda's B and B where he waved goodbye to the crowd and to a final cheer, walked inside.

Chapter 12 - Young Jason

Jason felt great. He hadn't felt that good in years. Not since his first successful development deal went through. Mind you the aftermath of that deal was rather unpleasant, but he still remembered the wonderful feelings of success, short lived as they were. Yes, he made

quite a splash back then. Amazing really, considering he was only nine years old at the time.

His parents were away for a week in Bali getting sunburned and wasting their money on gaudy clothing and hair braids. They did that kind of thing a lot. People used to smile benevolently at Jason's parents and tell the boy how lucky he was to have two parents still so much in love with each other. In love! All that snuggling and meaningful eye contact. Pet names and in-jokes. All those romantic weekend get-aways together at resort hotels offering special deals. He may as well not exist for the amount of attention they gave him. It made him sick!

Whenever they went away, he had to put up with Aunt Pauline, his mother's ancient and very stupid sister coming to stay. She would feed him stews with half-cooked meat and overcooked vegetables and tell him to eat it all up. She'd tuck him in bed and kiss him goodnight with a whiskery chin and foul breath. She was another one who would go on and on about his devoted parents and how lucky her sister was because she married a real man. Unlike her useless husband Ralph who didn't know one end of a screwdriver from another, who complained if his dinners were too hot or too cold, who watched sport on TV all day long. The list of Ralph's failures as a husband was as long as the hair coming out of the large mole on Pauline's chin.

Pauline came home from shopping one day to find that Ralph had left her to take up emu farming with his girlfriend Gina, about whom, until this moment, Pauline had not known existed, nor had she realised that Ralph had any interest in emus.

Anyway, during this particular time when his parents were away in Bali, he decided to organise some improvements to the family property. He'd always been fascinated with building sites and demolitions and knew from a very young age that that was what he wanted to do when he grew up. He loved watching houses, trees and old buildings tumble under the weight of the excavators. As far as he was concerned, it was one of the most exciting sights in the world. He couldn't understand for a moment why placard waving protesters became so upset when a building that had been there for far too long was knocked down and replaced by a lovely new one. Nor could he understand why they were so upset when forest and bushland were cleared. Didn't they realise no-one could use the land if the only thing on it was vegetation? At least when cleared and developed, lots of people could enjoy the land and all the wonderful amenities it could hold. Anyway, the trees were soon replaced with neat roll-on lawn and very sensible palm trees that didn't mess up the driveway and swimming pool with falling leaves. They kept the birds away too, which was a good thing. Birds were very messy and noisy, and had terrible habits like leaving their droppings on people's cars, and shrieking far too early in the morning.

He looked down into the back yard of his house and noticed how much land was wasted with just lawn, trees and shrubs. It was land no-one was using and he decided to put it to good use and make some money for his parents while he was at it. Perhaps they would pay more attention to him if he was able to hand over a nice, big bag of cash. He logged onto his parents' computer, found the website "Hire a Tradie dot com" and posted a request for quotes on clearing some land. Through the website he was contacted shortly afterwards

by three hopeful companies, from which he selected one. He paid them a deposit using his father's credit card whose numbers he had memorised. The next day a backhoe and bobcat ploughed their way through what was once quite a nice back garden. He then placed an online ad in "Build Your Dream dot com" describing in great detail the benefits of the land he had just had cleared.

By the time his parents returned from Bali, the back garden was beautifully level and under offer to a young couple and their baby. Aunt Pauline was unfortunately in hospital recovering from a minor stroke suffered when the earth moving equipment ploughed past her bedroom window and pushed over the outside toilet, that was thankfully unoccupied at the time. Had they arrived a few minutes earlier, Aunt Pauline would not have been so lucky.

Much to his surprise and great disappointment, Jason's parents were very angry with him. He thought this most unreasonable since, after costs were deducted, they'd made a profit of \$52,000 on land that was just sitting there doing nothing. His parents were even less impressed with their son's entrepreneurial skills when the Council later prosecuted them for selling the land without first getting it rezoned, knocking over a heritage brick toilet and allowing a minor to conduct business on their behalf.

For a while things were very tense in Jason's home. The young couple he'd sold the land to sued his parents for breach of contract. The credit card Jason used to pay the earth movers was over the limit and the payment to them was rejected, so they also sued.

Between that and the business with the Council his parents finally went broke paying fines and legal fees. His father had to work late

each night to make more money and his mother became very grumpy with him for never being at home. This made him stay out even more until one day he didn't come home at all. A week later he sent them a postcard from Uncle Ralph's emu farm stating he was now in the emu business and would call them when he'd made a fortune. No one heard from him again for four years during which time Jason's mother joined the Eternal Light Brethren and moved to a commune where she took up with the guru, and rumour had it, gave birth to more children.

Jason went to live with Aunt Pauline in her small, dark, smelly, untidy duplex. He was sent to the first of many foster carers at age eleven after demolishing Aunt Pauline's duplex and that of her neighbours on the other side. Using his now well-honed skills in mimicking adults, he put the land up for tender and received an offer from a well-respected land development company.

Even though the deal couldn't go through once again, because of stupid zoning regulations and the obvious fact that the developer was a minor, George, the manager of the development company that had nearly bought the property was very impressed with the young developer's talents and kept in touch with him during his time in foster care.

George offered Jason a part-time clerical job while he finished the last few years of his education in school and later in the local technical college. When Jason graduated with his certificates in business and real estate, George introduced him to his young cousin, Eric who had just started his own development business with money he had inherited from his late father.

Eric was everything George wasn't. Where George was fit and strong from regular exercise and a healthy diet, Eric was overweight, stooped and in need of some serious health-related interventions. George was an astute businessman and well respected by both his peers and his clients. Eric had the social skills of roadkill and managed to upset nearly everyone he came in contact with. He had some business acumen, but it was well hidden beneath self-promotion, insecurity and impulsiveness.

George believed that Jason would be able to develop some on-the-job experience with Eric despite his cousin's short-comings. He even lent Jason the money to buy into the business. Jason was very keen to get onto the first rung of the development ladder so he accepted George's loan and thus began Brown and Brown Developments Pty. Ltd.

Eric believed that it would make him look good in the eyes of his cousin if he took Jason on as his junior partner. Being something of a bully, Eric wanted someone he could boss around and who he could blame if anything went wrong. Naturally he didn't disclose the "boss around" criterion for a partner, preferring to take the credit for giving a young man the opportunity of a lifetime.

Chapter 13 - he Corner Hotel

As he sipped a strong cup of Earl Grey tea in his room in the B and B, Jason sighed at his reminiscences and brought himself back into the present. He still had a problem to solve but he knew he was the man to solve it.

Judging by Eric's response, it was obvious Hurricane hadn't talked to Eric about the 25% cut he wanted for getting rid of the Thing. Knowing Eric as well as he did, he also knew Eric would never agree to part with that much money. The only thing his partner liked more than yelling was money. So, he had to find a way of enlisting Hurricane's help without paying him the cut and appeasing Eric at the same time. For several hours he drank tea, thought, paced around his room and visited the loo countless times (an unfortunate side effect of drinking too much tea.)

Finally, his rumbling stomach caught his attention and he decided to continue thinking over dinner. When he looked at his watch, he was very surprised to see it was after nine o'clock. No wonder he was hungry! He hadn't stopped to eat lunch either.

Earlier, in between dodging angry crowds, he'd noticed a very pleasant café a short walk down the street from the B and B. He pulled on his suit jacket, straightened his tie and packing his still-wet phone in his pocket, left his room to walk to the café. What he'd not taken into consideration was the slower pace of life in the country. Everyone had finished their dinner by six thirty and was happily watching current affairs programmes or soap operas on TV.

The café was closed with a cheery "Please call again" sign on the door and the owner was already sipping tea in front of her favourite show, the one where reporters chase dishonest businessmen down the road and ambush them at the doors to their homes. She loved to see them bluster into the microphone and try to push the camera away. Serve them right, she would tell her family. Cheaters get what they deserve. Sometimes they also had entertaining stories about people fighting over who bought the winning lottery ticket, losing their life

savings to a fake, exotic prince and houses falling down because they were built on an old rubbish dump.

(Actually, the item on houses falling down she was watching tonight was one of Eric and Jason's projects, but she didn't know that.)

As he walked further up High Street, he noted the Corner Hotel located unsurprisingly, on a corner. On a scruffy blackboard leaning up against the hotel wall he saw that he could get a Parma and Pot for only \$10. He had absolutely no idea what either a Parma or a Pot were but took a punt that they were probably something to do with food, and at this stage, just being edible was good enough.

Entering the Corner Hotel, he was greeted by a cacophony of noise produced by a crowd of mostly men still in their hi viz vests and steel capped boots. Strident karaoke singing combined with patrons either yelling at the football game on the TV or loudly congratulating themselves on actually hitting the dart board and not each other. Everyone was shouting with the futile expectation of being heard.

Jason tried to sneak up to the bar to order the mysterious Parma and Pot without attracting the attention of any of the patrons. Maybe he might have remained anonymous in a city pub, but not in the country, and especially not in a small town like Grevillia. Especially since no one in Grevillia wore a suit to the pub, if indeed they owned a suit at all. Jason stood out like a lentil burger in a butcher's shop.

Doug, the foreman from the first unsuccessful attempt to demolish the Thing, had just thrown his last dart, this time grazing Spider's ear, when he turned around and noticed Jason slinking towards the bar.

"It's the man of the hour!", he yelled to the assembled masses. Because everyone else was also shouting, no one heard him except

Spider, whose grazed ear did nothing to enhance his already impaired hearing. He thought he heard Doug say, “it’s the man of the flower.” “What did Doug say?” Buster asked Spider. Spider said what he thought he heard to Buster. Buster in turn thought Spider had said, “it’s a pan full of flour.” By the time the message had been passed around a few more times, the noise in the Corner Hotel subsided and Pete, the last one to hear what he thought was what the bloke next to him had said based on what the bloke in front of him had said, scratched his head and said in a loud voice, “Doug, mate. What do you mean “the pan needs a shower?”

“I said it’s the man of the hour you dozy lot!”, pointing at Jason who wrongly thought he had managed to avoid detection while all the patrons were distracted playing a very weird game of Chinese Whispers.

Everyone looked at Jason, who was carefully examining the pressed tin ceiling in the public bar, vainly hoping no one could see him if he didn’t look at them.

“Oh him, the city bloke,” one of the patrons replied. “He’s the one who was going to demolish the Thing and now reckons he’s saved it, isn’t he? Someone buy him a beer.”

One by one the patrons rushed to the bar wanting to be the first to buy the (now very uncomfortable) Jason a beer. He was encouraged to drink each one, with lots of slaps on the back, to show their appreciation of the man who saved the Thing.

Try as he might, Jason could not refuse the beers for fear of offending the patrons or arousing their suspicions. By the time he

had downed the fourteenth beer he was only upright because there were so many men crushing into him and keeping him that way.

But all good things must come to an end and the hotel manager, Enid, a sizeable woman with a don't-mess-with-me-face and grey dreadlocks to rival those of Whoopie Goldberg, announced it was closing time. The patrons drifted towards the door downing the last of their beer as they did so. They wished each other a back-slapping good night and disappeared into the starry night.

Without visible means of support, Jason slowly crumpled onto the beer soaked, muddy floor.

"Come on you!" Enid said. "You can't stay there."

Jason mumbled something incomprehensible in return.

"Right then," replied Enid, "stop messing around and take yourself home."

Jason looked up at Enid from his lowly position, opened his mouth and burped loudly.

"That's it," she said, picking Jason off the floor using his knock-off Giorgio Armani belt as a handle. Dangling thus, Enid deposited him on the wooden bench situated outside the front door of the hotel, on the footpath next to a pair of rubbish bins, one for recycling and one for landfill. There he slumped in an alcohol-induced stupor.

Chapter 14 - The blue tongued lizard

Jason opened one bloodshot eye and quickly closed it again. He was definitely not ready to let the light in. Not while he was fully occupied dealing with the heavy metal band bouncing around in his head.

He felt something moving up the leg that was dangling down from the wooden bench where the rest of him had spent an uncomfortable night. Whatever it was, kept moving up his leg, slowly but surely. He kept trying to ignore it, but when he felt it climbing onto his stained shirt and destroyed silk tie, he could ignore it no longer. He opened one eye to find the thing on his chest staring at him through bright, beady eyes. It clearly didn't like what it saw. To make that point quite clear, it poked out a bright blue tongue. Jason jumped up off the bench with a startled cry, knocking onto the footpath a large bobtail skink that was slowly and deliberately crawling up the very smelly human occupying her morning sun spot. If a skink can give a disdainful look, then this one did its best. With another flash of its blue tongue, the skink waddled down the footpath and disappeared up a gravel lane next to the Corner Hotel.

Jason looked around through semi opened eyes and wasn't impressed. The sun was rising far too brightly over the hill on his right. The rubbish truck was lumbering up the main street on his left, picking up, emptying and returning bins to their upright position with more noise than his already throbbing head could handle. And when he looked down, the sight of his stained suit, white belly on full display and shoes covered in a substance he didn't even want to try and identify, Jason felt he had reached rock bottom.

Somehow, he managed to stagger back to the B and B and get into his room without waking Magda. Based on just a few minutes of making her acquaintance, Jason had already judged her chatty enthusiasm tiresome. To be fair, he didn't much like anyone who was chatty or enthusiastic or both. Unless they were talking about knocking things down to build other things, he wasn't really interested in anything they had to say. So, he was grateful (to the extent he was capable of gratitude) that he didn't have to endure her cheerfulness or explain why he looked and smelled like the floor of a pub.

A long, hot shower followed by careful attention to his uncontrollable hair, a clean suit and shirt, and a new yellow silk tie restored his equilibrium somewhat. He was rather annoyed he had to throw his counterfeit Armani suit, shirt and tie into the bin. But with beer stains, ground in chips and other unidentifiable things stubbornly adhering to them, he didn't see an alternative. He doubted that the local dry cleaners could restore his clothes to their former pristine condition. Come to think of it, he doubted that Grevillia had a use for a local dry cleaner, given everyone he had met so far seemed to wear the sort of clothes that were washed and thrown into the dryer.

Sitting quietly in his room, Jason became aware of two things; his growling stomach and his thumping headache. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast the day before. He thought longingly of a big, English breakfast with bacon, eggs, sausages, fried bread but his stomach and head had other ideas. "Water," they cried in unison, "give us water." Jason gulped down two large glasses of water and waited several minutes for his head and stomach to give him permission to eat. Reluctantly, they complied.

Chapter 15 - Breakfast

Jason made his way through to the dining room. This should have been a simple task, but like everything lately, it wasn't. He left his room and started down the passage when Magda appeared out of an adjacent room. She was wearing a candlewick dressing gown in a dull shade of beige, purple fluffy slippers and a hairnet over her full head of curlers. Her face shone with moisturising cream and a beaming smile.

"There you are Love," she crowed. "My friend Enid called and said you had quite the night last night. You look a bit worse for wear I must say. One of my famous big breakfasts will see you right."

Jason set his mouth in what was meant to be a smile, but which looked more like a sneer – his default facial expression. He stared to move on down the corridor but Magda had other plans.

"Before we go in to the dining room, I'm sure you'd love to see my silver spoon collection," she said pointing to a vast number of spoons displayed in a wooden frame hanging from the wall. "This one is very special. My dear, departed husband brought this back from Kununurra when he was up there on the mines. Look at the detail! You can almost see the haul pack driver's teeth, the detail is so, so, so," she searched for the right adjective finally settling on "detailed!"

Jason's ears momentarily pricked up at "haul pack" but quickly resumed their normal position as Magda droned on about this spoon and that. She had collected many of them overseas when her

husband worked the mines as a sparky and she had gone with him, often for years at a time. She stopped to draw breath at the precise moment Jason's stomach, still deprived of food despite its best efforts to send the signal, let out a huge gurgle.

"Goodness me!" Magda cried, "that was a big one! You must be starving. I heard you only had a liquid dinner last night." She cackled at her own joke.

How she knew that particular detail, Jason was loathe to ask. He simply nodded his head and mumbled that yes indeed, he was very hungry.

"Come on through to the dining room and I'll get your breakfast on the go," Magda said as she waddled down the passage and into the dining room that was painted a very assertive shade of dark burgundy. "I'll make you a pot of tea to be going on with. Or would you prefer coffee? Not one of those dreadful herbal things, I'm sure."

"Tea will be fine," responded Jason. At this stage he would have drunk drain cleaner if it would only stop her talking and start cooking.

Within minutes a brown, glazed teapot of freshly made leaf tea was put in front of Jason who sat down at one end of a very long, dark wood dining table, big enough to accommodate the town's football team. The dining room was barely big enough to fit it though, so none of the chunky wooden chairs could be pushed back too far. Jason had found it difficult to squeeze his protruding belly into the limited space.

The tea with plenty of milk and three sugars restored his brain function somewhat but had the opposite effect on his stomach,

which thought it was getting food and was deeply disappointed that it wasn't. It made its feelings known by uttering another loud growl.

"Dear me," said Magda, sticking her head through the servery window. "We are impatient, aren't we? I won't be long."

Jason wasn't sure where to look to avoid making eye contact with Magda, so he stared at a wall where a framed picture of a horse galloping into a storm hung at a disconcerting angle. Jason realised too late that appearing to be interested in the picture would set Magda off again.

"I see you're admiring my beautiful picture," she cried. "My darling, late husband brought that back from Kununurra, along with the spoon you were admiring before. You have wonderful taste, just like my darling hubby. I do miss him. Eight years he's been gone now. It was his heart. His big, beautiful heart." Magda looked into the distance for a moment, then shook her head. "Enough chatter, you're keeping me from making your breakfast."

To avoid any further situations that could lead to yet more memorialising of her late husband, Jason pulled out his tablet and scanned his emails. This too, was a bad idea. There were thirty-two from Eric with the subject lines becoming increasingly more threatening to the health and well-being of Jason. He read the last one, which summarised went something like this.

"You are a useless (swear word), poor (swear word) excuse for a man. You couldn't organise a (swear word) (vulgar suggestion) in a (house of ill-repute) let alone a major (swear word) development. Get that (swear word) thing out of the (swear word) way or you can

kiss this (swear word) (swear word) (swear word), partnership goodbye.”

Jason deleted all thirty-two email plus a swathe of others he deemed a waste of time, and put his tablet down on the table. He sighed a big sigh and his stomach joined in sympathy by uttering the loudest growl yet.

“I heard that, dear!” Magda shouted from the kitchen. “Breakfast is nearly ready.”

True to her word, within a few short minutes, Magda brought a big tray into the dining room and offloaded a massive plate of fried eggs (three), bacon (six rashers), fried tomato (two), sausages (three), fried mushroom (indeterminate number, but a lot), a stack of toast (six slices) and a bowl holding small packets of sauce, butter, Vegemite, jam and marmalade.

As much as Jason was capable of enjoying anything, he enjoyed the big breakfast and the seemingly endless cups of tea Magda poured for him. He leaned back in his chair, or tried to, since there was no room to lean back, and uttered what could pass for a contented sigh.

Magda watched him like a hawk throughout breakfast, and as soon as he pushed his empty plate aside, she cleared her throat.

“Now dear,” she said. “Did you read the confirmation email I sent you when you booked? Remember I said I could only put you up for two nights even though you asked for more? It’s just that the South West Morris Dancers are holding their AGM in town and I need your room, like I said in the email. Three of them stay here every year and I can’t let them down.”

Jason looked surprised at first, then sheepish as it dawned on him that he just might have deleted Magda's email when he deleted all of Eric's. He started inspecting the pattern on the dinner plate.

"Well," he spluttered, "I've been very busy and I don't remember reading that email. This is very inconvenient. If I can only stay two nights, that means I have to leave tomorrow." Jason shook his head as if to create room inside his brain to process the whole accommodation issue and then returned to his plate pattern inspection.

"Oh dear," Magda said, trying and failing to make eye contact with Jason. "I'm really sorry, Love. Look, I can see if my sister, Una, has a vacancy. She also runs a B and B. Would that help?"

"Thank you. That would save me from having to find somewhere else at short notice." he replied, somewhat haughtily while he checked out the design on his bread and butter plate. "Is she far from here?"

"No, no. She's two doors up the road as you're walking towards High Street. The beautiful, purple house. I'm sure you would have noticed it when you were coming to my place. Everyone comments on it." Magda replied as she dialled her sister on the phone.

Jason recalled the house in question and he wasn't surprised everyone commented on it, though he doubted if any of the comments were positive. Yes, it was purple, but it was by no means beautiful, as Magda described. Una clearly had a love affair with purple since not only was the house painted purple all over, but she had a garden full of purple flowers and a purple car in the purple garage. Having few other options, Jason decided to try and ignore the colour scheme and accept the room if it was available.

Magda waved her phone in front of Jason to attract his attention, and gave him a thumbs up. “Una says come on over tomorrow morning and you can stay as long as you like.”

Jason wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or not until he remembered his night on the street bench and the bobtail skink climbing up his leg. A purple house was preferable.

When he had finished breakfast, Jason realised he had a whole day to fill. There wasn’t anything to do at the building site until Hal knocked over the Thing. Jason wasn’t the kind of person who is self-contained in these situations. He didn’t have any hobbies, never read the paper, didn’t do puzzles or play games. He was also deficient in social skills so would no more go into town and chat with the locals than he would pass over the opportunity to knock something down.

He went into his room, turned on his laptop and hopped onto the bed to get a bit of outstanding admin done.

Chapter 16 - Moving

Another day dawned in Grevillia. Jason woke up with a start. For a moment he couldn’t work out where he was or why his laptop was on his chest. Then he realised that he’d slept the whole of the day before.

As he came to, he heard a flock of black cockatoos screeching raucously and chewing on the tree outside his bedroom window. Jason was not a nature lover. He preferred knocking down trees to looking at them and the ear-splitting squawking of the black

cockatoos just reinforced to him why knocking down trees was the way to go. No trees. No noisy birds interrupting his early morning reverie. The fact that these particular cockatoos are critically endangered bothered him not. He actually thought this was in his best interests. When they weren't around, nobody would be carrying on trying to protect them. Too many pinko greenies cared more about trees and noisy birds than the progress he was delivering. Jobs, shopping, shiny malls playing calming music. He drifted off into a daydream just thinking about this, a daydream that was rudely interrupted by Magda knocking on this door.

"Wake up sleepy head," she warbled. "Breakfast is long gone. You'd better eat at Una's."

Jason combined feeling disappointed that he was missing out on another one of Magda's huge breakfasts with trying to motivate himself to get out of bed. Reluctantly he pushed the doona off and stood up. He was definitely feeling better than the same time yesterday. Hangovers have nothing to recommend them, he concluded.

After a quick shower, he selected the day's outfit of another in his collection of counterfeit Armani suits and shirts, knock-off Jimmy Choo shoes and his signature, genuine imitation yellow silk tie. Jason did not do casual. Long ago he decided that in order to be taken seriously in the world of development, he needed to look the part. Not having a great deal of money, the clothes he wished he could wear were way out of his league. Through various contacts, some of which were decidedly dodgy, he sourced counterfeit designer label clothes. One day, he said to himself, he would only ever wear the real thing. But for now, the knock-offs would have to do.

Showered and dressed, Jason preened himself in front of the full-length mirror attached to the ancient oak veneer wardrobe. He sucked in his protruding belly, once again telling it that today was the day he was going to do more exercise and get it into shape. His belly wasn't concerned by the often-heard empty threat, and gave a happy wobble.

Chapter - 17 Una

After bidding Magda goodbye, Jason walked up the street to Una's house to drop off his belongings and have something to eat. He approached the bright purple door with a minimum of zeal. The pure purpleness of everything he laid his eyes on was already starting to make him feel nauseous.

The doorbell chimed enthusiastically when he pressed the button marked, "press the button if you're good looking." It pealed out a version of "We Will Rock You," that seemed to go on interminably. As the sound drifted away, he heard loud clumping coming towards the door. It opened and there loomed Una. She was the tallest woman Jason had ever seen. Standing six feet four in the old money, she towered over Jason. Dressed in a purple tracksuit, purple trainers and sporting short, bright purple hair, Una looked Jason up and down, and not in an admiring kind of way.

"You'd better come in then," Una huffed. "Magda told me all about you. You're the one who's going to destroy the old Brown farm. Such a shame. Development you call it. Vandalism more like it. You'd better leave the Thing alone. It's one of a kind and a legend in these

parts.” With that, Una strode off into the house with Jason following in her wake.

She stopped halfway down the hallway and stood at a purple door waiting for Jason to catch up. She threw open the door and shepherded Jason inside. Were it not entirely purple, it would have been a very pleasant room. It had a large bed, small sofa, desk and chair and a TV hanging on the wall. Jason believed that had it been possible to colour the TV purple, Una would have found a way.

“Here’s your key. Don’t come in drunk, no visitors, quiet after 10pm and breakfast is between 7.30 and 9.00 in the dining room over there,” Una pointed to another door at the end of the hallway. “I don’t cook breakfast. There is cereal, fruit, toast and spreads. If you want anything else, go to the café on High Street. Any questions?”

Before he could form a question Una turned her back on him and headed back down the hall. “I’m going for a quick run,” she said as she took off through the front door. “Let yourself out if I’m not back before you leave. You can come back at 5. No earlier. Make sure you lock the door on your way out.”

Jason harrumphed to himself. He did not appreciate her tone but he was too intimidated to say anything at the time and he doubted that she was someone who would be open to that kind of feedback in any event. Tipping his case onto the bed, he harrumphed a bit more while he unpacked and hung up his clothes.

Chapter - 18 Hal again

After Una left, Jason checked his phone to see if it was working yet. It wasn't so he put it in his pocket and looked at the email on his tablet instead. He mumbled under his breath about how inconvenient it was that his phone still didn't work and he was forced to use the more cumbersome tablet for quick checks of this and that. Scrolling down a dozen email from companies he'd once bought something from and would never patronise again, he found an abrupt email from Hal saying, "Coffee shop on High St, 10.30 this morning. Don't be late." He had more than an hour to eat breakfast and wander into town. He checked his appearance (again) in the mirror attached to the back of the door to his room. He wanted to look the part of the suave business man for his meeting with Hal. He pulled in his belly and admired himself in the mirror. When he stood up straight, he was quite tall and he told his reflection, yet again, that he really should join a gym and tone up some muscles. His hair looked like an abandoned bird's nest, and no amount of combing and product seemed to change its appearance. It had also taken on a purple tinge from the overall purple ambience of the room. He sighed, pulled his shoulders back and chanted his mantra, "I am in control. I am powerful," a few times.

Feeling much more in control and reasonably powerful, he turned and made his way to check out the dining room and hopefully get something to eat. Despite its over-use of purple, it was far roomier than Magda's with three small tables, each with two chairs, presumably for guests. A variety of breakfast-like products were displayed on an old-fashioned Welsh dresser.

By now, Una was back from her run and topping up the cereal containers. In addition to her purple tracksuit, she now wore a purple Dockers' cap on her head. It was fortuitous that there was only one Australian Football League team that wore purple, and naturally she was an ardent supporter.

Where Magda was short, round and cheerful looking, Una, as well as being extremely tall and lithe, had the kind of face that would not just launch a thousand ships, but would likely blow them all up. Jason could see that she was not to be trifled with. Given that he was rather deficient in reading body language, that was saying something.

When Jason entered the dining room, Una looked up at him and raised her eyebrows. "Why do you city types think you need to put half a kilo of glue on your hair? If you hope to be taken seriously around here, you would do well to get a decent haircut, and lose all that stuff you put on it," she said in a withering tone.

Jason didn't know what to say. Insults from Eric were part of their relationship, but he hardly knew Una and she was already giving him a hard time. He grabbed at the mess that was his hair, and patted it ineffectually.

"The tousled look is very big overseas," he finally managed to say to Una via the spoon he had picked up to inspect.

"No wonder the world is in such a mess," she replied and left the dining room shouting out as she went, "I'm going to the gym. If you eat anything, put your dirty dishes in the dishwasher and turn all the lights out."

The front door slammed loudly and her heavy footsteps could be heard as she headed out of the gate at a fast pace. Jason sighed with relief.

“How rude!” he said to his bowl of muesli. Fortunately, it was not a two-way conversation.

Jason filled his mouth with a large spoonful of very dense, organic muesli, the type that can take several minutes per spoonful to chew. His now dried out phone chose this precise moment to ring.

Hurricane’s name appeared on the screen. Jason answered before realising there was no room in his mouth for words to come out. A large glob of partially chewed muesli exploded from his mouth as he said hello. Actually, he said, “aghragh,” or something to that effect.

“Have you been on the booze again?” Hal enquired. “I heard about what you got up to the other night.”

Jason was by now getting a bit tired of people talking to him like an irresponsible teenager. He spat the rest of the muesli into the bowl and tried to put Hal right. It was a waste of time. Before Jason had a chance to defend his good name, Hal launched into the reason for his call.

“Before our meeting this morning, I wanted you to know that Eric has given me the go-ahead to demolish that thing. I won’t be charging you, but I get a 12.5% share in the development. Once Eric came to and was cleared by the doctor, we discussed the situation and this is what we decided”.

“And what say do I have in any of this?” Jason enquired petulantly.

“None boy. Zip, zero, the big, round nought. It’s decided. The crew are already on their way.” Hal blustered.

Jason could see the sense in what Eric and Hal had negotiated. Hal charged exorbitant fees, probably equivalent to the 12.5% share he was going to get. But there was a principle involved. He was a partner after all.

“I wish to have my dissatisfaction at being left out of the negotiation duly noted,” Jason said in his most dissatisfied voice.

“What do you think this is, boy? The United Nations? It’s a business not a democracy,” he said sarcastically. “Now get yourself down here. I’m at the Never Bean Better Café on High Street drinking one of their poor excuses for coffee.”

Jason realised that yet again, there was no point in arguing and agreed to meet Hal in 15 minutes. This gave him sufficient time to clean up the globs of half-chewed muesli from the table, and put his bowl in the dishwasher.

Chapter 19 - Plotting

Jason entered the Never Bean Better Café through a glass door with a cheery sign on it urging him to “When you leave your troubles at the door you’ve Never Bean Better!” Jason wished it was that simple. With his troubles still firmly attached, Jason looked around for Hal. He spotted him sitting half on, half off a wheel-backed chair that was doing its best to accommodate as much of the considerable rear end of Hal as it could. The round, wooden table, also attempting to accommodate Hal’s girth was in the corner of the café opposite the

cake fridge and espresso machine. Actually, it wasn't hard to find Hal. If you failed to notice his enormous bulk, then you couldn't avoid his loud, gruff voice.

"You're late!" Hal yelled across the café. "Time is money, I always say!" he added.

At the sound of his voice, dozens of customers' heads arose like battery hens at feeding time. Jason detected a few "tut tuts" and the compulsory "really!" coming from a number of the tables. Feeling his face flushing dangerously, Jason slinked over to Hal's table and sat down. Hal looked imposing in his dark blue suit and overly long orange tie. His jacket was open in the mistaken belief that it made him look slimmer. Jason thought that if Hal had dyed blonde hair instead of no hair at all, he would be the spitting image of Donald Trump. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

Hal snapped his fingers and yelled, "Can we get some service here?"

A familiar face emerged from the kitchen. "Oh, hello dear," Magda said. "Fancy seeing you here!" Jason wanted to say the same thing to her but Magda noted his surprised face and said, "This is my cousin Hank's café and he needed a hand today, so here I am!" Jason was beginning to think she was related to the whole town.

Magda smiled at Jason but scowled at Hal. "There's no need to be rude! I can hear you perfectly well without you shouting. Now what do you want?"

"He'll have a flat white," Hal said, waving his hand in the general direction of Jason who was given no say in what he wanted, "and you can bring me another cappuccino with extra chocolate – and this time make it drinkable!"

Magda bristled visibly, thought about giving him a serve then decided that he wasn't worth it. She left to fill their order.

"Right," said Hal, "let's get down to business."

"Before we start," Jason said. "There is something you need to know."

"You can't possibly tell me anything that I need to know," Hal retorted. "I've had thirty years in this business. What could you possibly enlighten me with?"

Jason opened his mouth to try again but Hal bellowed over the top of him, "listen to me, tomorrow I'm finally going get rid of that thing in Brown's Field so we can get on with the job you were supposed to be doing!"

All heads in the café rose as one. "What did you say?" Doug the foreman said, slamming his chai latte down for emphasis.

"None of your business," Hal yelled back.

Doug pointed to Jason. "He said that the Thing was safe, that it wasn't going to be removed!" A chorus of "that's right", resounded through the café. It looked like the whole demolition team from the other day were sitting down drinking coffee. Their loud, angry voices filled the café. Everyone had something to say on the subject. A lot of swear words were used.

Hal glared at Jason. "You said WHAT?" he bellowed.

Jason spoke quietly out of the corner of his mouth to Hal, "that's what I was trying to tell you. I told them that the Thing was safe. It's a strategy to calm everyone down. Everyone was getting worked up

about it and something needed to be said to distract them. You can see how upset they are.” He failed to mention the real circumstances, choosing to put himself in a better light, if that was at all possible.

Hal was speechless for a moment. Jason was waiting for the explosion. Hal’s face went through a variety of contortions while he processed both the noisy protest in the café and what Jason had just told him. The penny dropped.

“That’s right!” Hal cried. “The Thing is safe (he winked at Jason), I was talking about that other thing in Brown’s Field – that awful cottage – you know the one.”

“Steady on,” Spider interjected defensively. “Tarquin’s Cottage is a wonderful example of Gothic Revival architecture.”

No one had the slightest idea of what Spider was talking about but nodded their heads in agreement nevertheless.

“OK then,” Doug said giving Hal a penetrating look. “Just don’t try any funny business with the Thing or you’ll have HOOTS to deal with, and that is not something you want to risk. Most of the town have joined and we’re not to be messed with.”

Hal smiled the sort of smile you’re likely to see on the face of a crocodile before it bites your leg off. “You’ve nothing to worry about (winking again at Jason) or I’m not Hurricane Hal!”

“Yeah, well... what he said,” Spider piped in. “And leave the cottage alone while you’re at it.”

Hal shook his large head, heaved a big sigh and muttered to the top of Jason’s head since his face was doing a complete audit of the

crumbs on the table. “Country bumpkins, all of them. Not a spark of imagination between any of their ears. They don’t know what’s in their own best interests.”

Hal’s comments were overheard by Magda who delivered the coffees with a scowl aimed at Hal.

“Don’t you even think about touching the Thing. And mind your manners. You’re a guest of these country bumpkins,” she muttered under her breath. Slamming the bill on the table, she made her way back to the kitchen.

Hal took a sip of his coffee, grimaced and said in an uncharacteristically quiet voice, “I don’t say this often boy, but that was a very good strategy.” Jason started to preen himself but Hal went on, “now don’t go getting a big head. We’ve work to do.”

Putting their heads closer together so the other customers in the café could not overhear, they planned the next move.

“I’ve brought along The Beast,” Hal said. “It’s the biggest, strongest excavator ever built. It can knock over a residential tower in half an hour – less if no-one is living in it. It’s parked ten clicks out of town and the guys are camped nearby. Tomorrow morning at first light we get The Beast into Brown’s Field and knock that thing down. We’ll be finished in time for morning coffee, but not the damn awful swill they make here.”

Jason nodded in agreement and sighed with relief. Maybe now he could leave his troubles at the door.

Hal scoffed his coffee, handed Jason the bill and stomped out of the café. Jason looked at the bill and saw that Hal had not held back.

Before Jason had even arrived, Hal had eaten two ham and cheese croissants, a slice of New York cheesecake and drunk three cups of coffee. Jason packed up his laptop and reluctantly paid Magda more than \$50 that he knew he'd never see again.

Chapter 20 - Grevillia

It was still early and Jason didn't have anything to do. He couldn't get back into the B and B for another 4 hours or so. This was both a plus and a minus. He was forced to find something to pass the time but at least it wasn't time spent surrounded in purple.

Jason stepped out onto High Street, looked up and down and came to the realisation that Grevillia was not only a few kilometres away from Brown's Field, but it was bursting with development potential.

"Why didn't I think of this before?" he asked himself. "It's just what this backwater needs. We can link it to the Brown's Field development. Knock over these old shops. Put up some apartments. Have a highway linking the two places..."

Jason was in his version of heaven. He crossed over the road and walked up one side of High Street taking note of the shops. There was the Post Office he had already been in. Lots of space was wasted there. Next door was the charity op shop. He hated the smell that came out of op shops. It seemed to be the same smell no matter where the shop was. That would have to go. Maybe a nice boutique instead?

The “Wholly Roller Ladies Hairdressing Salon” was the next shop along. That had a horrible smell as well – a combination of ammonia and cheap shampoo. There weren’t any customers in the shop when he looked in through the window. The female stylist was slumped in one of the salon chairs drinking what looked to be a large glass of wine. “Lots of potential there,” Jason noted, meaning the property, not the stylist.

Crossing over the intersection with Station Street, so named despite the fact there was no station within several hundred kilometres, Jason continued his inspection. On the corner was a very tired old building that housed the offices of a real estate company, (Brown and Daughters), an accountant, (Brown and Sons) and a lawyer, (Brown, Brown, Brown and Black). The preponderance of people named Brown in the town was a little unsettling.

Next door to the office building was a complete waste of space, according to Jason. It was a tired looking park with climbing equipment, a basketball hoop, a gas barbeque and a lot of trees. Jason could see a beautiful apartment block there instead. It wouldn’t even need much demolition to get things going. A few trees, he thought dismissively. They looked pretty old anyway, he concluded, completely unaware that some of them were over 400 years old.

Next to the park was a bridge over the river leading out of town. He couldn’t see any more commercial properties, just a few houses, which he concluded (magnanimously) could stay as they were. He crossed over the road and worked his way back down High Street.

Opposite the park was a bookshop that sold new and second-hand books.

“No need for that. Not when there are perfectly good tablets to download books onto”, he thought somewhat hypocritically, given he did not read anything other than email, contracts, Excavator Quarterly and the weather forecast. “The building has some potential though. I can see a nice suite of offices here.” He pressed on.

The next shop was something he had not encountered before. It was called the Mystical Crystal Shop. It was a small shop with its door open and a multi-coloured beaded curtain that flapped in the breeze, hanging from the door frame. There was a small window that held a display of lot of bits of rock with labels claiming the “precious crystals” had healing and other powers. A notice on the window invited him to have his chakras opened in a group or in individual sessions. He didn’t know what chakras are, whether he had any and if by chance he did, whether opening them in any setting was a good idea. He peered through the curtain and was assailed by the pungent odour of some substance that appeared to be coming out of smoking sticks stuck in vases or some such, sitting on the counter. The music was pushing the boundaries of what music should sound like in Jason’s view. If he had to describe it, he’d have to say that it sounded like someone blowing their nose loudly.

He stood to one side as two beaming women pushed through the beaded curtain and walked out of the shop carrying small bags of something or another. One said to the other, “isn’t she just the loveliest, sweetest person you ever met.” The other nodded in agreement. “She never has a cross word about anyone.” The two

customers crossed the road, continuing to extol the virtues of the person who served them. Jason found it hard to believe that anyone could possibly be that nice. His experience of people was the exact opposite. Most people he knew were anything but nice – especially people who opposed development, other developers competing for “his” developments, the media who took the side of the people who didn’t want development – the list went on and on.

The Never Bean Better Café was next to the crystal shop. As he walked past it, Magda looked up and gave him a cheery wave. Jason was a bit baffled by Magda. Here was another nice person. “That’s two in a row,” he thought to himself. Because he normally had little to do with nice people, his interactions with people tended to be defensive in nature, and he lacked strategies to respond in any other way. So, when she waved at him, he really wasn’t sure what to do. He took a punt and flapped his hand in her direction, hoping that would suffice, and carried on walking.

The next building was the Corner Hotel. He was momentarily transported back to the experience of lying on the filthy floor amongst ground in chips, slopped beer, mud and other detritus of unknown origin. He shook his head to move the image along so he could appraise the building for its development potential. The images persisted so he kept walking.

After a while, having appraised the main street, Jason concluded that the town of Grevillia was caught in a time warp, existing some twenty or more years in the past. The buildings were old and dull. There was nothing to do. The people seemed unaware of how backward their lives were. They wouldn’t know themselves if he had his way and developed the town into a bustling metropolis linked to Brown’s

Field. There would be shops, factories, apartments, recreational facilities – yes, the possibilities were endless. He couldn't wait to draw up a proposal to present to the town council.

As luck would have it, the next building was the council office with a library attached. He had a few hours to kill before going back to Una's B and B so he went into the library to use their internet. The issue desk was unattended and he seemed to be the only one in the building. Finding a quiet corner with a comfortable chair and a power point, Jason opened up his laptop and started tapping away at the keys.

Remembering his previous unsuccessful attempt to find food at what he considered a reasonable time of day, he packed away the laptop at 4.30 and went into the general store to see what he could find. They sold a range of snack foods that he liked so he stocked up on pot noodles, crisps, chocolate bars and some energy drinks. Laden with food-like substances he made his way back to Una's to spend a quiet evening planning and eating.

Chapter 21 - Summa

Dawn broke loudly in Grevillia. A choir of magpies oodled and arded harmoniously in juxtaposition to a murder of crows expressing their feelings with a discordant "fark, fark, fark, faaaaaaark!" Una sounded like she was stamping out a grass fire as she performed her pre-run, morning warm-ups in the hall outside Jason's room.

Jason surfaced from a dreamless sleep to be insulted both aurally and visually. His purple room in the early morning light was nothing short of vicious. Every one of his self-preservation instincts said “run!” And when he checked his phone and saw what the time was, that was exactly what he had to do.

He bounded out of bed, struggled into his work clothes, (shirt, tie, suit – someone had to uphold sartorial standards, never mind the situation) and zoomed out into the hall, narrowly avoiding Una mid-star jump. As he ran towards his car, he could hear above the cacophony of birds, the low rumble of heavy machinery in the distance.

“Good”, he said. “You won’t know what hit you, Thing!” He turned the engine over in his SUV and gunned out of town towards Brown’s Field to watch the downfall of the Thing and the completion of the first stage of his wonderful development.

Once on the open road, he asked Google to play “Another One Bites the Dust”, by Queen, and pounded his hands on the steering wheel in time with the music. In the process, he accidentally hit the horn, which blared loudly.

Driving out of town in front of Jason’s car was a 1976 Kombi van with Summa Day, the Mystical Crystal Shop owner at the wheel. Summa was on her way to drop off some supplies to her mother and twin brother Wynter, who lived in a communal farm and yoga retreat with a dozen other like-minded folk.

Summa had been born on the commune and while she liked communal life, she found it somewhat limiting. Nobody actually owned anything as everything was shared, and this was incompatible

with her long-held desire to run her own business. She wasn't sure why she was the only one in the commune to be bitten by the capitalism bug, but bite her it did. She was sure there was a greater purpose for this to happen to her, which was yet to be revealed.

Starting her own business presented her with two main challenges, the first of which was her total lack of possessions other than her clothes, so she had no assets she could liquidate or use as collateral to get a loan. The second was her complete lack of any kind of business experience or training. The latter challenge worried her a lot less than the lack of capital. She believed that the lessons she needed to learn to succeed in business would present themselves to her in the fullness of time.

Confident that now was the time to take a leap of faith and start her business, she asked her spirit guide to help her find what she needed. Her wish was granted in the most extraordinary way. One day she was running barefoot down the hill to the river to have a swim. She stubbed her toe on a large rock and collapsed in pain onto the grass. When she looked at the offending rock, she noticed a band of the most exquisite blue that caught and danced with the light. Summa had always been interested in crystals and she knew instinctively that she had tripped over something extraordinary.

Everything about Summa's upbringing led her to believe that she should share her find with her family and the rest of the commune. Yet she knew that doing so would be the end of her dream. And why else did she of all people stub her toe on that particular rock, in that particular place when the sun was shining, if not to start her crystal business? Did she not just ask her spirit guide to help? If she ignored the help, would she ever be helped again?

After a lot of soul searching, Summa decided to keep the stone a secret, at least until she had found out if it was worth anything. One day when everyone in the commune had left for the monthly farmers' market, she hitched a ride to the city. She took the rock to a gemmologist who nearly fainted when he saw what she had found. He gently chipped away at the rock to reveal three sapphires of the most outstanding quality. Each sapphire would weigh more than 10 carats when cut. After the gemmologist had taken his fee, Summa walked away with more than enough to buy a small shop in Grevillia with a tiny apartment attached, and stock it with sacred gems, books, essential oils, whale song CDs, and other items that made her aura glow.

The shop was Summa's pride and joy. She loved everything about it and relished her interactions with the people who wandered in. She bent over backwards to provide them with the best service possible. Her service was so good that soon she had the reputation of being the nicest person in town. Unfortunately, all the great customer service did not convert into sales. Here, her lack of experience in running a business was starting to show. People were happy to look, happy to chat, happy to be immersed in Summa's positivity, but not happy to part with their money. She tried running workshops on activating chakras and harnessing divine energy, but in a town that serviced pragmatic farmers, interest ranged from limited to non-existent. Reluctantly she took casual work in the town to pay the bills and feed herself and finally reached the point where she realised things were not going to plan.

It just so happened that today was the day when Summa had reached the end of her rope and finally had enough of being nice all

the time. It didn't increase sales, it took too much effort, and it didn't make her feel good. In fact, she'd decided (being somewhat binary in nature) to try just the opposite to see what would happen. In the moment she had made up her mind, she heard a loud tooting coming from the obnoxious SUV behind her. Normally she would move over onto the gravel shoulder on the narrow road and let faster cars pass. Today, she decided that she wouldn't.

"That's it! You want me to move over? I'll move over! You can eat my dust!" she yelled out of the window as she pulled over onto the gravel shoulder and slammed on her brakes. As well as sending the ancient Kombi into a spin, she created a cloud of dust that hung in the air like an orange miasma.

Jason was completely oblivious to the drama playing out in front of him as he continued to bash his hands on the wheel in time with the music. It wasn't until his vision was obscured by the dust kicked up by the Kombi that he realised something was amiss. He had a split second to react. He didn't do split seconds. He was more of a "let's mull this over for a while" kind of guy, which when you're driving blind on a narrow country road with gravel shoulders on both sides, is not the best strategy.

He swerved to avoid hitting the Kombi and, in the process, crossed over to the wrong side of the road and skidded on the opposite gravel shoulder. SUVs are designed to deal with situations like this, but not if they are driven by people who haven't a clue how to handle them. Instead of slowing down and turning the steering wheel into the skid to regain control, in his panic, Jason put his foot on the accelerator. The SUV and a very alarmed Jason disappeared down an embankment coming to rest millimetres from a towering karri tree. A

flock of black cockatoos happily shredding the nuts and blossoms looked down on the drama playing out below with as much disdain as a cockatoo is capable of showing on its face, which isn't a lot.

Summa Day observed all these goings on and once she realised no real harm had come to Jason and his ridiculous car, sat in her Kombi with a satisfied smile on her face. For once it felt really good not to be all sweetness and light. She yelled, "Ha! Eat my shorts!" in the general direction of Jason and his SUV. She thought that "eat my shorts" was probably not the most cutting thing to say, but as she had, up until now, never tried insulting anyone, her lexicon of insults was rather impoverished. She drove away vowing to learn more insults and find more situations to use them in.

Meanwhile Jason stood underneath the karri tree looking at his SUV that was now covered not only in dust, but in liberal quantities of twigs, nuts and in no time at all, cockatoo droppings. There was no way he could turn the SUV around. His only option was to reverse up the embankment and he wasn't at all confident that (a) the SUV was capable of such a manoeuvre, and (b) he was capable of driving it even if the SUV was capable of such a manoeuvre. He finally had to admit to himself that he had not yet put the SUV into reverse all the time he had owned it. He didn't like reversing and avoided it at all costs. But now was not the time or the place to give into his fear. So, he took several deep breaths, and shouted his mantra "I am in control, I am powerful" several times into the dense forest in which he was marooned. Just when he thought that perhaps he was in control and powerful, two kookaburras in a nearby tree burst out laughing.

“I hate this place and everything in it!” he cried plaintively. He felt his eyes stinging and finally gave into feeling extremely sorry for himself. He didn’t know who to phone for help, even if there was a signal on his phone, which there wasn’t. He climbed into the cab and slumped over the steering wheel giving in to a feeling of existential exhaustion.

A loud clatter on the roof of his car woke Jason up. He jumped out of the SUV and looked to see what had made the noise. The black cockatoos were dropping large gumnuts onto the bonnet. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that they were doing it deliberately. He didn’t know better, because they were doing it deliberately. Cockatoos are never to be underestimated.

Jason was once again overwhelmed with his situation. He took out his frustration by kicking the tree trunk. The tree took its revenge by bruising Jason’s right big toe. Jason was left with no alternative but to scream at the tree and curse it for harbouring delinquent cockatoos and inflicting yet more unnecessary pain on him.

At that moment Tony, a wine producer from out of town was driving his tractor along the road heading towards the far end of his property. He noticed the skid marks on the side of the road and the broken shrubbery on the embankment. He’d seen these signs before and knew that someone had gone off the road. He stopped his tractor, got out and looked down to the bottom of the embankment. There he saw the pitiful sight of Jason, yelling at a karri tree and sniffing loudly.

“You in a spot of bother, mate?” Tony enquired, glad to see that no one was hurt.

Jason ran his sleeve along his runny nose and tried to look both powerful and in control. He failed on both counts.

“Some mad woman in a Kombi ran me off the road,” Jason said.

Tony shook his head. “You don’t mean Summa Day do you? She passed me a while back in her Kombi. It couldn’t possibly be her. I can’t imagine her running anyone off the road. She’s the nicest person you could ever meet. Got some strange ideas, I’d have to say but she couldn’t harm a fly. She thinks they are reincarnations of something or another. Very odd.”

Jason was about to argue the point but weighing up his options, and truth be told, there really was only one, he decided to bite his tongue.

“Well, maybe it wasn’t a Kombi. But a camper van definitely ran me off the road and I can’t get back onto it. Could you give me a hand?”

“Well, I can’t leave you here so I guess I’d better.” Tony climbed the embankment, walked to his tractor and re-appeared shortly afterwards with a tow rope that he attached to the SUV.

“You go up on the road and watch for traffic while I hoist this suburban tank up the embankment,” Tony said, adding “and why on earth do you city folk think you have to drive these great lumps of metal? I don’t get it.”

Jason was very put out hearing his pride and joy described that way and he also wasn’t too thrilled at the prospect of interacting with traffic on a country road with a speed limit of 100km/h. But he was now desperate to get back on the road and onto what he hoped was a nice, clear building site devoid of the Thing. He realised that Hal

would probably be his usual, rude self and give him a hard time for being late, but one just had to roll with the punches in his line of work, he told himself with a big, self-pitying sigh.

“Oi!” Tony yelled at Jason’s back, interrupting his day dreams. “Are you going to help, or what?”

Jason climbed with great difficulty up the embankment. Jimmy Choo shoes, genuine or otherwise are not designed for climbing. Having slipped backwards several times, much to the amusement of Tony, Jason eventually made it onto the gravel shoulder of the road. He stood as far away from the asphalt as he could, not wanting to be hit by the first fast vehicle that came along.

He need not have worried. The only vehicle that he could see in the distance coming down a hill was the same Kombi that ran him off the road in the first place. It was heading his way painfully slowly, weaving from side to side, with a procession of large trucks, family cars, delivery vehicles and work vans stuck behind it. As the convoy headed towards him, he could hear frantic tooting of horns and a woman’s voice shouting, what sounded like “eat my shorts!”

Jason made himself small in a clump of bushes near the side of the road and watched as the strange convoy made its way past him. He saw the Kombi driver giving all the hooting traffic behind her what she must have thought was a rude gesture, which he observed involved her sticking her thumb out of the window and wagging it around. From time to time, she yelled “eat my shorts!” Jason was very confused by all of this and concluded that there were some country folk who were not at all well.

As he was trying to make head or tail of the Kombi driver's actions, he heard the tractor's engine start up and putt putt down the road. With the screaming of broken vegetation and the percussive sounds of gravel being thrown up by the spinning wheels of both vehicles, he saw his SUV emerge from the bush and onto the side of the road.

"You owe me a beer," Tony declared, unhitching the tow rope and looking towards Jason, expecting some sort of acknowledgement.

"Er yes, of course," Jason replied hesitantly looking at his shoes. "And er, thank you." He looked up at Tony. He knew he was supposed to make eye contact in these situations, but once again he'd left it too late. Tony was already walking towards his tractor.

"Yeah, well don't go overboard with gratitude," Tony responded as he jumped into the cab and continued on his way. "City folk," he mumbled to himself.

Jason looked upon the sad sight of his once pristine SUV that was now covered in orange gravel dust, cockatoo droppings, various pieces of vegetation stuck on the roof and bonnet, and worst of all, scratches down both sides. His suit was also covered in an excess of nature, including, he noted, a large dollop of cockatoo droppings on his shoulder. In that moment, he thought things could not possibly get worse.

He was wrong.

22 Demolition

Cleaning himself as best he could, Jason finally hit the road and headed towards Brown's Field. By now it was nearly midday and he had missed the much-anticipated sight of the Beast demolishing the accursed Thing.

"Never mind," he reassured himself. "As long as it's gone, that is all that matters."

Within a few minutes he pulled off the road and headed up the track towards the bottom paddock. His spirits lifted as he visualised a pile of detritus where once and ugly indefinable lump of something had stood defiantly.

He reached the top of the hill next to the old homestead and looked down on the lower paddock through the windscreen of his SUV.

"What the...?" he yelled. He tugged on the handbrake, turned off the engine, jumped out of the cab and took off down the track towards earthmoving equipment sitting idly by while a group of men in hi viz vests and steel capped boots danced around and slid off the Thing. Right at the top stood Hurricane Hal shouting, "I'm the king of the castle and youse all are a bunch of tossers!"

Hal spotted Jason and yelled, "Hey! Jason! Take your tie off and come and join us!"

All the men in their hi viz vests turned around and looked at Jason. "Yeah, have some fun for a change," one said. "This is so cool, you gotta try it!"

There was muttered agreement from the rest. But they soon tired of looking at Jason who remained rooted to the spot, and resumed their games.

Jason didn't have words to describe what he was feeling. Whatever the feeling was, it was much bigger than him and was slowly choking all the light out of his life. He made his way back to his scratched and defiled SUV, climbed into the driver's seat and hung his head despondently. Once more he had no idea what to do next. It was fast becoming his default setting.

"It's cursed," he bemoaned. "Anyone that goes near it becomes a silly child. How on earth am I going to get rid of it?" He turned the engine over and headed back to town to have a shower and think things through. He was especially concerned about what he was going to say to Eric. How can he tell him that a lump of matter in a paddock in a one-horse town seems to have supernatural powers?

Chapter 23 - Rock bottom

Jason parked outside Una's B and B and dragged himself out of the SUV, through the gate and into the front garden of her awful purple house. As he walked up the path, Una came charging in behind him in her purple track suit, having just completed yet another run. She looked Jason up and down, noting the cockatoo droppings on his shoulder and his overall disreputable state.

"What happened to you?" she enquired as she stretched her quads, balancing firstly on one leg and then on the other, a feat Jason knew he could never achieve.

With a despondent shrug of his shoulders, Jason found himself unable and unwilling to share his dreadful day with someone so

uncompromisingly capable. He felt so inept and a very long way from feeling in control or powerful no matter what he tried to tell himself. He walked slowly towards the front door, looking carefully at the paving stones to avoid meeting Una's powerful gaze.

"Well don't tell me," she snapped. Pushing past him, she jogged up the path and into the house, calling back as she did so, "And don't wear those filthy shoes into the house. Leave them on the shoe rack on the veranda so no one trips over them."

Jason looked down at his shoes. Maybe they weren't the real deal. Who could afford over a thousand dollars for a pair of shoes? But he thought they looked good and they had served him well. Right now, though, they resembled the bottom of an aviary. Despondently he took off his dirty shoes and left them on the shoe rack, outside the front door until he could clean them.

Unbeknownst to Jason, the neighbour's golden retriever, Gloria, was watching him through a hole in the fence. When Jason was safely inside, she squeezed through the hole, picked up one shoe in her mouth and took it next door to add to the collection of some 30 single shoes she had secretly stashed under the house. Gloria took her role as a retriever very seriously.

Jason removed his clothes, which were once again beyond redemption, bundled them up, and threw them into the waste basket under the sink in the bathroom.

"That's two suits this damn town has cost me," he said to his reflection in the mirror. A long, hot shower restored his spirits marginally and addressed the odour coming off him substantially. He had thought to pack some smart, casual clothes just in case an

occasion arose where his suit was inappropriate. He couldn't have imagined the occasion he now found himself in, but he was glad he had something to wear that was not covered in the vast range of disgusting things the country threw at his clothes. He put on a pair of stone-coloured chinos and a stone and white striped polo. Complete with white sneakers he looked about as colourful as something that is not at all colourful. But he felt clean and comfortable, so that was a positive.

Taking a big breath and reciting his mantra a few times, he dialled Eric to share the latest catastrophe. The receptionist put him on hold for several minutes, until at last Eric picked up.

"What in the (swear words) have you done to Hal?" he yelled at Jason.

"Nothing," Jason replied defensively. "It's that (swear words) Thing!"

"Watch your (swear words) language, boy," Eric bellowed hypocritically. "So, it's all gone to (swear words, swear words) yet again?"

"I wasn't even there when Hal arrived. I was having car trouble and arrived a few hours late. By then he and his men were under the spell of the Thing," Jason explained.

"What's this?" Eric continued bellowing. "Now you're telling me that the thing in a paddock has magical qualities? Can't you come up with something better?"

"It's the truth. If you don't believe me, come and see for yourself!"

Jason's rare attempt at assertiveness resulted in a string of invective from Eric that made the potted peace lily in his office blush.

“Right,” said Eric when he finally ran out of curse words. “It’s time to bring in the really big guns. I’m going to get my sister, Fairy-Wren onto the job.”

Chapter 24 The Browns

Jason had heard of Fairy-Wren and her demolition company. “Fairy-Wren Demolitions! Never get a man to do a woman’s job!” the tall, solid and imposing figure of Fairy-Wren said in her ads on TV. Despite, or perhaps because of her name, Fairy-Wren didn’t let anything get in the way of her demolitions. If Fairy-Wren said it was coming down, it was coming down.

It is worthy of note that Fairy-Wren was not the only one of the Brown children with animal, vegetable or mineral names. The names their hipster (not to be confused with hippy) parents gave their three children were Dugite, Fairy-Wren and Bauxite. While the hipster parents were very pleased with the singular names they had inflicted on their children, the children were not in accord. They were teased unmercifully in the trendy inner-city suburb where they grew up.

Dugite loathed his name and changed to Eric as soon as he left home. Bauxite became Beau when she transitioned from female to male, but Fairy-Wren fought her way through childhood, defending her name. She was so ferocious that every child was terrified of her and eventually they left her alone. The tactics that Fairy-Wren used to manage her tormentors made her fit, strong and formidable. It was hardly surprising that she turned to demolishing things as a career. She’d had plenty of practice growing up.

When Eric had finished chewing what was left of Jason's ear off, he picked up the phone to call Fairy-Wren.

After a few rings, she picked up. "Well, hello!" she said noting who the caller was. "How's my snaky big brother then? Sssssss," she hissed like a snake. "Bitten anyone recently?"

"Do you have to?" replied Eric. "Can't you just greet me like a normal person. Oh, that's right, you're not a normal person."

"Lame, Doogie, lame. So what do you want?" she enquired. "You don't usually call me for my scintillating conversation."

"Could you just stop calling me Doogie," Eric said. "The joke is old and tired."

"Just like you," Fairy-Wren quickly interjected giggling to herself.

Eric sighed and pressed on. "Look, I need someone to do a job that so far no one has been able to do and sadly I think you're the only person who can do it."

"Well, wonders will never cease" she said in a taunting voice. "Roll me in strawberries and call me jam! What's this big, bad job that has my brother beat?"

Eric took a deep breath and resisted the urge to defend himself. Instead, he spent a few minutes describing the situation in Brown's Field in Grevillia. Predictably, he had to put up with Fairy-Wren heaping scorn on him and everyone else involved in the debacle. She laughed hysterically when he told her that Jason thought the Thing was possessed. She had a very low opinion of Jason. At least on that point, they were in accord.

“Can you knock the (swear word) thing down?” he asked, trying and failing not to sound too desperate.

“In my sleep,” Fairy-Wren replied.

“Actually, that maybe a good idea!” said Eric. “If you knock it over at night, then your team won’t see it because that seems to be the problem. When people get close to it, apparently, they don’t want to destroy it.”

Fairy-Wren snorted derisively at that. “That’s because you have been sending men to do women’s work.” Eric had heard that particular mantra many, many times before.

Fairy-Wren was an expert at night works. Many of her demolition projects had heritage protection and the only way she could knock them down was at night. She and her team of proud and strong women workers wore night vision goggles to undertake their work. They were seldom caught in the act of demolition as they were well camouflaged in Ninja-like clothes and had learned to work as quietly as it is possible given the nature of the work. On the rare occasions that the team were caught in the act, Fairy-Wren was happy to pay the fine. Her work was well rewarded and she was quite frankly, rolling in money.

“It’s going to cost you, Bro,” she said.

Eric ground his teeth together. He hated spending money unnecessarily and especially hated rewarding his sister who would doubtless hold it over him for years to come.

“Yes, I know,” he replied petulantly. “But you’re not getting a cent until that (swear word) Thing is a pile of rubble.

“No sweat,” Fairy-Wren said. “Get that big bag of money ready. I’ll be collecting it soon.”

Chapter 25 - Insults

With few options at his disposal, Jason walked into town to have lunch at the Never Bean Better Café. He chose a table near the window so he could check out what was happening outside. Nothing was happening outside. He transferred his attention to the small vase of wilting flowers on his table. It wasn’t very interesting either.

Magda’s cousin Hank was back on board. He brought Jason a menu and left him to make his selection. He settled on the soup of the day. He waved his hand as Hank drifted by and he stopped to take his order.

“Can I have the soup of the day?” Jason requested. “Also, a chicken sandwich with salad and mayo.”

“Sorry Mate,” Hank said, not looking at all sorry. “The kitchen is closed.”

“Then why give me a menu?” Jason retorted.

“Habit,” Hank responded.

Jason groaned inwardly. His stomach groaned outwardly.

“That’s quite a growl you have there, Mate.” Hank observed.

“Hungry are we? I know it’s not much but we have some muffins I can zap in the microwave. That should see you right until dinner time.”

A muffin was better than nothing, so Jason settled on two muffins and a large flat white. He went over the day in his mind, which he felt he was starting to lose, considering all that had gone wrong. Surely that was the end of it, he thought. But he had a feeling that it probably wasn't.

Hank dropped off his coffee and heated muffins. The muffins looked and smelled pretty good, he thought. One was chocolate, the other was something with fruit in it. He bit into the chocolate muffin. Warm chocolate filling squirted out over his pristine stone and white polo shirt.

"Yep," he said to himself in a resigned voice, "it's that kind of day."

"What I need is a plan that will work. Plan", he thought. "Come up with a plan." "Good idea," the remaining functional part of his brain added.

Jason patted at the chocolate stain on his shirt with a napkin that he dipped into the water Hank had put on the table when he arrived. He only succeeded in spreading the stain further with his efforts. "Leave it," said the functional part of his brain. "Argh!" shouted the part trying to send him insane. Jason draped another napkin over the stain, had a sip of his coffee and started to think things through.

Clearly the Thing had an effect on people. Jason didn't want to believe it was supernatural, even though that was what he'd concluded earlier in the day. If it wasn't supernatural, then what was the attraction? Why did grown men and women become like children when they encountered it?

"Good questions," Jason congratulated his brain. He tried to come up with more questions. The only other question he seemed to be able

to articulate was, “why can’t I think of more questions?” “Never mind,” he thought, “I’ll work with the two questions.”

Question one. Why is it so attractive to people? He had barely articulated the question when Hank called to him from behind the counter.

Drink up. We’re closing in 5 minutes”

Jason looked at his watch. It was nearly three o’clock. He hadn’t had breakfast, he’d had two muffins for lunch and when he finally felt like he might have the most tenuous of holds on something resembling a thought, he now had to move. He glared at Hank, walked up to the counter, took his card out to pay for the coffee and muffins, swiped it petulantly over the EFTPOS machine and walked briskly out of the café onto the footpath and the scintillating afternoon sun. There he collided with Summa Day who had just walked out of her shop next door. After her introduction to being the opposite of nice earlier in the day, she had decided to close the shop early, go for a walk down to the river and practice her insults.

“You!” they both said at the same time. Then they both sneezed in unison.

Summa sniffed and looked Jason up and down noting his stained shirt and overall colourlessness. Jason also sniffed, looked Summa up and down noting her long rainbow dress, short, curly hair dyed green and bare feet. Neither was impressed.

“Look where you’re going,” Summa said.

“You look where you’re going,” Jason replied.

Summa dug deep. Now was the perfect time to serve up an eloquent and witty insult. She didn't have any. She made do with, "I was here first, Mr Chocolate Shirt."

"No, you weren't, Ms Dangerous Driver," Jason retorted. Truth be told, he was more used to being on the receiving end of insults rather than delivering them. He needed to do better than that, he thought.

"You honked your horn at me for no reason. That was rude and uncalled for," she replied.

"I did not honk my horn at you. I accidentally honked my horn and you just happened to be in front of me when it happened," said Jason.

"You honked deliberately coz I was going too slow, you big liar," said Summa warming to this whole insult thing.

"Don't call me a liar, you scruffy, gaudy hippy," Jason fired back.

"Well, at least I don't look like a melting choc top ice-cream." Summa was on fire.

Jason looked down at his stained shirt and decided he'd had enough of Summa, and all of Grevillia, truth be told. He harrumphed loudly and pushed past her. She shouted at his retreating back. "Yeah! Eat my shorts!" She shook her head and vowed to get on with finding something a little less obscure and inaccurate, to hurl at the next person who annoyed her.

Chapter 26 - Fairy-Wren

While walking back to the B and B to once again change his clothes, Eric rang. Jason was tempted to just let it go through to voice mail but knew that was only delaying the inevitable pounding his ears were going to get, so he picked up.

“Eric, how’s things?” Jason enquired. It was yet again, entirely the wrong thing to say and he realised this the microsecond the words left his mouth.

“What do you (swear word) mean, how’s things?” Eric bellowed. “Things are not going well, you may have noticed. You had one job. Oversee the clearing of the land, but no, you had to turn it into an episode of the X Files instead. There is still an inanimate object in the way of our development and you seem totally unable to do anything about it.”

Most of what Eric shouted at him went in through one ear and out the other, until Eric mentioned the X Files. Jason had no idea what he was talking about. The rest was nothing he hadn’t heard before. He decided to say nothing. Eric didn’t notice as he continued his rant.

“Because of you, I’ve had to get ANOTHER demolition company to do the job. This one charges an arm and a leg and it’s going to come out of your bonus.”

The unfairness of this was not lost on Jason but he saw the futility of arguing the point so bit his already chewed tongue and took a deep breath.

“I’m assuming you got Fairy-Wren Demolitions.”

“You assume correctly,” Eric replied. “And just so you know, Fairy-Wren is my sister and I’m never going to live this down, thanks to you”

Jason had an immediate image of Fairy-Wren’s TV ads and could not reconcile the strong, imposing, ruthless business woman portrayed in them with his flabby, bully of a partner.

“I’ve heard of her,” Jason replied. “When will she get here?”

“She has your number, so you can deal directly with her,” Eric responded and abruptly hung up.

Within seconds, Jason’s phone rang again. The caller ID on his phone said, Fairy-Wren Demolitions. Jason’s heart sank as he picked up.

“Jason Brown,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” responded Fairy-Wren. “I’ll be at the demolition site at 1am tomorrow morning. You’d better be there. Turn your headlights off before you drive onto Brown’s Field. And make sure you wear black,” she ordered and she too, abruptly hung up.

Jason was very confused but self-preservation kicked in and he decided not to call her back to ask obvious questions like, “why 1am?” and “what’s the point of turning off my headlights,” and “black is not one of my colours. Can I wear something else?”

Chapter - 27 Dinner

In his room in the B and B Jason changed his shirt, told his brain to stop trying to work out what was going on, and set out to finally, get some food. It was by now close to 6pm and he knew meals at the Corner Hotel would be available from 6pm onwards. Maybe this time he could acquaint his stomach with the mysterious Parma and Pot.

He walked into the bar and headed over to the counter to order his meal. Thankfully, it was not crowded like the previous time he was there. Half a dozen men in hi viz vests and steel cap boots lounged against the bar drinking beer and talking to each other out of the corner of their mouths. Eye contact was to be avoided at all costs. A few tables were populated by both men and women, also drinking beer and scoffing bags of potato chips. One of the men looked up at Jason. It was Doug. "Of course it is," thought Jason. "This guy seems to be everywhere."

"What was going on in Browns' Field today?" Doug enquired. "We heard ruddy big machines heading there looking like they were going to knock the Thing over, but when a group of us went to look, we found a dozen men playing on it. Are you up to your old tricks again?"

Jason tried to look both innocent and surprised. He was not good at imitating either and instead just looked baffled. "I don't know what you're talking about," he replied. "I told you, the Thing is safe." His nose did not grow at that point, because Jason was not Pinocchio, but it should have. Even he felt ashamed, but what else could he say and still retain all his teeth? He cleared his throat, turned his back on

Doug and looked for Enid so he could order his food. Instead, he found Magda.

“Hello Love,” she exclaimed. “What can I get you?”

Jason was more than a bit surprised to see her behind the bar. “I didn’t know you worked here,” he said.

“I don’t normally, but my cousin Enid has shingles, so here I am,” Magda replied.

Jason wondered yet again if Magda was related to everyone in town.

“I’ll have a Parma and Pot,” Jason requested.

“Sorry Love, we only serve that on Friday night. Tonight, it’s barra and chips,” Magda replied.

Jason had about as much knowledge of barra as he did of Parma but his stomach by now had reached the conclusion that his throat must be cut.

“I’ll have that then,” he replied.

“Fried or grilled? Vegies or salad?” Magda rattled off.

Trying valiantly not to scream, Jason ordered his barra fried with a salad, and a lemon, lime and bitters to wash it down. He sank onto a chair at one of the tables and checked his phone. He saw an SMS from Fairy-Wren. “1am and wear black,” she reminded him. He was none the wiser but unwilling to text her back and own up to the fact that he hadn’t the first idea what she was on about. Instead, he checked his social media accounts. There were no “likes” on any of his posts about the wonders of clearing land and old buildings for

development. He ignored the rude and angry comments from the anti-development activists and turned off his phone.

The barra finally arrived. Jason noted that it was fish, so at least that mystery was solved. He quite liked fish and really liked chips. He had to hand it to the Corner Hotel, the food looked and smelled delicious. His mouth watered copiously as he cut into the fish but his fork had hardly started its journey towards his face when he became aware of someone standing next to him. He looked down and noted a long rainbow skirt. As he looked up the skirt turned into Summa Day.

“So, Mr Developer,” Summa said with a sneer. “Knocked over any heritage listed buildings lately? Killed any endangered wild life? Hm?” Summa had been practicing this down by the river and was quite pleased with how it came out.

Jason tried to ignore her, quickly stuffed the fish into his mouth and started to chew madly. He hadn’t had anything resembling a decent meal in what seemed like a week. He was hungry, demoralised and very, very cranky.

Summa wasn’t done. “I’m talking to you, Mr Developer,” she said. “Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?” She was especially pleased with that one.

That was it! Jason finally reached the end of his very fragile and bruised tether at the mention of his mother. If he was the Incredible Hulk, he’d be turning green and bursting out of his very pedestrian clothing. But he was no Hulk and the last colour he ever wanted to be associated with was green, so he did what anyone would do in the same situation, he wondered what he should do.

Here was a delicious dinner, barely touched. There was a mad woman in a long rainbow dress taunting him for no discernible reason. Here was a man thwarted at every turn. There was a pub full of patrons seemingly hanging on every word.

Tipping his plate onto the table, Jason sprang up, looked Summa in the eye and said with a sneer, "Eat my shorts!" With that he barged out of the pub onto the footpath and collided with Una on her evening run.

Words were exchanged between Jason and Una after their collision. They were not nice words.

The interaction between Una and Jason was observed by Magda, who had scooped Jason's upturned meal into a paper bag and poured his untouched drink into a take-away coffee cup. She knew better than to interrupt Una mid-argument, so she waited until Una thundered off in a flash of purple and Jason was standing alone on the footpath looking completely lost before handing him the food. Jason, who by now was ravenous, took it tentatively from Magda. Given how life was treating him at the moment, even this small act of kindness was treated with suspicion.

"Eat up, Love," Magda said. "You don't want to waste the food."

"Thank you," Jason replied rather flatly.

"You're welcome. But can you try not to go around upsetting everyone in town?"

Jason thought that the last comment was somewhat unfair. True, people were a bit upset when he looked like he was going to demolish the Thing. In his experience most people tended to be a bit

put out when the things they had an unnatural attachment to were demolished. But he had no idea why Summa had decided to pick on him, and one person being upset with him was not everyone. He really didn't like people exaggerating. He thought about putting this view to Magda, but by now, she'd disappeared back into the pub.

Jason sat on the infamous bench outside the pub, put the cardboard cup next to him, and opened the paper bag. He was pleased to see the fish and chips, despite their bedraggled appearance. Magda had also included a few limp lettuce leaves, some slices of tomato, a squeeze pack of tartar sauce and a slice of beetroot all mixed in together. He was so hungry that none of this mattered.

Jason ate his fish and chips and licked his fingers clean. At least the growling in his stomach had settled, removing one of the many things occupying him. He thought about the upcoming activity in the early hours of the morning. He'd heard about Fairy-Wren's legendary night-time demolitions but he'd never been involved in one and he wasn't at all sure he wanted to be. Knocking things down was an experience that should be observed, enjoyed and celebrated in broad daylight. Lurking around knocking things over in the dead of night seemed somewhat disrespectful. He shrugged his shoulders, stood up and walked back to Una's B and B.

Thankfully Una wasn't at home by the time Jason arrived. He concluded that she was off running somewhere. It seemed she did little else. He slunk into his dreadful purple room and looked through his clothing to find something appropriate to wear. Fairy-Wren was emphatic about him wearing black and the only black outfit was his least favourite black suit that he believed made him look too pale. He picked out a navy blue and white striped polo shirt. It was the only

clean shirt he had. "This will have to do," he said to his image in the mirror.

He went outside to collect the shoes that Una had demanded he not wear inside and found only one. He looked around for the other. Gloria spied on him through the hole in the fence expecting him to leave more shoes for her to retrieve. She was quite disappointed when he didn't.

Losing one of his only pair of leather shoes just added to the loathing that Jason felt for everyone and everything Grevillia. Without any other options, Jason pulled on his white trainers. He looked in the mirror and groaned realising that now he looked like the so-called trendy business men he despised, men who wear t-shirts instead of shirts, and sneakers instead of shoes. The only positive in this whole miserable mess that his life had become, was that no-one would see him at that hour of the night.

Chapter 28 - Night works

Twelve thirty came around and Jason climbed into his SUV. For the previous few hours, he had poured out his loathing of Grevillia onto his social media accounts. This made him feel a lot better.

After a short and uneventful drive, Jason arrived at Brown's Field. For the last part of the drive, he had turned off his headlights and drove the car slowly to the top of the hill overlooking the paddock where the Thing was about to meet its fate. Despite his earlier confusion

and misgivings, he now felt like a Special Forces operative on his way to a dangerous mission.

The night was very dark but he could just make out some heavy machinery parked some distance away. Disabling the interior lights, he opened his door and stepped out of the car. He felt quite proud of the way he had worked out that his interior lights also needed disabling but his pride bubble was quickly popped when someone grabbed him. The formidable form disguised in black hissed at him.

“What do you think you’re (swear word) doing?” Fairy-Wren said. “I said dress in black. Black! Not blue. Not white. Black! Do you want to get us arrested? We need to be invisible. You’re glowing in the dark with that striped shirt and white shoes.”

Jason started to tell her that no one was going to arrest anyone. He owned the paddock and could do what he liked with the land. But Fairy-Wren, like Eric, was not the kind of person you contradict, even assuming you could get a word in.

Watching Jason open and close his mouth as if he had something to say only succeeded in rubbing Fairy-Wren even further up the wrong way. She huffed loudly. “Get back in your car and stay there until we’ve finished.”

“You can’t talk to me like that,” Jason said petulantly. “This is my development. You’re working for me!” By now he was getting quite worked up and feeling very aggrieved.

“I say what goes on during a demolition. Not you. People like you have no idea!” Fairy-Wren retorted. “You’re the reason I only work with women.”

“Oh, get off your feminist hobby horse,” Jason persisted, sounding even more petulant than before.

“I give up!” Fairy-Wren muttered as she silently drifted away – a difficult feat for such a solid woman.

Jason was totally taken aback by this interaction. He climbed into the car and watched as Fairy-Wren blended into the dark.

Fairy-Wren headed back down the hill determined to tell her useless brother to get rid of his useless partner. She never understood how they got together in the first place. There was work to be done, however, so she focussed on that.

“OK ladies!” she whispered to the assembled crew, all heavily disguised and barely visible. “Let’s get our night goggles on and get to work on this (swear word) Thing.”

The women jumped into their blackened excavators and started the engines. They were quieter than normal excavators as their engines had been muffled for night-time work by a very creative mechanic whose dream it was to build stealth excavators. He still had a way to go realising the dream, but he counted the muffling as a positive first step.

As the women climbed into their excavators and started the engines, Fairy-Wren walked on ahead to assess the best place to start the demolition. Even with night vision goggles, she was finding it hard to see a weak spot to focus on. She made the decision to climb onto the Thing to get a better overall view.

Meanwhile, on the hill above Brown’s field, Jason in his SUV squinted into the dark to watch the progress of the demolition. He could

barely see what was going on until it was evident that the main purpose of the exercise, demolishing the Thing, was no longer a priority to the excavation crew. He came to the conclusion that progress had ceased mainly because all the excavators had turned on their lights. Worse still, all the women were climbing over the Thing laughing and screaming like teenage girls on a school bus.

“No, no, no, no!” Jason yelled as he bounded out of his car and set off down the hill.

The closer he got, the more disturbing the scene. Fairy-Wren in all her formidable glory was sliding down the Thing squealing with delight. Her fellow workers were using the hand and foot holds to climb the Thing, and one woman had found a tarpaulin to drape over it to make a cubby. The scene was now very familiar to Jason; once again the Thing had turned perfectly rational adults into uncontrollable children.

Jason dared not go any closer in case he was also infected, so he turned around, climbed into his SUV and with a heavy heart, he headed back into town.

Chapter 29 - Going alone

After the latest debacle in Brown’s Field, Jason had returned to the B and B determined that he was going to see this thing through himself. He alone understood the power of the Thing and he alone could demolish it. No one had listened to him when he warned them about the Thing. They had scoffed at and scorned him. Well, no

more. The development was going ahead and the Thing was going to get out of the way and let that happen. But how? How?

With these thoughts creeping tentatively through the remaining, functional parts of his brain that weren't on the verge of a complete meltdown, he climbed into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

He had a dream. In the dream he saw himself looking down on the Thing from a great height. Dozens of child-like people in their underwear were playing games on it. Suddenly, one person who looked like a two-year-old version of Eric, but with a moustache and a bald head, looked up at Jason in the sky and started to scream. Everyone else on the Thing also screamed and slid down to get away. That was when Jason was awakened by the now familiar bird calls and another noise he really didn't want to recognise. In the hallway outside his room, he could hear Una instructing another woman in how to do star jumps. It wasn't the star jumps that bothered him, nor was it Una instructing another woman in how to do them, it was the fact that the other woman was Fairy-Wren. The two of them were getting along famously, jumping and laughing and encouraging each other to go faster.

"I feel on top of the world!" Fairy-Wren pronounced loudly.

"It's because you've been Thinged," Una responded. "Isn't it the best?"

Fairy-Wren shouted a resounding "yes" as she jumped up and down.

"Let's go for a run," said Una. "Burn off some of this energy, eh?"

Jason heard them thunder down the hall and out of the front door. He lay in bed processing the catastrophe from the night before,

trying not to recall a dozen or so fully grown women, playing on the Thing. But it was a sight he couldn't unsee. To try and banish the images from his mind, he thought about the dream he was having as he woke up. Then it suddenly hit him.

"That's it!" Jason exclaimed as he bounded out of bed. "We attack from above!"

He quickly showered and dressed in his stained chinos and last night's blue and white striped polo. With only one leather shoe remaining, he slipped on his white sneakers again. He helped himself to cereal and toast in the dining room, feeling a bit on edge in case something happened to deprive him yet again of a decent meal. His relationship with food since arriving in Grevillia had been somewhat strained, so he made sure he ate as much as he could. He had some serious planning to do.

Sitting down, loudly crunching on a bowl of particularly chunky muesli, he checked his phone for messages. There was one SMS from Eric's PA Chris that said, "Eric called in sick this morning and will be taking extended leave. Please refer all queries directly to me."

"Ha!" said Jason. "So, he's heard what happened last night." He felt a warm glow of satisfaction knowing that if he really wanted to, he could say to Eric in very superior tones, "I (swear word) told you so!"

Jason felt he needed to get out of Grevillia to think. It was thirty-five kilometres to the nearest town, Lemon Gum, where he hoped he could find a café that served decent food in a civilised manner. There he intended to plan his aerial attack. He packed up his laptop and set off.

Chapter - 30 Bikies

Jason left the township of Grevillia where the speed limit was 40 kilometres per hour and put his foot onto the accelerator as soon as the speed limit increased to 100. Now no longer afraid of going over 50km/h, Jason discovered that there was something very satisfying about speeding along an empty country road. He instructed his sound system to play Money, Money, Money by ABBA. Loud!

He happily banged the steering wheel in time to the music and thought that finally, life was good. He was powerful and in charge until he drove over a hill and there in front of him was the Kombi driven slowly by Summa Day. The road was narrow with the gravel shoulders that brought him undone the last time. There was no way he could overtake Summa without risking his life, and there was no way that Summa was going to let him pass.

When an old, familiar SUV came over the hill, Summa smiled to herself.

“Well, Mr Developer,” she muttered to herself. “Eat my dust!” She slowed right down and weaved this way and that across the road kicking up red dust as she skimmed over the gravel shoulders. She was really enjoying herself. This new, sassy persona she was morphing into was so much more interesting than the Summa of old. Her range of insults had diversified, despite her tendency to start most of them with “eat my.” So now in addition to “eat my shorts” she had practiced “eat my dust” (just used to great effect), “eat my lumpy porridge” (she couldn’t wait to use that one), “eat my toe

clippings” (she wasn’t sure about that one) and her piece de resistance, “eat my aura.”

Meanwhile, Jason was seething. He couldn’t overtake and his car was getting coated in red dust again. His destination was still 30 kilometres away and at the current speed Summa was driving at, he wouldn’t reach Lemon Gum for over an hour. Tooting his horn was pointless. He tried it once and she only drove slower. He had no alternative but to literally eat her dust until he came upon an overtaking lane, and he was pretty sure that wasn’t going to happen.

The impasse continued for another 15 minutes until the road twisted around a bend and headed up a steep hill. Summa’s Kombi was old and she wasn’t very diligent servicing it. All the weaving around was within its capabilities, but combining that with a steep hill climb was just too much. Halfway up the hill Summa noticed the needle on the temperature gauge in the red zone.

“Not good,” she muttered to herself. “Did I put water in the radiator?” she wondered. That question was answered a few metres further on when the Kombi uttered a big sigh and stopped.

Close behind her, Jason observed firstly, steam coming out of the engine in the rear of the Kombi, and secondly, its apparent demise half way up the hill.

“Ha ha! Serves you right!” Jason shouted as he scooted past her. In his rearview mirror he watched as Summa got out of the Kombi and stood next to it looking very annoyed. Maybe she was looking confused. Or it could have been unhappy. He wasn’t great at reading people but whatever her face was saying he knew it wasn’t “yippee!”

He accelerated up the rest of the hill and headed towards Lemon Gum.

Summa watched the retreating, loathed SUV as it sped up the hill and disappeared over the crest. For a moment she wondered whether the new version of herself was actually worthwhile. Nice Summa would have let him overtake her that first day and none of what occurred subsequently would have taken place. OK, maybe the Kombi breaking down would have still happened. She really should service it more often.

“Oh well,” she said to herself as she watched clouds of steam coming out of the Kombi engine. “It is what it is,” she added, drawing on the countless hours she’d spent trying to reach enlightenment. That attitude lasted about thirty seconds until the trickle of anger she had so far ignored became a raging torrent. Summa jumped up and down, banging the side of the Kombi and hurting her knuckles. The manic jumping broke the last threads holding her ancient, vegan sandals together and she yelled as she landed on the rough gravel without the soles of her sandals to protect her.

Summa leaned up against the Kombi and went through her current options. She concluded quite quickly that she didn’t have any. She was stuck halfway up a hill on a quiet country road with an ancient and broken-down Kombi. She didn’t have a mobile phone to call someone and her only hope was that a passing car might stop and take her back to Grevillia.

No sooner than she had that thought than she heard a roar. A very loud roar. The roar of a large pack of motorcycles upon which rode black leather clad bikies. Summa’s heart sank. Here she was, a

solitary woman, stuck on a lonely country road where no one could hear her scream. She asked her spirit guide to make her invisible. It didn't. The bikie gang screeched to a halt and surrounded her and the Kombi.

Chapter 31 - Hot air

Within half an hour of zooming past Summa, Jason arrived in Lemon Gum and parked outside the Lemon Delicious Bakery. As he left the SUV, he could smell the intoxicating aroma of baked goods and his stomach uttered a loud growl of anticipation. He entered through the old wooden door and went up to the counter to check out the pastries. He decided he would order a ham and cheese croissant followed by a vanilla slice (the best in Australia the sign said), all washed down with the largest cappuccino they could serve. He looked for someone to take his order. He could only see a smattering of elderly customers drinking their coffees and doing Wordle.

Jason found a bell and tapped it to attract attention. A very familiar face emerged from the back.

"Hello Love," said Magda. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Don't tell me," Jason replied. "The bakery is owned by another one of your relatives who is sick with bubonic plague."

"Now Love, don't be silly. My cousin is in the city getting a new set of false teeth." Magda nodded her head and smoothed her brightly coloured apron that covered a very sensible pink floral cotton frock.

“Are you meeting that loud, rude friend of yours, cos if you are, you can tell him from me to mind his manners.”

“No, I’m here alone,” replied Jason. Magda nodded again and smiled. Jason put in his order and sat down on one of the two uncomfortable wooden chairs at a small table with near the window looking out on the main street.

Magda delivered his food and went over to talk to one of the older couples who by now had finished Wordle. There was much to discuss; their starting word, how many turns it took to get the correct word, why they should have worked it out sooner, and who uses that word anyway?

Jason settled in with his food, coffee and a notebook for jotting down ideas. He took a deep, satisfying sip of his coffee and looked around the bakery. It was then that his eye was caught by a small community noticeboard on the wall near the door. It wasn’t the noticeboard or the things attached to it that captured his notice. He wasn’t interested in joining the community choir or buying a dining table (like new). It was the poster with a picture of hot air balloons that drew him out of his chair and over to the noticeboard for a closer look.

“Up, up and away!” the poster declared. “Join us as we glide over beautiful hills, valleys and rivers. See the famous Thing in Brown’s field, renowned for making even the grumpiest person happy and carefree. Can you work out what its magic is? Why not try? Weather permitting, our flights leave the Lemon Gum Football Club oval every Saturday at 6am. Contact Gav to book your flight.”

Jason quickly jotted down the number and sat back at his table. His hand shook as he raised his coffee to his lips, such was his excitement. "That's it!" he said under his breath. "I need to get onto a flight." He jotted down a list of ideas, with "get hold of explosives" at the top.

Tucking into the best vanilla slice he had ever eaten (the sign was correct, he concluded), Jason imagined himself flying over the Thing in the hot air balloon throwing a large explosive device out of the basket. In his mind he saw the scourge of his existence shattering into a million pieces as the explosives blasted it into another dimension. He dwelt on that scenario for a few, wonderful moment until reality kicked in. "It's going to blow me up as well!" he uttered loudly.

"Do you need something, Love?" the wide girth of Magda appeared at his side. "I thought I heard you say you were going to blow up!"

Jason realised what he had done and struggled to find a way to explain his outburst. He knew he had to say something to put Magda off. He dug deep.

"Did I say that out loud? I meant I was so full of this wonderful vanilla slice, I could explode." He felt very weird saying this but it appeared to work.

"You're a silly billy! But I'm glad you like the vanilla slice. It's my favourite too. Just don't eat too many or you will explode!" Magda laughed at the thought and wobbled like a jelly as she did so. She scuffled off and Jason went back to his thoughts.

There were two main problems as he saw it. Firstly, getting hold of the explosives, and secondly, not blowing himself up in the process. If

he was going to use the balloon to drop the bomb, the bomb needed to be on a timer. This was not his area of expertise. He needed an expert. Apart from Hal and Fairy-Wren, who were now utterly useless, he didn't know anyone he could casually call up to ask if they'd make him a bomb complete with timer. That might attract the wrong kind of attention. An idea jiggled around in his brain trying to get his attention. He drank the last of his coffee. The idea jiggled a little more forcefully. "The Dark Web!" it yelled into his brain. Jason finally took notice. "The Dark Web," Jason muttered to himself.

Now Jason was in his late twenties and was fairly tech savvy, but he had absolutely no idea about the Dark Web or how to access it. Yet he was sure that this was where he needed to go. But how? His brain took up the challenge. Jason felt like he was on the edge of solving the problem. Suddenly he knew. "Brenda!" he said to himself, making sure this time he didn't attract Magda's attention.

Chapter 32 - Looking for Brenda

Brenda was someone he knew from his high school days. She was an IT whiz kid who from a very young age had learned to hack into just about anywhere. One time she hacked into the high school record keeping system and changed around all the marks of the kids in her class. Suddenly Jason found himself up there with the smartest kids. It was a lofty feeling. It lasted two hours when the school's IT specialist realised what had happened and restored the status quo. Jason slipped back down the ladder into the mediocre where he had resided for the best part of his educational career.

Jason started to look for Brenda in various social media accounts. Initially he couldn't track her down. There were plenty of women called Brenda but none of them looked or sounded like the girl he once knew. He racked his now exhausted brain for other names she might be using. There was one she used in school. She used to call it her hacking handle. Jason needed another coffee to help him think.

He saw Magda chatting to another table of elderly ladies. They were having a very animated discussion about their various medications. From what he could hear, they were getting quite competitive trying to outdo each other with numbers and types of medication. Given the vast quantities of drugs, they as a group, were taking, Jason was surprised that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme could cope. Magda saw Jason looking at her and shuffled over to see what he wanted.

"Are you still going to explode?" she asked with a chuckle. Jason looked nonplussed for a moment until he remembered what he said earlier about blowing up.

"No, no," he replied. "But I would like another of your coffees. That one was really good." The compliment slipped out before he realised what he was doing. In his line of work, compliments were considered a sign of weakness. Yet there was something about Magda that made him want to please her. This revelation was most unexpected and something he needed to think about. But not now. There were bigger issues to resolve.

Magda smiled. "I don't know why everyone gets so wound up by you," she told him. "You act like you're a tough business man, but I think that inside, you're just a big pussy cat." Jason was appalled. He

hated the arrogant indifference of cats and certainly didn't feel he resembled one in the least. Magda waddled off to get him another coffee and Jason stared out of the window onto the main street while she did so.

The main street was very quiet with the occasional car or truck passing by. A few people walked slowly along the footpath, some being taken for a walk by their dog, others chatting to friends and neighbours. It was a scene of peace and tranquillity until a large group of bikies roared into view and stopped outside the bakery. Jason was both concerned and intrigued. He had heard many stories about the exploits of motorcycle gangs, none of them positive. But they still held the kind of appeal that street brawls have, as long as you are just an onlooker.

Jason watched as the pillion passenger on one of the motorbikes scrambled off. Unlike all the other riders this one wasn't dressed head to toe in black leather. No, this rider was wearing a long, rainbow coloured dress, and when she took off her helmet, there was her green hair in all its glory.

Not Summa again! Was she stalking him? What was she doing travelling with a bikie gang? He watched as she bid a cheery farewell to the bikies who waved back at her as they thundered out of town. Summa came into the bakery and Magda waddled over to greet her.

"Hi Auntie Magda," she said. "Sorry to be late. You won't believe what just happened!"

"I was getting worried about you." Magda said. "And what on earth were you doing with a bikie gang?"

“That’s what I was going to tell you,” said Summa. My Kombi broke down and that waste of space developer, Jason, sped right past me and left me there. But luckily the Rollin’ Pinz bikie gang came past and offered me a lift into town. There’s a convention for female bikies on this weekend so I was lucky they came past when they did.”

Listening to all this, there was a lot for Jason to take in. Aunty Magda? Really? Summa’s related to Magda? Female bikies? A female bikie convention? Summa on the back of a motor bike? “And hey! I’m not a waste of space,” Jason muttered to himself. “I never waste space! Give me some space and I will develop it to the next level.” He was feeling quite aggrieved until he realised that once again, he was in the same space as Summa, adding despair into the feelings mix.

Slumping down in his seat Jason hoped the screen of his laptop would hide him. It was not a great strategy and was doomed to failure when Magda announced loudly, “What a coincidence! Jason is sitting just over there. I was just getting him another coffee but you can do that now. Thanks for taking over. I must rush home and make sure all the rooms are made up for the Morris Dancers Conference folk. It finishes tomorrow, thank goodness. It’s been quite a challenge working around them. Everywhere I go in the house, there’s one or more of them prancing around, flicking their hankies and jingling their bells. They keep taking my dusters and tea towels, and using them when they can’t find their own hankies.”

As Magda left the bakery, Summa walked over to where Jason was sitting and glowered. “Thanks a lot for leaving me stranded,” she growled. “You unenlightened lump of damaged chakras.” (“That was EPIC!” she said to herself.)

Jason had no idea what she was talking about. He concluded that it wasn't a compliment going by her tone and the look on her face. He sighed. He felt tired all of a sudden. The last few days had been very difficult and his interactions with Summa were not helping.

"Would you have got into the car with me even if I offered you a lift?" Jason asked petulantly. He saw the look of disdain (whatever that is) on her face and continued, "I thought not, so can you cut out the insults. You're not very good at them."

Hearing this Summa was devastated. She was really proud of that last insult and now he was insulting the insult. Her lexicon was still quite sparse so she couldn't think of anything to say back to him. She turned and stomped off. Given she wasn't wearing shoes, this action lacked the impact she was hoping for.

Summa's presence was going to be a distraction, Jason concluded so there was no point in staying. He packed up his computer and phone and headed off to his car to drive back to the B and B.

Chapter 33 - The Ballroom

It didn't go unnoticed by the good folk of Grevillia that there had now been three unsuccessful attempts to demolish the Thing. Some trusted that the Thing would look after itself. Others feared that sooner or later someone would succeed in destroying it.

Such uncertainty could only be addressed one way, the way that for centuries has been the go-to method to solve problems. Hold a meeting. So, HOOTS sent out word that there was to be a meeting in

the ballroom in the Corner Hotel, 7.30pm tomorrow night. Tea and coffee provided. Bring a snack to share.

On the day of the meeting, Enid set up a rickety collection of chairs in neat rows in the ballroom. She found a table with all four legs more or less intact and put it up the front with two chairs behind it. She stood back to admire her handiwork when everything was in its place. She concluded there wasn't much that was admirable, but it would do.

Even Enid, who loved the Corner Hotel despite all its shortcomings, had to admit that it was a bit of a stretch calling the dingy, cavernous room out the back of the hotel a ballroom. True it had served that purpose when Grevillia was the bustling centre of the short-lived goldrush. However, only one ball (a debut for the young ladies of the town) was held in it and the goings on that evening became something of a legend, for all the wrong reasons.

Despite an overwhelming lack of gold found nearby, there were still many gold prospectors who refused to accept that fact. Like their optimistic counterparts throughout the ages, they believed that "next time" their luck would change. Each pebble panned in the river was one pebble away from the jackpot. Occasionally, a prospector would find a nugget the size of a rice grain, and the optimism amongst the die-hard prospectors would soar to dizzying heights. Random reinforcement is a curse.

When the debut ball was planned by the genteel folk of Grevillia, the idea was to showcase the town, the ballroom and of course the young ladies. The men would look dandy in their evening attire and the women would try to outshine each other in their elaborate

ballgowns. The young ladies, on the other hand, were expected to look suitably demure all dressed in white. The mayor of Grevillia had the responsibility to introduce each of the young ladies into society after which there would be dancing to a live string quartet, a tasty supper and all the fruit punch you could drink. That was the plan.

Instead, a group of rowdy prospectors in their Sunday best gate-crashed the ball intent on having a jolly good time and perhaps even finding a lovely debutante, or at a pinch, her mother, to dance with. They drank far too much fruit punch, which they liberally laced with the whisky they had smuggled into the ballroom. In their inebriated state, they took over the dance floor and used it to sing bawdy songs that they unsuccessfully tried to teach firstly to the members of the string quartet and when that didn't work, to the scandalised ball guests. Their shenanigans derailed the genteel event that had been so meticulously planned. The ladies in their very elaborate frocks had no opportunity to show them off. The tearful debutants were not presented to society. The men had no idea what to do, so they also got stuck into the whisky-laced fruit punch, called the prospectors unflattering names and started a brawl, which lasted well into the early hours of the morning.

The prospectors' hangovers lasted longer than both their optimism and any hope of finding gold.

The ballroom was never used as a ballroom again. Over the years it became a venue for wedding receptions, significant birthday celebrations and an annual talent competition. But even these uses fell away and its sole function for the past fifty or more years was to house anything that didn't have anywhere else to go. Occasionally,

that included Corner Hotel patrons too inebriated to find their way home.

Before she could put out the chairs, Enid moved two ancient horse saddles, six empty milk crates, a box of pirated DVDs, empty paint cans, a broken vacuum cleaner, a fetid floor mop, umpteen boxes of chipped crockery, piles of newspapers, a carton of tired Christmas decorations and a dead possum. She placed all of these things, except the dead possum, onto the cracked timbers of the raised stage and closed the dusty curtains that hadn't even had better days to see.

Satisfied with her efforts, Enid left the ballroom, went behind the bar and poured herself a double Scotch.

Chapter 34 - The meeting

At 7.30pm the good folk of Grevillia filed into the ballroom and sat in chairs as far from the front as they possibly could. Latecomers stood at the back rather than sit in the front rows. This seating behaviour is a well-established protocol for attendees at meetings, though one that won't be found in Robert's Rules of Order.

Doug, who had sent out the invitations to the meeting, sat behind the table with Rose Woods, who assumed that given her status as mayor, it was only right she should occupy what she considered to be a position of authority. She had certainly dressed for the part. Where most of the women in the room wore comfortable pants and tops, Rose was immaculately dressed in a fitted, dark grey suit, aqua silk

blouse, black high heels and a large barrette keeping her mass of blonde curls in a sensible French roll.

At the back of the ballroom, on a precarious trestle table, sat the offerings brought by the attendees. Along with the usual suspects of dips and crackers, salted peanuts, and packets of Tim Tams, Joyce, the town librarian, brought her prize-winning passionfruit cream sponge and placed it front and centre on the table. Una contributed a healthy but very unattractive kale and chickpea slice. Mrs. Barnes, who seldom left her farm to come into town, brought her very puzzling jam and onion tarts. A low groan emanated from the assembled when, with a flourish, she placed them on the table. Many gentle attempts had been made in the past to dissuade her from bringing this particular offering to every community event, all to no avail. No one really wanted to press the point as she was a very sweet, old lady who was also a multi-award-winning, competitive trap shooter.

Attached to the ballroom was a kitchen with a large sink, a broken old refrigerator, a pantry cupboard with a selection of boxes and jars of unidentifiable substances, ancient teabags, a large tin of International Roast instant coffee that had gone solid over time, a canister of sugar complete with dead ants, and a large number of old plastic bags. The urn, however, was still in working order and Magda cleaned it and filled it up, setting it to boil. She rifled through the cartons of chipped crockery behind the curtains on the stage, and found a selection of mismatched mugs and cups that were still serviceable, in that they would probably hold hot liquid, but with no guarantees. Enid had supplied teabags, instant coffee, sugar and milk

thereby saving Magda the ignominy of serving tea and coffee purchased sometime in the last century.

At 7.35pm, Rose cleared her throat and declared the meeting open. She repeated this process a few more times while people shuffled into their seats, greeted their neighbours and generally failed to pay Rose any attention.

Getting a bit fed up with Rose's approach to quietening things down, Doug put two fingers in his mouth, whistled loudly then shouted, "hey you lot, stop talking. We have a meeting to get on with." Quiet descended upon the ballroom as people responded to Doug's commands as a sheepdog would - quickly and obediently.

Rose stood up and acknowledged the traditional owners of the land before declaring the first meeting of Hands Off Our Thing open.

"Despite reassurances to the contrary from the representative of the development company, Mr Jason Brown, it appears that the plan is the demolish the Thing in Brown's Field," Rose said addressing the townsfolk. Murmurings of "boo," "shame," "how dare he," and other comments that would never make it into the minutes, if only someone was taking them, went around the room. "I'll ask Doug Duggan-de Greaves to give us a report on what has been taking place, as it seems he's been privy to some interesting information. Doug?"

Doug, dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans and boots, stood up and looked very awkward. He was one of those people, who at a funeral, would rather be in the coffin than giving the eulogy. He cleared his throat a few times. "Right, well... this Jason bloke asked me and my crew to clear the land on Brown's Field so it could be "developed". Doug used

air quotes and stared meaningfully at Rose, who had used her casting vote on the council to approve the development. "Until we got on site, I had no idea that he also wanted us to demolish the Thing. We all refused point blank." Several people cheered and clapped.

"Order!" shouted Rose, who earned another meaningful glare from Doug.

"That's not all," Doug went on. "The next day this Jason bloke turns up with the crew from Buster Brothers. Luckily lots of us were there keeping guard over the Thing. We had the barbie going and the kids were having a ball climbing all over it." Doug's eyes shone as he recalled that morning. He shook his head to clear the memory so he could get back on track. "Yeah, well, then the Buster Brothers blokes came and joined us, so luckily we dodged a bullet that time."

Spider called out from his seat, "that wasn't luck mate. That was the Thing. It won't let anyone destroy it." Murmurs of agreement went around the room.

Doug continued, "next thing we know, Jason is meeting a bloke called Hurricane Hal Merriweather in the Never Bean Better Café."

"He was very rude!" Magda called out from her seat.

"We heard him, Magda. He had no respect!" One of the café patrons, Peggy, interjected. Many voices joined her in agreement. Soon everyone was having their say on developers, rude city folk, how nice Magda is, and when was this meeting going to end.

"Order!" Rose shouted. "Speak through the chair."

"Order yourself!" Enid interjected. "Who put you in charge?" A low growl of agreement went around the room.

Rose blushed and sat down.

Doug continued. "Now I have it on good authority" – "Mine!" interjected Una. "As I was saying, I have it on good authority (pause) Una's, that a notorious, all female demolition company that you may have seen advertised on TV also made a night-time attempt to demolish the Thing."

"That was me!" interjected Fairy-Wren jumping to her feet. There was an audible gasp in the room and all heads turned towards Fairy-Wren who cut an imposing figure in denim overalls over a bright red t-shirt and a denim baseball cap on top of her spikey, grey hair. "I'm so sorry," she added. "I didn't understand how special it was. I would never harm the Thing. It's changed my life." Fairy-Wren looked at Una with dewy eyes as they grasped each other's hands, and the room erupted into a loud cheer.

Rose shook her head, clearly dying to tell people to come to order. Doug whistled loudly and the crowd settled.

"So, this is how it goes," Doug went on. "The Thing is not safe and we can't trust anyone from the development company." Loud boos erupted in the room. "So, what do we do?"

The room went unnaturally quiet as people pondered solutions to the current situation. They kept on staying unnaturally quiet, checking out the ceiling, auditing the state of their footwear, looking at their phones or staring blankly anywhere but at Doug.

"Come on! Someone must have an idea," said Doug. The room continued to stay unnaturally quiet as is often the case. No one wanted to be the first to suggest something. This too would be in the unwritten rules for meetings, should one ever be written.

A tentative hand went up. "Great, an idea," said Doug.

"Actually, I have a suggestion," a small, dark haired, south Asian woman said. "My name is Caitali Vaarma, but everyone calls me Cat. I moved here about six months ago. I live in the old Rectory." Lots of heads nodded and uttered various "ohs" and "ahs". Cat went on. "I don't want to be one of those pushy, city people so I'm a bit reluctant to butt in."

"Butt away," said Doug. "We need all the help we can get."

"OK," said Cat. "One of the things I really don't like about meetings is how only a few people talk so we never hear what others have to say."

"Yeah, in this town most of them are called Rose," a voice contributed from the back of the room.

"That's not true!" Rose responded defensively. She was clearly shaping up for a verbal fight but Doug quickly interjected with a whistle and a well-timed "Oy. That's not helpful!" Order returned to the room with just a hint of sniggering from the general direction of the previous interjector.

"What I meant was that in a large group like this only the most confident or experienced will contribute their ideas." Cat looked at Rose as she said this. Rose looked modestly smug, a combination that is quite hard to pull off normally. "So, my thought is get a cuppa, break into a number of smaller groups, and brainstorm ideas. After about half an hour, we get back together and report on what we discussed in our groups."

“That’s a ridiculous idea,” said Rose. “How will we know what everyone is saying if we’re not all together?”

Some heads nodded. “I get what you’re saying, Rose. But we will all have a chance to share our ideas when we get back together. And people feel a lot less self-conscious talking about what the group came up with, rather than putting forward their own ideas.”

Rose pooh poohed a moment longer. “I suppose we can give this new-fangled idea a try,” she agreed reluctantly. Rose at the tender age of 29, had the uncanny ability to sound like someone fifty years older in the mistaken belief that people would take her more seriously. Being the youngest ever mayor of Grevillia had a few drawbacks.

“Well, I think it’s a great idea, Cat,” said Doug. “It sounds like you know how these things work. How about you run this part of the meeting?”

“OK,” responded Cat. “If you’re all happy to give it a try?”

Lots of heads now nodded in agreement. “Good. Then let’s get some good ideas!” said Cat. “Grab a cuppa. Get into groups of four to six, and we’ll meet back here in about 40 minutes.”

People moved around selecting who they wanted to be in the group with and soon there was a long line of people getting their tea or coffee and helping themselves to the goodies on the table. Mrs. Barnes was very pleased to see how quickly her tarts had disappeared, and she made a note to herself to make sure she made more for future meetings. Una’s slice, on the other hand, stayed right where it was. The last slice of Joyce’s passionfruit sponge was passed

over by a number of people who didn't want to be the one to be seen taking it.

Magda was clearly relishing her role serving the hot drinks and thanks to her efficiency everyone had a chipped cup of something hot to drink and a chipped plate of food in no time at all. The townsfolk shuffled their chairs into small circles in various parts of the very large ballroom and set to work.

Meanwhile, with the help of Enid, Cat had scraped together some paper and pens and distributed them amongst the groups to take notes. A busy and productive hum quickly replaced the previous awkward silence. Cat wandered around the groups offering encouragement and suggesting each group choose someone to feed back their ideas.

Cat sat down near the stage and looked around the ballroom. While she was happy to see everyone so engaged, she felt uncomfortable putting herself forward. She had moved to Grevillia for a quieter life. Her children were grown up and had left home. She no longer had any responsibilities keeping her in the city, and that included her stressful job, which she'd suddenly quit. When management decided to reduce the number of staff and add their work to Cat's already heavy work load with no additional pay, she finally realised there was more to life. She had a little consultancy business on the side and she worked out that she could survive nicely in Grevillia on much less money and so far, things were going well.

The time passed quickly. Cat asked Doug to do his whistling thing to attract the attention of the group and he was happy to oblige. Chairs shuffled back into rows and all eyes were on Cat.

“Let’s hear these ideas then,” said Cat. “Una’s group, do you want to be first?”

Una shot to her feet. “We had lots of ideas,” she said. “Some of them probably won’t work because they’re not very legal.” The room erupted into sniggers. Clearly other groups had the same ideas. “But the one we liked best is to hold a festival to celebrate the Thing. We can invite the media to raise its profile.” Lots of heads nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, Una,” Cat said. “That’s a great idea.”

“Now how about this group,” said Cat pointing to Spider’s group.

“Sorry, I don’t know your name.”

Spider stood up. “Hi, I’m Jeremy, but everyone calls me Spider. Don’t know why.”

“It’s because of your hairy arms and legs,” someone quipped.

Spider shuffled awkwardly for a moment, then went on. “We thought about maybe buying Brown’s Field back, but it’s probably too expensive. Maybe we could do one of those GoFundMe thingamabobs. The festival could help with that.” Spider sat down. Again, heads nodded in agreement.

“Who wants to be next?” Cat asked.

Summa jumped to her feet. “I suggested putting an energy forcefield around the Thing to protect it, but the others weren’t sure if that would work.” The heads in her group shook vigorously. Clearly her idea didn’t have a lot of support. “But we also thought that some sort of awareness raising would be good. Get some articles online, call up some TV stations. That sort of thing.” Summa sat down.

Cat systematically worked her way around all of the groups until each one had presented their ideas. “Well, we’ve heard some great ideas,” said Cat. “But the one that seems to have legs...”

“Not hairy ones like Spider’s,” someone shouted out making everyone laugh.

“No, not those kinds of legs,” Cat said with a smile. “I mean the one that people seem to be most excited about is the festival. The festival ticks a lot of boxes – publicity, awareness raising, fund-raising, and fun. So, is there anyone who does NOT support a festival of some sort?” Cat paused waiting for a response. “Great, it looks like everyone is behind a festival. Now all we have to do is get an organising group together...”

“I nominate Cat as chair!” Magda shouted out. “You did good, love! You kept this motley crew in check. That’s what we need. Someone to get things done!” Everyone started clapping. Rose looked quite put out, but eventually joined in.

“That’s really kind of you all,” said Cat looking quite uncomfortable. “Maybe it should be someone who’s been here longer.” Rose started preening herself thinking she could put herself forward, but was stopped short by Doug. “Magda said it. You got results. Will you do it?” he asked.

“OK,” said Cat, “but I need at least another four people to be part of the organising group.” A flurry of hands immediately shot up. “Well, it looks like I have...six, seven, no eight volunteers! That’s amazing. How about we stay back and work out when our first get-together will be.”

Rose jumped to her feet. “I declare this meeting over,” she said, quite unnecessarily. She needn’t have bothered as everyone started milling around, grabbing the last Tim Tam or chip, but carefully avoiding the last piece of sponge, until Spider, shamelessly, swiped it off the plate and into his mouth. Cat and the volunteers huddled in a corner and so began the first stage of planning the Festival of the Thing.

Chapter 35 - The library

Following his interrupted planning in the bakery in Lemon Gum, Jason went back to the B and B and organised with Una to stay for at least another week. Nothing could be done to progress the development until the Thing was demolished, and it was abundantly clear to Jason that he was the only one who could make it happen. Eric could bluster as much as he liked, he could send as many demolition crews as he liked, but Jason knew his plan was the only one that could possibly work. The Thing had to be attacked from the air.

The last few days finally caught up with Jason. Instead of going out for a meal, he helped himself to some muesli and toast, and climbing into the most purple of beds, fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A cacophony of “aak, aak, aaaaaak!”, “oodle ardle” and “squark, squark!” accompanied by the sounds of vigorous star jumping in the hall brought Jason, reluctantly, to consciousness. He pondered the myth of a quiet country life, thinking that the sound of traffic had a lot more to be desired when it came to background noises. By now his senses were beginning to accommodate the colour purple

everywhere he looked, a realisation that concerned him somewhat. No one should accommodate so much purple!

After a shower and a change of clothes (beige chinos, light teal polo shirt, white sneakers), Jason emerged from his room and collided with Una who was striding up the hall, holding hands with Fairy-Wren. They were both dressed in purple track pants, purple t-shirts and Dockers hats.

“Look where you’re going!” Una said in a loud and stern voice.

“Yeah,” echoed Fairy-Wren. “Watch where you’re going.”

“Think you’re the big man, eh?” said Una. “You’re in for a nasty shock!”

“Yeah, a real nasty shock,” Fairy-Wren echoed again. Both women looked at him and sniggered. Jason just stood at the entrance to his room doing a goldfish imitation and trying to work out what was going on.

The two giant-sized women pushed past him and out of the front door cackling as they went. Jason slammed his bedroom door shut, to show the empty hall how angry he was feeling. “You can’t talk to me like that,” Jason said to the pot plant sitting on a low table outside his room. The pot plant had nothing to say in response.

After a breakfast of cereal, toast and tea, Jason packed up his laptop and set out to the library to plan his aerial attack.

The Grevillia library sat within the council building and had clearly not caught up with contemporary trends in running a library. The librarian was Joyce Butter, of prize-winning passionfruit sponge cake fame. She sat behind the issue desk, her eagle eyes taking in all the

action, of which (apart from Jason) there was precisely none. Her grey hair was pulled back into a tight bun, her half-moon glasses hung on a chain around her neck, her pale pink cardigan was buttoned all the way to the top, and her mid-calf length tweed skirt completed the stereotypical librarian look. Or it would have, were it not for the bright red, studded and fringed cowboy boots she wore on her feet. The boots were Joyce's "statement". About what, no-one really knew.

When Jason walked into the library, Joyce raised her eyebrows and gave him a withering look. Being rather lacking in the skills to correctly interpret facial expressions, Jason concluded that she was probably in some kind of pain. If that was the case, he really couldn't be bothered hearing about it should she decide to share any details, so he avoided looking at her and found himself a desk and chair as far away from her gaze as he could.

Connecting to the library's Wi-Fi, Jason continued his search for Brenda, the IT whiz kid he went to high school with. He knew she had a hacker handle, but what was it? As well as hacking he remembered that she loved pizza, sausage dogs and dancing. At school he'd had a bit of a crush on Brenda and he used to eavesdrop on the conversations she and her friends had during lunch and recess time. At the back of his mind, he thought that if he found out more about the things she was interested in, he could one day strike up a conversation with her. That never happened. Now he was glad he had retained that information.

The hacker handle was still elusive but Jason knew that it was somehow connected to the meaning of her name. He typed "meaning of name Brenda" into Google and got the response that

her name was ancient Nordic and meant torch. He felt he was getting closer now. The word “soup” squeezed its way out of his distant memories to where he thought he might just snare it. It had something to do with soup. Brenda Soup? Brenda Campbells? Brenda Broth? Close! Then he remembered. It was an anagram. But of what? He dug deep. “That’s it! Brenda and torch. Yes, that was it,” he shouted inside his head. Jason quickly found an anagram generator on the internet and typed in “Brenda torch”. Within a second, thousands of anagrams were generated, but there near the top was Broth Dancer! That had to be her!

Using the handle, he searched various social media platforms, and there she was, hiding in plain sight. Her posts included endless pictures of sausage dogs and videos of her doing interpretive dance. She hadn’t changed in appearance since high school, except that her shiny dark hair was now streaked with purple, blue and green. Her eyes were the same penetrating blue and she was still very petite. Jason admitted to himself that he may still have a crush on her despite the fact that she used to taunt him mercilessly in school. He wondered what she would make of him contacting her after all this time. The thought was daunting, so he recited his mantra a few times to settle his nerves before starting his message to her.

Hi Brenda. I hope you remember me. I’m Jason Brown from high school.

“That’s a good start,” he muttered to himself. Then his mind went blank, which is how it remained for the next half an hour. During this time, he surfed the internet looking for business suit bargains. He had ruined two suits so far and would likely ruin more, given how life was

currently treating him. Not having any success with the suits, he returned to his message.

You may recall that I was responsible for selling my parents' back garden. It made all the TV news programs.

"No, that won't do," he said under his breath. "Argh!" The "argh" came out quite loudly and earned a severe look from Joyce.

"No talking in the library," she said. "You will disturb other users."

Jason looked around and saw that he was still the only person there besides Joyce. He felt like pointing this out to her but thought better of it when she gave him one of her most fearsome looks. He went back to the message.

I was the kid you used to call Granola face, because of my skin condition.

"Do I really want to remind her of that?" he muttered quietly, hoping not to attract Joyce's attention. He tried again.

I was suspended for trying to sell off the football field that was only ever used occasionally. I could have got the school a good price too.

"Not that either," he concluded. "Let's just get straight to the point."

I need your help accessing the Dark Web so I can find out how to make a bomb.

"Perhaps not THAT straight to the point," he thought.

I remember how good you were with computers and I need some help finding something to help me solve a problem at work. I can only tell you what the problem is in person. It's very sensitive.

“That’s better,” he mumbled. “Be mysterious. Everyone loves a mystery.”

I’m working on a project in Grevillia, but I can come up to the city to meet.

“Something’s missing,” he thought. He racked his brains and suddenly he had a vision of Magda and something he’d felt around her. “I need to be grateful,” he concluded.

I hope you will agree to meet me. I’d be very grateful if you could.

“Perfect!” he said out loud, earning another punishing look and a loud “tut tut” from Joyce. He quickly hit “send.”

While he waited for a response, he went back to suit hunting. He normally enjoyed looking at suits, seeing if he could get any bargains or preferably, knock-offs. But today he didn’t have any enthusiasm for the task. As he shifted around in his seat, it occurred to him that he was actually much more comfortable in his chinos and polo shirt than he would be in a suit. This was quite a revelation. While he tried to make sense of this, his computer pinged, indicating he had received a message.

Is that you Granola face? Didn’t you try to sell off the football field at school? I thought that was pretty cool actually. So, what kind of mess have you got yourself into? I’m intrigued. As it happens, I’m in Myrtle for a dance workshop in two days’ time. How about we meet at the bakery in Myrtle on Thursday at 10.30?

Jason read the message at least ten times. “She thought what I did was cool!” he muttered to himself. “Me, cool!” He certainly wasn’t expecting her to respond this way, and he was delighted. Having

achieved his purpose for the day, he packed up his things and left the library, making sure he didn't make eye contact with Joyce.

It was nearly lunch time, so he headed to the Never Bean Better Café. He hoped that Summa wasn't there. He didn't want the good feelings he was experiencing ruined by her petty vendetta against him. But given his luck, or lack thereof, when he entered the café, there she was with a group of people all of whom were in animated discussion.

Chapter - 36 Another meeting

The first meeting of the Festival of the Thing was organised at the end of the HOOT's meeting held in the Corner Hotel Ballroom. All the volunteers agreed to meet for lunch in the Never Bean Better Café the following day.

At precisely 12 noon, the members of the festival organising committee came through the door of the café and put together two small tables to accommodate the seven members who were able to come. The group consisted of Cat who was the nominated chair of the group, Summa, Una, Fairy-Wren, Spider, Enid and Rose. Doug was an apology as he was busy digging holes for a new house being built in town.

Magda was standing in at the café for Boris, another one of her cousins, who was in the city, to see a prosthodontist. Boris was having a great deal of difficulty with his new top set of false teeth, which would slip down onto his bottom set every time he opened his mouth. The loud clunk this made was irritating Boris and upsetting

the customers, who really didn't need to see bare gums and a detached top set when they were ordering their food.

After a few minutes to allow the group to settle, Magda trundled over to the organising committee's table, pad and pencil at the ready, waiting to take their orders. As is often the case, there is one person in a group who appears to be memorising the menu, holding everyone else up. This time it was Fairy-Wren, who wanted to make sure that she read everything in case she missed out on something. Then she had a number of questions that needed answering like what kind of ham did they use, what vegetables were in the vegetable soup, what kind of bread came with the soup, could it be toasted, was the lettuce fresh, could tomato be added to the ham and cheese toastie... Magda waited patiently for Fairy-Wren to make up her mind while the committee members fidgeted.

"Don't hurry, Fairy-Wren," said Cat. "We'll all order while you decide. I'll have the soup and sourdough bread with a flat white, please Magda."

One by one the rest of the committee put in their orders to Magda who had the dual responsibility of recording what everyone wanted and answering Fairy-Wren's questions. Finally, Fairy-Wren was ready to order. "I'll have the soup with a ham, cheese and tomato toastie on wholemeal bread with an oat milk flat white," she said to Magda who was clearly resisting the urge to shout, "halleluiah!"

The subject of the meeting suddenly felt a lot less daunting than ordering lunch. Cat took charge. "OK, we need a date and time for the festival. Let's get that out of the way."

Everyone knows that agreeing on a date and time for any future event when there is more than one person involved is about as complex as negotiating a ceasefire between warring nations. Each suggestion is usually unsuitable for at least one person, who will spend the next several minutes explaining why it's unsuitable. Multiply this by the number of people in the group and it's a miracle that future events take place at all.

Cat was ready for this having been down this particular path many times before. "The festival has to be on a weekend so people who work during the week can come." All heads nodded in agreement. "Sunday seems to work better than Saturday for parents with kids who do sport and other after-school activities." All heads bar one nodded in agreement. "What about church?" Rose butted in. "Good thinking," agreed Cat. "So, we need to make sure the festival is both morning and afternoon so church-goers can come." All heads nodded again.

Magda arrived with the first of the orders, and the meeting was suspended while people took their food and started eating. Fairy-Wren poked around in her soup with the spoon apparently doing an audit of the vegetables. Observing this, Magda scuttled back into the kitchen to avoid any further interrogation. Seemingly satisfied, Fairy-Wren took a spoonful of the soup and slurped it down loudly earning a masterful side-eye from Rose who set great store in good table manners. Living in Grevillia where eating the food was considered far more important than how it was eaten gave Rose ample opportunities to perfect her disapproving, side-eye routine.

After about fifteen minutes, most people had finished their meal and were onto their hot drinks. Fairy-Wren scraped the dregs of the soup

from her bowl with her spoon, creating a lot of noise as she did so. Rose thought her eyes could possibly leave their sockets with the amount of distain they were trying to convey. When Fairy-Wren lifted the bowl and drained it into her mouth with a final and rowdy slurp, Rose nearly had a stroke.

“OK team,” said Cat. “Let’s get started. We have a lot to discuss. Maybe we can start just throwing ideas around about what activities, stalls and facilities we might need. We can discuss the logistics later. Who has an idea?”

“How about Thing climbing?” said Spider. “We have guides taking people up the Thing making sure they use the hand and foot holds so they’re safe. We only let a few up at a time.”

“That’s a great idea, Spider,” said Una. “I’d like to be one of the guides.”

“How about we charge people to climb on the Thing and we use the money to help cover some expenses?” Spider added.

“I can get my mother and brother to set up a vegetarian food stall,” offered Summa. “They can serve it out of my Kombi.”

“I’ll get Doug and Andy to get the barbie going,” said Spider. “We can have a sausage sizzle. People love a sausage sizzle.”

“Do you have any ideas, Fairy-Wren?” Cat enquired.

“I could ask my demolition crew if they would put on a hip hop dance performance,” she replied. “They’re pretty good. They nearly made it into Australia Has Talent.”

“Great,” enthused Cat. “Are there any other entertainers you can think of? Preferably willing to perform for no charge.”

“Boris has a great voice,” Una added. “When his false teeth stay put, that is.”

“Doug plays the guitar and Andy has a drum kit,” Spider said. “They have garage band with some of their mates and they sometimes play at the Corner Hotel.”

“Speaking as Mayor,” Rose interjected, “if you’re going to serve food, put on entertainment, and charge people, you’ll have to get permits, hire toilets, get insurance, do risk assessments, provide parking and disability access.”

“Ah, Rose!” said Enid, “you always have to pour cold water on things!”

“That’s true!” added Una. “You’re the mayor. Surely you can sort these things out!”

The group started mumbling their disapproval. Rose puffed herself up and looked very uncomfortable.

“Hold on folks,” said Cat. “Rose has a point. We will have to think of these things.”

“See?” said Rose so petulantly you could hear her feathers ruffling.

“But if we focus too much on the details, it can stifle the ideas,” Cat continued. “Let’s just keep coming up with ideas and then we can work on the details after.”

Rose’s feathers settled down and the group spent the next half an hour discussing ideas. The ones that had the most support included

having live entertainment, hot food, drinks, activities like climbing on the Thing, art and craft for the children, pony rides, as well as stalls selling local produce. With so many good ideas, the mood of the group lifted. Even Rose appeared to be enjoying herself.

That was until the moment Jason walked through the door with only one thing on his mind, food.

The happy chatter died and if a pin had dropped at that precise moment, the sound would have been deafening. All eyes were on Jason. Jason's eyes were on the ceiling where once again he hoped that avoiding eye contact would render him invisible.

"You!" Summa uttered as she jumped to her feet. "How dare you show your face around here, you lying piece of pig's offal!" She was secretly really proud of that insult, which had just come to her out of the blue.

Jason looked over at her and opened his mouth to reply. He was quickly cut off by Una who jumped to her feet, knocking the wooden, wheel-back chair backwards with a clatter as she did so.

"You told us the Thing was safe. That you had saved it, but all the time you were trying to destroy it! You should be ashamed of yourself. In fact, I don't want to see your face again. You can pack your stuff and find somewhere else to stay." With a loud huff she sat down, forgetting that the chair was no longer there. The momentum of outrage was suspended while Fairy-Wren and Spider hefted Una to her feet.

"Good!" Jason replied, shaking with rage and humiliation. "I'm sick of you and your ridiculous jumping up and down, and all that hideous purple, and I'm sick of being blamed for everything. I'm just doing my

job. The land was sold to my company, so we can do whatever we like with it, including clearing that ugly lump of whatever it is! In fact, if I see any of you on that land again, I'll sue. I mean it."

With that he turned on his heels and stormed out of the café.

Chapter 37 - Crisis

Magda observed all the commotion and went up to the committee's table.

"What have you done?" she said to the group.

"We've told him what we think of him," responded Una. "And not before time."

"Yes, you did and now you've really offended him," Magda added.

"His company owns the land, just like he said. We can't do anything on it without his permission. Didn't any of you think of that?"

Each person in the group looked shocked. Clearly, they hadn't thought of that particular detail, fixated as they were on only one aspect – the Thing.

"You were always going to have to get permission for the festival and he's hardly likely to welcome the idea after the way we treated him."

"Magda's right," said Cat. "We didn't think of that! It's private land now. Even if he agreed to a festival, he's never going to support our aim of saving the Thing. He wants it gone."

“Then let’s give him what he wants,” piped in Rose. There was an audible gasp from the group.

“You can’t mean let him destroy the Thing?” said Summa.

“No,” said Rose. “This is a bit sneaky, but the survival of the Thing is at stake. So about we ask him if we can hold a festival to farewell the Thing and at the same time promote the new development to the community. He can’t refuse. He’s obsessed with the development and would surely welcome a chance to showcase it to the community.”

“That all sounds fairly straightforward,” said Spider. “What’s sneaky about that?”

“The sneaky bit is somehow getting him onto the Thing at the festival, and we all know what will happen then...”

“That’s brilliant!” said Una. Rose positively glistened with pride.

“Good idea, Rose. We’ve been so focussed on the Thing, we’ve overlooked the bigger picture. The development is going ahead whether we like it or not. It already has all the necessary approvals, is that right Rose?”

Rose nodded, somewhat self-consciously.

“Well then, I think we will need to change our strategy but not our plans. First off, we need to make things good with Jason.”

“I’ll do that,” volunteered Magda. “He seems to like me, and really, he’s not all that bad. Awkward, vain, obsessed – yes, but deep down he’s a good person, and there’s something about him...”

“Ooh yuck!” said Summa. “There’s something about him alright. He’s a waste of karma that’s what, but if you can win him over, then go ahead Auntie Magda. I couldn’t do it.”

Magda pulled off her apron and strode out of the café to talk to Jason, going as fast as her size, arthritis, hip pain and varicose veins would let her.

Chapter 38 - Remorse

Jason was beside himself. Ever since he’d arrived in Grevillia he had been verbally attacked, maligned, mistreated, misunderstood, disrespected; at this point his feelings word lexicon was drained. No amount of reciting his mantra would alter the fact that he felt just, plain miserable. He hadn’t felt this bad since his parents abandoned him to do their own thing leaving him with his mother’s dreadful sister Pauline, and subsequently a series of foster homes. The only person who had been even the slightest bit nice to him was Magda.

He entered the appalling purple house for the last time and started to collect his belongings in his room. As he was stuffing his toiletries into their bag, he heard the front door opening.

“There’s no need to check up on me,” he shouted through the closed door, “I wouldn’t stay here another minute even if you painted the whole place beige!”

The bedroom door opened and the friendly face of Magda peeked around.

“It’s only me, Love,” she said. “I’ve come to apologise on behalf of the group.”

Jason was so shocked he dropped his toiletries bag on the floor. His hair products, brush, comb, toothbrush – the lot all fell out in a heap onto the purple carpet. He shook his head and chuckled ironically.

“OK, you had me there for a minute. I thought I heard you say you were here to apologise.”

“You heard right. It wasn’t fair what happened to you in the café and I’m here to make it right.”

“That’s impossible.” Jason said facing her. “I want that lump of stuff that everyone seems to be in love with gone. You all want to keep it and have been really mean to me when I’m only doing my job. How can you possibly make it right?”

“I agree with everything you just said. People have been very unkind. They are very attached to the Thing and the goodness it seems to bring out in people, but trying to persuade you to keep it has done the exact opposite. It’s brought out the worst in us. All I can say is that we’re all sorry. And I’m here to tell you that there has been a change of mind by the group and they want to work with you on a different approach.”

“Nah!” said Jason. “This is some kind of trick. I’ve seen what that Thing does to people. You’re not going to let it get demolished.”

“No trick, Jason. We realise the land and the Thing are no longer ours to enjoy. We can’t stop you doing what you like on your own land. No one wants it gone, but there’s nothing we can do about it. We would love to change your mind, but we know when we’re defeated. So, we

just want to say goodbye. If we could all work together to put on a farewell festival, it would bring the community together and would be a great way for you to promote the development.”

Jason paused for a moment to let this new information sink in.

“So, you’re telling me you want to hold a festival to farewell that lump of matter and you actually want me to work with you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Magda replied.

“What about the others? That mad woman Summa and your purple-obsessed sister? What do they think?” Jason asked. “They would never agree.”

“Well, they have, and it took some doing mind,” said Magda. “I gave them a good talking to and they agreed that you were just doing your job. Some of them feel quite ashamed of their behaviour.”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Jason. “And I can’t think now, I have to pack and find somewhere else to stay.”

“You can have your old room back,” said Magda. “It’s free now.”

“Why are you so nice to me?” asked Jason, looking genuinely surprised by her offer.

“You remind me of someone, that’s why,” replied Magda. “And I don’t like seeing people bullied. So do you want the room or not?”

Jason took a deep breath. “OK, I’ll take it,” Jason said. He paused for a few seconds. “Thank you.” He paused for another few seconds.

“That’s very, er, kind of you.”

“Good,” said Magda. “Then that’s settled. Come when you’re ready. I’m going home now to make dinner. Would you like to join me and do you like beef casserole?”

The look Jason gave Magda was confirmation that yes, he’d love to stay for dinner and yes, beef casserole was something he would walk on hot coals for.

Magda left and Jason finished packing. He was still overwhelmed by the last few hours, and not at all sure what to think. On the one hand, if Magda was telling the truth, then it was a great victory for him. He could tell Eric exactly what he thought of him knowing that he, Jason Brown had pulled off a feat that no one else could possibly replicate. But if this was all a ruse, then he would be the most gullible person alive and it would be the end of his career. He knew that he needed time to think and to see what was what. Staying with Magda was really going to help, not to mention that he would finally have a regular, reliable source of food. His stomach made a contented growl at the thought.

Chapter 39 - Magda

For the next two days Jason rested at Magda’s and enjoyed some good home cooking. He found her constant chatter annoying at times. She seemed averse to silence and as soon as there were any gaps in the conversation, she quickly filled them with stories about her late husband, their holidays, what they bought on their holidays, the food they ate on their holidays, the local people they encountered on their holidays, and the places they saw on their

holidays. If the subject of holidays became temporarily exhausted, she also shared stories about the countries they had lived in where her husband worked on this mine and that. It seemed they had been on the move constantly until he retired and they settled back in Grevillia.

When she wasn't busy cooking or doing other chores, she would drag out the photo albums and take him through each one, photo by photo. Despite this, Jason felt happier and more at home than he could ever remember. Magda took great pleasure in cooking for him and he took genuine pleasure in eating what she prepared.

Magda and her late husband had not had any children of their own, but as is often the case with childless women, she poured her love into her nieces and nephews, and any other children that were part of her life. She was known as Auntie Magda no matter what the relationship, even to many of the adults. Throughout the year she knitted toys and clothes for her brood of actual and "adopted" nieces and nephews. She gave these as gifts on their birthdays. She wasn't particularly good at knitting and the items seldom looked as they were designed, and they tended to slowly unravel. But they were made with such love, no one minded. At Christmas time she baked cookies and bought stocking fillers for all the children. So, it was hardly surprising that she decided to "adopt" Jason, whom she saw as a sad and lonely young man despite his rather unfortunate personality and choice of career.

Magda knew that she was part of a conspiracy to deceive Jason and she felt a measure of regret. However, knowing the joy that the Thing brought into the lives of even the hardest of souls, she believed she was doing this for a greater good.

At the same time, Jason was feeling the first stirrings of regret that he was still intending to blow the Thing up whether or not the planned farewell festival was genuine. He simply couldn't take the risk no matter how nice Magda was. The development was his first real step up the ladder of success in a life that was otherwise filled with disappointment. As far as the people of Grevillia were concerned, he, Jason Brown was totally on board the Farewell to the Thing Festival.

Chapter 40 - Brenda

Thursday came around and Jason set off to meet Brenda. They had arranged to meet at the bakery in Myrtle, another twenty kilometres past Lemon Gum. Jason had researched the owners of the bakery to reassure himself that they were in no way related to Magda or Summa, both of whom had a knack of turning up wherever he happened to be. As he drove out of town, he looked up the road to see if there was any likelihood of running into Summa. He sighed with relief when the road ahead appeared to be lacking in Kombis.

The last thing he needed was another confrontation with Summa. He didn't believe for one moment that she regretted all the things she had said, no matter what Magda conveyed on behalf of the planning committee. He knew that as soon as their paths crossed, she would launch into another tirade of bewildering insults, and for some reason, he would not be able to resist responding. He could not understand the dynamic between them. He was used to being on the wrong end of put-downs and insults, but her reaction to him was

next level. And, if he was being honest with himself, something he was not normally good at, then he had to admit that his reaction to her was also not normal.

Mentally shrugging his shoulders, Jason concentrated on the road ahead determined to put her to the back of his mind. The day was bright and sunny and he was even beginning to enjoy himself until he drove past the place where Summa ran him off the road. Then he started stewing all over again.

“Damn it!” he said out loud. “What is her problem? Nicest person you’ll ever meet they say? Ha!” The sunny day was not so sunny any more for Jason. “Come on Jason,” he said to as he neared Myrtle. “Remember – I am powerful, I am in control!” He repeated his mantra until he arrived and found a parking spot under a tree, over the road from the bakery.

As Jason climbed out of his SUV, he caught a whiff of fresh bread baking and he quickly crossed the road to follow his nose. He entered the bakery and looked around inside for Brenda. He saw an elderly couple sipping coffee and doing Wordle, two workers in high viz jackets eating meat pies and Magda pouring herself a cup of tea from a small pot.

“Hello Love! Can you believe we’ve run into each other again?”

Without pausing she went on. “You must be wondering why I’m here. Well, my late hubby’s cousin, Phil owns this place, and I’m helping his wife, Milly today while he gets an ingrown toenail removed. I’m on my break. Aren’t I love?” she shouted out to Milly behind the counter. “Now that’s me. Why are YOU here?”

Jason was flabbergasted. No matter where he went, Magda always seemed to be there. He was convinced it wouldn't happen so far from Grevillia. But once again, he was wrong.

"I'm meeting a friend," he managed to utter once he had recovered from the shock.

"That's nice, dear. Girl or boyfriend? Not that it matters these days. Whatever makes you happy I reckon."

"No, er, not that kind of friend," Jason blurted out. "Just someone I used to go to school with."

At that moment a petite woman with short, spikey dark hair streaked with purples, blues and deep reds, walked in through the bakery door. She was dressed in skinny black jeans, a black hoodie and green Doc Martin boots, which somehow, she managed to carry off with grace. She looked around and spotted Jason talking to Magda.

"Jason?" she enquired.

"Is this your friend?" Magda piped in before Jason had a chance to identify himself. "Hello love. I'm Magda. I was just chewing the fat with young Jason here. He is staying at my place while he bulldozes old Brown's Field." Magda gave Brenda a beaming smile.

Brenda laughed. "So, nothing has changed then. Still knocking things down!"

Jason flushed an unattractive shade of red and uttered a juddery laugh. While he tried to find a half-way appropriate greeting, he did his goldfish impression. Brenda laughed again. "Yep, same old Granola face! Don't look so terrified. It's good to see you."

"It's er good to see you too," Jason finally stuttered. "This is Magda. I'm staying with her," he added redundantly.

"So, I believe," Brenda responded. "Nice to meet you, Magda. Now come on Jason, we have some catching up to do."

Brenda pulled him away from Magda's table and they walked towards a vacant table in the corner of the bakery. Magda waved them off with a cheery, "enjoy your catch-up you two." Much to Jason's horror she finished the sentence with a wink.

"She seems very nice," Brenda said of Magda.

"She is," Jason replied, surprising himself. "In fact, she's the only person in Grevillia who is nice to me." Jason looked down-trodden as he momentarily relived his experiences in Grevillia.

Brenda gave him a friendly punch on the arm. "Well, you'd better tell me what this is all about, and how I can help," Brenda said. "I'm really curious as to why you contacted me after all these years. But let's get some coffee and goodies first."

The two of them went up to the counter and drooled over the cakes and pastries made famous in country bakeries; vanilla slice (yet another claim to be the best in the country), apple turnover, jelly slice, custard tart, lemon meringue pie, chocolate eclairs, beesting, and many more besides. Brenda ordered an apple turnover and Jason found he couldn't go past the vanilla slice again. They each ordered a flat white coffee and Jason, quickly paid Milly before Brenda could get her purse out. "This is on me," he insisted, surprising himself once again.

They sat back down and Jason started telling the story of how he and his partner had bought the Brown's farm and had approval to develop it into a shopping mall, cinema and sports facility. Then he told her about the Thing.

"You mean to tell me that there is an unidentifiable lump of matter in a paddock that turns everyone who comes into contact with it into a child," Brenda summarised. "This I must see!" she said.

"Please, no! You can't go near it!" Jason begged. "I know it sounds impossible, like something I've made up, but it's real. I've seen what it does. It was responsible for all the workers in three demolition companies going mad."

Brenda laughed. "Seriously?" she said.

"Yes, totally seriously," Jason replied. "And this is why I need your help. I need to build a bomb that I can drop on it from a hot air balloon without blowing myself and the balloon up."

Brenda couldn't help herself and started laughing. Her laughter attracted the attention of everyone in the bakery, including Magda who looked over at them and gave a thumbs up.

"If you're not going to take this seriously, I'm out of here," Jason said in a huff.

Brenda wiped her eyes with her serviette. "Oh, come on, Granola face! If someone told you what you just told me, how would you react?"

Jason didn't know how to reply to that. He took a big bite of his vanilla slice. The custard filling shot out of the other end, fortunately

landing on his plate but icing sugar went all over his polo shirt. Brenda collapsed into peals of laughter again.

“Why did you agree to meet me if all you’re going to do is make fun of me?” Jason asked.

“I was curious,” Brenda replied. “At school you were the only one besides me who broke the rules big time. I thought you had guts trying to sell the football oval. I just wish you’d succeeded. So, when you reached out for help, I knew it would be for something wild, but never in my imaginings did I think you wanted help blowing up something that by all accounts shouldn’t even exist. I mean, is this Thing for real?”

“OK,” said Jason. “Maybe this will convince you.”

He stood up and walked towards the community notice board near where they were sitting, and took down the advertisement for the balloon rides. It was the same as the poster in the Lemon Delicious Bakery in Lemon Gum.

Brenda read the poster and looked up at Jason. “I believe you, unless of course everyone around here is bonkers and just think it has powers,” she said. “If everything you say is true, are you sure it has to go? It sounds like a hoot. You could make serious money out of it.”

“Yes, it has to go so I can make some serious money out of the development. I’m a property developer, not a fun park manager,” said Jason. “It’s right where we are planning to put the artificial lake – the development’s centrepiece.”

“It seems a pity, but I’ll help you. I’ve never blown anything up, and I reckon that will be an even bigger hoot,” Brenda handed back the

poster to Jason and finished the dregs of her coffee. "Let's meet after my workshop on Sunday to see what we can do. If we're going to research bomb making on the dark web, we will need to be extra careful. Many of these sites are monitored by the authorities. You don't want to attract that kind of attention."

Jason sighed with relief. They exchanged phone numbers and stood up ready to leave. Magda shuffled over to their table before they had a chance to walk out of the door. "Did you have a lovely catch-up you two?" she enquired, using air quotes around the words "catch-up".

"Yes, thank you Magda," Brenda replied with a smile. "We talked about old times. It was a blast!" she giggled. Jason gasped. "We're planning another 'catch-up' in a few days' time. So, I may see you then." Brenda started to laugh again. Jason went a deep shade of red, which was rapidly becoming his default complexion colour.

"Well, dears, if you're going to be doing any more 'catching-up', why don't you come to my place. I've a comfy lounge room and there's bound to be something freshly baked to have with a nice cuppa." Magda beamed at them both.

Jason started to say no to her offer, but Brenda got in first. "That would be lovely, wouldn't it Jason?" Jason felt trapped by the two women into agreeing to something he didn't want to do. Yet at the same time, he didn't want to hurt Magda's feelings, something he'd never been bothered about before, with anyone if he was being honest. He dug deep for an appropriate response. "Er, yes it would, thank you Magda."

Brenda and Jason said goodbye to each other on the footpath outside the bakery, and went their separate ways.

Chapter 41 - Relationships

Jason drove at a leisurely pace back to Grevillia. At one point he had to stop the car to let an emu and his six chicks cross the road. The motherless family appeared to be in no hurry to make it across. Each chick looked like a feathery egg on legs and for a moment, Jason was distracted by their cuteness. He wasn't normally interested in things that could be described as cute. Things that attracted his interest and attention were usually described as profitable, potentially profitable, can be used to create a profit, not profitable and needs demolishing.

The father emu, with all the time in the world, swayed across the road and disappeared with his brood into the thick bush on the opposite side. Jason knew that the male emu raised the chicks, and he wondered what the female did all day without child-rearing responsibility. That thought led to other thoughts about the mystery of women in general, which inevitably led to thoughts about Summa. They were not happy thoughts. He could not, for the life of him work her out. As he started to relive some of her bizarre reactions to him, he could feel his blood pressure rising.

"This is no good," he said, shaking his head to try and clear out the negativity. "I seem to always think about the people who make me feel bad about myself. Eric, Summa, half of Grevillia... But that's not everyone. So, who makes me feel good?" he demanded of himself. Unbidden, Magda's face popped into his mind. At first Jason was very surprised to see her there, but on reflection (and driving in the country provides plenty of time for reflection) he acknowledged to

himself that he was, indeed happy when he was with Magda. She was always cheerful and always kind. She was how he imagined a favourite auntie would be. But that thought brought back memories of dreadful Aunt Pauline.

“No! not her!” Jason cried out loud. “Get out of my head, you evil, smelly old woman!” He focussed on the road for a while, watching out for more emus. His mind wandered again. An image of Brenda with her jewel-coloured hair wheedled its way in. “That’s better,” he told the steering wheel. He was really enjoying her company, even when she teased him. He’d forgotten how Brenda loved to tease, and how lovely she was when she did it. He felt his face flush thinking about her.

“Stop it, Jason! Don’t make a fool of yourself. She’s just an old school acquaintance,” he said out loud. “Yes, she’s beautiful and yes, she’s nice to me, but her being nice to me doesn’t make me special to her. She’s nice to everyone.” For a moment he imagined asking Brenda out on a date to a nice restaurant but quickly dismissed that idea. That was never going to happen. When it came to dating, he was less than competent.

With a deep sigh he reviewed his dating history. He’d tried online dating a number of times, but he never managed to get a second date. The women made all sorts of excuses not to see him again. Their excuses mostly involved accidents or illnesses of some kind, often afflicting grandmothers, mothers, baby brothers, dogs, cats and even goldfish. If not illnesses then it was visitors from overseas, upcoming trips interstate, a full calendar for the next six months, overtime at work and various appointments getting in the way of seeing him again. The most puzzling excuse of all came from a

woman who said they couldn't possibly have a second date as their numerology numbers were incompatible. He didn't even know that that was a thing.

After a number of failed dating attempts, Jason sought advice on how to date successfully. He didn't really have any mates he could ask and he was too embarrassed to go into a bookshop and buy a book. So, instead he found a number of sites online and even a few podcasts on the subject that gave him some ideas. He did everything the experts suggested like making eye contact, asking them questions about themselves and paying for the coffees. But when it came time to talk about what interested him; land-clearing, demolition, development and the unreliability of banks, he noticed something odd happening to their eyes. They seemed to stare blankly at him. At first, he thought that this meant they were making intense eye contact with him (as suggested by dating experts) and were really interested in him and his work life, but maybe he had it wrong. He needed to think on that a bit more.

So, no, there wasn't going to be any dinner date with Brenda any time soon. Jason concluded that he would just enjoy her company for now. And who knows?

Chapter 42 - Cat and Dog

The Farewell to the Thing planning committee as it was now called, were to meet again two days later at Cat's place in the old rectory. She had plenty of room and more importantly, there was no possibility that Jason would walk in on them.

Cat had a long, wooden table in the old-fashioned kitchen with an Aga stove that provided warmth in winter. She scrounged an assortment of chairs from other rooms and put the kettle on to boil.

Part of her felt quite self-conscious inviting people into her home. Since arriving in Grevillia, she had kept mostly to herself, spending many hours revegetating the big garden with native plants and shrubs. The house was big, but it worked well for her. There were rooms where her adult children and friends could stay when they came to visit. For the first time in her adult life, she had a room for herself where she could work, draw, sew and write without having to pack everything away so the room could be used by someone else. Life was good, she mused. Or it would be if her Jack Russell terrier Paddy wasn't such a jerk.

Paddy was typical of his breed, and then some. He was single-mindedly committed to digging his way under any fence whose purpose was to contain him. When Cat bought the old rectory, she was quite certain that the fencing in the back garden would be sound enough to prevent Paddy digging underneath it. But it turned out not to be the case at all. Cat had only been in the house for two days when Paddy dug his way out and made a bee-line to the local primary school where he created havoc in the playground entertaining the children with his antics. The school secretary phoned her to please come and get him. When she arrived, she was greeted ecstatically by a very happy dog, which made the situation worse. He had absolutely no shame.

Cat blocked the hole in the fence. Paddy dug himself out elsewhere and made it back to the school where he'd had such a wonderful time previously. Cat blocked the new hole in the fence. Paddy dug his

way out again somewhere else. The principal's patience wore thin after the third or fourth time, and he warned Cat that he would get the Council's dog-catcher onto Paddy if it happened again. Cat promised that she would make sure this time was the last.

Cat asked Mike the fencing contractor to build a roomy enclosure in the back garden close to the house that Paddy couldn't possibly dig his way out of. Mike was very confident that his structure would do the job. Paddy had other ideas. After he had escaped for the umpteenth time, Mike began to regret the money-back guarantee he'd given Cat. He put his reputation on the line by telling her that it was impossible for anything to escape his structures.

Being a man of his word, Mike spent many unpaid hours at her place repairing, rebuilding and re-conceptualising the dog-version of Alcatraz. This wasn't entirely a negative experience for Mike. Cat, feeling somewhat guilty calling Mike continuously to fix the enclosure, made him delicious cakes and biscuits, which he enjoyed with many a cuppa in her kitchen. After a while Mike started to look forward to his visits, and it wasn't just the baking he looked forward to.

In the meantime, while Mike was trying to solve the problem, Cat allocated Paddy one of the bedrooms inside the house. This way she could go out without worrying about what Paddy was up to. She accepted the collateral damage he inflicted on the soft furnishings in the room as part of the price she had to pay for peace of mind.

Finally, Mike built a large, impenetrable enclosure by pouring a concrete base and setting the fencing deep into it. Cat made sure the enclosure was warm and dry with Paddy's favourite toys to keep him

company. With all the comforts a (normal) dog could want, she transformed Alcatraz to the Jack Russell Hilton. Nevertheless, he was not amused and showed his displeasure by whining very loudly every time he was put inside it. Mike was not totally happy either, now that he had finally finished the project. It meant no more cosy cuppas, chats and baked goods with Cat.

Chapter 43 - An idea

At the appointed time, the committee members arrived at Cat's house. Summa, Enid, Una, Fairy-Wren, Spider, Rose, and Doug who was not digging any holes at that particular time, settled themselves around the table. Cat filled the kettle and put cups and mugs on the kitchen bench. Earlier, she had baked some blueberry muffins, and she placed them next to the cups.

The kettle whistled proudly to announce it had fulfilled its purpose. Rose helped Cat make and deliver cups of tea and coffee to everyone. Enid had brought along some Tim Tams left over from the first meeting. A meeting was not a serious meeting without Tim Tams. These and the muffins were swooped upon and demolished in short order.

The group soon ran out of small talk and sat around Cat's table not sure what to say as they waited for the meeting to start. Finally, the only noise coming from the group was Fairy-Wren slurping her tea. Rose's disapproval was palpable to everyone but Fairy-Wren. Paddy was none too impressed for different reasons. He had been shown to

his enclosure and was whining loudly and pathetically, as if he was the most ill-treated dog of all time.

"I'm sorry about the dog," said Cat. "He's a handful and I'm a lousy dog parent. He's my daughter's dog but she's gone interstate so I'm stuck with him and he rules my life!"

The group mumbled understanding and started comparing notes. Who hadn't at some time been humiliated by an out-of-control dog, tantruming toddler, Dad joke or epic wardrobe fail? Discussion about the various situations individuals had found themselves in may have taken up all of the allocated meeting time, however Cat brought the group back from that particular brink.

"Look, I know the situation with Jason and the Thing are a bit weird now," said Cat.

"You can say that again," butted in Spider.

"But we still have a festival to plan so, let's get on with it!" Cat said enthusiastically.

Cat's enthusiasm for "getting on with it" wasn't shared by the rest of the group to the same extent, but they dutifully shuffled in their seats and looked once again to her for leadership. At least she seemed able to get things done at meetings.

For twenty minutes or so, the group discussed various agenda items like entertainment, toilet facilities, accessibility, seating, food, publicity and who was going to take responsibility for what. Then the elephant in the room made an appearance and started swinging its trunk around. "Come on people," it seemed to be implying. "You've talked about the easy stuff. Who's going to notice me? Eh?"

Enid came through for the elephant. "Planning a festival sounds simple compared to how we think we're going to get Jason onto the Thing," she said. There was muttered agreement from the group. The elephant, having been acknowledged plodded away. "So far, he's managed to avoid going anywhere near it, and I doubt he's going to let us trick him into it now. And we can hardly force him."

Reality seemed to hit the group at that moment with a collective sigh. Fairy-Wren slurped more tea and Rose's bristling was almost audible.

"I've got an idea," said Summa. Heads lifted and looked at her. A few in the group secretly groaned. Despite being the nicest person you could ever meet, (at long as you weren't Jason) Summa's ideas were often somewhat impractical.

"All ideas are welcome," said Cat. "Go on, Summa."

"What about hypnotising him into climbing onto the Thing?" she said tentatively. There was a low groan from the group. "No! Hang on. It could work," she added passionately.

"Hey you all!" Cat interjected. "Give her a chance to explain."

Summa nodded thankfully towards Cat and took a deep breath.

"My Mum did a course in hypnotherapy and she's pretty good at it too. She's helped lots of people give up smoking," Summa said.

"Maybe we can hold a raffle with different prizes. One of them could be a fifteen-minute session with my Mum on using mantras to get ahead in business and life. I know Jason recites a dumb mantra all the time and even he must think it isn't working. She could use the mantra to hypnotise him."

"Hm, that could just work," Enid said. Summa beamed at her. Usually, her ideas were shot down even before they grew wings. "But," Enid added, "we just have to make sure that Jason enters the raffle and wins that prize."

"That's easy," said Fairy-Wren. "Let's hold our normal raffles. You know, get local businesses to donate things. We can sell those tickets and give the money to a charity. Then we hold another free raffle with the hypnotherapy one of the prizes..."

Summa chimed in. "I'll add something from my shop to the free raffle so there's more than one prize."

"That's great Summa. I reckon he'll take any tickets we offer him just because they're free. Then we only put his ticket butts in the hat when the raffle is drawn. You do the drawing, Rose. No one would suspect the mayor of cheating," she said, tongue in cheek.

Rose had the good grace to laugh with the rest of the group. No one disagreed with Fairy-Wren's strategy. There remained just one other problem.

"What if he doesn't want to use the prize?" asked Spider.

"We can ask Magda to encourage him. She seems to be able to handle him for some odd reason," Una chimed in. "We get her to emphasise how he's getting something for nothing, like Fairy-Wren suggested. It's bound to work!" All heads nodded in agreement.

"So, are we going with hypnotherapy then?" Cat asked the group.

"I think so. Summa's idea might just work," Fairy-Wren said. "I'm one of those people Summa talked about who used hypnotherapy to give up smoking."

“So did my husband,” added Rose. “In fact, he not only successfully gave up smoking, he also took off to Bali with the hypnotherapist.” There was a gasp from the group.

“I had no idea,” Enid said. “I thought that he was working fly-in, fly-out and we just kept on missing him when he was here.”

“That’s what I wanted you to think. I was too embarrassed to say what really happened. But hey! Hypnotherapy works. Let’s give it a try. What do we have to lose? Apart from a husband or two.” Rose laughed at her own joke, and soon everyone joined in.

“Ok, that seems to be settled,” said Cat. “Summa, could you ask your Mum if she’s willing to help?”

“Sure thing!” Summa replied. “She’s really excited about the festival. She’s been looking up lots of different vegan recipes to make using organic and biodynamic produce from the commune.”

At this point, Doug tuned out after hearing the words “vegan” and “biodynamic,” and not hearing the words “sausage” and “steak.” He was relieved when Cat finally closed the meeting. He quickly headed out of the door making a bee-line to the café for a nice, hot meat pie. Spider was a very close second with the same intention as Doug.

Chapter 44 - Green jelly

Jason was looking forward to his second catch-up with Brenda. But before the anticipated pleasure of her company, he first had to endure a long and pointless phone interaction with Eric. Since the

stalemate following the various attempts to demolish the Thing, Eric had made a point of phoning Jason every few days. Jason could see no reason for these calls other than providing Eric with unfettered opportunities to insult and belittle him. He tried reciting his mantra to himself during Eric's rants but he was having a hard time believing that he was either powerful, or in control where Eric was concerned. There was a part of Jason that still wanted Eric's approval, and he wasn't very happy with that part. But he seemed powerless to do anything about it.

Finally, Eric ran out of negative things to say and hung up on Jason. For his part, Jason snarled at the silent phone and rehearsed what he'd really like to say to Eric. He paced up and down the loungeroom acting out his frustrations, pausing every so often to sip the tea that Magda had made for him earlier. She seemed to have the knack of bringing him tea when he most needed it, he acknowledged to himself. He wasn't used to such consideration and he found it somewhat puzzling.

Quietly, outside the partly open loungeroom door, Magda stood watching Jason. Even from that distance, Magda could hear the awful things that Eric was saying to him. It was not the first time she had witnessed the bullying and her heart was going out to Jason. He was so ill-equipped to handle Eric, or anyone for that matter. Magda knew that she was really the only person who could see the insecure and unhappy young man he was. She felt very protective of him and went out her way to show him kindness. Magda couldn't help being Magda.

A knock on the front door disturbed Magda who opened it to find a smiling Brenda standing there. Her jewel-coloured hair shone in the sunlight brightening Magda's mood.

"Come in, Love," Magda said with a smile. "Jason's in the loungeroom. He's just been on the phone with that awful business partner of his. I hate the way that man bullies Jason. He doesn't deserve it."

Brenda looked concerned as she walked inside. She stopped in the hall and pulled on Magda's arm. "What is he saying to Jason?" she asked.

"Terrible things," Magda replied. "He tells him he's useless, he can't get anything right, he can't be trusted – it's a very long list. Look, I know that Jason can be annoying, pompous, and a bit thick at times, but he tries. I can see some changes in him. They're small, but they show me that he's a good person at heart."

Brenda sighed. "You know, at school he went through about four different foster homes. Both of his parents ran off and he didn't hear from them again. He liked to act as if it didn't matter. But it must have. And I'm pretty sure that the times he tried to sell off other people's land was just his way of getting the attention he needed."

Jason's head appeared around the door. "I thought I heard voices," he said. He looked at Brenda, taking in her bright hair, black jeans, green Docs and black hoodie with pi to fifty places printed on the front. "Hi Brenda. Thanks for coming." His greeting was timid and he was feeling the first signs of his face flushing red.

"Now you two get settled in the loungeroom and I'll bring you a hot drink. I've made a batch of scones you can have with homemade

raspberry jam and cream.” Magda smiled at Jason and Brenda and walked towards the kitchen. “Tea or coffee?” she called back to them.

“Tea, please,” they both responded in unison.

“Magda told me you had a tough phone call with Eric just now,” Brenda said as she settled onto a large, flowery lounge chair.

Jason bristled. “I can handle him,” he muttered.

“That’s not what I heard,” Brenda replied.

“Well, you heard wrong,” Jason fired back, looking both angry and defeated.

“Jason, you shouldn’t have to handle him. He has no right to bully you!” Brenda looked at Jason who quickly looked away.

“It’s easy for you to say,” Jason said sounding petulant.

“Yes, it is,” Brenda replied. “I’m not the one getting bullied. I’m concerned that you don’t seem to realise that he’s your business partner, not the school yard tough guy.”

Despite himself, Jason giggled. “He looks nothing like a tough guy. You should see him! He wobbles like a jelly any time he moves!”

“There!” Brenda exclaimed. “There’s your solution! Every time you talk to him, imagine he’s just a big, green, wobbly jelly.”

“Eeu! That’s a disgusting image.” Then Jason burst into uncontrollable giggles.

“Do you think you could do that, Jason?” Brenda asked. “Change the way you think about him?”

“Yes. I will try. I mean, who can take jelly seriously?” Laughing so much had made Jason’s eyes and nose run, He darted over to the sideboard where there were a pile of paper napkins and honked loudly into one of them.

When Magda walked in with the tray of tea and scones, she found both Brenda and Jason laughing together. She had never seen Jason look so happy. He’d lost his stuffy, business-man persona and dressed in jeans and a hoodie, looked like just an ordinary young man having a good time with a friend.

“Well! Something’s tickled your fancies,” Magda said as she set the tray down.

“Brenda has just made me realise that Eric is nothing but a lump of green, wobbly jelly!” He collapsed into hoots of laughter while Brenda and Magda exchanged knowing smiles.

Brenda selected a scone and put liberal quantities of jam and cream on it. She sat back down with a cup of tea and for a few minutes said nothing while she savoured the scone. Jason did likewise. He was so absorbed in the deliciousness that he did not even notice he had dropped a glob of jam onto his jeans. When Brenda, with a large chunk of scone in her mouth, mimed to Jason that he had jam on his pants, he burst out laughing again, shooting half-eaten scone across the room.

“OK,” said Brenda. “Enough of this nonsense, let’s plot the downfall of the Thing.”

“There’s been a couple of developments,” said Jason, wiping a dab of cream off his nose. “It seems everyone has finally accepted that my company owns Brown’s Field and that the Thing has to go. Or at least

that's what I've been led to believe. Anyway, the Festival of the Thing committee have asked if they can hold a farewell festival of the Thing. They even encouraged me to use the event to promote the development."

"Do you really think they've given up?" asked Brenda. "It sounds a bit suss to me."

"It doesn't matter whether they've given up or not. I still want to go ahead and demolish the Thing. It really matters to me that I succeed with this development."

"You said there were a couple of developments. What is the other one?"

Jason hesitated and looked uncomfortable. He reached for his tablet and pulled up his email. He clicked on one, opened it and handed the tablet to Brenda. "This came a few days ago."

"This is from the state environment Minister!" Brenda read on.

"What the (swear word)?"

"Yes. It looks like the Thing could be placed on The Tentative List that's going to be submitted to UNESCO. It means that it could be considered for World Heritage Listing. No decision has been made yet. Apparently, someone is going to visit the Thing the day after the farewell festival and a decision will be made based on the visit."

"Jason, this means if it is listed you won't be able to do anything to it. And it will probably mean the whole development can't go ahead."

"I can't let that happen. It has to go and it has to be before the assessment. Actually, I have an idea how we can fix this..."

Together, Brenda and Jason started to hatch a plan.

Chapter 45 - Chef's special

Cat called a special meeting of the festival planning committee the following evening so she could share some developments with them. She suggested that the group could combine the meeting with a pub meal. Everyone met at the Corner Hotel, wondering what the new information was all about, but their curiosity took second place to the important business of ordering food.

Una, Enid, Spider, Doug, Rose, Summa, Fairy-Wren and Cat stared up at the menu on the chalkboard next to the bar where they could place their orders. Magda was behind the bar helping out so Enid could attend the meeting. One by one people ordered their dinner, that is until it came to Fairy-Wren's turn. Magda wrung her pinafore into a tight knot while she listened with frustration to Fairy-Wren hum and ha over what to eat. There were endless questions that Magda tried hard to answer without swearing. The knot in her pinafore got tighter and tighter, threatening to tear the fabric apart, but still Fairy-Wren couldn't make up her mind. Finally, Magda had had enough.

"Look love. I need to get these other orders into the kitchen. What do you reckon I order a Chef's Special for you. I can't tell you anything about it because Chef keeps it a secret. I only know everyone loves it."

Fairy-Wren opened her mouth to ask a question, saw the steely look in Magda's eyes and made up her mind. "OK. I'll have a Chef's Special", she capitulated.

Magda let go of her pinafore, smoothed out the creases, took a big breath and headed to the kitchen to place the orders. "I've got three fish and chips, two chicken parmas, one eggplant parma, one bangers and mash and one Chef's Special," said Magda to Than who was up to her elbows in flour, breadcrumbs and various pieces of meat and fish.

"Got a fussy one, have we?" she asked.

"You guessed it!" Magda replied.

"Leave it with me," said Than as she lowered the basket of frozen chips into the hot oil.

Sitting around the table, waiting for their food to arrive, the various group members chatted amongst themselves. All talking ceased, however, when Jason and a petite young woman with jewel-coloured hair arrived and sat down at the table.

"Jason asked if he could join us," said Cat by way of explanation. "He has some news for us."

Jason looked very uncomfortable. Summa looked dangerous. Brenda smiled at everyone. "Hi, I'm Brenda. Jason and I went to school together. I'm giving him a hand with his part of the festival." Despite their misgivings, everyone seemed to warm to Brenda.

Clearing his throat loudly, Jason looked at the group. His mouth opened and closed a few times and when he finally spoke, a small squeak came out of his mouth. Cat passed him a glass of water and

he gratefully took a large swig. It went down the wrong way and he dissolved into fits of coughing. Fortunately, Magda arrived with the first of the meal orders so the attention of the group transferred to organising who ordered what.

Free of the plates, Magda gave Jason a few hard pats on the back. "You'll be right, Love," she said to him as he nodded his head, eyes streaming and nose running. Things were not going as he had envisioned them – again.

Finally, Jason was able to take a deep breath and make another attempt. "I've decided that Brown and Brown Developments will put on a fireworks display on top of the Thing at the end of the Festival. We'll make it a night to remember!"

"What a great idea!" said Spider. He looked around the table and noticed that no-one else looked especially enthusiastic. They were playing their parts well. "I know that we all want the Thing to stay, but we know it can't, so let's give it a big send-off!" Sly glances were exchanged between various people as Spider said his piece. One by one the others agreed with Spider that fireworks were indeed a great idea.

Jason looked at Brenda and smiled a knowing smile.

Magda brought out the rest of the meals and slapped down a big bowl of Phở in front of Fairy-Wren.

"What's this?" Fairy-Wren asked, poking the Phở suspiciously with a spoon.

"It's the Chef's Special," replied Magda. "She's famous for it. Now eat up!"

Fairy-Wren sipped a tentative spoonful, savoured the Phở in her mouth and looked up at Magda with surprise. “It’s delicious!” she said in awe. And that was the last anyone heard from Fairy-Wren until she had (to Rose’s disgust), slurped down the very last drop of the Phở.

The atmosphere at the table in the Corner Hotel was jovial as people enjoyed their meals and planned the Festival. Even Jason lost some of his awkwardness and struck up conversations with Spider and Rose. Summa continued to look anywhere but at Jason, who in turn was looking anywhere but at her.

Chapter 46 - Resistance

The next morning at nine o’clock on the dot, Eric phoned Jason. Brenda had driven home a few hours earlier and Jason was missing the confidence she seemed to instil in him.

“Well,” said Eric. “Is there any progress yet or are you still messing around wasting our money?”

Jason bit his bottom lip. “There’s progress. I can’t tell you what it is, but the Thing will be gone in less than two weeks.”

Eric exploded. “I don’t believe you. I have a mind to come down and see to all this myself. I can’t trust you to do the simplest of tasks. You make up some cock and bull story about a lump of matter with magical qualities just to cover up your incompetence.”

Jason took a deep breath. As he did so, he remembered Brenda comparing Eric to a green, wobbly jelly. The image gave him strength. After all, who takes jelly seriously, he reminded himself?

“Come down then,” replied Jason.

“What did you say?” roared Eric.

“I said, come down!” Jason replied with feeling. “All you do is yell and complain and blame everything on me. Well, I’ve had enough. Come here and see if you can do a better job.” As his confidence grew, so did Jason’s vision of Eric as green, wobbly jelly. Unable to stop himself, Jason started laughing.

“What are you laughing about?” Eric shouted. “This is no laughing matter. Our reputation is on the line here!”

“What reputation? We’re a laughing stock in the development world,” Jason uttered between laughs.

“That’s on you and your incompetence!” Eric snarled.

“No Eric, it’s on you. You taught me to be like you – to think you’re the best, to never admit you’re wrong, to push people around. It doesn’t work. I see now that you’re about as scary as a green, wobbly jelly. And pushing me around, using me as your personal punching bag won’t work any more.”

“What are you talking about? Are you calling me a jelly? I’ll show you who’s the jelly!” Eric continued shouting into the phone long after Jason had hung up with a big smile on his face.

At that moment Magda walked into the loungeroom where Jason was sitting in a comfortable chair looking very pleased with himself.

“Bravo, Love!” she said. “That was amazing! You really told that horrible man what you thought of him. That deserves a hug! Come on, up you get and give old Magda a hug.”

Jason didn't do hugs. He didn't understand them, but despite himself, he stood up and Magda gave him a great, big squeeze. Jason was a head taller than Magda so his chin rested on the top of her head, or more accurately, on top of a curler, which scratched his skin. Even though he felt rather awkward, at the same time a warm feeling started spreading through his body.

"I'm really proud of you, Love," Magda said as she let him go. She noticed that his eyes had started to water, but she didn't say anything, knowing that Jason would be embarrassed. "I think we both deserve a cup of tea. I've baked some Anzacs, so let's celebrate."

Jason dabbed his eyes with the napkin that he had put in his pants pocket. "Hay fever," he muttered as he walked through the lounge room into the kitchen.

Chapter 47 - Eric

Each evening for the next four days, the Festival planning committee met at the Corner Hotel for a working dinner. Jason was invited to attend so he could share his ideas. He didn't really have any that he was able to disclose, but he was happy to sit and listen to the group making plans. He was also fast becoming a fan of pub food, finally understanding what a Parma and Pot were (only on a Tuesday).

Ordering the food was far less stressful for everyone since Fairy-Wren had discovered Phở. She ordered it every night and enjoyed every noisy mouthful. Rose opted to wear earplugs while Fairy-Wren ate. It was either that or resort to words or actions unbecoming the Mayor of Grevillia.

By the fourth night of eating and planning, the Festival was taking shape with all the major planning boxes ticked. Publicity was out on social media as well as in the local newspaper. Posters had been produced and put up around the town and further afield in neighbouring towns. The group were confident that the attendance would be good. Even Jason was starting to enjoy himself. Summa still tended to look at him with distain and distrust if she looked at him at all. For his part, still feeling the positive effects of his interaction with Eric, Jason found himself far less distracted by her negativity.

Things were indeed looking good until, without warning Eric put in an appearance. He walked into the hotel, marched over to the table where the committee and Jason were coming to the end of the meeting and with the most imperious look on his face that he could muster, stood over Jason. The tactic may have worked but for two factors: Jason was still basking in the afterglow of his last interaction with Eric and secondly, Eric had not factored Fairy-Wren into his thinking.

“Doogie!” she bellowed. “What are you doing here?”

“Doogie?” queried Jason. “I thought he was Eric.”

“Nah!” she replied. “His real name is Dugite. You know, like the snake.”

“That’s enough!” Eric bellowed back. “The name is Eric, and you know it! And I’m not here to be insulted by you. I need to talk to my so-called partner. This useless piece of rubbish here.”

Spider stood up and eyeballed Eric. “You need to tone things down a bit Mate. That’s no way to talk to anyone. Jason’s doing a good job here.”

Jason was so surprised at being defended by Spider that the mouthful of beer he was about to swallow went down the wrong way and brought on another paroxysm of coughing. At which point Magda stormed over and smacked Jason on the back yet again. She glowered at Eric.

“You!” she said. “Watch your manners. You’re a guest in this town.”

Eric was furious by now. Not only was he blind-sided by the unexpected presence of Fairy-Wren, but it seemed everyone was closing ranks around Jason, and telling him, Eric, what to do in the process. The nerve!

“You want to do things this way, eh?” Eric blustered. “Fine! I should have taken over ages ago. Never send an idiot to do a man’s job. All you had to do was demolish an obstacle. But no, you turned a simple task into a fairy story, and got my sister involved in the process”.

“Hang on a minute!” Fairy-Wren interjected. “YOU got me involved. And I’m very glad you did. I’ve seen the error of my ways and I’ve never been happier.” She looked at Una while she said this and they gently reached out for each other’s hands.

“Oh, spare me!” Eric cried dramatically. “You’re as bad as this fool here – worse because you should know better.”

Magda interjected again. “Sir, if you don’t tame your language and stop insulting these good people, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

By now Jason didn’t know what to think. Here were people he was planning to deceive being nicer to him than any other group of

people he had ever encountered. He was used to Eric insulting him and treating him like a fool, but this was something quite new.

Eric glared at Magda, cleared his throat and took the volume down several decibels. "Here's what going to happen," he hissed. "I have brought an explosives expert with me. He's the best there is.

Tomorrow morning at 9am, he is meeting me in Brown's Field and he is going to blow that THING into the next dimension. You're all invited to come along and watch." With that he stormed out of the pub.

"What about our festival?" Rose wailed. "We can't call it off now. Too many things are already in place."

"It's not going to work," Jason said quietly.

"What's not going to work?" asked Doug.

"Blowing up the Thing. Unless they plan to fire at it with a long-range missile. As soon as either of them come into contact with the Thing, they won't be able to carry out their plan. You've seen what happens when anyone tries to demolish it. So, I reckon we should all go there tomorrow and enjoy the show."

Chapter 48 - Con

Next morning the sun rose over Brown's Field. A family of kangaroos grazed around the Thing. Joeys jumped into and out of their mothers' pouches while they found the sweetest shoots of grass to nibble. Life had been quite peaceful lately for the kangaroos. There had been no

processions of large machines, men and women in and out of the paddock for a while now.

Overhead a flock of black cockatoos atop an old red gum, chortled amongst themselves in between stripping the branches of nuts and flowers. They watched the antics of the joeys and tried to drop gumnuts on their parents. Just for fun of course.

The peace of the morning was punctured by the sounds of a procession of SUVs, utes, ATV and Summa's Kombi. Startled joeys bounded head first into the nearest pouch as their spooked mothers and fathers headed into the safety of the nearby bush.

Eric in a huge, silver SUV with redundant bull bar headed the convoy. Behind him in a dust covered, sturdy work truck that quite possibly was once white, was the explosives expert, Con Stavros. It wasn't hard to work out that that was who he was, as emblazoned on the sides of his truck was a graphic picture of an explosion with the words "I blow stuff up" in large, red letters. His vanity licence plates read 1BL05TUF.

Con had retired from the army four years previously. There he was a bomb disposal expert, his dream job from when he was a small child. He had been making and setting off explosive devices for as long as he could remember. If you were to ask his long-suffering parents, they would tell you that even as a baby he showed signs of things to come. He loved loud noises and laughed uproariously when he saw explosions on TV. His first word wasn't Mum or Dad, it was BOOM, said with great conviction. Aged four, he saw on a kids' TV show that if you mixed bicarbonate of soda with vinegar and soapy water, it made a very satisfying, fizzing mess. He applied this new knowledge

the next day in the kitchen, creating a mess that took his mother several hours to clean up. Aged eight he tried mixing chemicals and metals and putting them into the microwave to see what would happen. After replacing five microwaves, Con's parents gave up and stuck to the stovetop for reheating.

As a teenager, Con was positively dangerous around fireworks. One Guy Fawkes night, he accidentally set off several rockets inside the garage. These started a fire that laid waste to his mother's carpentry tool collection and a carton of rare comics his father had accumulated over the years. After this episode, Con was forbidden to go anywhere that he could lay his hands on fireworks. This did not stop him. As he grew older, he found ways of obtaining them through contacts he made on the internet. He pulled the fireworks apart and fashioned far more exciting explosions from the various components.

In desperation, Con's parents enrolled him in school army cadets, hoping he would benefit from real explosive experts warning him about the dangers of blowing things up. Rather than discouraging him, Con's enthusiasm and vast knowledge of all things explosive gained the attention of the cadet sergeant who recommended him to his superior officer, himself a bomb disposal expert. As soon as Con left school he joined the army and spent twenty blissful years blowing things up. He would have happily spent another twenty years had he not blown the fingers off his right hand juggling live hand grenades at a particularly raucous New Year's Eve party held at the barracks.

Nowadays, Con blew things up for other people, and occasionally disappeared into remote areas to set off homemade bombs, for old times' sake.

Con was very well prepared for the task of blowing up the Thing, and he charged Eric a great deal of money because he could. He put together a variety of explosive devices, planning for every eventuality.

Parking his truck a safe distance from the Thing, Con jumped out and busied himself double checking the equipment. He put on his hearing protection, hard hat, leather gloves and non-slip soled boots. From the back of the truck, he removed safety tape and witches' hats that he placed at intervals around the base of the Thing. He had learned his lesson juggling hand grenades and now took occupational health and safety very seriously.

Everything he needed to set and detonate the explosives was at the ready in a backpack, which he hoisted onto his back. Con looked up at the Thing and placed his right foot on a foot hold that seemed to be just the right shape, size and height. With his left hand, he grabbed hold of a hand hold, that like the foot hold, was perfect for hoisting him up to the next level. Strangely, the hand holds that he used for his right hand, which was missing the fingers, were a perfect fit. A warm feeling came over him. He stopped part of the way up the Thing and stroked its smooth sides. Quick as a fruit fly zeroing in on a rotting apple, he scurried up the sides of the Thing and stood up tall when he reached the top.

"It's wonderful!" he shouted to the people below. "You've got to try this!"

With that he took off the backpack and found a smooth side to slide down landing at the feet of Eric who looked about ready to explode.

“You’ve gotta try this, Eric! It’s unbelievable. I could no more blow this up than blow up my dear old Mum.” He turned and quickly headed back up to the top of the Thing.

Jason and a large proportion of the population of Grevillia watched the situation with Con and the Thing unfold. Jason and the Grevillia folk were not in the least surprised. They had seen it all before. Eric, for once, was speechless.

“Oi! Eric Brown,” Con yelled from the top of the Thing. “Come on, you stubborn old (swear word)! You should get up here!”

Eric spluttered and shook his head in disbelief. He glared at Jason. “You did this,” he said. “I don’t know what you did but you don’t fool me.”

“I told you this happens,” Jason said defensively.

“Rubbish!” Eric replied. “I’ll show all you weak-minded fools what strength of character can do. I’m going to climb that Thing and blow it up myself.”

“I bet it happens to you,” said Jason.

“What did you say?” Eric yelled.

“I said I bet it happens to you,” Jason repeated.

“Right!” said Eric. “You want to bet with me? You’re on. I bet you my share of this property that I can climb up that Thing over there and not turn into a moron. If I win, you hand over your share of the property.”

“Fine,” said Jason, without the slightest hesitation. “Let’s put that in writing.” He disappeared into his SUV and came out with his

briefcase. He unpacked a notepad and jotted down what he had heard Eric say. He gave it to Eric who made a few minor changes. "We need to sign this and have it witnessed."

"I'm a Justice of the Peace. I'll witness your agreement," said Rose who up until now seemed to be fascinated at the sight of Con playing on the Thing. Doug and Spider had joined him and were having the time of their lives sliding and climbing. She quickly witnessed the two signatures and ran down the paddock towards the Thing. She kicked off her shoes and found hand-holds and foot-holds to help her climb to the top. Not even the tight blue skirt and suit jacket she was wearing impeded her progress. Once on top, she introduced herself to Con and within moments they were both sliding down the sides laughing like a pair of happy kids. Con ran to his truck and brought out a clean tarpaulin that they both used to make a cubby.

Eric looked at the goings-on with scorn and marched with his version of steely determination towards the Thing. He turned around and sneered at Jason, who stood his ground with a smug grin on his face. Magda stood next to Jason and dug him gently in the ribs with her elbow.

"Good for you, Love. This is going to be great!" she said.

"Yes, it will," Jason agreed, with a huge smile on his face. They both watched Eric approach the Thing, stand and puff his chest out, take one last look at Jason, make a rude gesture in his general direction, and place his hands on the Thing.

Chapter 49 - A small win

The beer flowed freely at the Corner Hotel that evening. Jason was buying. Never in his life had he bought anyone a drink, let alone a whole pub-full of people who were largely strangers to him. But the sight of Eric sliding, climbing and decorating the Thing as if he hadn't a care in the world was enough to make Jason open his wallet and celebrate. People he barely knew came over and thumped him on the back, saying things like "good on ya," and "well done" even though most of them didn't really know what all the fuss was about. But free beer was free beer and any bloke buying it was a good bloke.

In the far corner of the pub was a karaoke machine and bashing out a passionate rendition of "My Way" were Rose and Con. They gazed meaningfully into each other's eyes and sang their hearts out. The Thing had that effect on people. Una and Fairy-Wren, both dressed in matching purple overalls over violet t-shirts, had had their turn singing "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun". Neither could hold a tune. Lining up for their turn were Doug and Andy, who thankfully had nice voices and better taste in clothes. Their nominated song was "Livin' on a Prayer," which they performed regularly on karaoke nights. They had quite a repertoire of songs but this was their favourite.

Jason watched people singing and dancing and drinking a lot of beer. He felt his eyes pricking and he dashed away a surprise tear with the sleeve of another new hoodie he'd recently bought at the local general store. There were feelings creeping into his life that he didn't know he could feel. One of them was happiness. He had come into this community to get a job done, but instead he was making friends,

having fun and wearing casual clothes. Now being the sole owner of Brown's Field, he could prove to himself and others that he was a successful developer. He and Brenda would blow up the Thing and the planned buildings could go ahead. People may be a bit sad for a while, but once the development was opened and all the benefits flowed through to the community, they would be grateful to him for having the vision and seeing it through. As Rose and Con reached a crescendo with the final "I did it myyyy waaaay" Jason took a deep breath and sang with them. He couldn't hold a tune either.

Chapter 50 - Jason on a roll

Jason spent the best part of the following day in the loungeroom on the phone to various contractors. Actually, he spent the first part of the day nursing a hangover. The best part of the day was when his headache subsided, and he could finally form coherent sentences. Magda had taken pity on him and dished him up a greasy breakfast of bacon, sausage, eggs and hash browns, declaring it 100% effective in curing a hangover. Her hubby swore by it, she assured him. Not wanting to offend her, Jason ate it all. In addition to a headache, he now had indigestion.

But all that was behind him and he was on fire. He sent the contractors a link to the plans and specifications for the development and gave them two weeks to submit tenders. Normally Eric did the tendering process, claiming that Jason was too unreliable, stupid, inexperienced or other equally dismissive reasons for not letting him try. If only Eric could see him now!

"In two weeks, the festival would be over, the Thing will be a thing of the past (pardon the pun – my first, yay) and tenders would be rolling in." Jason nattered to himself then uttered a contented sigh.

"You sound happy, Love," said Magda as she entered the room with a tray of tea and freshly baked banana bread.

"I really am!" Jason replied, gratefully accepting a mug of tea and a thick slice of buttered banana bread. "You've been really kind to me when no-one else was. I'm making friends. Actually, I'm not making enemies, and that's just as good. And work is going well. Soon the building will start and Grevillia will benefit. There will be jobs during the building and jobs once the development is complete." Jason uttered another big sigh of contentment.

"Well, I'm happy for you, Love," said Magda. "Your parents must be proud of you."

Jason stiffened in the chair and looked very uncomfortable. "My parents are not part of my life. I was too much trouble for them, so they gave me away. I haven't heard from either of them since I was a kid."

It was Magda's turn to look uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, Love. I didn't mean to upset you. I had no idea. But look at it this way. You've made a success of your life even though you had a rough start. I'm proud of you for what it's worth."

"It's worth a lot. Thank you." Jason could not believe what was coming out of his mouth these days. He'd never really related to people except in a transactional way, and then almost entirely about work. Magda's kindness seemed to open up a part of him that was

unfamiliar, but nice. Yes, nice. Just plain, old, nice. Jason was starting to like himself.

Then Summa walked into the loungeroom. As well as her signature long, rainbow dress, she was wearing an Olympic gold medal-winning scowl. She bestowed it on Jason who immediately started to bristle. What was it about this woman that annoyed him so much?

“Hello Love,” Magda said with a big smile. “Sorry, I forgot to tell Jason that you were coming. Never mind, you’re here now. Sit down and have a nice cuppa. I’ll top up the pot.” With that and without drawing a breath, she left the room pulling the door closed behind her.

Summa sat on a couch as far away from Jason as the size of the room would allow. Jason unconsciously shuffled further back into his chair to try and increase the space.

“The committee has given me the job of liaising with you about the fireworks, so that’s why I’m here.” Summa managed to convey in that short piece of information that she would rather be anywhere else, that the task was akin to cleaning dishwasher filters, and that liaising with Jason over anything other than his imminent departure from Grevillia was the last thing she wanted to do.

“What do you want to know?” Jason managed to convey in his response that she was about as welcome a visitor as the Grim Reaper, that liaising with her had all the appeal of discussing septic tanks, and he would rather spend this time juggling chainsaws than spend it with her.

“I don’t know. You’re the one organising fireworks.” Summa shrugged her shoulders and carefully examined a piece of green yarn

left over from one of Magda's knitting creations that had made its way onto the seat next to her.

"How am I supposed to answer your questions if you don't ask any?" Jason was likewise absorbed in examining a morsel of walnut that had fallen out of his banana bread. They both continued their forensic inspections until Magda burst into the room with yet another tray of tea and plate of banana bread.

"Here you are Loves. I'll top up your tea, Jason and I've buttered you another piece of banana bread. I know that you love it." Both Jason and Summa welcomed the interruption and for the next few minutes shuffled backwards and forwards to the sideboard where Magda had placed the tray, effectively avoiding any kind of contact with each other.

"Isn't this nice, eh," said Magda cheerfully and completely oblivious to the animosity being passively aggressively orchestrated around her. "Two young people discussing a very important event together. And just think, it wasn't that long ago that you didn't even like each other. I never understood why. You're both so alike."

Jason spluttered the tea he was drinking and Summa choked on a banana bread crumb. Both broke into paroxysms of coughing that helped cover up their collective horror at being described as "so alike".

"Deary me!" Magda clucked. "Look at you two! You even choke at the same time. Now, don't let me get in the way. I can see you have some important things to discuss."

The meeting with Jason took less than five minutes, but it was five minutes that Summa would never get back. He reluctantly told her

that he would put on a fireworks display on the Thing at the end of the festival. Everyone would have to stand back. He didn't want anyone getting hit by a stray rocket and suing him, blah, blah, blah...

Before she drove off, Magda asked Jason to help Summa put some pans and storage containers that she was lending Summa's mother into the Kombi. Magda watched in amusement as the two young people avoided any kind of interaction throughout the loading process. That ended when the sun came from behind a cloud and they both uttered an enormous sneeze. "A couple of sun sneezers! What are the odds? I told you that you two are the same!" Magda laughed. "You keep proving me right."

Jason turned on his heels and beat a hasty retreat into the house and as far away from Summa as he could get.

Chapter 51 - Summa

Summa went back to her shop and put on some soothing whale song, lit a fragrant infuser, made herself a cup of camomile and lavender tea to settle her nerves and sat in "The Wellness Corner," a space in the shop where she had placed a pile of brightly coloured cushions. She took some deep breaths and let her mind find a peaceful place that she could visualise. It didn't work. As soon as she cleared her mind, Jason jumped into the available space. She had never had such a reaction to another person before. Usually, she got on well with people. After all, wasn't she one of the nicest people you would ever meet? Everyone said she was. Then Jason came along with his ridiculous suits, his single-minded pursuit of knocking things over, his

arrogance, his gas-guzzling tank of a car – he had, in her opinion absolutely no redeeming features. Though, to be fair (and Summa was always fair) he had improved his dress sense since that friend of his (what’s-her-name) came to visit.

“I need to put him out of my mind!” Summa said loudly to herself.

“Why? Are you having man trouble?” a voice from the door of the shop enquired. Summa stood up from the pile of cushions to find her Mum grinning broadly. Summa’s Mum (Meadow) was a very attractive fifty-something with a mane of wavy brunette hair going silver in all the right places. She clearly shopped at the same places as Summa as she too, was wearing a long, rainbow-coloured dress.

“I am not, Mum!” Summa retorted. “It’s that Jason person. He just gives me the irrits.”

“The Universe has sent him to you to help you learn something about yourself,” Meadow replied.

“Well, the Universe got it wrong this time, Mum. I’m not learning anything about myself that I didn’t know already.”

“I don’t think that’s true, Summa,” her mother replied. “You’ve told me more than once that there is something about him that sets you off. You need to find out what that is and learn from it.”

Summa rolled her eyes and took another deep breath. Her mother was prone to spontaneous therapy sessions. She also tended to be right and Summa wasn’t sure what annoyed her most. “Enough of that, Mum. It’s lovely to see you. What brought you here?”

“I have prepared a simple menu for the festival and I’ve managed to borrow a food truck so we won’t need your Kombi after all. I thought

you might like to see what we will be cooking.” Meadow handed over the print-out of the menu and Summa ran her eye down it. There were three types of curries, rice, samosas, wraps with various fillings and chia puddings with coconut yoghurt.

“This looks amazing, Mum,” Summa exclaimed. “People who want to eat meat can get that at the BBQ that Doug and his mates are organising. But I think your menu will sell really well.”

Meadow smiled at the enthusiasm expressed by her daughter. Lately, she had found her to be uncharacteristically sullen. Hopefully, the situation with Jason and the Thing would resolve soon so everyone could go back to normal.

“Wynter will be helping me serve the food. He will take over when I go into the therapy space. I’ll do that after the lunch rush is over. I’ll use the commune’s yurt for my sessions. Blossom volunteered to patch some of the holes. She and I are really the only ones who know how to sew and she knew I was busy with the food. I’ve found an old massage table for people to lie on. It needed some repairs and Jarrah did that for us. He loves fixing things. I think we’re all ready for the big event.”

“Do you think Wynter can manage the food truck on his own?” Summa said with some concern in her voice.

Wynter was Summa’s twin brother. He had not developed at the same rate as Summa. Meadow said he just had his own rhythm by way of explanation if anybody asked. Meadow home-schooled him and encouraged him to follow his interests. These turned out to be gardening and cooking. He loved helping with both. He had grown into a gentle young man who was always smiling. He was never going

to achieve academic or professional success, but he brought simplicity and joy into the lives of the people who knew him.

“I’ve asked Jett to lend a hand at the same time. But I’ve told Wynter he is in charge. He loves being the boss! It will be fine. There’s no need to worry about him.” Meadow ruffled Summa’s green hair.

“Thanks, Mum. I really appreciate your help. This festival is important to so many people. If we can get Jason onto the Thing I know he will change his mind about demolishing it. Are you sure you can hypnotise him? What if he doesn’t want to be hypnotised? What if he can’t be hypnotised...”

“Stop worrying, Summa. It will all be fine. You need to trust the Universe.”

There’s the Universe again, Summa thought. The Universe didn’t seem particularly trustworthy to her. She found it hard to trust something that appeared to be set on letting the occupants of one of its planets destroy it. More negative thoughts started pouring in after that one and Summa knew it was time to calm her mind with some more tea and whale song.

“Mum, I’ve got a lot to do in the shop. It’s been lovely seeing you and hearing your plans, but I’d better get on.”

Meadow gave her daughter a big hug and left. Summa made more tea, changed the CD, turned the “Closed to recharge my aura” sign around to face the street and settled down on her nest of cushions to try and regain her equilibrium.

Chapter 52 - Up and away

Brenda and Jason were in regular contact with each other working out the steps involved in blowing up the Thing. Brenda had found instructions on how to make a bomb out of fireworks on the Dark Web. Getting it onto the Thing without actually coming in contact with it continued to challenge them both. Despite some obvious drawbacks, Jason was still pretty committed to trying the balloon. So, the first opportunity they could find, they booked a ride. Jason packed a dummy bomb into his backpack to see what was involved in hefting it out of the balloon and onto the Thing.

The balloon captain, Gav, welcomed them on board. The sun was barely up and there was the gentlest of breezes blowing. A couple on their honeymoon were also on board and the four young people chatted while Gav fired up the burner. The balloon filled slowly and when fully inflated, the bright yellow exterior loudly advertising a local winery started tugging at the ropes. Gav threw out the sandbags and off they floated.

Chapter 53 - Heights

Jason came to lying under a gum tree. A paramedic was taking his blood pressure. She smiled reassuringly. "You're fine, Jason. Though I think you gave everyone a bit of a fright."

"What happened?" Jason asked.

“Well,” said Brenda. “I think we’ve established that you’re afraid of heights!”

Within moments of the balloon taking off, he had passed out. It happened without warning, other than his face going an unattractive shade of grey. Gav claimed it was a first. Sometimes he’d have passengers who admitted to being a bit afraid of heights, but never someone who was standing one moment, and the next was in a heap in the bottom of the basket. Gav quickly descended and called an ambulance just in case. Patrons dying in his balloon was bad for business and involved far too much paperwork.

Reassured that Jason was fine, Gav took off again with the honeymooners. Jason and Brenda watched the bright yellow balloon sail off into the blue sky along with their plan for using it to bombard the Thing. Clearly, they needed a Plan B.

They thanked and farewelled the paramedic then sat under the tree to try and work out what to do next.

“I don’t think we thought this through,” Jason admitted.

“Oh, you think?” said Brenda. “Do you mean the part where we smuggle a bomb onto a balloon and hope there are no honeymooners who may ask questions? Or the part where we innocently chuck a bomb over the side and hope it lands where it’s supposed to? Or the part where one of the conspirators collapses in a heap as soon as the balloon lifts off?”

Jason’s eyes grew wide as he considered Brenda’s questions. Then he burst out laughing. “We’re not very good at this, are we?”

“That’s probably a good thing.” Brenda started to laugh. “I for one, have no intention of ever bombing anything again after this.”

“Me neither,” said Jason. “Me neither.”

They sat beneath the tree in companionable silence listening to the sounds of the morning – the birds, the wind in the trees, distant traffic, a high-pitched whine...

Looking up they saw a man and a little boy flying a drone at the far side of the footy field. The drone zipped this way and that as the little boy used the controls to guide it. From time to time his Dad would take over the controls, clearly enjoying the experience as much as the little boy. Their happy laughter filled the air.

Jason and Brenda watched first with interest, then the interest turned into a revelation.

“A drone!” Jason and Brenda shouted in unison.

Chapter 54 - Dissolution

First order of business for Jason the next morning was to find a pyrotechnician who could organise the fireworks display. He approached Con Stavros, the explosives expert Eric had hired to blow up the Thing. Jason thought that Con probably had contacts in the fireworks display business. As luck would have it, or some might say predictably, Con had trained as a pyrotechnician when he left the army. Because Con had experienced the power of the Thing first hand, he was confident he could organise an epic display for the

festival. He even offered to do it free of charge if Jason footed the bill for the fireworks.

Life was changing rapidly for Con and he felt generous. Within a day of meeting Rose and playing happily with her on the Thing, he had moved in with her. At her insistence, he taught her how to make effigies of her husband and blow them up. Council meetings were going to be much less stuffy now that Rose and Con were together. She admitted to herself that she was positively giddy compared to her former staid version, and she really like the giddy version best.

Rose was keen to help Con set the fireworks as long as she could include an effigy of her husband that could be attached to the biggest rocket money could buy. Con couldn't say no.

Jason gave Con the money to buy the fireworks and left the design of the display up to him. There was only one firework Jason was interested in, and that was the big one that would destroy the Thing.

As the day of the festival approached, Brenda moved from the city to a room in Magda's B&B. She was able to continue her paid employment remotely during the day and spend the evenings with Jason planning the festival finale. Jason was in heaven. Life was finally going to plan. He had a development project that was going well, he had Magda making a fuss over him, the festival planning meetings were short, productive and angst free mostly, Brenda was nearby and even Summa was less hostile towards him.

When he and Brenda went to the Corner Hotel for a pub meal or to bash out some songs on Karaoke Night, Jason even received the odd slap on the back from some of the locals accompanied by an "ow yer doin'" or "giddyay mate." Una and Fairy-Wren were civil to him, when

they weren't oblivious to anyone other than themselves. It was a far cry from the early days when everyone was hostile towards him. Now they just tolerated him, like you tolerate a slightly wobbly table – he was still irritating but not so much that anything needed to be done about it.

Then the email arrived from Eric's solicitor. Eric, despite being charmed by the Thing, was still the same old Eric when not around it. When he returned to the city and realised what he had handed over to Jason as a result of the bet, he was furious. He consulted his solicitor who advised him what to do. The letter outlined the advice. Eric had dissolved the partnership cutting Jason off from all the clients not connected to the Brown's Field development. A cheque for \$30,000 was enclosed with a warning that if he, Jason, didn't accept the terms of the dissolution, he could expect to pay a great deal in lawyers' fees fighting it.

Over afternoon tea prepared by Magda, Brenda watched as Jason read the email. His face looked frozen, then he started to turn a familiar shade of red, and then to her surprise he started to laugh uncontrollably.

"What's happened, Jason?"

"I'm free!" he replied, throwing the tablet up in the air, and surprising himself, caught it again. "Eric has set me free! I never have to listen to that man insult me ever again."

Magda, hearing the commotion, rushed into the loungeroom from the kitchen. She was greeted by the sight of a very excited Jason trying to dance with Brenda and not doing a particularly good job of

it. Dancing was definitely not one of his super-powers. But despite his physical awkwardness, he looked elated.

“Eric has dissolved our partnership! I’m free! I’m also broke, but it’s worth it. I just have to sell all the properties off the plan in the Brown’s Field development so I can pay the contractors – piece of cake!” Jason started to laugh uncontrollably again.

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright?” Magda asked, looking very worried.

“Of course I am. I’m a developer!” Jason tried to dance with Brenda again. She instead steered him toward a couch and pushed him down onto it.

“Here, drink some tea,” she ordered. “It’s been a big day.”

Magda rushed over to top up his cup and putting the pot back on the sideboard, she sank into one of the armchairs with a loud “oomph”.

“So, you mean to say that you have no money for the development?”

“I have \$30,000. That’s all. But that’s how development works. I own the land and I’ll sell the buildings off the plan. When I’ve sold enough, I’ll start construction. I’ve been doing this for most of my life. It will be OK.”

Brenda joined in the conversation. “What’s the worst that can happen if you don’t sell any of the buildings?”

“I’ll own a very large piece of useless real estate,” Jason replied.

“Maybe I’ll do up Tarquin’s cottage and live there myself. But it’s going to be OK. I’m not worried. Things are moving fast down here and the area needs more facilities. Anyway, I wouldn’t have bought

the land in the first place if there wasn't interest in the development. Let's not think about what could go wrong. I'm free! I need a celebratory drink at the Corner. Who wants to come? I'm buying!"

"Well, as long as you promise not to dance with me, I'll join you," said Brenda.

Magda struggled to her feet. "Why not? I'll join you for just one little drink."

Chapter 55 - Hangover

Magda opened one eye and immediately wished she hadn't, so she closed it again. But in a split second of awareness, she realised she was lying on top of her bed with her feet up the head end on the pillow. On the other side of the bed, right way up and snoring quietly was Brenda, her feet tucked under Magda's armpit. Magda tried opening both eyes. The light coming into her room was screaming loudly at her as were the magpies outside her window, the car driving up her street and the pounding in her head.

"Oh dear. What happened last night?" she muttered quietly to Brenda's feet. They didn't respond, which she found strangely reassuring.

"We celebrated just a teeny bit too much," Brenda muttered back to Magda's feet. Both women struggled to a semi-upright position. "You have nacho chips in your hair, Magda."

Magda touched her hair and pulled several chips out of the tangled mess. Without thinking, she popped them into her mouth and chewed loudly.

“I need water,” Brenda moaned as she swung her legs off the bed. She looked puzzled to find an empty chip packet clutched in her hand. She dropped it onto the floor. It was then that she noticed she was wearing one of Magda’s voluminous flannel nighties. On the floor in a pile lay her black jeans and grey hoodie. Both were not only saturated but were also covered in food scraps and smelled like a beer cellar. Brenda shook her head at the sight, and staggered out of the bedroom to the kitchen get water.

Magda sat up very slowly. She was wearing her nightie back to front. Next to Brenda’s pile of wet clothes was her blue dress scrunched up and clearly beyond the ability of a washing machine to restore it. Magda walked slowly into her ensuite, turned on the shower and stood under it until her fingers resembled prunes.

Jason walked into the kitchen as Brenda downed her fourth glass of water.

“You look pretty rough,” Jason observed.

“You don’t look so good yourself,” Brenda replied. “Nice nightie!”

“What?” Jason slowly became aware of what he was wearing. He was mortified to find that like Brenda, he was wearing one of Magda’s flannel nighties. He brushed his hands over it in a vain attempt to make it disappear.

Brenda looked at Jason and shook her head. “Yellow isn’t one of your colours,” was all she could think to say.

Jason looked down at the nightie again, then at her as realisation started to dawn on him. "Tell me, Brenda, did we actually have a food fight or am I imagining it?"

"Oh no!" she groaned. "I thought I'd imagined it as well. Did we really stand in the middle of the street and throw food at each other? What were we thinking?" Jason shook his head.

The two delicate co-conspirators worked around each other making hot drinks and toast. Every noise made them wince. Every smell added to their nausea. A large boulder of regret sat on each of their backs. Sitting quietly sipping tea and trying not to make noise crunching toast, they were a very sad sight indeed. So, imagine their surprise when a very chirpy Spider burst into the kitchen.

"Good grief!" he exclaimed. "Just look at the two of you!" In his hi vis vest and work shorts, Spider looked ready to take on the day. "Nice nightie, Jason. But blue is a better choice with your colouring."

"What are you doing here?" Jason croaked, looking very confused. Brenda looked similarly nonplussed to see Spider completely out of context.

"You three were in no fit state to make it home alone. Doug and I semi-carried you here and I stayed the night in case anyone needed anything."

"Is that why I ended up in bed with Magda? You were in my room?"

Spider nodded as he loudly crunched on freshly toasted bread spread with a thick layer of jam. A glob of jam ran down his whiskery chin and he wiped it off with the back of his hand. "You certainly

entertained the Corner mob last night with your loud singing and the food fight out in the street.”

Jason and Brenda moaned in unison as Magda staggered into the kitchen in her dressing gown. Her hair, now free of nacho crumbs, was hanging in wet strands that dripped onto the collar of her dressing gown. She looked a pale shade of green. Spider handed her a cup of tea with lots of sugar and she sank down onto a bar stool to drink it.

“I feel sick,” she declared. “I must have eaten something rotten.”

“Threw it at Jason and Brenda more like it,” Spider said with a smile.

“Oh no! The food fight!” Magda cried. Jason and Brenda nodded. “It wasn’t a dream then?” They shook their heads and wished they hadn’t.

“I’d better leave you lot and get onto work,” said Spider as he drained his cup and picked up his hard hat. “You behave yourselves! You’re going to get a reputation if you’re not careful.” With a loud laugh he headed out of the front door.

Chapter 56 - The food fight

Evidently, the food fight started inside the Corner Hotel bistro when a very drunk Brenda and Magda decided it would be fun to use their dessert spoons to flick mashed potato from Brenda’s plate into Jason’s open mouth. At the time he was slumped back, open mouthed, in a dining chair, fast asleep. Unsurprisingly, they missed

his mouth and hit his face instead. This woke him up. He scraped the potato off his face with his hand and randomly flicked it. As luck would have it, the potato landed on Brenda's head. Brenda dissolved into peels of laughter, which set Magda off who then scooped up her uneaten burgundy and beef pie and threw that at Jason.

Hearing the ruckus in the bistro, Enid rushed over and told the three of them to take it outside. They took her literally and gathered up their plates of uneaten food, and piled on top any other food they could lay their hands on as they made their way to the door. Once outside, they flicked and flung the food at each other making such a commotion that dozens of patrons poured outside to watch. Spider started a book giving odds on who would be the last one standing. People lined up behind their food fighter of choice and passed more of the left-overs from the pub to them to keep up their supply of ammunition.

Constable Bob thought he ought to intervene but he didn't want to spoil the fun or create more paperwork. Besides, he couldn't think of a law that they were breaking. OK, maybe they were causing a public disturbance, but the public seemed to be enjoying it. Maybe they were littering, but that was the role of the local government to enforce, and the mayor of that local government was shouting encouragement to Magda, her favourite contestant. Littering didn't seem to be bothering her at all. Concluding that as Constable Bob he didn't have a role in the incident, just plain Bob scooped up a handful of leftover food in a bucket at the side of the road, and passed it to Jason to throw at will.

The food fight was reaching a crescendo when two things happened. The first was Magda declaring she was tired and wanted to go home.

As if to illustrate her point, she slowly sank down onto the roadside curb next to the bench and rubbish bins, propped herself up against the bins and went to sleep. Jason tried to dance with Brenda making her even more dizzy than she already was. She too sank down onto the side of the road and lay down with her head on Magda's lap. Jason then declared himself the winner and passed out on top of Brenda.

The second thing that happened was that the skies opened up and rain pelted down soaking the contestants, the cheer squad and the gamblers. The food on the road started to slip down into the gutters and into the drain, thereby saving the street cleaning team a particularly nasty job.

People rushed back inside the pub, primarily to keep out of the rain, but also to claim their winnings (if they had actually won) from Spider who concurred with Jason that he (Jason) was the victor. A number of those who lost demanded their money back despite Spider informing them that that wasn't how gambling worked.

Doug cornered Spider and pointed out that the three food fighters were still outside in the pouring rain and likely to catch their death of cold. The two men each helped the women get up off the side of the road while Jason staggered on behind reliving with great volume, the key moments of the food fight where he prevailed over the two women.

Once back at Magda's place, Doug phoned Una to come over and help undress her sister and Brenda. Una turned up with Fairy-Wren and together they tried to get the two women to remove their dirty, sodden clothes, but Brenda and Magda were having none of it. They

slapped Una and Fairy-Wren's hands away when they tried to pull their clothes off, and burst into uproarious laughter in the process. It took both of the women to finally strip Magda's dress off and pour her into a nightie. Magda grabbed her sodden dress and refused to let them put it in the laundry. "You'll just shrink it," she declared. Once Magda was free of her wet clothes, Una and Fairy-Wren turned their attention to Brenda. She, being petite, was an easier proposition to undress, but like Magda, she insisted on hanging onto her clothes. "What she said," Brenda uttered. "You're not shrinking my clothes."

Una gave Magda a good talking to about her excessive alcohol consumption, outrageous behaviour, poor choices and was just warming up to tell her some more home truths, when Magda looked at her sister, smiled and said, "I love you, Una. Now (swear word) off so I can get some sleep." Magda took a very quiet and slightly green looking Brenda by the arm and together they wobbled into Magda's bedroom, collapsed on the bed and slept where they fell.

Jason would have just fallen into bed fully clothed, if he had his way but Spider convinced him to take off his drenched clothes and change into something dry. Once changed, Jason collapsed onto the bed and was asleep in less than a minute.

Doug, Spider, Una and Fairy-Wren thought it best if one of them stayed the night in case anything happened. Spider volunteered. While he raced home to collect his work gear for the following day, Doug, Una and Fairy-Wren made themselves a cup of tea and sat around the kitchen table drinking it in silence, apart from Fairy-Wren's slurping. There really wasn't a lot more to say about the evening's carry-on. Not yet anyway. But plenty was said over time so

that the famous Corner Hotel Food Fight lived on in Grevillia's mythology, along with the Prospector's Ball, and the Farewell to the Thing Festival Finale.

Chapter 57 - Paddy

It took all day for Magda, Brenda and Jason to begin to feel human again. Long, hot showers and drinking a lot of water helped. Magda needed a lie down. While she slept, Jason and Brenda went out for a walk and tried to avoid running into anyone by cutting through side streets until they came to the bush walking track that led down to and along the river.

The track was steep and in their delicate state, Brenda and Jason were very careful not to trip over a tree root, or their own feet for that matter. When the track levelled off, they reached an open space on the banks of the river where there was a picnic area, a gas barbeque and some climbing equipment for the children. Jason and Brenda sat at one of the wooden picnic tables underneath an ancient red gum and listened to the sound of magpies warbling and kookaburras laughing, at their folly they thought.

Behind the call of the birds Jason heard a loud yapping and a woman raising her voice. He nudged Brenda to draw her attention to the noise. They both walked to the water's edge and saw Cat standing on the bank about a hundred metres away shouting at a dog in the water. The dog was oblivious to her shouts for attention, fixed as he was on chasing two ducks. The ducks paddled in front of him and as soon as he gained any advantage, they flapped their wings, walked

on water and landed a bit further in front of him, tantalisingly close, but just out of reach.

Cat noticed Jason and Brenda and walked up to them. "That (swear word) dog of mine!" she exclaimed. "He's been in the water for over an hour now and won't (swear words) get out. Paddy! Paddy! You little (swear word). COME HERE!"

Despite themselves, Jason and Brenda couldn't help but laugh, though it was clear that Cat was at the end of her rope.

"How are you going to get him out?" Jason asked, looking quite concerned.

"I have an idea," said Cat. "But I need your help. Could you two watch him? He's never going to willingly get out of the water so I'm going up to the caravan park to borrow one of their kayaks. They're just up the river to the left a few hundred metres. I'll get him that way. Argh! He is the most (swear word) stubborn animal I've ever known."

There wasn't much that Jason or Brenda could do to help other than stand on the side of the river and watch Paddy obsessively and futilely chase the ducks. Cat took off quickly in the direction of the caravan park walking around a bend in the river, disappearing out of view within minutes.

Paddy oblivious to her departure, continued the pointless exercise of chasing the ducks that continued to taunt him. He was so water-logged by this stage that only his shiny black nose and the white tip at the end of his tail were visible above the water line.

After about ten minutes, Cat appeared from around the bend in the river, paddling a blue plastic kayak. She drew alongside Paddy and hoisted him out of the water by his collar. "Right, you little (swear word), in you get!" Paddy shook himself vigorously, covering Cat in droplets of water. He ran up to the front of the kayak and started barking happily. This did not improve Cat's mood one little bit.

Brenda helped Cat beach the kayak and held onto Paddy's collar while Cat disembarked. She clipped on his lead and asked Brenda if she and Jason would mind holding onto Paddy while she returned the kayak. Now that he was out of the water, Paddy started to shiver. He looked so pathetic that Brenda took off her black hoodie and wrapped him up in it. For her efforts, she was rewarded with a big lick on her face.

"You're a little devil," Brenda said rubbing Paddy to keep him warm. She continued to cuddle him to keep him warm until Cat jogged back from the caravan park.

"He's done it again, hasn't he?" she said with a smile, looking a lot less stressed than before. "He's totally adorable but a complete jerk! I cannot outsmart him and he walks all over me."

"Well, he's made my day," replied Brenda. "We are both a little worse for wear after last night."

"I heard," said Cat. "I believe the food fight was one for the ages!" Jason looked uncomfortable and appeared to be examining a very interesting branch in the banksia tree near the picnic area. "Actually, I'm glad I ran into you two," said Cat. "I wanted to find out if you need any help setting up your stand at the festival."

Jason stopped looking at the tree and turned towards Cat. "Thanks, but it's ok. I need to write and print off some information about the development. I can't use the old stuff since Eric dissolved the partnership. Now, at least I can promote it my way."

Cat noted that Jason looked happier than she had ever seen him. He was a very different person to the stuffy businessman who had first come to town. The town, it seemed, was changing him.

"Thanks for helping me with Paddy," Cat said as she took control of his lead. "I'll wash your hoodie and get it back to you, Brenda."

"No need," Brenda responded. "It was due for a wash anyway."

"Thanks again, you two. You saved me from letting the little (swear word) drown! Come on you, let's go home and get some dinner." Hearing the word "dinner" Paddy rushed ahead up the track pulling on his lead and dragging Cat behind him.

"Well, that was fun!" exclaimed Brenda. "I feel heaps better now. How about you?"

Jason stood up from the picnic bench and stretched. "Yeah. I'm feeling better too," he replied. "We should try to find someone to help her manage Paddy. He's a great little dog, but he's the boss of her. I think she needs help to become his boss. I saw something about that on the tele once. What do you reckon?"

"That's very thoughtful, Jason. Let's do it when we get back to Magda's." Brenda hid her surprise that Jason had thought about a way to help Cat. Jason of even a few weeks ago wouldn't have done that. Jason hid his surprise at being called thoughtful. That had never happened before either.

Chapter 58 - Preparations

The next few days flew past. Jason and Brenda went shopping in the nearest regional centre and bought a drone. They practiced flying the drone and perfecting how to drop a fake bomb from it. They needed to get out of town to do this in case anyone was watching. Brown's Field seemed like the best option. They didn't use the Thing for their practice in case something went wrong. Neither of them wanted to climb up and retrieve it and there wasn't anyone else they could ask, so instead they made a target out of one of Jason's stained business shirts and secured it with rocks on the roof of Tarquin's cottage, which was waiting to be demolished. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to drop the fake bomb onto the target, they finally worked out how to do it.

Their activity was closely watched by the family of kangaroos that had returned to grazing in the area after the disruptions of the previous few weeks. They didn't know what to make of the strange bird that made strange sounds as it flew up into the air and let go of a very large dropping that the humans seemed to like picking up and giving back to the bird. Humans are very odd creatures, they thought, not for the first time.

Preparations were being made elsewhere. Rose and Con spent their evenings together planning the fireworks display. Rose discovered she had quite a flair for sequencing the various explosions making sure that there was a gradual, but still entertaining lead-up to the grand-finale where the biggest and best were left until last. Con was

delighted that she showed such an interest in explosions. His previous relationships had floundered when it became clear to his new love interest that nothing made him happier than blowing things up. They found it very hard to compete with his hand-crafted bombs that he loved to describe in great detail. His idea of a romantic date was to take the woman to the twenty acre block he owned not far from Brown's Field and demonstrate how these bombs worked. There was seldom a second date, despite the fact that Con was stunningly good-looking with classic Greek God features – golden skin, gold curly hair and a sculpted body. For the first time, Con had found someone who was genuinely interested in what interested him. True, in the beginning she mostly fantasised about blowing up her errant ex-husband, but she had moved on from that and could now appreciate the power and wonder of a well-planned and executed explosion. Theirs seemed to be a match made in heaven.

Fairy-Wren and Una were busy in the Corner Hotel Ballroom, sorting through the trestle tables that were in various stages of disrepair. They found several that were beyond redemption, and used them for spare parts. Eleven serviceable trestle tables cobbled together with a range of work-arounds were the result of their efforts. They weren't good looking, but they were sure to do the job.

When they weren't mending furniture, the two women were putting together an outdoor gym program that they intended to run at the festival. Una had a collection of dumbbells, resistance bands, fit balls and mats in her shed. She put out a call to her gym buddies and managed to scrounge several medicine balls, a set of battle ropes, more dumbbells and some bar bells of various weights. Una and Fairy-Wren poured over different programs that they had worked on

together or separately. They finally settled on a circuit that they were certain would delight the good folk of Grevillia. They didn't consider for a moment that some of the exercises might be beyond the current fitness levels of the vast majority of Grevillia's finest. They were happy and that was all that mattered.

Mrs. Barnes and the (mostly) ladies of the Grevillia Progress Auxiliary busied themselves planning the afternoon tea stand. Naturally, Mrs. Barnes volunteered to cook her jam and onion tarts. Equally naturally, the other (mostly) ladies tried to find kind ways of changing her mind. They suggested she make other offerings like Anzac biscuits, fruit scones, fairy cakes or cream sponge, but Mrs. Barnes was adamant that she would bake her special tarts that, she claimed, always seemed to disappear in a flash as soon as they were put on the table. Little did she know that the disappearance of her tarts was better explained by looking in the nearest bin. So, the (mostly) ladies of the Grevillia Progress Auxiliary sighed and resigned themselves to once again find a way of whipping the offending tarts off the table without Mrs. Barnes noticing.

Summa and her family were busy getting together the ingredients they needed for the food. The commune had a large kitchen garden and most of the vegetables would come from there. The food truck was fitted out with a stove, a Bain Marie for keeping the food warm and a fridge to store perishables. There wasn't a lot of room to move around once everything was installed. Fortunately, Summa's mother and brother were quite slight in build.

The yurt that Meadow would use for her hypnosis was patched and cleaned. Summa offered the cushions from her shop to add to the

pile that were already in the yurt. One simply could not have too many cushions.

To create a sense of mystery, Meadow decided to wear a veil to cover her face and wear her best, long blue velvet dress with a full skirt that swayed when she walked. Yes, she thought to herself, I will definitely look the part.

Doug called his garage band members together to select some songs they could play at the festival, especially during the fireworks. The band called Doug De Graves and the Zombies was not, despite the name, a heavy metal band. They were more into Indie Rock and liked to perform old classics like This Charming Man, Where is My Mind, and Just Like Honey. Sadly, the good folk of Grevillia were not familiar with the genre, nor the classics, leading to howls of “play Sweet Caroline!” or “play some real music” or “what’s wrong with “Tubthumping”?

Whenever they performed at the Corner Hotel, the deal was they would sing a few songs that the band liked and then play the tired old songs the Corner patrons (inexplicably) liked. If they managed to get the balance right, they didn’t have to buy their own beer all night. If they didn’t, someone was likely to unplug the sound equipment and turn on the karaoke machine.

Bearing this in mind, Doug suggested to the band that they just play crowd favourites and forget about trying to raise the musical IQ of the town this once. They settled on a medley that included Am I Ever Going to See Your Face Again?”, Living on a Prayer, It’s a Long Way to the Top, Sweet Caroline, and Eagle Rock. Having compromised their musical values, the very least they hoped for was free beer.

Magda and Enid worked behind the scenes making sure that the furniture was collected and delivered to the right place at the right time. They asked around and found three generators that people were willing to lend. That took care of the power needed to boil water, amp sound and light up the stalls with some capacity left over, because you never knew what was going to happen. The women went through the boxes of crockery again and managed to put together enough cups and plates for the (mostly) Ladies Grevillia Progress Auxiliary to serve their morning and afternoon teas. The (mostly) ladies were adamant that their tea and coffee could not be drunk out of the nasty cardboard cups – not because they were single use and therefore not good for the planet, no, because they made the tea in particular “taste funny.” Enid solved the problem of washing the cups after they had been returned to the (mostly) Ladies Grevillia Progress Auxiliary’s stall by hunting down a portable dishwasher at the caravan park. Enid and Magda, typical of the type, were the under-appreciated, seldom recognised engine room for big events. They thought of all the things that no-one else thought about or notice when they were there. But they sure noticed when they were not.

The good folk of Grevillia went to bed that Saturday night knowing they had done what needed to be done. Or woke up suddenly in the middle of the night remembering what they had forgotten to do. Nonetheless, when the sun started to light the clear eastern sky, and magpies, parrots and crows announced this fact in full voice, the good folk of Grevillia awoke to the day of the Farewell to the Thing Festival.

Chapter 59 - The Festival

One by one, people offering food and drinks, music, activities, fireworks, information and advice, trickled into Brown's Field and put the finishing touches to their enterprises.

The weather was perfect; not a cloud in the sky, a forecast maximum of 26 degrees and a light south-westerly breeze. Brown's Field was covered in lush, green grass with liberal sprinklings of yellow and blue wildflowers and clumps of kangaroo droppings. The kangaroos, from experience, knew that they would be better off lying low until the humans climbed into their metal pouches that huddled together beyond the fence surrounding Brown's Field and went away to leave them in peace.

Una and Fairy-Wren busied themselves setting out their gym circuit, tracking backwards and forwards from the car park carrying loads that would challenge the fittest of weight lifters. Once their circuit was completed, they were busy helping other stall holders who needed a pair or two of strong arms.

Summa drove the food truck onto the field, quite close to the Thing. Wynter was very excited. This was his first time selling food from a truck and he could hardly wait until the afternoon when his Mum had promised he would be the boss.

Jason, Brenda and Magda arrived together in Jason's SUV that looked a lot less like it had just been driven out of the new car showroom, and a lot more like the dusty, dented vehicles that everyone in town drove.

Magda shuffled off to find Enid and continue to do their invisible work. She was wearing a voluminous, brightly patterned, red, pink and blue work dress that didn't show the dirt, and a pair of comfortable shiny gold sneakers she had bought in the city last time she visited.

Brenda and Jason had coincidentally chosen the same outfit as each other, black jeans and a black t-shirt. Jason momentarily thought about wearing his suit, but felt uncomfortable just thinking about it. In the past few days, he had made a few trips to the general store to stock up on casual clothes and footwear. His hair, usually styled with large amounts of hair products, had grown in the past few weeks and was flapping in the breeze, product-free. It was far less unruly than before, getting its own way about which direction to fall in rather than being told what to do. All in all, Jason just looked like an average twenty-something and not the uptight, vain, insecure and short-tempered man who had rolled into town several weeks ago.

Brenda and Jason found the table where he was going to set up information about the development. He had run off a hundred copies of the new advertising material. Stretching his IT skills to their limit, and with the help of the IT expert, Brenda, Jason had cut and pasted images from the former information material developed by Eric and added his own style and flair in the explanatory text. Brenda had persuaded him to limit the number of times he used the words "innovative, cutting-edge and ground-breaking" and to remove the word "very" from in front of the word "unique." Unique is one of a kind, she explained to him. So, something can't be very one of a kind. Jason thought she was being a bit picky, but he went along with her suggestions. She seemed to get things right more often than not.

The Thing glistened in the morning light. The instigators of the “Get Jason Onto the Thing” plot looked at the Thing and tried to imagine what it would be like if they failed. It was too painful to contemplate. Failure simply wasn’t an option.

Chapter 60 - Bees

By mid-morning, Brown’s Field started to fill up and a happy buzz filled the air. The buzzing, however, was not human in origin. It was in fact a swarm of bees that had, that morning, decided to move house from the hives in Spider’s back garden to one of the ancient red gums dotted around the perimeter of Brown’s Field.

Spider, in full protective gear was up a ladder with a smoker and a large, cardboard box coaxing the bees to get into the box so he could take them home again.

A group of children, fascinated with the unfolding situation, stood close to the tree watching Spider at work. Their anxious parents were trying, unsuccessfully to pull them away. The bees were the least invested participants in the whole affair. They were doing what they liked to do and were quite happy to keep on doing it. However, the smoke was beginning to interfere with their comfort. A few of them flew into the box, obviously found it to their satisfaction and invited the rest of the swarm to join them.

When it was clear to the children that no-one was going to be attacked by a swarm of crazed bees, they drifted away feeling very disappointed indeed. Many turned their attention to demanding ice-

cream and other potential near-death experiences to witness. Sadly, for the children, Rose's risk assessment skills had ensured (rogue bees notwithstanding) that near-death experiences would not be happening on her watch.

Craft workshops were on offer to occupy the children and many parents took advantage of the child-free breathing space to quickly join the beer queue that was growing by the minute.

Unsurprisingly, Una and Fairy-Wren's gym circuit was not attracting the participants they had hoped for so they decided to use it themselves and demonstrate what fitness looked like. The two women looked formidable in their matching purple tracksuits, smashing through the various exercises with boundless energy. Onlookers trickled over to watch the women but resisted all attempts to join in. That would have meant putting down their beers and pies. No, watching took up just the right amount of energy.

Chapter 61 - Raffle tickets

Summa walked around with raffle tickets that she was giving away while she promoted Madame Prairie Meditation and Hypnosis Workshops in the brightly coloured yurt.

"Discover your hidden potential through meditation and hypnosis, with Madame Prairie," she spruiked as she went from person to person.

"You could win a free session with Madame in our raffle. First prize is a half-hour session usually priced at \$60. Second prize is a beautiful

double-terminated amethyst pendant courtesy of the Mystical Crystal Shop. With the double-terminated amethyst, you can infuse your aura with pure energy.”

Summa was beginning to think that her aura was need of some pure energy. Despite successfully handing out more than fifty tickets, she hadn’t yet found the motivation to approach Jason. While she knew it was the whole point of the exercise, the thought of talking to him was rattling her aura, and not in a good way. She gave her aura a good talking to, took a deep breath and made her way to Jason’s information stand.

Jason was busy talking to a couple who seemed quite interested in the development. They were looking to start a fitness studio and peppered Jason with questions about the size of the spaces, cost per square metre, parking, accessibility, rates, common area levies, building timetable, local zoning requirements, investment potential, whether the developer is trustworthy and a variety of other detailed questions. Jason couldn’t answer most of them but reassured the couple that when the development was a little further down the track and he had more detailed plans to show them, he would definitely be in touch. He handed them some information and they left to join the beer queue.

His sighs of relief when the couple finally left were replaced with big sighs of dread when he saw Summa heading in his direction. She didn’t look too thrilled to see him either so the smile she fixed on her face as she approached him was clearly at odds with the scowl projected through her eyes. Jason was baffled.

“Oh, hi Jason,” said Summa still trying to keep the smile where it was.

“Yeah, hi Summa,” was his less than welcoming reply.

“We’re giving away free raffle tickets and I think you might be interested in the first prize.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, I know you use the power of positive thinking in your work-life, I’ve heard you recite your mantra, and Madame Prairie is renowned for taking people to the next level through meditation and hypnosis. Wouldn’t you like to remove all your blockages so you can really succeed with the development?” Summa was beginning to warm to the task in hand. Jason was by now really baffled.

“Since when are you interested in my blockages – whatever that means...”

Sensing that Jason was spoiling for a fight, Summa pressed on.

“Here, take these five tickets. You take some too, Brenda. The raffle will be drawn at three this afternoon and you can see Madame Prairie up until the fireworks start. They’re free. What do you have to lose?” Summa handed Jason the tickets and swished away in her long, rainbow dress, her green hair showing signs of sandy-coloured regrowth.

Brenda had watched the interaction with interest. The dynamic between the two of them was predictably combative. Jason had been unable to explain to Brenda why Summa pushed his buttons. She just did and clearly, for reasons he couldn’t understand, he pushed her buttons.

“That was different,” Brenda mused. “You two were almost civil to each other.”

"It was hard," Jason replied.

"Are you going to go to Madame Prairie if you win?"

"Would you?"

"Yeah, probably. Just out of curiosity really. Well, would you go Jase?"

Jason thought for a moment. "I'll see. I do like to practice the power of positive thinking but anything associated with Summa seems to do the exact opposite. I have to win first so I won't worry about that now. Are you sure everything is ready to go with the bomb?"

"The drone and bomb are still in the back of your car. I've double-checked the settings on the phone. After it's delivered by the drone, I'll arm it and set it off only when the fireworks have finished."

Brenda took hold of Jason's arm and gave it a squeeze.

"Don't worry. It's going to be a hoot."

Jason's arm tingled from the touch, sending his mind into a whirl, and the only thing he could think to say in response was, "Hmn."

Loud tuneless shouts of "am I ever going to see your face again? No way get (swear word), (swear word) off," came from the direction of the beer stand. Doug De Graves and the Zombies were belting out the crowd favourite to the predictable and profane crowd response. Half a dozen cans of beer were already lined up along the edge of the makeshift stage they were performing on. The crowd was onside. The leads to the amps were safe.

Chapter 62 - Mrs. Barnes

There was mild consternation at the (mostly) Ladies Grevillia Progress Auxiliary tea stand. Sales were good and the food baked fresh by the (mostly) ladies was disappearing fast. Ern, who was an honorary member of the Ladies Progress Auxiliary and the one who was responsible for it being (mostly) ladies, was charming everyone as they ordered their tea and baked goods. He complimented the women on their dresses and the men on their choice of hats. He told Dad jokes to entertain the children, whose response was usually a groan rather than a laugh. But that wasn't the cause of the mild consternation. Neither was the malfunction in the portable dishwasher. Shirl soon saw to that with her trusty screwdriver and a few well-chosen swear words. No, it was the total absence of Mrs. Barnes and her ubiquitous jam and onion tarts. The absence of the tarts was, to be honest, not causing the consternation. There was a general sense of relief that they didn't need to practice sleight of hand to remove them before Mrs. Barnes noticed they were gone.

Mrs. Barnes was a lovely old woman who despite her lack of baking skills had been a stalwart of the (mostly) Ladies Grevillia Progress Auxiliary since its inception in 1935. She lived on a farm out of town that she ran with her late husband for more than 60 years. Her eldest grand-daughter, Peg and her family, lived in the big house with Mrs. Barnes and ran the farm for her, when Mrs. Barnes would let her. She was fiercely independent for a woman people estimated must be in her late 90s.

Shirl rang the farm to find out if Mrs. Barnes had forgotten or needed a lift. The other members of the (mostly) Ladies Grevillia Progress Auxiliary stood around as Shirl made the call and watched as Shirl's smiling face fell. She finished the call.

"Ladies and Ern, I have some very sad news. Mrs. Barnes has passed away. Her grand-daughter found her in the kitchen sitting at the table surrounded by her freshly-baked jam and onion tarts."

There were gasps of "oh, no!" and "how sad" and "she had a good innings" as people came to terms with the news.

"Her grand-daughter said that Mrs. Barnes looked very content. She died doing something she loved – baking for people."

Muttered comments like "that's a blessing" and "we'll miss her" continued for a few more moments until Shirl patted down her apron and said, "come on ladies – and Ern. We have tea to serve. Mrs. Barnes wouldn't want us to mope. There's a long queue. Let's get to work." With that the (mostly) ladies, also patted down their aprons, straightened their backs, put on a smile and served tea.

Chapter 63 - The raffle draw

Rose, in her role as mayor, walked onto the stage with the slightly tipsy musicians and tapped the microphone. Tap, tap, tap "can you all hear me?" she asked unnecessarily. Tap, tap, tap "can you hear me now?" she asked redundantly.

"They can hear you, Rose," Doug reassured her.

The urge to tap was too strong to resist. Tap, tap, tap “good people of Grevillia, as mayor it is my great pleasure to facilitate the raffle draws. As you know, there are two raffles. The prizes in the first one were kindly donated by local businesses. I’m going to ask our local celebrity sport star, Una to draw the prizes. But before I ask her onto the stage, I’d just like to say a few words.”

An audible groan emanated from the assembled townsfolk. Rose’s “few words” were seldom few.

“I heard that!” she said with a self-deprecating grin. “And you’re quite right. I do tend to go on a bit. But not today. In fact, never again. I’m stepping down as mayor and embarking on the next phase of my life with my dear Con.”

Rose waved in the direction of Con, who smiled up at her affectionately. When the good folk of Grevillia also turned to look at Con, his Greek god-like looks did not go unnoticed.

“But that’s enough about me. Today is about celebrating the uniqueness and wonder of the Thing. It’s stood there in all its mystery since the beginning of time, but now it’s time for us to bid it farewell and welcome the great opportunities that the Brown’s Field development offers us. We thank Jason for giving us these opportunities and wish him all the best.”

A number of people in the crowd booed. The rest just looked sad. “So now I’d like to ask Una to draw the first raffle.”

Una stepped onto the stage with the box of ticket stubs. She quickly and efficiently drew first prize, a meat tray courtesy of We’ll Meat Again butchers; second prize, hair styling to the value of \$80 courtesy

of The Wholly Roller Hair Salon; and third prize, two bottles of local wine.

Defying the laws of probability, Fairy-Wren won all three prizes. Controversy raged about this outcome for many years to come.

Rose had some difficulty calming the crowd until Doug stepped in with his piercing whistle to gain their attention again.

“Right, you lot! A bit of decorum please! Let Rose speak.”

A few people muttered amongst themselves trying to get a handle on the word “decorum”, deciding that it probably meant “be quiet”, so they were.

Rose cleared her throat. “We’re lucky to have a free raffle as well. The first prize is a session with the wonderful Madame Prairie who has been very busy today helping people identify and realise their full potential. The second prize is this lovely pendant donated by our own Summa Day. She assures me it has great powers!” Summa nodded her head enthusiastically. “We don’t have a third prize...” Rose was interrupted by Doug.

“Yes, you do! The band and I are donating twenty cans of beer. We can’t possibly drink it all!” A loud cheer went up from the crowd.

“Magda, please draw the raffle.”

Magda stepped onto the stage, her voluminous dress billowing in the afternoon breeze. She carried a shoe box with numbered ticket stubs scrunched up inside. Another cheer went up from the crowd. She reached in and drew out the first ticket stub.

“This is for third prize. Twenty cans of beer.” A huge cheer went up. “It’s green ticket B16. That’s green B16,”

Magda held the ticket stub up so those whose eyesight was the equivalent strength of a small telescope could verify that it was, indeed, green B16.

A loud groan sounded from behind her on the stage. “Would you (swear word) believe it! That’s my ticket.” Doug didn’t look thrilled. “I don’t want it. Draw again, Magda.”

Another cheer went up. Magda dipped into the shoe box and pulled out another stub.

“This one is blue C22. Blue C22!”

“That’s mine!” yelled Mike the fencing contractor. “You beauty!” This almost made up for the disappointment he felt when Cat turned down a date with him.

“Now for second prize. The beautiful amethyst pendant.” Long pause... “I have another blue ticket. This one is number C54. That’s blue, C54.”

A happy squeal erupted from the crowd. “That’s mine!” Shirl pushed her way through the crowd waving her ticket in the air as she approached the stage. “I never win anything!” Shirl exclaimed as Magda handed her the small, cardboard box with the amethyst pendant inside. The pendant wasn’t something that Shirl would normally wear or even like, but she won it! She was one of those people who feels good when they win, no matter what the prize.

“Now to the first prize,” Magda declared. “The free session with the wonderful Madame Prairie. Let’s see who the lucky winner is!”

Magda had rehearsed how she would manage to pick out Jason's ticket stub without anyone noticing. She settled on sticking it to the inside of the shoebox with a small piece of Blutak. As she shuffled the ticket stubs, she deftly removed Jason's between her thumb and forefinger and held it up high.

"The winning ticket is pink B23, pink B23." She paused and waited for a response. None came. "Does someone have pink B23?" she repeated loudly. There was still no response.

"Draw again!" someone in the crowd yelled. "Yeah. Draw again!" several others picked up the cry.

Meanwhile, Jason was oblivious to the drama unfolding on the stage. A gust of wind had caught his handouts and scattered them all around. He was busily picking them up as Magda called out the number of the winning ticket. One piece of paper fluttered just out of his reach and landed at the edge of the crowd that had gathered for the raffle draw. He reached out to retrieve the paper as the crowd took up the call of "draw again, draw again!" and Jason wondered what was going on.

"One last chance for the lucky winner!" Magda cried with a note of desperation creeping into her voice. "Check your pockets. Pink B23!"

Something stirred in Jason's brain. A pink ticket. A pink ticket. Why did that ring a bell? Then he remembered. He reached into his jeans pocket and there it was. Pink B23.

"That's me!" Jason exclaimed. The chanting stopped. A number of people left to find another beer or a cup of tea. A few grumbled that it was Jason who had won. But the enthusiastic members of the

Farewell to the Thing Festival Planning Committee let out a cheer with undertones of relief. Phase two of the plan was complete.

Jason, like Shirl, wasn't all that excited about the prize, but he was very happy to have won. He saw it as a good omen that his luck had definitely changed. Squeezing his way through the remaining people in the crowd, Jason climbed onto the stage to accept the prize (in the form of a voucher inside an envelope) from a smiling and relieved Magda.

"Here you are Love," she said, giving him a big hug as she handed him the envelope. Jason was not used to either winning or being hugged, but he had to admit to himself, both felt rather nice. He took the envelope, smiled awkwardly, climbed off the stage and headed back to Brenda at the information stall.

"Hey! Good work Jase!" Brenda said with enthusiasm as he, the papers he had retrieved off the ground and the prize all returned to the safety of the space he had created.

"That's the second time you've called me Jase. No one has ever shortened my name before," Jason explained to Brenda.

"Do you mind?"

He shook his head. "Nah. It's kind of cool actually."

"How come no one has ever shortened your name? This is Australia after all. We shorten everything." Brenda laughed.

"Actually, Jason isn't my real name. I told everyone that my real name was Jason before I went to high school. I legally changed it when I turned 18."

“Really!” Brenda looked surprised. “What is your real name then?”

“I’d rather not tell you. I hated it. I was always being teased about it. No one took me seriously.”

“Surely it can’t be that bad”.

“You have no idea! It was definitely that bad,” Jason shook his head.

“I don’t know what my parents were thinking when they chose it. But knowing them, I’m sure they weren’t thinking of me.”

Brenda looked at Jason’s sad and vulnerable face, and felt for him. His hard “developer” persona made sense now. The authentic Jason Brown was fragile and needed protecting. Jason Brown developer fulfilled this role. He wore the protective armour and called the shots.

“I reckon you should use the prize that you won,” Brenda said.

“Maybe talking to someone you don’t know will be a good thing for you. I can see that you’re still very hurt by what your parents did.”

“I dunno. It was a long time ago. I’m over all that. I have a good life now. I don’t need to keep dragging it all up.” Jason appeared to busy himself tidying already tidy piles of information. Brenda could see that he didn’t want to talk any more about it.

“Would you like me to get you a cuppa?” Brenda offered by way of changing the subject.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “That would be great. White and one thanks, and if there are any cakes or biscuits left, could you pick a few out for me?” Jason pulled out his wallet to pay Brenda who shook her head.

“On me, Jase. You can buy next time.”

As Brenda walked away, Cat appeared with Paddy by her side on his lead.

“Jason. I can’t thank you enough for sending me the link to the podcast. That bloke, the Dog Whisperer, is a genius!”

Jason smiled. After seeing Cat struggle with Paddy down by the river, he researched dog trainers and discovered the podcast. The guy seemed to make a lot of sense, so Jason sent the link to Cat.

“He’s still a naughty little so-and-so, but I’m showing him who’s boss and I think he is getting the message.” Paddy looked up at Cat and tilted his head in an endearing way, conveying the impression that he was the most innocent of dogs. “We have a long way to go, but at least he brings the ball back to me now when I throw it instead of making me walk up to him to get it. That’s progress, believe me!”

Jason laughed, bent down and patted Paddy who rewarded him with a sloppy lick to his face.

“Yuck!” Jason stood up and wiped his face on a tissue he had stuffed into his pocket. “I’m glad. He’s a cute dog.”

“That’s the problem,” Cat laughed. “He’s an adorable menace. Come on you, let’s play ball.” Paddy pricked up his ears and pulled on the lead at the mention of the word “ball.” Cat ran behind him to a space near the carpark and Jason watched for a few minutes as Cat threw the ball and Paddy retrieved it. He’d never have a pet before and he started to wonder what it would be like to get one. This place is really getting to me, he thought.

Chapter 64 - Second thoughts

By 5pm, Jason still hadn't visited Madame Prairie's tent and there were a few people starting to panic. The fireworks would be starting soon signalling the end of the Festival, so time was running out to get Jason onto the Thing.

The conspirators would arouse his suspicions if they tried to persuade him to use his prize. So, they initiated Plan B – Magda. The original plan had identified her as back-up given her relationship with Jason, and it was time for her to do her part.

Magda was feeling quite ambivalent about the deception she was about to perpetrate on Jason. She, like no other, had watched the changes in Jason since he moved into Grevillia. He was no longer the pompous developer dressed in knock-off designer label suits. The young man whose emotional intelligence was in the negative range along with his social skills. Magda watched him gradually respond to kindness, empathy and good home cooking. His friendship with Brenda was clearly something he valued – maybe a bit too much. But a crush was very normal for a young man his age and she saw this as another indicator that his shell was cracking. She had even begun to believe that he could be negotiated with to somehow retain the Thing in the development without tricking him into succumbing to its power. She had agreed to encourage him to see Meadow as Madame Prairie, but she decided she wouldn't coerce him in any way.

Magda waddled up to Jason's information stand. He was sitting in a camping chair with his back to her, drinking a can of lemonade and

flicking through his phone. When he sensed someone behind him, he stood up and turned around.

“Hi Magda. Can I interest you in a once-in-a-lifetime investment opportunity?” Jason gave a cheeky smile.

“Of course, I’ll use all my spare millions and make myself squillions!”

They both laughed. “I was just talking to Madame Prairie and she said that she hadn’t seen you yet. Are you going to use your prize?”

Magda was satisfied that she had done what the committee had asked her to do and she decided that that would be the end of her role in the conspiracy.

“I’m thinking about it,” Jason replied. “Brenda thought it might do me good to talk to someone I don’t know. What do you think I should do?”

Magda really didn’t want to give him advice. She scrambled for the best response. “You’ve got to feel comfortable whatever you decide. If you feel comfortable trying a new experience, then go for it. But if you feel more comfortable not going, then that’s the right decision for you.”

“Maybe I’ll just drop in and talk to her and see if I like her.” Jason nodded his head as if he was agreeing with himself.

“That sounds like a good plan, Love. Let me know how it goes.”

Magda turned and walked away feeling less compromised than expected. She could report back that she was certain he would visit Madame Prairie (the agreed outcome of her intervention), but what happened next was beyond everyone’s control.

Chapter 65 - Final preparations

Before Magda's visit, Jason and Brenda went through the final details of their plan. The drone was fully charged. The bomb was on stand-by, Brenda's phone was also fully charged and ready to instruct the bomb to count down to detonation. During the early stages of the fireworks, Brenda would fly the drone to the top of the Thing and deposit the bomb near the rockets. She entered the coordinates of the drop-off point into the drone. She was able to be precise having seen a plan of the fireworks that was proudly presented by Rose at the final meeting of the festival committee two days earlier. The rockets were the last of the fireworks to be detonated and it was her plan to detonate the bomb once the rockets were exploding overhead. It would be quite a spectacle!

Brenda left Brown's Field in Jason's car and parked on the side of a gravel road leading into the main homestead at Brown's Farm. She had a good view of the festival in the valley below her. She had about two hours to kill so opened up her laptop and busied herself with a coding problem she was trying to solve for the company she worked for. She loved working from "home".

Jason waited another hour before packing up his information into plastic crates and shutting their lids. He hadn't given much of the material away but he had enjoyed the conversations with people who had dropped by to look at the plans. Some were still upset that the Thing needed to be demolished. Others agreed that there were some good employment opportunities attached to the development. A few teased him over the drunken food fight with Brenda and

Magda a few days earlier. He blushed as the details of his indiscretion were recounted to him. He still had very little recollection.

Chapter 66 - Madame Prairie

Meadow checked her watch for the umpteenth time, noting that there was only about another hour before the fireworks began and she had to shut up shop. Or should that be shut up yurt? In any event, she hadn't seen Jason yet and was tired of reiterating this fact to the very anxious members of the festival organising committee. Her reassurances that "what will be, will be" and "focus on what you can control" and "the universe has a plan" did not wash with the good folk on the festival planning committee, who contrary to all the pearls of wisdom she uttered, kept popping in to double check. Added to this, the veil she had chosen to cover her face was irritating her skin and making it hard to take big, calming breaths.

A young man entered the yurt and looked tentatively at her. Meadow noted that he was tall, slightly stooped, fair skinned, blue-eyed and had a mop of unruly, sandy hair.

"Are you Madame Prairie?" the young man asked. "I won the prize for a half hour of hypnotherapy."

"You must be Jason," Meadow responded. Pointing to the pile of brightly coloured cushions she added, "come over here and make yourself comfortable."

Jason stood his ground at the entry to the yurt. "I'm not sure about hypnotherapy. Can we just talk first?"

“Of course,” Meadow replied. “Sit down and I’ll make you a cup of herbal tea.” When she noticed Jason turning up his nose at the mention of herbal tea, she added “or not. I’ll get you some cold water.”

Jason watched Meadow glide in her long, blue velvet dress to a small table with glasses and an empty jug. She filled the jug with cold water from a camping fridge and poured two glasses, which she carried over to Jason who was sitting rather awkwardly on the pile of cushions. Meadow handed him his glass and she set hers down on the floor next to the cushions. She lowered herself onto a pile opposite Jason.

“What do you want to know, Jason?”

“I’m not sure. People say that it’s good to talk to someone you don’t know about things that are troubling you. Things weren’t troubling me until I came down here for work.”

“Tell me what happened?” Meadow tipped her head to one side and looked directly at Jason. Up this close he noticed how blue her eyes were.

“I met Summa and she had the strangest reaction to me. It’s like she decided that no matter what, she was going to hate me. Then I kept failing to demolish the Thing, which made my business partner, Eric abuse me even more than normal. Then all the people in Grevillia were unpleasant to me because of the Thing. I mean really unpleasant, like Una kicking me out of her B and B, which I was going to leave anyway. Who needs that much purple in their life?” Jason was on a roll. “But then I met Magda and she was kind to me and I don’t know why. She is the kindest person I ever met. I’m staying at

her place while I get the development up and running. Then there's Brenda. I used to go to school with her and she's helping me with a plan to demolish the Thing. I have a big crush on her and I don't know what to do with that either." Jason stopped and took a sip of water.

Meadow took a deep breath. "Jason, I can't really talk to you about these things because, full disclosure, Summa is my daughter, and Magda and Una are my sisters. I'm not Madame Prairie. That's just my business name. Actually, I'm Meadow."

Jason flushed bright red. "I'm sorry if I was rude about your family," he stuttered.

"Don't worry. Una is the weird sister and Magda is the saint. So, you have summed them both up well. As for Summa, she told me all about you and how you drive each other crazy. If you want to know what I really think, I think you two have history in another life."

"I don't believe in all that stuff about past lives," Jason retorted.

"Magda reckons we set each other off because we are too much alike. I don't think so."

"Look Jason, I can't be your therapist, but there's nothing to stop us just having a nice chat." Meadow reached for her glass of water and was about to take a sip when she remembered the veil. "I don't need this," she said as she bent her head to pull it off.

Chapter 67 - Lifting the veil

Meadow shook her long, wavy greying hair loose, flicked it behind her shoulders and looked up at Jason. His mouth was wide open and he was pale as a ghost.

“Mum?”

“Wombat?”

Time stood still as mother and son stared at one another. Neither could form a coherent word. Both thought, “how could I not have seen this?” and both concluded absolutely nothing. It was all too overwhelming.

Jason reverted to his goldfish imitation as he tried to process not only the fact that he was sitting opposite the mother he hadn’t seen in twenty years while sitting on a pile of cushions in a yurt, but also that Summa was his sister, and Una and Magda were his aunts.

“My name’s Jason,” Jason croaked at last. “And what possessed you to call a child Wombat? Do you know how hard it was going through school with the name Wombat? His voice became stronger and he sat up straight looking Meadow in the eye. “It was hard enough living with your other mad sister Pauline. How many more are there of you anyway?”

Meadow shook her head. “Just the four of us,” she said. He continued. “When did you change from Barbara to Meadow? How many other brothers and sisters do I have that I didn’t know about? Where’s Dad? Still emu farming?”

“I’m sorry Wo...Jason! You must have hundreds of questions...”

Jason cut her off and said in a very shaky voice, “actually I only have one question I really want you to answer and I’m sure you know what it is. Why did you give me away? I was just a little kid. You left me with Pauline and a string of foster parents and just disappeared out of my life.”

“I don’t expect forgiveness or understanding, Jason. What I did was wrong. I’ve regretted those decisions every day since I made them. I ran away from everything and everyone and you suffered because of it. When your Dad left, I was completely lost. He was everything to me. I couldn’t give you the care you needed when I was in such a bad way myself. I thought you would be better off without me and that you would be OK no matter what. If you could sell off half the land our house sat on when you were only nine, I wrongly thought you could manage anything. I forgot you were still just a little boy.”

Jason looked miserable and shocked at the same time. His head was spinning after what he’d just discovered. He wasn’t sure which was the greatest shock, finding his mother or fighting all this time with his sister. Then there was Una being his aunt. He wasn’t happy with that. But finding out that Magda was his aunt was a big plus.

“I don’t know what to say, Mum, Meadow, Madame Prairie, Barbara, who ever you are. From having no family at all, suddenly there you all are. Hiding in plain sight. Are there any others I should know about?”

Meadow paused and took a deep breath. “Actually, yes. Summa has a twin brother, Wynter. You might have seen him helping at the food truck.”

“At least you didn’t call any of them Koala, Kangaroo or Echidna.” Jason shook his head as if to loosen all the jumbled thoughts in it.

Meadow smiled a weak smile. “There’s that.”

“So, you live in the commune out of town?” Jason asked. “Have you been there all this time? Did you ever make any attempt to find me?”

“I did a few years back but there was no trace of you. I get it now. You changed your name. Jason, I’m sorry. This has been a big shock for you, for me too, and it’s going to take a long time to work through it all. That is, if you want to. And I completely understand if you never want to see me again.”

“I can’t answer that right now. I need to talk to Magda. She makes the most sense to me. But I think I need one of those herbal teas you offered earlier. I don’t think I can get up right now.”

“Better than that. How about I get you something you like and I’ll find Magda and bring her back with me.”

“Coffee would be good, if you can find one.” With that Jason slumped back onto the cushions and closed his eyes.

Chapter 68 - Magda

Magda was looking for Jason when she saw Meadow coming towards her. She looked pale and not at all well.

“What’s the matter, Sis? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” Magda clucked around her sister, putting a protective arm around her.

“I’ve just met Jason,” Meadow said quietly.

Seizing the wrong end of the stick and running with it, Magda sighed with relief.

“Ah yes. He can be a bit hard to fathom to begin with, but he’s a really lovely young man when you get to know him.”

Meadow shook her head vigorously. “No Magda, you don’t understand. He’s not Jason...”

“There’s an imposter in there? Oh, my lord, let me get Constable Bob for you and we’ll flush him out.” Magda started to walk away.

“Stop, Magda! He’s not Jason, he’s Wombat. He’s my son.” With that Meadow broke down and sobbed.

“Wombat? Are you sure?” Meadow nodded. “I knew there was something familiar about him. He’s got your eyes and wild hair. How? When? Oh dear, no wonder you look so shocked.”

“He needs you, Magda. He really cares about you. He’s in the yurt. I said I’d get him a coffee and bring you back with me. Will you come?”

“Of course I’ll come. The poor lad. He must be in shock. He doesn’t need coffee, he needs a strong, sweet tea. Let’s pick one up from the ladies auxiliary.”

Meadow resumed sobbing. “You know my son better than me! I’m a terrible mother!”

Magda tutt tutted. “Enough of the self-pity. Now’s not the time. You both need to take this slowly and try to keep a clear head.”

The two women reached the (mostly) Ladies Grevillia Progress Auxiliary tea stand as they were starting to pack the tea things away.

“We have a tea emergency!” Magda stated as she fronted the stand. “We need one, strong white tea with three sugars, I’ll have a… make that two strong teas, and you Barb?”

“Make that three,” Meadow responded.

“We’ve had a bit of a shock, you know?” said Shirl.

“How can you have heard?” Meadow asked. “I’ve only just found out myself!”

The wrong end of the stick made another appearance. “Well, when she didn’t turn up this morning, we called her daughter and she gave us the sad news. How did you find out, we’re the only ones her daughter has told to my knowledge.”

“You’re not talking about Jason then?” Meadow said in a shaky voice.

“Why would we be talking about him when it’s Mrs. Barnes whose died!” Ern retorted.

“What’s happened to Jason?” asked Shirl.

“Mrs. Barnes is dead?” said Magda. “Look, I think we had better just collect our teas. This is getting very confusing.”

Meadow carried two cups of tea and Magda one. They made their way through the various groups of people to the yurt. The sisters walked quietly inside. Jason was still curled up on the cushions. Magda thought he looked like a little boy and her heart went out to him yet again. Jason stirred, looked up and saw the two women. He jumped off the pile of cushions and threw himself at Magda who was barely able to put the tea down on a table as he did so. She wrapped

her arms around him and he burst into tears. Magda rocked him from side to side patting him on the back.

“It’s going to be OK, Love. You’ve had a big shock. But you’re with your Auntie Magda now.”

Hearing her say those words, Jason sobbed even louder. He sobbed like he had never sobbed before. All those loveless childhood years suddenly overwhelming him.

“Come on, Love. Sit down. I’ve got a nice cup of tea for you. You sit down too, Barb. Let’s just drink our tea.”

Meadow and Jason sat back down on the cushion pile with their cups of tea. Magda brought a folding chair over near them and took a big sip of hers, nodding encouragement to Jason and Meadow to do the same. Jason took a number of shuddering breaths and sipped his tea. It was like a medicine. Since living with Magda, tea had taken on a whole new meaning to him. Magda served tea with love and always at the right time. Like now. He felt more grounded now that Magda was here.

“Well! This is not how I thought the day would go,” said Magda. “I’ve had quite a shock. I can’t imagine what you two are feeling!”

Jason and Meadow looked at her and shook their heads. Neither felt much like talking.

“It’s beginning to get dark and the fireworks will be starting soon. We should find Summa and tell her what’s going on. She deserves to know. So does Wynter. Do you know where they are?”

Chapter 69 - Fireworks

Just then the first fireworks started to crackle. "They're all on top of the Thing watching the fireworks," Meadow said.

"What do you mean they're on top of the Thing?" Jason exclaimed. "It's out of bounds!"

"No, Love," Magda replied. "They had to move the fireworks to the top of the cottage roof. Every time Con and Rose tried to set the fireworks on top of the Thing, they became distracted and started playing."

"There can't be anyone on top of the Thing," Jason yelled. "It's going to blow up!"

"No, Love, I told you, the fireworks have been moved. They'll all perfectly safe up there."

"They're not! Brenda and I have put a bomb together that's going to go off during the finale of the fireworks. Brenda is using a drone to drop it!"

"What? This can't happen! You've got to stop her!" Meadow screamed.

Jason looked so pale Magda feared he would faint. "Can you contact her?" she asked Jason anxiously. But Jason was already on his phone trying to contact Brenda.

"It's going to voicemail," he replied anxiously.

"Where is she? Is she here on Brown's Field, Jason?" Magda was by now going pale as well.

“No, she’s not on site. She was going to the gravel road entrance to Brown’s Farm. I don’t have time to get to her. She has my car. I’ll go and warn everyone on top of the Thing. Could one of you find someone to drive to where she’s parked and try to stop her giving the drone the go-ahead to deliver the bomb?”

Meadow and Jason charged out of the yurt. Meadow grabbed the first person she could see, who turned out to be Fairy-Wren.

“Can you drive me to the entrance to the farm? Now! I have to stop a bomb being dropped.”

Fairy-Wren looked incredulous. “Have you been on the whacky-backy? What’s this about bombs?”

“I don’t have time to explain. Can you drive me? It’s a matter of life or death!” Meadow looked so distraught that Fairy-Wren concluded there was something serious going on.

“Come on then. My car’s in the carpark. You can tell me what this is all about on the way.”

Jason took off like a rocket to the Thing shouting as he ran.

“Bomb! There’s a bomb on the Thing. Everyone get back.”

Doug De Graves and the Zombies were playing the accompanying music to the fireworks display that was rapidly reaching a crescendo. Jason rushed onto the stage and grabbed the microphone from Doug.

“There’s a bomb on the Thing. Get back. Get back.”

People burst into laughter.

“Yeah, good one, Jase!” some said.

Others said “pull the other one!” Most just ignored him and called on Doug to get back to playing music.

Seeing no alternative, Jason charged forward towards the Thing and using the handy hand and foot holds, starting climbing. A sense of well-being overcame him and he started to wonder what he was doing in such a wonderful place. He looked around and saw many ways that he could slide or climb, and if he had a big sheet, make a fun cubby to sit in. But something was tickling the back of his mind. What was it? Something not good. Danger. Yes! That’s it. There’s danger. A bomb is going to be dropped. He climbed to the top and started shouting at the people sitting there.

“Get down. There’s a bomb coming. It’s going to be dropped on top here in a few minutes. You have to get as far away as you can.”

Summa stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“Trust you to ruin our fun! Go away!”

She sat down again and started to laugh with her brother and friends as they watched the fireworks.

“I’m serious. You have to listen to me. A drone is going to deliver a bomb to blow up the Thing at the same time as the end of the fireworks. I’m not making this up! Please. Please Summa. You have to believe me. Your Mum sent me up here to warn you. Our Mum sent me up here. Our Mum.”

“What did you say?” Summa screamed. “Our Mum?”

“Yes. It’s true. I’m your half-brother Wombat. I only found out just now that Meadow is my Mum and you are my sister. But we don’t have time for this now. Please, all of you, please get off the Thing!”

Summa stood up and looked like she was going to hit Jason, until she looked below and saw Magda jumping up and down. People were running away from the Thing, some of them screaming. Summa's brother and friends realised that something was going on and started to slide down the Thing. Summa stood her ground.

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on."

"I will, I promise, but please leave. The last of the fireworks have already been launched. The drone will be here any minute, then we only have a few minutes to get away."

"You can't blow the Thing up!" Summa looked distraught. "Can't you do something?"

"I'll stay until it drops then I'll try to disarm it, but you have to go. Now!"

Jason heard a buzzing sound approaching and saw the lights on the drone.

"Summa. Go!"

Summa ran to one of the slides and scooted down to the ground, taking off after all the other people who were running away.

The drone hovered over Jason's head and slowly dropped its lethal load. He caught it in his hands and as hard as he could, he threw it off the far side of the Thing near the creek. He followed Summa down the slide and ran.

"Get as far away as you can," he yelled.

When Jason was a safe distance from the Thing, he took a deep breath and waited for the explosion. He felt something bump his leg.

He looked down. Paddy looked up at him with the bomb in his mouth and his tail wagging.

“Aren’t I a good boy?” he seemed to say. “I’ve brought back this funny shaped ball that you threw.”

“Good boy, Paddy,” Jason said through clenched teeth. “Give me the ball.”

Paddy dropped it at Jason’s feet. Jason gently lifted the bomb and set off away from the crowd towards the creek. The timer on the bomb said ninety seconds – maybe enough time to throw it into the water where it would do the least amount of damage. Jason ran as fast as he could with a very excited Paddy trying to get the bomb back so the nice man could throw it again. Twenty seconds. Ten...

Chapter 70 - Finale

The grand finale of the fireworks burst into the night sky, with explosions of brilliant colours and streaks of diamond clusters. At the same time a loud boom sounded from behind the Thing in the direction of the creek. A plume of water shot into the air. Magda, Meadow and Summa gasped then held each other in a despairing group hug.

“Oh Jason, what have you done?”

Magda felt tears stinging her eyes. Meadow was sobbing and Summa didn’t know what to feel.

A whisper went round the crowd as people realised Jason had run away from them to get rid of the bomb and that he had no chance of surviving. The atmosphere was heavy as the full extent of what he had done hit them. People hugged each other and started to drift away. Until they heard loud barking and a small and very wet Paddy came charging towards them looking for Cat.

“Paddy! You’re OK! Good boy! Where’s Jason?”

Someone in the crowd pointed towards the Thing and said “look! There he is!” Jason was standing on top of the Thing soaking wet. He was jumping up and down clearly having a great time. A cheer went up from the crowd. Magda, Meadow and Summa rushed to the Thing. Brenda joined them. Fairy-Wren had reached her too late to stop the drone being launched and she feared the worst like everyone else.

Jason looked down and saw the family he didn’t know he had just a few hours ago.

“Hi Mum, Aunty Magda, Sis! Hi Brenda. Will you marry me?”

Brenda yelled back, “Nah. I’d rather be your friend.”

“That’s OK. Come up and play! This is the best!”,

Summa and Meadow used the handy foot and hand holds to climb up the Thing. Magda declared herself too old for such nonsense and stayed at the bottom. When they reached the top, Jason gave each of them in turn a big hug. It felt good. Even hugging Summa felt good. Despite everything, Summa thought it felt good as well.

Magda went looking for Wynter to tell him them about his half-brother and shooed him up the Thing to join his family. Shirl joined Magda at the bottom of the Thing.

“You look like you need a cuppa,” she said.

“Oh! Yes!” said Magda and accompanied Shirl back to the (mostly) ladies of the Grevillia Progress Auxiliary tea stand where Ern put on the kettle, found a few folding chairs for them to sit in, and made the ladies the best tea they had ever tasted.

Eighteen months later

A large crowd gathered in Brown’s Field for the official opening of Brown’s Field Plaza. Doug De Graves and the Zombies were on a big stage in the heart of the Plaza – a huge open-air park with the new businesses leading from it. The Thing loomed majestically in the middle of the Plaza. It sat comfortably where it had always sat, once again part of the endless changes happening around it. The Plaza was the latest and wouldn’t be the last.

When the Zombies had finished their set, the VIPs mounted the stage. The Premier, Ms McKenzie Fishbaum, the Minister for the Arts and Culture, Rafiq Abraham, the Mayor of Grevillia, Una Waters and the developer Jason Brown took their seats.

Una stood up and walked to the microphone. She, as always, cut an imposing figure given her height. Today she had opted to move away from wearing purple everything and restricted it to the shirt she wore under a black suit jacket, purple boots and a purple streak in her

otherwise grey hair. She looked into the crowd and smiled to acknowledge her sisters, niece and nephews and partner Fairy-Wren who stood with them near the front of the stage. Una cleared her throat.

“Madam Premier, Minister and the good people of Grevillia, it is my pleasure to welcome you here today to officially open Brown’s Field Plaza. We came very close to not having this magnificent development that features the famous Thing, one of the unacknowledged wonders of the world, and soon to be World Heritage listed, as its central feature. I’m sure no one can forget that night when, thanks to the quick thinking and bravery of the developer of this Plaza, Mr Jason Brown, the Thing survived. I think we can all finally forgive Mr Brown for trying to blow it up in the first place.”

Una paused while the crowd laughed loudly. Jason flushed red and inspected his new, very trendy sneakers.

“The Plaza development has exceeded all our expectations, which in my case was easily done, as I had no expectations to begin with.”

The crowd roared with laughter again. “But hats off to Mr Brown, despite many setbacks and against all the odds, he never gave up. And here we have it – a magnificent facility that provided much needed employment during its construction, and many new employment opportunities now it has been completed. I’m particularly happy with the fitness complex complete with Olympic sized swimming facilities state of the art fitness equipment, personal trainers and coaches, all available to provide support for budding athletes in the region. We must thank the Minister for Sport and

Recreation, Saanvi Kaur, who couldn't be here today, for pledging on-going funding for development programs targeting local, talented young athletes. Without having to leave the region for training, we hope that one day many of them will represent their country in their chosen sport."

Una paused while the crowd clapped and cheered.

"We are also delighted with the arts complex that provides workshop spaces for local artists, music rehearsal rooms, a performing arts theatre that can seat eight hundred people, and a studio that can be booked to record podcasts and music."

A loud cheer erupted from Doug and his fellow band members, who had already used the studio to record their hit song, *The Thing Lives*, dedicated to the Thing and those who had worked to save it. Una continued.

"Of course, no development would be complete without places to eat."

Laughter erupted again.

"Brown's Field Plaza has a food court and half a dozen cafes and restaurants that cater to all tastes. I'll put in a plug here for my sister Barbara who has opened a vegan restaurant that makes the best curries you will ever taste."

A cheer went up for Meadow, now known by her given name of Barbara, from her family gathered around her.

"I could go on about all the others wonderful features of Brown's Field Plaza, but I think I've said enough."

A shout of “too right” from Spider sent the crowd into another burst of laughter.

“I’ll now invite the Honourable the Premier, Ms McKenzie Fishbaum to officially open Brown’s Field Plaza.”

Chapter 71 - Loose ends

With the formalities over, people drifted away to look around and find something to eat at one of the many outlets selling food. Jason, Magda and Brenda found three seats in a small café and ordered a much-needed coffee. They met regularly as good friends do. Today was no exception. There was still much to process.

“You’ll never guess what I found out yesterday,” Magda said mysteriously.

“You’re right. I’ll never guess. Can you guess Brenda? Shall we consult our spiritual guides...”

“Enough of that, young Jason. I was talking to Mrs. Barnes granddaughter. You remember Mrs. Barnes of jam and onion tart fame? She died the day of the Farewell to the Thing Festival. Well, she was going through her things and she found the infamous recipe...”

“I hope she burned it,” Jason butted in.

“No. That’s the thing. When Peg looked at the recipe, she noticed that the name of the tarts was obscured by an old splotch of jam. The main ingredient was as well. You’ll never believe this! When Peg

looked closely, she realised that the recipe was for ham and onion tarts, not jam and onion tarts.”

Magda could barely finish the sentence before she burst into peals of laughter.

“For years she used the wrong ingredient!”

Both Jason and Brenda were infected by Magda’s laughter, which was now accompanied by loud hiccupping.

The three of them eventually settled down, ordered their coffees and chatted like the good friends they had become.

Rose and Con walked into the café with their nine-month-old baby daughter, Fern, who was protesting loudly about being placed in a high chair. Doug and Andy came in shortly afterwards and sat near Rose and Con. Andy pulled funny faces at Fern who was soon reduced to giggles.

Jason, Magda and Brenda smiled at Andy’s antics and gave them all a cheery wave.

Magda looked affectionately at Jason.

He looked fitter and happier than he had ever been in his life. He had gained muscle to replace the fat around his middle. With Una as his personal trainer, he had no chance of fooling himself that his fat was muscle. Una didn’t mince words. His choice of clothing, slim fitting jeans, t-shirts, ankle boots and a leather jacket, contrasted mightily with the Jason of old who only wore suits and ties. Today his jeans were black, his white t-shirt advertised a well-known band he had started to follow and he had his favourite brown leather bomber jacket that Brenda had talked him into buying over a year ago.

Brenda still had jewelled coloured hair and favoured an all-over black look – jeans, long-sleeved top with cowl neckline and suede boots. She now lived in Grevillia and still worked for the same company phoning into meetings as needed while solving complex coding and security issues for clients. Grevillia had grown on her during the time she had spent there leading up to the attempted destruction of the Thing. She and Jason were still friends and trained together at the fitness facility at least twice a week. Brenda had met some other young people and had a happy social life that included regular karaoke sessions at the Corner Hotel. They usually met and ate together at the Bistro, where Brenda, Jason and Magda's food fight was immortalised in a mural on the wall.

Magda sipped her coffee and smiled benevolently. These two young people were very special to her and had shown her what she meant to them in many practical ways. In the past eighteen months her hip arthritis had become worse and she was booked in for a hip replacement in a few weeks' time. She had been advised to lose weight, and she did try, but it stubbornly refused to budge. Every morning, she walked (with great difficulty) down to the river where more often than not she ran into Cat and Paddy. Paddy was still very energetic, but Cat, using the tips she gained from podcasts, had established in his little mind that she was the boss, not him, so there had been no more repeats of the duck on the river incident.

"How did lunch with your Mum go yesterday?" Magda enquired of Jason.

He thought for several seconds before answering.

“I’d say good. We met at the Bakery so I was able to order a big meat pie instead of eating lentils.” The three of them grinned at this. “I don’t think we will ever be able to relate to each other like a normal mother and son. Too much water went under the bridge. But we’re both trying to relate to each other as adults and apart from when she bangs on about the Universe, I get along with her well.”

“I’m really glad to hear you say that, Jason.” Magda smiled at him and took his hand, giving it a squeeze. “I find her a bit odd as well. I guess all of us sisters are odd in our own ways, so I shouldn’t judge.”

“Talking of odd, Summa and I have started getting together to design my cottage garden. All those years growing up in the commune rubbed off on her. She’s really knowledgeable about growing vegetables and picking the right plants for the conditions. I’ve even started to encourage her to diversify her business and include landscape gardening. She’s thinking about it.”

“I remember how you two used to drive each other mad. Remember, I told you that it was because you were alike.” Magda looked a little smug.

“I’m still not sure about that, but funnily enough, we are alike in one thing. You know how we both sneeze in the sun? If I’d known it ran in families back then, I might have realised we could be related and run away!”

“Well, Love, I’m glad you didn’t.”

Jason swallowed and looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Magda, I don’t tell you enough what you mean to me. You were the only one who saw who I was and accepted me all the same. When I

had no one who cared about me in my life, you did. You've been more of a mother to me in the past few years than my natural mother or all of the foster mothers combined."

Jason looked at Magda who took a shuddering breath and burst into tears.

"That's the loveliest thing anyone but my darling hubby has ever said to me!"

"Stop it you two! Now I'm crying." Brenda picked up a napkin from the container on the table and honked loudly into it. "Cloud engineers don't cry, they're far too sensible!" At which point all three broke into peals of laughter.

"I really need to go but before I do, I have a present for you Aunty Magda."

Jason handed Magda a small, slim box. Her face lit up when she opened it.

"It's a silver spoon! Thank you Love. Look what it says, Brenda. 'Best Aunty Ever' with a little picture of the Thing. It's perfect, Jason and it goes straight into my collection."

Magda wiped another tear from her eye and carefully put the spoon into her handbag. Jason stood up to go.

"Mike is coming to Tarquin's cottage to put up some fencing. When that's done, I think I'm going to get a dog. Not one like Paddy though! I'm going to get a nice, placid rescue dog."

“Wow! Jason Brown, developer extraordinaire, not only renovating a run-down cottage but getting a dog. Next thing we know, you’ll be introducing us to your wife-to-be!”

Brenda poked Jason affectionately in the ribs. He blushed bright red.

“Funny you should say that...”

“No way! You’re not getting married, are you?” Brenda exclaimed.

“No! Of course not, but I have met a really nice woman who works in the Council. It’s early days so we’ll see what happens. But before you two give me the third degree, I have work to do on the cottage, so I’m off.” Jason gave Magda a kiss on the cheek and Brenda a sideways hug as she sat in her chair.

With a toss of his wild, sandy hair, Jason looked over at the Thing and mouthed “Thank you.”

Epilogue

In the Orion-Cygnus arm of the Milky Way, Sol began its slow death. It grew larger and larger consuming the outer planets as it did so. The Thing sat where it had always sat as the seas boiled, lava erupted from the earth and Sol edged closer and closer. As earth and all things on it dissolved, the energy of the Thing was free and unfettered at last to explore the far reaches of the Universe.

The end

About the author

Vanessa Lynne

Vanessa Lynne grew up in Western Australia where she spent most of her working life in the not-for-profit sector as an adult educationalist.

Most of Vanessa's writing was work related and generally not the sort to make the New York Time's bestseller list. But it was useful in its own way, some making its way into journals and short story collections.

After 47 years in the workforce, retirement was greatly anticipated then thwarted by an unreliable body and a diagnosis of Parkinson's. Oddly, having a brain that now had a mind of its own, seemed to unleash latent creativity. She started a business making fabric alternatives to wrapping paper naming the product Prezziesax, for which she apologises. Profits are donated to Parkinson's research. Find out more at prezziesax.com.au

This creative spell also unleashed an illustrated book for children about Parkinson's, another for children about Alzheimer's and a novel for adults that has nothing to do with degenerative, neurological conditions. Jason Versus the Thing is Vanessa's first full-length novel. It explores doggedness, joy, self-discovery and how to run meetings.



Vanessa now lives in Victoria with her subsequent husband and a blended family of four children and eight grandchildren.