A surreal image of a person surfing on a beach. The person is seen from behind, wearing dark shorts, with their arms outstretched. They are riding a wave on a sandy beach. In the background, the Earth is visible as a large, curved horizon line, set against a dark blue space sky filled with numerous white stars. The overall scene is a metaphorical representation of humanity's relationship with the planet.

***Who Will Save
the Planet?***

Peter McLennan

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by Peter McLennan

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Chapter 1

Preparations

‘Idiot!’ said Jason. He made his hand into a pistol shape and fired an imaginary bullet into the car’s radio.

‘Keep your hands on the wheel,’ said his father, staring through the windscreen with eyes wide open.

‘Well, he *is* an idiot.’ Jason skidded the car slightly as it rounded a corner on the dusty track.

‘That’s the Prime Minister you’re talking about.’

‘Then he should know better.’

‘You just worry about your driving. And be careful. This isn’t our car, you know.’

Jason kicked it up into third gear, this time without eliciting any crunching sounds from the gearbox. How dumb that he still had to wait for years before he could get his license, when he could drive perfectly well right now.

The radio continued on with its story:

‘So, Prime Minister, does that mean you won’t be signing up to the emission control targets at the Rotterdam Environmental Conference next month?’

‘I didn’t say that. I’ll be announcing the government’s position on the Rotterdam targets in a few days time. My point is simply that last month was the coldest November we’ve had in over a decade, so global warming isn’t obvious.’

‘He’s got you there,’ said Jason’s father.

‘No, he hasn’t. Just because one month was cold means stuff all. You can’t just look at one month—’

‘Watch out for that tree!’ Jason’s father gripped the dashboard in front of him with both hands.

‘I can see it. I *do* have my glasses on, Dad.’ Jason deftly manoeuvred the four-wheel-drive around the gum, secretly enjoying giving his passenger a scare. Two magpies thought it was a bit close for comfort, and abandoned the tree in favour of peace and quiet elsewhere.

‘Anyway,’ said Jason’s father, ‘you should be glad it’s so dry. If Mr McKenzie could get anything to grow on his land, you couldn’t practice driving on it.’

Jason waved a hand at the radio. ‘The Prime Minister’s just being selfish! He keeps talking about how much it’d cost to fix the environment, and he won’t cough up.’

‘It’s not really his money. He gets it from taxpayers like me.’

‘You and mum always tell me off when I’m selfish. Not that I ever am, of course,’ said Jason, managing to keep a straight face.

‘I guess you’re entitled to your opinion, but so is he. And so am I, for that matter.’

Jason nodded slowly. He had to keep reminding himself of that. Sometimes it wasn’t easy.

‘I’m getting a bit sick of this environmental stuff,’ his father went on. Maybe he was entitled to his opinion, but he was also entitled to another little thrill, so Jason steered towards the dry creek bed. It was almost two metres deep in places; not something you’d want to drive into.

‘Careful of the creek bed,’ said Jason’s father, with forced calmness.

‘Pardon?’

‘Creek bed!’

‘I can’t hear you over the radio.’

‘*STOP!*’

Jason spun the steering wheel hard, spraying a shower of rubble from the back wheels into the gully. Jason’s father was thrown against the car door.

‘Sorry about that, Dad. There’s a dry creek bed just there.’

‘I think I’ve had about as much of this as I can hack. Anyway, we’ve got to get ready for that church picnic your mother wants us to go to.’

‘Oh yeah. Bummer. Anyway, thanks for the lesson, Dad.’

‘If you really want to thank me, you can lug that tanbark around the back sometime. There’s a ton of it, though.’

‘No, I’ll do that.’

After Jason parked the four-wheel-drive in the shed, he and his father trudged across the stubbly paddock back home, which was just next door. A cloud of dust, kicked up by Jason’s driving, hung over the whole field; it was so thick that it made their teeth gritty.

‘Don’t forget to thank Mr McKenzie for letting you use his car and field,’ said Jason’s father.

‘Why don’t *you* get a four-wheel-drive, Dad? Then I could hoon around here whenever I wanted. School holidays are coming up, you know.’

‘They’re expensive, is why. We won’t be getting another car for yonks, I’m afraid. Maybe never, if the government does all those environmental things you want them to.’



Jason bounded up the steps to the broad wooden verandah that surrounded his home and went inside. As usual, the house smelt of an unpleasant mixture of fish from his father’s work clothes, and scented candles from his mother’s optimistic attempts to get rid of the fish smell. Jason was pretty much used to the aroma, and didn’t notice it after a few minutes.

He headed straight for his room and turned on his computer. Someone had put five or six copies of *Science Adviser* magazine on top of the keyboard. His mother must have scooped up some more back issues from work for him to read. ‘Thanks, Mum!’ he yelled in the direction of the kitchen, and moved the mags onto his desk.

Once his computer had finished booting up, he opened the file containing his notes for the debate at school tomorrow. Since the Prime Minister was talking about global warming on the radio, he really ought to mention that. He googled for ‘Amsterdam conference’ to get more info, but surprisingly nothing came up.

Jason’s mother walked in. ‘Ready for the picnic?’

‘Do I really have to go?’ said Jason, screwing up his face like a prune.

His mother looked a bit hurt. ‘Come on, it’ll be fun! I think David’s family is going.’

‘Nah; too many people. I’ll catch David at school tomorrow.’

‘Too many people? In Sapphire Bay?’

‘Anyway, I need to work on my speech for the debate tomorrow.’

‘You weren’t too busy to go driving earlier.’

Jason’s father walked in and came to his rescue. ‘Anne, don’t try to talk him into coming. Someone’s got to get that tanbark off the nature strip.’ He gave Jason a wink.

‘Sounds like a conspiracy to me,’ muttered Jason’s mother, and walked out.

‘Thanks, Dad.’

So Jason’s parents took themselves off to the picnic. Jason got stuck into moving the mountain of tanbark, which was pretty unpleasant work in the heat of the day. But at least it wasn’t as unpleasant as a church picnic, surrounded by heaps of nosey busy-bodies.

Although Jason didn’t find the activity to be particularly entertaining, that view wasn’t shared by his dog, Tangles. Nobody really knew what kind of dog Tangles was. ‘Most of them,’ Jason’s father reckoned. Tangles orbited the wheelbarrow’s every trip with frenzied excitement. Jason contemplated trying to harness some of that energy by hooking him up to the barrow, but couldn’t quite work out how.

At last, the chore was finished. Jason retreated inside and helped himself to a large glass of milk, then went to look at his debate notes again.



Some while later, Jason’s parents arrived home. ‘Haven’t you moved all day?’ asked his mother. She handed over a sausage sandwich wrapped in a serviette.

‘Yum! Lunch!’

‘Lunch? It’s four o’clock! Didn’t you get yourself something?’

‘Been busy,’ said Jason, through a mouthful of cold sausage.

His mother cleared a space on the bed and sat down. ‘So how are the preparations coming?’

‘Okay, I guess. I’m still not sure I want to do this, though.’

‘Why not? This debate is on your favourite topic!’

‘Yeah, but the whole school will be watching.’

‘You’ll be fine. That’s why I suggested you should join the debating club in the first place.’

‘To be nervous?’

‘I thought it would give you a bit of extra confidence in speaking to people, and working with other people as a team. Not to mention looking at issues from both sides, of course.’

‘I’ll just be glad when it’s over.’

Jason’s mother nodded. ‘That’s natural. Don’t worry about it. Just think of it as an opportunity to convince them about global warming.’

‘Yeah, that’ll be good at least.’

‘Just don’t take it too seriously. You can’t save the planet all by yourself, you know.’

‘I guess. Wish I could, though.’



Chapter 2

The Great Debate

Monday mornings were bad. It was the longest possible time until the next weekend.

What made things worse was that the school week started with Mr Szabo's English class. You'd think Mr Szabo would have slacked off, with this being the last week of school for the year, but no. He was trying to drag comments out of the class about some short story they were supposed to have read. Jason had actually looked at the story, but didn't think it was worth commenting on. Hardly anything in class ever was.

Mr Szabo wasn't having much luck. Even the class's attention-seekers had nothing to say. With an exasperated look, the teacher turned to Jason.

'Mr Saunders, you haven't said anything all year. This is your last chance!'

Jason just smiled.

Mr Szabo shrugged his shoulders and tried his luck elsewhere. In an attempt to at least *look* interested, Jason commenced a study of the graffiti on the brickwork behind Mr Szabo's head.

After English came geography, which was normally just as boring. At least today's topic was good, though: Ms McWilliam was talking about global warming. She was attempting a similar strategy to Mr Szabo, and was trying to construct a list of issues

based on class input. Jason just let them go for it, even though some of the comments were pretty stupid. Some were *very* stupid. *Intolerably* stupid.

‘Idiot!’ he muttered. Unfortunately, he said it a bit more loudly than he intended.

Ms McWilliam looked at him in surprise. ‘Jason, that’s no way to talk to your fellow students!’

Jason looked down, hoping that the teacher would drop it. But she didn’t.

‘Well? I think you owe us an explanation.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Good. But if you disagree, please tell us why. Just do it nicely.’

‘No, that’s okay.’ Jason cursed his instinctive reaction to Ralph’s comment.

‘It’s about time you contributed to class discussions. Go on.’

‘Well, we’re supposed to be talking about global warming, and Ralph just keeps talking about money.’

‘So tell us about global warming.’

Jason drew a deep breath. ‘Okay, look, it’s like this. It’s simple. Global warming is happening because of things people are doing, like pollution and stuff. If we don’t stop, we’ll have totally trashed the planet. People will be dying all over the place because there won’t be enough water or food. Ralph doesn’t seem to care about that.’

‘That’s crap, Jason,’ replied Ralph. ‘I never said that. I just said people need jobs and petrol and things right now, so you can’t just—’

‘What’s the point of having those things now if it’s going to kill the planet? That’s just selfish and greedy!’

Ms McWilliam stood up. ‘Jason, I said to keep it nice. If you can’t, you’d better just listen.’

‘I *am* keeping it nice! Ralph’s the one who’s saying we should all be selfish. Is that nice?’

‘I’d say it’s selfish to stop other people from expressing their opinions. You’ll get your chance at the debate this afternoon, won’t you? Aren’t you on the pro-environment team?’

‘Of course!’

‘Not “of course”. You’re just lucky you’re on that side. If the coin had come down the other way, you’d have had to argue that we *don’t* need to do anything about global warming!’

‘I would’ve refused.’

‘Yes, I know. It would have done you some good, though. Now, does anyone else have an opinion on global warming?’

After an awkward silence, someone dared to speak up. ‘I think it’s really sad. I mean, we won’t be able to live like our parents are. Everything will cost more, so we’ll be poorer.’

Some of the other students agreed. *This is more like it*, thought Jason. He relaxed slightly, relieved that he didn’t have to correct his classmates again.

But then Jane jumped into the conversation. ‘I don’t reckon it’s for real. My dad says it’s all just a big beat-up so the government can put up taxes.’

‘What rubbish!’ Jason made a motion like he was cocking a pistol, and fired off an imaginary round into the back of Jane’s head. *Bugger!* he thought, even before he’d finished.

‘Jason, I’m not going to tell you again,’ said Ms McWilliam. ‘Play nice, or don’t play at all.’

‘I know. I’m sorry. But it *is* rubbish! I’ve seen graphs in science magazines showing how much hotter—’

‘Just cool it, Jason. Actually, you’re both right.’ She turned and wrote some more on the board: ‘Higher tax. Some evidence of warming.’

The discussion continued, and Jason did his best to tune it out. The list of issues grew to fill the whole board, but Jason had taken off his glasses so that he couldn’t read it.

Finally, the classroom fell silent. Jason dared to put on his glasses again and looked at his watch. *If I can just ignore this for another fifteen minutes...*

‘Okay, people, that’s a pretty good list of issues,’ said Ms McWilliam. ‘As you can see, some points suggest that global warming could be really serious, but there’s also some points suggesting the opposite. Since there’s points on each side, what should we do?’

Jason remained silent. He’d had quite enough attention already. And with a reputation as a borderline geek, it wouldn’t do to show everyone just how much he knew about the subject.

But that concern didn’t stop Emma. How come girls never got classified as geeks? It didn’t seem fair.

‘Since warming isn’t obvious yet, we don’t need to do anything at all yet. We should just keep going like we are now, and wait and see what happens. When it’s obvious that we need to do something, then we can. That way, people can keep their jobs and use their cars and boats, at least for a while.’

Jason boiled. ‘That’s stupid! The longer we wait, the harder it’ll be to fix!’

Did he just call Emma stupid? *Damn it!* She was cute, too. How come he couldn’t just shut up?

‘Jason!’ snapped Ms McWilliam. ‘Other people are entitled to their opinions, and if you can’t tolerate that, you’d better leave.’

Jason shook his head in disgust. He wanted to walk out, but didn’t have the courage. With a superhuman effort, he managed to bite his tongue for the rest of the lesson.



As Jason was packing up his books, Emma swept past his desk on her way out of the room. ‘Um, Emma?’ he said, without really looking up.

‘Yes?’

‘Um, sorry about what I said. I didn’t mean to... I couldn’t help it. It just slipped out.’ He was sure that Emma could feel the radiation from his beetroot-red face.

Emma shrugged her shoulders and smiled. ‘That’s cool. You’re all right, Jason.’ She continued on her way, leaving Jason exhausted from the brief exchange.

Okay, lunch time. One hour until the debate. Jason headed for the school library and sat down at his usual carrel. He fished his debate notes out of his back pocket and carefully unfolded the page, which was starting to show signs of wear. For the millionth time he ran his eyes over it, muttering the words out loud without realising it.

Then he remembered the Prime Minister saying something about a climate conference coming up, and got a newspaper to see if there was any mention of it. But just as he found what he wanted, he was interrupted by David. ‘So *here* you are! I might have guessed...’

‘You *did* guess.’

‘Well, that was a pretty entertaining geography class,’ said David, plonking his solid frame down next to Jason.

‘I didn’t think so.’

‘You’ve got to admit, it’s pretty funny, you nearly getting thrown out for talking too much!’

‘What’s funny about that?’ asked Jason, half indignant and half hurt.

‘Because that was basically the first time you’ve opened your mouth in class all year!’

‘I guess so. I still don’t reckon people should be allowed to say whatever they want when they’re wrong.’

David shrugged. ‘Who knows what’s right? Even the experts say different things. I mean, they can’t *all* be right.’ He paused to take a bite out of the sandwich he’d smuggled into the library. ‘But I guess we don’t *need* them all to be right; we’ve got *you* to tell us what’s right, eh?’

‘Yeah, I know, I know,’ said Jason, with a half-glum expression on his face. ‘And on that subject, just let me finish this.’ He scrawled down something from the newspaper onto his debate notes.

‘There, that’ll do.’ He took off his glasses and put them on the table, then went to return the newspaper. As soon as his back was turned, David slipped Jason’s glasses into their case and zipped them into a pocket inside Jason’s bag.

‘I really don’t know why you want to do this,’ said David, when Jason returned. ‘Aren’t you nervous?’

‘Big time! But at least, when we’ve finished, everyone in school will know about global warming. Then there won’t be any more idiotic discussions like in class this morning.’

‘—if you win!’

Jason looked slightly surprised, as though the possibility of losing had never actually occurred to him. ‘We can’t lose, because we’re right.’

‘Oh, of course. I forgot already,’ said David, slapping his forehead. ‘How stupid of me.’



This was it: the moment he’d been looking forward to—and dreading—for weeks. The assembly hall was crammed. Jason sat beside the other members of the debating club on the stage, and looked down at the sea of faces before him. Fortunately, without his glasses on, he couldn’t see quite where the faces were looking, so it was easy to imagine that they weren’t looking directly at him.

In front of the mass of students sat a row of adults, most of whom were unknown to Jason. However, he recognised the man in the middle of the row: it was Mr Brunskill, the teacher who ran the debating club. The school principal, the terrifying Ms Ferguson, sat beside him.

Mr Brunskill stood up, faced the audience, and held up his arms until there was silence.

‘Thank you, and welcome to Sapphire Bay High School’s “great debate”, on the topic of whether we need to do more about global warming. I’d especially like to welcome our guest judges from the local community.’ He briefly introduced each guest: a fisherman, a hotel owner, a retired scientist, and the editor of the local newspaper. One by one, the guests acknowledged the polite applause, yet all seemed distinctly uncomfortable. Jason wondered why they’d agreed to come, if they didn’t enjoy being there.

‘Before we begin,’ continued Mr Brunskill, ‘let me remind you of the rules. As you can see, there are two teams. The first team will argue in the affirmative, meaning that we need to do more about global warming. The second team will argue in the negative, meaning that we *don’t* need to do more about global warming. Speakers from each team will take it in turns to speak, and can talk for a maximum of four minutes.

‘Judging will work like this. I’ll invite each of our guests to comment on the debate and say which team they found to be most convincing. You’ll then have the opportunity to indicate which team *you* thought was best by the, um, “enthusiasm” of your applause. Finally, Ms Ferguson will adjudicate and announce the winner.’

Jason was perspiring a bit by now, partly because the big fans on the ceiling didn’t really make much difference, and partly because of nerves. His stomach felt fuzzy and he felt like he needed to go to the toilet again, even though he only went ten minutes ago.

Finally, the debate got under way. Jason quietly got out his notes, which were by now almost falling apart at the creases, and undid the button on his shirt pocket so he could take out his glasses.

But they weren’t there!

They *had* to be there. That’s where he always put them.

He groped at his chest. Nope, nothing. Not there.

With some urgency, he scabbled around in his bag. *Phew!* How did they get in here? Never mind that now.

Compared to the wait beforehand, time seemed to fly by during the debate itself. Jason’s opponents trotted out all the usual arguments, just as he’d anticipated. *Got you*, he thought.

After what seemed like only a minute or two, Mr Brunskill got to his feet once again and announced that it was Jason's turn to talk. Jason stood up, hoping desperately that nobody could see how much his legs were shaking. He gripped his notes in a sweaty hand. Fortunately he didn't need to refer to them, as a tear was advancing down the page, threatening to rip his arguments in half.

'Ms Ferguson, guests, teachers, students. The speakers for the negative have claimed that we're better off not doing anything more about global warming. They've said we can't afford to reduce our transport and industries because that would cost people money and jobs. They've said that climate change mightn't be serious and mightn't even happen at all. I'm going to explain to you how climate change *will* happen, and how things will be even worse for us if we don't do anything about it.'

And so he launched into his well-rehearsed routine. He explained how pollution was filling the air with gases that trapped more of the sun's radiation. He explained how that radiation would heat up the air, the land and the oceans. He explained how the extra heat would reduce rainfall, causing more droughts. He explained how the polar ice caps would melt, raising the sea level and flooding low-lying areas. He explained how these things would impact on crops and cause damage and disease. He explained that the only way to stop all this was to cut back on pollution, such as by adopting strict emission control targets.

'Is this for real, or is it just a big beat-up, as my opponents have suggested? All we need to do is look around Sapphire Bay to see that climate change is already happening. Why won't

anything grow on Mr McKenzie's land? Why has Sullivans Creek been dry for so long?' Jason paused for effect; surely this evidence alone would win the debate.

'Finally, what about Sapphire Bay's fishing industry? I agree with my opponents that it's really important for Sapphire Bay, since so many of our parents work in it. My own dad does.

'But I *don't* agree that we can't do anything about global warming just because it might hurt our fishing businesses. If we keep putting heaps of carbon dioxide into the air, more of it will go into the ocean. That'll make the ocean like an acid. The acid water will kill the stuff that the fish eat. And, of course, the water will be hotter, too. The fish will starve, or not reproduce, or just go somewhere else.

'So, global warming means that there won't be as many fish to catch. By the time we students want jobs, Sapphire Bay won't *have* a fishing industry. Not unless we do something to stop global warming right now! So my opponents' argument about fishing is just a red herring.'

Some muted chuckles rose up from the floor of the assembly hall. Jason wondered what he'd said that was funny, but then realised. If only he'd said that on purpose...

The little bell under Mr Brunskill's hand emitted its now-familiar ting. Jason had timed it perfectly. The applause seemed generous, and he blushed a little as he returned to his seat. Relieved but high on adrenaline, he beamed down on the crowd like a king observing his subjects.

The remaining speakers said their pieces, but Jason scarcely heard them. When the final round of applause had died away, Mr Brunskill invited the first of the guest judges to address the audience.

The fisherman stood up nervously. He looked distinctly out of place in a suit; Jason found it easy to picture him wearing overalls and pulling nets onto the back of a fishing boat.

‘Thanks. Uh, well, I’ve got to say, that was all pretty impressive to a simple fisherman! I’ve never tried to follow the science of it all, although it sounds pretty convincing and, well, like bad news. But I could easily follow what the second team was saying, uh, what’re you called? The case for the negative? You’re right that if they stop me from using fuel, then I’m out of a job! Same deal if they put up the price of fuel much more, or bung on yet another bloody tax for using it. The whole fishing fleet along the coast would go bust. Like that team said, we can’t let that happen. Everyone needs money, everyone needs a job. So I’ve got to say that the second team, the negative team, gets my vote.’

Jason rolled his eyes. How come people’s opinions seem to be based on how they might benefit, rather than on what’s actually true? The fisherman was only worried about his income; his own immediate future. The fact that there mightn’t *be* any fish in a few decades time didn’t seem to bother him. And of course, there was much more to it than fish.

But the hotel owner saw it the same way as the fisherman. He talked about the need for a strong economy so that people would have lots of money to spend on holidays, which was essential for Sapphire Bay’s tourist industry. It’s as though he hadn’t listened to the debate at all, and was just saying what he’d thought all along. Jason clenched his jaw.

The third speaker was different, though. ‘Like the other guests, I was very impressed at the high quality of the debate. My congratulations to all of you. However, unlike the other

guests, I'm a bit of an impostor in Sapphire Bay. I only moved here a couple of years ago, after I retired from my research job in Canberra, so I guess I'm not so much a part of the local scene as the others. Because of my background, I found the scientific arguments by the case for the affirmative to be most relevant, and well argued.'

At last, thought Jason. This lady's got some common sense.

She continued: 'But these are complex issues, and the very real and practical problems associated with setting strict emission goals just can't be ignored.'

Jason held his breath.

'However, I think I'll support the case for the affirmative, because it appealed more to the scientist in me. And since the issues need to be carefully balanced, it seems only right that each side should get some recognition.'

Finally, the newspaper editor got up to speak. *If this bloke's not an idiot, thought Jason, at least we can end up with two votes each.*

'I've been the editor of the *Sapphire Sentinel* for a lot of years. I must have read literally hundreds of letters to the editor, so I know what's important to my readers. While we're all concerned about the environment and the future, it's clear that we can't go backwards by stopping people from earning a living. So like the first two judges, I have to go with the case for the negative.'

Jason was disgusted. The man wasn't thinking for himself; he was just echoing other people's thoughts. And they weren't thinking with their brains, but with their wallets.

‘Okay, that makes it three to one in favour of the case for the negative,’ announced Mr Brunskill. ‘But it isn’t all over yet. I’ll now hand things over to Ms Ferguson.’

The principal stood up and faced the audience. ‘It falls to me to make the final decision about which team wins. We’ve already heard from our guest judges, but now I need to get *your* opinions to help me make my decision.

‘So, to start with, if you want to vote for the affirmative team, who argued that we *should* do more about global warming, let’s hear your applause!’

The hall reverberated with clapping and hooting. Normally, Ms Ferguson would have glared at any such behaviour, but this time she’d asked for it.

‘Okay, thank you. Now, if you preferred the case for the *negative*, that we *shouldn’t* do more about global warming, let’s hear from you.’

Jason fancied that the din was somewhat more subdued this time. Nevertheless, he saw some of his best friends enthusiastically clapping against him. For a second, he was stunned. He felt betrayed. Why were they against him? But then it dawned on him: like so many people in Sapphire Bay, their parents were having a hard time with work. The fisherman and hotel guy spoke for most of them.

But that didn’t apply to Ms Ferguson, of course. She was a professional educator; her job was safe. And it was up to her to make the final verdict.

‘Well, we’ve heard our invited guest panel supporting the case for the negative by three votes to one. And it seemed to me that the audience applause might also have favoured the case for the negative. I therefore adjudicate that the case for the negative

has won the debate: the proposition that we need to do more about global warming is *not* supported. Congratulations to team two!’

More applause erupted. It almost hurt physically, as though every clap struck Jason on the body. He looked across at the members of the other team, who were lapping up the glory. They pumped the air with their arms; their smiles were so huge that their eyes seemed to sparkle.

Once the applause had died down, Ms Ferguson dismissed the students, who streamed noisily out of the hall. Mr Brunskill climbed onto the stage and congratulated all of the debaters. Some of the winners shook Jason’s hand. But Jason hardly noticed these things: he was too stunned and disappointed.



Chapter 3

Politics

It didn't take Jason long to trudge home from school, even though he lived on the outskirts of town. Sometimes he took the 'scenic route' down by the harbour and dropped into his father's fish processing factory. But not today. He did stop once to punch a tree, but instead of helping his mood, it just gave him a sore hand.

As usual, Tangles was waiting enthusiastically at the gate. As Jason entered, Tangles leapt up and put his front paws on Jason's chest. But Jason just brushed him aside and thumped up the steps and went inside, banging the fly screen door behind him.

'Hello Jason,' said his mother cheerily. She had either failed to detect his mood signals or was deliberately ignoring them. 'How did the debate go?'

'It was stupid. This town is full of idiots.'

His mother continued to sort out her beloved coin collection. She never seemed to actually finish doing that. 'Oh. I guess that means you didn't win.'

'No.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, after all the hard work you put into it. But there's two sides to every coin, you know.'

'Yeah, there's a right side and a wrong side.'

‘It doesn’t matter, Jason. Cheer up; it’s nearly school holidays.’

Jason snapped. ‘It doesn’t matter *to you!* All you care about is your bloody coins!’

‘Jason!’ exclaimed his mother, looking up at last.

But Jason had already stormed off to his room. He flounced down onto the bed, causing the debate notes in his back pocket to crunch. He fished out the page, screwed it up and threw it into the bin in the far corner of his room.

So nobody cares if everything gets destroyed, thought Jason. *Well, I can play that game too!* He went over to his desk and turned on his computer. His mother had put a couple more copies of *Science Adviser* on top of the keyboard, which he tossed over his shoulder onto the bed behind him.

The computer took so long to boot up that there was enough time to get changed while waiting for it. When it was finally ready, Jason double-clicked on the *Grand Theft Auto* icon and the computer went back to work. The game took ages to load—and it wasn’t even the latest version. That one wouldn’t run on his computer at all, without a better graphics card.

An image of a car’s dashboard appeared on the screen. Jason adjusted the car’s radio, and selected some music that he knew his mother didn’t like. He wound up his computer’s speakers as far as he thought he could get away with, and tapped the key that served as the accelerator. *Time for some serious mayhem...*



Some while later, a series of clunks and rattles outside announced the arrival of Jason’s father’s truck. Footsteps hurried into the lounge room; the TV clicked on.

Jason wandered out to see what the rush was, scooping up the topmost *Science Adviser* magazine from his bed on the way.

‘G’day matey,’ greeted his father, who was standing in the middle of the room furiously poking at the remote control in his hand. How come parents could never figure out how to operate remote controls?

His father finally found what he wanted on TV. He settled back into his preferred reclining chair, and put his feet up on a foot stool.

‘What’s the big hurry?’ asked Jason, as he flopped onto the couch.

‘Apparently they’re going to talk about the Jap fish board visit on the news. You might find it interesting.’

‘Oh, okay.’ While it didn’t sound the least bit interesting, Jason settled in to watch. Normally at this hour he’d volunteer to set the table for his mother so dinner would be that much earlier, but he was still poeey with her for not understanding about the debate.

‘So how was school, matey? Oh, just a sec, this might be it.’

‘Welcome back to News at Five. Prime Minister Lindsay is in trouble for putting his foot in his mouth again, this time on the subject of global warming. Environmental groups are outraged at the PM’s apparent denial of the reality of climate change. Mr Lindsay was forced to defend himself in front of Parliament House this morning:’

‘Okay, we all know I sometimes say things on the spur of the moment without picking my words perfectly. All I meant was that global warming isn’t as drastic as some people are claiming. But let me be clear about this: my government and I will make up our own minds about what to do about the

environment—if anything. Those lobby groups should remember that it's my job to run the country, not theirs.'

'What did that have to do with fish, Dad?' asked Jason.

'That wasn't it. Oh, here it is now.' Mr Saunders raised his voice in the direction of the kitchen: 'Anne, come and see this.'

'The Minister for Trade, Don Blacklock, today signed off on the proposed visit to Australia by a delegation from the Japanese Fishery Board. Speaking at a meeting of—'

The TV picture collapsed into a mess of coloured dots accompanied by static.

'Anne! Turn off that bloody blender and watch this!'

Jason's mother came in and sat down on the couch beside him.

'—the delegation will visit several companies in the Australian fishing industry, starting with Sapphire Bay Seafood. The company's owner, Mr Paul Saunders, had this to say:

'The Australian fishing industry's been doing it tough for years now. It's hard for us to compete against cheap seafood produced in other countries. But this visit will let us show the quality of the Australian product.'

'Woo hoo! Dad, you're famous!'

'It's about bloody time. The Japs have owed us a visit for years, and that idiot Minister has been dragging his feet on it. And if he thinks we can survive without government support, he's got a screw loose.'

'Do you really think this could make a big difference to the industry?' asked Jason's mother.

‘Better bloody hope so, else there won’t *be* an Australian industry. We can’t compete with foreign countries’ overfishing and high-density farming. They’ll always undercut us on price.’

Jason tried to be supportive. ‘And those unsustainable practices are bad for the environment.’

‘That doesn’t come into it,’ said his father, giving Jason an exasperated glance. ‘It’s as simple as this: no industry means no money!’ He kicked the volume of the TV up a few notches.

Jason resisted the temptation to argue. Disagreeing with his father wasn’t a good idea, these days. He used to be much cooler when he still owned his fishing boats. But ever since he’d sold them and bought the fish processing factory, he’d become all tense about money.

The news segment that his father was watching came to an end. ‘Well, at least they had the sense to finally approve the visit,’ he said. ‘Maybe there’s hope for us yet.’

‘The government today formally announced its position on the emission control targets that will be proposed at the Rotterdam Environmental Conference next month. Prime Minister Lindsay made the announcement at a press conference this morning.’

Oh, this will be more interesting, thought Jason.

The Prime Minister strode across to a podium amid intermittent flashes from reporters’ cameras. Unlike the judges at the school debate that afternoon, the PM didn’t look out of place in a suit, and seemed calm and confident as he prepared to speak. *The man in charge of the whole country is sure to take a broader view of things,* thought Jason.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I apologise for being a bit late. I’m going to have to keep this brief since I’m leaving shortly for a

couple of days off, to celebrate Julie's and my thirtieth wedding anniversary. If we don't make it to our holiday house by dinner time, Julie won't be speaking to me, which wouldn't be a good start.'

Some polite laughter, and a few calls of 'congratulations', arose from the audience of reporters.

'Okay, to business. My colleagues and I have just spent the last three hours in the Cabinet Room discussing whether the Rotterdam conference emission control targets would be good for our country. I can assure you that this was a "no holds barred" discussion, with all points of view seriously considered. However, it ultimately fell to me to weigh up the issues and determine the best course of action on behalf of the people of Australia.'

'As you know, my government was elected on the promise of continuing economic prosperity for our great country. I therefore find myself unable to agree to any actions that would cost Australian jobs, incomes and profits. Accordingly, Australia will not be signing up to the emission control targets at the Rotterdam conference.'

Jason was flabbergasted. So the Prime Minister was no better than anybody else!

'How stupid! What a bloody idiot!' Jason cocked his imaginary pistol and fired a round at the PM's image on TV.

'Jason!' snapped his mother. 'You know I don't like that silly shooting thing you do. I don't think you really want to take the PM's life. It would hardly help your cause.'

Jason mentally kicked himself. 'I know. I didn't mean to do that. But he's just being selfish and greedy.'

‘I think he’s actually got this one right,’ said Jason’s father. ‘It’s tough enough to make a living as it is. The last thing we need is to be told we can’t put fuel in our boats.’

‘But Dad, what’s the point of that, if the environment changes so much that there isn’t any fish to catch?’

‘That’s not going to happen, Jason. That’s just greenies scare-mongering.’

‘No it isn’t, Dad! Look, this is how it works—’

‘No, Jason, *you* look. The Prime Minister’s got access to the best advice in the whole country, and he obviously doesn’t think it’s a problem. And he knows we need our income. I think I’ve had about as much of your greenie crap as I can handle, so give it a rest, okay?’

Jason got up and strode out of the house, slamming the fly screen door as hard as he could for the second time that day. He ran across the front yard and kept on going. Teachers were against him, friends were against him, townspeople were against him, parents were against him—even the Prime Minister of the whole country was against him!



Chapter 4

Be Careful What You Wish For

Jason cut across Mr McKenzie's field and skidded down into the dry creek bed. Even though the creek bed was deep, it hadn't had an actual creek in it for years. It used to be possible to catch the occasional fish in it, but now all it was good for was a private short-cut. As he trudged along the creek bed, his thongs flicked up fine dust that glowed orange in the light of the afternoon sun. Some of it stuck to his perspiring body.

After about a kilometre, he scrambled out of the creek bed and headed for a nearby gravel road. The top of the local surf lifesaving clubhouse was visible above the grassy embankment that ran beside the road. It reminded him of another battle he couldn't seem to win, so he looked away. He just wanted to get into the surf lifesaving club so he could help people but they wouldn't let him in. To qualify, there was a swimming test: you had to be able to swim half a kilometre or so in under nine minutes. He'd had tried it a few times, but he always failed. They told him that he wasn't trying; that he didn't seem to care. 'You need to be *passionate* about saving lives,' they said.

They were idiots too.

He followed the road away from the clubhouse. His thongs slid around on the loose stones that served as the road's surface, almost like they were cheap roller skates. After a short distance, the road curved away from the embankment, but Jason kept

going straight ahead. The tall straw-coloured grasses that grew wild on the side of the embankment irritated his calves, but thinned out as the dirt became sandier towards the top. Kicking off his thongs, he felt the warm sand slide up between his toes. He half-walked and half-slid down the other side of the ridge and onto the beach—his ‘thinking beach’, his favourite private spot.

As usual, the small stretch of beach was deserted. Jason dropped his thongs on a log and walked towards the ocean. The dry sand gave way to moist sand, which caked onto the soles of his feet. The tide was out, and the waves were poor.

He sloshed into the water up to his ankles. The water was pleasantly warm, and yet the warmth annoyed him. It was as though the ocean—*his* bit of ocean—was taunting him for having lost the debate. Had the ocean got warmer just because he’d lost the debate? Of course, that couldn’t be; it just seemed like it.

He paced up and down in the water, kicking at it angrily from time to time. ‘Idiots!’ he exclaimed out loud, to nobody. Clearly, his parents were more concerned about their pay packets than about the future—*his* future. Just like the people who judged the debate. Just like the Prime Minister. Just like every adult. And they’d even managed to convince a lot of kids.

Although the sun was now setting, it was still hot. Then it occurred to Jason that he could go for a swim: he was wearing his board shorts. He wrapped his glasses inside his shirt and lobbed the bundle onto the sand.

The water further out seemed cooler. He swam laps parallel to the shore, digging his arms furiously into the water. *If only*

Jason bolted into the water, tossing his glasses behind him. Spray shot up as he pounded in. He swam powerfully, trying to ignore the fact that he was still weary from his earlier dip. Between strokes, he looked for the hand again to make sure he was heading in the right direction. But the hand didn't reappear.

He stopped and looked back towards the beach, trying to judge whether he was far enough out. He stared around for the hand, although the light was fading and his glasses were somewhere on the beach. 'Hey! Is anybody here?'

Just the gentle sounds of the water.

'Anybody here?'

Then, a cough. Jason twisted around to the direction it had seemed to come from and breast-stroked ahead, straining his eyes like they were radars.

Cough. 'Help.'

It was a man's voice, feeble but close. But Jason couldn't see anything. 'Where are you?' he yelled.

Then something brushed against his foot. He kicked his legs into the air and dived straight down. His eyes were useless in the black water. He groped and groped, but there was nothing.

Damn, he needed more air. Then down again.

Just as his lungs demanded another fill, his wrist struck something. He latched on to it. Was it hair?

Whatever it was, he pulled it upwards, and made for the surface.

Jason spluttered and breathed deeply. But the head he was holding above the water by its hair didn't do so. Had he been too late? Did he need to try to resuscitate the man?

Then the man coughed, spat water and gasped in a few breaths.

‘Are you alright?’

No answer. Jason realised he was still holding the man up by his hair, so he lowered him down. But the man just sank back under the water, so Jason supported him by placing one of his arms across the man’s chest. The man was breathing, but didn’t move.

‘Are you alright?’

‘Help,’ said the man weakly.

‘Can you swim?’

‘Help.’

So Jason rolled the man onto his back, hooked one of his hands under the man’s chin, and started side-stroking his way towards the beach. The man’s body remained completely limp.

An exhausted Jason dragged the man onto the sand. He was still breathing, but just lay there. It was hard to see what he looked like in the failing light, but he seemed to be fairly old by Jason’s standards; somewhat older than his father. His hair was well on its way to grey. *You’re lucky you went grey instead of going bald*, thought Jason wearily.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked, for at least the third time.

‘Yes.’

Relieved, Jason leaned back to concentrate on his own recovery. He vaguely detected lights and voices coming from the bushy headland at the northern end of the beach, but was too weary to pay much attention.

The people moved from the headland onto the beach. Jason could now make out about half a dozen silhouettes. *This is weird*, he thought through his exhaustion. *Where did these people come from?* They ran along the beach towards him, and when they got closer, he could see that at least two of the men

were carrying large cameras on their shoulders. Two figures wearing business suits dashed ahead of the rest and ran straight past Jason to the man he'd rescued.

'You okay, Graham?' enquired one, with urgency.

'Yes.'

They sat Graham up and gave him a drink. After a few gulps, he spat it out.

Graham was obviously feeling a bit better and stronger, and managed a little joke: 'I think I've had enough water to drink already, this evening.'

'What happened?' asked one of the other men. By now the cameras were pointed at Graham, and microphones held out towards him. But he seemed impervious to them, as though he didn't even notice them.

'Bloody rip. Got dragged out and down the coast. Tried to swim out of it but got worn out. Couldn't even keep my head up. Must have bumped it on something; it hurts a bit.' He massaged his scalp ruefully.

Jason quietly rubbed his hands to make sure that no traces of grey hair remained on them.

Only then did it occur to Graham that he was hugely in Jason's debt. He rolled onto one elbow and faced Jason. 'Young man, you saved my life! I want to repay you somehow. Ask me for anything, and I'll give it to you.'

Jason was too tired to think. 'That's okay,' was all he could manage.

Graham seemed much stronger now, having benefited from the attention of the suited people hovering around him. 'There must be *something* you want! Name it, and you've got it.'

Jason was still in a daze, and was feeling weak from hunger and fatigue. Plus, he had no idea where his glasses were.

Then a man stuck a microphone near Jason's mouth and said, 'Well, son, you've just been made an amazing offer! You can name your own reward. What do you want?'

Jason couldn't get his brain into gear. Did he hear right? Did the person thrusting a microphone into his face say he could have a reward? Anything he wanted? As though on autopilot, his mind reverted to what it had been festering on all afternoon. 'I want Australia to have emission control targets.'

One of the other men poked another microphone in Jason's face. 'Could you repeat that?'

Jason repeated wearily, 'I want Australia to have emission control targets. The Amsterdam ones.'

Everyone's attention returned to Graham, who was being helped to his feet by the two suited men. They led him off the beach—and away from the cameras—as quickly as possible. But the people with the cameras and microphones followed. They all headed inland and were quickly out of earshot, leaving Jason alone on his beach again, in near darkness. *Well, that was weird*, he thought.

His stomach rumbled again. Although he didn't really want to face his parents just yet, it was *definitely* time to try for some dinner, so he struggled wearily to his feet and headed off back over the sand hill.

One of the microphone men trotted back onto the beach. 'Hey kid!'

But Jason was too far away to hear.

‘Hey mate! Want a lift home?’ After hearing nothing but the gentle lapping of the waves on the beach, he turned and left again.

Jason trudged back past the surf lifesaving club and along the dry creek bed. *They could have at least offered me a lift home*, he mused.



Chapter 5

Sprung!

What a difference a good night's sleep made. Yesterday's dramas seemed somehow smaller now. As he prepared for school, Jason wondered if he'd ever see the mysterious 'Graham' again.

Things had still been tense when he got home yesterday evening. His mother had already gone to bed, even though it was still before nine o'clock. Jason had bounded into the house to proudly announce his rescue mission, but his father wasn't in a mood to listen. 'Your mother's left your dinner on the stove.'

'Dad, I rescued someone at the beach this evening!'

'Look Jason, you can't go running out of the house whenever anyone disagrees with you. People have disagreements all the time, but still have to get on with it. You're going to have to learn that.'

'Yes, Dad.'

'And apparently you were very rude to your mother. That's not on, Jason. I'd have just thrown your dinner away. You can't go disappearing to God-knows-where without letting us know where you're going—and you know better than to hang around the beach after dark.'

'Yes, Dad. Sorry.'

Clearly his father was in lecture mode, so Jason withheld further mention of his news and went into the kitchen to try to resuscitate his dried-out dinner.

Having delivered his sermon, Jason's father now tried to make peace. 'So you rescued somebody, did you? Who was it? Anyone we know?'

'I dunno. Just some guy.' Jason knew his father's tactics and didn't want to be befriended straight away, just to get back at his father for lecturing him. So the details of the evening's excitement had gone uncommunicated.



But now it was breakfast time. Jason's father was long gone; he usually left for work well before six. Jason thought that this alone was sufficient reason not to follow in his father's footsteps, job-wise. Anyway, he wanted to go to university—although preferably not the one where his mother worked.

He got himself a large bowl of cereal and sat down opposite his mother. She made no mention of his antics of the day before, and seemed to be pretending they never happened. Jason apologised for being rude and running out, which seemed to clear the air, at least a bit.

'Did Dad tell you what I did at the beach yesterday?' ventured Jason, still hoping that someone would take an interest in his achievement.

'Oh, so *that's* where you went. It might be best if we put yesterday's events behind us, I think.' She resumed her study of the morning newspaper. Jason finished his breakfast in silence, politely said goodbye to his mother, and left for school.



As usual, a group of Jason's class-mates was hanging around one of the raised garden beds beside the school's main walkway. Actually, it was more like a tanbark bed, since there was nothing growing in it. Despite that, you weren't allowed to sit on the tanbark, but were permitted to sit on the brick edges. How generous.

Everyone was huddled around in a circle, looking at something. Jason wandered over to see what was so interesting. It was Josh's new MP3 player. 'Cool screen!' said someone. 'Yeah, and I can play videos on it too,' said Josh proudly.

Jason's eyes lit up. 'That's exactly the one I've been hanging out for! Where did you get it from?'

'Nowhere around here,' replied Josh. 'We went to Sydney last weekend.'

'Figures. You can't get anything decent around here.'

'Nope. Boring place. There's nothing to do. Nothing ever happens.'

'Actually,' said David, 'Sapphire Bay was on the news this morning!'

'Really? Why?'

'I didn't hear it but my sister did. Apparently some guy nearly drowned in the ocean yesterday, and got rescued.'

'I wonder why that was on the news. People get rescued on beaches all the time.'

Jason piped up. 'Hey, that was me! I did that!'

'You nearly drowned? I told you all that swimming you do was a waste of time!'

'No, you idiot! I saved a guy.'

'Yeah, right.'

'No, really!'

‘Okay, who was it then? Why was it on the news, eh?’

Josh was still fiddling with his new toy, and was somewhat displeased that it was no longer the centre of attention. ‘Hey, I can get the radio on this, too. Let’s get the eight-thirty news and see if they say it again.’ The miniscule speaker made a tinny but comprehensible sound:

‘...by a youth at about eight PM yesterday. He’d become fatigued after trying to swim out of a rip while bathing off the coast from his holiday house, near the town of Sapphire Bay. The Prime Minister was apparently no worse for wear, and will be returning to Canberra early next week.’

Jason jolted. *Prime Minister?*

David stared at Jason, wide-eyed. ‘Did you save the *Prime Minister?*’

‘I dunno... I don’t think so...’

How could it have been the Prime Minister? The man last night seemed so feeble, gasping for air on the beach in his outsized swimming trunks, when compared to the confident statesman on TV in his dark blue suit. In his mind, Jason tried to dress the man on the beach in a suit.

‘If you saved the PM, you’d know.’

‘But it was dark and I didn’t have my glasses on...’

‘Shhhh!’

‘...emission control targets. The PM has been unavailable for comment, and his office has yet to release a statement. The identity of the young man who rescued the Prime Minister is still unknown, further hampering efforts to confirm the story.’

‘Well, was it you or not, eh?’

‘I guess it could’ve been.’

‘Must have been. That wouldn’t happen twice in the same day. Not around here.’

‘Woo hoo, you’re famous!’ Jason’s friends silently regarded him with newfound awe. But then the possible implications of the situation started to dawn on them.

‘So, is he going to cough up a big reward?’

‘Get one of those new GameBoxes! Then we can *all* play on it!’

‘No, get GameBoxes for *all* of us!’

‘Yeah, top idea! Then we can network them.’

‘Nah, bugger that. Get them to build us a skate park.’

But Jason had tuned out. He was trying to remember what had been said on the beach last night. His recollections were vague; he’d been too exhausted to pay much attention to the discussion at the time.

‘I think I might’ve already asked for something,’ he confessed sheepishly.

‘You mean you asked for something before consulting with your bestest buddies? How did you know what we wanted?’

‘It had better be good!’ warned David.

‘I think I might have asked for emission control targets, or something like that.’

‘*WHAT?*’ Incredulous eyes bored into Jason.

‘Well, that was bloody selfish of you,’ said Josh, with an air of irony.

‘So, is this like revenge because you didn’t win the debate yesterday?’ asked David. ‘Talk about a sore loser, eh?’

‘I reckon he’s pulling our legs. Come on, honestly Jason, did you *really* ask for emission control... whatever-they-are?’

‘I might have. I’m not sure...’

‘How come you don’t know? Weren’t you there at the time?’

‘Yeah, but it was dark so I couldn’t hear very well.’

‘Oh, that makes a lot of sense!’

‘It doesn’t matter anyway. The radio said they don’t know it was me.’

‘But we could tell them!’

‘No!’ begged Jason. ‘Please don’t do that!’

‘Why not? Don’t you want to be famous?’

‘Yeah, and how will they know where to send our GameBoxes unless we tell them?’

‘We’re not getting GameBoxes any more, remember? We’re getting emission control targets instead.’

‘Oh, that’s right. Woo hoo. Not.’

Jason remembered the cameras and microphones from the beach last night, and shook his head. ‘No, I don’t want to be famous. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. *Please* don’t tell anyone!’

‘Maybe you don’t want us to tell anyone it was you because it actually wasn’t,’ teased Josh.

‘Yeah, maybe it wasn’t me, so don’t tell anyone it was!’



Jason found it hard to concentrate on the morning’s lessons—more difficult than usual, that is. He just sat perfectly still and quiet. Hopefully, if nobody noticed him, it would all blow over.

At last, lunch time arrived. Jason headed down the corridor, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. He avoided making eye contact with anyone, on the assumption that if he didn’t look at anyone else, they wouldn’t look at him. If he could just get to

the stairs at the end of the corridor, he could disappear into the library.

But he didn't make it. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was Emma, from his geography class.

'Hey Jase. Congrats on saving the PM!'

Jason got that unpleasant sinking feeling in his stomach. 'Thanks Emma,' he said reluctantly. 'But who told you?'

'They said you asked for "mission control". What's that? Are you going to run the next NASA space flight, or something?'

Jason looked mystified. 'No, I never said— Oh, "*emission control targets*".'

'Ohhh. Yeah, that sounds more like the sort of thing you'd ask for.'

'Emma, please don't tell anybody else about this.'

Emma looked surprised. 'Why not?'

'I just don't want this to get too... big. So *please* don't tell anybody!'

'Um, it might be too late...'

Jason bit his lower lip, and spoke slowly. 'Why? Who did you tell?'

'I was listening to 2SB in my free period. They wanted to know who did it, so I texted them.'

'You told them it was me?'

'Well it *was* you, wasn't it?'

'Yeah, probably, but I didn't want everybody to know.'

'Well *I* didn't know that! I was just trying to help.'

'Bummer.' Jason looked down at his dusty joggers. The cat had been let out of the bag. But where would it go?



Chapter 6

Publicity

The afternoon's classes passed no faster than the morning ones. Wasn't it Einstein who worked out something about time slowing down? Maybe, like Jason, Einstein had had Mr Walters for history.

How could anyone be expected to concentrate on history at a time like this? Now that everybody knew the identity of the mysterious lifesaver, maybe that would be the end of it. If only the man hadn't turned out to be the PM! Then nobody would have cared. And that didn't seem quite fair: aren't the lives of ordinary people just as important?

Eventually, Mr Walters' lesson itself passed into history. After the final buzzer, Jason and David walked slowly across the asphalt basketball courts on their way home.

'Are you lot going away for Christmas?' asked Jason.

'Nah, just hanging around here.'

'Same with us. Dad reckons he's got to work, although we might get to Sydney for a weekend or something. That'd be good.'

David nodded. 'Woo hoo, shopping trip! And get away from all the tourists here, taking over the place.'

As they left the school property, a man and a woman sauntered up to them. The woman spoke to David: 'Excuse me, I'm looking for Jason Saunders.'

David pointed at Jason.

‘Jason, hi. I’m Marie Torelli, from the *Sapphire Sentinel*. Can I talk to you about last night, with the Prime Minister?’

‘Um, I guess so,’ said Jason.

‘Tell me, in your own words, what happened.’ She thrust a small recorder in front of him.

So Jason recounted the events of the previous afternoon. In retrospect, he didn’t think they seemed all that exciting. The only reason they might be interesting to anyone else was because someone important was involved. The reporter’s questions made that clear.

‘And you didn’t know it was the Prime Minister?’

‘No.’

‘So why did you ask for Australia to agree to emission control targets?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jason wearily, hoping this would all go away. ‘It was just what was on my mind at the time, I guess.’

Jason heard his name being called out. He looked over his shoulder and saw his mother’s beaten-up old station wagon, which she’d scored as a hand-me-down from the family business.

‘Excuse me; gotta go!’ said Jason to the reporters as he strode to the car. He got in beside his mother; David got in the back.

‘I was going to see if you wanted a lift,’ said his mother, ‘but I gather I don’t need to ask!’

‘Um, no. Thanks Mum! But why? You don’t normally give me a lift.’

‘They mentioned you on the radio. You’re famous! I thought I’d drop by and see how you were getting on.’

‘Thanks Mum,’ Jason said again. He fished out his mother’s *Coin Collector Monthly* magazine from underneath him, and tossed it onto the vacant back seat.

‘I wasn’t sure that a celebrity like you would want to be seen in this car.’

‘Well, it *is* pretty sad. You or Dad had better get a decent one before I get my license!’

‘Those reporters you were talking to, you don’t have to answer their questions, you know.’

Jason paused. ‘Really? It’s hard not to answer a question when someone asks you one.’

‘Just watch what you say to them. We had trouble with them at the university, at one stage.’

‘Hmmm.’ Jason frowned.

The whole way home, Jason’s mother quizzed him for details about his rescue mission, totally forgetting she’d previously said she didn’t want to hear about what he’d got up to that afternoon. She seemed as proud as if she’d saved the Prime Minister herself. Jason was relieved to be in his mother’s good books again, although he couldn’t help but worry about the reporters.



Jason was unusually glad to be home. However, Tangles didn’t seem so enthusiastic about it. He just walked up to Jason and whimpered. He didn’t even leave the ground.

‘What’s up with Tangles?’ Jason asked.

‘I don’t know,’ replied his mother. ‘He’s been mopey all day. Probably just the hot weather.’

‘If only we had emission control targets!’ said David.

Jason shook his head. ‘I really don’t know why I hang around with you, sometimes.’

Unusually, Jason’s father was already home. He came out the front door to greet them. ‘Well, here he is, the hero!’

Jason smiled, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

‘You never told me it was the PM you rescued!’

‘I didn’t know it was him, at the time.’

‘Okay, that’s all right, then. Just be more careful who you save in future!’

Jason laughed. ‘I thought you liked the PM.’

His dad shrugged, smiling. ‘Well, he makes sense sometimes, but he’s still a bloody politician. Next time, could you save the bank manager? I wouldn’t complain if he felt like doing us a favour.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’



David hung around with Jason so they could watch the evening news together. At a few minutes to six, they wandered into the lounge room. Jason’s father was crashed out on his reclining chair, watching a game show and cradling a mug of coffee. Jason could never understand why anyone would want to drink coffee on a hot day.

‘Going to watch the news, Dad?’

‘Nah, think I’ll give it a miss tonight.’

Jason hurled a cushion at his father. In retrospect, it wasn’t such a good idea, since it caused his father to spill some of his coffee. But there was no retribution, and the channel was changed as required. Jason wondered how long he could ride the wave of his new-found reputation. Maybe a little media

attention might be a reasonable price to pay for total control over his parents...

‘This mightn’t be all beer and skittles, you know, Jason,’ said his father.

Jason looked puzzled. Was his father saying he could drink beer now?

‘There were some media dills hanging around the house earlier this arvo. I chased them off, and called the cops to see if we can get rid of them once and for all.’

‘Oh. Can we?’

‘Apparently they’re not allowed on our property, or on your school, but they’re allowed to try to talk to you in the street. So you’re going to have to be careful.’

Jason nodded slowly.

And then, there it was on national television. There *he* was on national television!

‘...The young man who saved the PM’s life is a high school student, Jason Saunders...’

‘Woo hoo!’ whooped David. He was way more excited about it than Jason was—but then David didn’t have to worry about the consequences.

They showed the footage that had been captured by the cameras on the beach. The picture never shifted from the Prime Minister, but both sides of the conversation could be clearly heard:

‘Well, what do you want, young man? Name it, and you’ve got it.’

‘I want Australia to have emission control targets.’

‘So you *did* say that!’ exclaimed David.

‘No point denying it now, I guess.’

‘You shouldn’t have asked for that,’ said Jason’s father.

‘Shouldn’t it be Jason’s choice?’ Jason’s mother replied.

‘After all, he’s the one who saved the PM.’

The TV crossed to more footage of the PM, but this time it was broad daylight and he was fully dressed. Jason could now see that this was indeed the man he saw gasping for air on the beach.

‘I’m glad to report that I’m none the worse for wear after my little adventure. It was bloody scary, I’ve got to tell you! I’d like to say thanks again to the young man who saved me. He’s a fine example of everything good about young people in this country today, and I’m looking forward to meeting him again so I can thank him properly.’

‘Mr Lindsay, you promised Jason that you’d adopt emission control targets. Does that mean you’re doing a backflip on your previous position regarding the Rotterdam conference?’

‘Well, that’s not quite how the conversation went. I never promised that I’d adopt—’

‘But you said you’d give him anything he wanted, and that’s what he asked for.’

‘Well, yes, we’ve all heard the conversation. I’m just not sure that that’s really what the young man wants.’

‘But that’s what he asked for!’

‘Yes, well, that’s between him and me. I do think there’ll need to be further discussions about it.’

‘What does *that* mean?’ said Jason.

‘It means he’s trying to wheedle out of it,’ replied his father. ‘Which doesn’t surprise me. Old Graham likes to get his own way.’

The TV newsreader continued:

‘There’s been a range of responses to the Prime Minister’s mishap and its possible implications. Despite the incident, business and consumer groups have urged the PM to maintain his current policy with regard to climate change...’

‘Typical,’ said Jason. ‘Idiots!’

‘No, that’s fair enough,’ replied his father.

‘So you think the PM should break his promise to me?’

‘You know, I hadn’t really thought about that...’ Mr Saunders stared at his feet for a few seconds. ‘Well, I still don’t think we should cut back on industry. But if he said he’d give you anything, and if that’s what you asked for... I don’t know...’

‘Hey, look at this guy!’ said David. ‘I want a shirt like that.’

The shirt was basically bright red, with large pink and yellow flowers. It would have been loud on anyone, but seemed especially wrong on the balding and podgy character wearing it.

‘Yeah, that’s pretty intense. Dad, turn down the colour!’

‘Professor Ludwig van Dyne,’ read David from the bottom of the TV screen. ‘I wonder if that’s the school uniform at his university.’

‘Just a sec,’ said Jason, raising a hand. ‘I want to hear what he says.’

‘Did you know I went to school with Graham Lindsay? Yes, I did. So I’m relieved that he’s okay.’

'But this is an interesting development. My department has been helping the government to work out the environmental and financial impacts of their emission control policy. Until now, we assumed the government would not support strict emission control targets, so we haven't studied them. But young Jason's involvement is something our computer didn't predict! Now that Graham might support the Rotterdam proposal, we need to do more work on this.'

'Professor, do you think the Prime Minister should support the Rotterdam proposal?'

'Since we haven't finished the analysis for that, how can we know? These things are not as simple as the government says! But my personal feeling is that it would be good, especially in the future. So I hope Graham has a good think about this opportunity.'

Jason nodded in approval. 'That bloke makes sense.'

'Doesn't really matter what he says,' replied David. 'Anyone who'd wear a shirt like that can't be taken seriously.'

'Oh, here's the leader of the opposition,' said Jason's father. 'He'll be loving this!'

'Of course, I'm very glad that Graham Lindsay is safe and well. We may not see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, but I would never wish harm to him.'

'That said, in a way, I'm glad this happened because Mr Lindsay now has no choice but to sign up to the emission control targets at the Rotterdam conference, which is what he should have done all along. What a shame that it took a school boy to get him to do it!'

'Mr Lindsay hasn't yet agreed to signing up.'

'What choice does he have? He gave his word! His integrity, his honesty, is on the line here. If he goes back on his word, the people of Australia won't be able to believe another thing he says.'

'Ouch!' exclaimed Jason's father. 'Looks like you dropped old Graham right in it!'

'I didn't mean to.'

'Be careful what you wish for, eh, Jason?'



Chapter 7

An Unpopular Hero

Ah, school holidays. Time to do whatever you want.

For the first time in weeks, it was actually overcast. They were even predicting a few showers. Somehow, the weather seemed to know when it was school holidays: it always teased with hot sunny days beforehand, then turned bad. Or maybe having so many kids outside actually *caused* bad weather.

But it didn't matter, since Jason didn't feel like going out. After his mother left for work, he had the whole house to himself. He spent a couple of hours playing *Grand Theft Auto* with the music up louder than he could normally get away with. He browsed through an issue of *Science Adviser*, and looked up information on nothing in particular on the internet.

After helping himself to a cold roast beef sandwich for lunch, he ventured out to play with Tangles. But Tangles still wasn't himself. He hadn't even eaten his breakfast. Jason tempted him with a bit of roast beef, which he ate, but with less gusto than usual.

'At least you're still drinking,' said Jason as he refilled Tangles' water bowl. Tangles thrust his head into it and drank furiously, splashing out as much as he took in.

Jason went back to his magazines and computer. Sometime around mid-afternoon, his mother arrived home.

‘Mum, I’m worried about Tangles. He still won’t eat, even though it’s cooler.’

His mother nodded. ‘Looks like he might have lost some weight, I think. I’ll see if we can get him into the vet tomorrow.’



Next morning, Jason dragged himself out of bed at half past eight. He was tempted to lie in a bit longer, but figured he should at least greet his mother before she left for work. There was no way he was getting up at five-thirty to farewell his father, but if he didn’t surface before nine, eyebrows would definitely be raised.

‘Nice of you to put in an appearance,’ said his mother.

‘Don’t expect it every day. And I’m thinking of going back to bed again after you’ve gone.’

His mother managed to look amused and exasperated at the same time. ‘So you’re planning to mooch around the house all day again?’

‘I might.’

‘Why don’t you see what David’s up to?’

‘Maybe later.’

‘Just remember we’re taking Tangles to the vet at two.’

‘Oh, that’s right. I’ll be here.’

‘No doubt.’ His mother’s tone made it quite clear that she didn’t approve of Jason staying inside on his own the whole time.

After she left, Jason retreated to his room, grabbed a book and flopped onto the bed.



Some while later, there was an obnoxious knocking on the door. It was instantly recognisable.

‘Morning, David.’

‘I’m bored already. I feel the need to beat someone at *Grand Prix*, so get your shoes.’

‘We can take turns playing *Grand Theft Auto* on my computer. That way, we don’t have to go out.’

‘Nah, it’s not the same. I want to race *against* you. And humiliate you publicly.’

‘I’ve been practising. I might humiliate *you!* So you might want to just do it here.’

David wrinkled up his nose. ‘It pongs worse than the jetty in here. You need some fresh air.’

‘I can’t smell anything.’

‘Come on, chicken! I’ll protect you from those nasty reporters.’ David grabbed Jason by the arm and led him out.

They cycled into town and chained their bikes to a post. Normally such security wasn’t necessary, but this morning Pacific Street was buzzing with tourists. Jason never understood why city people bothered to look in Sapphire Bay’s puny collection of rundown shops.

But at least they now had a video game arcade. Outside, it looked like all the other shops: drab red bricks and peeling paint. But inside was a different world. It seemed to be lit entirely by the screens of the video games and the rows of networked computers. Today, even the sound was in contrast, as the tapping of intermittent raindrops on the verandah roof gave way to the electronic sound effects of a dozen different games.

Jason followed David towards the pair of *Grand Prix* sit-down game machines. Annoyingly, they were being used. ‘I

wish I could play against that guy,' said David under his breath, nodding at one of the players.

'Yeah, you might stand a chance then,' replied Jason.

But David stood a chance anyway. After a few minutes, the *Grand Prix* machines became free and the pair jumped in. As usual, David won easily.

After a while, hunger set in, so Jason and David went to get lunch at McDonalds, which was just next door.

'Sheesh, queues already!' said Jason. 'You go in that one and I'll go in this one.'

'Bet I beat you at this race, too.'

Jason queued up behind a young girl, who looked like she was only in second grade or so. Her meal was ready to go, but she was still rummaging around in her little purse.

'I know I've got five dollars! I saved it!' She rummaged with increasing agitation.

'Awww,' she uttered, as though about to cry.

Jason took five dollars out of his wallet, leaned forward and gave it to the woman behind the counter. The woman held out the change. Jason pointed to the girl, who took it.

'Thanks!' she said, and skipped off with her meal, hardly recognising that she'd been rescued.

Jason ordered cheeseburgers, fries and drinks for David and himself.

'There. I won.'

'Only because you bought that kid's lunch for her.'

'Yeah, right. That's why I did it, of course.'

'I know.'

Jason rolled his eyes. 'I can't win, can I?' He took the top off his burger, added a layer of fries, and reassembled it.

‘That’s just gross,’ said David.



After lunch, Jason and David went outside and started unchaining their bikes. The rain was heavier now, and a couple of families, probably on holidays, were sheltering nearby. One of the men glanced briefly at Jason, then looked back at him.

‘You’re the kid who saved the PM, aren’t you?’

‘Yep,’ said Jason. He stood tall with pride—and also because the man’s daughter was a bit of a babe.

‘See, I told you this was the town!’ she said.

The man turned to face Jason squarely. ‘You’re the one who’s trying to force the PM to put up petrol prices and taxes, then.’

Jason looked mystified. ‘No, that’s not me. You must be thinking of—’

‘He means about the emission targets,’ said David.

‘Yes, the emission targets,’ said the man. ‘That was you, wasn’t it? Obviously it was; your mate just said so.’

Jason didn’t know what to say. The man didn’t seem very happy. And he was big.

‘Look here, son. The country’s going backwards fast enough already without the likes of you sticking your nose in. You just mind your own bloody business!’

Jason just stood facing the man, speechless. Behind him, David quietly finished unchaining the bikes.

‘Ron, that’s enough,’ said the man’s wife.

But the man took another step towards Jason. ‘Did you hear what I said, son?’ He poked his finger into Jason’s chest. Jason stumbled backwards, more out of surprise than anything.

The other man in the group put his hand on Ron's shoulder. 'That'll do, mate. Don't worry about it now; we're on holidays, remember?'

'And it'll be our last one if morons like this get their way!' He took another step towards Jason. The other man grabbed Ron's arm, but he tried to break free.

'Here!' said David, and thrust Jason's bike at him. Jason snapped out of his frozen state and leapt on. They pedalled furiously down Pacific Street, without even daring to look back in case that slowed them down. Ron's bellows followed them.

'Come back here, you little coward! If you're going to be so bloody selfish, at least have the guts to...'

Fortunately, it wasn't long before Ron's rants were drowned out by sound of the rain pelting onto the shop verandahs. But Jason and David didn't stop pedalling until they got to Jason's house. Only then did they dare to look back, but nobody had followed them.

'Well,' said David between breaths, 'I think we made record time!' He shook his head and splattered Jason's face with raindrops—not that it made any difference, since they were both totally soaked.

They wheeled their bikes into the carport. 'I thought you said you were going to protect me!' said Jason, trying to make light of the situation.

'Only from reporters, not rugby forwards!'

'Now you tell me.'

They retreated inside, and locked the door behind them.



Jason's mother arrived home at a few minutes to two. As they gathered up Tangles for his trip to the vet, Jason and David told her about the encounter with Ron.

'I didn't think things would get this serious,' she said, frowning deeply. 'Your father knows some of the local police. I'll get him to talk to them about it.'

Although having a sick dog wasn't pleasant, at least the trip to the vet took Jason's mind off the confrontation in town. It seemed better to worry about someone else, even if the someone was only a free-to-good-home dog.

The vet was disappointing. Jason assumed that he'd simply look at Tangles, work out what was wrong, give him some pills or something, and that would be it. But it wasn't. He gave Tangles a thorough examination, and listened intently to the descriptions of his symptoms. But he didn't seem to know what was wrong. Or, if he did, he wasn't letting on.

Instead, he wanted to run some tests. He had Jason hold Tangles down and comfort him while he took some blood using a large needle and syringe. Jason couldn't watch.

'We'll have the results of the tests in a couple of days,' said the vet. 'In the meantime, make sure he's got plenty of water to drink. And try to feed him small amounts fairly often, instead of just one or two large meals a day.'

'Good thing you're on holidays, Jason,' said his mother.



That evening, Jason's father arrived home with a policeman. Jason's mother greeted them at the door. Jason could hear the conversation from his bedroom.

'Anne, you remember Tony? He came by to tell us about that bloke who picked on Jason.'

Jason wandered out. ‘Can I listen?’

‘Of course,’ said the policeman. ‘That’s why I’m here.’ He sniffed the air a few times and frowned.

‘Fish,’ said Jason.

‘Scented candles,’ added his mother.

The policeman’s eyes widened. ‘Fish-scented candles? Very... distinctive.’

They all went into the lounge room and sat down.

‘The good news is that Ron won’t bother you again,’ said the policeman. ‘We managed to find him in town. His mob was just passing through. They’ll have left by now, and I told them not to come back any time soon, either.’

‘Oh, thanks!’ said Jason. ‘So it should be okay for me to go into town now?’

The policeman screwed up his face. ‘It might not be as simple as that. Some folks have got pretty strong feelings about this. You could still bump into people who’ll want to hassle you. And then there’s the reporters, of course...’

‘So should Jason just stay inside all holidays?’ asked his mother.

‘No, that shouldn’t be necessary, but a few common sense precautions would be wise.’

Jason looked perplexed. ‘Like what?’

‘Well, it might be best if you stuck to busy places, so you don’t get caught alone. And call us straight away, even if someone just threatens you. Obviously, you’re going to be safest with your parents around, but I know you won’t want that all the time.’

‘No, how embarrassing.’

‘I’ve got to say, this is a pretty weird situation,’ said the policeman, scratching his head. ‘I’ve never heard of a hero needing this sort of protection!’



Chapter 8

Rules Are Rules

Jason didn't sleep very well. Too much had happened, what with the confrontation with Ron, Tangles having some mystery illness, and the visit from the policeman. But at least that meant he was out of bed next morning at a decent hour.

'Let me guess,' said his mother, 'you've got a quiet day planned for today?'

'Actually, no. I've worked out how I can use this situation to my advantage.'

'Really? After yesterday, wouldn't it be better if you had a quiet day? You need to be careful, like the policeman said.'

Jason raised his eyebrows. 'You've changed your tune!'

'I prefer to call it "learning".'

'Don't worry, I'm only going to see Chris. He'll be cool about it. And I won't see anybody on the way.'

After his mother left for work, Jason headed off towards his 'thinking beach', where he'd saved the PM. It wasn't actually raining, but the dark clouds were still hanging around and the stiff breeze made it surprisingly cool for a summer's day.

Yesterday's rain had made the bottom of the old creek bed very gluggy. Red mud caked onto Jason's joggers, making his feet feel heavy. It might have been smarter to cycle the long way around instead of taking the shortcut along the creek bed, but Jason always took this route to the beach. *Maybe I like being in*

a rut, he thought, wishing there was someone around to share his cleverness with.

Getting out of the creek bed was a challenge. The sides were very slippery, and the usual footholds just gave way. After a couple of false starts, he managed it without getting embarrassing amounts of mud on his clothes.

Across the road, the tin roof of the surf lifesaving clubhouse peeped over the embankment. Today, instead of continuing past it to his 'thinking beach', Jason walked up over the embankment and headed straight for the small red brick building. When he got to the concrete path, he tried to wipe some of the mud off his shoes, but only succeeded in getting sand on top of the mud. Oh well, he probably wouldn't have to go inside the building anyway.

Chris was sitting on a metal handrail outside the building. He was the club's chief instructor, and also a patrol captain. Even when he wasn't on duty, he always seemed to be here.

'Jason, long time no see!' Jason was invariably surprised that Chris could speak, since his sunscreen was smeared on like a layer of cement covering his whole face. It seemed especially unnecessary when he was sitting under the roof, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and on a gloomy day.

'I guess so. Been busy.'

'I know. Saw you on telly. Well done! We're all furiously jealous of you, of course.'

Jason sat on the handrail opposite Chris, dislodging a few flakes of paint in the process. 'You're not on duty, are you?' he asked.

‘No mate, just keeping an eye on things. Some of the new blokes haven’t had to deal with tourists before. Got to make sure they’re handling it.’

Jason nodded and looked around. ‘Lousy day to come to the beach.’

‘Yeah, but what else is there to do?’

Without taking his eyes off the beach, Chris swatted at a fly that landed on his leg. ‘So what’s instant popularity like?’

‘Actually, a bit of a pain. But there may be some benefits...’

‘Hope so! Got something in mind?’

‘Yeah, I’ve come to join the club.’

Chris looked lost. ‘I know you want to join, but we’re not holding a swim test today. Next one’s in a week or so, just after Chrissie.’

‘I figured that shouldn’t matter now.’

‘Why not? That’s the entry requirement.’

‘But I’ve already proved I can save people. You saw it on TV. You can’t tell me I’m not good enough now!’

‘Mate, I’m afraid it’s not that simple. We can’t just break the rules. It’s not up to me.’

This wasn’t going as smoothly as Jason had hoped. He looked out towards the ocean, which seemed uninviting and grey beneath the heavy clouds. There were a few kids in the water, but hardly any adults. Two lifeguards were keeping an eye on things.

One of the lifeguards saw Jason, and gave him a wave. ‘Hey Jason, way to save the PM!’ he hollered. ‘Why don’t you join the lifesaving club?’

‘We were just talking about that,’ Chris yelled back hurriedly, so Jason couldn’t respond.

‘*He* thinks I should join,’ muttered Jason.

‘So do I,’ said Chris, without lifting his gaze from the beach. ‘But the Lifesaving Association needs to maintain its standards. If we let someone in who can’t meet the requirements and they stuff up, someone could drown. And we could be taken to court.’

‘But I’ve already shown that I can save people!’

‘Yes, I know. But saving the PM doesn’t necessarily prove you’re a good swimmer. You just had the opportunity. If we let you in, we’d have to let everyone else in who swims at the same speed as you.’

‘No, just let in everyone who saves a life.’

Chris smiled, even though Jason was obviously getting annoyed. ‘Sometimes it’s easy to save someone. Sometimes you don’t even need to swim at all.’

‘It was bloody hard!’

Another fly landed on Chris’s leg. He cupped a hand and tried to trap it, but it got away.

‘Jason, if you say so, I believe you. But if it was as hard as you say, then you must be good enough to pass the time trial! And I really reckon you can. Just remember what I’ve told you before.’

Jason’s head felt like it was pounding. He jumped down from the handrail. ‘So that’s it?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Then you’re no better than everybody else, only looking out for yourself! I’m trying to do something so I can help people, and you’re trying to stop me!’

For what seemed like the first time in the conversation, Chris stopped scanning the beach and looked directly at Jason.

‘Jason, I’m sorry you feel that way. But rules are rules. Just swim your best at the next time trial, and you’re in. Simple as that.’

Jason stormed off, even though he could think of more things to say. Walking away stopped him from getting ruder, and he didn’t really want to be rude to Chris.

But how stupid was that? Chris was always complaining that they could never get enough people, and had been helping Jason to pass the time trial. Now he’d gone all selfish and was just covering his own bum. Jason had thought Chris might have been a bit different, but no, he was just another typical adult.

Stuff the surf lifesaving club.



Chapter 9

The Head Shed

All of the rooms in Canberra's Parliament House were tastefully decorated, and the Cabinet Room was no exception. Contrary to its name, there weren't any cabinets in the room. Neither were there any windows, because government ministers often had private meetings in the room and there had to be no chance of anyone looking in to find out what was going on.

Graham Lindsay's senior ministers were milling around the long wooden table that dominated the room. They all wore drab suits, except for the four women, who provided about the only colour to be seen.

Graham Lindsay swept into the room. 'Okay ladies and gents, sorry for keeping you waiting.'

Everyone took their seats. Mr Lindsay sat at his usual place in the middle of one of the long sides of the table, and took a sip from the mug of black coffee that was waiting for him.

'Ladies and gents, thanks for coming to this meeting at such short notice. And thank you also for the concern you've shown me after my little swimming adventure last week. I can assure you that I'm none the worse for wear.'

He looked down and exhaled slowly. 'Unfortunately, I'm not sure the same can be said for our policy on the Rotterdam conference's emission control targets. We need to find a way to

get out of this mess so we can get on with more important business.’

One of the ministers flicked the front page of the newspaper on the table in front of her. ‘Apparently, there *is* no more important business at the moment! This has got all the headlines, and the opposition’s having a field day with it. We could lose us a lot of popularity over this.’

‘You’re right of course, Donna. If this costs us the next election, we won’t be able to get on with any business at all. We have to find a way of resolving this without adverse publicity. Suggestions?’

The Minister for the Environment jumped in first. ‘Graham, I know you won’t like it, but one option is to actually do what Jason asked for. Remember that almost half of us were in favour of the Rotterdam targets, so the issue isn’t quite as clear as we’ve been trying to tell everyone. I know you’ve got the casting vote, but—’

Mr Lindsay screwed up his face. ‘We’ve already been through this, John. The facts haven’t changed, so neither has my decision. I still believe that adopting these targets would be bad for the Australian economy. And backing down would just give the media something else to criticise me over.’

‘At least it might stop them saying how ruthless you are, though’

‘“Ruthless” is just their word for “determined” when they don’t like you. No, I won’t back down. More ideas please, people.’

There was silence. Nobody made eye contact with anybody else. A few of the ministers doodled; a few frowned; a few chewed the ends of their pens.

‘Prime Minister, if I may,’ said a tall lean man who was sitting away from the table, almost behind the PM. ‘I know I’m not a politician, but let me say this: at the end of the day, this kid has absolutely no right to tell you what to do. Give him nothing. Tell him to pull his head in.’

‘Thanks Robert, but I don’t think that would get us very good publicity. I did say I’d give him something, and the media knows it. Anyway, it’s only reasonable to give him something for saving my life. I just didn’t expect it to be this.’

Silence fell again. Even the gentle breeze from the air conditioning could be heard.

Mr Lindsay drummed his fingers on the table. ‘Come on, people! *Someone* must have an idea!’

‘Can’t you just, um, “clarify” the offer? Say that you didn’t mean he could have literally *anything*, but just a present.’

‘It might be a bit late for that now,’ said Donna, flicking her newspaper again. ‘The media would crucify us if Graham goes back on his word. He said he’d give the kid “anything”, and they know it.’

The PM looked uncomfortable. ‘Okay, so I put my foot in my mouth again. I know it would have been better if I’d picked my words more carefully, but I’d just been pulled out of the water!’

‘What kind of kid are we dealing with here, anyway?’ said the Treasurer, who sat beside the Prime Minister. ‘What kind of kid wants emission control targets when he could have a new computer, or surfboard, or whatever?’

A man at one end of the table slapped it with both hands. ‘Of course! All we need to do is to get the kid to change his

mind. Just offer him something else; something better. If he retracts his wish for emission controls, we're off the hook!

For the first time in a while, they all looked up. Many heads nodded.

'Okay, that's it,' said Mr Lindsay, with obvious relief. 'I'm going to ask you to deal with this, Sue.'

The woman sitting opposite the PM looked up in surprise. 'I don't think that would be such a good idea.'

'Oh really? Why not?'

'What would the media say if you wriggled out of dealing with it personally? *You* made the promise to the kid, so *you* should be the one to talk to him.'

'But I'm too busy!'

'Too busy to deal with our most important issue? The issue that could cost us the next election?'

'Sue's right, Graham,' said the Treasurer. 'And because of what you went through together, you'd have a stronger relationship with the kid. He's more likely to cooperate with you than with anyone else.'

The PM slumped back in his chair. 'You're right, of course. What a bloody nuisance! I wouldn't know what young blokes want these days; I've only got daughters.'

'Bill mentioned a computer or surfboard. They're good ideas.'

'Stereo?'

'Guitar?'

'Huge TV for his bedroom?'

Mr Lindsay scribbled these ideas down. 'Excellent! Keep them coming!'

‘Why do *we* have to choose what to offer him? Why not let *him* decide?’

‘Last time Graham did that, it got us *into* this mess!’ The speaker, suddenly realising the tactlessness of that statement, carefully avoided the PM’s glare.

‘No, I mean, take him to a shopping mall or something. Let him pick out anything he can see.’

‘Top idea! They don’t sell emission control targets at shopping malls!’ Everybody laughed, largely with relief.

‘How about a car? Every young male wants a car.’

‘They don’t sell cars at shopping malls either.’

‘Sometimes they raffle them there, though. If the kid saw the car and liked it, Graham could just offer to buy him one outright.’

‘Yeah, that might work. Except we’d have to find a mall that just happens to be raffling a car that would appeal to him.’

‘Not necessarily. Leave that to me.’

Mr Lindsay looked at the man who had just spoken. ‘Don, what are you proposing?’

‘Don’t ask. Just let me know where and when you’re going to do this.’

The PM shrugged his shoulders. ‘I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I was hoping to get out of it altogether. I suppose I could invite the lad to my Sydney electoral office. It’s in Woribah mall.’

‘I hate to bring it up,’ said the Treasurer, ‘but is Jason old enough to drive?’

‘If he isn’t, he can just park the thing in the driveway and rev the guts out of it,’ replied the man who suggested the car in the first place.

‘Or go bush-bashing on private property.’

‘Is that legal? Is it legal for an under-aged person to even *own* a car?’

The PM interrupted. ‘Details, details! Don’t lose sight of the bigger picture here. If we have to bend a few rules to get this kid off our backs, then so be it. Think about the alternatives: if we stick to our guns and refuse to sign up to the emission controls, we’d be voted out because we’re ruthless and can’t be trusted. If we give in, we’d be voted out because we’re weak and willing to sacrifice the Australian economy for the sake of saving face! No, we have to do whatever it takes to get this kid to change his mind.’

Mr Lindsay turned to face the lean man sitting behind his shoulder. ‘Robert, please get me full briefing notes on the young man’s whole family. Interests, dislikes, the usual info.’

Robert nodded, and wrote on his clipboard.

A woman, who’d sat quietly throughout the whole meeting on a chair in the background, stood up. ‘Prime Minister, before we break up, I’ve been asked to make a small presentation to you on behalf of all of your ministers.’

‘Really, Jill? Off you go, then.’

‘We’ve all been quite distressed by your swimming accident, and everyone’s very relieved that you’re okay. We’ve taken up a little collection and bought you this gift, to express our concern. Your colleagues thought it most appropriate for me to present it to you, in my capacity as Minister for Sport.’

She moved around to the PM’s side of the table and handed him a small present, about fifteen centimetres square. It was nicely wrapped in shiny gold paper, with a red ribbon tied in a bow.

‘Jill, everyone, I’m touched. You didn’t have to do this!’ Mr Lindsay pulled the bow undone, and picked at the wrapping paper. It tore open, and the contents dropped onto the table. It was a blue box with bright yellow writing, which said:

Swim-Safe Inflatable Arm Bands. Large size.



Chapter 10

Temptation

‘Jason! Phone call!’

‘Thanks Mum!’

Jason bounded up the back stairs three at a time. ‘Hello, Jason speaking.’

‘Mr Saunders, my name is Robert Aldershot. I work in the Prime Minister’s private office. The PM has asked me to give you an invitation.’

‘Really? What to?’

‘The PM feels that he didn’t get to thank you properly for rescuing him last week. There’s also some confusion about what you asked for after you rescued him, so the PM would like to meet with you again.’

‘I asked for Amsterdam emission control targets. What’s confusing about that?’

‘Nobody knows of any Amsterdam targets. Perhaps you meant Rotterdam?’

‘Rotterdam, Amsterdam; I knew it was some dam city!’ Jason’s mother glared at him.

‘Either way, at the end of the day, the PM would like to discuss it with you in person. He’s very busy, of course, so he’d find it difficult to visit Sapphire Bay again soon. But he’d be very grateful for an opportunity to meet with you in his electoral office in Sydney next Friday.’

‘Oooh, Sydney! But I can’t get there on my own.’

‘You and your parents would be Mr Lindsay’s guests. We’ll provide a limousine and accommodation. May I assume you’re interested?’

‘Of course! But I’ll have to ask my parents.’

‘If you put your mother back on now, I’ll explain it all to her and sort out the details.’

So Jason did. As he hovered around excitedly, he watched his mother’s eyes open wider and wider as the conversation progressed.



Friday seemed to take forever to arrive. Jason wasn’t sure if he was more excited about meeting the Prime Minister or the luxury trip to Sydney. Time dragged all the more because he didn’t go out much, to avoid reporters and idiots like Ron. But he kept in touch with his friends just enough to make sure they were all jealous of him.

His mood had been dampened a bit by news from the vet about Tangles. Tangles had diabetes. Because they’d detected it early, the vet didn’t expect any serious side-effects, but they had to be very careful with Tangles’ diet. Worse, Jason had to give Tangles an insulin injection twice a day, probably for the rest of the dog’s life. What a horrible thing to have to do!

At the appointed time on Friday morning, Jason and his mother waited in the lounge room. Jason couldn’t sit still, and kept bobbing up to check whether the limo had arrived. His mother remained seated, but was perched uncomfortably on the front edge of her chair. Hobnobbing with the PM was not the sort of thing your average Sapphire Bay resident got up to. What made it harder again for her was that Jason’s father couldn’t

come, because the Japanese trade delegation was visiting his factory on the very same day. It was a business opportunity too good to miss.

Then there it was. It wasn't just a normal car: it was heaps longer, and had more doors. Its shiny blackness reflected the kerb.

‘Wow, cool!’ exclaimed Jason.

A black-suited chauffeur emerged from behind the dark window tinting and placed the luggage in the boot. Jason helped himself to a seat, while the chauffeur politely assisted his mother with her door.

Even before the car moved off, Jason was exploring its features. ‘Wow, this has got *everything!* TV, internet, fridge...’

‘We’ve got all those things at home,’ his mother pointed out.

‘But not in the car! And especially not in your bomby old heap.’

Jason had brought a couple of science books to read, but spent most of the trip playing with the car’s integrated TV/computer. The driver invited them to help themselves to the refreshments in the bar fridge; an offer Jason exploited to the max.

Jason’s mother occupied herself by marking a bundle of assignments she’d brought with her, and then browsed the latest copy of *Coin Collector Monthly*. ‘Oh look, there’s a big “Coin Expo” on in Sydney tomorrow! I wonder if there’ll be time for me to duck in.’

‘If there’s spare time, I want to look for a new MP3 player. I mean, since we’ll be at Woribah Mall anyway...’

‘Don’t forget you’re here to talk to Mr Lindsay. I don’t think you’ll be doing much shopping.’

After a lengthy drive through the bustling Sydney suburbs, they arrived at a swanky hotel. ‘Hey Mum, there’s an indoor pool! Let’s go for a swim!’ said Jason, before they’d even checked in.

His mother rolled her eyes. ‘At home, you’ve got the whole *ocean* to swim in.’

‘Yeah, but the pool’s heated!’

‘Now you *want* to get into hot water?’ murmured his mother.

For the rest of the day, Jason indulged in all the luxuries the hotel had to offer: pool, gym, sauna, spa and games room. He wanted to order a thickshake from room service but his mother wouldn’t let him, even though she wouldn’t have had to pay for it. A complementary massage was also disallowed.

After a four-course dinner, Jason spent the evening flicking between cable TV shows. His mother found some decorative candles in the room and lit them all, claiming they helped her to relax. Even though they were unscented, Jason still thought they made the room smell like fish.



Next morning, Jason was up well before the cooked breakfast was delivered to their room. He’d ordered one of everything on the menu; after all, the Prime Minister was paying. His mother just nibbled on a piece of toast.

After breakfast, a limo picked them up from the hotel and took them to a nearby shopping mall, which seemed to go on for block after block. When the car finally pulled up, they were met by a tall lanky man. It was Robert Aldershot, the man who Jason

had spoken to on the phone. Jason thought he looked like a funeral director—not that he'd ever seen one, except on TV.

Mr Aldershot escorted them to the PM's suite on the third floor. 'I'm afraid you'll have to wait for a few minutes,' he said. 'The PM's running a bit behind schedule.' But it wasn't long before they were ushered into the inner office.

'Jason, thank you for coming,' said the PM. 'I'm glad to be able to meet you again.' He rose from his desk and extended a hand towards Jason, which Jason politely shook.

After introducing himself to Jason's mother, who half shook hands and half curtsied, the PM led them to a small coffee table surrounded by three luxurious leather chairs. 'Of course, the main reason I wanted to meet you again was to thank you properly for what you did for me. I don't think there's much doubt that I owe my life to you.'

'That's okay, Sir. You're welcome.' What else was there to say?

'You don't have to call me "Sir"; "Mr Lindsay" will do fine. Mrs Saunders, you must be very proud of Jason!'

And so the meeting progressed. Graham Lindsay was a good conversationalist, and Jason's mother started to relax a bit. She and the PM had coffee. Jason had asked for a chocolate thickshake, which Mr Aldershot had been dispatched to obtain. His resentment at having to do so was obvious.

When the drinks were empty, the PM made an unexpected request. 'Anne, I wonder if you'd mind if I got to know your son a bit better, just one-to-one. I feel like we've got a special relationship, after what we went through together.'

Jason's mother was caught by surprise. 'What did you have in mind?'

‘Oh, I’d just like for us to go for a stroll around for a little while. We’ve got a few things to discuss, rescuer to rescuee.’

‘Well, I suppose... Is that okay with you, Jason?’

‘Sure, I guess.’ The PM seemed harmless enough, but Jason didn’t think they really had all that much to talk about.

‘Great! Anne, I happen to know you’re a keen coin collector. There’s a “Coin Expo” on at the moment, not far from here. Robert would be happy to take you, if you’re interested.’

‘Actually, I knew that was on. Quite a coincidence!’

The PM and Mr Aldershot glanced at each other. ‘Yes, very fortunate.’

So Jason’s mother went off with Mr Aldershot, without giving much thought to how the PM could possibly have known about her interest in coins.

‘The PM’s being very patient with your son, Mrs Saunders,’ said Mr Aldershot. ‘Your son’s demand for emission controls is... inappropriate.’

Jason’s mother was caught by surprise. ‘Jason *did* save the PM’s life! And he’s only trying to do what he thinks is best for everyone.’

‘People shouldn’t be allowed to interfere with the political system like this. If I’d got into politics, I wouldn’t have tolerated it.’

‘Did you try to get into politics, Bob?’

Mr Aldershot bristled slightly. ‘My name is “Robert”. Yes, a few years ago, I registered a political party of my own. But it didn’t take off.’

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Saunders, hoping she sounded sincere. ‘Why not?’

‘At the end of the day, politics is really all about popularity, and I— it didn’t suit me.’

Mrs Saunders smothered a smirk. ‘Well, at least you’re still involved with it, in a way.’

‘Yes, as Graham Lindsay’s thickshake lackey,’ Mr Aldershot muttered.



Jason and the PM took an escalator down to the mall’s main shopping area. They were flanked by four of the PM’s security staff, whose very appearance was sufficient to keep them from any unwanted attention. A few people tried to take photos using their mobile phones, but the security guards moved them along pretty quickly.

At first, Jason was a bit nervous about talking to the PM one-on-one. What would he say? But the PM kept him busy with questions about school, school holidays, swimming, and even the beach where the rescue had taken place.

Since it was less than a week until Christmas, the shopping mall was festooned with Christmas decorations. Carols were playing through the PA system, although it was hard to hear them above the crowd. All of the shops seemed to be having Christmas sales, and were advertising their latest wares.

‘Hey, that’s the new GameBox!’ said Jason, pressing his nose against the window of a computer games shop. ‘Look at those graphics!’

‘Is it?’ replied Mr Lindsay, hoping that his mock surprise was convincing. But Jason was too smitten to be analysing the PM’s tone of voice.

‘I’ve never really had a close look at things like that,’ said Mr Lindsay. ‘I should, though. Technology is important to Australia.’

‘My friend’s got the model down from this. I could show you what it can do.’

‘Really? Let’s go in, then.’

Inside, one of the units was all set up, ready for demonstration. Jason showed the PM how to operate it. He even coaxed the PM into doing a couple of laps against him in a Formula One racing game. Needless to say, Jason thrashed him.

‘This is great!’ declared Jason. ‘Much more powerful than Jim’s—not to mention my crappy old computer. My friends would be *soooo* jealous!’

The PM smiled but said nothing.

They continued on through the mall. The crowd magically parted around them as they moved, due to the PM’s security escorts. It reminded Jason of Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea. He and the PM were probably the only people in the whole place who could move without bumping into anyone.

‘Jason, do you remember what you asked for that evening, when you rescued me?’

‘Yeah, I half-remembered. Plus, it was on the news.’

‘I assume what you meant was for me to sign up to the emission control targets at the Rotterdam conference.’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘Of course, the conference isn’t until late January, so I haven’t had an opportunity to take any action on that yet.’

Jason nodded. ‘That’s okay.’

The PM left it at that for the moment. They kept on walking.

‘Gee, look at the size of that!’ prompted the PM, as they approached an electrical appliance store.

Jason looked in awe. ‘Is that a TV?’

The salesman hovering nearby fielded the question. ‘It can be. Or you can watch DVDs on it. Or even connect your computer up to it. This is the latest 165 centimetre plasma model, just arrived.’

‘Wow, cool!’

The PM looked at Jason, who couldn’t take his eyes off the colourful wall of pixels dancing before him. ‘It’s almost as big as I am!’ said the PM. ‘It’s a bit *too* big, isn’t it? Would that fit in your bedroom, Jason?’

‘Hmmm, I never thought about having something like that in my bedroom. It’d take up a whole wall! But I’m sure I could make room for it.’ He imagined sitting on his bed playing *Formula One* on a new GameBox, using the giant TV as a display.

With some difficulty, Jason peeled his eyes away from the screen, and he and the PM rounded the corner into the last corridor of shops. At the far end of the concourse, a sparkling green car was standing proudly on a small platform, like a mountain lion on a rock. Its grille looked like teeth; its fat black tyres like limbs ready to spring. Jason did his best to ignore it and pay attention to the PM as they walked slowly past the intervening shops.

Finally, they reached the vehicle. A small gaggle of people crowded around it; many were buying raffle tickets for it. The PM read from the placard on its roof: ‘“*Predator* four-by-four off-road SUV”. SUV?’

‘Sport Utility Vehicle. These are cool,’ said Jason, jealously eyeing the ticket-buyers.

‘Could you use one of these down your way?’ asked the PM.

‘Sure, a few people have got things like this. They’re great on the dirt tracks up behind the town. Some people use them on the beach too, but I don’t know if they’re supposed to.’

‘Are you looking forward to getting your license?’

‘Oh yes; I’ve already been practising.’

They walked around the vehicle, and looked under the propped-up bonnet.

‘Big donk,’ said the PM, admiring the gleaming silver engine block.

‘Gotta be. SUVs need them for going up steep tracks and dunes.’

‘Makes sense. Want to sit inside?’

‘Could we? Nobody else seems to be allowed to touch it.’

The PM signalled to the man who was selling the raffle tickets. The man nodded back.

‘Okay, jump in,’ said the PM. ‘You’re driving!’

Jason leapt up behind the steering wheel, while the PM clambered in the other side. Jason adjusted his seat, mirrors and seat belt.

‘Comfy?’ enquired the PM.

‘Yep, I could get used to this!’

‘Well, you know you could.’

Jason looked at him quizzically.

‘Jason, I said I’d give you whatever you asked for, and I’ll keep my word. If you ask for one of these, that’s what you’ll get.’

‘But I already asked for something.’

‘Well, like I said before, I haven’t had a chance to do anything about that. So it’s not too late for you to change your mind.’

‘Oh, I never thought about it like that.’

‘On the beach, you answered my question on the spur of the moment. Sometimes when I say things on the spur of the moment, what I blurt out isn’t the best. It’s better when I take the time to think before I answer. You could do that; I won’t hold you to your original request.’

‘Thanks! That’s very nice of you!’

‘Jason, it’s the least I can do for someone who saved my life. This car would be very suitable for you. You could take your mates for spins around the paddock—and I’m sure your lady-friends would be most impressed! So what colour would you like?’

‘What colour?’ echoed Jason, taken aback the speed with which this new development was unfolding. ‘I don’t know; shouldn’t I ask my parents?’

‘Can’t *you* decide the colour? After all, you’re the one who saved me, not them!’

‘I guess, but my dad would need to build another carport for it, and he mightn’t want to. So it might be better if I took the TV, but it mightn’t fit in my room. I don’t know... Do I have to decide right now?’

Mr Lindsay looked down. ‘I suppose you can have a quick think about it and let me know. Just ring Robert at my office; he’ll be there right up until Christmas.’



As Jason and his mother headed back to Sapphire Bay in the limo that evening, Jason compared it with the glittering green Predator in the mall. The limo didn't seem quite as wonderful as it did before; the Predator would certainly be more fun around Sapphire Bay. And the limo's tiny fifteen centimetre TV screen seemed comical, compared to the 165 centimetre monster set. Jason wondered whether the PM might let him get both the big TV and the GameBox, as a combined package.

So many options!



Chapter 11

Decisions, Decisions

Jason woke up early, to the sound of his parents having a tense discussion about something. While he couldn't work out every word, it seemed to be about him. His mother said something about 'good for his development and growth'; his father said 'too important for that'. It ended abruptly, and Jason rolled over and managed to get back to sleep.

An hour later, he was woken again by the roar of a ride-on mower, indicating that it must be Saturday. One of Jason's favourite aspects of school holidays was losing track of what day it was, since every day felt like Saturday. But today it made a difference, because he wanted to tell his father all about the meeting with the PM. He vaguely recalled blurting out some details when they got home last night, but it was after midnight and he'd been really sleepy.

But first, Tangles was due for his morning injection. 'Come here, boy!' said Jason. It had never been necessary to say that before, since Tangles had always mobbed Jason as soon as he appeared. But now that Jason meant injections, Tangles wasn't quite so enthusiastic. As usual, he flinched and let out a little yelp as the needle went in.

Jason watched his father rallying around on the mower. He contemplated offering to take over, since it would be good practice if he were to get that Predator SUV. But there wasn't

much left to do, so he just sat on one of the cast iron chairs on the front verandah and waited for his father to finish.

‘So, you saw all sorts of goodies in the mall, you mentioned last night.’

‘Yeah, there was this humungous TV set! It was as big as my bedroom wall. And a Predator like Mr Baker’s, only the latest model. There was lots of cool stuff!’

‘Of course, it won’t be the latest model by the time you get your license. Not to mention how long it would take you to save up for it!’

‘But I could get it now for free! Mr Lindsay said I could have anything I wanted.’

‘I thought you’d already told him what you wanted.’

‘Well, yes, but he said I can change my mind.’

‘Oh did he just!’ Jason’s father leaned back in his chair and nodded slowly, half frowning and half smiling. ‘Seems to me like old Graham’s trying to buy you off!’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Well, you know the government doesn’t want to agree to emission targets, or whatever they are. And it would be pretty embarrassing for the PM to have to agree to them just because of something he blurted out when you saved him, so it would suit him just fine if you changed your mind about what you wanted. He’d happily buy you any toy you can think of, if it would get the media off his arse so he could go back to doing what he wanted to do in the first place.’

‘I thought he was just being generous by offering me more choices,’ said Jason, frowning. ‘So what should I do?’

‘Apparently, that’s not for me to say,’ his father replied, looking into the house through a window.



His father’s cynical view put quite a different complexion on the PM’s offer. Jason’s immediate reaction was to force the PM to honour his promise and cough up what he’d originally been asked for—whether he wanted to or not. But was that just being silly and bloody-minded? Should he deny himself a big TV, or even a car, just to get back at the PM? There was much to think about.

And the best place to think was at his ‘thinking beach’, so that’s where he went. It also provided a good opportunity to get in some swimming practice.

After a long relaxing swim, Jason got out of the water and slipped his shirt on. His mobile was beeping; there was a text from David:

need 2 beat u @ grand prix. now!

Jason didn’t really feel like going into town. Being hassled by strangers was no fun. Plus, he hardly ever beat David at video games. Of course, things would be different if he had a new GameBox to practice on...

But David never took ‘no’ for an answer, so Jason headed for the video arcade. He took a back route, away from the main streets, even though the policeman had recommended otherwise. But he made it without incident, and felt safe enough inside the arcade. People who had strong feelings about politics generally didn’t hang out in video game arcades.

David was already there, blasting away at aliens. Jason crept up behind him and put his hands over David’s eyes.

‘Hey!’ exclaimed David, and shook his head free just in time to snare another marauding spaceship.

‘Hey yourself. Only 72,380, and you’re on your last ship. That’s pretty hopeless.’

An alien snuck through David’s defences, resulting in a loud and distorted crash emanating from the machine, informing everyone within earshot that the player had been overcome.

David bashed the side of the machine in disgust. ‘75,420. That sucks. But tell me how you got on with the Prime Minister yesterday.’

‘If you want to play *Grand Prix*, maybe we should jump in now while nobody’s using it.’

‘Good plan. Prepare to get thrashed.’

They sat down in the machines, but before the race started, two boys rushed over.

‘Oh, they’re taken now,’ said one of them to his mate.

‘Maybe they won’t be long.’

‘I can’t wait; Dad’s probably already looking for me. Oh well.’

Jason turned around. ‘Hey kids, want to jump in?’

‘Really? That’d be great!’

So Jason and David got out, and the two boys jumped in.

‘Hey, the seat’s wet!’ complained the boy who’d taken Jason’s machine.

‘Oh yeah, sorry about that,’ said Jason, slapping his wet board shorts.

‘Let me guess: terrified that I was going to thrash you again?’ said David.

‘Don’t flatter yourself. Been practicing for the SLSC time trial.’

‘Eh?’

‘Surf Life Saving Club.’

‘Oh. I thought you weren’t going to bother with that.’

‘Well, Chris reckons I can do it, so I’ll give it one more go.’

‘Yeah yeah, that’s what you said last time. I still don’t understand why you want to get into that, anyway.’

‘They do lifesaving courses and coaching. Plus, I can help people who get into trouble at the beach.’

‘Like the Prime Minister.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And look at the trouble that’s caused!’

‘Good point,’ said Jason, nodding.

‘Maybe before saving someone in future, you should check who it is, eh? And you still haven’t told me what happened yesterday.’

‘It was okay, I guess,’ said Jason. He told David about the things he’d seen, and how the PM said he could have any one of them instead of what he’d originally asked for.

David raised his eyebrows. ‘That sounds more than okay to me!’

‘Yeah, but Dad reckons the PM’s not doing it to be nice, but to get out of having emission control targets.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Dunno yet.’

‘You could score a great Christmas present out of it!’

‘Yeah, I know.’



Jason spent the next few days mostly at home. He finished a couple of books and got through a couple of *Grand Theft Auto* missions on his computer. He even found some sort of SUV in

Grand Theft Auto, and took it for a spin. But playing on his computer was not so much fun any more, now that he'd seen the wonderful graphics on the new GameBox. He wound up the graphics quality settings on his computer, but the result was unplayably slow. What made it worse was knowing that he could have a GameBox simply by asking the PM for one—but at the expense of the environment.

A few days before Christmas, Jason's mother dropped him off at the hardware store to get a present for his father. As he was waiting at the cash register, the store manager came over and introduced himself.

'The rumour is that you can get anything you ask for out of the PM. Is that right?'

'Well, sort of, but—'

'You know you should get something that benefits all of us.'

'You mean the emission control targets?'

The man stifled a chuckle. 'No, I mean something *useful*. Something *practical*. What we really need is to get the main road fixed. The council won't do it unless they get a government grant, but the government keeps turning them down.'

'Actually, that's a good idea. Pacific Street is falling apart.'

'—and way too narrow. There needs to be angle parking along both sides. And in the middle. The lack of parking really stops the shops here from doing good business, especially during holiday periods.'

'I'll think about that,' said Jason, even though it wasn't altogether true. Fortunately, he was now at the head of the queue, so he paid quickly and left.

He didn't get far. 'Hey, Jason Saunders!' yelled a voice from the other side of the road. Jason pretended not to hear, and

walked a bit faster. But the voice's owner crossed the road and tapped him on the shoulder.

'How lucky I saw you,' said the woman. 'I've just got an idea about what you should get from the Prime Minister.'

'How do you know I can get anything?'

'Oh, *everybody* knows. Look, what you want to do is get him to make child care free for working mothers.'

'I didn't know working mothers went into child care...'

The woman eyed Jason suspiciously, trying to work out whether he was being sarcastic or not. 'No, not for them, for their children.'

'Are you a working mother who uses child care?'

'Of course. That's how I know how badly it's needed.'

'And it would save you a lot of money, I guess.'

'Oh yes, a huge amount!'

Jason nodded. 'I'll add it to my list of suggestions.'

Jason had had more than enough harassment by now. He put his head down and ran for the car park where he was supposed to meet his mother. The car park was absolutely full, so it took him a while to find his mother's car. *Well, what do you know; we **do** need more car parking!* he thought.

His mother wasn't back yet. Jason optimistically pulled on the door handle. To his surprise, the door opened, so he jumped in and hid his face behind a copy of *Coin Collector Monthly*.

Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long. 'How did you get in?' asked his mother.

'Lock's busted.'

'Figures. I'll get your father to take a look at it.'

Jason shook his head sadly. 'This car isn't worth the effort. Just wait until I can give you a lift in my Predator.'

‘Is that what you’ve decided?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Don’t you have to let the PM know before Christmas?’

Jason nodded.

‘Well, that means tomorrow!’



Jason heard his father leave for work at the usual time. It seemed especially rude that he should have to go to work that early on the day before Christmas. Jason tried to get back to sleep, but couldn’t. These holidays just weren’t working out to be all that relaxing.

His mother was having breakfast and reading the newspaper. Jason poured himself some corn flakes and sat down opposite her.

‘“Election will be popularity poll for PM”,’ said Jason, reading the newspaper headline from upside-down. ‘I didn’t know there was an election coming up.’

‘It’s a state election,’ said his mother.

‘So will Mr Lindsay be in it?’

‘No, his government runs the whole country. Prime Ministers get elected at federal elections, not state elections. There’ll be one of those next year.’

Jason looked confused. ‘If he’s not in this election, why are they saying it’s a popularity poll for him?’

‘Well, even though he personally isn’t in it, other people from his party will be. But if people don’t like the PM, they won’t vote for the other people in his party. And Mr Lindsay isn’t all that popular, at the moment.’

‘Because of his anti-environment policy?’

‘No, it isn’t that. A lot of people think he’s a bit ruthless. They say he doesn’t like to listen, and won’t back down even when he’s wrong about something.’

‘He seemed pretty nice to me.’

Just as Jason was finishing his cereal, there was a knock at the door. Jason’s mother went to see who it was. Jason could hear everything from the kitchen.

‘Mrs Saunders, we’re representing the local real estate agencies. We’ve put together a scheme to boost home ownership in the area, which is just what Sapphire Bay needs. We were wondering whether Jason might like to ask the PM—’

‘I’m sorry, you’re a bit late. Jason has already made up his mind and told the PM what he wants.’

The door closed and his mother reappeared, with a disgusted look on her face.

‘Thanks Mum.’

‘What parasites!’

‘Yeah. Everyone in this town is just being selfish; trying to get something for themselves.’

Jason’s mother nodded. ‘Have you decided between the Predator and the TV yet?’

‘Well, I’m kind of leaning towards the Predator, because—
Oh.’

Jason’s mother managed to keep her face expressionless, and went back to her newspaper.

‘Excuse me,’ said Jason, ‘I’ve got a phone call to make.’



Jason sat on the end of his bed and dialled the number for the PM’s office. There was a long and threatening recorded message that droned on about security and privacy implications, calls

being recorded and monitored, blah blah blah. Finally, Mr Aldershot answered, and Jason passed on his decision. After hanging up, he trudged out into the lounge room, where his mother was finishing her coffee and newspaper.

‘All done?’ she asked.

‘Yeah. Things can go back to normal now.’

‘Why so glum then?’

‘Well, I’ve just turned down a free car. Or a TV. Or something.’

‘Jason, I’m proud of you for sticking up for what you believe in. Most people can’t see the big picture. Let’s hope Graham Lindsay doesn’t have any more tricks up his sleeve.’

Jason nodded. ‘Maybe he—or someone—will give me a Predator for Christmas, as a reward for unselfishness.’

‘I think you deserve one.’ His mother looked towards the Christmas tree. ‘Unfortunately, none of the presents looks quite big enough.’

‘Maybe it’s just the keys in the box.’

‘I wouldn’t get my hopes up...’

‘Yeah, I know. And speaking of not seeing the big picture...’ Jason turned on the lamentably small TV, to see if there was anything interesting on that might distract him. A morning news segment sprang to life:

'...Woribah mall last week. Angry ticket-holders have protested to the government Office of Gaming. An investigation by this station has revealed that the fake raffle was registered by a Mr Douglas Schneider, who works in the private office of Donald Blacklock, the federal Minister for Trade. Mr Blacklock has been unavailable for comment.'



Chapter 12

Doing It by the Book

Christmas came and went quietly. Nobody gave Jason a Predator. Not even a big TV. Jason half-regretted not taking the PM up on his offer, but at least his parents got him a new MP3 player.

It was the day of the next SLSC swimming trial. Jason headed along the creek bed to the SLSC clubhouse. To avoid being recognised, he went straight down to the far end of the beach, where they conducted the trials. It was always quiet there because that area wasn't patrolled by the lifeguards, and the beach was pretty narrow and rocky.

Jason sat on a rock and waited for other candidates to arrive. It was pleasantly warm in the sun and there was hardly any breeze. The ocean was almost as still as a swimming pool. That was bad for the surfers, but good for the swimming trial.

Ten minutes passed, and still nobody else showed up. Maybe today's trial had been cancelled. Jason wouldn't really have minded that: it was very relaxing, with nobody else around. He contemplated going back home to get a book to read but couldn't be bothered, so he just lay back and closed his eyes.

'G'day Jason.'

'Oh, hi Chris. I'm surprised you're still speaking to me. I'm sorry I was so rude last time...'

'That's okay. I know how it looks from your point of view.'

Chris slapped at a fly that was making its way across his clipboard. ‘So how was your Christmas?’

‘Quiet, which was good.’

‘Yeah, I’ll bet people are getting in your face a lot, at the moment.’

Jason rolled his eyes. ‘I don’t dare go into town any more, and reporters keep hanging around our house. The beach is the only place they haven’t tracked me down, actually.’

‘What a pain. Decided what to ask the PM for, yet?’

‘I stuck with the emission control targets.’

‘Good man. Doing the “benevolent dictator” thing, eh?’

Jason responded with a mystified expression.

‘Oh, it’s a political theory, or something,’ explained Chris.

‘Since when do you know anything about political theories?’

‘Hey, I went to university, you know! Where do you think I learnt to surf?’

‘Figures,’ said Jason, smiling and rolling his eyes again. ‘So what’s a “benevolent dictator” then?’

‘It’s where the bloke in charge gives people what’s best for them, whether they ask for it or not.’

‘Well, when people don’t *know* what’s best for them, someone’s gotta do it!’

‘Of course, you wouldn’t be very popular...’

Jason shrugged. ‘I could do with a bit less popularity.’

‘Well, it looks like you’ve got it this morning. Time’s up, so let’s get this show on the road. Or water, I guess.’

Jason waded into the ocean and breast-stroked out to the starting buoy. Chris gave him a wave, and he set off for the buoy that marked the far end of the lap.

The swimming conditions were perfect. There was no wind to blow him off course, and hardly any swell, which made it easier to maintain a nice steady rhythm. The water was the perfect temperature.

Perhaps best of all, he was on his own. There was nobody else to avoid and nobody to kick spray into his face as he was trying to breathe. He felt safer in the water than on land: nobody could hassle him here. He relaxed, and swam with long, smooth strokes.

After the required number of laps, he rounded the final buoy and swam ashore.

Chris was shaking his head sadly. ‘Sorry, mate.’

‘Well, that’s it then. I just can’t do it.’ Jason walked past Chris and slumped down on his rock.

‘Jason, you *can* do it! I’ve seen you swim much harder than that. You just looked like you were out for a stroll. You need to be passionate if you’re going to save lives!’

‘I already have, remember?’

‘Well, show me some of that passion at the next trial, which is during the surf carnival in a few weeks.’

‘It’s bloody hard when it’s so artificial. Nobody’s drowning here. Obviously I can do it when there’s a reason!’

Chris nodded thoughtfully. ‘So you need to be stirred up, do you? Okay, just before the next trial, ask me again about getting in without actually passing the test. That seems to get you going!’

‘I still reckon that’s a stupid rule. I mean, talk about— never mind.’

‘I did actually let someone in once, who hadn’t passed the test.’

‘Really? Why won’t you do it for me, then? Who did they save, the Queen?’

Chris held out his clipboard. ‘See this form? Before someone can get in, I’ve got to sign it to say they’ve met the entry requirements. I ended up getting dragged before the Lifesaving Association’s disciplinary board when I, shall we say, “bent the rules” before. It wasn’t pretty.’

‘Oh. Anyway, talking about that just makes me not want to join at all.’

‘Okay, maybe I could just give you a kick in the arse at the start, next time.’

‘Isn’t that called assault?’

‘Talk about hard to please!’ Chris looked down, and smoothed a patch of sand with one of his thongs. ‘Then how about I set a pack of wolves after you?’

‘You can arrange that?’

‘You might be surprised...’



Chapter 13

If At First You Don't Succeed...

The Prime Minister cradled his mug of coffee in his hands, and looked around the Cabinet Room at his colleagues. ‘Ladies and gents, I apologise for recalling you all to Canberra so early in the new year. I know that many of you were away on holidays, but we’ve got a significant problem on our hands.’

He took a swig from his mug. ‘Blah, it’s cold. Anyway, as you probably know, our efforts to tempt Jason Saunders to change his mind about emission control targets were unsuccessful. We need to find some other way to get him off our backs—and quickly, since the Rotterdam conference is only a couple of weeks away. I’m open to suggestions...’

There was silence.

‘Nobody?’ asked the PM. ‘All still in holiday mode?’

‘I think we ran through all our ideas the last time we discussed this problem.’

Silence returned. The PM tapped his fingers on the table. The Minister for Defence started sketching a cartoon in his notebook. One of the others stared at her newspaper, as though the answer might be found there.

‘Have we learnt anything new since our previous meeting?’ prompted the PM.

The Minister for Education nodded. ‘Yes, actually. I flicked through the file on Jason Saunders that Robert put together. It

seems he's hell-bent on getting into the local surf lifesaving club, but can't. I'm sure we could swing that for him.'

'We're already copping a lot of flak from the media over our previous strategy,' said the man beside her. 'They're calling it "bribery". Let's not give them "jobs for the boys" as well!'

Mr Aldershot spoke up, from his position behind the PM. 'I took the phone call from the kid when he turned down the previous offers. He said he'd really have liked the car, but didn't want to be selfish. So, at the end of the day, he'd probably say no to this for the same reason.'

'He didn't want to be selfish, eh?' said the Treasurer. 'We've never had to deal with an unselfish opponent before! That'll make it a lot harder.'

'Yes, he's a good lad,' said the PM. 'We had a long chat in the mall. His heart's in the right place, so I'd rather not resort to dirty tricks.'

A few of the ministers looked up in surprise. A few raised their eyebrows.

'If his heart's off limits, we need to work on his head, then.'

Dr Harris, the Minister for the Environment, shook his head. 'I wouldn't go there. We need to steer clear of arguing about the technical merits of the Rotterdam targets. It just isn't as simple or clear-cut as we've been making out. It's a quagmire; a minefield. You could never hope to convince him.'

'Well, we need to do *something*,' said the woman with the newspaper. 'Have you seen the latest popularity polls? They're predicting a massive swing against us in the state election this weekend. And they're saying it's because of the way we're dealing with this kid and the environment.'

‘Isn’t that typical? Our surveys show that most people don’t *want* environmental targets that would cost jobs, income, etcetera. We’re trying to give them what they want, and we’re being criticised for it!’

Dr Harris shook his head again. ‘I hate to be a party-pooper —’

‘Don’t worry John, we’re used to that by now.’

‘Yeah, well, the surveys aren’t all that clear either. Our surveys show that people don’t want targets, but the opposition’s surveys show that they do. So do the media’s surveys, by the way.’

‘I’m not sure that surveys are all that relevant here,’ said the PM. ‘It’s true that we’re trying to do the best thing for everyone, but we’re being blocked by one person, who isn’t even old enough to vote!’

‘Selfish little twerp,’ muttered Mr Aldershot.

The PM swung around. ‘What did you say?’

‘Oh, Prime Minister, I didn’t mean you! I meant that kid.’

‘Yes, I realise that. But did you just call him selfish?’

‘Well, here you are, trying to take everyone else’s opinions into account, and he’s saying “no, ignore them, just listen to me!”. At the end of the day, he’s really just taking away other people’s opinions, or influence.’

‘But didn’t you say he turned down our previous offer because he doesn’t want to be selfish?’ asked a woman on the opposite side of the table.

‘That’s right, ma’am.’

‘Well then, maybe that’s his weakness; his “Achilles’ heel”. Maybe we can use his unselfishness against him!’

The PM looked lost. ‘How can unselfishness be a weakness? Isn’t it rather admirable?’

‘It’s like Robert said. He’s being selfish by telling us what to do here. He’s taking away other people’s right to have their views taken into account. We could point that out to him. If he really wants to be unselfish, he’ll have to back down.’

‘Actually, that’s pretty good,’ said the PM. ‘Tricky, though.’

‘Is the kid bright enough to get it?’

‘Oh yes, he’s bright. It’s just a bit... subtle. I mean, how do you explain it to someone who doesn’t vote? Or better still, how do you *show* it; *demonstrate* it?’

Things went quiet again, except for the sound of the PM’s fingers on the table.

‘I think Andrew’s got a better idea. It’s much simpler!’

The Minister for Defence stopped drawing in his notebook and glared at the woman beside him.

‘Excellent!’ said the PM. ‘What have you come up with, Andrew?’

‘It’s nothing.’ He tore out the page he was scribbling on, screwed it up and tossed it into a bin in the corner of the room.

‘It was very good!’ said his neighbour.

The minister for defence turned slightly red. ‘It was... inappropriate.’

Someone sitting near the bin fished out the ball of paper and unscrewed it. ‘Hmmm, it looks like a plan for a military solution to the “Jason” problem.’

Mr Lindsay shook his head. ‘We need to take this seriously, people!’

A man who wasn't at the previous meeting tentatively raised his hand. 'I don't know if I should speak up yet, since this is my first cabinet meeting—'

'Barry, how rude of me!' exclaimed the PM. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I've asked Barry to take over from Don Blacklock, since Don has had to step down due to that unfortunate business with the raffle. Barry, welcome aboard!'

'Thank you, Prime Minister. I was going to suggest a way to show Jason that he's being selfish: give him a guided tour of parliament house here. You could point out where all the politicians sit and cast their votes, so that everyone's opinions count.'

The woman beside him grimaced. 'Yeah, but that only shows that *politicians*' opinions count. What about ordinary people?'

'No problem, if we can move quickly. Do it this weekend, just after the state election. We can set up a tally room, with monitors showing the votes coming in from everyone who's eligible to vote.'

'Oh, I like that! We can even point out that his parents' votes will be in there somewhere.'

'—and that he's selfishly over-riding their input!'

'Ladies and gents, that's really good thinking,' said the PM. 'And I guess I have to be the one to do this?'

Everybody nodded.



Chapter 14

De-Voted to a Good Cause

Things had settled down a bit for Jason. A few more people had tried to talk him into getting things they wanted from the PM, but that stopped as soon as news of Jason's decision got around. Some people still hassled him over concerns about their jobs or income, so he still had to be on his guard.

The phone rang as Jason happened to be walking past it. It was Mr Aldershot.

'Mr Saunders, the government has been discussing how to give you what you asked for. There's some concern that it could be wrong of the PM to do what you said. Since you've decided to make political decisions, the PM thought it would be appropriate to show you how the system is supposed to work, so you can understand.'

'I don't know... Last time, the PM tried to trick me. I think I'd rather not...'

'Oh. That's a nuisance, since I've already organised the helicopter for this Saturday.'

'Helicopter?'

'It seemed like the quickest way to get you to Canberra and back. You wouldn't have needed to stay overnight, so your parents wouldn't have had to come with you.'

'I could fly to Canberra and back in a helicopter?'

'I can cancel it, if you wish.'

‘Don’t do that! Let me just ask my parents.’

Jason rushed outside to where his parents were working in the garden. ‘Hey Mum, can I fly to Canberra in a helicopter?’

‘What?’

‘Mr Lindsay asked me to. Just me. To see how Parliament House works, or something.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jason’s father, who was finally taking some time off work. ‘He’s bound to be up to one of his tricks again. Someone should at least go with you.’

‘Graham’s not that bad,’ said Jason’s mother.

Jason’s father raised his eyebrows. ‘“Graham”? You’re on first name terms with the PM now?’

‘Well, I *did* have morning tea with him. And being shown how parliament works by the Prime Minister is a pretty unique opportunity.’

Jason’s father nodded begrudgingly. ‘I guess so.’

‘Woo hoo! Helicopter flight!’ whooped Jason.



At least he didn’t have long to wait. After lunch on Saturday, Jason and his parents waited near the school oval. Fortunately, nobody else had found out about the trip; the only other people present were a few men making sure that nobody got onto the oval.

Then there it was. The dot grew rapidly larger until the angry beast was hovering only a few dozen metres away. It was so noisy that everyone blocked their ears, and the dust and debris it whipped up made them squint.

After the helicopter settled down, Jason was escorted aboard like a VIP in a movie. He waved to his parents as the machine powered back into the air.

Jason had assumed it would be quiet inside, like an airliner—but it wasn't. You could hardly talk. But that didn't matter much, because neither Mr Lindsay nor Mr Aldershot was on board. The two men with him didn't say much, so Jason spent the trip staring out the windows. Fields of various shades of yellow passed by, occasionally separated by bushland where the hills were too steep for farming.

One of the men pointed ahead. 'Canberra,' he said loudly. The city buildings grew gradually larger. Parliament House was easy to spot because of its weird flag pole. Jason hoped they'd fly over the city, and maybe even land at Parliament House, but instead they veered away from the city and landed at the airport.

Mr Aldershot was waiting for him. 'Enjoy the flight?'

'Oh yes! It was great!'

'I hope it makes up for having to meet the Prime Minister again.'

Jason didn't know quite how to respond. Was Mr Aldershot trying to be funny? Or didn't he like the PM? Or was he just being rude?

'I just don't think Mr Lindsay should have tried to trick me last time. He said I could have whatever *I* want, not whatever *he* wants me to want. He should keep his word!'

'He hasn't said "no" to anything. He's kept his word, and then some. I think you've been a bit lucky.'

After the excitement of the trip, Mr Aldershot was a real downer. They sat in silence as they were driven from the airport.

Parliament House didn't seem all that great from the outside. It looked like a building that was trying to be a hill, since it was built into the side of one. It almost seemed ashamed

of itself. *And so it should be, given the way the Prime Minister has behaved*, thought Jason.

But things were different on the inside. It looked much more spacious than had seemed possible from the outside, and the large stone and wood structures were pretty impressive.

After passing through a security check, Jason followed Mr Aldershot along several long corridors. Mr Aldershot walked so fast that it was hard to keep up with him.

They entered a dimly lit room, a bit smaller than a classroom. At the front were at least six large TV screens. Electrical cables ran everywhere. Sound could be heard from at least two different TV stations.

Mr Aldershot's phone rang. He motioned for Jason to sit down in one of the lounge chairs at the front of the room, then went out into the corridor to answer the call. Jason looked over his shoulder. There were about a dozen lounge chairs in the room, all facing the front, but only a couple of people were sitting in them. A third man was sitting at a computer keyboard at the front of the room.

Mr Aldershot swept back in. 'That was the PM. He should have been here by now, but he's running a bit late. He's just on his way.'

'That's okay.'

'I'm glad you think so. He's late for everything. I arrange his schedule perfectly, but at the end of the day, if he won't stick to it, there's nothing I can do.'

Jason tried to make sense of the information on the screens in front of him. Some of them seemed to be showing TV coverage of the election that had been held that day, but since the sound was garbled, it was hard to be sure. Other screens

were displaying information from a computer. None of it seemed particularly interesting.

‘Jason! Welcome to Canberra! Did you enjoy the flight?’

Jason stood up and shook the PM’s outstretched hand. ‘Yes, it was great! Australia sure looks dry, inland.’

‘Didn’t you see Lake George? It’s massive!’

‘No, I didn’t see any lakes before we got to Canberra.’

‘Not very observant, are you!’ The PM turned to Mr Aldershot. ‘Robert, could you get me my usual? And a thickshake for Jason from the cafeteria.’

‘Chocolate,’ added Jason. Mr Aldershot gave him a frosty look, then departed.

Jason and Mr Lindsay sat down. The PM explained that the room they were in was linked up by computer to the Tally Room in Sydney, where they were counting the votes for the election that day.

‘Let me tell you what’s happening. Most adults get to vote, which means saying who they want to represent them in the government. The people in each region get to pick one representative, from among the candidates who want the job.’

‘Yeah, we covered that in school.’

The PM pointed to one of the data screens. ‘This screen is showing us how many votes each candidate has got, in one particular region. You can see the numbers change as more and more votes get counted.’

‘They’re voting for *people*, not emission control targets, of course.’

‘Yes, but the voters know which candidates want the targets and which ones don’t. For example, they know that people from my party don’t support strict targets.’

‘Oh, I guess that makes sense,’ said Jason. ‘Can we see the results for Sapphire Bay?’

The man at the computer poked at the keyboard, and the data on one of the screens changed.

‘Your parents’ votes will be included in those numbers,’ said the PM. ‘See how every person’s opinion is taken into account?’

Jason nodded. ‘The candidate from your party isn’t doing very well, is he?’

The PM shifted his posture. ‘Not at the moment.’

‘Maybe that’s because he doesn’t support emission control targets.’

‘No, it’s probably because of some local issue. It could even be because the other guy is the local footy hero, or something.’

‘So the one who wins could win because of something else, even though most people might actually want emission controls?’

‘Well, in theory— Oh good, coffee! I need this; it’s been a long day.’

Mr Aldershot handed over the drinks. Unfortunately, he’d forgotten to get Jason a straw, and had to go back and get one.

The PM showed Jason a few more things while they finished their drinks, but there wasn’t much more to it.

‘Okay, now that you’ve seen how people elect representatives, I want to show you what those representatives do.’

They got up and walked along some more corridors, and down a wide flight of stairs. The PM pushed open a large wooden door, and ushered Jason through.

It was a large hall, even bigger than the school's assembly hall. Over 100 seats were fixed in a giant arc on the floor, with more seats looking down from above like an indoor basketball stadium. But unlike a basketball stadium, everything was immaculate.

'This is the House of Representatives,' said the PM, with a faint show of pride.

'It's very green,' Jason quietly. It seemed irreverent to talk much above a whisper.

'This shade was chosen to be representative of the Australian landscape.'

'Maybe you should paint it yellow, then.'

The PM didn't respond.

'Oh sorry!' said Jason. 'I wasn't trying to be rude, about the emission targets. It's just that Australia already looks yellow, to me. Like out the helicopter window.'

'Let me explain what happens in this room. The candidates who win in today's election will become members in the state government. But the ones who win in federal elections get to be members in here. This is where we decide on really big issues that affect all of Australia.'

'Like emission control targets?'

'Like emission control targets. Let's take that as an example. If we sign up to the Rotterdam targets, there'd need to be new laws, to reduce pollution and fuel use, and things like that.'

Jason nodded vigorously. 'Yes, exactly! Good! That's what I want!'

'All the members in here get to vote on new proposals, like those. If most members are in favour, the man who runs this

place says “I think the ayes have it”, and the proposal becomes a law. Then, everyone in Australia has to comply with it. But if most members don’t like it, it’s just thrown out, and nothing changes.’

‘“The eyes have it”? Why would he say that?’

‘“Aye” means “yes”.’

‘Oh. That makes sense, then.’

The PM walked down an aisle between the rows of seats to a huge table in the centre of the room, then rolled back a large business chair from the table.

‘This is where I sit. Want to try it for size?’

Jason lowered himself into the soft green leather. ‘Woo hoo, power! Let there be emission control targets!’ he said, with a regal wave of his arm across the rows of empty seats facing him.

‘Actually, that’s the point,’ said the PM, sitting down beside him. ‘In here, I only get one vote, just like everybody else.’

‘Then how could you possibly sign up to the Rotterdam targets? Most of the others here would still vote against the new laws you’d need.’

The PM grimaced slightly. ‘Well, the members usually vote the way their political party wants them to. If I told the members in my party to support laws for the Rotterdam targets, they would.’

‘Oh, so you *could* say “let there be emission control targets”!’

‘But should I? If I forced the members in my party to do what you want, then they wouldn’t be doing what they said they’d do when people voted for them. They’d be breaking their word—and so would I.’

Jason screwed up his nose. ‘Oh yeah. People shouldn’t break their word. So how do you work out which way your members should vote? Do you have a climate change expert?’

‘The Minister for the Environment sits there,’ said Mr Lindsay, pointing to a nearby seat. ‘But don’t forget that he doesn’t have to be an expert. He got elected, just like you saw in the Tally Room.’

‘But if you don’t have any experts, how do you know you’re getting it right?’

‘It’s not so much about “getting it right”, as about getting it the way most people want it.’

‘So if most people want it wrong, that’s what you do? If most people want to stuff up the future, that’s what you do? What if most people wanted to declare war on Tasmania, or something?’

Mr Lindsay slumped back in his chair. ‘Who’s to say what’s right?’ he said wearily.

‘People who know! Experts. Like that professor on TV, who wears a shirt. Van... something.’

‘van Dyne? Actually, he’s doing some research for us.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, we’ve asked him to study the long-term effects of climate change. If we hadn’t done that, you’d probably never have heard of him.’

‘So you *do* have to think about the future! If you did something now that trashed the environment in fifty years time, would you be punished somehow?’

‘No, but if we trash the Australian economy, we’ll be punished in the election this year!’

‘That’s pretty sad.’

‘Absolutely. We have to win the next election so we can complete the good work we’ve started.’

‘No, I mean it’s sad that you’re rewarded for doing good in the short term, even if that makes it worse in the future. *My future.*’

Mr Lindsay slumped back in his seat again. ‘If that’s what the Australian people want, isn’t that what we should do?’

‘I guess so,’ conceded Jason. ‘For me to force everyone to do what I want, and to ignore what they want, seems sort-of selfish...’

The PM stroked his chin. ‘Hmmm, good point. I suppose it does, in a way.’

‘Makes me wonder if I’m doing the right thing...’

‘Yes, I can see where you’re coming from. I suppose you could change your mind, if you’re concerned about being selfish.’

‘It’s not too late?’

‘Not quite. If you tell me now, I can still do what people expect me to do. And don’t forget my previous offer, the car. That’s still on the table.’

Strong table, thought Jason.

Even though Mr Lindsay seemed keen for him to make a decision on the spot about whether to change his mind, Jason figured he should at least sleep on it, so he just thanked Mr Lindsay for showing him around and promised to let him know what he decided very soon.



It was pretty late by the time the helicopter took off. Jason craned his neck around to watch the lights of Canberra disappear into the distance. Unfortunately, it was too dark to see details of

the country scenery. Every so often, a white dot on the ground would mark out a farm house, or a group of dots would signify a town. Strings of dots could be seen driving along some of the roads. And every dot indicated at least one voter: one person with an opinion on global warming; one person that Jason was telling the PM to ignore.

And there really were quite a few of those little white dots, even out in the bush.



Chapter 15

An Injection of Confidence

Next day, David wanted to know all about it. So, as usual, he coaxed Jason out to lunch.

‘Well, how was it?’ asked David, as he unwrapped his burger.

Jason disconnected himself from his thickshake. ‘Actually, pretty interesting.’

‘Is that all? I’d have thought it would have been great! Did they let you fly it?’

‘Oh, I was talking about Parliament House.’

David made a farting sound with his tongue. ‘That’s only a building. Boooring.’

‘No, not the building, what they do in it. That was pretty interesting.’

David made another farting sound. ‘Politics. Even boring-er.’

‘But they did let me fly it, sort of. I got to sit in the PM’s chair!’

‘Yee-ha! So what laws did you make? Emission controls? Free Predators for your mates?’

‘I don’t know...’

‘Oh, here we go again!’

‘I can see why the PM doesn’t think he should agree to emission controls. I guess there are more opinions than just mine.’

‘Well, duh! What do your parents reckon?’

‘They reckon it’s my decision,’ said Jason, while carefully arranging a layer of fries inside his cheeseburger. ‘Although I know Dad’s against it.’

David eyed the fry-spiked burger with distaste. ‘I still reckon that’s gross.’

‘Ever tried it?’

‘Nope. And don’t plan to.’

‘Well, don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.’

David shivered with disgust, even though it was so warm that the restaurant’s air conditioning wasn’t quite coping. ‘And speaking of gross, did the PM say anything about that cartoon?’

‘What cartoon?’

‘The one in today’s paper, of course!’

Jason shook his head. ‘My parents never showed me any cartoon...’

‘Oh, it was a Sydney paper, I think. Maybe you don’t get it. Just a sec...’

David got up and retrieved a newspaper from a vacant table nearby. ‘There you go, front page!’

Jason inspected the sketch. It looked like something a student would draw during a boring history lesson. There were aircraft, ships and tanks, all firing an assortment of weapons—at him! There was no mistaking it; the exaggerated glasses made it quite clear who the intended target was. An arrow pointed to the bespectacled stick figure, with a sign that said ‘Emission Control Target’.

‘It’s pretty funny, in a way,’ said David.

Jason couldn’t reply. He gripped the newspaper so tightly that his fists turned white. What was this, a sick joke? Or were they trying to scare him? He stared at the picture in silence for a full minute before regaining his voice. ‘Who drew it?’ he asked quietly.

‘Some politician, they reckon. Someone smuggled it out of parliament house. Could it have been the PM?’

‘No, he wouldn’t do that. He’s okay. They better find out who *did* do it, though.’

‘If they do, the newspaper reckons they’ll get the sack.’

‘So they should!’



When Jason got home, he found his mother fuming about the cartoon. ‘I’ve got a good mind to ring Graham about it,’ she ranted. Jason begged her not to, and only succeeded by pointing out that she’d only get to speak to Mr Aldershot anyway. The stress caused by the cartoon itself was bad enough, but the prospect of being publicly defended by one’s mother was a million times worse.

Unfortunately, next morning’s newspaper brought even more bad news. ‘*Local Youth Robs Voters,*’ said the headline. Jason got that tight feeling in the chest, like when he accidentally damaged his mother’s car when he was mucking around in it without permission. He read on:

‘A source close to the Prime Minister has revealed details of a secret meeting between the Prime Minister and local youth, Jason Saunders, concerning Australia’s stance on the Rotterdam Environmental Conference’s emission control targets.’

‘Since rescuing the Prime Minister after he got into difficulty while swimming near Sapphire Bay last December, Mr Saunders has been pressuring the government to sign up to the conference’s emission control targets.

‘The source, who does not wish to be named, contacted the Sapphire Sentinel’s office yesterday afternoon.

‘“Mr Saunders has no right to dictate policy to the Australian people. At the end of the day, his demand amounts to selfishly taking away the rights of ordinary voters,” he said.’

‘Selfishly,’ murmured Jason.

‘Unfortunately, that’s how a lot of people are going to see it,’ said his mother.

‘But I’m doing it to be *unselfish!* I just want things to be okay for people in the future.’

‘Even so, you might be best to avoid people in the present, until this blows over. In fact, I think we need to ground you, for your own good.’

What an appalling suggestion! Being punished for saving the PM’s life! Jason tried to talk his mother out of it, but with only limited success. In the end, he promised to stay away from the main part of town but was still allowed to go to the beach, which was fortunate because he really needed to work out what he was going to tell the PM.

So, after breakfast, he scooped up a few things to take to the beach. After assuring his mother that he’d be fine, he headed out the door and made for the neighbour’s gate.

‘Jason! Excuse me!’ A woman was running down the street towards him, and a man was getting out of a car parked nearby.

Jason lengthened his stride.

‘Jason, hi. I’m Marie Torelli, from the *Sapphire Sentinel*. We spoke just after you saved the PM, remember?’

‘Yes,’ said Jason, as he swung himself over the gate to his neighbour’s field. To his surprise, the woman climbed over with him.

‘Can I talk to you about your meeting with the PM?’

‘I’d rather not,’ said Jason, walking as briskly as he could without actually running.

‘It’s already in the papers. Don’t you want an opportunity to tell your side of the story?’

‘This is private property, you know.’

‘Yes, but it isn’t *your* property. Do you agree what you’re doing is a bit selfish?’

By now, the man had caught up with them and was running ahead of Jason, taking photos of him.

‘Could you please leave me alone?’

‘People have a right to know what’s going on, when you’re making decisions on their behalf, don’t they?’

The photographer was half-running backwards, still snapping away.

‘Look out!’ said Jason, but it was too late. The photographer fell backwards into the dry creek bed. He made an ‘ooph’ sound as he hit the hard ground about two metres down.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Ms Torelli.

The man just lay there. Jason jumped down into the creek bed and went over to him, but just as he got there, the man sat up.

‘Winded,’ he said. He slowly got to his feet and wriggled his limbs, as if to make sure they were still working.

Jason picked up the man's camera and handed it back to him. The lens had broken off and the body had some serious dings in it.

'Can we continue?' asked the woman.

The photographer dusted himself off. 'Yeah, fine by me.'

'Not by me!' said Jason. He scrambled out of the creek bed and ran back home, without even looking over his shoulder to see if the reporters were following him.



From his bedroom window, Jason watched a police car drive slowly up to the reporters' car. A policeman got out and spoke to the occupants through the driver's side window. After about a minute, the reporters drove off.

'Thanks, Mum.'

'I still wouldn't go outside for a while.'

'Now I believe you.'

His mother responded with a look of exasperation.

So Jason was basically a prisoner in his own house. Oh well, he still had his computer and books, and was too worn out to move anyway. But knowing that he *couldn't* leave home was still galling.

Fortunately, people seemed to have very short attention spans. One day, you could be the hero; next day, the villain—or better yet, just a nobody. And the Rotterdam conference was only about a week away. After that, this would all be old news. Nobody would care any more, or even remember.



Jason awoke, and was surprised to find himself in the hammock in the back yard. The book he'd been reading was on his chest;

his watch showed half past two. He struggled out of the hammock and went indoors.

His mother was doing some ironing in the lounge room. ‘Good nap?’

‘That’s the first time I’ve ever slept during the day!’

‘After ten AM, anyway.’

‘That’s not “during the day” when it’s holidays. And anyway, I haven’t slept in much at all, these hols. Haven’t been able to.’

His mother nodded glumly. ‘It’s probably a good thing you weren’t available. The phone’s been ringing hot for you.’

‘We ought to rip the phone from the wall.’

‘Your father’s got a better idea. Go and see.’

Jason wandered out to the hall, where his father was battling with a multitude of electrical cords. ‘There, that should do it.’

‘That’s the third time you’ve said that,’ said Jason’s mother, without moving from her ironing.

‘Yeah, but things always work on the third go, so I *had* to say it three times.’

‘Answering machine!’ exclaimed Jason. ‘Cool!’

‘You know, it would have been easier if you’d just changed your mind.’

‘Paul!’ scolded Jason’s mother.

‘I know, I know.’

‘So does it work now?’ asked Jason.

‘Should do. Just got to record a greeting message. Give me some shush.’

Mr Saunders held down the ‘Record Greeting’ button on the machine and spoke into its microphone hole. ‘G’day, you’ve reached the Saunders residence. Leave a message after the beep

—unless you want to talk about environmental stuff, in which case you can just piss off.’

‘Paul! You can’t say that!’ said the voice from the lounge room.

Jason’s father looked at him. ‘What do *you* reckon, matey?’

‘Sounds fine to me, Dad.’

Footsteps could be heard rapidly crossing the lounge room floor. Jason’s mother burst into the hall and strode over to the answering machine. After studying it for a while, she found and pressed the ‘Play Greeting’ button. The machine recited the recorded message in a tinny version of Jason’s father’s voice:

‘G’day, you’ve reached the Saunders residence. Leave a message after the beep.’

Smiling, she shook her head and disappeared back into the lounge room, while Jason and his father had a good laugh.



Jason spent the rest of the afternoon aimlessly browsing the internet. The answering machine worked well, except for one thing: a lot of people still left messages, and Jason could hear the messages being recorded from his room. Very few of them were polite. Jason toyed with the idea that the full version of his father’s greeting message might have been better.

Amidst the abusive calls was a message from Chris, reminding him that the next swimming trial would be at the surf carnival on Saturday. Jason just deleted the message along with all the rest. He also found a way to turn down the answering machine’s volume, so he could no longer hear the messages as it recorded them.

At five o'clock, Jason's father clicked on the TV news. Even though there was a good chance he'd be at least mentioned on the news, Jason didn't bother going to watch. It was bound to be just more criticism.

A few minutes later, his father called out. 'Hey Jason, you want to see that professor bloke you like?'

Jason ventured out. Professor van Dyne was unmistakable in a red and lime green shirt.

'Yes, we've applied to the government for an additional research grant. Now that Australia might adopt the Rotterdam targets, we need to look at the implications of those targets much more closely, which will require a significant expansion of our research. We need to be careful not to over-simplify things when they're as important as this!'

'I wish that professor was PM,' said Jason. 'Then nobody would be hassling me.'

'That would be the only way he's going to get the money he wants,' replied his father. 'Unless he does a deal with the devil, that is.'



Next morning, Jason's parents were actually having breakfast at the same time. Jason joined them.

'How are you going with your big decision?' his father asked.

'I meant to think about it yesterday, but... it wasn't a good day.'

Jason's mother nodded. 'Anything we can help with?'

'I don't think so. I'll work it out after breakfast.'

‘Don’t forget to give Tangles his injection,’ said Jason’s father. ‘You forgot, yesterday.’

‘Oh, did I? Is he okay?’

‘Yes, your mother did it.’

‘Thanks Mum. I still don’t like doing it. It seems kind-of selfish and cruel, forcing stuff into him when he doesn’t want it.’

‘Tangles doesn’t know the injection is actually good for him, of course,’ replied Jason’s mother, pouring herself a second cup of tea. ‘And since he’s not capable of thinking about his long-term health, we have to do that for him. So if we’re sure the medicine will help, it’s not being selfish, it’s actually being kind.’

‘“...if we’re sure...”,’ echoed Jason, fidgeting with the salt and pepper shakers. ‘Yes, I’m sure! Excuse me, going to call the PM’s office.’ He left the table and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

His parents looked at each other. ‘What was *that* about?’ asked his mother.

‘Beats me!’



Chapter 16

Take the Bull by the Horns

It was raining in Canberra—not that you could tell from inside the Cabinet Room since it didn't have any windows. A couple of the ministers had obviously been caught out in the rain; a few drops fell from one minister's hair onto the newspaper she was scanning.

'I really thought that would work,' said the PM to his senior ministers. 'We *needed* that to work. Although I do feel a bit bad about what we've— what *I've*— had to do, though.'

'I can't understand how it *couldn't* have worked,' replied the Treasurer. 'Didn't Jason understand it?'

'Oh, he understood it all right, but that's just water under the bridge now. The way I figure it, we've got just one more chance. There's less than a week until the Rotterdam conference—'

'—and the media's killing us,' said the woman with the newspaper. 'They're saying you're being ruthless, weaselly and ungrateful. Unless this turns around fast, we might as well start packing our offices.'

'Thanks Donna; I know the situation. If I say "no" to Jason, we're voted out for being ruthless. If I give in, we're voted out for being spineless—not to mention damaging the Australian economy. I can't say "yes" or "no" without losing.'

'Depends whose public opinion polls you believe,' said the Minister for the Environment.

‘I believe ours,’ replied the PM. ‘We just *have* to get Jason to stop dogging us; that’s the only way out of this. Robert, did the phone call from Jason provide any clues?’

‘It didn’t make a lot of sense,’ said Mr Aldershot. ‘He said something about “needing to take medicine”, and “he was sure the medicine was right”. Personally, I think the kid might be losing his marbles. At the end of the day, that could be very useful.’

‘How could that possibly help us?’

‘Surely the media couldn’t expect you to submit to the will of a mentally unbalanced child! You could simply say “no”, without any criticism or backlash.’

The PM shook his head. ‘Jason doesn’t deserve to be treated like that. Does anyone have any *honest* ideas?’

‘Well, there’s always the obvious strategy of tackling Jason head-on. Convince him that he’s actually wrong about emission controls. I know you’ve always rejected that idea in the past, but...’

The PM screwed up his face. ‘I didn’t want to have to go there. But I suppose it’s the honest thing to do, to debate the issue itself instead of distractions.’

The Minister for the Environment was shaking his head. ‘The issues are just too unclear. You’ve got no chance of convincing him that he’s wrong, unless he wants to be convinced.’

‘Maybe we don’t have to convince him that he’s wrong,’ said the Minister for Education. ‘It might be enough to just convince him that he isn’t necessarily *right!*’

Most of the other ministers looked at her with bewildered expressions.

‘Pardon?’ said the PM.

‘Well, at the moment, it sounds like Jason is absolutely certain about what he thinks is going to happen. If he were less sure, maybe he’d back down.’

‘Graham, is Jason smart enough to understand that things can be unclear?’ asked the Treasurer.

The PM exhaled slowly. ‘He did a pretty good job of poking holes in our political system when I was trying to make it seem crystal clear, so maybe...’

‘Fine. Give him some of his own medicine, then. Drag him in to see the people in John’s department.’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea, either,’ said the Minister for the Environment.

The PM looked at him in exasperation. ‘Why not, this time, John?’

‘If you use government people to explain it, Jason will think they’re biased; just ventriloquist’s dummies saying what you want them to say.’

‘Actually, that’s a good point,’ said the Treasurer. ‘We need someone who Jason would believe. And it would be nice if they could also talk about the economy, since that’s the main reason we can’t do what he wants.’

‘So,’ said a man at one end of the table, ‘what you’re saying is that we need to find someone who the kid would respect, who knows about the environment and the economy, can make things seem unclear and will do what we require of them. Oh, and we have to find them by Friday. I think I’ll start packing my office.’

The PM frowned. ‘Don’t be so negative, Martin. Ladies and gents, any suggestions?’

None were forthcoming.

The PM started tapping his fingers on the table. ‘Come on people, there must be *someone!*’

There was a quiet knock on the door.

‘Right on cue,’ said the Treasurer. ‘An answer to your prayers perhaps, Graham?’

The door slowly opened, and a woman from the cafeteria pushed her trolley into the room. ‘Refills, anyone?’

‘Already?’ said the PM. ‘The meeting’s only just begun!’

‘Don’t forget we started half an hour late,’ replied the Treasurer.

‘Oh yes; sorry about that.’

There was an awkward silence as the tea lady made her way around the room. ‘You don’t have to stop talking because of me,’ she said. ‘I’m cleared to top secret, you know.’

‘Yes,’ replied the PM, ‘but this meeting is about something especially sensitive.’

‘I’ve heard you discussing military plans before! It can’t be more sensitive than that.’

‘I think the less said about military plans, the better. Wouldn’t you agree, Andrew?’

The Minister for Defence hung his head and said nothing.

After a few more minutes of silence, the tea lady manoeuvred her trolley out the door.

‘Okay, you’ve all had time to think,’ said the PM. ‘Who do we get to, um, “educate” Jason?’

‘I think I know just the man,’ said the minister opposite the PM. ‘That professor who’s been on TV recently—what’s his name?’

‘van Dyne?’ said the man beside her, with some surprise. ‘But he’s a raving greenie, isn’t he?’

‘He’s a raving greenie who wants a large government grant.’

The PM raised his eyebrows and nodded slowly. ‘Interesting idea! Although I wouldn’t call Lou a *raving* greenie; he just doesn’t like people over-simplifying things and twisting them to suit their own purposes. To us, he seems like a greenie, but to a greenie, he probably seems like... a “greedy”.’

Many of the ministers laughed. ‘Sounds like a greenie with a cold,’ said someone.

‘Well, if he can cool Jason down a bit, the grant money he’s asking for would be money well spent,’ said the Treasurer. ‘And if he criticises us for over-simplifying things to suit ourselves, it’s only fair that he should do the same to Jason.’

‘But would Jason listen to him?’ asked the Minister for Education.

The PM nodded. ‘Definitely. Jason’s seen him on TV, taking digs at us. Robert, could you make the arrangements please? Just make sure Lou knows it’s just a private visit; I don’t want the media there. They’d make it look like I was just trying to wriggle out of my promise.’

‘Well, you are,’ said the Minister for the Environment, under his breath.

The PM looked at him suspiciously. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Well, you are, um, taking a chance that nothing goes wrong. What if the professor doesn’t play ball, and tells Jason to stick to his guns?’

‘Oh, for a minute, I thought you were implying something else,’ replied the PM. ‘Don’t worry; I’ll make sure Lou’s on-side.’

‘What will you do if the kid doesn’t cave in?’ asked the Minister for the Environment. ‘Will you sign up to the Rotterdam targets?’

Mr Lindsay bit his lower lip. ‘I’d be within my rights to do so, since our cabinet discussion was evenly divided—as you keep reminding me, John. But I still believe that signing up would be the end of us in government. The economy has to come first; people would forget about Jason faster than they’d forget about ongoing pain in their wallets and purses.’

‘Maybe so, but they wouldn’t forget about either before the next election. Not with the media and opposition continually reminding them...’

‘—which is why I really don’t want to choose between two bad options. Anyway, I really think this will do the trick. I’m so confident that I’m going to buy that car Jason likes, so I can get it delivered as soon as he backs down. That way, he won’t be able to change his mind back again. Robert, do you think you can entice Jason to pay us another visit?’

‘I’ll find a way, Prime Minister.’



Chapter 17

Muddying the Waters

Just a few more days, thought Jason. Today was Thursday, and the Rotterdam conference was on Wednesday next week. After that, everyone would know that the PM had signed up at the conference. It'd be a done deal. There'd be no point for anyone to try to change Jason's mind because it would be too late. So it should be safe to go out again in maybe a week—or perhaps two, to give people time to forget. Just in time to go back to school. *Terrific*.

Jason browsed through his computer games for the hundredth time, in the hope of finding one he wasn't bored with yet. His deliberations were interrupted by a call on his mobile from Mr Aldershot.

'It looks like you've won, kid. As we speak, the PM is changing his speech for the Rotterdam conference.'

'...saying that he'll be agreeing to the emission control targets?'

'What choice did he have? In his speech, he wants to talk about what will happen in Australia as a consequence, but since he wasn't originally intending to sign up, he has to get more information. So he's going to meet with Professor van Dyne tomorrow.'

'Oh good! I've seen him on TV.'

‘So the PM mentioned. Since you’re a fan of the professor, the PM thought you might like to meet him and sit in on the discussions.’

‘Wow, that’d be great! But did you say “tomorrow”?’

‘It has to be tomorrow, because the PM has to leave for the conference on Monday. I know it’s short notice, but there’s a single seat available on an Air Force VIP aircraft that I can get you on.’

‘A VIP aircraft, like Air Force One?’

‘No, that’s American, and it’s huge. This is a smaller plane that can land at your local airport. Ask your parents and call me back as soon as possible, so I can organise for the plane to pick you up.’

Jason’s father was sceptical. ‘Are you really sure you want to go? It’s probably a trap, like every other time.’

‘Not this time! The battle’s over; I’ve won! The professor will tell Mr Lindsay that I was right all along.’

‘I think I should come along, just in case.’

‘But Dad, there’s only one spare seat on the plane, so you’d have to drive.’

‘It can’t really hurt to let him go, Paul,’ said Jason’s mother. ‘Graham’s never actually lied to Jason, or anything. It’s just that things didn’t go quite as we expected.’

Jason’s father rolled his eyes. ‘Defending your mate Graham again? But I guess you’re right.’

So Jason called Mr Aldershot back, and the arrangements were made.



Early next morning, Jason’s mother stood tapping her foot at the front door. ‘Come on Jason, we’ll be late!’

‘It doesn’t matter; Mr Lindsay’s always late.’

‘They mightn’t hold the plane for you. It might have to leave on time.’

‘It wouldn’t dare; I’m a VIP!’

But they made it to the airport in time to see the aircraft arrive. It was much smaller than Jason imagined, and it had propellers instead of jets. It wasn’t all that luxurious inside, either. Not that it mattered; the flight to Canberra took only half as long as it had taken in the helicopter. Jason kept an eye out for the big inland lake that Mr Lindsay had mentioned, but still didn’t see it.

After landing at Canberra, Jason was driven to Parliament House to meet up with Mr Lindsay. Needless to say, the PM was behind schedule, and showed up fifteen minutes later.

‘Jason, glad you could make it! Did you see Lake George this time?’

‘No, and I was looking for it, too.’

‘You can’t be very observant!’ chided the PM. ‘It goes on for miles. Actually, I’ve heard it’s a bit smaller these days, so maybe it only goes on for kilometres now.’

‘Mr Lindsay, how come what we talked about before got into the newspaper?’

‘I hope you don’t think I did that! The newspapers are blaming me for it, and accusing me of being ruthless. This whole business could cost me the next election.’

‘Oh yeah; I never thought about it like that.’

‘I’m as unhappy about it as you are. I’ve got some people investigating. If it happens again, we’ll catch whoever’s responsible for it.’

Jason and the PM were driven from Parliament House to the university. On the way, the PM pointed out some of the sights of Canberra.

‘That’s the Captain Cook Memorial Water Jet,’ he said, pointing at a small concrete island in the middle of a lake. ‘It can squirt water over 100 metres in the air.’

‘Wow! Does it work?’

‘It does, but they don’t turn it on too often any more because the water level is a bit low.’

‘I can tell.’

‘Really? How?’

Jason pointed out the line on the shore where the water level used to be, and the debris on some of the rocks along the lake’s edge.

‘Well there you go; I never noticed!’ said the PM.

It didn’t take long to get to the university. The car pulled up outside a two storey brick building. One window was boarded up and the paint on the gutters and downpipes was peeling. Despite the condition of the building, a faded sign said ‘Centre for Sustainability’.

Professor van Dyne came out to greet them. ‘You’re a bit of a hero of mine,’ he said to Jason, without actually looking him in the face. ‘You’ve got everybody talking about sustainability! And that’s always a good thing, yes?’

‘So long as they get it right!’

The professor laughed. ‘Interesting! I wonder if my department here is “getting it right”.’

‘You’re not sure?’ said Jason, widening his eyes slightly. ‘But you’re a professor!’

‘That’s interesting, isn’t it? You think the issue is simple, and that the environment is top priority. Mr Lindsay thinks the issue is simple, and that the environment *isn’t* top priority. But I don’t think it’s simple at all. You two must be smarter than me.’

Jason looked confused. ‘But on TV, you said—’

‘Come with me,’ interrupted the professor. ‘I want to introduce you to Grendel, who can explain it better than I can.’

They went inside and headed upstairs.

‘I’m taking you to our student laboratory room,’ said the professor. I apologise for entertaining you in such a messy place, but that’s where Grendel is, and he’s so large that he can’t leave the area.’

‘Not even at night?’ asked Jason in amazement.

‘Not even at night.’

‘Wow, he must be big!’

‘He’s a big boy, yes. We measure him in “gigaflops”.’

‘Gigaflops,’ echoed Jason thoughtfully. ‘I’ve heard of those.’

They entered a large open area. Desks and chairs ran along the edges of the room, but a high bench ran down the centre, making it look more like a chemistry or biology lab. Several dissected bits of computer were lying on the lino floor.

Jason looked around for Grendel, but couldn’t see anyone.

‘Graham, Jason, meet Grendel,’ said the professor, as he lifted back a plastic sheet that was covering a large mound on the bench.

‘Wow,’ said Jason. There were twenty-four computers under the sheet, lined up side-by-side in two rows. All their covers were removed so their circuit boards were visible, and a web of cables criss-crossed between them.

‘This is a “Beowulf cluster computer”,’ explained the professor. ‘All these computers are connected so it acts like one really fast computer. Yes, you need all the speed you can get when you’re trying to work out what will happen in the whole world for the next century.’

For all those computers, there was only one screen. A printed sign on top of it said ‘GREEN DELL’, but someone had crossed that out and written ‘GRENDDEL’.

‘Okay,’ said the professor, ‘outside we were talking about how simple it is to “get it right”. That’s what Grendel is for. Yes, it works out what might happen to the climate in the future. So if I click this button, we get a graph...’ The professor clicked, and a line slowly snaked its way across the computer screen.

‘There!’ exclaimed Jason triumphantly, as though he were somehow responsible for what they saw. ‘It’s going upwards, so the climate is getting hotter!’

‘That’s what this graph is telling us, yes,’ said the professor. ‘But this graph is based on a lot of information.’ He manipulated the computer’s mouse and a screen full of numbers appeared. ‘If I change any one of these numbers, Grendel will make a different prediction about what the climate will do. Yes?’

‘I guess so,’ said Jason.

‘An example, perhaps. Currently, Grendel is assuming that the ocean’s ability to absorb carbon dioxide is nine units.’

‘What’s the ocean got to do with it?’ asked the PM. ‘Aren’t we talking about the atmosphere here?’

The professor looked at Jason. ‘Can you explain it, Jason?’

‘Easy. The more carbon dioxide the ocean takes out of the air, the less there is left in the air. And since carbon dioxide

traps heat in the atmosphere, the more the ocean takes out, the better.'

The PM scratched his head. 'Really? Is that right?'

'That's exactly right, yes,' said the professor. 'How did you know that, Jason?'

'Mum gets me science magazines to read.'

The professor nodded appreciatively. 'Anyway, let me change the nine to a ten, and run the program again.'

A new line now made its way across the screen, but this one went downwards.

'So, what's this graph telling us?'

Jason didn't like what he saw, so remained silent.

The professor tried again. 'How would you interpret it?'

'Well, it's saying that things will get cooler. But that doesn't make sense! You only changed that number by a little bit.'

'Interesting, isn't it? Yes, the environment is very sensitive, at least to some things.'

'So just put in the right number and you'll get the right answer.'

'And what is the right number?' asked the professor, without actually looking at Jason. 'Ten? Nine? Twelve, perhaps?'

The PM smirked, but tried to hide it by putting his hand over his mouth.

Jason shrugged his shoulders and screwed up his nose slightly, to show his objection to the question. 'I don't know; you're the professor!'

'I don't know either.'

Jason stared at the professor, who just stared at the floor.

Jason gave up staring first. ‘Well, to get the right number, you’d have to measure... stuff.’

‘Yes, lots of people are doing that. They get different results, depending on how they do it, and lots of other factors. So, how can I know which number is right?’

The PM raised his eyebrows and nodded, like he’d just learnt something.

‘But,’ protested Jason, although he wasn’t quite sure what he was objecting to. ‘But on TV, you said you wanted emission controls! How come you could work it out then and not now?’

The professor carefully avoided the PM’s gaze. ‘That was just a personal opinion, not a scientific conclusion. And I hope I didn’t say I was sure about it.’

‘But this is important! You *need* to be sure!’

The professor smiled. ‘Jason, do you like games?’

Jason’s eyes lit up. ‘I love them! I’ve got heaps of them!’

What kind of wondrous graphics could Grendel do? With the power of twenty-four normal computers put together, it should be awesome. Jason eagerly waited for the professor to call up a game from Grendel’s keyboard, but instead, he reached deep into one of his pockets and pulled something out.

‘Oh,’ said Jason.

‘Do you see this die?’

‘What, that dice in your hand?’

‘Yes, okay, this dice.’

The PM smirked again, and his hand returned to his mouth.

‘This game is simple,’ explained the professor. ‘I’m going to roll this dice once, and if it comes up with a six, Jason wins. But if it doesn’t, Mr Lindsay wins.’

‘That seems fair,’ said the PM.

‘No it doesn’t!’ objected Jason.

The professor looked surprised. ‘Why not?’

‘Because it probably won’t come up with a six, of course.’

‘But are you *sure* it won’t come up with a six?’

‘How can I be sure? I can’t predict every little bounce of a dice.’

‘But the dice is simple!’ said the professor, rolling it around in his hand. ‘We can see all the possible outcomes and how they can happen. We can roll it over and over and see how it behaves. But we can’t do those things with the environment. If we can’t be sure about the dice, how can we be sure about the environment?’

Jason screwed up his nose. ‘I guess I lost that game. And you never even rolled the dice.’

‘I disagree. If you “got it”, you won.’

Mr Lindsay took the die from the professor and rolled it across the desk. It stopped on four. The PM clasped his hands and shook them over his head in victory. ‘I wouldn’t mind winning a cup of coffee,’ he said.

‘Graham, where are my manners!’ exclaimed the professor. He led them to a nearby kitchenette. The PM started to look at the notices on a pin board that dominated one wall, but quickly turned away when he realised they were all advertisements for conferences on environmental topics, green power, and the like.

‘I know what Mr Lindsay will have, but what can we get you, Jason?’ asked the professor.

Jason turned to the PM. ‘Mr Lindsay, did Mr Aldershot come with you today?’

‘No, I just came with a couple of security staff. Why?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ replied Jason. ‘I’ll just get a soft drink out of the fridge then, if that’s okay.’

‘Help yourself,’ said the professor, as he filled an old electric jug.

‘Why don’t you just use that?’ asked the PM, pointing to a hot water boiler on the wall.

‘The students disconnected it earlier this year. That sort of boiler runs all the time, and they thought it was a waste of energy, adding to greenhouse gas pollution for no good reason.’

Mr Lindsay glanced towards the ceiling. ‘I shouldn’t have asked.’

‘Good on them!’ exclaimed Jason.

‘Are you sure that greenhouse gas pollution causes global warming, Jason?’ asked the professor, without looking up from his coffee-making duties.

‘It’s obvious, isn’t it? Ever since people started doing greenhouse gas pollution, there’s been global warming. So that’s what causes global warming. Easy.’

‘Oh,’ said the professor. ‘Then I’d better not tell you that I’m thinking of getting the boiler reconnected.’

‘Why would you want to do that?’

‘The steam from the jug causes the paint to peel from the ceiling. See?’

Jason and the PM looked up at the tatty paint.

‘That would have needed repainting anyway,’ said Jason. ‘Paint just peels off after a while. I’ll bet it had to be repainted years ago too, before you started using the jug.’

‘Interesting,’ said the professor. ‘So, the jug can’t be the cause if the peeling would have happened anyway?’

‘That’s obvious, isn’t it? Especially if the peeling happened before.’

‘In that case, how could people be the cause of global warming? Global warming came first.’

‘But I’ve read that it’s caused by pollution!’

‘People have only been polluting for a few hundred years. But there was global warming well before that; even over a hundred *thousand* years ago. How could people have caused that?’

Jason frowned. ‘I did know the temperature went up and down, but—’

‘If it goes up and down anyway, whether people are causing emissions or not, how can we be sure that people are causing it now?’ asked the professor, while apparently studying something on the floor. ‘And if human emissions *aren’t* the cause, reducing those emissions can’t be the solution, can it?’

‘But... But, you said “if”. So emission controls *might* help, mightn’t they? So we should try them anyway.’

‘They *might* help, yes. But they would *definitely* be expensive.’

The PM nodded vigorously.

‘Maybe Grendel can help us here,’ said the professor, leading the others back to the laboratory. ‘Jason, would you like to drive Grendel?’

‘I wouldn’t know how.’

‘It’s just like a computer game. Yes, think of it as “Sim Planet”.’

So Jason sat Grendel’s keyboard and followed the professor’s instructions. A complicated diagram appeared on the screen.

‘We don’t just study environmental sustainability here,’ said the professor. ‘This diagram shows some of the other things Grendel tries to predict, and how they’re linked together.’ He pointed to a group of boxes with arrows and numbers between them. ‘This bit shows that if we adopt emission targets, we’d have to cut back on our current means of electricity generation, transportation and industry—’

‘—which is good,’ interrupted Jason.

‘In itself, yes,’ agreed the professor. ‘But you can see that those things are linked to other things. To make up for those changes, the government would have to spend a lot of money on different types of electricity generation, transport, and so on—’

‘—which is also good,’ said Jason, interrupting again.

‘Well, let’s just see. To get the money they’d need, the government could increase taxes. But paying higher taxes would be hard for people, because they’d already have to spend more of their income on environmentally-friendly cars or public transport. In fact, almost everything would cost more, so people couldn’t buy as much as they do now. And the costs to industry could mean that people might have to get paid less.’

The professor showed Jason how to run Grendel’s program, and a set of graphs appeared. There were graphs for income, education and health. And all of them were going downwards.

‘Increasing taxes is a bad idea,’ said the PM. ‘Governments don’t like to do it because it causes them to lose elections.’

The professor nodded. ‘The other way is for the government to spend less money on other things, like education and health. Yes, can you try that, Jason?’

Jason went back to the big diagram and figured out how to change some of the numbers. The professor watched closely, then raised his eyebrows and nodded to the PM.

The PM nodded back. 'I told you he was smart.'

'Maybe you'd like to do this for a living one day, Jason,' said the professor.

Jason's eyes lit up. 'That'd be great!'

'Hopefully we'll have a job for you. Of course, if— I mean, after Mr Lindsay signs up to the emission control targets, there mightn't be as much funding for universities.'

Jason frowned and returned to Grendel. He ran the program again, and new graphs appeared. He managed to get the 'education' line to stay level, but the other lines went down savagely. He went back and tried some other numbers, but couldn't make the graphs do what he wanted.

'This is impossible!' he complained. 'It's easier just to look at one problem and fix it.'

'Easier, yes,' said the professor. 'But when problems are linked together, if you ignore the links, you can actually make things worse.'

'I don't want to make things worse. I thought I was making them better.'

'You might be making *one* thing better, yes. But what about the others?'

'I'm responsible for *all* those things,' said the PM, 'so I can't just focus on the environment. It's a hard balancing act, but I think I'm looking after people best of all by taking care of the economy.'

Jason went to fiddle with Grendel some more, but the professor interrupted him. 'No matter what you do, adopting

strict emission control targets will hurt. So you need to be pretty sure you're "getting it right" about them!

'What a bummer,' said Jason, gazing out the window. 'I was looking forward to this visit, too.'

'What's wrong?' asked the professor.

'I thought we were on the same side, but now you're telling me I'm wrong.'

The professor looked down. 'I'm not trying to tell you that you're wrong. No, I'm just suggesting that you aren't necessarily *right*—and that goes for me, too.'

'So you're not sure,' murmured Jason, thinking aloud.

'Am I sure? No. Certainly not sure enough to ignore everyone else's opinions.'

Jason pointed to the PM. 'Mr Lindsay's doing it!'

The PM shook his head. 'I think I'm *representing* everyone's opinions, not ignoring them.'

'Oh yes,' said Jason, 'I guess you are.' He looked out the window again.

'I suppose I should have said that I *wanted* to represent everyone's opinions, but since I'll be signing up to the targets at the Rotterdam conference, I actually won't be.'

The professor leaned over and started clattering away on Grendel's keyboard. 'Here's something else I think you should see, Jason.'

Jason groaned inwardly, and his head slumped forward a bit.

Mr Lindsay looked across at Jason. 'I think we've seen enough, Professor.'

'But I haven't shown Jason—'

'Thank you, Professor,' said Mr Lindsay firmly. 'I think we should go. I'm probably late for my next appointment anyway.'

The professor backed off, with a slightly surprised expression on his face. After thanking him, Jason and Mr Lindsay headed back to their car.

‘Mr Lindsay, if I wanted to talk to you about this again, could I?’ asked Jason, as the car pulled away from the university.

‘Sure, you can always leave a message with Mr Aldershot.’

Jason frowned. ‘Mr Aldershot,’ he mumbled.

‘I know he can be a bit prickly, but he keeps me organised. Tell you what: if you don’t want to talk to him, ring before ten o’clock on Monday, and you can speak to me personally.’

‘Thanks; that’d be great.’

‘If you’re going to call, just don’t be late. You do understand how important this is, I hope. My career’s on the line here; the media will swat me like a fly if they can.’

Jason nodded and stared out the window, with a grim expression on his face.

‘What did you make of the meeting?’ asked the PM.

‘It wasn’t what I expected. It’s very... complicated.’

The PM nodded. ‘Lou—Professor van Dyne—is a smart man. You did well to keep up with him.’

‘I don’t know. The main thing I learnt is that... I don’t know! Maybe I don’t know anything about anything. Maybe I’m really stupid.’ Jason looked down.

Mr Lindsay put his hand on Jason’s shoulder. ‘Jason, I disagree. You’re learning all the time; I’ve seen it. You’d make a great addition to the professor’s team.’

‘Every time I’ve met you, I’ve ended up feeling like an idiot.’

‘There were some things I needed to show you, and I’m sorry if that’s been unsettling. But it’s over now.’

‘I just want to do the right thing!’

‘There’s no doubt in my mind about that, Jason. But I also just want to do the right thing; so really, we agree. We just see some of the details a bit differently.’

‘I guess so. Pretty important details, though.’ Jason looked towards the water jet, just in case it was going. But it wasn’t.

‘Tell you what,’ said the PM, ‘if I’m still Prime Minister next time you come to Canberra, let me know and I’ll get them to turn the water jet on for you.’

‘Thanks Mr Lindsay, but if it’s bad for the environment, I think I’d rather that they didn’t.’

‘Oh of course; sorry.’

‘That’s okay. I do hope you’re still Prime Minister then, though.’



Jason spent the whole of the flight back home staring out the window. He saw the same things that he saw on the flight up to Canberra that morning: straw-coloured fields, burnt-out forests and dry creek beds. But in the morning, those things had told him about global warming, and begged him for emission controls; now, he didn’t know what they were saying. Maybe they weren’t saying anything meaningful at all.



Chapter 18

Surprise!

‘Jason, there’s a message here from yesterday you might want to listen to,’ said Jason’s father from the hall.

‘It isn’t about emission targets or anything, is it?’

‘Course not; I just delete all those. It’s from that bloke at the surf club.’

‘Oh okay.’

‘G’day Jason, it’s just Chris again. I don’t know if you got the other message I left. Just a reminder that the surf carnival is tomorrow. There’s a surprise for you so make sure you come along, even if you’re not planning to have another go at the time trial. Oh, and wear your togs!’

‘You’d better have some breakfast so you’ve got enough energy for the trial,’ said Jason’s mother from the kitchen.

‘I don’t think I’ll bother going.’

‘We know you can get into the surf club, Jason, even if you have to wait until you’re a bit stronger. Or maybe Chris’s “surprise” will help you.’

‘Yeah, maybe he’s got me some flippers,’ mumbled Jason. He sat down at the table and glanced at the newspaper. *‘Local youth tries to destroy Sapphire Bay jobs’*, read one heading. His heart kicked up a few notches. What was this?

'The Sapphire Bay youth who saved the Prime Minister's life, Jason Saunders, is still pressuring the Prime Minister to accept the Rotterdam conference's emission control targets. This is despite efforts by the Prime Minister to point out the consequences of doing so.

'A source close to the Prime Minister has informed the Sapphire Sentinel that Mr Saunders has been made fully aware of the difficulties associated with studying climate change, and the disastrous economic impacts that would follow from clamping down on greenhouse gas emissions.

'"Despite knowing that emission controls might make no difference to the environment at all, Mr Saunders remains intent on destroying the Australian economy," said the source. "At the end of the day, the kid seems quite willing to gamble away the welfare of the people of Sapphire Bay."'

How did the newspaper find out about the meeting with the professor? If it wasn't the PM, who was it?

Obviously his mother hadn't noticed the story. Jason considered not pointing it out to her, but decided it would be better if she found out about it while he was around so he could stop her from trying to phone the PM. Predictably, she was disgusted, and alternated between rants at 'sleazebags' in Canberra and consolations for Jason. But he succeeded in keeping her from doing anything about it, pointing out that it will all be over soon.

After breakfast, Jason browsed the internet for a while, organised the icons on his desktop, and even sorted out his overflowing list of emails. But it was impossible to concentrate on anything, with the phone ringing every few minutes. Even

though the answering machine took care of the messages, he knew what they were about.

And it seemed like a great day for the surf carnival. They usually had bands playing live music, which was pretty unusual for Sapphire Bay. He hadn't missed a surf carnival in as long as he could remember.

Then there was that strange message from Chris. What could the 'surprise' be?

Surely it would be safe enough to go. Nobody had ever hassled him at the beach. Maybe beachgoers weren't as tense about the economy as people in town, and maybe the reporters didn't think he was important enough to justify getting sand in their shoes.

In the end, curiosity about Chris's 'surprise' got the better of him, so he bludged a lift to the beach off his parents. They wanted to hang around in case anyone caused any trouble, and to watch if he had another go at the time trial, but he assured them that neither of those things was going to happen.



The beach was packed. SLSC members stood out from the crowd in their bright yellow shirts. Several of them were making repairs to a large canvas-walled enclosure for race contestants. A band was playing on a podium nearby; they sounded pretty good.

Jason looked around for the surprise that Chris mentioned, but didn't see anything unexpected. Maybe it would come later.

He headed down the beach to the rock he usually used as his home base. David was already there, waiting for him. They were about to head back up the beach to listen to the band when the

music stopped and the muffled sound of a loudspeaker kicked in. It waffled something about contestants for an event.

‘Bummer,’ said David. ‘I wonder how long they’ll be off for.’

‘Look, there he is!’ said a raised voice from the car park behind Jason’s rock.

‘What do you know? He’s right where that bloke reckoned he’d be,’ said another voice.

‘Come on, get your camera!’ yelled a third.

Jason looked around nervously. At least six reporters were rushing down the track from the car park to the beach.

‘Do you have any comment on the article in this morning’s paper?’ asked the one in front, even before he’d got to Jason.

Jason backed away. ‘No.’

‘Is it true that you realise emission controls mightn’t make any difference?’ said another.

‘No— I mean, yes— it isn’t that simple!’ By now, two large cameras were being pointed directly at Jason.

‘They said you don’t care about people, but only about the environment. Is that true?’

‘Would you please leave me alone?’

‘But don’t you care that everyone here might lose their jobs?’

‘Just go away!’ said Jason loudly. He backed away further, with David beside him. A few of the other people on the beach came over to see what the commotion was about.

‘Can you explain why you want to save the planet but not the people on it?’

‘That’s not what I’m doing! People don’t understand—’

By now, some of the spectators were asking questions as well. Others were just hurling abuse.

‘Why won’t you let the PM decide?’

‘You’re no better than those greenies who injure people to protect trees!’

So many people were talking at once that it was nearly impossible to work out what any one of them was saying.

‘I’m going to get help!’ said David. He turned and ran towards the clubhouse.

‘I’m coming too!’ yelled Jason, and ran after him. The reporters and spectators followed them, but couldn’t keep up.

While David headed straight for the clubhouse, Jason made for the canvas enclosure in front of it. He ran straight past the lifeguard minding the enclosure’s entrance and ducked down so he couldn’t be seen over the canvas walls.

‘You can’t come in here unless you’re a contestant,’ said the lifeguard. Jason looked up. Fortunately the lifeguard wasn’t talking to him, but to one of the reporters outside.

‘But I just want to talk to someone.’

‘I’m sorry, this area is for contestants only.’

The lifeguard came over to Jason. ‘I’m afraid that goes for you too, mate. Are you a contestant?’

One of the large cameras was staring at Jason from over the top of one of the canvas walls. He looked out the front of the enclosure. About a dozen people were lined up along a starting line, ready to race. Beyond them was the ocean, where no reporter would be able to follow him. He quickly took off his shirt and thongs, and went to join the group at the starting line. But before he got there, the starter’s pistol went off, and the group bolted into the ocean. He sprinted after them.

What idiots those reporters were! Not to mention the stupid spectators gawking at him. No, not gawking; *attacking* him. He plunged into the water behind the other swimmers and started swimming furiously.

How *dare* they accuse him of not caring about people? Didn't they understand that he was doing this for *them*? The fools didn't know what was good for them. His arms pounded the water, whipping it into a frothy foam. He reached a turning buoy and instinctively swam around it, heading off parallel to the beach towards the next buoy.

Why should he bother trying to look after the environment for these people? They don't deserve a decent environment—not the way they've been treating him. Their punishment should be to live with the consequences of their selfishness. He kicked at the water as though it were the reporters' shins.

But it wouldn't be just them who'd have to live with the consequences. What about their kids? It wasn't fair that these people could benefit from harming their own descendants. He reached a buoy and turned around it, as though on auto-pilot.

Did they really accuse him of *injuring* people? Can't they see how stupid that is, when *they're* the ones trying to injure people—especially future people? That's just hypocritical! He thrashed away at the ocean, pulverising it into submission.

And who was leaking information about his meetings with the PM to the newspaper? Someone in Canberra was obviously out to get him. Why? What did they want? Whatever it was, hopefully they wouldn't get it. If anyone should lose their job, it should be them. Jason's arms flailed wildly, as another buoy went by.

‘Last lap!’ announced someone through a megaphone, but Jason didn’t really notice.

Why wouldn’t they all just leave him alone? What business was it of theirs? They just wanted to sell newspapers, or get pay rises, or something. It all boiled down to money. They were using him to get themselves money—while accusing him of being selfish! Another buoy came and went.

‘That’s it; come in now!’ said the megaphone, but Jason was doing that anyway, because that’s what he always did after this many laps.

Did it really matter if he wasn’t absolutely sure about things any more? Do you just ignore a problem until you’re *certain* about how to fix it? Wasn’t that just an excuse to do nothing, while making the problem worse? Jason was swimming through gentle surf now, but was still surprised when his foot touched the bottom. He stood up and waded strongly out of the water.

The crowd’s cheering grew louder as he powered up the beach. He could make out David’s voice in particular, probably because it was saying his name.

‘Go, Jase! You can do it!’

Jason looked up. There was a ribbon across the finishing line. He’d never seen it intact before. And there was nobody between it and him. He sprinted though the ribbon and came to a stop.

Chris came over to congratulate him. ‘Surprise!’

Jason looked back towards the ocean. The other competitors were only now starting their runs up the beach.

But they weren’t the only ones approaching. The gaggle of reporters was pushing its way through the spectators. Jason looked around for an escape route.

Chris saw the reporters too. ‘Come with me!’ he said, and turned and ran towards the clubhouse. Jason followed as fast as he could, although he was suddenly feeling very weary. But they made it ahead of the reporters and went inside. Chris locked the door behind them.

‘Thanks Chris,’ said Jason, between pants. He collapsed onto a plastic chair.

‘That was some passionate swimming!’

‘I wonder how those reporters knew where I’d be.’

Chris looked away and busied himself with something on the desk in front of him. ‘Just a sec; I’ve got some paperwork to do.’

By now, people were knocking at the door. ‘Jason, we need to hear your side of the story about global warming.’

‘I’ve just won a race,’ replied Jason through the locked door. ‘Why don’t you talk to me about that?’

‘Don’t you think we should be focusing on the bigger picture?’

Jason ignored them.

Chris photocopied the sheet of paper he’d been writing on, and handed the copy to Jason.

Jason recognised the document. It was the SLSC membership application form he’d submitted over a year ago. Chris had filled in the ‘SLSC Staff Only’ section of the form, putting a large tick in the box beside ‘Swimming time trial’. In the ‘comments’ area, he’d written ‘Jason is an enthusiastic and athletic young man, with a strong commitment to helping people. He will be a valuable member of the Sapphire Bay SLSC. Application approved. C.W. Mundy, Sapphire Bay SLSC Chief Instructor.’

‘I passed? I’m in?’

‘I timed you. Eight minutes twenty-three seconds. That’s almost a minute faster than you’ve ever done before.’

‘Eight minutes twenty-three seconds! Wow!’

‘Yeah, those reporters got a bit out of hand,’ said Chris, with a frown. ‘That probably wasn’t such a great idea after all.’

‘What idea?’

‘It doesn’t matter; you’re in now.’

‘Aren’t you worried that I won’t be able to swim that fast again?’

‘Nope. Now you’ve got the best swimming coach in the state. By this time next year, I’ll have you swimming that fast even if you’re heading *towards* the reporters!’

Jason read the comments on the application form again. ‘Eight minutes twenty-three seconds,’ he repeated. ‘I wish I’d been paying attention so I could have enjoyed it!’

‘If you’d been paying attention, you wouldn’t have passed.’

‘Yeah, probably. Bummer.’

The knocking on the door had stopped, but now it started again. ‘Jason, are you in there?’

‘David, is that you?’

‘No, I’m a big bad reporter. Let me in, or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll—’

‘Are you alone?’ asked Chris.

‘Yeah, the cops shooed the reporters and everyone away.’

Chris unlatched the door and let David in. A fly came in too; Chris tried to trap it between cupped hands.

‘Incredible race, Jase!’ said David. ‘You blitzed them!’

‘Thanks,’ replied Jason, blushing slightly. ‘Look.’ He handed David the sheet of paper he was holding.

‘Woo hoo! You did it! Maybe you can save the planet after all!’



Chapter 19

Who Will Save the Planet?

After the excitement of the swimming carnival, Sunday was a real anticlimax. Of course, Jason's parents had been highly impressed that he'd passed the SLSC swimming test. 'If we'd known you were going to enter an event, we would have come and watched,' they said. Jason assured them that it wasn't intentional.

In the newspaper, there was a rather unflattering picture of him backing away from the mob at the beach, but no actual news. They could have at least mentioned that he won the race he was in, and will soon be a real lifeguard. You'd think that would have been newsworthy, since this all started with him saving the PM. But that wasn't important any more; it was all about saving the planet when most people didn't want to. Or, at least, some people...

After breakfast, Jason browsed through a *Science Adviser* magazine. There was an article on global warming, based on studying ice in Antarctica. They used words like 'might', 'could' and 'probably'. Before he'd met Professor van Dyne, he wouldn't have noticed words like those, but now they seemed to jump out at him.

His reading was interrupted by a phone call from David.

'Hey Jase. You up for lunch?'

‘No way am I going into town! You saw those reporters yesterday—and the other people as well...’

‘Yeah, but I’m still game.’

‘It wasn’t *you* they were after. Anyway, I promised my mother I wouldn’t go into town.’

‘Okay, I’ll get take-away, and see you at the track. Don’t be late, or it’ll get cold!’ David hung up, so he couldn’t be argued with.

Oh well, it would be better than having a sandwich for lunch, at least taste-wise. There’d be plenty of time for sandwiches once school started again.

Jason cycled cautiously, expecting reporters to spring out from every parked car. When he got close to the main part of town, he detoured down a side road that ran parallel to Pacific Street and stopped at a vacant lot that was used as a makeshift dirt bike track. He wheeled his bike along a track to a clearing that was surrounded by waist-high weeds. David wasn’t there yet. Jason sat on an upturned milk crate, which he positioned so he could face Pacific Street and keep an eye out for anyone coming.

The first person to turn off Pacific Street was David. He sped up to the clearing and skidded his bike to a halt just in front of Jason, raising a cloud of dust that drifted into Jason’s face.

‘Thanks,’ said Jason, and faked some coughs.

David lobbed over a paper bag. ‘Quit complaining and eat.’

As usual, Jason inserted a layer of fries into his cheeseburger. David watched, disgusted but mesmerised. ‘I still say that’s gross,’ he said.

‘And I still say don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.’

‘Don’t criticise what you don’t understand, eh?’

‘Not you too!’ said Jason. ‘You sound like Mr Lindsay, or Professor van Dyne. Or just about everyone else, actually.’

‘Sorry, couldn’t help it. It just seemed kind of... topical.’

‘You’re right, though. It’s not as simple as I thought. And it’s not my decision—or it shouldn’t be, or something.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘The right thing.’

‘Which is...?’

‘I don’t know, any more.’

‘Well, there’s a first!’

A car turned off Pacific Street and headed towards them. Jason watched it closely, while making sure that his head didn’t stick up too high above the weeds. But the car drove straight past.

David wiped some sweat from his forehead. ‘I wish they’d turn the air conditioning up!’

‘Yeah, and the décor needs work,’ said Jason, sweeping a hand across the weeds. ‘At least it’ll all be over soon, no matter what I do. Then we can eat inside.’

‘I don’t reckon.’

‘Why not?’

‘If you don’t cave in, the PM’s always going to be buzzing around bugging you, trying to get out of doing whatever it is you’re getting him to do. And if he won’t leave you alone, neither will anyone else.’

Jason wrinkled up his nose. ‘I never thought about it like that.’



After lunch, Jason was hoping to head down to his ‘thinking beach’ to decide whether he should ‘cave in’, as David put it.

After all, the PM left for Rotterdam tomorrow. But David had other plans, and dragged Jason over to his house to play a flying combat game he'd just got. David had obviously been practicing on it, so it wasn't really a fair fight. At least that's what Jason insisted.

By the time David got sick of fragging Jason's aircraft, it was too late to go to the beach. The big decision would have to wait until tomorrow.



Jason didn't feel very well, next morning. He stayed in his room with the door closed and listened to the radio.

Someone knocked gently. 'You okay in there?' asked his mother, without opening the door.

'Yes Mum.'

'Want any breakfast?'

'No thanks.'

'Anything you want to talk about?'

'No thanks.'

Jason looked at his watch. It was nearly half-past eight. 'Decision time,' he said to himself, and scooped up his hat and phone. Remembering Mr Lindsay's warning about how important it was to call on time, he made sure there was plenty of battery charge left in his phone. Being in trouble with the Prime Minister of the country was definitely something to avoid.

The creek bed was as dry as usual. Jason kicked at the red dust, sending a puff of it into the air. 'It doesn't need to be like this!' he said out loud.

But was David right about being bugged forever by the PM—and everybody else—unless he butted out? Although, 'forever' could be fairly soon for Mr Lindsay: if the TV and

newspapers were right, he mightn't be Prime Minister for much longer. In a way, it didn't seem fair that he was copping so much flak for trying to get out of his promise to Jason, when Jason was asking for something he probably shouldn't.

Just as Jason scrambled out of the creek bed, Chris drove up and parked in front of the SLSC clubhouse.

'Jason! How's our newest member?'

'I feel like there's a knot in my stomach. I've got to decide about the emission controls, once and for all.'

'Tricky. You're putting a lot of responsibility on your own shoulders, for a young bloke.'

'It didn't used to seem tricky. I was certain I was doing the right thing. But now I'm not sure the medicine is actually good for the dog.'

Chris looked mystified. 'Huh?' A fly landed on his arm, and he cupped his free hand and moved it slowly towards the fly.

'And I don't want the PM hassling me forever, and I don't want to cause him to lose the election.'

Chris nodded slowly, while keeping his eyes on the fly. 'I'm not going to tell you what I reckon, Jason. I just hope you get the result that's best for you.' He continued moving his cupped hand closer to his prey.

Jason watched the fly on Chris's arm preening itself, oblivious to the approaching prison. 'But it's not just about me, Chris! I could make things better for heaps of people. Or, at least I thought I could...'

Chris brought his cupped hand down suddenly around the fly.

'Hey, I think you caught it!' said Jason.

'Yeah, I can feel it buzzing around in there.'

They stood silently for a while, listening to the bursts of buzz from the trapped insect.

‘So now what are you going to do with it?’ asked Jason.

‘No idea! I’ve never actually caught one before.’

They listened to the fly’s attempts to escape for a while longer. Then, Chris raised his hand and the prisoner flew off to freedom.

‘I don’t think I’d have done that,’ said Jason.

‘Yeah, well, I didn’t want fly guts on my hands.’

Jason nodded. ‘There is that...’

‘And it’s racked off anyway, so it’s not bugging me any more.’

Jason nodded again. ‘...not bugging me any more,’ he murmured.

After Jason and Chris parted company, Jason carried on towards his ‘thinking beach’. As usual, there was nobody else there. He nervously looked out over the ocean to see if there were any hands bobbing up out of the water. Fortunately there weren’t, so he sat down on a log.

Since the last meeting with the PM, the only time Jason had felt like sticking to his original request was during the swimming carnival. He attempted to rekindle his passion from the carnival, but it was gone. Maybe that was for the best: insisting on emission control targets just to get back at pushy reporters, and selfish townspeople and tourists, was probably not the right reason.

‘They’re all idiots,’ he said out loud, but without enough conviction to even convince himself.

Someone had built a sand castle a bit further up the beach. Jason couldn’t remember seeing a sand castle at his beach

before. He walked over and inspected it. It had five main towers, obviously made with a bucket. Straight walls joined the towers. It had been built on the moist sand near the water's edge, but now the tide was turning against it and the surf was starting to undermine its foundations.

Jason picked up a stick that had been washed up on the beach and balanced it across the top of the turret nearest the ocean. He gently pushed down on one end of the stick, making the other end rise up like a see saw. 'Environment goes up, economy goes down,' he said to himself. 'Determination goes up, freedom goes down.' The last remnant of a wave sloshed against the tower under his stick, and it collapsed onto the beach.

Jason looked at his watch, then took out his phone and called Mr Lindsay's office. As usual, a recorded message played. Phones needed to have fast-forward buttons so you didn't have to wait, he thought.

Finally, the call was answered. 'Prime Minister's Office, Robert Aldershot— oh, it's only you. Decided to interfere again?'

'Can I speak to Mr Lindsay, please?'

'No, you can't. He's already left.'

'But he's left early! He's always running late!'

'I told his driver to set the clock in his car forward, so he wouldn't be late for once.'

'But I'll be in trouble if I don't speak to him!'

'I know. That would be a shame, wouldn't it?'

Jason was tempted to hang up, but that really wouldn't have helped. 'Can you give him a message?'

'Depends what it is.'

‘He doesn’t have to sign up to the Rotterdam targets. He can do whatever he thinks is right.’

‘That’s what he was planning to do anyway, kid.’

‘No, it isn’t! And tell him anyway, please.’

‘We’ll see.’

Jason hung up. At least he wouldn’t have to talk to Mr Aldershot again.

He looked at the remains of the sand castle, which was now little more than a soggy mound on the beach. ‘Now who’ll save the planet?’ he asked it.



Chapter 20

A Different Perspective

Mr Lindsay leaned over and looked at the car's clock again: a quarter past ten. 'Are you *sure* this is the correct time?' he asked his driver.

'I've been told that it is, Mr Lindsay.'

The PM adjusted his watch. Jason should have rung by now. Instead, there'd be big trouble, for both of them. Even though Jason had stood firm after each of their other encounters, Mr Lindsay was still a bit surprised that he hadn't backed down this time. All the attempts to educate him, and to provide alternatives, obviously hadn't been enough.

But it was hard to dislike Jason because of that. You had to admire his determination to do what he thought was right. He'd put himself in an awkward situation, and it was a shame that it had been necessary to put him under so much pressure.

Mr Lindsay wondered what he should do with the Predator he'd bought. Was it too late to return it? Probably. Would one of his daughters drive it? He couldn't quite picture that. Should he just give it to Jason as a reward for saving him, even though he'd asked for something else? No, that would just make it easier for the media to criticise him for *not* giving Jason what he'd actually asked for.

The PM's limousine drove past the water jet—or at least where it would have been if it had been going. The PM peered at

the jet's outlet. Judging by the copious bird droppings on it, it hadn't been fired up in a while.

A bit further on, a couple of men were fishing from the shoreline. Mr Lindsay looked to see if they'd caught anything, but it was impossible to see inside the bucket behind them as the car drove past. However, he couldn't help noticing the marks on the shoreline further back, showing how much higher the lake used to be.

The people at the airport seemed surprised to see him. 'Oh, Prime Minister! We should be ready to board soon.'

'Is there a delay?'

'No, just take a seat in the VIP lounge. Some of the others going with you are already there.'

The aircraft was ready soon enough. Mr Lindsay settled into his seat and took a manila folder out of his briefcase. Even though he always worked when flying, he still found it relaxing. Maybe that was because there weren't any distractions and interruptions, so you could just concentrate on whatever you wanted to.

The aircraft lifted off and quickly left Canberra behind it. The Minister for the Environment, who was sitting beside the PM, got up and went to speak to one of his staff. The PM opened his manila folder and started reviewing his speech for the Rotterdam conference.

After he'd edited a couple of paragraphs, the aircraft banked around. He looked up from his work and observed the countryside going past beneath him. It was a lush pasture, divided into paddocks. Although the aircraft had been climbing for a while, he could still make out cows enjoying the grass.

He remembered the discussion with Jason at Parliament House. *'Yellow', he reckons!* thought the PM. *It looks pretty green to me!*

Lake George should have been coming up soon. Mr Lindsay looked further ahead. Although the mountains seemed vaguely familiar, he couldn't see the lake yet.

'Your coffee, Mr Lindsay,' said a flight attendant as she placed a cup on the tray table in front of him.

'Ah! Thank you.'

'Just press the "call" button when you're ready for your next one.'

'Could you let me know when we get to Lake George?'

The attendant bent forward and looked out the PM's window. 'We're beside it right now.'

Mr Lindsay peered out the window again. 'That field?'

'Yes, that's it.'

'How long has it been dry for?'

'Oh, years. Not very observant, are you, Prime Minister!' chided the attendant.

'I suppose not...'

The attendant departed, and Mr Lindsay looked at what had become of Lake George. *Maybe we should rename it 'Paddock George',* he mused, and went back to his speech.

'It is the opinion of the Australian people that global warming is not...'

That wasn't quite right. He couldn't really say 'the Australian people' when young people like Jason didn't have any input—even though they'll be the ones most affected by this decision. He remembered some of the discussion with Jason in Parliament House. Maybe Jason had half a point...

The PM inserted some extra words into the speech and reread it.

*'It is the opinion of **some of** the Australian people...'*

That sounded rather wishy-washy.

*'It is the opinion of **this government**...'*

That was sort-of true, but seemed a bit weaselly.

*'It is **my** opinion...'*

That just felt uncomfortable. He put the manila folder down and looked out the window again. His fingers drummed on the folder's cover.

You're not making this very easy for me, Jason, he thought.



Chapter 21

Oops!

For the next few days, Jason moped around the house. Of course, he couldn't go out without risking being cornered by reporters or disgruntled locals, but now he didn't even feel like trying. Nor did he feel like playing computer games, or reading, or anything else. His parents had tried to interest him in various activities, and his mother kept saying what a good job he'd done in working through such difficult issues. Then why did he feel so lousy?

David had rung a few times, but Jason hadn't bothered returning his calls. David was just being nosey, wanting to know what Jason had decided. Not that he really cared; David didn't take anything seriously. It was a bit hard being around David when you weren't feeling on top of your game. Plus, David would want to drag him into town, or to the beach, or somewhere else—and that just wasn't on, at least for the time being.

At least it wouldn't be long until the everyone found out that their beloved money was safe. Because of time zone weirdness, it was a bit hard to figure out exactly when the Rotterdam conference finished, but it was definitely sometime this week. Then, the PM would announce that he hadn't signed up to the emission control targets, so everyone could carry on burning fuel and trashing the atmosphere. Their jobs would be safe, their

wages would be high, and everything would be cheap. And they'd thank Jason for letting the PM off the hook. They'd congratulate him for making a smart decision.

Jason's parents were in the back yard. The house was empty and quiet, except for Tangles clawing at the back door. Jason opened a new bag of dog biscuits, spilling a few on his mother's coin collection which was spread out on the kitchen table. As soon as he opened the back door, Tangles shot past and made for the kitchen table to see if there was anything thawing for dinner that needed his assistance. There wasn't, but he quickly found and consumed the spilled dog biscuits—along with at least two coins.

'Bad dog!' said Jason in horror, and wrestled Tangles back outside. 'Although, I guess the medicine is right after all.'

Jason tried to lay out the coins so that the gaps weren't so obvious, but was interrupted by a flamboyant drumming on the front door. He groaned.

'I came to see how you were,' said David. 'Thought you might be sick or something.'

'Nope.'

'So what did you do?'

'Caved.'

'Too bad. At least you'll get a Predator, or something.'

'Oh, I forgot to ask about that.'

David bashed his forehead with the palm of his hand.

'It doesn't matter,' said Jason. 'I don't want one anyway. I don't deserve it.'

'You still saved the PM, don't forget.'

'I guess.'

David took off his backpack and pulled a laptop computer out of it. 'I brought over my dad's lappy. I thought we might be able to network it with your computer and do some head-to-head racing.'

'Hmmm, that might be interesting,' said Jason, inspecting the laptop. 'Does your father know you've got this?'

'He won't miss it; he's gone fishing.'

So they connected the computers together, and managed to get one of the car racing games to recognise the makeshift network. Jason actually won a few races, mainly because David found it hard to steer using the laptop's keyboard.

'I think we should swap computers,' said David, after suffering another defeat.

'I don't think I should touch your father's laptop. Not with it being stolen.'

'It's not stolen; it's just... borrowed. But you're probably right.'

Mid-way through the next race, there was knock on the front door. 'Mum!' called Jason, without taking his eyes off the screen.

Whoever it was knocked louder. 'Mum! Dad!' yelled Jason, but nobody came.

'Bugger.' Jason got up to answer the door. His car impaled itself spectacularly on a guard rail, and David's vehicle flew past.

'I'm looking for Jason Saunders,' said the man at the door.

'That's me.'

'Really? Oh well, just sign here, please.'

The man handed Jason a clipboard, and pointed to a dotted line. Jason signed, and the man gave him a copy of the document and left.

Jason's father came into the hall. 'What was that, Jason?'

'I don't know, yet.'

'You shouldn't just sign stuff without reading it. Give us a look.'

David came out and joined them in the hall. 'You lost,' he informed Jason.

Jason's father stroked his chin. 'It looks like you just accepted delivery of a car,' he said, without looking up from the document.

'I did?' said Jason, trying to read the page at the same time.

David squeezed past them and opened the front door. 'Whoa!' he exclaimed. 'You did!'

A metallic green Predator was parked on the nature strip. They went outside to take a closer look. Jason's mother came around from the back yard to see what all the commotion was about.

'The keys are in it,' said David. 'Let's go hooning!'

'I don't want to touch it,' said Jason. 'It just reminds me that I caved in. I let the environment down.'

'You're the only one who thinks that, Jason,' replied his mother.

'Only because nobody else wants to see the planet looked after.'

'No, it's just that this wouldn't have been the right way to do it.'

Jason nodded. 'Yeah, I guess that's why I wimped out. One of the reasons, anyway.'

‘So we’re not taking it for a spin?’ asked David.

‘Not if Jason doesn’t want to,’ replied Mr Saunders. ‘It’s his car.’

They decided to leave the Predator where it was for the time being and retreated inside to have lunch. It was fresh sweet corn that Jason’s mother had just picked. Normally, Jason would have devoured it enthusiastically, but not today.



After lunch, Jason’s father went to delete the nuisance messages off the answering machine.

‘Jason, there’s a strange message here you might want to listen to.’

‘It isn’t Chris with another “surprise”, is it?’

‘No, it’s that professor bloke you went to see in Canberra.’

‘That’s odd; I wonder what he wants.’

‘Hello Jason, this is Professor van Dyne. I’m just ringing to congratulate you for sticking to your guns. Yes, I was afraid you might change your mind. I felt bad about trying to confuse you. I’m glad I didn’t succeed! Yes, this is a good day for the environment; well done!’

‘Well, that doesn’t make any sense,’ said Jason.

‘Maybe he’s being sarcastic,’ suggested Jason’s father. ‘Is he a bit on the nasty side?’

‘I didn’t think he was.’

‘I reckon he’s losing it,’ said David. ‘Did you hear him on the news this morning?’

Nobody had.

‘The government said they were going to give him some big chunk of money he’d asked for, but he said he didn’t want it any more.’

They listened to the message again.

‘Nope, I’ve got no idea what that’s about,’ said Jason.

Jason’s father deleted the message, and Jason and David returned to their racing.

‘Unless...,’ murmured Jason’s mother, and turned on a radio in the kitchen.



Jason couldn’t concentrate on racing any more. He felt like he was being haunted by the Predator on the front lawn. David started to win more races, even though he was still using his father’s laptop. Fortunately for Jason, they were interrupted by a call from Jason’s mother: ‘Jason, come here, quick!’

Jason and David rushed into the kitchen expecting to see the evening meal on fire, or something like that. Instead, Jason’s mother was bent over her little radio, listening intently.

‘What?’ asked Jason.

‘Shhh. News,’ replied his mother, and pointed at the radio.

‘...surprise from the Netherlands, when the Prime Minister announced that he’d signed up to the emission control targets proposed at the Rotterdam Environmental Conference. This is despite the PM insisting that adopting the targets would be bad for Australia, even as recently as last week. Although the PM had been asked to sign up to the targets by the youth who saved his life last year, most analysts did not expect the PM to honour his promise.’

‘I thought you told the PM he didn’t have to sign,’ said David.

Jason felt like the blood was draining out of his head. ‘I did! Well, I told Mr Aldershot, and asked him to pass it on.’

‘Oops,’ said David.

Jason’s mother bit her lower lip. ‘That man has some serious issues.’

‘What did I do wrong?’ asked Jason. ‘I couldn’t talk to Mr Lindsay; he left early!’

They went out the front, where Jason’s father was trying to repair the station wagon’s door lock, and told him the news. ‘Oh,’ he said, with great restraint. ‘That isn’t good.’

‘At least it’s good that Graham kept his promise,’ said Jason’s mother.

Jason’s father raised his eyebrows and nodded. ‘And it’s funny that Jason got what he asked for, even though he didn’t end up wanting it.’

‘I don’t think it’s funny at all,’ said Jason. ‘Mr Lindsay’s going to kill me, and everyone’s going to hassle me forever.’

‘I’ll tell you what’s funny: that,’ said David, pointing at the Predator.

Jason’s father scratched his head. ‘Yeah, you’re right. Someone in Canberra must have stuffed up. Which isn’t surprising, of course.’

‘We’d better not touch it,’ said Jason’s mother. ‘They’ll want it back.’

‘I can think of a better reason not to touch it,’ said David. ‘It’s probably booby-trapped!’



Chapter 22

The Ayes Eyes Have It

‘PM COMMITS AUSTRALIA TO THE WAR ON GLOBAL WARMING’, shouted the headline of Friday’s newspaper.

‘Listen to this,’ said Jason’s mother, from the other side of the paper. ‘The Prime Minister, Graham Lindsay, displayed a rarely-seen human side when he signed up to the emission control targets at the Rotterdam Environmental Conference yesterday. Setting aside his personal opposition to the targets, Mr Lindsay chose to honour a promise made to a young man. Regardless of one’s opinion on global warming, it is to be hoped that this signals the start of a new approach by the Prime Minister, with the ruthless, over-my-dead-body style of the past replaced with a generous measure of compassion and integrity.’

‘That sort of publicity won’t do him any harm,’ she added.

‘Except that it’s all a big mistake,’ said Jason’s father. ‘He wouldn’t have signed if he’d got Jason’s message.’

‘What’s going to happen now?’ asked Jason. ‘If we tell Mr Lindsay that he didn’t have to sign, can he un-sign, or something?’

‘I don’t know,’ said his mother. ‘We’ll try to sort it out when he gets back from overseas. Maybe now you’ll let me ring him.’



Jason spent the day helping his father erect a pergola in the back yard. It really wasn't the ideal way to spend the rapidly-dwindling remains of the holidays. Every so often, he peeped around the front to see if anyone had come to take the Predator away. But it was still there, even as dinner time approached. Surely they wouldn't just forget about it! He couldn't help but wonder whether David's booby-trap theory might actually be right.

After dinner, Jason grabbed a book and joined his parents in the lounge room. The current affairs show that his parents were watching turned its attention to the PM's announcement about the emission control targets. Wasn't that old news by now? When would they drop it? People needed to forget about it and just move on.

'We can now report the results of our telephone and internet polls on your reactions to the PM's announcement. Contrary to his party's expectations, Mr Lindsay's decision has been very well received, with many viewers applauding his sensitive handling of the issue. The PM's astonishing rise in popularity is also consistent with this station's assessment of public opinion regarding the need to do more for the environment.'

'That's kind-of interesting,' said Jason's father.

'It's kind-of confusing,' replied Jason.



Saturday commenced with an invitation from Jason's father to help paint the pergola. Fortunately, Chris had provided a way out: he'd left a message saying that Jason's official membership certificate from the Lifesaving Association was ready for

collection. He'd also stressed that he didn't have any surprises this time.

Despite that, Jason's mother had her doubts. 'You're going out?'

'Only to see Chris, and maybe to the beach. I've only got one week of holidays left, and I don't want to spend it all hanging around here.'

'I can find lots of things for you to do,' said his father.

'I know. That's why.'

'I'm not sure I approve of you going to the beach,' said his mother. 'Remember what happened last time...'

'Oh, not the main beach; just to my private beach. I haven't seen anyone else there all summer.'

'What about Mr Lindsay?'

'He doesn't count. He only ended up there because I put him there.'



Jason approached the SLSC clubhouse cautiously and tapped on the door.

'Ah, Jason,' said Chris. 'Now, where did I put your certificate?' He started rummaging around under the files on the table. 'I heard about the PM signing that Rotterdam thing. Happy?'

'No; I'm going to be in serious trouble. I tried to tell him that he didn't have to.'

'Really? Why?'

'Things just aren't as simple as they seemed at first.'

'Things seldom are,' said Chris, without looking up from his ferreting.

'Plus, I didn't want to get Mr Lindsay's guts on my hands.'

Chris laughed. ‘Yeah, you had him trapped good and proper! Ah, here it is.’ He straightened up brandishing a wooden frame, and came out to join Jason on the verandah.

‘Congratulations again,’ said Chris, shaking Jason’s hand with a firm grasp. ‘You worked hard for this. It’s great to have you on board!’ He handed over the certificate and sat on one of the handrails.

Jason sat on the opposite handrail and inspected the certificate. It looked very official, with a shiny blue emblem and old-style lettering in black and gold. Even his name was embossed, standing out from the parchment.

‘Thanks Chris. This is great!’

‘I hope you can understand why I couldn’t just let you in before you’d passed the swimming test.’

‘Well, actually, I still think—’

Jason closed his mouth, and looked out to sea. A couple of seagulls flew past. A surfer tried to catch a wave, but failed.

‘I can see your point of view,’ he said.

‘Can’t ask any more than that. Thanks, Jason.’

After talking to Chris for a bit longer, Jason headed up the dirt road and over the embankment to his ‘thinking beach’. He sat down on the usual log, put his glasses down beside him and rubbed his eyes.

What did it all mean? The summer’s events had just been too weird. He got what he wanted after he wasn’t sure he wanted it any more, and the PM did what he was told after Jason had said he didn’t have to. Then there was the matter of the Predator...

‘I thought I might find you here.’

‘Mr Lindsay?’ Jason hurriedly put his glasses back on and struggled to his feet on the soft sand.

‘Don’t get up. May I join you?’

‘Of course!’

The PM sat down beside Jason on the log.

‘Mr Lindsay, I’m really sorry about what happened! I changed my mind, and tried to tell you, but you left early, and didn’t get the message.’ Jason looked down at his feet.

‘Actually, I *did* get the message.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes, but not from your friend, Mr Aldershot. Security staff were doing an investigation to find out who was leaking information to the newspaper, and they discovered your message just before the conference.’

Jason cocked his head to one side and frowned. ‘But you still signed up to the targets! I don’t get it...’

‘On my way to the conference, I started noticing things. Things I’d seen before, but never paid any attention to. It was as though I was seeing things through a different set of eyes. Your eyes, perhaps.’

‘What things?’

The PM looked around. ‘Things like that,’ he said, waving a hand at the straw-coloured grass covering the embankment behind them. ‘It’s yellow, isn’t it? Before I met you, I thought grass was green.’

‘But what about jobs, and money, and those things?’

The PM laughed. ‘Whose side are you on?’

‘I don’t think I want to be on *any* side, any more.’

‘Money will be an issue, but I can see that things just aren’t as simple as I first thought.’

Mr Lindsay noticed a sand castle a bit further up the beach, exactly where one had been the last time Jason was here. He got up and walked over to it. As before, the gentle sloshes of the surf were undermining its sides. The stick Jason had used as a see saw was still there; Mr Lindsay picked it up. Jason wondered whether he'd balance it on top of the castle as he had done, or maybe just use it to trash the castle entirely. Instead, the PM sculpted a moat around the castle so that the water flowed around it. 'That should hold it for a while,' he said, sitting down beside Jason again.

'You know that everyone's going to give me a hard time over this,' said Jason.

'No they won't. This was my decision, and I'll make sure everyone knows that.'

'I hope they believe you,' said Jason, kicking at the sand.

'They will, because I can prove it. We've got your telephone call recorded, where you said I could do whatever I think is best. That's what the security guys found.'

'You recorded that?'

'All calls to my office are recorded. The message you hear whenever you ring my office should have mentioned that. Didn't it?'

Jason shrugged his shoulders. 'Who listens to pre-recorded messages?'

'Good point. And you're not the only one who's been surprised by that. It seems that Mr Aldershot had forgotten that that phone line was always recorded.'

'Why? What happened?'

The PM paused. 'Suffice it to say that we found the source of those leaks. And when we asked Mr Aldershot about your

message, he said you deserved to get into trouble for interfering because government policy was none of your business.'

'I guess I ended up agreeing with him.'

'—and I didn't. When it's about the future, it's very much your business. More yours than mine, really.'

'So is Mr Aldershot in trouble for interfering now?'

'Well, he's no longer running my office. He's been moved aside until we work out what to do with him. In fact, at the moment, he's managing the Parliament House cafeteria. So next time you're in Canberra and feel like a thickshake...'

Jason smiled. 'It'd be worth making the trip just for that.'

'Well, now you've got the wheels. All you need is your license.'

'You mean I can keep the Predator?' asked Jason, with his eyes wide open.

'Of course. It's your reward for saving me. You didn't end up asking for emission controls, after all.'

'Wow! Thanks!'

Mr Lindsay bowed his head in acknowledgement. 'But maybe you were right in the first place. According to the latest popularity polls, it seems that more people actually see things your way than either of us realised.'

'Yeah, I saw that on TV. That's good, isn't it?'

'It's certainly good for me! My party might win the next election after all. So, in a way, you might have saved me for a second time!'

Jason looked out over the ocean and thought about that. 'Does that mean you'll give me anything I ask for, a second time?'

‘No.’
‘Good.’

###

Preview: Hot Quolls

I hope you enjoyed reading this book! A sequel, *Hot Quolls*, will be published soon. Here's a sneak preview...

Hot Quolls Chapter 1

Logging In

Jason wrestled to control the car. He'd entered the corner going way too fast. The SUV's wheels slid on the dirt track, spraying out clouds of dust that glowed in the sun. Jason's heart pounded as he pulled the steering wheel to the left as hard as he dared.

Almost there. The young driver cracked half a smile, although David, in the passenger's seat, sat rigidly with his fingers digging into the upholstery.

The terrified face of a woman suddenly appeared in front of them.

Crap!

Jason spun the steering wheel to the right and the SUV lurched sideways, throwing David hard against his door. The vehicle started to tip onto its side; Jason had visions of his beloved Predator becoming so much scrap metal. It teetered on two wheels for what seemed like an hour, before deciding to live for another day and dropping back onto all four.

The boys glanced at each other's white faces, then jumped out of the car and sprinted back to where they'd seen the pedestrian. A pall of dust kicked up by Jason's hooning hung over the whole of Mr McKenzie's field.

'You didn't get her, did you?' asked David as he ran.

Jason, easily outpacing his heavily-built friend, shrugged his shoulders.

The woman was still lying on the ground. Five or six other adults were standing around her, and two were kneeling at her side. The boys reached the group just as the lady was being helped to her feet.

A lanky man, who Jason vaguely recognised, turned to face the boys. 'Are you two alright?'

'Did we hit her?' asked Jason.

'No, she's fine.'

The lady was brushing dust off her suit, which was way too up-market for strolling through a disused paddock. It was too up-market for anything around the town of Sapphire Bay, really.

'I'm sorry,' Jason said to her. 'I didn't think anyone would be around.'

'It's my fault. I didn't look before coming through the gate. I should have known better, since your father said you'd be practicing here.'

Jason peered across to the house next door, hoping his dad hadn't witnessed the near-tragedy. It could still turn out to be a tragedy if he was forbidden from thrashing his Predator around Mr McKenzie's field, because then he'd have to wait until he could get his licence before he could use his car. Fortunately, Mr Saunders wasn't visible.

Jason turned his attention to the motley bunch before him. A couple of their faces seemed familiar. Although the lady was nicely dressed, the others were pretty messy. Most of them were wearing jeans that were well past their use-by dates, but one chubby guy stood out in a Hawaiian shirt and orange board shorts that went halfway down his calves.

'You were looking for me?' Jason asked the lady. 'What did I do?'

‘You stopped the Prime Minister from making global warming worse.’

‘Hooray for Jason!’ said the man in the orange boardies. ‘Jason’s our Parry Hotter.’

‘Oh, so you’re reporters.’ Jason felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He’d had more than enough hassles with reporters.

‘No. My name’s Gillian Bradley. We’re just a group of people who are concerned about the plan to allow logging in Sapphire State Forest. We’d like you to join us, because of your reputation.’

Jason looked down. He’d hoped the business with the Prime Minister was over and done with. Even though he got his way in the end, the whole episode was just too heavy. When the PM and a professor and your father and your friends and everyone else in town all tell you that you don’t know what you’re talking about and it’s none of your business, you start to believe them.

And anyway, that wasn’t about cutting down trees.

‘I think I’d rather not,’ said Jason.

A short muscular guy spoke up. ‘I thought you was supposed to be full-on for trees and the environment and shit.’

‘Used to be. I don’t believe in anything any more.’

‘You’d be a great asset to our cause,’ said Gillian. ‘You could really help us to stop the thinning.’

‘Thinning?’

‘“Thinning” is what the loggers call it, instead of “cutting down”.’

‘Come on, Jason,’ said orange shorts, doing a little dance. David motioned towards the dancer with his head while giving Jason a bemused look.

Jason screwed up his face. ‘What would I have to do?’

‘Nothing hard,’ replied Gillian. ‘Just come to meetings with us. Be seen with us. Maybe you could say a few words to reporters.’

Jason shook his head slowly.

‘I told youse he was useless,’ said the muscle man.

Gillian glared at the speaker. ‘That isn’t helpful, Einstein.’

David nudged Jason and nodded towards the tall man who’d asked if they were okay. Emma, who went to the same school as Jason, was peeping out from behind him. ‘Go on, do it,’ whispered David while administering another nudge. ‘Everyone knows you’ve got the hots for Emma.’

Jason stepped away from David. Why couldn’t that guy take anything seriously?

A couple of the greenies had strolled over to Jason’s car. One of them was inspecting the bodywork while the other was pushing on the hood, making the vehicle bounce on its suspension. Jason wanted to go over and keep a closer eye on them but figured he shouldn’t just walk away from the lady he’d nearly flattened. Fortunately the pair didn’t mess with the car for too long before ambling back to the main group.

‘Is it okay?’ asked Jason.

‘Seems to be. Except for the pollution it belches out, of course.’

Six months ago, that comment would have made Jason feel guilty, but now he just shrugged his shoulders. ‘The environment isn’t any of my business any more.’

‘It can be,’ said Gillian. ‘But I know you’ve been through a lot. You don’t need to decide straight away.’ She handed over a business card, and the group turned and started walking back to the gate.

‘That was weird,’ said David. ‘Are you going to do it?’



Hot Quolls Chapter 2

A Tabled Invitation

‘You’ve now heard our case in favour of legalising euthanasia, and you’ve also heard the other team’s case against it.’ Jason looked down at his notes. As the final speaker in his debating team, one of his jobs was to undermine his opponents’ arguments. He’d scribbled down copious points while they were speaking, even though they never said anything he hadn’t thought of himself while preparing for the debate.

‘They made a lot of interesting points. They could be right that a cure could be found, or that the patient could just get better. Those things really happen, so we can’t just ignore them.’

Behind Jason’s back, one of other members of his team cleared his throat raucously. It was obviously fake and Jason knew what it meant: he was supposed to be trashing the opposition, not agreeing with them.

He skimmed his notes again, looking for another issue to attack. ‘Cost. Yes, as the speakers in the other team said, if euthanasia was made legal, then the government would have to cough up money to pay for it. They’d have to put taxes up. Actually, that’s a good point. With this recession thing at the moment, lots of people are struggling so we really wouldn’t want higher taxes.’

That wasn’t going to make his team-mates any happier. He could feel their glares drilling into the back of his skull.

Remembering he was supposed to make eye contact with the audience, Jason looked around the classroom. It was pretty empty, which wasn't surprising: not many students wanted to spend their lunch time listening to a debate.

Ms Gow, who ran the debating club, sat front row centre. She wasn't a pretty sight: there was too much of her, and her dress didn't cover enough of her seriously sun-weathered skin. She was clicking her pen over and over, as she usually did when she was unimpressed. And she was always unimpressed. Her eyes were fixed on Jason with a glare that could spotlight rabbits.

Jason quickly looked away to avoid getting his retinas burnt, and attempted to recover the situation by summing up his team's main points again. Judging by the reduced frequency of the pen clicks, Ms Gow seemed placated.

'So, to conclude, you can see it makes sense for euthanasia to be legalised. It's just cruel to keep people in pain when they don't need to be and don't want to be. And it would free up hospital beds so that we could treat other patients instead of keeping them waiting for ages like now.'

Jason looked to the back of the classroom in an attempt to seem confident. *Bull!* What was *he* doing here? There's no way that thug would voluntarily turn up to anything that wasn't compulsory. Ms Gow must have put him on detention.

There was probably time for only a few more sentences. Jason knew he should hammer home his team's position, but that just didn't seem right. If he'd learnt anything from his battle with the PM, it was that things were never totally one-sided. It was dumb to pretend they were.

‘But these things have to be balanced against what the other team said. When you think about that, it makes sense for euthanasia to be illegal. So, I don’t know, I guess it’s impossible to decide. Thank you.’

Jason sat down, red-faced. That wasn’t going to go down well, but what else could he honestly say?

Fortunately, lunch time was nearly over so there wasn’t much opportunity for Ms Gow and Jason’s team-mates to hook into him. The English teacher ranted away in her husky voice and was supported by occasional jibes from the others. Not surprisingly, the other team was declared the winner.

Jason didn’t bother to defend himself. He knew what they expected of him, and they knew that he knew, so it all seemed rather pointless. In addition, he was keen to get out of the room before Bull was set free, just in case Bull wanted to thump him for his role in wrecking his lunch time. Not that it was Jason’s fault, but Bull would never let a technicality like that get in the way of an excuse to bash a geek.

As soon as the opportunity permitted, Jason scooped up his things and strode towards the door. Just as he was about to escape, someone behind him grabbed his arm. Jason’s head dropped and he turned around slowly.

It wasn’t Bull. It was the leader of the other debating team. ‘Thanks, mate,’ he said with a wink.

‘Don’t mention it,’ muttered Jason. He shook himself free and departed.



Lunch time the next day was supposed to be spent helping David with maths, but Jason couldn’t find his friend anywhere in the library. Even though David had asked for the session, he’d

probably forgotten about it and was still kicking a football around.

Jason grabbed a table and waited. His head was still ringing with the crap they lectured at him after the debate. Why should everyone have to take sides all the time? Were you supposed to simply ignore half the issues and make your mind up—then tell everyone else what to think?

‘So *this* is where the library is,’ said David, plonking his mass down on the chair opposite Jason.

After they got out their stuff, Jason explained the basics of trigonometry then got David to try one of the exercises in the textbook. Jason jotted down the answer while David drew diagrams of triangles and scratched down a few equations.

Jason resisted the urge to help. He drummed his fingers quietly on the table. Its surface felt strangely rough under his fingertips; looking down, he saw that Bull had etched his nickname into the wood. Stupid Bull. He was typical of the idiots who thought they knew everything and had to ram their opinions down everyone else’s throats.

‘Okay, I give up,’ said David. ‘This trigger-monetary doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Trigonometry,’ corrected Jason. He went over the principles again, then David resumed his attack on the problem.

Maybe this one-sided thinking was just a school thing. Maybe people in the real world were smarter and knew that some things were hard to decide. Jason wondered whether he should consider himself lucky that the PM and other people in Canberra had taught him not to jump to conclusions, even though that meant he didn’t fit in with the simple people around him.

‘There,’ announced David. He looked over at Jason’s notes and, seeing their answers were the same, clasped his hands over his head in triumph.

‘Easy, isn’t it?’ Jason skimmed through the problems in the book to find another one to test David with. ‘Try number nine: “A surveyor finds that the top of a tree makes an angle of twenty degrees from the horizontal. If the tree is 100 metres away, how tall is the tree?”’

David briefly closed his eyes, then started drawing a diagram.

Trees. Yes, those greenies were another example. They were just looking at their side of the argument. There was probably a good reason for chopping down the trees, but the greenies weren’t interested in that. ‘Why do they want to chop down the trees?’ Jason murmured.

David looked up, confused. ‘Eh? Where does it say that?’

‘I was just thinking about those greenies.’

‘Oh. Yeah, I don’t get that thinning stuff at all.’

‘Obviously.’

‘You’re just jealous ‘cause you’re so scrawny,’ said David, returning to his diagram. After staring at it for a while, he scribbled it out and started drawing a new one.

Jason flipped idly through the pages of his textbook. ‘I guess they’ll make paper from the trees.’

‘What? Oh, that.’

‘Sorry, I’ll shut up.’

David fiddled with his new diagram for a few minutes, then put down his pencil. ‘I reckon the book’s got this problem in the wrong section.’

‘It’s exactly the same as the one you just did.’

‘No it isn’t. That one didn’t have a tree in it.’

‘Ignore the tree. Just think of it as a line with a length.’

‘Ohhh.’

Jason looked around the library. There were dozens of shelves of books. That was nothing new, of course, but it made a difference when you thought of them as ex-trees.

‘Thirty-six metres,’ said David.

‘What? Oh. Yes.’ Jason looked across at David’s pad, but David obscured his working by placing an elbow on it.

Jason narrowed his eyes. ‘You cheated!’

‘Who, me?’

‘You looked it up in the back of the book.’

‘Well!’ exclaimed David, crossing his arms in mock indignation. ‘You just don’t realise how smart I am.’

‘Okay, if you’re so smart, do this one...’ After thinking for a moment, Jason folded a piece of paper in half along one diagonal, then slid it towards the middle of the table. ‘There. Your sides are lined up with the edges of the paper, so that’s forty-five degrees. If the corner of the paper is fifty centimetres away from you, how fat are you?’

‘I’m not fat; it’s muscle. Muscle from playing rugby.’

‘Yeah, right. Anyway, I bet you can’t work out the answer since it’s not in the book.’

David started drawing yet another diagram, and Jason’s mind returned to the forest. He’d done a few of the bushwalks there with his parents. There were kangaroos and various kinds of parrots, and specky views from the track up Mount Gore. Plus all those trees were busily absorbing carbon dioxide which helped to slow down global warming.

‘I guess I could hang out with them for a while, just to sus it out,’ Jason said out loud without meaning to.

‘Eh? Oh, those greenies. I reckon you should, ‘cause of her.’ David nodded his head at someone over Jason’s shoulder.

Jason looked around and saw Emma standing at one of the library’s computers. She had her back to the boys, so Jason looked longer. Emma was too tall for the computer desk and was hunched over, but then she always seemed to be looking down. Her long hair looked too black to be real and blended into the black of her shirt, which would have blended into the black of her jeans had it not been interrupted by a silver-studded belt.

‘I don’t think she likes me,’ said Jason.

‘Course she does. Smart athletic guy like you, how could she not?’

‘Skinny geeky guy, you mean.’

‘Well, let’s find out.’ David placed cupped hands to his mouth. ‘Psst! Emma!’

‘Don’t do that!’ demanded Jason, pulling David’s hands down.

But the damage had been done: Emma was on her way over. Jason pretended to read his maths book so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact, then pushed it aside when he realised how nerdy that looked.

‘So what were you doing hanging around with those greenies?’ David asked Emma.

‘I like the birds in the forest. And my dad says we need it for tourism.’

‘Is that who that skinny guy was? Jason was worried it was your boyfriend.’

Jason tried to kick David under the table but only managed to bang the toe of his shoe against a chair leg.

‘Missed me,’ said David. ‘And I told you you weren’t the only raging greenie in this school.’

‘I was when I was fighting the Prime Minister and everyone else about global warming.’

‘Nup,’ said Emma, focusing on the table. ‘Maybe it seemed like that, but it wasn’t true.’

Jason shrugged. ‘I’ve given up trying to work out what’s true.’

‘I just know we can’t let those logger scum win. We’re doing a protest march on Saturday.’ Emma paused and flicked her hair away from her face. ‘It’d be good if you’d come,’ she added without looking up.

Jason couldn’t help but think Emma had just invited the table to participate in a protest march. David’s eyebrows were flailing wildly, which Jason assumed was supposed to convince him to do likewise.

‘Next Saturday?’ said Jason, frowning. ‘I didn’t know I’d have to decide so quickly.’

‘It’s got to be then,’ said Emma. ‘Dad says we’ve only got a few days before the government decides about letting them hack down the forest.’

David’s eyebrows were still all over the place. Jason wondered how long he could keep it up before he got forehead cramp. Unfortunately, he didn’t get to find out because the buzzer marking the end of the period sounded.

Then Emma played a dirty trick: she looked at Jason.

Those deep brown eyes were more than Jason could resist. ‘I guess I could come.’

As he trudged off to class, Jason kicked himself for getting sucked in. This was exactly the sort of thing he swore he'd never do again. The forest did seem to be a good cause, but what was the other side of the story?



Hot Quolls Chapter 3

March Ado About Nothing

Jason stood under the autumn-coloured leaves of a liquidambar in the park, shifting his weight from foot to foot. A couple of dozen protesters had gathered on the far side of the park. Jason recognised some of them from when he'd nearly run over Gillian with his Predator. The strange guy who'd been wearing the citrus shorts was impossible to miss: today's shorts were luminous yellow, making his red and green floral shirt seem tame by comparison. Einstein, the muscleman who didn't seem too bright, was there too. Several of the protesters had crudely-written placards, saying things like 'don't misTREEt our forest', 'leave our leaves alone' and 'log off'. The last one appealed to Jason's computer instincts.

Jason looked at his watch. It was only a few minutes until the march was supposed to start. Emma still wasn't there, and neither was her father.

Jason's parents weren't there either, even though Jason's father had agreed they shouldn't allow logging in the forest because the forest was a tourist attraction and tourism was good for business. Despite that money-grabbing reason, Jason was relieved that he and his father were on the same side. They'd clashed heaps of times when Jason had been battling the PM about emission controls to reduce global warming. Mr Saunders hadn't wanted emission controls any more than the PM had.

Even though he wanted the logging stopped, Jason's father was adamant that he shouldn't have anything to do with the protest. He said it would be 'inappropriate' for a respected businessman to be seen with a bunch of rowdy yobbos. Jason had assured him it wasn't going to be like that, although he didn't really have any idea what it *was* going to be like. Hopefully just a nice quiet walk down Pacific Street.

David had wimped out too. Rugby training, or something. He'd reckoned his absence would be better for Jason, otherwise Jason would have faced too much competition for Emma.

'Um, Jason?' said a quiet voice behind him. He turned and saw Emma and her father striding towards the protesters, so he trotted over and joined them.

Gillian was trying to herd the rabble into some sort of formation but the rabble obviously preferred chaos. The guy in the bad-taste clothes seemed to have appointed himself leader of the march.

'That's Sal,' said Emma. 'He's not from Sapphire Bay.'

Jason nodded. 'I'd have noticed him before if he was. I don't recognise most of these people.'

'A lot of them are from Sydney,' said Emma's father. 'They help out at protests like ours, wherever they are.'

Sal was waving wildly. 'Jason, come up to the front with me!'

Jason took a step back.

'Jason, you're our hero. You should be here!'

'He'll be okay with us,' said Emma's father.

Sal shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention elsewhere.

'Thanks, Mr Johnson,' said Jason.

‘Call me Tom.’

After a signal from Gillian, Sal waved his arms and the group shuffled off. Pacific Street had been closed to traffic, and barricades had been erected on either side. It seemed like overkill since there were hardly any spectators. Jason had imagined it would be like those huge parades on TV, but Sapphire Bay wasn’t big enough to have crowds like that. Or maybe the locals just didn’t care whether the forest got cut down.

Despite the small number of onlookers, the police didn’t seem to be taking any chances. Jason counted six officers, which is more than he thought Sapphire Bay had. Even so, there weren’t enough of them to patrol the whole length of Pacific Street so they trudged along beside the gaggle of marchers. In some stretches there were more police than spectators.

The disappointing turnout didn’t seem to bother Sal. He waved his placard in the air and shouted slogans at the top of his voice, which occasionally broke into a squeak. From time to time he turned around and walked backwards, flailing his free arm to rev up the other marchers in a chant of ‘trees forever, logging never’. That seemed a bit lame, and Jason kept his mouth shut.

Emma and Tom were totally into it, though. Jason had never seen Emma so full-on. ‘Come on, Jason,’ she urged between repetitions. Jason lip-synched along for a while, but drifted towards the middle of the pack of protesters so he’d be less visible to the onlookers.

Fortunately, Sal was putting on such a good show that the onlookers didn’t pay much attention to anyone else. They seemed more interested in watching the spectacle than showing

any support for the cause. The only time they cheered was when Sal, walking backwards, tripped in a pot-hole and accidentally did a backwards roll.

The march took longer than Jason expected because everyone was dawdling. Sal's antics didn't help, either. By the time the council offices finally came into view, the heat rising off the road was making Jason sweat even though summer had finished a couple of weeks ago.

There were more spectators here. Most of them sheltered in the shade of the orange-leaved trees dotted around the council park. There were even a couple of TV cameras, one of which was pointing directly at the marchers. Jason manoeuvred himself so that Tom was between him and the camera.

Tom tapped Jason on the shoulder and pointed at a well-dressed man standing behind one of the barricades. 'See that bloke?' he said, nearly having to yell to make himself heard over the chanting. 'He's the enemy.'

'Who is it?'

'Boss of the loggers. His name's Wherrett.'

Mr Wherrett didn't look like a logger. Loggers didn't wear light grey suits or have upwards-combed blond hair. He stood expressionless, just watching the rabble pass noisily by.

But the man beside him looked like a logger. He was built like a gorilla, with legs as thick as tree trunks. He stared furiously at Sal but Sal was too busy conducting the procession to notice.

However, Sal noticed when the logger fired up his chainsaw and started hacking into a log. The raucous sound cut through the greenies' chants and a shower of wood chips blasted into the

spectators nearby. The men with the TV cameras pushed in front of everyone else to get an unobstructed view of the action.

Most of the marchers edged towards the other side of the road, and Jason was happy to do likewise. Emma grabbed her father's hand. Even though there were lots of adults around, and even police, Jason would still have felt safer if David had been there. David wouldn't have been worried about a loony with a chainsaw.

Einstein wasn't worried either. He positioned himself between Sal and the chainsaw-wielder and returned the logger's stare. The cameramen moved around so they could get Einstein in the picture.

Two cops rushed over to the logger and alternated frantically between pointing at his saw and making cut-throat gestures. The man looked over to Mr Wherrett, who nodded, then turned off the saw and held it high above his bald head.

Einstein inched closer to the barricade in front of the logger while making a variety of gestures with his fingers and fists. For Einstein's sake, Jason hoped the police could stop a fight breaking out: the greenie might have been muscly but he was at least a ruler-length shorter than the other guy.

Fortunately, Gillian and Tom rushed over to Einstein and pulled him back into the main body of marchers. The group sped up to get past the loggers and Sal resumed his cheerleading, though he was less flamboyant than before and glanced back at the chainsaw man from time to time.

Jason stole a backwards glance too. The chainsaw was still being held high above the logger's sweaty scalp. Jason wondered if there was any chance his father wouldn't find out about this. It was exactly the sort of thing he'd warned about.

Einstein was now gesticulating rudely at the crowd for no apparent reason, and Sal was just plain embarrassing. Jason contemplated ducking under one of the barricades and disappearing, but figured that would probably draw more attention than trudging on with the mob.

The marchers finally halted in front of the council offices. Tom immediately broke from the pack and ran over to a yellow van, returning promptly with a PA system. After plugging a few things in, he handed Gillian a microphone.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for—’ The PA system was silent. Gillian looked at Tom, who fiddled with something and then gave a thumbs-up.

‘Ladies and—’ Feedback squeal. Gillian looked at Tom again, who shrugged his shoulders. Gillian tapped on the microphone but that made it worse. Jason could see some of the spectators sniggering. What a nuisance. He didn’t want to move from his nice anonymous position in the middle of the greenies, but he couldn’t stand to see Gillian embarrassed. He ran over to the PA system and repositioned it so it was in front of the microphone. The screech dried up and Jason skulked back into the mob. Gillian was too preoccupied to acknowledge his contribution but Emma smiled and nodded, which was much more valuable.

Gillian commenced once more. This time the PA system functioned properly—but after listening to Gillian for a while, Jason started to wonder whether that was a good thing. Her speech meandered all over the place, mentioning heaps of reasons why logging shouldn’t be allowed but never explaining or justifying anything. Not in terms that Jason could understand,

anyway. If she'd been a member of Jason's debating team, Ms Gow would have ripped her to shreds.

Jason tried to look interested even though he wasn't. Many of the spectators obviously felt the same way and wandered off. Maybe Gillian should have let Sal do the talking; at least he would have been entertaining. Even the feedback squeal had provided greater entertainment.

The people who did manage to concentrate on Gillian's talk weren't exactly supportive. There were catcalls of 'says you', 'prove it', 'where's your evidence?', and the old classic, 'bullshit'. Jason suspected the group's antics during the march probably destroyed a lot of sympathy for their cause.

Gillian was getting flustered. She kept losing track of where she was up to and had to refer to her notes. She started saying 'um' and 'ah'. She looked over at the police whenever anyone shouted over the top of her, but the police just looked back.

Einstein strolled over to the loudest of the loudmouths and stood in front of the barricade that separated them, but the stream of criticism continued. The reporters that were filming Gillian abandoned their positions and scuttled over to the stand-off. Two policemen also hurried over and stood between Einstein and the barricade.

Gillian's speech seemed to go on for longer than the march. After she finally shut up, Sal attempted to whip the protesters up into another frenzy of chanting, but he only got a half-hearted response.

After a few minutes of forced noise, Gillian tapped on her watch and the protesters fell silent. Workmen started collecting up the barricades and the few remaining spectators drifted away.

Jason watched with relief as Mr Wherrett and the chainsaw man got into a dirty Range Rover and drove off.

‘We showed ‘em,’ said Einstein, puffing out his already well-puffed chest.

‘I’m not sure what we showed ‘em,’ replied Tom.

‘That we won’t take no shit!’

Tom opened his mouth to respond but Gillian interrupted. ‘Guys, I’ve had it. We need to discuss how this went, but not today.’

Tom nodded. ‘Anyone up for a burger, then?’

‘I’d rather a nice seafood buffet,’ said Gillian, wiping perspiration from her forehead. ‘And I could do with a decent Chardonnay.’

‘You want seafood?’ asked Einstein. ‘I’ll fix it up for Tuesday.’

Gillian looked surprised. ‘Really? How nice of you, Mr Einfeld!’

Gillian, Tom and some of the others wandered off to get lunch. Emma didn’t go with them so Jason headed home. He didn’t feel like celebrating with the greenies anyway. After all, what had they really achieved?

Since the official decision about the logging was due soon, it wouldn’t be long before they found out.



Hot Quolls Chapter 4

Buffeted

Jason's bed was covered with fragments of a cardboard box and torn-apart plastic bags. Two instruction manuals lay open on the desk and bits of computer were strewn across the floor.

'Typical,' said Jason, adjusting the tangle of connectors inside his computer. 'The graphics card arrives on the day I'm supposed to go to that thing with the greenies.'

'Then don't go,' said David.

'It's not as though I even agree with them. They could be wrong for all I know. Screwdriver.'

David passed the tool, then picked up a stray fan and inspected it. 'Shouldn't this have gone in there somewhere?'

'Couldn't see a place for it,' said Jason as he screwed the computer's case back together.

'Won't it blow up or something, if you don't do it right?'

'One way to find out.' Jason connected the peripherals and plugged the power cord into a power point near the door, but hesitated before flicking the switch. 'Come here.'

David looked half mystified and half distrustful, but complied. Jason positioned his bulky friend between himself and the computer, then snaked out a skinny arm towards the power point.

'Get lost,' protested David, twisting out of harm's way. He easily overpowered Jason and held Jason in front of himself.

‘There’s no point trying to use me as a shield. Most of you would stick out the sides.’

‘Just turn it on, smart-arse.’

Jason did. The computer powered up normally.

Jason’s antiquated version of *Grand Theft Auto* had never looked so good or run so well. It was silky smooth. The new graphics card was obviously a brute and would have no problems running even the latest version of the game, but unfortunately the rest of Jason’s computer wouldn’t be up to the task.

Jason’s mother popped her head around the bedroom door and frowned at the debris. ‘I thought you two were going to do some homework.’

‘We are,’ said Jason. ‘Computing. I showed David how to install a graphics card. We’re just seeing if we got it right.’

Mrs Saunders tried to stifle a smile but failed. ‘If you can stand to tear yourselves away from your work, there’s something coming up on the news you might want to see.’

Jason looked down. That sort of invitation always brought back bad memories of grappling with the Prime Minister last year. The PM had decided Australia shouldn’t have strict emission controls, which infuriated Jason because he was worried about global warming. Then, one evening, the man got caught in a rip while swimming near Sapphire Bay, and Jason managed to save him from drowning. When the PM promised Jason any reward he wanted, Jason asked him to agree to the emission controls. Even though that wasn’t the sort of thing the politician had in mind, his promise was caught on tape by reporters so he was trapped.

Things got pretty messy after that. It was on TV a lot, and Jason was harassed by reporters so much that he eventually caved in and let the PM do whatever he wanted. The PM finally *did* approve the emission controls, but even though the politician made up his own mind in the end, Jason still got blamed for it so he'd learnt to ignore the issue when it was on TV and in the paper. But his mum still pointed out any mentions of it.

Jason and David followed Mrs Saunders into the lounge room. Jason's father was lying on a lounge chair that was reclined so far back he would have been staring at the ceiling if he hadn't had his hands behind his head.

After an ad break, the news resumed:

In the face of the economic downturn, the Prime Minister, Graham Lindsay, has come under fire for his continued support of the Rotterdam emission control targets. The Australian Business Council has claimed that the restrictions are crippling the Australian economy because local businesses can't compete with those in countries that didn't sign up to the Rotterdam targets. It also pointed out that because the world's biggest polluters didn't sign up, Australia's efforts to cut emissions will not significantly reduce global warming.

In a statement issued earlier today, Mr Lindsay had this to say: 'It's true that the Rotterdam proposals haven't been as widely accepted as we would have liked. The government understands the challenges that Australian industry is facing and is considering options to assist. We'll be making a major announcement shortly.'

David blew a raspberry. 'They didn't mention you.'

'Why should they?' replied Jason. 'I didn't force the PM to agree to those emission controls.'

‘You did at the start.’

‘That was before they showed me that everything’s too complicated and isn’t any of my business.’

‘So old Graham’s going to make a major announcement, is he?’ murmured Mr Saunders. ‘It had better be good. Else there’ll be one less fish processing factory by the end of the year: mine.’

Jason’s mother pointed at the clock on the wall. ‘You’d better get moving, Jason. You don’t want to be late for your dinner.’

‘I don’t think I’ll go,’ said Jason, waving an arm at the TV. ‘That’s reminded me I shouldn’t have an opinion.’

Mrs Saunders frowned. ‘I really think you should go. It’d do you good.’

‘And don’t forget Emma will be there,’ said David, starting his eyebrow thing again.

Jason’s mother looked quizzically at David but didn’t follow up on his comment. ‘Aren’t they having a seafood buffet? That’s good for Dad’s business. Especially if it’s somewhere nice, like Hendrick’s.’

Mr Saunders grunted. ‘Can you get them to have one every night?’

‘I guess I’d better go,’ muttered Jason. ‘I said I would.’ He got up and headed to his room.

‘Put on some proper clothes,’ his mother called after him. ‘They won’t let you into Hendrick’s if you’re wearing jeans.’



The caravan park was pretty empty at this time of year. There was only one cabin that showed any signs of life: a pair of jeans drying on a makeshift clothes line.

Jason propped his bike against a nearby gum tree then peered through the fly screen door. Gillian and a few of the other greenies were inside. Gillian gestured for Jason to join them.

‘I’m glad I decided to pack a good dress,’ Gillian was saying. ‘I haven’t been to a fancy restaurant in months.’

‘So we’re going to Hendrick’s?’ asked Jason.

‘Einstein’s keeping it a secret. He just said for everyone to be here at six.’

Gillian’s cabin was not much bigger than a caravan, and was boringly tidy. Other than the jeans outside, the only sign that someone was actually living there was a set of ornaments lined up neatly along the edge of the orange kitchen bench.

Through the window that comprised one end of the cabin, Jason could see several groups of greenies walking across from the camping area on the other side of the park. A few cars drove up as well. Soon the cabin was full, and new arrivals congregated in the canvas annex attached to its side. Everyone was dressed nicely, which didn’t look right at all.

Jason kept an eye out for Tom’s delivery van, but Tom arrived in a Nissan X-Trail. Unfortunately, he seemed to be on his own, except for a yellow Labrador that started to show an interest in a large pot plant near the cabin door.

Gillian caught sight of the dog and rushed over with arms flailing. ‘Get lost, you nuisance!’

‘It’s not mine, your honour,’ said Tom. ‘Or were you talking to me?’

‘Its owners just let it roam around off its leash. I’ve got a good mind to slap a cease-and-desist order on them.’

Tom sighed. ‘Typical barrister,’ he said with a smile.

‘You’re a barista?’ Jason asked Gillian. ‘You make coffee?’

‘No, I do *not* make coffee,’ Gillian answered testily. ‘I’m a barrister, a lawyer. Just because I’m a woman, everyone assumes—’

Tom interrupted, flicking one of the pot plant’s leaves. ‘Maybe we should find a better place for this.’

‘I’ve got a philodendron by my front door in Sydney, so I put one here too since I thought this was going to be home for a while. But after last weekend...’

The lawyer didn’t finish her sentence because she was distracted by a dirty Ford Escort ute that was driving way too fast through the caravan park. It headed straight for Gillian’s cabin but at the last second skidded to a halt with all four wheels locked, spewing a cloud of dust into the air.

Gillian looked terrified and furious at the same time, but Tom just bashed his forehead with his hand and muttered ‘Einstein’.

As the dust cleared, Einstein’s grinning face appeared through the driver’s side window. ‘Seafood buffet time!’

Gillian’s expression changed to resignation. ‘I’ll get my handbag,’ she said, and turned to go inside.

‘You don’t need no handbag,’ said Einstein. He got out of the car, revealing a dirty singlet, stubbies and bare feet. After gathering up a mound of paper parcels from the floor of the vehicle, he strode past Gillian into the cabin. A similarly-clad passenger got out of the other side of the ute and lugged an esky in, leaving a trail of sand on the lino. Gillian quickly tended to it with a dustpan and broom.

‘Hey, city-girl,’ called Einstein, ‘this is the coast. It’s *supposed* to be bloody sandy.’ With a sweep of his arm, he

shoved the ornaments on the kitchen bench to one side and dropped his parcels in their place. He tore into one, revealing an oily mound of fried fish. A second parcel became a mountain of chips.

Gillian shook her head slowly and smiled, then took a stack of plastic plates down from an overhead cupboard and placed them on the bench. 'I'm not sure whether I've got enough plates for everyone.'

'I reckon you do, since we don't need none.' Einstein ripped off a piece of butchers' paper and dumped a generous handful of chips onto it. Gillian took a plate but most of the others made do with paper. Jason opted for paper as well, figuring it was somehow better for the environment. Recycling, or something.

'Okay, where's my Chardonnay?' asked Gillian. Einstein's accomplice opened the esky and tossed her a can of something that almost certainly wasn't Chardonnay.

Jason dug around inside the esky and was surprised to find a lemonade. He retreated to a corner of the cabin and sat on the scratchy brown material that substituted for carpet. The eating arrangements made it impossible to eat politely; a chunk of fish managed to escape down the front of Jason's good shirt, leaving a greasy trail. Mum wasn't going to be impressed, but it was her fault for making him dress up in the first place.

Tom saw Jason eating on his own and came over to pass on an apology from Emma. She'd wanted to come but her mother had grounded her. Tom also took the opportunity to ask Jason if he'd seen Sal recently, but he hadn't. Apparently nobody had seen Sal since the protest rally. His car and things were still in the caravan park so it wasn't as though he'd just left without telling anyone.

Just as Jason was helping himself to a second piece of fish, Gillian's mobile rang and she hustled off to the bedroom to take the call. Jason tried not to listen in but couldn't help overhearing some of the conversation since his niche was near the bedroom door. 'Already?' he heard Gillian say. 'I didn't expect it so soon.' When she emerged, she looked like she might have heard about a death in the family. Tom noticed and asked if she was okay; she replied with a nod but didn't look very happy.

After everyone had finished eating, Gillian called them all into the annex. There weren't enough folding chairs to go around, so most people just sat on the tarpaulin floor. Since the sun had set, it was surprisingly cool in the annex. Jason wished he'd brought a hoodie.

Gillian tapped on one of the annex's poles to get everyone's attention, then thanked them for coming. 'I was really hoping Sal would be here, but we'll have to start without him. I think we all know that our protest march could have gone better.'

'Whaddaya mean?' interrupted Einstein. 'We kicked their arse. I was on TV!'

'You don't get it, do you?' said a voice from the back of the annex. Einstein looked around with a fierce expression on his face but couldn't work out who'd spoken.

Gillian quickly continued. She read from a newspaper article that called the protest 'embarrassing' and her speech at the end of it 'a rambling shambles'.

Jason silently agreed with those assessments. Gillian certainly didn't seem like she could convince a jury of anything. Maybe she wasn't a very good lawyer.

Gillian's focus dropped to the ground and she exhaled deeply. 'I was going to use those quotations to start a discussion

on how we can do better next time. But during our, um, “seafood buffet”, I received news from someone I know in the government.’ She looked up at the group in front of her. ‘The logging contract has been approved.’



The rest of *Hot Quolls* will be published soon!

For more information, check out
<http://writer.catplace.net/jason2.shtml>

About the Author

Peter McLennan served for 28 years in the Royal Australian Air Force, where he focused on strategic planning. He has tertiary qualifications in engineering, information science and government, and a PhD in planning for uncertainty. He has had several non-fiction monographs and papers published.

Peter now writes fiction from his home in Canberra. His hobbies include playing computer games badly and developing software badly.

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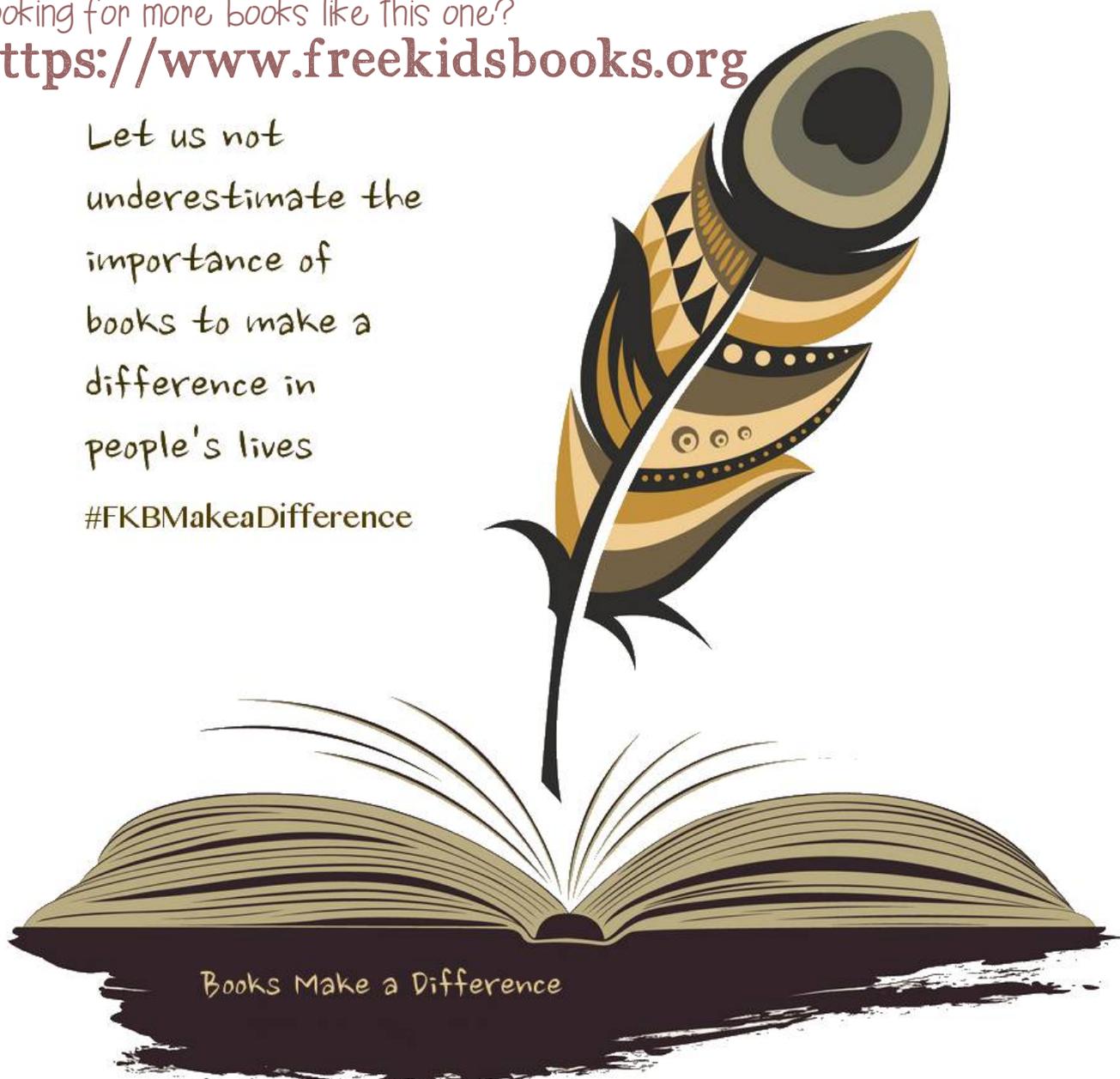
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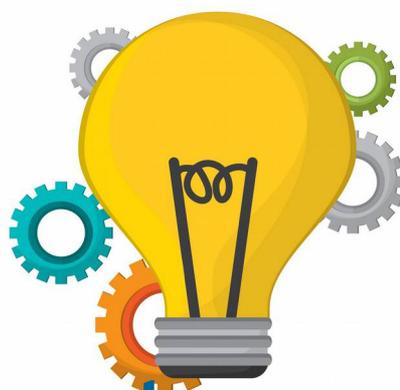


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