

An AB Discovery Book



THE SIX MISFITS

THE SEVENTH MISFIT

DYLAN LEWIS



The Six Misfits

The Seventh Misfit

By Dylan Lewis



Author's Note:

The story is set at the present time (2019) in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, and in the adjoining farming area of the Wheatbelt.

The events in this story occur after those in the second book in the series – *'Six Misfits – A Man And A Dog'*.

Any resemblance to real people or institutions is almost entirely coincidental. The locations are real. The government internment camp referred to in a later chapter is the Moore River Native Settlement. The 2002 movie *'The Rabbit Proof Fence'* depicts the Settlement as it was in the 1930s.



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The Six Misfits

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The Six Misfits

The Seventh Misfit



Dedication:

*For everyone who struggled as a teenager with a non-conforming
sense of self.*



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1. Alone



“

Have you sent that text yet?”

The voice came out of nowhere, but Chloe Petrovic knew it instantly. Britney Durack, bitch queen of Year 9. Chloe often heard that silken menacing tone in her nightmares. She felt her stomach rise to her throat and the fear close around her racing heart. Her knees felt weak. She knew the signs.

“Oh God, please don’t let me have a panic attack,” Chloe thought to herself. She was alone and out of sight from the rest of the school.

The walkway was between the high blank walls of the learning centre and the science block and screened by luxuriant, shade-loving plants. Chloe looked around quickly. There she was.



Britney Durack. And she had two of her cohorts with her, Monique Woo and Zara McLeod.

On the surface, they were all fourteen-year-old schoolgirls at the elite Congregational Ladies College in the midst of the wealthy leafy western suburbs of Perth. But Chloe knew better. She was human, but she might just as well have been a lamed gazelle. The others were hyenas in skirts... and they smelled blood.

Chloe had thought she was safe. She was taking the back way to her bolthole in a far corner of the learning centre to wait out the time before the bell for morning form class. She had desperately wanted to avoid being caught by Britney out of sight of the teachers. Chloe stood frozen and mute, as the trembling seized her body. The other three girls surrounded her, cutting off any escape.

“You haven’t, have you?” Monique accused Chloe.

Burly Monique would always be a henchman, never a leader. With her lashing tone and openly sneering expression, she didn’t have the smarts to disguise her malice. The other girl, Zara McLeod, was a weak-willed follower, afraid of getting on the wrong side of the other two. She and Chloe used to be friends.

“Oh Jelly Bean, you don’t have to make it so hard on yourself,” Britney told the quaking Chloe in a tone that professed concern. Chloe flinched at the use of her nickname.

A casual listener wouldn’t know the contempt and derision that came wrapped up with it. Britney had promoted the adoption of the nickname through her cohorts. Soon everyone knew it was a sure-fire way to curry favour with Year 9’s leader-of-the-pack. And so now, to most of her fellow students, Chloe wasn’t Chloe anymore, she was Jelly Bean. It labelled her childish, fat and stupid.



"Have you sent it?" purred Britney, like a cat playing with a mouse.

Chloe didn't know what to do. She was terrified of Britney. The other girl looked like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but Chloe well knew that Britney was capable of turning the life of any Year 9 girl into a living hell. Britney ruled from the top of the totem pole. To Chloe, she was the epitome of CLC perfection – beautiful, symmetrical face, long blonde hair, bright at schoolwork without being a nerd, captain of the middle school hockey team with a slim athletic figure to match, and a scion of the CLC 'tribe'.

Chloe did the only thing she could. She nodded ferociously. She was sure she looked like one of those ridiculous nodding toys.

"Ye... Yesss..." she stammered.

Britney fixed her with a piercing stare. Chloe quaked. She knew it wasn't even a half convincing lie. Britney held out her hand, like a queen graciously deigning to acknowledge a grubby peasant.

"Let me see," said Britney, coldly. Chloe started at the outstretched hand. Monique took a menacing step closer. Monique was on the hockey team with Britney, but her robust build would have been better suited to playing rugby.

Chloe shook her head. No way was she giving up her phone. Not even if they beat her up. It was her lifeline.

"Oh Jelly Bean, you aren't lying to me, are you? Don't you remember our school values, integrity and honour?" purred Britney. Her tone was still silken, but for a moment, the mask of faux concern slipped, and Chloe saw the cruelty in her tormentor's face. She shook uncontrollably.



Chloe couldn't believe how she had got into this situation. She'd made herself a target for the worst bully she'd ever come across. The text Britney wanted Chloe to send was to a boarder, Reshma Mehta. Reshma was an overseas student from India or Pakistan or somewhere like that. She had come to the school last year. It wasn't hard to see why Britney hated Reshma. The shy foreign girl had the smarts, looks and slim athletic figure to match Britney. But that was only salt in the wound. Reshma was a very good hockey player. For some reason, Britney couldn't handle that.

The text was to say, *"Yr nu name is the suicide bomber. U will answer to it."*

The nickname was a reference to Reshma being a Muslim. Chloe didn't really know Reshma. But knowing Britney, Chloe guessed the barb was what would cause the foreign girl the most hurt. Her faith was probably important to her. Reshma didn't wear any of those Arab *things* on her head, but Chloe remembered one of the other boarders said that Reshma prayed five times a day. In the morning, she even got up in the dark to pray. To Chloe, that was some weird foreign shit.

Britney wanted someone else to send the text because she was too smart to leave electronic footprints for her bullying. In term one, poor mousy Fran had copped a suspension for a text all the girls knew was Britney's handiwork. The old Chloe would have thought it was horrible but sent the text anyway. Chloe knew she had sometimes been a bully herself in the past, but only little league compared to Britney and more to avoid being a target for being bullied herself. Girls could be very cruel. It was a jungle. If the tiger was eating someone else, it wasn't eating you.



"Why didn't I just send the frigging text?" she reproached herself silently, in her abject fear.

She knew why.

In the last year, she had changed – and dramatically. She was now, one of *The Misfits*, an unlikely gang of friends, who made her feel good about herself for the first time in a long time. They were hardly Sunday School types, but Chloe was sure none of the other Misfits would have sent that text. They had more spine than that. If they ever knew she had sent it, they would think she was just a spineless, white-bread kid.

But none of the Misfits were here now and she was alone with Britney Durack and her cohorts, in a world that Britney owned.

"Are you going to send that text, Jelly Bean?" Britney demanded. The gloves were off now. Her tone was like a whiplash.

Chloe shook her head miserably. The first sob of fear escaped her lips and she couldn't stop shaking.

"Oh Jelly Bean, first you lie to us and now you're siding with the Suicide Bomber against your friends," said Britney, as though she was a teacher speaking to a disobedient student.

"I'm going to give you one last chance to prove that you're one of us," said Britney.

Chloe couldn't stop the tears rolling down her face, but she shook her head again.

Britney continued, not caring at all about her victim's distress. "If you don't send that text by the end of school today,



we're going to have to give you a new nickname too, and Zara will send everyone a very special photograph of you to back it up."

Chloe recoiled as though struck. She suspected what the photograph would show. Zara had once been her friend. They'd done sleepovers at each other's houses. That was before Chloe lost the plot after her parents' vicious divorce and was tagged around the school as a loser.

"Show her the photograph," Britney commanded Zara.

Zara held up her mobile. The picture showed Chloe a year ago. She looked happy and pretty. Her smile flattered her rounded features which otherwise looked a little heavier than was perfect. Her long brown tresses were thick and lustrous. She could never be described as petite, but her figure gave promise of growing into shapely womanhood. To Chloe, none of that counted.

What mattered was that she was dressed in a manner completely out of character for a western suburbs teenage girl. Chloe's peers wore a 'uniform' of expensive, figure-hugging, designer clothes that precociously proclaimed they were a mature, sexy girl-woman. In the picture, Chloe's makeup and clothes proclaimed just the opposite. She looked like a little girl in her best party dress – all ringlets, bows and lace, and flouncy petticoats. Worst, she was cuddling a beautifully dressed doll that any pre-schooler would cheerfully kill for. And the backdrop showed an exquisitely decorated bedroom that 'screamed' *six-year-old princess*.

Chloe recognized the picture instantly. It was her bedroom. It was her beautiful dress and doll. Chloe was a devotee of Sweet Lolita cosplay. It was a Japanese inspired trend where adolescent and young women dressed up in exquisite Victorian-style little



girls' costumes. It was a whole sub-culture. In the first years of middle school, it had been celebrated by her friends and her mother as fun and cute, but not anymore. Now, Chloe sensed everyone thought it was pitiable and infantile. Unlike her friends, she hadn't surrendered to peer pressure and quietly bagged up the outfits - only to be taken out for the occasional longing reminiscence. For Chloe, it was who she was.

Backed by the scorn of Britney's clique, the picture would make her a laughing stock. It wouldn't matter that a dozen other girls had similar pictures of only a few years ago in their digital directories.

"Zara..." Chloe implored.

When Chloe had been hospitalized for attempting suicide and for anxiety, Zara had been one of the many who had walked away. Chloe thought she saw a look of guilt and misgiving in Zara's eyes. But under the scrutiny of Britney and Monique, Zara smirked.

Chloe felt like she wanted to die. This was the worst.

No, it wasn't.

"Some of the girls will think this is just you wanting to be a silly baby. But we know better, don't we?" taunted Britney.

"You're really primping yourself up so dirty old men will take notice, aren't you? So, we're going to have to call you Baby Bait," said Britney.

For a moment Chloe was frozen in shock. Britney knew she had delivered the killer blow.



Chloe's heart shrivelled. This twisted her passion in the cruellest way. She loved Sweet Lolita because it made her feel innocent and protected. It inoculated her against the anxiety of having to live in the grown-up world with the likes of Britney, or her unfeeling mother. Chloe couldn't hold back her sobbing.

"She's going to wet herself again," sneered Monique. Tears filled Chloe's eyes at the cruel taunt and the hateful memory.

"I'll bet you've got nappies under that pretty baby dress," Monique taunted.

Chloe shook her head. Nappies were not part of the Sweet Lolita style. She was no teen baby like her friend, Dylan. Britney's eyes lit up. That was really twisting the knife.

"Zara, if Chloe turns her back on her friends, you will tell the others about Chloe's nappies, won't you?" Britney purred. Zara nodded hurriedly.

"So, will it be Jelly Bean or Baby Bait," Britney taunted, "We'll see you at the end of the day to find out."

They left Chloe slumped against the wall sobbing her heart out.

Chloe went through her morning classes in a daze. She wiped the tears off her cheeks, but her eyes were puffy with crying. She sat at the back as usual and her teachers were oblivious. Her mind was doing somersaults. In maths, she was blindsided by a question and got told off by the teacher.

Could she go and spill her guts to the school psych?



No! No proof!

It was her word against the others. Britney was little Miss Perfect with the teachers, a real suck, whereas Chloe knew she was seen as an 'emotional' girl. That was code for an attention seeker with a history of self-harm and anxiety. She wouldn't be believed. And as Britney never stopped telling everyone, her father was a big wheel on the College foundation – worth lots of money to the school. Britney was the CLC tribe's darling. Chloe would be a tribal sacrifice. All that would happen is she and Britney and the others would get called up to the Deputy Principal, get a lecture, and then Chloe would be chucked back in with the hyenas. There was no witness protection in Year 9.

She thought about wagging school for the rest of the day. That would just mean Britney would have Zara send the picture and tomorrow she'd walk into cruel shaming stares and whispers. She knew it wouldn't solve anything, but her desire to run away was strong. Even if she got away unseen, as opposed to just running out the gate, there would be a call to her mother. Chloe didn't think she could stand another round of her mother's cold disappointment, masquerading as concerned parenting. It felt like a knife in her heart. She would just end up screaming her hurt and frustration at her mother, slamming the door and shutting herself in her room, and crying on the bed. Then her oh-so-reasonable mother would ground her, confiscate her mobile phone and only let her do schoolwork on her laptop in the kitchen. She would have no contact with her best friends, Lily and Dylan or the other Misfits. Chloe knew that suited her mother just fine.

At lunchtime, Chloe called her best friend Lily. She really needed her besties. They would do anything for each other, but



there was no answer to her call. She'd already missed the lunch break at Lily's school and Lily usually turned off her phone in classes. She was a real swot. Chloe sent a text saying, 'call me urgent'. She then called Dylan, her other best friend. Same result. Dylan was a swot too and crap at phone etiquette. He often forgot his phone was turned off until she called his parent's landline.

She cried more tears of misery at not being able to reach her friends. She thought about ringing the other three Misfits, Martha, Daria or Steven, but couldn't bring herself too. They were strong. They would never be in this situation. Chloe rang her mentor and therapist Georgia. She got voice mail and left a tearful message pleading 'call me'. Georgia was a government social worker and always busy. She would probably wouldn't call back until tonight.

Chloe never even thought about ringing her mother. There was no point. There was never any point. Her mother was a big wheel with an oil company who hated being called at work. Chloe thought about ringing her father, but that was no good either. These days he was fly-in, fly-out on a mine site way up north. Even if she rang, she'd only go through to voicemail. She missed him dreadfully. The house was lifeless without his laugh.

Even if his business had collapsed, why did he have to sleep with my mother's best friend? Are men really that stupid? Really?

It felt like he had betrayed her as well as her mum. And it had turned her mum into the wicked witch of the west. Chloe felt like she had lost both of them.

She hid in her favourite bolthole in the far corner of the learning centre for the rest of lunch. She looked constantly at her mobile, hoping against hope that someone would call back. She felt



sick to the stomach, so missing lunch was no hardship. She kept pushing down the rising panic, trying to remember all the techniques Georgia had taught her. From the top storey of the well-appointed learning centre, she could see the sunshine almost sparkling on the resplendent manicured lawns and garden beds of the school. It might as well have been another world from the one she was currently suffering in.

Chloe got through the first classes after lunch, but she knew Monique was in her personal development class. The panic seized her. Her vision narrowed to a tunnel and her heart felt like a jackhammer in her chest. Clutching her bag tight to her chest, she fled to the toilets at the back of the Performing Arts Theatre. At this time of the week, it was the closest she could come to a refuge. She hid in the furthest cubicle from the door and sat sobbing. The bells for the next classes came and went. When she heard someone come into the toilet, she held herself tight and tried to still her breathing. After she heard them leave, she checked her phone for the umpteenth time. Nothing. The tears streamed down her face.

After the bell for the start of the last class went, she sent the text. She sobbed with relief and hated herself for it. What had she done? She was in the same English class as Reshma. If only Chloe could have found a reason to dislike the foreign girl, it might have made it better. Reshma kept mostly to herself, but she seemed like a nice girl. And now Chloe was part of Britney's plan to make the other girl's life a misery, just to save herself.

Chloe could never tell the other Misfits. She was sure they would despise or pity her. Even her besties. She could imagine the reproachful look in Dylan's eyes, even as he tried to make her feel better. She couldn't bear the thought. She had learned to like who



she was because of the Misfits. They had stuck by each other even when they feared for their lives in a couple of scrapes out in the back blocks of the empty West Australian Wheatbelt.

Most of The Misfits were ‘welfare’ kids in foster care. Only her friend Dylan was from the western suburbs too, although not from the really snooty part like her. But they’d taken her as a friend. Even Daria and Lily who had been street kids, or Steven and Martha who had been turned out by their families, had forgiven her for being a waste-of-space, white bread kid from the stuck-up western suburbs, as they originally called her. And now all that was a lie too.

When the last bell sounded, she went on autopilot to her after-school study enrichment class. It didn’t matter what they called it. It was still just childminding for parents like her workaholic mother who needed to park their kids for the working day.

Britney bailed her up on the way. Trust Britney to know where she would be.

“Well did you send it?” Britney demanded. Chloe nodded, ashamed.

“Show me,” Britney retorted. Chloe tapped on her mobile and held it up for Britney to see, ready to pull it back quickly if Britney tried to grab it.

“Good girl Jelly Bean. I’m glad to see you know who your friends are,” Britney gloated to her victim before turning away and striding off.

Even the chance to work on her sketches for fashion design didn’t cheer Chloe.



"What have I done?" she asked herself over and over. *"Poor Reshma will think everyone's against her, just like Britney wants."* The fact that Reshma was an overseas student far from her own family and friends compounded Chloe's guilt.

She got return calls from Lily and Georgia and even from Dylan. She just let them go through to voice mail. It was too late. She'd done it now, and she'd have to live with it. Reshma too. Chloe didn't trust herself to talk to Georgia or any of the Misfits without spilling her guts and letting them know she was just a spoiled waste-of-space in a big house who didn't have the courage to stand up for what was right.

Her mother picked her up. She appeared as immaculate in her tailored clothes as she did when she'd dropped Chloe off at school. Chloe just shrugged in reply to her mother's perfunctory query, *'how was your day'*. The girl pretended to be occupied with her mobile until her mother got the inevitable work call on the car's hands-free. Working for an international oil company, her mother was always getting calls from around the world at all hours. Mercifully, Chloe had little need that evening to pretend and to cover her mood. As per usual, the housekeeper had left the house immaculate and sterile, just as her mother liked. They had a take-out delivered meal watching the television news at the kitchen bench and then her mother holed up in the study to work.

Chloe took refuge in her room. She took the longest shower, but still didn't feel like she could wash herself clean of her complicity in Britney's cruelty. There were more returned calls from Lily and Dylan. She desperately wanted to pour her heart out to her besties, but she didn't know what to say to them. She couldn't bear to think of losing the Misfits' respect and friendship.



Even the exquisite pastel and lace confection of her Sweet Lolita themed bedroom didn't comfort her like it usually did. Sweet Lolita wasn't just fashion to Chloe. When she dressed in her beautiful dresses with all the accessories, with her hair and makeup perfect, she inhabited another self. With Georgia's encouragement, she had named her alter ego, Princess Chloe or just Princess. Georgia had helped Chloe to understand it wasn't pretend, that it was a real part of her. It made life special, despite her parent's horrible divorce and the emptiness of life as part of the smug CLC tribe. It was an innocent little girl identity that made her feel safe and protected. And now, Britney had cruelly twisted that into something sexual and perverted that left Chloe feeling dirty and unsafe.

There's only so much misery you can feel at once.

Chloe went to sleep numb and despairing.



2. What To Do?



It was the moment Chloe had been dreading. Even more than seeing Britney or any of her cohorts.

Seeing Reshma.

Chloe had tried to hang back when everyone trooped into English class, but Reshma evidently had the same idea. They came face to face.

Reshma stared into Chloe's eyes trying to understand how anyone, let alone a girl, could be that cruel. She thought she had left all that behind. She didn't think Chloe was like that. Chloe wasn't one of the catty ones. She was kind of pretty - a little chubby, but with a nice feminine figure, and lovely rich brown hair. Reshma noticed those kinds of things. Chloe had a nice laugh when she forgot the worry that so often clouded her face. But she had that stupid pin on the lapel of her blazer that said her mother had gone



to the school. Reshma had learned to be watchful of girls with that pin. It was a fairly reliable indicator of an entitlement that easily turned into something nasty. But not always. Reshma had thought Chloe was different. She'd been wrong.

"Suicide bomber?" Reshma anguished silently. "Is that really what they think of me? Behind the smiles is that what they all think? Is that what they think of my faith?"

Neither of the two girls could help their gaze from locking for a moment. Chloe saw a flash of reproach in the other girl's eyes and then Reshma looked down. Reshma desperately wanted to hold the Australian girl's gaze and show that she was proud of her faith. It gave her hope and solace, just as it did millions of others, no different than Christians or Jews or Hindus. She rejected the fanatics and their violence. They no more represented her faith than the fanatics of other creeds represented theirs. Instead, she felt crushed by the malice that was now shown to be hiding amongst her fellow students. She couldn't keep her eyes from seeking the floor.

Chloe was horrified. The look that had passed across Reshma's face, told of a deep hurt - the kind of hurt that says you are alone amongst strangers and enemies. Chloe knew that hurt, but now she was the cause of it. She wanted to say she was sorry, that she wasn't like that, but the girls pressing behind forced her to keep moving and take her place in the classroom.

The rest of the day dragged. Chloe's guilt followed her like a bloodhound. She thought about seeking Reshma out, but what could she do to make amends? The damage was done and couldn't be taken back. Moving between classes, Chloe heard the phrase *'suicide*



bomber’ joined with laughter in a conversation between two Year 9 girls. She guessed the awful nickname would be racing around the school. Later in the day, she saw Reshma walking past a line of girls waiting outside class. As Reshma passed, several of the girls leaned over to a companion as though sharing a confidence or joke. Chloe was too far away to hear, but she saw Reshma lift her head up higher and keep walking.

“She’s got all the guts I haven’t,” Chloe thought to herself.

Chloe hadn’t felt so wretched and ashamed for a long time. She doubted she had Reshma’s courage to face the cruel taunting that Zara’s photograph would have brought, but that didn’t excuse her inflicting that misery on anybody else.

“I really am a waste of space,” she reproached herself.

There were several more return calls from her best friends Lily and Dylan, and one from Georgia her therapist. She let them all go through to voicemail. She was too ashamed to speak to them. She got through the rest of the day and the evening in a fog.

The next day it got worse.

At her morning form class, Chloe’s form teacher, the normally effervescent Ms Bishop, stood in front of the class stern-faced. The class knew that look. Some shit was going down. Chloe’s guilt accused her. Her heart quailed.

“It has come to the attention of the Principal that one of our girls has been subject of the most unconscionable bullying. To bully a student on the basis of their religion is a disgrace. It is a disgrace to bully any student, but if she is a boarder or an international student, that bullying is even more disgraceful. It runs against



everything that our College stands for, everything we can be proud of," Ms Bishop declared.

Chloe hoped the ground would open up and swallow her. She liked Ms Bishop. But the tone of the young teacher's voice and the look on her face were eloquent in communicating her disdain for the culprits.

"The school will not stand for such bullying. Any girl caught engaging in such a breach of the College's values will have to explain herself to the Deputy Principal and her parents," Ms Bishop continued. Her tone said, *'good luck with avoiding expulsion, and good riddance'*.

She went on for some time, but Chloe didn't register the rest. Any moment now, she would be hauled out of class and marched to the Deputy Principal's office. The whole school would know she was an evil malicious bitch. Her text was all the proof anybody could want. And Britney Durack would deny any involvement, imply that Chloe was a few sandwiches short of a picnic, and not to be believed. Monique and Zara would back Britney up.

Chloe traversed her classes in a daze of fear and guilt. It made it worse when she overheard several staff members saying that any suggestion of religious discrimination and intolerance would bring damaging publicity and threaten the school's accreditation to enrol international students. It was a big deal.

"They're going to burn me at the stake, like a medieval witch," Chloe told herself.

"No more than you deserve," she told herself.



But the blow didn't fall, and Chloe didn't understand why. And then it came to her.

Reshma had not dobbed.

Some staff must have overheard the phrase 'suicide bomber' in chatter between girls and put two and two together. But they didn't know who the culprits were. Relief flooded through Chloe followed by deep shame. She felt her hands were stained with cruelty, but she didn't have the courage to go to Ms Bishop and confess.

Her misery was compounded when Britney passed her in the corridor, gave her an evil smirk and made a quick motion to signify cutting her throat. Chloe realized the bully owned her now. Britney could drop a hint in a circle of girls and Chloe would be dobbed into the staff for the text to Reshma. Even if Reshma didn't choose to give her up, the staff could demand the boarder's phone and check for texts. And at any time, Reshma could have her revenge.

That evening Chloe hid out again in her bedroom while her mother replied to her work emails in the study. The Sweet Lolita décor and her gorgeous beloved dresses and perfectly matched accessories were robbed of their appeal. Instead, they reproached her for her weakness. If she didn't love her dresses so, if she didn't need them to feel safe, Zara wouldn't have that photograph and Reshma wouldn't look like she was being hunted.

"Maybe I should just throw all my stuff away?" Chloe thought to herself. That scared her. How had her mood slid this low so quickly?



The sound of the doorbell yanked her out of her musing. She heard her mother's voice. She couldn't hear the specific words, but the tone was surprised, and annoyed, under the guise of western suburbs courtesy. It was just past 7:00 pm.

"Oh no! Has the College sent someone around to tell mother I'm suspended or expelled?" Chloe anguished. *"She'll just lose it. After the divorce and all the stuff at work, she's wound pretty tight."*

She heard her Mother's footsteps on the Italian marble stairs. It sounded like she wasn't alone. Chloe got up from the bed and faced the door.

There was a knock on her door. Chloe knew her mother's annoyed knock. The door opened before Chloe had time to reply. Her mother was standing at the door with her *'oh-so polite but pissed'* look. It carried the unspoken declaration *'we'll discuss this later'*. Behind her shoulder wasn't the frowning Deputy Principal, but the worried faces of her two besties, Lily Nguyen and Dylan Lawson.

Chloe wanted to fall down on her knees and cry with relief and happiness. Their visit was out-of-the-blue. She knew it would have taken several changes of bus and train for them to get here.

She barely heard her mother saying, "Lily and Dylan said you'd promised to help them with their homework. You didn't tell me. If I'd known you were having your friends over, I'd have gotten supper, but I've got to finish these emails. I'll put the kettle on and you can make yourselves something. It's a school day tomorrow, so, you can study together until nine o'clock. Right?"

Her mother's tone clearly conveyed she didn't credit the homework story, but she was going to let it go for now.



“Thank you, Ms Markson,” Lily and Dylan chorused in their best, well-brought-up voices. It was a masquerade they had practised all their lives.

In the grand, cold Markson/Petrovic house, they felt like they were going undercover in unfriendly territory. It was obvious to all that the Misfits weren’t exactly the upper crust friends Elisabeth Markson would have preferred for Chloe. The Misfits called her Mrs Ice Queen. But Elisabeth was grateful Lily and Dylan were good friends who did her tempestuous, sometimes troubled daughter a power of good. Lily was a model of well-groomed femininity and Chloe was safe behind closed doors with Dylan because the boy was obviously gay in her opinion. In public sight, he was a stereotypical geeky teenage boy who dressed indifferently in Department store clothes. But Elisabeth had sometimes glimpsed him oohing and ahing and giggling with Lily and Chloe over her daughter’s lamentably infantile Lolita dresses. The teenagers expected Ms Markson would freak if she knew the truth. Lily was transgender, male to female. And Dylan was not gay. Out of her mother’s sight, Chloe and Dylan frequently kissed and held hands.

Lily saw the look on Chloe’s face and quietly told Dylan to close the door. No sooner than it was closed, Chloe was weeping on Lily’s shoulder.

Chloe blurted out everything. She had meant to keep it back, but the physical presence of her closest friends made it impossible not to tell all. The hugs from Lily and Dylan settled Chloe’s fears that they would judge her harshly for her cowardice and complicity in Britney’s cruelty.



"Girlfriend, you stuck by us when it was life and death with those bikies out at Klontarie. You were just as brave as Daria or Steven. No one can ever take that away from you," reassured Lily.

"And with the rednecks before that - it was you and Lil that stopped us getting a kicking," added Dylan. "Once a Misfit, always a Misfit. And don't you ever forget it. Or you will see trouble. Daria will whip your ass."

Chloe could see both her friends loved her fiercely.

In other circumstances, having her two besties with her in her bedroom would be wonderful. Lily and Dylan were cheerfully envious of its unapologetic girly splendour. It was the best place in the world for the three *princesses* to catch up. That's what the three called themselves - but only within the safety of the Misfits. Lily loved feminine things. With her lissom Vietnamese figure and beautiful delicate features, she could go from drop-dead-gorgeous girl-woman to giggling princess playmate in seconds flat. Dylan was a boy most of the time, sometimes as annoyingly obtuse and fashion blind as any teenage boy, but like Chloe, he had an alter ego. He was a teen baby. His alter was a toddler baby girl, Deanne. She was like a baby sister to Chloe and Lily. But for now, the dresses and dolls were left aside.

"You can't tell Daria or the others. You can't! Promise me," Chloe told them. The others looked doubtful. By her own volition and common agreement, Daria was the leader of the Misfits. She and Lily lived with the same foster family in the suburbs.

"Look, what happens if she wants to come to the school and deck Britney. She's already had grief with the cops. This isn't the back blocks of Klontarie. If a foster kid with a rap sheet who's been



on the street took out a precious western suburbs princess all hell would break loose. Daria would end up banged up. It would blow up her life. Steven can be a hothead. He wouldn't stand by and let anything happen to Daria. And then he'd end up banged up too. The Misfits would be stuffed," said Chloe.

"Look I agree that Daria would want to deck the bitch. We know what she's like with anyone messing with the Misfits. But give her credit, she's smart. She'll figure out another way," said Lily. Dylan nodded.

"What if there isn't another way? The school is the heart of the western suburbs. The game is fixed for the likes of Britney Durack. They're a tribe. They'll protect their own, squash anyone who gets in the way, and then dress it up as right," said Chloe. Lily and Dylan looked at each other uncertainly.

"Look it doesn't feel right to keep the others in the dark. Daria's going to ask me when I get back to tonight. She's worried about you," said Lily.

"You think Daria's going to think you're a shit, don't you?" Dylan asked Chloe. The look on Chloe's face was all the answer he needed.

"When she hears I've helped a snotty, bitch princess make life a misery for a hockey-playing coloured girl who's not got any family here, she's going to think she was right about me in the first place. And she's not wrong, is she? You know what I was like before Klontarie. I was a bitch like Britney," said Chloe.

Daria the leader of the Misfits, was the daughter of Indian migrant parents with a passion for hockey.



"No. You're not like that bitch. You were messed up. Your mum and dad had split, and the snobby kids cut you loose. No one in the wide world had your back. You turned it around, girl. And you're wrong about Daria. Sure, she's going to speak her mind, but she's got your back. Mumma Bear would take on the world with one hand tied behind her back for any of us. She'll find out sooner or later and then she's going to be really pissed. You know she hates being kept in the dark," said Lily.

"I don't want her told, please. Not till I can work out what to do," insisted Chloe. Lily shrugged and nodded.

"If we're not telling Daria, then you gotta call Georgia," said Dylan. Lily nodded. Georgia, a middle-aged woman was the Misfits' mentor and social worker.

"It's nearly eight o'clock. She'll be drop-dead tired," said Chloe.

"It's Georgia. When you didn't return her calls, she called us, and we told her we were coming over. She'll be glad to hear from you," insisted Dylan.

Chloe called Georgia, who answered straight away. Chloe put her mobile on speaker and for the second time that night, poured her heart out. With a few perceptive questions, Georgia deduced that Britney's cruelty had punctured Chloe's sense of safety with her Sweet Lolita alter ego and that Chloe had cut herself off from her friends by not returning their calls.

"Sweetheart," Georgia told Chloe. "You are both a brave, strong young woman and a little princess. Never stop being proud of both parts of yourself. And never forget the Misfits and I love both parts of you. Now I want you to do something for me. Talk to



Lil and Dylan about scheduling some princess time and don't cut yourself off from those who love you. Make sure you always return their calls. Promise me."

Chloe felt her mood lift.

"What about Reshma and Britney?" queried Chloe, "I've made such a hash of it."

"Sweetheart, the two people who matter in all this are you and Reshma. You're both being bullied by the same girl. Bullies win by making everyone feel like they're alone. They lose their power when we refuse to be victims and we stand together. I know you want to make it right and I love you for it. You'll find a way to reach out to Reshma," said Georgia.

Georgia added as an afterthought, "If you think it'd help, I can speak to your mum."

Chloe gave an involuntary grimace. Chloe sensed her mother didn't like Georgia one bit, though she hid it under the usual western suburbs veneer of cool courtesy. Her Mother only tolerated Georgia in Chloe's life because of Georgia's role in Chloe's recovery. It was the same with the Misfits. Both Chloe and Georgia understood that Georgia's intervention with her mother was just as likely to backfire. Chloe's biggest fear was that her mother would ban her from seeing the Misfits and Georgia.

"Thanks, but no thanks," said Chloe.

By the time they finished talking, Chloe felt like it was still a long dark tunnel ahead, but there was a light at the end of it. Not for the first time, she wished Georgia was her mother. Chloe didn't voice the thought. The last time she'd said that, Georgia had looked

The Six Misfits

The Seventh Misfit



very stern and told her, “Cut your mother some slack. She’s just been through a divorce that probably feels like it’s ripped her heart out. The Princess inside her has been stomped on pretty hard. She wants to love you, but right now she can’t remember what love feels like. One day, you might find you’ve more in common than you think.”

Chloe loved Georgia, but that last remark was going to take some time to forgive. She didn’t want to ever have anything in common with her mother’s behaviour.

Mrs Georgia Jackson set down the phone, lit a cigarette, leant back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling.

She loved the Misfits, but they were the cause of more than a little of the grey in her otherwise dark wavy hair. She was a senior social worker with the Department of Community Services and a therapist. Last year on a shoestring budget, with the lukewarm approval of management, she had set up a therapy group for teenagers at risk because of their identity issues - the Six Misfits.

Daria da Costa the leader, was lesbian, Steven Kickett was Indigenous and gay, Lily Nguyen was transgender male to female, Martha McCorkell had been shunned from her fundamentalist family for being a tomboy, Dylan Lawson was a teen baby with a baby girl alter ego, and Chloe had a Sweet Lolita little princess alter ego. Georgia started doing some therapy with them, but they had really pulled themselves together when they had accidentally been left to their own devices at a remote Department campsite in the Wheatbelt. They had got themselves through some scrapes with rednecks and then outlaw bikies, guns and all. It had ended well



because the kids had shown smarts, guts and loyalty to each other. They were an impressive bunch and she was proud of them.

But as well as outlaw bikies, they'd also made her an outlaw social worker. The secrets she had willingly kept, to keep the Misfits safe and together would get her sacked. They were a bunch of minors, mostly kids in long-term foster care, some with a history of self-harm or violence. They had armed themselves with guns to fend off armed rednecks and outlaw bikies, without so much as a responsible adult in sight. To stop overzealous cops or juvenile courts stepping in and locking up some, or shutting down the therapy group, she had told her Department none of it. She had decided the Misfits were safer in each others' hands than in the malign clutches of the juvenile justice system or the bumbling bureaucracy of Social Services. She was content she had done right.

But if the Department found out it would freak everyone, from the Minister and Director General down. Georgia could just imagine the headlines, not to mention the questions in Parliament - from the dishonourable member for Plonksville to the Minister for Community Services.

"When did the Government decide that giving guns to fourteen-year-old wards of the state was a good idea? Will the Department of Community Services be holding joint exercises with the Army? Etcetera, etcetera."

She could smile grimly at the scenario in her head, but it would be anything but a laughing matter if it happened.

Similarly, none of the kids' parents or guardians had been told of the risks the Misfits had successfully navigated. The parents might be lousy at understanding their kids' struggles with identity,

The Six Misfits

The Seventh Misfit



but they would still get on their high horses. She could just imagine the lawsuits against the Department. Not to mention the calls for her head. It could only end with the therapy group being shut down and her being sacked.

It meant that Georgia had put her livelihood and her future in the Misfits' hands. She might as well be a Misfit herself. They were smart kids. They could join the dots. They knew that in keeping their secrets, she had broken all the rules. Georgia knew teenagers well and with anyone else other than the Misfits, she might as well have kissed her job goodbye. Even when they meant well, teenagers had issues with impulse control and shooting their mouths off. All it would take is for one of them to get angry and throw their adventures in the face of a parent or authority figure, and the cat would be out of the bag. That prospect arose every time one of the Misfits got into potential trouble with authority. Like now with Chloe, seemingly on a collision course with her elite school and perhaps, her wealthy mother. Navigating a sometimes less than kind world with their identity issues and secrets meant the Misfits and Georgia were often walking on a tightrope without a safety net.

But Georgia trusted the Misfits. She kept her fingers crossed, but she trusted them.

Georgia made no concession to the power the Misfits could have over her. She was too high minded for that. They were impressive kids, but she was still the responsible adult and if she needed to take a firm hand for their own good, she did it. The Misfits being the Misfits, they trusted her for that.



3. Redemption



It took Chloe a day to work up the courage to approach Reshma. Chloe still wasn't quite sure what she would say. She rehearsed the conversation over in her mind and it never ended well, but she knew she needed to make amends. Reshma was unexpectedly hard to find in the breaks. She seemed to appear right at the start of her classes and then disappear right afterwards.

Chloe almost managed to catch her quarry after their English class, but Reshma looked right through her. Chloe hesitated, struggling to find her words and by then, Reshma had walked right past her.

Near the end of the day, she managed to bail up Reshma on the walkway between the gym and one of the teaching blocks, without too many other girls in the vicinity.

"Can we talk, please?" Chloe blurted out, imploringly.



“Leave me alone,” said Reshma coldly. Chloe was horrified to see the hunted and haunted look in the other girl’s eyes.

“What have I done?” Chloe asked herself. Before she could gather herself Reshma had swept past in a rush.

Worse, when Chloe halted trying to collect her thoughts, she saw Britney watching her intently across the courtyard. She felt like a rabbit caught in the open being sized up by a hovering hawk. Like a rabbit, she froze. Britney walked over with a suspicious look on her face.

“You haven’t forgotten who your friends are, have you, Jelly Bean?” Britney asked. Chloe wanted to shout, ‘you’re not my friend’, but all she could manage was a frightened shake of the head as she fled to her next class.

The day finished without Chloe being able to talk to Reshma and she was dispirited by her failure. Strengthened, however, by the moral support from calls with Lily and Dylan that evening, she resolved to try again. She sent a text to Reshma saying ‘I am very sorry. Please, can we talk.’ She checked her phone constantly, but there was no reply by the beginning of school the next day. Chloe expected Reshma had probably blocked her texts.

The buzz amongst the Year 9s confirmed Chloe’s supposition that Reshma had not doxxed on Chloe or anyone else. Britney’s cohorts apparently still regarded Chloe as being on-side with them and talked freely in front of her. Instead of commanding admiration, Reshma’s silence seemed to stoke the cruelty of Britney’s clique. Reshma seemed to have withdrawn into herself. It seemed as if she was reluctant to involve the teachers. Chloe could understand that. There was no witness protection in Year 9 and Reshma was a



boarder who couldn't even escape the school after hours. Britney's clique, however, the hyenas in skirts, smelled blood and a wounded animal separated from the herd. Chloe was dismayed and scared to realise they were circling for a kill.

She had to find Reshma first.

Where was Reshma disappearing to during the lunch and recess breaks?

Chloe tried to put herself in the other girl's shoes. Reshma must have her own bolthole. Chloe's was in a little-frequented corner of the learning centre where she could look up fashion stuff on the high-speed wi-fi. Reshma was a swot, so Chloe scouted each floor of the learning centre. Nothing. She was late for the next class, but her excuse just slid her through without a demerit. Then it came to her. Reshma was really into hockey. Maybe she was taking refuge somewhere where she could practice by herself. At lunch, Chloe headed for the sports pavilion and fields. There was a grassy spot mostly hidden from view behind the changing rooms that was a good prospect.

As she was walking around the changing rooms, she heard the chatter of voices. The tone was derisive, baiting. She was too late. Chloe recoiled at the cruelty in the voices. She couldn't hear any answering response. Her step faltered. If she turned around now, no one would know she was ever there. And even if she butted in, what could she do? She was no fighter like Daria or Steven. She wasn't even fit and athletic. Britney and Monique could just push her to the ground and then she'd only be joining Reshma as a victim of the pack, not rescuing her. If it was one of the Misfits, or she was with the Misfits, it would be completely different. But it wasn't. All



she would achieve was Britney acting on the threat to send that photograph around Year 9. All the thoughts racing through her mind agreed it was best to turn around and walk away.

Chloe did the only thing she could manage. She stopped listening to her thoughts and let her legs do the thinking for her. She rounded the back corner of the changing rooms and saw what she expected to see. Britney, Monique and two other girls were in a semi-circle, trapping Reshma against the wall. They were jeering and baiting.

“Gonna blow yourself up now, suicide bomber?” was one of the taunts. Monique had a hockey stick and was bashing it viciously against the wall close to Reshma. Monique’s intent seemed to be to damage the stick and intimidate her victim, rather than hit Reshma. Reshma had tears rolling down her face but was otherwise silent.

Chloe froze, not knowing what to do. Everyone stopped and looked at her. Britney read Chloe’s face.

“Piss off, Jelly Bean!” Britney hissed viciously. Clutching the scratched and scrapped hockey stick, Monique turned towards Chloe.

“Piss off or you’re next, Baby Bait!” Monique told Chloe.

Suddenly Chloe knew what to do. She’d been in this situation before, with the Misfits. She sucked in a deep breath - and screamed - at the top of her voice.

Chloe wasn’t a swot nor was she a sporty type, but all the Misfits could attest to her hidden talent. If there was an Olympic event for piercingly shrill, attention-getting screaming, Chloe would