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Opening extract from

Now

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Now, at last.

It's arrived.

I can see it on the post office shelf.

Good on you Australia Post and your very kind pick-up counter that stores parcels instead of delivering them to grandfathers and spoiling their birthday surprises.

'That one there,' I say to the man behind the counter. 'The one with my name on it.'

I show him my homework exercise book to prove I'm me.

'Hmmm,' says the man. 'Zelda. Nice name that. Daringly exotic and a bit unusual.'

'Actually it belongs to someone else,' I say. 'I got it second-hand.'

'I know the feeling,' says the man.

He points to his name tag, which says *Elvis*.

We give each other sympathetic looks. Elvis hands me the padded post bag.

'There you go, second-hand Zelda,' he says. 'Hope it's something good.'

'It's for my grandfather,' I say. 'He's eighty tomorrow.'

Elvis says something about how he wishes he was eighty so he could retire. I sympathise, but I'm not completely listening. At last I'm holding Felix's present and I can't wait to give it to him. I can't wait for his big grin when he sees what it is.

Oops, I didn't mean to make an excited noise in the post office.

Calm down, Zelda, you're not a squeaky toy.

I thank Elvis and head for the door.

My phone beeps in my school bag. I know who it is without even looking. Poor Felix. He gets worried if I'm late home from school. He's not used to being my substitute parent.

I text him back.

on my way see ya soon

I hug his present to my chest and hurry out of the post office. If I run fast and don't faint in this heat or trip over and fall into any ditches, I can be home in fifteen minutes.

But I don't get far.

'Hey, shorty,' says an unfriendly voice. 'Where's the fire?'

Three girls are blocking the footpath. They're older than me, year eight or year nine. Their uniforms are creased like they get into lots of fights and never do any ironing. The toughest-looking

one's got a badge on her school bag that says *Carmody's Pest Removal.*

She's looking at me like I'm the pest.

I don't know why. I've never met these girls before.

Escape plans flash through my head.

I could climb up the mobile-phone tower on top of the post office or I could dash round the back of the video store and through the fence and hide in the forest or I could run into the bank and get a personal loan and buy a ticket to Africa on a flight that leaves in the next two or three seconds.

No, I couldn't.

'So,' says the pest-removal girl. 'Doctor Zelda, I presume?'

I try to work out what she means. And how she knows my name.

Adults are walking past, not even looking at us. Don't they realise that when three year nines are standing this close to a year six kid, it's not a social event?

'Hope we're not keeping you from a medical emergency, Doctor Zelda,' says the pest-removal girl.

Oh, OK. I get what she's on about. And it's my fault. A few days ago in class, when I was the new kid, Ms Canny asked me to tell everyone about my family. I told them about my parents being devoted doctors in Africa and my grandfather being a retired brilliant surgeon.

I shouldn't have said brilliant. It's true, Felix is brilliant, but it sounds like boasting. I should have said quite good or average.

'I'm on my way home,' I say to the girl. 'It's not a medical emergency.'

'Yes, it is,' says one of the other girls. She points to the pest-removal girl. 'Tonya needs medical attention. She's swallowed her gum.'

I smile to show them I know that's a joke.

They don't smile back.

'Come on,' says Tonya. 'Cure me.'

Lots of other kids walking home from school are stopping and staring now.

'Or is that stuff all lies?' says Tonya. 'About your family being Australia's top medical geniuses.'

'I never said that,' I reply.

'My little brother's in your class and he reckons you did,' says Tonya. 'Is that why you had to leave your last school, Doctor Zelda? Cause you make up stories?'

I don't know who her brother is, but he's wrong. He's also lucky. I wish I had an older sister. Then she could help me explain to these three bullies the real reason I had to change schools.

More kids are gathering. Tonya grins.

'Doctor Zelda's new in town,' she says to them. 'We're all very excited. She's a medical genius. She can cure zits and bed-wetting and do heart transplants.'

I try to leave.

Tonya's bully-girl mates drag me back.

'Not so fast, shorty,' says Tonya. 'What have you got there?'

I hold onto the padded post bag as tightly as I can. I might not be the biggest or toughest person in the world, but when I'm defending a precious birthday present I can be very determined.

'None of your business,' I say.

Tonya prods the post bag.

'You look swotty so it's probably a text book,' she says. 'Let me guess. *Boasting For Dummies*.'

A couple of kids snigger.

'It's for my grandfather,' I say. 'If you harm it, I'll tell the police you damaged the property of a senior citizen.'

Tonya's face goes a bit uncertain. I should get away while I can, but I don't.

'I'll tell the local paper as well,' I say. 'It'll be front-page news, an eighty-year-old man having his birthday present vandalised. And when I tell them who did it, your photos'll be on the front page too.'

I stop, out of breath. I'm taking a risk because I'm not sure if there is a local paper around here.

Tonya glances at the other kids. Some are looking uncomfortable. A few are moving away.

'What a storyteller,' says Tonya. 'Spellbinding. Mesmerising. I'm totally entranced. No I'm not.'

She grabs the post bag and yanks it out of my hands.

'Give it back,' I say, lunging at her.

‘Make me,’ says Tonya.

She ducks away and pushes past the kids and dances down the street. Her two mates go with her.

I run after them.

I know what I should be doing. I should be ringing the police.

But I haven’t got time for phone calls.

Inside that post bag is something very rare and precious and I think it’s going to make Felix very happy and I want it back now.