



INKFLOWER

Chapter Sample

SUZY ZAIL

'A powerful and necessary tale, beautifully told'

DANIELLE BINKS

For my father

Inkflower

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SUZY ZAIL



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CHAPTER 1

NOW

There are a mountain of lessons you learn at school. You won't find them in textbooks, and no teacher will ever quiz you about them, but you commit them to memory because you want to survive. Mr Prescott is looking at me, like I'm stupid enough to put up my hand. Putting up your hand to answer a teacher's question without being called on breaks at least a dozen of Glenrock Secondary's unspoken commandments including: Don't suck up to teachers. Never admit you've been listening. And don't be too smart. There are other lessons: Don't be too stupid. Don't ask stupid questions. Don't ask too many questions. Don't ask questions your teacher says is a *good question* or you'll wind up the teacher's pet. Don't speak in a foreign language or wear jeans from Big W or have a weird name. Don't try too hard to be cool (but *be* cool). Don't *take* notes in class – *pass* notes – and don't get caught, but if you do, eat the evidence.

So, no way am I going to put up my hand to answer a question. Especially a question about sex in Sex Ed class. Because there's no coming back from that.

"Abstinence," Mr Prescott sweeps a strand of dyed black hair back over his bald spot, "is the safest course of action." He stops at my desk and drums his fat fingers on the wood. "Anyone disagree?"

I want to die. His beady black eyes which were, moments ago, scanning the room for prey, have zeroed in on their target. Me. Possibly, the least qualified person to debate the point. I pick up a pen and write the word *abstinence* in my notepad, hoping that will satisfy him. I pretend that twenty-seven heads haven't turned to look at me, that twenty-seven sets of eyes aren't watching me sweat through the armpits of my shirt.

Prescott circles my desk, fingers steepled over his stomach, chins wobbling. "Good," he says, a screwed-in smile poking out from under his handlebar moustache. "Because if you have sexual relations, you'll get pregnant, and die." He doesn't actually say the last bit, but he wants to. Year 10 sex education is about *not* having sex and he wants to be sure we get the message.

He adds two more words to the board – *self-control* and *chastity* – and tells us that sexual intercourse should only occur with God's blessing. I don't believe in God, but I'm not about to tell *him* that. Just like I didn't admit to not needing one of the brick-shaped feminine hygiene products Mrs Worthington was handing out in Year 7 Sex Ed. (I got my period in Year 8, at a pool party. It was horrible.)

I focus on disappearing – *nothing to see here!* – and finally, after what seems like a decade, Mr Prescott returns to his desk, crossing his thick arms over his belly. “Any questions before the bell rings?” He chews on his moustache.

Paul’s hand shoots up. “Why don’t we just pick partners ... and practise?”

I catch Adam’s eye and he grins. The class erupts. It was hot in here to start with. There’s no air-conditioning in these cinder-block classrooms, but it’s not just the late November heat of an Aussie summer, it’s the heat of a mixed Sex Ed class and the heat coming off our sixteen-year-old bodies, especially Adam’s, which sparks on contact, spreading like a bushfire inside me whenever he’s near.

“Mr Marsh!” Prescott barks over the bell, shaking his finger to mark his words. “Principal’s office. Now.”



We grab our bags from our lockers and head to the oval.

“It was worth it, just to see Prescott’s face.” Paul joins us at the smoking pit behind the huge jacaranda.

“Youch!” Adam says, staring at the red strap marks on the back of Paul’s legs. “How many?”

“Seven.” Paul pulls a crumpled cigarette packet from his pocket.

“No thanks,” Adam says. No-one on the soccer team smokes. Paul shakes the packet at me.

“Dad would kill me,” I say. “He has this thing about smoke ...” He hates the smell. Cigarettes, bonfires, barbeques. Leaves the room if one of his friends lights up.

Deb waves away the offer. “Smoking’s bad for the skin.” So is the sun but Deb has yanked down the straps of her tank top so she doesn’t get tan lines. The final bell rings and Paul takes a last drag, letting out a ripple of white smoke. He tosses the butt into the pit, a sad hole some kid carved out in the dirt so the teachers wouldn’t find out half the year was addicted to nicotine.

“Sleepover Friday?” Deb sweeps a handful of purple flowers from the grass and tucks one behind her ear.

“Sure,” I say, hooking an arm around her shoulder. “But can we sleep at yours?”

Deb has a puppy. A yellow, floppy-eared labrador called Elle. As in L for Lowe. As in Rob Lowe. We’re not allowed a dog. She also has a double bed and a phone in her room. The walls are plastered with posters of a half-naked Christopher Atkins on the beach in *The Blue Lagoon*, and her mum serves burgers for dinner, which we wash down with Coke in front of the TV. Her mum is cool. She doesn’t fire questions at us about school and there’s no dad in the picture so there’s no let’s-all-sit-down-to-eat-together. There’s no ten o’clock-lights-out or you’re-too-young-to-read-*Cosmo*-magazine, so we get to stay up late, studying the sealed section’s bedroom tips to fill in the blanks.

I glance back at Adam, leaning against a tree, arms crossed, face sun-browned. He sees me watching and shoots me a smile.

“Call you later?”

“Sure,” I say, like it’s no big deal that I’m dating Adam Winter. It’s been two months but it still feels surreal. Adam Winter is the type of boy girls write songs about. The type of boy who reads books and likes girls who spend way too much time in their heads and who aren’t ready to have sex, not yet. A boy with electric green eyes and his own private voltage.

I want to stay, but if I’m not in the carpark when Dad gets here, he’ll park the Holden and start wandering the halls, calling for me. Dad doesn’t have a mouth, he has a megaphone, and an accent you can’t pin down, but it’s not from around here. I unhook my arm from Deb and race to the carpark.

“Hey, pineapple!” Dad waves me over. He’s not in the car. He’s standing on the steps, chatting to a shirtless man bent over a bush with a pair of pruning shears. “This is Bill,” Dad says, introducing me to a man in sagging overalls and a crumpled straw hat, “but you probably already know that.” He turns back to the man. “How long did you say you’ve been the gardener here?” The hat looks up.

“Ten years in December.” Bill squints in my direction. “Hi Bill,” I whisper-croak.



We walk to the car.

“No time!” Dad says, pulling me away from Elle, who’s straining at her leash for a pat.

“So where are we going?” I open the door and sink into the brown bucket seats of the hulking Holden. Dad reaches for the volume button on the stereo and cranks it up. Frank Sinatra croons through the open window.

“Dad?” I interrupt Frank. “I’ve got stacks of homework. Do I have to –?”

“It won’t take long.” Dad exits the carpark. “I’ve just got to smile for a few photos. It’s not every day I get to open an aged-care centre.”

“Mr Mayor!” A man in a pinstripe jacket waves from the steps of the Sunnyside Home for the Aged. There’s a plaque bearing Dad’s name and the date of last week’s official opening, 14 October 1982.

“Why don’t you come in?” Dad says, grabbing my backpack. “They have a canteen.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a two-dollar note. “Buy yourself something cold.”

The reporter points the way.

The hallways are long, the walls tiled and washed in fluorescent white. Every few steps there’s a door opening onto a room with somebody in it. Silver-haired women and toothless men with empty eyes and trembling hands.

A wrinkle of a woman stands behind the canteen glass. She wears a hairnet and is spooning mashed vegetables onto plates.

“You the mayor’s kid?” she says, when I step up to the

glass. “Bless, you look just like your father.”

“Thanks,” I say, pointing to a can of Fanta. “I get that a lot.”

My mother has movie-star looks – killer cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes and jet-black bouncy hair – but no, I look like my father.

I walk back through the sad corridor, past the high-care ward, which gives me the creeps with its moaning and shrieking and flashing lights, past men slumped in wheelchairs and nurses carrying bundled sheets. A woman in a silk slip, wearing a string of pearls, stops muttering when she sees me.

“Veronica!” She smiles a gummy smile and slips a spindly arm through mine. “I thought you’d forgotten your little sister’s birthday.”

I try to back away. “I’m not Ver–”

“Well, don’t just stand there, Ronni.” She shuffles on slippers. “Come help me do my hair.”

Wrinkles frame her mouth and eyes.

“You want me to do your hair?” I ask, peering into rooms for one that might be hers.

“Well, I can’t very well turn up to my seventeenth birthday party looking like this, especially since –” she brings her face close to mine, “– Robert has promised to come.” She points the pale pink tip of a manicured finger at a bed in a room with not much else in it. There’s a small sink with a single tea cup drying on the rack, an empty vase and a pink cardigan with pearl buttons folded neatly on the single bed. The room smells like a toilet.

“Here.” She pats the bed next to her. “Grab the brush. They’ll be here soon.”

“Who?” I ask, draping the cardigan over her shoulders. I don’t ever want to grow old, not this kind of lonely, dried-out old, when you talk to strangers as if they’re family and forget to get dressed.

“Well, Mother, Father ...” she rattles off names, “... and Robert of course.” She reaches for a small silver frame, bones creaking. “Handsome, isn’t he?” She shows off a man in a bathing suit. He has a curling moustache and slicked back hair. “I think he might propose today.”

“There you are!” Dad sweeps into the room, grinning. “I see you’ve met Mrs Montgomery. Nice cardigan, Edith.” Dad winks at me. “You ready to go?”

I should stay and help her pick the perfect outfit. But it’s all too awful: her faraway eyes, the smell of the sheets, the sterile walls, and her pencilled-in eyebrows that dance when she talks.

“Yep, let’s go.” I return the brush to the table and follow Dad out. “Just a sec,” I say, stopping at the door.

Edith looks up and smiles through watery eyes, her bony fingers still clutching the frame.

“The red dress would be nice,” I say, pointing to the closet, “and the sparkly shoes with the heel.”