They say that you can tell a lot about a person by the shoes on their feet. Now, I’ve never met the contingent of mysterious humans who make up they or them or even the masses, but I’d defy them to pin a label on me based solely on what I look like from the ankles down. Currently my feet are wearing Converse. Old-school high-tops. Once rust-coloured, now faded out to a malty pink. They epitomise coolness. The shoes, not me – let’s get that straight from the get-go. For decades this shoe has been worn like a badge of artistic rebellion, exuding comfort, creativity, effortlessness and confidence. A pair of shoes as equally at home on the feet of movie stars and millionaires as it is on back-alley midnight spray-can artists and trying-to-make-it singer/songwriters who have moved out of their parents’ homes and travelled halfway across the country to sit on a stool and strum their guitars in seedy Melbourne cafés just waiting to be noticed by someone half as interesting but slightly
more connected than they are. But my shoes don’t tell
the whole story about me. I didn’t break them in. Didn’t
wear them down like this. I picked these up on eBay for
twenty-two bucks. Up until a week ago I was wearing
Dunlop Volleys.

It’s a sad thing when two hunks of canvas have way
more going for them than I do. I got the sizing a little
wrong, and they kind of bunch up when I tighten them,
but although the chances are slim that my foot will
widen with age, they’re a start. Will they change my life?
It’s unlikely. Transform me into a respected member of
the school community to the point that I’m glanced
upon favourably by Candace McAllister? Probably not.
But hey, it’s almost summer. A new season is just around
the corner. And when you step into anything new, you
need to have good solid foundations. You need to start
from the ground up.
Chapter 2

Thanks for nothing,
Bryan Adams

Whether looking for answers to life’s big questions or just seeking a spoonful of standard garden-variety advice, some people will by default turn to their parents. Or their peers. Or the internet. Or the lyrics to a Taylor Swift song, hoping to extract the true meaning of existence. But me? I prefer to picture myself on the set of a TV game show. Before me is a huge grid, three squares wide, three down – like at the beginning of The Brady Bunch. But instead of Mike, Carol and the rest of the Brady posse, there’s a wall of nine random celebrities, each of them at my disposal. And I can ask them anything I like.

‘My next question is for eighties rocker Bryan Adams.’ His body of work is familiar to me. Everything from his early redneck-rockers to the endless stream of schmaltzy ballads he dripped out in the years that followed.
Bryan turns up a sleeve of his checked shirt and spins his chiselled jaw in my direction. ‘Bryan, can I call you Bryan?’ I ask. ‘Listen, Bryan, have you ever stopped to consider every screwed-up teenager who accidentally flicked on the radio to hear you belting out Summer of ’69, banging on about your forty-plus years ago perfect summer? You know – the band. The girl. The best days of your life? One upbeat guitar riff intro, a few good-old-days lyrics and pretty soon they start thinking, hey, maybe everything will be all right. Maybe good old Bryan’s onto something. Maybe somehow it’ll all work out, and I too will have the perfect summer. Well, thanks for freaking nothing, Bryan, because here’s what you’ve achieved with your stupid song – you’ve managed to set up every teenage kid on the planet for a lifetime of summers filled with complete and total disappointment – are you happy to own that?’


‘But it doesn’t stop there, Bryan Adams,’ I say. ‘Look at all the half-hour TV sitcoms and glossy magazine ads. Every PG movie ever made. Glee, for God’s sake – every one of them has tried to sell me on the idea that no matter what life throws at me, it will make me a better person. That everything will work out. That the average kids will have an uprising and eventually I too will be accepted and praised by the masses, and although my best friend is a massive dork, his dorkiness will be endearing enough that the hottest girl in my class will get to know him, then notice me, and within minutes she’ll dump her stereotypically meat-headed football captain boyfriend, and
together the two of us will skip along the beach every day at sunset, kiss like starved hyenas for hours without a breath, and laugh and love our way through a never-ending perfect summer dream sequence.’

I continue. ‘I don’t mean any disrespect but, for starters, you come from Canada. Canada – you know that vast wintery blob above America where it snows every day of the year? What could you possibly know about summer? Plus there was a guy in your band called ‘Jody’. That doesn’t even make sense. Third strike? A duet with a Spice Girl. And here you are giving me advice? I mean, what makes you even remotely eligible to be the spokesperson for the “perfect summer”?’

‘I guess the fact that I had one is a pretty good start,’ Bryan Adams responds.

And there it is. Even my own manifested celebrity is taunting me.

Now I know that if I lived in BryanAdams Land I could wake up every morning with complete confidence that from first light on the first day of December, the smattering of zits on my face would clear up, I’d be sporting abs of steel and Candace McAllister would instantly start sending me text messages that I’d be unlikely to share with my mother.

But unfortunately I don’t live in BryanAdams Land. I live here. On the fringes of suburbia, with no job, no girl and no idea of how to get close to anything that resembles the best summer of my life.

My best summer to date? It was right before high school. I’d been out of action for most of the holidays
with a broken left foot and had just hobbled out to de-mail the mailbox when she rode past.

Candace McAllister.

On her actual bike.

She makes a right turn from Travers Street, and I see her pedalling towards me, her golden hair sprouting from the back of her Strawberry Shortcake bike helmet, dancing like a trail of rose petals on the wind. She gently applies the back-pedal brake and gracefully glides to a stop right outside our house.

‘Hey,’ she says. She’s the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.

‘Hey,’ I reply, and I’ve already eclipsed my total-words-spoken-to-Candace-McAllister tally by one.

‘How’s your leg?’

‘It’s my foot.’

‘Oh, right. Your foot.’

‘It’s good.’ Awkward silence. I quickly think of something to fill the void. ‘Got plaster,’ I say and point downwards.

‘Mmm,’ she says. She nods. Then there’s more awkward silence. She nods again. More silence. And a little more. And then, finally, she speaks. ‘OK, well, I guess I’ll see you,’ and she reapplyes herself to her bike seat and rides off through the patchwork of light and shadows cast by the great jacarandas that line our street.

The tragic news is that, to date, this still ranks as one of the highlights of my entire life.

*
Fast forward a handful of years, and it’s now November twenty-ninth, two days before summer. Fourteen days until the school holidays kick in, and I can feel the buzz in the air – the optimism so tangible I can almost break off a chunk and pick my teeth with it. The school year is a few short days away from being just another bad memory, and my summer to-do list is firmly in place.

**One: Find a way to make Candace McAllister my girlfriend.** I realise that I’m punching way above my weight even suggesting it, but in a perfect world it would at least be a possibility. The truth is that the likelihood of Candace McAllister bypassing every single footballer, cricketer, chiselled surfer and good-looking academic kid in a six-suburb radius to select me as the one guy she devotes herself to sits somewhere between absolute zero and a chocolate Paddle Pop’s chance of surviving the summer in hell. So naturally there’s more than one item on my list. Here’s a slightly more attainable goal.

**Two: Have a conversation with Candace McAllister.** An actual conversation where she talks to me and I talk back, and maybe she flicks her hair and smiles a little. It doesn’t have to be a direct result of something I’ve said – just to see her smile up close, a smile for no one else but me that I can take away with me and add to my slideshow of Candace images to replay over and over in my mind. Maybe it’ll only last a few seconds, the conversation and the smile. Maybe just the span of one or two breaths, but in that space of time, to be the only thing that Candace McAllister is thinking about? That would be impressive. If I can get number two off
the ground, this summer will eclipse all summers, past or future.

No one else can see it coming — not the genius Bryan Adams or even my hit-and-miss psychic Nanna — but I’m quietly confident that something will happen these holidays. I can feel it in my bones. I’ve heard Mum say that if you feel something in your bones it’s usually a sign of early onset osteoporosis, but I find it hard to take a hundred per cent of what my mother says seriously. After all, she’s part of the two-person team who chose my name in the first place.

Starrphyre.

I know. My parents were complete idiots. I can understand the concept behind burdening a child with a name like Starrphyre if they were intergalactic space warriors and I was named after their dying home planet, or if my dad was a rock god from a tragic 1980s hair metal band, but that just wasn’t the case.

At least not entirely.

You see, my dad actually was a rock god. Of sorts. He played bass guitar for Waxxonn, a mildly successful screaming wall of noise that had one hit single in 1986 – ‘Nagasaki Miyagi’ – followed by an EP and one fairly ordinary album. There’s a framed photo hanging above the two-and-a-half-seater at his place, him with the other guys in the band all prancing about in spandex onesies, gelled-up mullets and more make-up than a gaggle of available grannies at a singles-only bingo night. To look at him now, after folding up his skin-tight rock-suit and hacking off his mullet years ago, nobody would ever suspect he was anything more than your
average nerdy accountant. See, it’s all right for him. A quick haircut and a change of clothes and he’s just like everyone else. But me? It won’t make a difference if I change my clothes, cut my hair or rip off my entire head; I’ll still be stuck with the stupidest name in the history of stupid names.

Starrphyre.

For the rest of my life, every single person I meet I’ll still have to introduce myself by saying, ‘Hi, I’m Starrphyre …’ And then follow that with something like, ‘Yeah, it is kind of a girly name, but actually … I’m a guy. I’m sixteen, have a haircut that makes me look like a nine-year-old girl, and am the proud owner of quite possibly the stupidest parents who ever walked the earth.’

Over the years I’ve had numerous conversations with my parents about my name – none of them shedding any fresh light, but as I sit here at the breakfast bar at 8.15 on a Monday morning, chugging down my second bowl of Wholegrain Heaven, the most recent conversation about my name is in full swing.

‘I just want to know,’ I screech, ‘on what planet is Starrphyre an acceptable name for … anything?’

‘But darling,’ Mum says, ‘you know the story – ancient magical stone possessing unlimited positive energy and power?’ She holds out her left hand to me, the unidentifiable stone in the ring on her finger failing to sparkle in the sunlight as I’m sure was her intention. ‘The Starrphyre is the most beautiful and rare of all the gems in the cosmic realm.’

‘Come on, Mum, that’s bollocks. You totally made it up!’
‘Made it up?’ She shoots me a fake shocked look.
‘How could you even suggest such a thing?’ she says.
‘I’m deeply hurt. But all things considered, I do suppose
you’re right.’

‘What?’ Rice milk splatters sprinkler-style from my
mouth, dotting my hands, the placemat and parts of my
shirt with small white circles of dairy-free goodness.

‘Well, you might as well know,’ she says. ‘We did
kind of make it up.’

‘Hold on, can we rewind a little?’ I say. ‘What are
you talking about? And why am I just hearing about this
now?’

‘I think you’re old enough to handle the truth,’ Mum
says, and she sits down in the chair opposite me. ‘You
have to understand, my love, that when you popped out
I was still medicated to the eyeballs and talking gibberish
at best. You were just so pink and cute and tiny – such
a magical little bundle – and I convinced your father
we had to give you a name that would reflect that, and
would continuously remind us every day of how special
you are to us.’

‘You could have hung a sign above my bed that
said, Special kid sleeps here. Slightly less damaging,
wouldn’t you think? You didn’t have to give me a joke
name.’

‘It’s no such thing. Come on, let’s hold hands and
say it together. Starrrrr-phyrrrrrrre,’ she says, teasing me
with her ridiculous rolling r’s.

‘It’s a crap name. Admit it. Admit to me that you
gave me a crap name!’

‘I won’t do anything of the sort.’
‘It’s pathetic, you know it is.’
‘It’s a beautiful name.’
‘Beautiful? Jeez, Mum, even a unicorn would get the crap kicked out of it if its name was Starrphyre.’
‘Well, what would you prefer to be called?’
‘Like I have a choice.’
‘No,’ she says. ‘I’ll admit defeat. Obviously you know best. I mean, it’s not like for forty and a half weeks I let you grow inside my body, carried you in my uterus and then squeezed you down my very own birth canal …’
‘Eew, God, Mum, don’t say birth canal.’
‘What then? Shall I use the other word? Would you prefer me to say …’
‘Aaaaaaaaah-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-I’m-not-listening!!!’
And … hold it right there. At this point I just have to say that mothers who talk about their own personal female body parts to their teenage sons are just wrong. So very, very wrong.
‘Oh, and by the way,’ Mum calls as she heads out the door, keys jingling chirpily, ‘Warren’s moving in.’
‘What?’
‘Oh, it’s not for long, darling.’ And she’s still walking away. ‘Turns out the place he was renting sold. Pretty quickly, from all accounts.’
‘But …’
‘I know it’s not ideal, but it’s only until the new year. Just push your bed over against the wall. You know, make some room. He’ll be here around 4.30. Don’t be late for school. Byehee.’
‘My next question is for the gentleman in the centre square.’

The neon strip around the perimeter of square number five flickers from a dull maroon to a radiant, glowing red, and the bald, moustached American occupying the square readies himself for a response.

‘Doctor Phil, I’m about to face an existence where I have to share a room with my sister’s meathead boyfriend, Warren the Tool. Being that he’s a testosterone-packed alpha-male boofhead, what effect do you see that experience having on my emotional growth and general wellbeing?’

Doctor Phil, TV therapist and authority on all situations relating to human behaviour, leans in to his microphone and lets his slow Southern drawl loose. ‘Now what you have here, young man, is a potentially dangerous environment. He’s going to establish himself as top dog, right from the word go. Anything that’s yours will soon be his. Your room will be his room. But the real danger is in the risk of you not only losing ownership of your room and your general possessions, but also losing ownership of yourself.’


He hasn’t had his whooping round of applause yet, so Dr Phil continues. ‘You see, if you allow him to take you away from you, by bullying or by whatever means he sees fit, you’re going to fail to have an identity. Not only that, you’ll have condoned his bullying patterns, accepted those terms, and that’s just not an option.’

‘So how do I …?’

‘You’ve gotta stand up to him from the start, young
man. Even before he sets his bags down, establish the ground rules—your terms, and declare your territory and let him know that you won’t take any of his crap.’ Applause follows as expected. Big American applause.

Suddenly, without invitation, TV craft-maker/cookie-baker Martha Stewart chimes in, and square number three, top right, neons into gear.

‘Whenever I get a new dog, now I live with a number of dogs in my house, anyone here live with dogs?’ More applause. Americans must have hands of steel. ‘Now the first thing I do when I bring a new dog into my home is I lean into it … and this might surprise you, but I lean in really close and I bite it on the ear. I’m not kidding. I actually take the dog’s ear, put it in my mouth and I bite down on it.’ A quick pan reveals an audience of shocked faces. ‘I don’t draw blood, oh, gosh no, but a solid bite on the ear is enough to let that dog know who’s in charge. And they never forget it.’ Applause. Big time.

‘So,’ I ask, ‘what if Warren the Tool walks in this afternoon and straightaway bites me on the ear?’

‘Then,’ Doctor Phil says, taking back his position of authority, ‘then, young man, you’re well and truly in the poop.’
Chapter 3

Princess Leia and Chewbacca hook up

It’s six minutes before first bell and I drop my bag. It joins the pile of mistreated backpacks growing beside the long row of silver lunch seats hugging the edge of Block B – English block – all the way from the start of the quadrangle to the covered walkway that leads off to the library, the science labs and the rooms where the dumb kids bang nails into bits of wood. Ben Hemmerling has been occupying our seat since eight o’clock. The same silver seat we’ve been occupying since we found ourselves as the only people with a pair of XY chromosomes in the whole of our grade seven home ec class.

‘I’ve almost taken out the boss on the gatekeeper level,’ Ben says, looking up from his phone for a microsecond. ‘Three warrior keys and the skull-token of Wrathbah to go and the pathway to the Kingdom of Glory will be unlocked.’
I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about. He might as well have pulled a Lithuanian dictionary on me and started up a game of ‘What’s this word mean?’.

‘Dude, once I enter the Kingdom of Glory, the hot queen is going to be on me like a fat kid on a cake,’ he says, fingers still pressing and swiping at the screen. ‘The hot queen, man.’

‘I have no interest in your stupid game, Hemmo,’ I say to Ben. ‘Never have, never will.’

‘Dude, you’re so missing out.’

I look at him, hunched over his miniature gaming console, eyes barely a fist-thickness from the screen, oblivious to the year twelve girls in netball skirts who are currently slinking by.

‘Yeah, Hemmo, I’m missing out.’

I turn my face to the quadrangle, but before my eyes can focus, there’s a shocking smack to the side of my head. I clutch at the burning sensation in the space between my cheekbone and my ear. It feels like someone walked up to me and punched me, point blank, but when I look down, I see a tennis ball, rolling into hiding under the silver seat.

‘You should peg it back at that kid’s head,’ Hemmo says. ‘That little year eighter, see him? He looks like he’s about nine. Here, give it to me. I’ll chuck it at him.’ But I don’t. It really didn’t hit me that hard and there’s a chance he didn’t even mean it. I bend down, reach under the lunch seat, pick up the ball and throw it back to the random year eighter, who’s still laughing.

Polar Fleece Reece joins us. Bailey, too, and their backpacks instantly merge with the pile.
‘Guys, she came into work on Saturday,’ says Reece, who looks like he’s earned too many excitement tokens, and may actually explode at any second.

‘Who did?’ asks Hemmo.

‘Your mother, who do you think?’ says Reece. ‘Candace Mc-freaking-Allister.’

‘Holy crap, are you serious?’

‘Wow, Candace McAllister,’ says Bailey. ‘She’s pretty.’

‘Pretty freaking hot is what she is,’ Reece says. ‘And she came into my store!’

Reece works weekends and Thursday nights at Pant-R-Us, a discount fashion store that specialises in – you guessed it – pants. Or pant. It’s run by a husband and wife team with a limited grasp of the English language and no grasp at all on the concept of store naming. And they’re also Reece’s parents.

They talk about her, Candace McAllister, as if she’s the living child of Princess Leia and Chewbacca, or a one-off life-size inflatable Gollum personally autographed by Peter Jackson and Tolkein. It’s like she’s the Holy Grail of sought-after physical objects. Like she’s on a golden pedestal and they’re looking at her from behind safety glass as thick as their heads. But they don’t know her. Not as a person. Not like I do. Well, I don’t technically know her, I mean, we’ve never really hung out together. But I have spoken to her. That time on the bike when I was twelve. And at the end of last term when she told me to drop dead, but that was clearly a misunderstanding. To me, she’s more than just someone to idolise or drool over. She’s more than that. She’s … well,
she’s perfect. Wait, is *perfect* too strong a word? I guess for her not to be perfect, she’d need to have at least one identifiable fault. So far I haven’t come across it, so until I do, perfect she is.

‘And what did you say to her? Did you talk to her? Did you say anything to her?’ Hemmo asks. ‘What did you say to her?’ His position in this scenario is that if someone he’s friends with actually talks to Candace McAllister, then he’s one degree of separation closer to the hottest girl in our grade.

‘Well, Mum pounced on her as soon as she walked in,’ Reece explains. ‘But I was behind the counter, pressing buttons on the register. You know, trying to look cool. I don’t even know what I was pressing. Anyway, she comes over to me, right up to the counter, and she picks up a hairclip.’

‘You sell hairclips?’ I ask. ‘I thought it was just pant.’

‘Hairclips too,’ Reece says.

‘What kind?’

‘Material ribbons attached to silver clips. They come in all different patterns. Limited fabric runs. They’re all handmade in Plumpton. Some lady does them, she’s semi-retired, I think.’

‘Woah. You know a lot about hairclips, Reecey.’

‘I have to. It’s my job.’

‘So was she impressed with your unnatural knowledge of head accessories? What did she say?’ Bailey asks.

‘Well, she rocks up to the counter, obviously drawn to me, and she picks one of the hairclips up. Yellow-lime with spots. And she says, “How much is this?”’

‘And what did you say?’
‘I said, “Hairclips.”’
‘That was dumb,’ says Hemmo.
‘I know, but who cares, right? Then she says, “Are they for your hair?”’
‘And I say, “What’s up?”’
‘Idiot.’
‘I know, but before I realise what’s going on she’s turned around and she’s walking out the door, moving onto the next shop.’
‘So then what?’
‘So I see her as she’s walking out and I don’t want it to be over. I mean, this is Candace McAllister in my store, and I’m watching her walk out, and it’s simultaneously one of the most soul-destroying and one of the most spectacular things I’ve ever seen and I just watch her, step by step, as she’s walking away but I don’t want it to be over, so, and get this, I jump over the counter.’
‘Seriously?’
‘Totally,’ Reece says. ‘I go full Starsky and Hutch over the counter and I knock a pile of pamphlets or whatever onto the floor, but I don’t stop to pick them up and Mum’s freaking out, thinking I’ve gone nuts, but I don’t care, I just keep moving ’cos it’s Candace McAllister, and I’ve landed funny on the floor, kind of stumbled and I might have done my ankle, so I’m half crawl-running, and cheap-ass pants are hitting me in the face, but I make it to the front of the store. I look out into the mall and I see her heading into, get this, Bra Bazaar, and I follow her all the way to the bra shop.’

No one’s saying a word. Candace McAllister and bras. Nothing further needs to be said.
‘And I’m standing there in the doorway of the bra shop, and I’m puffing and wheezing and I catch my breath just a bit, just enough to yell out to her.’

‘Yell?’ I ask. ‘You yell at her?’

Reece nods.

‘What the hell do you yell at her?’

‘I yell, “Thank you for shopping at Pant-R-Us.” She doesn’t turn around, but I know she heard me. Hell, everyone heard me. Thanks for shopping at Pant-R-Us.’

There are high-fives all round. Polar Fleece Reece has just earned legendary status. He’s the first in our group to actually speak to Candace McAllister since high school began.

The pathway to the Kingdom of Glory has been unlocked.