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INVISIBLE BOYS

HOLDEN SHEPPARD

FREMANTLE PRESS

For you,
if you have ever been invisible
or still are.

1

TIME BOMB

Charlie

THERE ARE TWO WAYS out of this poxy shithole of a town: you leave in a blaze of glory and never look back, or you die.

I don't want to die.

I've wanted the blaze of glory option since I was a little kid.

★★★

When I was ten I used to wake up on Saturday mornings and run to the lounge room to watch cartoons. We'd had a flat screen once, but Dad sold it at Cash Converters for rent money. We ended up with this piece of crap boxy TV with a wonky aerial held together with Blu Tack and lacky bands.

One morning, I got to the lounge and Dad was already sitting on the sofa watching something loud. He was hunched forward, nursing a king brown of Emu Export, eyes hanging out of his head as he squinted against the slats of sunlight creeping through the venetians. I'd never seen him drunk before, and I suppose

that was the start of everything going wrong, but at the time I just remember seeing him as a man instead of as my dad. I thought he looked damn cool.

'Charlie, look at that,' he said. 'That's what it means to stick your middle finger up at the world.'

He was watching *Rage*. It was a music video of some 90s punk band – I think it was Rancid. I remember being taken by their mohawks, coloured hair, tattoos, piercings and clothes. The way they dressed was *rad*. They looked like a feral army that marched to its own raging drum.

'Don't they get in trouble at work?' I said.

Dad chuckled, and took a swig of beer like he had to wash something bitter down his throat. 'They don't have to work, kid,' he said. 'They don't have to do anything they don't want to. They make punk music. They do what they want, when they want. That's the dream, buddy.'

That was the Saturday morning I stopped watching cartoons. For the next year or so, I'd get up and watch old music videos on *Rage* with Dad as he either sobered up or drank straight through his impending hangover, depending on how his week had gone. And when he got his compo payout for his leg getting crushed by that machine, we upgraded to cable and we could watch music videos whenever we wanted, from just about every era and genre. That was the best year. Dad told me all this stuff I never knew he knew, about all the punk bands, and about grunge, and metal, and even 70s glam rock like Sweet and T-Rex. And he told me all this stuff you'd never get told at school, like how the government tries to keep everyone poor so the one percent of rich people keep all the money.

One morning, after watching the film clip for Green Day's "American Idiot", with Billie Joe Armstrong leaping into the air with his guitar and swaggering around like the god of punk, I said to Dad, 'I wanna do that. I wanna be like him.'

'Don't just *want* to be him,' Dad said at once, swirling his Woodstock and Coke. 'Be him. *Do it*, buddy. Only you can make it happen.'

After that day, he started giving me jobs to do around the house in exchange for a two-dollar coin here and there. For a few months, I pulled weeds, brushed away spider webs, helped fix the barbeque, took the rubbish out, and fed the dog (until we had to put her down). I even emptied Mum's ashtray so she wouldn't have to miss a second of *Neighbours* (or get off her fat arse, which was the real issue). And Dad was always good for the payments: for each chore, I got a gold coin, which I clinked into an old Peters ice cream container.

When I was eleven, Dad took me to the only shop in Geraldton that sold guitars and I bought my first cheap-arse Gibson.

I knew then, the first day I started tightening the strings and playing out-of-tune Smoke on the Water, that this was my way out. My ticket to something bigger: to becoming the next Billie Joe Armstrong or Dexter Holland or maybe Dave Grohl. This would be my blaze of glory.

★★★

After about a year, our morning video marathons stopped. More often than not, Dad was passed out on the couch instead of conscious. I still sat next to his snoring carcass and watched the videos anyway.

And even without him egging me on anymore, I kept on with the guitar, strumming and practising, until I was good enough.

At the start of year ten, the lead guitarist of a local teen party band – Acid Rose – moved to Perth. I auditioned to replace him and I got the gig. Acid Rose is my whole life now. I do lead guitar and backing vocals; Hannah sings and plays bass; and Rocky is our skinsman. If I could just get them to start working on originals, we could put an EP together, then fly to Melbourne and get it in the face of some manager or label or something.

But Hannah and Rocky don't seem to get how big we could be if we actually *tried*.

Now that we're in year eleven, we only have one class together – Biology – which sucks big hairy donkey balls, because we hardly get any time to talk or even rehearse anymore. We make a point of sitting up the back in Bio, so we can use the class as an unofficial band meeting.

On Tuesday we have Bio last period, and Hannah rocks up in a fucking *mood*. Her face is red and blotchy and pouty and she won't look me or Rocky in the eye as she pushes her stool out and slumps down on it. She pretends to listen to Mr Capaldi going on about the mouse dissection, which is Hannah-speak for, 'Aren't you going to ask me why I'm ignoring you?'

I can't be arsed taking the bait this time, but Rocky does.

'Is this about the Facebook thing?' he asks, pressing a chewed pen lid into the sleeve of her hoodie to make her notice him. 'Richelle's comment?'

'She is such a fucking moll,' Hannah seethes, staring with dead eyes at the whiteboard as Mr Capaldi shows us how to cut a mouse open. 'As if she's never dyed her hair before, like, why

try to make me a laughing stock for actually trying something different? Just because I'm not a mainstream basic bitch like her.'

'It looks fresh,' Rocky says, running a hand over his short buzz cut as if reassuring himself that his own hair is way better than hers.

Hannah pouts and flicks her hair as she faces me. 'Does it, Charlie? What do you think?'

If I was to be completely honest, I'd say Hannah's new hair – a washed-out green rinse cut into an unfashionable bob – makes her look like an overweight, off-brand Lady Gaga who never got famous.

'It's original,' I say. 'It's very you.'

'Aw,' Hannah says, tucking some of that ugly-arse hair behind her ear.

'Anyway, forget Richelle,' I say. 'Can we talk about the EP?'

'What's to talk about?' Hannah says, whipping out a red pen and doodling something on my notebook. 'Aren't we just in the ideas stage?'

'Well, I've already written my two songs, so I thought I'd see if you guys had, too?'

Hannah screws up her nose. 'Are you still writing that grunge shit?'

'Grunge isn't shit.'

'Oh, please! Charlie, grunge isn't an actual subculture like punk, okay? Grunge died with Nirvana. Kurt Cobain was dead and buried before we were born! Move on, man.'

'Okay, first of all, Kurt Cobain was cremated, not buried. And secondly, you'd already know that if you actually read my blog, which you obviously didn't.'

'Grunge is off brand,' Hannah says. 'Acid Rose is a party band. Pop-rock only.'

It's always the same conversation.

'Rocky – c'mon,' I say, nudging him.

He's in the middle of pulling a face for a sneaky selfie, his cubic zirconia stud earrings a perfect contrast to his brown skin. But the moment his phone camera clicks, he shakes his head.

'Nah, man. I've been thinking, you know, maybe we should have more of an electro influence to our stuff. I've been listening to a lot of trip hop lately.'

I kick the stool in front of me; Piera O'Dell flinches.

'Sure,' I say. 'Let's make a punk-grunge-pop-rock-trip-hop EP and see how that goes down.'

Rocky grins, adding a filter to his selfie. 'Well, I bet nobody's ever done it before.'

'Guys, shut up,' Hannah hisses.

It's too late: Mr Capaldi is at our bench; damn Piera must've dobbed on me for kicking her chair.

'Charlie Roth,' he says, with a faux-smile. 'Imagine my surprise at having to interrupt my teaching yet again to deal with you.'

He puts his hands in his pockets; I swear he thinks it makes him more "street" and "approachable" but it just makes him look like a pussy who doesn't know what to do with his hands.

'Well, you still haven't answered my question from RE class, sir.'

'That's because it was inappropriate, Charlie.'

Rocky punches me in the arm. 'Go on. What'd you ask him, dude?'

'He taught us that gay guys can't have sex, like, ever. What were the words your textbook used, sir?'

Mr Capaldi's lips are thin and snakelike. '*Homosexuals are called to lead chaste lives*, Charlie. It's the Catholic Church's position, not mine.'

'So, I asked him if they all die of blue balls, then,' I tell Rocky. 'They would, wouldn't they?'

Rocky pisses himself laughing. Mr Capaldi finally takes his hands out of his pockets. Street Capaldi is over.

'Get to work,' he says. 'The instructions are on the board.'

'But sir, we're rock stars,' I say. 'When are we ever going to need to know this crap?'

'Well, maybe becoming a rock star won't be as easy as you think.'

'You dissing me, sir?'

'I wouldn't dream of it, Charlie. I'm just suggesting that the dreams you have when you're sixteen might not necessarily come true.'

'I guess that's true, sir. I mean, just look at *your* life.'

Capaldi's face doesn't go black, like some teachers when I push them past their breaking point; he just looks hurt for a second. Bastard must be way over forty, still single, sad little brown tie over his yellow shirt, driving his shitbox late 90s sedan to school each morning. Oh yeah, I struck a nerve.

I love it when I strike nerves.

'That's it,' he snaps. 'I'm splitting you up. Charlie, come with me.'

The teachers at this school love to hate me. I'm not exaggerating that, or playing the victim. I get detention at least once a week, as if that's gonna stop me saying what I want. One arvo, Mr Meder sat me at a desk outside the staffroom after school and made me write lines for an hour. I think the other teachers didn't know I was there, or they forgot, because they started talking

more casually than I've ever heard teachers speak, joking around and playing 'would you rather' games and stuff.

Then I heard Mrs Wu say to Mr Capaldi, 'Okay, here's a good one for you, Joe. Be honest, would you rather get punched in the face every single day for the rest of your life, or have Charlie Roth in your class for a year?'

The whole group of teachers laughed.

Mr Capaldi said, 'I think I'd take secret option C: kill myself.'

That got a bigger laugh.

Then I heard Mr Meder whisper to them all. The laughter stopped, but they never came out to say anything to me.

Mr Capaldi doesn't hate me as much as some of the other teachers, but he does like to split me off from Hannah and Rocky every chance he gets. He walks me through the class, and I realise that most of the other groups are actually doing the experiment – with varying results. Squares like Sabrina Sefton have their safety glasses on and are following the diagram on the blackboard with pinpoint accuracy. The popular girls, with their shirt sleeves rolled up, are taking photos of the dead vermin and laughing. The footy jocks, with their shirts untucked, have already slashed the mice open; as I walk past, Hammer impales what looks like a mouse liver onto the end of a scalpel and flicks it across the table at Razor. Stupid meatheads.

But any one of them would be preferable to work with than the ultimate destination Capaldi has in mind for me: Zeke Calogero.

Zeke is literally the embodiment of everything I hate about this school. He's the classic nerd, and I don't just mean that he gets top marks. He's quiet, shy, and says sorry every five fucking seconds, even when he hasn't done anything wrong. I don't

dislike him because he's smarter than everyone else in the room; I dislike him because he's so weak. In every social situation it's like he's flattening himself against the walls, trying to melt into them and disappear.

'Zeke, you can work with Charlie on this,' Capaldi says. 'Pedro, come and work with Hannah and Rocky.'

Pudgy Pedro exchanges a look with Zeke and slouches off.

As soon as Capaldi's gone, I nudge Zeke in the shoulder blades. 'You're gonna do all the work for me, right?'

'It's all good,' he says.

I heard him say the same thing once in the change room. Razor grabbed his nipple and squeezed it and asked if he could get milk out of Zeke's udders. Poor bastard has the worst set of manboobs you've ever seen, which is weird since he's not even that chubby. But when I yelled at Razor to leave him alone – and he did, because people think I'm a psycho – Razor pretended it was all a big joke. And there was Zeke, forcing a smile and saying, 'It's all good.'

Like I say: he's weak.

'Bet you've never seen a dead animal before,' I say.

'I have, actually,' Zeke says. 'We get a lot of field mice at home. We live up near the river.'

'That's festy,' I tell him. I peer at the dead mouse. 'Stupid bugger shouldn't've got himself caught, should he?'

The conversation doesn't get any better from there. Zeke is like Clark Kent, but without the interesting double life.

The bell goes at three. Me, Hannah and Rocky walk together as far as the car park, then they head for the bus and I jump on my scooter. I never go home after school – the less time I spend

around Mum and Fitzy, the better – so I head into town.

My favourite place to kill time is kind of random: the roof of the old primary school near the middle of town. They shut it down a few years back because they found asbestos in one of the classrooms. It's the best hideout place because it's abandoned so nobody will ever tell me to move on. I spend at least an hour here every day. Jump the wire fence, climb up to the roof using the drainpipe as a foothold, then sit up on the red roof tiles and watch the main streets of Geraldton unfold beneath me.

I feel better when I can watch the town from a distance. Watch people park for two seconds in the street, grab the one thing they need from one shop then race home, where they'll wonder why so many shopfronts are boarded up and decrepit. Hear the waves breaking on the town beach, even over the jeers and shouts of the labourers in the beer gardens nearby. Smell the sea salt mingling with the warm odour of hot bread from the Vietnamese bakery. When I'm down there, in it with the rest of the town, it drives me stir-crazy, how small everything is. But up here on the roof, alone, it makes me feel like I'm not a part of it. Like I'm watching from far away, the way I'll see it when I come back and visit when I'm famous one day.

It never takes long for me to get busy doing what I actually come here to do, though.

I sprawl out on my back, my scratched-up, servo-brand sunnies filtering the hot February sun as I whip out my phone, turn the GPS on and login to The App. The one I gravitate to at least one night a week, if not more.

This arvo, the prospects are pretty much the same as every other time. There are nine active users within a fifty-k radius. None of

their profile pictures show faces, except for one or two brave-ish blokes with wrap-around Oakleys or dirt bike helmets on. One guy is just a set of abs. Another guy is a can of Emu Export.

I while away an hour or so chatting to guys who flake out before a bubble pops up on my phone out of the blue.

Hey m8 new on here hows it goin

Huh. I actually haven't seen this dude around before. I type back pretty fast.

Good man. Horny as. Wot u lookin for?

His thumbs must be like lightning on his phone screen.

some fun right now u keen?

Some people have a lot of qualities they look for in a hook-up: looks, preferred positions, whatever. For me, it boils down to one question at this point.

Can u host?

A long pause, and then:

u defo 18 yeah?

Yeah, man, I lie.

A shorter pause.

can host later tonight … come over my place after 8pm

★★★

There's something wrong with his house.

My guts lurch before I even get off the scooter. It's not the house itself: it's a 90s cream-brick situation on a quarter-acre block and feels safe enough. Nothing like the seedy crack-den place I ended up in last weekend.

No – the lurch comes when the scooter's headlight passes over

a weedy lawn strewn with a couple of kids' tricycles and a sun-bleached plastic chair painted with a My Little Pony pattern.

This is a *home*.

I pull into the brick-paved driveway, flick the kickstand out and shut the ignition off. The porch light blazes to life straight away. He's been waiting for me.

The door opens before I'm within arm's length of the Fremantle Dockers doorbell.

'Quickly,' he whispers, holding the door open about six inches. I can't even see him.

I shrink my body into itself and press through the sliver of an opening. The guy watches me struggle, but he doesn't open it any wider. Prick.

He shuts the door behind me and twists a key in the deadbolt.

'Locking me in, huh?' I say, partly to lighten the mood, because his face looks about as grim as the reaper. But mostly because it's weird as shit to be locked in a stranger's house.

The guy stares straight at me with dead eyes. The whites are bloodshot and the irises are grey. Do his eyes always look like this? Is that why he wore a dirt bike helmet in his profile pic? Because his fucked-up eyes make him look possessed by a demon?

Or maybe he's on something, because in response to my comment, he sways to the side on a more precarious angle than the Leaning Tower and mutters, 'Lock the door if I want to, mate.' He sways to the other side. 'Don't lock it if I don't want to.' He somehow keeps his feet and tractor-beams me with his dead eyes. 'Is it my house or your house?'

I swallow. 'Your house. My bad. Didn't mean to be rude.'

He bares his teeth in what promises to be a smile but morphs

into a grimace. His chompers are yellow, and he looks too young for that. Maybe late thirties. Little beer gut but not yet out of waistband control. Bald spot flanked by limp strands of brown hair; no attempt at coverage.

'I'm Charlie, anyway,' I say, holding my hand out. We're just standing a couple of feet apart in his dingy entry and it's awkward as hell.

The guy sandwiches my hand in his clammy palms. He yanks my arm, but there's no strength behind his handshake. His muscles are as limp as his hair.

'What's your name?' I prompt him. We're still shaking hands. His eyes are glassy.

'Doesn't matter,' he says. 'Come on. Bedroom's this way.'

His sweaty fingers entwine with mine, and I let them.

He leads me into the main part of the house. It looks like the perfect suburban family home – a week after the perfect suburban family fell apart. The mahogany table has a black glass vase in the centre of it; its occupants, gerberas, I think, are dead, their colour long gone. There's an espresso machine on the granite bench, its water reservoir empty except for droplets of condensation. The armchairs in front of the LED screen are reclined but nobody's laying on them. There's a bong on the kitchen sink, fast-food wrappers overflowing from beneath the armchairs and empty cans of pre-mix all over the kids' play mat.

The guy lets my hand go and opens the fridge. I cop a whiff of off milk.

'Beer or bourbon?' he asks.

'Oh. Nothing.'

'Good one. What do you want?'

'No, really. I'm good.'

The dead eyes fix on me. 'You can do whatever you want here.'

'I'm not a big drinker.'

He sways again and steadies himself on the fridge door. 'Weak as piss. When I was your age I woulda done anything for free grog. You really are a fruitcake, aren't ya?'

He takes two cans out and passes one to me.

'I'm not a fruitcake,' I tell him, cracking the can in defiance. The gases that waft into my nostrils smell like the varnish we use in woodwork class.

'How many straight blokes paint their nails?' He spills half his drink as he tries and fails to wrap his lips around the top of the can, like a baby trying to suckle on its father's nipple.

'It's not a gay thing,' I tell him. 'They're painted black. It's a punk thing. I'm in a band.'

He peers at me in the semi-darkness. 'Oh, yeah. Your hair. I see it now.'

I brush my fringe out of my eyes. 'Why would you call me a fruitcake if you're gay, too?'

He takes another swig of bourbon. His stained white T-shirt acquires a new streak of brown.

'I'm not,' he says, wiping his mouth. 'I'm straight.'

'But how –'

'You talk too much. Come to bed.'

He leads me down a passage. The hallway is decorated with girly stuff: a block-mounted poster says 'Live, laugh, love'; a blown-up photo of a couple on their wedding day with block letters 'Kevin & Alicia' in the background (ha! got your name, wanker); and a professional portrait of this guy with a strong-

jawed, blonde-haired woman and two little blonde girls.

I yank my hand out of Kevin's just as we get to the bedroom.

'What now?' he grumbles, nudging the door open with his foot.

'These.' I tap the glass of one of the family photos. 'You have kids.'

'Don't look at those.'

'But – are you still married?'

'How does that affect you?'

Without meaning to, my fists clench. The can crinkles; cold alcohol fizzes over my knuckles and drips onto the vinyl.

'Because cheating on someone is the most fuckedest thing you can do.'

Kevin ogles me, still glassy-eyed.

'Well, tell my wife, mate. She's the one who took off with me apprentice.'

'Oh. Right.' I suck the fizzy stuff off my fingers. It tastes like death. 'Sorry. That's horrible. Are you okay?'

He gapes at me. 'What are you on about? Just get into bed.'

The bedroom is dirtier than the rest of the house. As well as the cans and half-eaten corpses of hamburgers, there's dirty clothes layering every inch of the floor. Half the drawers are open, with women's clothes hanging out of them. Some of the open drawers are empty.

Kevin backs his arse onto the unmade bed, but my eyes are drawn to the mess of CDs sprawled out over the top of the chest of drawers. Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Hole … so much good stuff. Some albums I haven't been able to buy yet, because I like physical copies more than digital and nobody in town stocks enough 90s music.

'Oh, sweet!' I say. 'Are you into grunge?'

Kevin sculls his bourbon and finishes it. 'Uh huh.'

'It's my favourite kind of music,' I tell him, glancing at the back of a Smashing Pumpkins album. 'Grunge, alternative rock. All the 90s stuff. It's so much deeper than anything on the radio right now, huh? I swear I was born in the wrong generation.'

'You gonna come suck me or what?'

I run my finger over the cover of the Smashing Pumpkins album. I wonder, if he wasn't so horny, if we could've talked more about how we both like the same music. He must feel the same connection to grunge if he has so much of it in his collection. He must have those same feelings. If he wasn't so much older than me, maybe we'd end up becoming friends.

I take a sip of bourbon and leave it on the chest of drawers. It's bitter.

'Yeah, okay,' I say, turning to Kevin. 'I'll suck, but no kissing.'

'Cool,' he says, stretching out and shaking his pants off. 'What about –'

'Nope. I don't fuck,' I tell him firmly.

We get into it for a few minutes. Now he's on the bed, he's completely relaxed – and drunk, and possibly high – so it takes forever to get him hard. I keep trying. He keeps saying 'yeah boy' despite his dick barely responding. It's weird.

Just when he's finally cracked a fat, his whole body suddenly goes rigid.

I come up for air. 'What? Teeth?' I ask him. 'Sorry.'

'No!' he cries. There's more energy in those dead eyes than there has been since I arrived. 'Get up!'

I sit up. He's moving faster than he should, and predictably, he trips over the doona and collapses to the floor.

'You okay?' I cry.

Kevin disentangles himself from the bedspread and finds his way to his knees.

'No!' he gasps. 'It's my wife! She's home.'

My heart begins to drum in my ears.

'Your what?' I splutter. 'She's what?'

'Hide!' he hisses, finally up on his feet.

'You said you weren't married anymore!' I say. 'You said she left you!'

'It's complicated!' he roars, pulling his pants back on and hiding his half-arsed erection in the waistband of his Bonds jocks.

My ears are ringing, like someone just fired a shotgun next to me. I know I should disappear, but there's too much screaming for attention in my head. Terror. Disgust. Rage.

'Wardrobe. Now!' Kevin bellows, shoving me with more strength than he's shown during this whole visit.

He bolts out of the room and, just before the bedroom door clicks shut, I hear a female voice from the living area call, 'Alright, Kevin. Whose scooter is it?'

I cram myself into the walk-in wardrobe, but the door won't shut. Dirty pairs of jeans stuck in the door. I kick them into a bigger pile of clothes and close myself into silent blackness.

My heartbeat is out of whack, drumming discordantly in my ears. I hate Kevin for making me the bad one in this scenario. I hate Alicia for coming home. I hate myself for being here in the first place.

I hate that I am now *literally* in the closet. Or in the wardrobe, I guess. I'm a wardrobed homo.

Bad time to joke.

Shouts echo down the hallway, then grow louder as the bedroom door is thrown open.

'Oh, please, Kevin!' the woman cries. 'There's obviously a girl here! Her jeans are still on our bed.'

Jesus. My jeans. Yes. I'm wearing my shirt and my boxers, nothing more.

'You said we were done!'

'I said I needed time to think – that's all!' Alicia cries. 'And this isn't about me! We're still *married*. Oh, come on, don't tell me she's hiding in the wardrobe?'

My breath catches in my throat. This really was the most predictable place to hide.

'Come on out, sweetie,' Alicia calls. 'Let me get a look at you. Come on, you were perfectly happy to have an affair with my husband. Don't start being embarrassed now, just because I caught you!'

She knows I'm here. I know she's going to find me. And yet it's the principle of the thing, not to surrender yourself to fate until fate gets you. I stay rooted to the floor of the wardrobe, huddling my arms to my chest. This is legit the worst night of my life.

The wardrobe door flies open.

'Come on, show your face, hun,' Alicia says, flicking the light on.

Her eyes meet mine.

'Oh,' she says. The colour leaves her face. She stares at my bare legs, my boxers, the guilty smile that's fought its way to my face. 'You're a boy,' she says blankly.

'He told me you were broken up,' I say. 'If I knew, I never woulda …'

'Stupid kid,' Kevin mutters from the doorway.

Alicia's green eyes go wide, like a feral cat.

'Oh my God, Kevin, you freak,' she cries. 'He's – he's a *he*. And he's – how old are you?' She snaps her head back to face me.

'Sixteen.'

'Fucksakes,' Kevin says.

And then the worst thing happens. Alicia stares at me for the longest second in history. Her wild eyes spark and she clutches her mouth in horror.

'You're Nadine Roth's son,' she breathes, through her white-knuckled palm. 'Charlie.'

If there was any blood still circulating in my body, it drains to my feet. My head spins.

'Don't tell anyone,' I say at once. 'You can't tell anyone. You can't tell my mum.'

Alicia takes a step forward. For whatever reason, she's got my jeans clutched in her fist. She looms over me, despite being a few inches below my head height.

'This is my life you've wrecked,' she whispers. 'This has *nothing* to do with you. I don't give a damn if your mum knows. Nadine *should* know where her son is going at night. You're only a teenager!'

Alicia flicks her head back to Kevin, like she can't work out who to breathe fire at first.

'He's a *teenager*, Kevin!' she screeches. 'What did you do to him?'

'I didn't do anything to him!' Kevin protests. 'It was online. He wanted it. *He approached me!*'

Like that's gonna make it any better, moron.

Alicia sinks onto the bed and chucks my jeans in my direction.

Her hands claw at her forehead. 'For God's sake. How long has this been going on?'

'I just came over tonight for the first time,' I splutter.

'I'm not talking to *you*!' Alicia shrieks, eyes sparking with green venom. 'Just get your shit and get out!'

Alicia rounds on her husband. He's pitiful: gross grey eyes leaking as his wife tears him to pieces. Nearly forty and he just sobs like a kid who scraped his knee. He keeps muttering, 'Don't tell anyone, Leesh.'

'I'll tell whoever the hell I want!' Alicia roars.

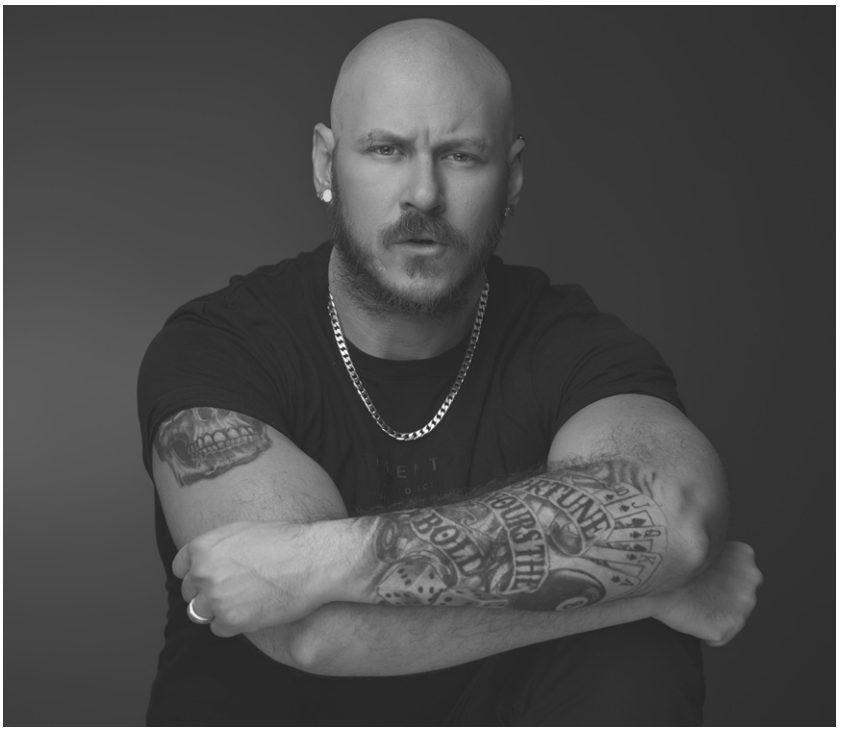
I try to put my jeans on, but my hands are shaking. Everything's shaking. My shoes and socks are on the other side of the room. I can't get to them. I can't get into my jeans. I can't see. I can't think. I can't breathe.

I crush my jeans into a denim ball, hug it to my chest, and sprint from the bedroom barefoot in my boxers. I run through the dirty bomb house and outside, where the fresh air prickles my exposed skin and the scooter's engine takes too long to fire up and the headlight lingers for too long on the tricycles of the little girls whose home I've now broken.

Alicia's words ring in my ears the whole way home. *I'll tell whoever the hell I want.*

If she didn't listen to her husband, she sure as hell isn't going to listen to my pleas for her not to tell anyone.

Which means, by tomorrow, the whole town will know.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HOLDEN SHEPPARD was born and bred in Geraldton, Western Australia. His debut novel, *Invisible Boys*, won multiple awards including the WA Premier's Prize for an Emerging Writer and the City of Fremantle Hungerford Award. *Invisible Boys* was adapted for television as an acclaimed Stan Original Series, which was nominated for a prestigious Peabody Award in the US.

Holden's subsequent novels include *The Brink* – a thriller about young adults grappling with a murder during their schoolies trip – and *King of Dirt*, a gay bogan love story set in the world of construction workers. Holden's latest novel, *Yeah the Boys,* the long-awaited sequel to *Invisible Boys*, won the 2025 Minderoo Artist Fund Award and is now in development as a television series.

Holden's writing has been widely published in books, journals, the media and on screen, and his advocacy for writers, gay men and mental health saw him named a WA finalist for the 2026 Australian of the Year Awards. Holden graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Honours from Edith Cowan University, where he is now an Adjunct Creative Fellow, and he featured in the 2022 'Bogans' episode of the ABC television series *You Can't Ask That*. When he's not writing or reading, Holden can be found working out at the gym, playing video games or watching footy. He lives in Perth's far north with his husband and his V8 ute.

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