

SENSITIVE

Allayne L. Webster

UQP

Chapter 1

I've decided to stop being me. Finito. Game over. Access denied.

No, I'm not falling victim to an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* scenario – yet. Nor am I having plastic surgery or moving to Antarctica or wherever it is people go to escape their past – though putting that kind of distance between me and my mother could possibly save lives. Actually, I've done something tried and tested and favoured by TV scriptwriters the world over: I've moved to a new town.

New town. New me.

Technically, I didn't choose to move – my parents moved and I was dragged along for the ride. At thirteen you don't get much choice. At first I was upset about it, but my lightning-bolt moment came when Mum gave me and my brothers the hard sell: *Think of how much fun it will be to*

live in Kingston SE! It's a country town with a beach, a fishing jetty, parks, sporting ovals, new friends, new things to do. A chance to reinvent yourself!

I usually don't agree with *anything* my mum says or does, but that last bit – the bit about reinventing yourself – well, she had a point. For once.

I'd tell you *why* I want to reinvent myself, but New Me isn't into oversharing. New Me is evasive. Mysterious. Hard to crack. New Me is as stubborn as nits in a primary school.

'Stop that, Samantha!' Mum hisses.

'I'm not Samantha anymore.' Seriously, the woman doesn't listen. 'I'm SJ.'

'Stop that, SJ.'

'Stop what?'

Mum's eyebrows skyrocket. 'You know what.'

We're shopping at our new supermarket. Mum says it's time to cook real food. Living on takeaway for two months has seen my parents gain a collective total of seven kilos – the lion's share of which (according to Mum) belong to Dad. I kind of agree, but I'm not telling her that.

Mum likes to shop when it's just me and her. She says it's easier to think when she doesn't have my brothers tugging on her arm. Dylan and Roan *are* pretty annoying. They're the Ebola virus and Kim Jong-un rolled into one. They are to supermarkets what oil spills are to the Great Barrier Reef – the stuff of international incidents. Right now they're at home with Dad, putting together the bunk bed. Dad says they're like his supervisors at work: they do a whole lot of talking and not much else.

Mum steers the trolley up the next aisle. ‘Where’s the flour?’

I pass her a kilo package.

She examines it, hands it back. ‘The other one.’ I pass it to her. ‘Samantha!’ she squawks. ‘You’re doing it again!’

I’ve rolled up my sleeve to scratch my elbow. There’s no one in the aisle. I wouldn’t do it if there was.

‘I told you, Samantha. Willpower. *Will-pow-eeerrrrr.*’

‘And I told you to call me SJ. *S. Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay.*’

We enter the next aisle. I roll down my sleeve and rub my forearm against my hip. Mum shakes her head with that *why do I bother?* look and tosses Vegemite, jam and cheese spread into the trolley.

‘Want to try this?’ She holds up a jar of weirdo-brand honey paste. It’s the kind of food hippies eat – not that I know any hippies, but I bet they totally go for this stuff. The label is beige with squiggly writing and there’s a picture of a bee wearing a farmer’s hat that looks like an eight-year-old drew it. ‘It says it has organic healing properties.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Oh come on, Sam. I mean, *SJ*. We have to keep trying, right?’

Mum gets cross when I won’t try new things. She’s always waving some new product in my face. *Try this. Try that.* It isn’t worth the argument.

I roll my eyes. ‘Fine. Knock yourself out.’

The honey paste goes into the trolley. So does the sauce with the same label. ‘That’s the spirit!’ Mum says. ‘You never know.’

We turn into the personal care aisle. ‘Dad wants deodorant and shaving cream,’ I remind her.

‘Yes, yes, okay.’ She points to a box of tampons. ‘Not long now, eh? Maybe soon?’

A guy choosing loo paper looks our way. I want to die. Why doesn’t she get on the store PA and announce it to the world?

‘Don’t give me that look, Saman—’

‘SJ!’

‘Don’t give me that look, SJ. I’m just saying. You’ve turned thirteen. It can’t be far away.’ She nudges me and winks.

You’ve got to give my mum points for enthusiasm. She thinks thirteen is the magic number. Thirteen means I’m officially a teenager. Thirteen is when I’ll get my period. (Mum was thirteen when she got hers.) Thirteen is when my skin disease might clear up because of all the hormones and stuff. (I hope she’s right about the last part.)

She throws cans of hairspray, wax, make-up wipes and three cakes of soap in the trolley. She picks up a pump lotion and examines the label. ‘We’d better get you some more Sorbolene cream.’ She says it in this *if I have to* voice. It’s totally fine that Dad needs shaving cream and deodorant, and it’s okay if Mum needs make-up wipes, but it’s a massive inconvenience when I need Sorbolene cream.

‘Don’t worry. I think I still have some.’

‘Good.’ Mum puts the bottle back. ‘I’ll stock up next time I go to the city. It’s a bit expensive here.’

A girl from my old school in Broken Hill, Isabella Forsythe,

used Sorbolene cream. I saw her in the girls' dunnies taking off her make-up with it. She lumped it on, rubbed it around, and baby-wiped it away. Isabella doesn't need Sorbolene cream. She doesn't need *anything*. She's freakishly gorgeous. Cameras orbit her. Flowerbeds wilt when she walks by. Sorbolene cream is the last thing she needs.

'We'll have to buy shampoo in the city too,' Mum says, examining another label. 'These all contain sodium lauryl sulfate.'

'Sodium *what*?'

'You know ... that stuff that makes your head itchy. We don't want you flaking everywhere.'

Oh. *That*.

Mum worries a lot about how I look. She's always telling me how I need to present myself well and that first impressions count. Dad says the opposite. He says looks don't matter and brains count. But he's a school teacher. School teachers eat that idea for breakfast.

I also happen to know Dad is full of it. He told me the story of how he met Mum. It went like this: he saw her in a bar and she had soft flowing blonde hair, sparkling blue eyes, and he immediately knew he *had* to talk to her. She hadn't even opened her mouth and he *had* to talk to her. I asked, 'So if Mum had've been butt-ugly with warts, a big hook nose and crooked teeth, would you still have wanted to go talk to her?' He got all fidgety and changed the subject.

Mum turns the trolley up the toilet paper aisle and browses the wall of poo-tickets. (My brother Roan calls them that.)

She's deciding which is the best value for money. I bend over to scratch my ankle. Mum prods me with her elbow. She used to slap my hand away, but she's since given up on that. When I was a baby, she cut my fingernails short and wrapped my hands in mittens. Now I'm older I guess she can't exactly tie me up.

We head to the dairy aisle. Mum grabs a punnet of yoghurt and some cheese slices. A tall girl with dark curly hair and long brown legs stands by the dairy case, reading the side of a custard carton. She looks my way.

I know I'm staring. I don't mean to. But ... *I wish I had legs like that!*

She puts the custard carton back on the shelf. 'Cool sneakers.' She comes closer to admire my new Adidas pumps. I've threaded a pink lace through one and a green lace through the other. Everyone in Broken Hill had a pair. 'They're the bomb.'

I smile. 'Thanks. They're new.'

Mum thrusts out her hand. 'I'm Mrs Backler. Lovely to meet you.'

The girl gives Mum a look like she's speaking Swahili. She stuffs her hands in her pockets.

Mum does a nervous giggle. 'This is my daughter, Saman – I mean, *SJ*. We've just moved from Broken Hill.'

'I know who you are,' the girl says matter-of-factly.

Mum blinks.

'My Uncle Barry is the real estate agent. You moved into the government teacher's house on the foreshore. Ocean views,

galley kitchen, ducted heating, study-come-fourth bedroom, two-car garage.'

Mum's mouth hangs open. 'Er, yes, that's right,' she stutters.

The girl turns to me. 'Olivia Humphries. Everyone calls me Liv or Livvy. Take your pick.' She smiles expectantly. 'You've got brothers, right?'

It's at this point I realise my plan to be a Woman of Mystery might be under threat. Liv-OR-Livvy's Uncle Barry sounds like he works for ASIO – the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (aka, the Department of Australian secret spies). Grandma told me about ASIO. They know everything, but apparently they draw the line at what colour underpants you're wearing. Grandma says it's why she likes to travel – because it keeps them on their toes. Right now, she's in New Zealand, climbing ancient volcanoes.

'The teachers told us there'd be a new family joining us,' Liv-OR-Livvy says. 'Do you have a bike? I can show you round.'

Mum's face lights up. Then her lights go out and I can see her worry-clock ticking. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* She thinks if I go out on my own, some big bad wolf will abduct me and I'll be chopped up and stewed into soup. Last time she said that, I told her not to worry, I only wear my red cape on weekends. She didn't see the humour. She said, 'You won't be laughing so hard when you end up the leading story on the six o'clock news.' Which is dumb, because it's not like anyone who abducts you would sit you down to watch yourself on TV, would they? But that's the thing about my mum. She has a vivid imagination. Even more vivid when she's drinking wine.

‘Where’s your mother, dear?’ Mum asks.

OMG. Did she have to say *dear*? Doesn’t she know that’s like legit old-people speak? My face gets hot. Mum is obviously about to do the whole parent cross-check thing to make doubly sure Liv-OR-Livvy’s family are not axe murderers. Or worse, Liberal Party voters.

‘Mum’s at home,’ Liv-OR-Livvy says. ‘I ride my bike around town pretty much all day.’

Mum rubs her chin, thinking about it. ‘I could drop SJ over. Introduce myself to your mum?’

Liv-OR-Livvy glances at me. ‘I’ll ride over to your place. You’ll be home soon, right?’

‘Um ... I guess,’ Mum says, sounding harried. ‘In about twenty minutes.’

‘See ya then!’ Liv-OR-Livvy grabs a can of Dairy Whip and heads to the checkout.

Mum stares after her. ‘I think I’ve just been ambushed.’

‘Did you have to call her *dear*?’

Mum huffs and rolls her eyes.

We grab an industrial-sized packet of poo-tickets and head to the checkout. There’s no line so we go straight in. The girl serving can’t be more than a few years older than me. She has red hair and creamy porcelain skin. I *always* notice people’s skin.

She scans our groceries. ‘How’s your day been?’

Something in her voice tells me she couldn’t care less.

‘Busy,’ Mum says. ‘Lovely weather, isn’t it?’

The girl nods, smiling. Then she looks at me and does a

double take. I grab some chewies from the confectionery stand and pretend to read the label. The girl puts through a few more groceries. Finally, curiosity gets the better of her. 'So, do you have sunburn or do you just have really sensitive skin?'

Like that. Out there. No missing it.

New Me wants to say, *So, do you have verbal diarrhoea or are you just unbelievably rude?* But the force is strong in Old Me. A lifetime of habit is hard to break. I hide behind my hair.

Mum snatches our groceries, stuffing them into bags with the enthusiasm of a doomsayer storing up for the apocalypse. 'My daughter suffers from severe eczema.'

Oh God. Here we go. Get me out of here.

Now.

'It's not an easy thing to deal with, you know.'

'Mum! Do you have to?'

'For your information it's called chronic atopic eczema,' Mum says, ignoring me. 'It's a skin disease. An autoimmune disorder. A horrible, cruel illness. Have you heard of it?'

The girl shakes her head. The look on her face says, *Holy potatoes, lady. I'm sorry I asked.*

'She didn't cause it,' Mum waffles on. 'It's not psychosomatic. It's a real thing. And she gets quite distressed when people point it out.'

'Mum—'

'I'm not finished yet!' She turns back to the girl. 'I've taken her to countless doctors. More doctors than you've had dresses, young lady.'

There's no stopping her when she's on a roll. She's a top-ten

hit stuck on replay. She's going to tell the shop assistant my life story and nothing will stand in her way. Soon it will be all over town: *Meet the new resident freak, SJ*. So much for reinventing myself.

Mum keeps going. 'I've tried everything there is: lotions, prescription medicine, natural remedies. Nothing cures it. *Nothing*. We've made ourselves crazy trying to figure out what causes it. Animal dander, grass, pollen, food, you name it – it could be anything! How the hell are we supposed to know if the doctors don't know?'

The girl puts up her hand, signalling for her superior. 'I need a bathroom break.' She doesn't even wait for someone to come. She leaves us standing at the register.

As soon as she's out of earshot, I crack it. 'Mum! Really? Do you have to?'

Mum buries her face in her hands. 'I know. I did it again.'

'You could have just said I have bad sunburn. That's what we always say to people. It's easier than explaining!'

'It's just ... I get sick of the questions, Samantha. Like they think I'm a bad mother. Like they think I'm ignoring it or something. I don't know why I didn't think about how moving to a new town would—'

I cut her off. 'Mum. I'm used to it, okay? It's fine.'

But the truth is I'll never get used to it. I hate it. And I hate my skin. Most of all, I hate myself for not being able to control it.

'It's not *fine*, Samantha. It's not fair when people make you feel different.'

I don't bother saying *she's* the one who makes me feel different.

I grab a grocery bag. 'Let's take this stuff home. That girl we spoke to might be waiting for me. I'd like to go riding with her.'

A middle-aged woman with wiry grey hair and a name tag that says *RITA* takes over the register. Rita has twenty-odd pens stuffed in her apron pocket. I want to ask her what that's all about, but she reads from the same script as the girl before her. 'Hi there! How's your day been?'

Mum presses her lips. She packs groceries.

'Our day has been downright terrific,' I say. 'Thanks for asking, Rita!'

She looks at me and whistles long and loud. 'Golly! Someone has spent too much time at the beach, haven't they? Forget the sunscreen?'

Mum looks like she's going to explode. I laugh. 'Yeah, I'm a total beetroot.'

'You need to invest in some fifty-plus, honey.' She glances at Mum as if to say, *Buy it, you tight-arse*. 'Aisle seven. It's on special for sixteen ninety-five.'

'Thanks, Rita. I have some at home. I just forgot to put it on.'

Mum stuffs a wad of cash into Rita's hand, grabs the groceries and bolts out the door.

In the carpark, Mum has Meltdown Number Two. She curses and carries on about how people are rude and ignorant and insensitive and stupid. People in the carpark stare at

us: rude, ignorant, insensitive, stupid people. One old lady visibly shakes her head.

‘Mum, can we just get going?’

‘Yes, yes. Okay.’

I climb into the front seat, relieved we have tinted windows. If this is what a trip to the supermarket is like, how is my new school going to be?

I’m not sure I want to find out.

Chapter 2

We've been home ten minutes when the doorbell rings. It's Liv-OR-Livvy. (It's at this point I decide to call her Livvy.) She stands on our front porch wearing shoes like mine. She must have gone home and changed. 'Ready?' she asks, pulling her black curls into a ponytail and snapping a headband. Her long brown legs glisten in the sun.

'Going!' I holler over my shoulder.

I grab my bike from the garage and struggle down the driveway. Our new house is on a hill and it's like climbing the Great Pyramid of Giza to get to the front door. Dad says the retaining work must have cost a fortune. Mum reminded him that the property is owned by the Education Department so they can probably afford it, what with all the redundancies the government keep making. I suspect she was being sarcastic.

‘I’ve always wanted to roll down this hill,’ Livvy says. ‘Have you tried?’

It did cross my mind. But so did the fact I’m now thirteen. Rolling down a hill is a pretty childish thing to do.

‘It’d probably hurt your boobs if you did.’ Livvy grabs her chest. It’s only then that I notice her boobs practically have their own postcode. Meanwhile, mine are lost in transit. She laughs. ‘They get in the way, don’t they?’

‘Um, yeah.’

‘I’m getting a new bike for my thirteenth,’ Livvy says, manoeuvring hers and climbing on. It’s bright pink, dinged up, and it has a basket with a yellow flower. ‘When’s yours?’

I jump on mine and follow her. ‘Last month.’

‘Oh, bummer. You could have asked for a new one. Heidi and Mahli are getting new bikes.’

‘Who are Heidi and Mahli?’

‘Girls from school.’

‘Are they your friends?’

‘Sort of.’

I wonder how you can be *sort of* friends with someone.

‘We’ll ride to the Big Lobster, okay?’ Livvy says.

I visited the Big Lobster – or *Larry the Lobster* as the locals call him – the first day we arrived in Kingston. I’d seen it on postcards and in holiday brochures, but seeing it in person was something else. It’s massive. When we were there checking it out, this nice European tourist-dude offered to take our photo. Then he asked Mum to return the favour. Mum took ages, fussing over getting the angle just right, and the guy’s

group were like, *Just get it over with already!* Finally, when she was done, he showed us photos of other big stuff he'd visited. He'd seen everything: the Big Banana, the Big Pineapple, the Big Rocking Horse. Big things are a big deal.

We ride along the beachfront in the shadow of enormous pine trees. Beyond them, deep blue water stretches as far as the eye can see. Livvy tells me about the jetty and the nearby shop where they sell fish and chips. She says there's a place not far from Kingston called Cape Jaffa where the fishermen sell their catch.

We turn down a street that goes past the Royal Mail Hotel, the supermarket and the post office.

Livvy points out another takeaway shop. 'They won a medal. The crab sticks are to die for. And there are two bakeries. One makes better pies than the other.'

I feel like I should have a writing pad for taking notes.

The sun is warm on my back. Dribbles of sweat make their way down my neck and under my top, pooling at my chest. I sit up straight, letting the bike cruise along, and I rub my shirt to relieve an itch. Livvy doesn't notice. We circle a roundabout and head down the main street. Most of the shops are closed. There are only two cars parked on the roadside.

'Is it always dead like this?' I ask, starting to puff.

Livvy powers along. 'Not always. It's Sunday. Everyone's home or at sport, or at parties and stuff.'

We reach Apex Park and go to a little island near Maria Creek with a sundial in it. It's a *human* sundial – one where

your shadow tells the time. Livvy points to two service stations on opposite sides of the road and tells me how one makes better chicken than the other. This, according to her, is crucial stuff to know if you live here.

We ride up to the Big Lobster and find a tourist bus parked out front. The tourists are hanging around looking like they've just been there/seen that, and now they're ready to board the bus – probably to go to the newsagent and buy souvenirs. Mum bought a whole bunch of fridge magnets from there. *When in Kingston*, she said.

Livvy drops her bike at the base of Larry and walks underneath. She steps into its tail, a massive pink bowl dug into the ground. I climb in too. We're under the red belly and I have to say it's kind of creepy. It's all scaly and sectioned just like a real crayfish.

Livvy sits cross-legged, looking up at it. 'What do you think?'

'Pretty amazing.'

Rusted scaffolding pokes through the gaps in the fibreglass structure. I hope it's strong enough. I don't want my gravestone to read: *Here lies SJ Backler, crushed to death by a giant crustacean.*

'Local legend has it that the builders misunderstood the architect's plans and got the dimensions wrong. It wasn't meant to be this big.' She flicks some stones out of the tail. 'I don't know if that's true. If it is, they got totally punked.'

'Totally.'

'Have you tried crayfish?'

'Oh. No. Not yet.'

‘We feed it to our dog,’ she says, shrugging.

But crayfish costs a fortune! Posh people love it. Livvy’s parents must be seriously cashed up.

‘Dad’s a cray fisherman. A deckhand, actually. It’s all we eat.’ She makes a face. ‘I’m so over it.’

I wonder what Mum would say if she knew Livvy’s parents ate crayfish for dinner every night. ‘What’s a deckhand?’

Livvy laughs. ‘I love you! You’re, like, a total alien.’ She ruffles my hair. ‘A cray boat is manned by the boat owner and the deckhand is kind of like his assistant.’

Maybe that meant Livvy’s parents weren’t rich after all.

‘It costs over a million dollars to buy the licence. Most people around here either bought the licence years ago when it was cheap or they’ve inherited the business from a relative. Dad brings home cray tails for dinner because the ockies break them and it means they can’t be sold.’

‘Ockies?’

‘*Octopuses*. They eat cray. Crush ’em and suck their guts out. Sometimes Dad catches an ockie and he cuts off its head, dices it up and chucks it back in the pot for bait. That means the ockies eat the crays and the crays eat the ockies.’

‘That’s cannibalism.’

She thinks about it. ‘No. It would be cannibalism if the crays ate crays.’ She lies back against the giant tail. ‘So,’ she says, ‘are you wearing those shoes to school on Monday?’

I look at my Adidas pumps.

‘I’d take out the laces if I were you. Heidi and Mahli won’t like them.’

Livvy seems to care a lot about what these girls think. I haven't even met Heidi and Mahli and I'm getting worried.

'Why do you keep doing that?' she asks suddenly.

I'm rubbing my stomach. Mum says I scratch without knowing it. 'Oh, it's nothing.'

'You look red. Do you turn red when you exercise? That happens to my Aunty Carol. She comes out of the gym looking like someone took a torch to her.'

'I'm just hot. And hungry. I was rubbing my stomach to stop it from growling.'

Livvy buys it. 'Fair enough. Let's ride to the caravan park shop. They do the best toasties. They have heaps of different icy-poles too. One of those will cool you down.'

She sure knows a lot about junk food.

We make our way back through town. I ride behind Livvy so I can scratch when I need to. I come up with a plan: if I need to scratch at school, I'll do it in the girls' toilet. I could have a really good scratch in there and no one would know.