

Amelia
WESTLAKE



ERIN GOUGH



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Amelia Westlake
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For Emma and Rory



PART ONE

Chapter 1

WILL

I've been thinking a lot lately about hoaxes. My life, for instance. Lately it feels less like a life and more like a joke. Somebody's practical joke.

Don't get me wrong. It's nothing I can't handle. Terrible stuff has been happening to me since I was born. Mum and Dad named me Wilhelmina for a start. I've had three pets hit by cars. Last winter I was mildly electrocuted by a faulty hair dryer. Then there are the elements that make up my daily slog: having separated parents on different sides of the country. Living in a shoebox beneath a flight path. Going to a school full of rich, selfish brats.

But lately things have been particularly vile. Case in point: Phys Ed this morning. Coach Hadley held me back to swim extra laps along with Ruby Lasko and Harriet Price.

Hadley has always been a jerk, especially to me, although it's true he likes to pick on most of his students a few times each term. It's his idea of equal opportunity. Today, though, he reached a special category of loathsome. When Harriet and I finished swimming, Hadley wouldn't let us go until Ruby completed her laps. It was probably the pressure of us watching that made Ruby trip on a ladder rung on her way out of the pool and crash back into the water.

'Too many muffins for breakfast, hey Ruby?' said Hadley, grinning.

Now, you don't need a psychology degree to know Ruby is sensitive about her weight. She forced out a laugh but I could tell she was working hard not to cry. This time, Hadley had gone too far. 'What Ruby eats is none of your business,' I said.

'Come on, Will,' he replied, a twinkle in his eye. He tried to poke me in the ribs but I stepped out of reach. 'I was kidding. Ruby knows it was a joke, don't you, Ruby?'

Ruby, who was struggling up the ladder again, smiled bravely.

'See?' Hadley threw up his arms. 'Why should you mind if Ruby doesn't?'

What a creep. I shot him a look of disgust. He met it for a second before turning away.

'Prick,' I muttered under my breath.

Hadley whipped around, his expression dark.

I heard the sound of footsteps.

'Will Everhart. What did you just say?' Miss Watson, Head of the Sports Department, was standing behind us with an armful of floating aids.

Just my luck. Watson has hated me since I skipped this year's athletics carnival. Not to mention the ones before that. 'Answer me,' she said coolly.

'Fine. I called Coach Hadley a prick,' I said, equally coolly. Watson's whole face twitched.

'Well, he *is* one,' I said, and turned to Harriet Price for back-up.

For the record, it's not that I couldn't manage Watson on my own. I've got experience in Crappy Life Moments, as I've said. But I knew that having Harriet's support would help. She's a prefect. She's won debating comps. Plus, Watson worships her because she plays for the tennis squad. She's also on some fancy sports committee Hadley set up. She heard what Hadley said to Ruby. She could have called him on it.

The problem with Harriet Price is that she's also a prime suck.

You know those ads for vacuum cleaners so powerful they can pick up furniture? When I see those ads, I think of Harriet Price: grovelling to the principal, or arse-kissing one of the teachers, or giving a speech at Assembly about how Rosemead Grammar is educating 'Australia's future leaders'.

I shouldn't have been surprised when, instead of backing me up, Harriet stood there with her mouth hanging open like one of those clown heads at the Easter Show waiting for a ping-pong ball.

I wish I'd had a ping-pong ball.

'I'm sick and tired of these performances, Will,' said Watson, once her twitching face had settled down. 'This is not the first time I've had to speak to you about inappropriate

language, but you'd better hope it's the last. I am quite frankly disgusted –'

On and on she went. As she was ranting I let the sound of her voice wash over me, and my mind wandered to an old movie Dad and I watched a few years ago. It's called *The Truman Show*, and it's about a guy whose whole world is the set of a reality TV show in which he's the unwitting star.

'You'll hate it,' Dad told me, by which he meant 'you'll love it'. He and I have been playing a game of opposites since he was feeding me with an aeroplane spoon. He's progressed from 'you'll love these mushy beans' to 'you'll love washing the car for me, Monster Child'. In true Opposite Game spirit I always reply, 'You are the best father in the whole wide world,' before giving him the finger.

I was skeptical about *The Truman Show*. 'What makes you so sure I'll think it's the worst film ever?'

'Because you *love* reality television and the film critiques that whole genre.'

Dad adores the word 'genre'. He also likes 'hegemony' and 'oeuvre'. This is what I've had to put up with as the daughter of a fine-arts journalist. But he was right about the movie. It was great. At the end, Truman figures out the whole living-in-a-reality-TV-show thing. He gets in a boat and travels to the domed edge of his bogus world. The boat's bow pierces the dome's painted sky, revealing what he's long suspected: he's been trapped in a farce.

Watson's rant went on for so long that I missed half of Biology. After that, there didn't seem much point in showing up for the rest. So I headed to the year-twelve common room for twenty minutes of peace.

I'm sitting there now, eating someone else's Tim Tams from the fridge, and thinking about the final scene from that movie. It's exactly what I'm waiting for, I realise. I'm hanging out for the day I get to launch a boat off the wrecked shore of my own existence to discover my true unblemished destiny beyond the 'Exit' sign.

What will I find there? A world in which people like Hadley get what they deserve. A world where my classmates care about sticking up for each other more than they care about whose parents have the most expensive car. A world where there are no teachers, no swimming coaches, no prefects.

And no Rosemead bloody Grammar.